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Tending to seeds of civic activity

Navigating democratic transformations to sustainability

STEPHEN LEITHEISER
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Tending to seeds of civic activity
Navigating democratic transformations to sustainability

PhD thesis

to obtain the degree of PhD at the University of Groningen on the authority of the Rector Magnificus Prof. C. Wijmenga and in accordance with the decision by the College of Deans.

This thesis will be defended in public on Thursday 20 October 2022 at 11.00 hours

by

Stephen Richard Leitheiser

born on 8 April 1990 in West Bend, United States of America
Abstract

Calls for societies to become more sustainable are becoming increasingly urgent. Tired of waiting for ‘the market’ or ‘the state’ to solve problems for them, many civic actors are claiming an active role in carving out pathways towards sustainable transformation in practice: finding sustainable ways to meet their daily needs, work, make decisions, and define value together.

Driven by the question of what can be done now given the circumstances, and inspired by political ecology’s project of radical democratization, this thesis explores the ways in which existing civic practices, strategies, and imaginaries are contributing to sustainability transformations. The researcher got his hands dirty, both literally and figuratively. Literally, he engaged in ethnographic work alongside small-scale farmers in the Netherlands: pulling weeds and harvesting vegetables while discussing wider possibilities for a regenerative food economy. Figuratively, he attempted the messy task of making his PhD work relevant to civic actors: from small-scale Dutch farmers, to German citizens inventing new spaces of governance in food policy councils, and beyond.

Civic activity is conceptualized as a ‘seed’ that stores the potential to grow into a robust plant – here understood as a counter-movement against unsustainable ways of relating to nature and each other. This thesis argues that the seeds of civic activity are being scattered all around. Recognizing and helping them to grow is as good of a place as any to start in finding pathways to truly ‘sustainable’ ways of relating to nature and each other.
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SUMMARIES
1.1 Motivation and background of study: In the midst of a great transformation

Karl Polanyi’s 1944 classic, *The Great Transformation* (see Polanyi, 2001), was a seminal reflection on social ruptures and transformations in the 19th and 20th centuries (Aulenbacher et al., 2019). Writing in the midst of the second World War, Polanyi saw the rise of fascism in Europe as an outgrowth of a crisis in democracy. At its root, the crisis of democracy he observed was one of market fundamentalism – that is, a society in which more and more aspects of nature and human life were treated as commodities, or standardized objects to be bought and sold on the market (Polanyi, 2001). For Polanyi, *market society* is based on a utopian vision and is enacted as a gradual process of de-embedding social and natural relations and commodifying them into decontextualized, unmoored objects. This vision aims to replace human decision making with market rationality and organization. Polanyi warned that the results of realizing such a vision would be devastating, and that a Great Transformation of such a society’s social order would come about, inevitably, whether by “design or by disaster” (Colby, 2021, p. 38). The American writer Mark Twain is credited with saying, “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it often rhymes”. Although the circumstances of today’s world are different in many ways, they also could be said to rhyme with the social ruptures and transformations that took place in the last centuries. Change and transformation are the default state of the world that agents must always contend with (De Roo, 2020). Yet, the rate of change, and the magnitude and convergence of multiple crises, which are simultaneously political, social, and ecological, make the idea of a great transformation, and the task of diagnosing its root causes, and sketching out possible remedies, increasingly relevant for social and political theorists (Aulenbacher et al., 2019; Block and Somers, 2019; Streeck, 2020).

Governments around the world increasingly acknowledge these issues, and work to implement solutions. Yet mainstream approaches have largely been subsumed into industrial market society’s trajectory of socio-natural separation and top-down control (Shiva and Shiva, 2018). The dominance of de-politicized and techno-managerial institutional frameworks threatens to exacerbate crises of democracy, and repress social and political difference (Frankel, 2021; Swyngedouw, 2010). Following Polanyi, and other more contemporary theorists (among others, Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; Swyngedouw, 2007), I also view today’s crises – even those that are cultural, ecological and economic – as outgrowths of a widespread crisis of democracy. That is, put simply, a crisis in how people collectively decide how they want to live together. Departing from this state of affairs – a crisis of democracy that runs the risk of being exacerbated by the ways societies respond to a crisis of unsustainability – this dissertation aims to explore how existing civic practices and strategies can contribute to the democratization of sustainability transformations.

As a member of the RECOMS (Resourceful and Resilient Communities) consortium project on Citizenship and Responsive Governance, I was motivated to understand how problems of citizenship and governance more clearly, and to join the search for solutions. I quickly came to understand that there can be no democratic transformations to sustainability without radical shifts in the ways ‘we’ understand and practice democracy and citizenship. As political philosopher Chantal Mouffe (1992, p. 225) has made clear, the ways that we define political concepts and categories, like citizenship and democracy, while not fixed and static, are “intimately linked to the kind of society and political community we want.” This does not mean that language literally shapes reality, but it does mean that it is co-constitutive in the “symbolic-material order of things” (Peter, 2021, p. 92; see also Castoriadis, 1987). In a world where ‘global’ and ‘local’, and the ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ are too often understood as binaries (Baker and Mehmood, 2015; Gibson-Graham, 2008a), my contribution attempts to foreground the central importance of civic activity in democratic sustainability transformations, and explores the possibilities for synthesis among those who are working within these assumed binary pathways. I will argue that, at the moment, seeds of civic activity are germinating all around us. With a bit of tending care, these seeds can spread...
and be nurtured to grow into robust democratic counter-movements against the unsustainable contradictions of commodification.

The following two sub-sections elaborate further on the twin crises of democracy and unsustainability that underpin my motivation for and approach to this dissertation. This is followed with an introduction of the research aims and questions, and a brief description of an urban political ecology framework. Next, I address the first and second aims of this research: (1) to form a critical understanding of citizenship in the context of a perceived widespread crisis in representative democracy; and (2) to explore potential counter-movements in the midst of the present crisis in representative democracy (see Table 1 on p. 11 for a full list of aims). These sections also provide a theoretical underpinning of my approach. Finally, I provide an overview of how the research questions are dealt with in the respective chapters, and a justification of the methods used.

1.1.1 The crisis of democracy

The practice of democracy is and always has been imperfect in compared to its ideal (Taylor, 2019). But in recent decades, the contradictions of institutions which claim to embody democratic ideals have been seen as particularly salient by several political scientists and theorists. Beginning in the 1990s, a few prominent political theorists started to independently develop the notion of ‘post-democracy’ (Crouch, 2004; Rancière, 1992; Wolin, 2001). The post-democracy thesis argues that contemporary democracies are, in practice, oligarchies (government of, by and for the few) with the outward dressings of democracies (government of, by and for the people) (Miller, 2020). Although the formal casings of democratic governance (e.g. elections, parliaments, civil rights, participation) are widely trumpeted, democratic politics is reduced in practice to the managerial administration of neoliberal globalization (Gills, 2000; Mouffe, 2005). In other words, democratic ideals, like political equality, popular sovereignty, legitimacy, and accountability continue to underpin the entire politico-cultural imagination, despite much evidence that they are not embodied in the practice of politics (Miller, 2020). Critics point out that the practice of neoliberal governance by the Market is far from its rhetorical ideal of democratizing decision making power – it actually undermines democracy in many ways (Cumbers et al. 2019). On the one hand, it flattens out the plurality of social relations (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; Swyngedouw, 2018). On the other hand, it does not erase hierarchy, but re-arranges and restructures it so as to relieve the state of responsibility to its citizens (Palumbo & Scott, 2017). For example, this is done through the re-centralizing of power to (1) unaccountable technocratic institutions (e.g. the International Monetary Fund, European Central Bank, etc.) and (2) owners of concentrated capital. Such unauthorized actors (Swyngedouw, 2019), in turn, exercise vast control in (1) setting the ‘rules of the game’ in the Market system and (2) undemocratically determining how collectively-produced capital surpluses are distributed (cf. Palumbo & Scott, 2005). Rampant inequalities, which the ancient philosopher Plutarch associated with the downfall of all republics, have been exacerbated in liberal democracies of Europe and North America (Hopkin and Lynch, 2016; Lefkofridi and Giger, 2020; Piketty, 2014; Stolle and Hooghe, 2011).

In the words of Graeber and Wengrow (2021, p. 367), “democracy as we have come to know it is effectively a game of winners and losers played out among larger-than-life individuals, with the rest of us reduced largely to onlookers.”

In the aftermath of the 2007-2008 global financial crisis, democratic crisis has mounted as various populist movements have been ignited across the globe (Crouch, 2019; Mouffe, 2019). Recent events, which have unfolded throughout the course of this PhD project, have exacerbated democratic unrest. The COVID-19 pandemic saw the practice of governance by state of emergency – in which constitutional rules, procedures and rights are suspended – reinforced and normalized across the globe (Agamben, 2008, 2021). In the words of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance’s 2021 report, “the world is becoming more authoritarian”.

These trends can be understood as a continuation of what Wolin (2004) has referred to as a shift towards centripetal governance: the concentration of political, cultural and economic power. He argues, along with fully (2008b), that, more and more, the practice of politics is disproportionately shaped from above by a complex interplay of governmental, non-governmental (i.e. NGO), corporate, and to a lesser extent academic and cultural elites (Wolin, 2004). Critics understand multilateral institutions like the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, the European Union and its Maastricht Treaty, along with various trade agreements that nations have signed) as supranational governance bodies that constitute the post-democratic condition (Streeck, 2020). Constitutional scholar Danny Nicol (2010) has referred to these supranational arrangements as neoliberal constitution building. By this he means that transnational regimes like the European Union, the World Trade Organization (WTO), or The Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), have established de facto supranational constituions, which embody and enforce neoliberal ideology: principles

and precedents that bind and delimit the capacities for national governments to control market-driven flows of goods, services and capital (see also Block 2019; Mitchell and Fazi 2017; Shiva 2020). Nicol argues that such agreements have empowered transnational corporations as “protagonists in constitutional transformation”, under the guise of impartial and “highly technical trade policy” (Nicol, 2010, p. 152). Trade agreements are presented to the public as apolitical or too complicated for laypeople to critique and amend. While nations may still choose to exercise sovereignty in the face of this soft power, detractors run the risk of becoming international pariahs that “face economic sanctions and the threat of military action” (Block 2019, p. 1173). “Whenever someone starts to talk about the ‘free market’,” Graeber (2015, p. 31) puts it, “it’s a good idea to look around for the man with the gun. He’s never far away.” This means that the soft power of supranational governance (Tully, 2008b) is ultimately backed up and regulated by a threat of real violence, whether military or economic.

Structural gaps between people and the structures of power that govern their lives are growing, spurred by, among other things, a general decline of organized labor (Blyth, 2002) and the rise of professionalization in politics and lobbying. As these gaps between people and power widen, various strains of anti-establishment populism have become mainstream, corroborating the notion that democratic crisis is coming to a head (Crouch, 2019; Fawcett et al., 2017; Mouffe, 2019; Ricci, 2020).

1.1.2 The crisis of unsustainability and the dark side of sustainability transformation

While the democratic crisis seems to intensify, ecological breakdown due to a crisis of unsustainability also looms large. Barrir miraculous technological innovation, the current economic trajectories of exponential growth and commodification of everything can no longer be maintained, simply from a material perspective (Heikurrinen, 2018; Spash and Smith, 2019). The relative prosperity experienced by some parts of the global population under industrial capitalist society would not have been possible without cheap and abundant fossil fuels (Smil, 1994). In addition to their role in climate change, declines in energy return on investment (EROI) for fossil fuels will necessitate a major shift in the ways humans relate to energy use in the twenty-first century (Court and Fizaine, 2017). While some see renewable technologies as a magic bullet, their production and maintenance are still heavily dependent on fossil fuels, and are much less energy dense (Fizaine and Court, 2015). If one considers Jevons paradox (Polimeni et al., 2008) – that increases in energy efficiency ultimately lead to more energy use as lowered energy costs make more industrialization viable – one could argue that new technologies, or efficiency increases alone, would serve to exacerbate the ecological problems of industrial society (Haberl et al., 2009). The implications of this are profound and entail a major shift in the way people live, work, and consume in this century.

Moreover, it is crucial to recognize that development in the industrial capitalist core has been made possible through the exploitation of land and labor in the periphery of the ‘hinterlands’ (Heron and Heffron, 2022). ‘Development’ and prosperity in the industrialized world do not exist despite ‘underdevelopment’ and poverty elsewhere – development and underdevelopment constitute a totality (Brookfield, 1975) and much of the former has been made possible by the latter through colonial, neo-colonial, and imperial relations in which the center is sustained through exploitation of the periphery (Al, 2021; Smith, 2008). The concept of an ecological footprint of land-use is illustrative in this regard. While the ecological carrying capacity of the planet is approximately 2.1 global hectares per capita (based on a 2009 estimate which is diminishing as population increases) (Amin, 2009), the average ecological footprint in the ‘Global North’ is orders of magnitude higher than this. For example, it is estimated that a person living in the United States has an ecological footprint that is twice that of someone living in Europe, and nine times that of someone living in India (Council of Europe, 2013). This means that the majority of the globe’s ecological capacities are going toward supporting life in the centers of industrial capitalist society. It follows that bringing this trajectory of urbanization (increasingly dense mega-cities, which have always relied on an influx of resources from the ‘hinterlands’) everywhere implies a new frontier of exploitation (or a miraculous technological breakthrough, which may create new problems of its own). Since today’s ‘hinterlands’ are increasingly planetary (Brenner and Schmid, 2012), the frontiers for exploiting land and labor to prop up life in the hyper-dense city are running out (Clement, 2011). These conflictual dynamics highlight that the notion of sustainability transformation has a dark side that is often drown out by nice-sounding rhetoric (Blythe et al., 2018).

Sustainability and transformation are not terms that contain any inherent value content. Sustainability simply implies that a system is maintained over time. Transformation indicates a fundamental re-configurations of a social order (Blythe et al., 2018). Without explicitly addressing questions of power and politics – e.g. who benefits and who suffers? – societies run the risk of promoting transformations to sustainability that create enclaves of ‘sustainable’ socio-environmental relations which rely on unsustainable (or even catastrophic) relations in other places, or for those already marginalized (Kaika, 2017; Syyngedouw, 2021; Turnhout, 2018).

The dangers of a de-politicized approach to environmental politics have been well articulated by Harvey (1974). Harvey argues that if the unsustainability of
a current societal trajectory is recognised by an elite group of some sort, it has historically manifested in the form of concerns about the environment (namely overpopulation and resource scarcity). Referencing past examples of genocide, colonialism and imperialism which were carried out and rationalized by such concerns, Harvey (1974, p. 274) argues:

“If we accept a theory of overpopulation and resource scarcity but insist upon keeping the capitalist mode of production [understood as the exponential accumulation of capital] intact, then the inevitable results are policies directed toward class or ethnic repression at home and policies of imperialism and neo-imperialism abroad.

In other words, if growth (or the movement towards commodification) cannot continue in the face of mounting contradictions, the existing social order may look towards new forms of population control and/or accumulation by dispossession in order to protect the status quo from a potential redistribution of political and economic power brought about by the shift to a new social order. Indeed, researchers have already noted a tendency for the security of elites to take priority vis-à-vis the most vulnerable in regard to climate change (Thomas and Warner, 2019). New forms of imperialism associated with sustainability may be seen to include the financialization of nature and ecosystems (e.g. in ‘natural asset companies’, a new investment vehicle recently introduced in the New York Stock Exchange (Harty, 2021)), and the (further) commodification of information and genetics as a techno-fix to environmental problems (Shiva and Shiva, 2018; Wark, 2021). Tools of repression may also already be emerging in the form of surveillance capitalism and biopolitics (Agamben, 2021; Zuboff, 2019), which can (and are already) being mobilized in the name of sustainability (Stock and Gardezi, 2021).

Such dangers stemming from apolitical and technocratic approaches to questions of sustainability and transformation highlights the importance a critical understanding of these concepts. At the very least, they run the risk of eliminating legitimate political and social difference, or doing away with the notion of democratic governance altogether (Bormann et al., 2022; Frankel 2021; Swyngedouw 2010; Wainwright and Mann 2013). This would exacerbate the current crisis of democracy and likely lead to an emboldened reactionary counter-movement. At the worst a de-politicized approach to sustainability transformation could be used to rationalize class warfare, or even result in actions that approach genocide.

One may wonder why, given the critiques and dangers I’ve outlined above, I would continue to contribute to the discourse of ‘sustainability transformation’ in this research. This is done for the simple fact that ‘sustainability transformation’ is a big tent, under which a wide range of actors with different interests and conflicts are operating. This discourse can be found in governments, multilateral institutions and corporations; but it can also be found in the activity of citizens, activists, and those who attempt to construct political and economic alternatives. An openness to intervening in the public discourse on sustainability transformation, to highlight its contradictions and shortcomings and work towards re-articulating a new hegemony around democratic transformations (with the plurality being key) toward sustainability, is seen as prudent in this regard (cf. Mouffe, 2018).

1.2 Research aims and questions

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<tr>
<th>RESEARCH AIMS</th>
<th>Addressed in chapter</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>To form a critical understanding of citizenship in the context of a perceived widespread crisis in representative democracy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>To explore potential counter-movements in the midst of the present crisis in representative democracy.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>To demonstrate how the ‘seeds of civic activity’ are already being scattered all around us by everyday people, waiting for conditions in which they can be nurtured into robust counter-movements.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>To discover, recognize, and amplify socially innovative practices and ‘seeds of civic activity’ that exist within the cracks of contemporary neoliberalism and post-democracy.</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>To explore and reflect on the role of academic researchers in bringing about democratic sustainability transformations.</td>
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Table 1: Research aims
At the time of beginning this PhD in 2018, calls for transitions and transformations toward sustainability were becoming increasingly urgent, widespread, and mainstream. The separation between theory and practice has been increasingly blurred, and the performative influence of academic work on real actions in the world has become more apparent and accepted (Gibson-Graham, 2008b; Turnhout, 2018). More and more, researchers – even early stage researchers like myself – are being pulled away from traditional disciplinary investigation of understanding problems and challenges, and called to incorporate a focus on social innovation (Moulaert et al., 2017), finding and building solutions, and generating societal impact with our work (Bartels and Wittmayer, 2018; Franklin, 2022). While these approaches may seem ‘new’ to some, I argue that they can merely be understood as reviving classical traditions of social and political inquiry in which practical intellectual activity (phronesis) has accompanied know-how (techne) and scientific knowledge (episteme) (Flyvbjerg, 2003; Sayer, 2011; Tully, 2008a).

With the goal of contributing to public discourse and debate, this dissertation is positioned at the intersection of several research agendas focused on exploring, amplifying, and nurturing the strategies and movements toward sustainability transformations emerging in the form of civic activity and collective action (Gibson-Graham, 2008b; Kaika, 2018; Saleh, 2021; Tully, 2008a; Wright, 2010). Civic activity “is politics at the human scale” (Levine 2011, p. 4), and it fundamentally “differs from the efficiency logic of governments and markets” (Boyte, 2017, p. 14). The connecting thread of this research is an emphasis on co-creation with civic actors and scholar activism in the realm of sustainability (Montenegro and Wit, 2021; Temper et al., 2019). Such a scholarship seeks to go beyond observing and analyzing at a distance, and highlights the urgent need for academic research to boldly aim for normative interventions in both public discourse and civic activity with their fellow citizens.

1.2.1 Research questions
A full list of research questions and corresponding chapters can be found below in Table 2. The main question that has guided my inquiry is:

**How can existing civic practices and strategies contribute to the democratization of sustainability transformations?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESEARCH SUB-QUESTIONS</th>
<th>Addressed in chapter</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Is there potential in <em>The Smart City</em> for reconciling top-down and bottom-up approaches to co-produce ‘truly smart and sustainable urban futures’?</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>How do civic initiatives attempt to common governance?</td>
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<td>3a</td>
<td>What are the constraints that contemporary academia places on researchers interested in contributing to sustainability transformations?</td>
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<td>3b</td>
<td>How might researchers navigate these tensions?</td>
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<td>4a</td>
<td>How do new entrant proto-regenerative farmers in the Netherlands engage in the construction of regenerative socio-ecological relationships?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4b</td>
<td>What strategies do farmers use to carve out spaces of regeneration?</td>
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Table 2: Research (sub-)questions
1.3 Urban political ecology as a framework for socio-spatial transformation

My unconventional research journey, which is outlined in more detail below (in section 1.7), began with an overarching interest in urban political ecology (UPE) and a focus on cities. For the field of UPE, cities are much more than geo-spatial locations marked by high population density and skyscrapers. Cities are understood primarily as a process: a site at which the flux, motion, and flows that produce modern life can be viewed (Kaika, 2005). For UPE, cities are not just locations, but “socio-spatial processes that are simultaneously local and global, human and physical, cultural and organic” (Heynen et al., 2006, p. 1). UPE blurs these binaries by recognizing that much of life in the so-called ‘hinterlands’ is heavily influenced by and geared towards the production of life in cities, and a complex interplay of social and physical processes that transform nature. This connects to the earlier discussion of center-periphery relations, and highlights UPE’s analysis, not of the city as such, but of the planetary process of urbanization (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2015). The example of food, a lens used in two chapters of this dissertation, can help to illustrate. David Harvey, an economic geographer who has inspired a great deal of UPE scholarship, often posed the question to his students: ‘Where did your breakfast come from?’

Beyond simple answers like, ‘the supermarket’, the point of this question, according to Harvey, is to recognize that modern capitalism has made it near impossible to really know and understand the ways in which our lives are sustained on a daily basis. The breakfast that many city dwellers consume is produced through an infinitely complex series of relationships, involving millions of people, nature’s relationships around the globe. Tracking these relationships from an UPE perspective would first need to include an investigation into the relationships that generate fossil fuels. UPE would not only take into account this metric and the physical process of drilling for oil. It would also account for the political, economic and military relationships that underpin the global energy market. Moreover, it would consider the origins of agricultural inputs (including the monopoly market shares of multi-national corporations like Bayer), the hardware and software that coordinates logistics, ad infinitum.

UPE asks, if this is the case, how can we really say where the city – as a socio-spatial process – ends and where it begins? This UPE ‘umbrella’ foregrounds an understanding of modern life as produced through the transformation of natures into commodities (Swyngedouw, 2006). Socio-natures, a term which implies that humans and natural systems are always in relation with one another, departs from an understanding of the idea of a ‘singular’ and homogenous ‘Nature’. Socio-natures are defined as a complex and stochastic set of processes that humans depend on (including habitats, ecosystems, weather patterns, species, etc.) (Swyngedouw, 2007). The concept of ‘metabolism’, and its metaphors of flow and process, are a thread that is often implicit, but central to understanding transformation in this research (Swyngedouw, 2006). In modern society, this transformation of nature is primarily organized through a process of commodification, or the conversion of natures into homogenized, standardized objects to be bought and sold in global markets (Patel and Moore, 2017). For example, commodification turns a forest ecosystem into lumber. Once the useful lumber has been extracted, the remaining soil becomes a medium to which commodities (chemical fertilizers, fungicides, herbicides, etc.) can be added to for producing soybeans or other commodities. This process removes ecological, social and cultural context, as everything is viewed through the mechanistic lens of utility and exchange value. However, to be clear, this process of stripping away all context is not a phenomenon that is exclusive to ‘the market’. Scott (1998, p. 8) points out that quite often, “market standardization and bureaucratic homogeneity” are alike, with the difference being that for capitalists, “simplification must pay”.

Facing this state of affairs, the aim of UPE is not only analytical: to understand and describe the ways in which nature is transformed through these socio-spatial processes. It is also a political project that aims toward radically democratization of socio-spatial processes and metabolic flows. With an orientation towards politicization, UPE’s approach brings particular socio-environmental issues into the realm of the political, in which the normal rules of politics may be transcended (Swyngedouw, 2007). Politicization occurs when a particular matter, demand or issue becomes elevated through a process of metaphorical universalization, where specific problems (for example CO2 emissions, or nitrogen pollution) are not seen as isolated technical matters. UPE’s radical politicization foregrounds such matters as a particular instantiation of a more universal problem with the ways in which socio-metabolic processes (i.e. ‘the economy’) are structured. The act of politicization moves the discussion from the restricted realm of business as usual politics to the open space of the democratic political.

1.4 Radical democracy and citizenship

1.4.1 Radical democracy
Radicality implies going to the root. The roots of the word democracy go back to ancient Greece, where δημοκρατία roughly meant ‘rule by the people’. For the
Greeks, democracy indicated a sharing of power or rule (kratos) among members of the political community (the demos, which was, of course, exclusive of slaves, women, and foreigners). Demokratia can be traced back to Greece in ca. 500 BCE, but more recent archaeological studies have provided evidence that the word demos, and cultures and practices based on popular self-government, have much older origins in the lands that are today Syria, Iraq and Iran (Keane, 2009). Moreover, there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that indigenous North American cultures, like the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) Confederacy, had a profound influence on the philosophical foundations and organizational principles of Euro-Americans like Roger Williams and Benjamin Franklin, who are recognized with contributing to the formation of modern liberal democratic principles (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021; Parry, 2020). The essence of democracy is also represented in India’s swaraj, which generally means self-rule and self-organization in independence from foreign domination (Shiva, 2005). Freedom from domination, demanding legitimacy from authority, and self-determination also resonate broadly with cooperative movements, various strains of anarchism, libertarian socialism, anti-colonialism, feminism, and human rights movements (Chomsky, 2018). Suffice to say, the democratic ideal of people coming together as equals – or demanding and presuming equality – to decide how they want to live in common has been around for some time, and has been emergent across various cultures and groups of people.

The qualifier of ‘radicality’ in radical democracy is understood as necessary, since throughout the 20th-century the practice of ‘democracy’ reflected in government and political theory became increasingly detached from the roots of the word. Prominent democratic realists of the 20th-century, including Schumpeter (1942) and Schattschneider (1960), put forth seminal theoretical works which legitimized the attitude that popular involvement in politics should be restricted as much as possible (Miller, 2020; Palumbo, 2015). Such theorists helped to entrench the notion that democracy, understood as rule of the people, was an archaic concept that was unfeasible in a complex modern world. In turn ‘free and fair’ elections increasingly became the hallmark of democracy, despite elections being associated with anti-democratic modes of governance like aristocracy for much of European history (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021, p. 356). Democracy in the 20th-century was, in turn, re-defined to include arrangements of governance that were more akin to competitive oligarchy, or the few jockeying for power to rule over the many (Miller, 2020).

Throughout its long history, democracy has not been seen as a fixed set of formal procedures and juridical institutions, as it often is thought of today. It has rather often been understood as an activity of people deciding together how they want to live (Tully, 2008a). Democracy’s creed of self-governance has, in fact, often led to the transcendence of those institutions of government which claim to embody it. Beginning with the Haitian Revolution against the French in the late 18th century, uprisings and struggles have continuously arisen in the name of democracy in the context of societies which profess themselves to already be democratic (Žižek, 2011). History has shown us that the who and the how of democracy are subject to constant change. Democracy has been (and on the margins of society, continues to be) a contested and protean concept. Radical democracy, as such, is an always ongoing, always imperfect, and always incomplete process that can never be closed. It is in this spirit that I use the word.

The ways that citizenship and the common good are understood and defined have deep implications for how democracy is put into practice. Mainstream political theory has tended to focus on two major traditions of citizenship: the liberal tradition, and the civic republican tradition (Mouffe, 1992). These traditions of citizenship are rooted in different conceptualizations of democracy, what Tully (2014) has called the civil tradition (of liberal citizenship) and civic tradition (of civic republican citizenship). These traditions unfold different understandings of what constitutes the common good, and, therefore, different understandings of how the public sphere (as a space of interdependence) and the private sphere (as a space of autonomy) should be organized. After briefly outlining these different traditions here, I will sketch a nuanced and fluid (but not relativist) understanding of citizenship that informs this thesis.

1.4.2 The civil tradition of democracy

In the civil (or liberal) tradition of democracy, citizenship has been primarily understood as a legal status (Mouffe, 1992; Tully, 2014). This position, articulated by Kantian liberals like John Rawls (1971), is primarily focused on guaranteeing rights, which are institutionalized into formal rules and procedures (Peter, 2021). Rights are understood as rationally deduced (e.g. Rawl’s ‘veil of ignorance’), and granted and upheld by states. Civil citizenship is primarily concerned with rights of ‘negative’ liberties. A ‘negative’ liberty is understood as the right to an “absence of coercion” from public interference (Mouffe, 1992, p. 228). This generally means that individuals are free to pursue individualized notions of ‘good’ in the private sphere (Mouffe, 1992; Tully, 2014). The ‘good’, as such, must be defined and pursued by each individual in accordance with their personal values, desires and self-interests. This is a strong separation of ethics and politics, in which normative concerns – deciding what is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ – are increasingly relegated to the private moral realm (Mouffe, 1992, p. 230). This separation is necessary for liberals, as they see any efforts attempting to construct a substantive ‘common good’ in politics to have totalitarian implications (as in the ‘tyranny of
the majority’) (ibid.). For Rawls (1971), placing a particular interpretation of the common good ahead of individual liberties is never justified (Skinner, 1992). As such, the common good is understood in an aggregate sense, as the “sum total of individual goods” (Skinner, 1992, p. 214; Rawls, 1971, p. 246). This conception of democracy, which is hegemonic in the contemporary context, excludes the possibility for legitimate political action to manifest outside of the formally established procedures and rules of existing institutions.

1.4.3 The civic tradition of democracy
If we understand citizenship in the civil democratic tradition as the valuation of the individual right over the common good, citizenship in the civic tradition of democracy can generally be understood as a reversal of these valuations. Civic citizenship is constituted by “negotiated practices, as praxis – as actors and activities in context” (Tully, 2014, p. 35, emphasis in original). The participation of citizens in negotiating the common good is an inherent part of the political community, as civic republicans argue that the postulates of liberal citizenship are themselves based on a particular substantive interpretation of the common good (Mouffe, 1992; Peter, 2021). In order for the ‘modern individual’ to have been constituted at all, it is argued, there needed to be some semblance of a common good that first established the institutions and organizational structures which defined and enforced civil rights (Taylor, 1985). While the civil tradition is concerned with ‘negative’ or ‘positive’ freedoms (the freedom from, or the freedom to, that are granted by institutional authorities), freedom in the civic tradition is inalienable – it is based on “an act and a perpetual praxis of being free” (Peter, 2021, p. 134). “Civic freedom is not an opportunity but a manifestation,” Tully (2014, p. 39, emphasis added) explains; it is “freedoms of and in participation, with fellow citizens” (Tully, 2014, p. 39, emphasis in original). “The right to participate in the democratic codetermination of one’s common reality,” as Peter (2021, p. 135, following Tully (2014)) puts it, is “not something that is provided for by institutions, but instead something that is acted upon when people feel negatively affected by existing circumstances.”

Debates about citizenship and legitimacy are particularly salient today as we can observe increasing trends of ‘active citizens’ seeking to form civic communities around more substantial forms of democratic participation than those which are currently offered. For some, this may signal a rejection of liberal citizenship and a return to ‘pre-modern’ civic republicanism. However, in order to avoid nostalgia, it is also important to recognize the many accomplishments and virtues of liberal citizenship, like the guarantee of civil rights and protection of pluralism (Mouffe, 1992). Moreover, it should be noted that active citizenship is not inherently progressive or geared towards social justice (Purcell, 2006; Silver et al., 2010). When critiquing and aiming to go beyond the ways liberal citizenship in its dominant form is practiced, it is important to not ‘throw the baby out with the bathwater’.

1.4.4 Radical democratic citizenship
In order to conceptualize how the desires of active citizens can be responded to without simply returning to a civic republican institution of citizenship, a radical democratic perspective on citizenship is based on an anti-essentialist understanding of the public and private spheres (Laclau, 1996; Mouffe, 1992; Peter, 2021). Here, the public and private spheres are not a dichotomy, but a gradient of qualitative difference, or an “unstable frontier that is constantly trespassed” (Mouffe, 1996, p. 3). Depending on the context, there will be many legitimate interpretations of what a citizen is and how they choose to participate in democracy or act politically. Citizenship is neither just a passive legal status granted by an institution, nor the ultimate identity of a person. Interpretations and practices of citizenship are dynamic and may change based on different contexts. Radical democracy in this sense, is an “inherently intersubjective and social form of being in everyday life” (Peter 2021, p. 26). From this perspective, participating as a democratic citizen cannot be limited to the realm of the state and its formal procedures. Even under the most “institutionalized and rationalized” rule of law (Tully, 2014, p. 57), the practice of law is always negotiated, and is subject to dissenting interpretations (Peter, 2021). Participation in life is inherently political, in this regard, as “everyday patterns of action” are constitutive of “different relationships and institutions” (Peter, 2021, p. 134).

Here, the common good is here understood as what Mouffe (1993) calls a vanishing point. The common good, as such, is a concept which we must refer to when analyzing the ways that citizens act together, and form communities or coalitions in pursuit of common goals, but which is never fixed into an “end state” (Tully, 2008a), or restricted to a particular path. Although the common good cannot be fixed around a particular substantive interpretation, it could be said to point in a general direction. This general direction is guided by ethical-political principles upon which a political community is founded, and a conflictual consensus in which various interpretations of those principles co-exist in negotiation with each other.

The example of liberal democracy can help to illustrate further. In a liberal democracy the ethical-political principles that constitute the common good are liberty and equality. Ontological disagreement about how these principles are interpreted leads to different factions (social democrats, conservatives, neo-liberals, socialists, greens, etc.). For Mouffe and those who follow a perspective of agnostic
pluralism, this ontological disagreement over the common good is a constitutive element of any political community. There can never be a final agreement on a particular interpretation of ethico-political principles. Agonism “implies the impossibility of a final reconciliation of all views” (Mouffe, 2013, p. 130), and pluralism recognizes that compromise across social and political difference is characteristic of politics as a final agreement can never be reached and sustained. It follows that, depending on the context, there will be a plurality of legitimate interpretations of what a citizen is and does, how they choose to participate in democracy, or act politically. In summary, radical democratic citizenship recognizes the importance of formal procedures and a stable framework for democratic relations, but understands these procedures and frameworks as co-constituted by civic actors who are involved in constant negotiation over and interpretation of the latter procedures and frameworks.

This stance is pluralistic, but it should not be seen as a relativism that justifies any articulation of citizenship, or any political system (Mouffe, 2000). It is rather based on the acceptance of a “plurality of legitimate answers to the question of what is a just political order” (Mouffe, 2000, p. 62), as justice cannot be rationally deduced from first principles, but is contextually negotiated through praxis. This can be illustrated using the example of a signpost encountered on a path given by Wittgenstein (1953, p. 85):

*Does the signpost shew which direction I am to take when I have passed it; whether along the road or the footpath or cross-country? But where is it said which way I am to follow it; whether in the direction of its finger or (e.g.) in the opposite one?*

Mouffe argues that this insight about multiple ways of following a signpost avoids an ‘anything goes’ relativism: it is clear that one could choose to go in the opposite direction, which would be analogous to blatantly violating a set of ethico-political principles (e.g. violating minority rights). Yet there are a multiplicity of interpretations and practices of liberty and equality that can be rationally defended: I can follow the signpost that points in the direction of liberty and equality, but there are nearly an infinite number of paths I could choose to take while walking in this general direction. This perspective allows for critical judgement, while at the same time recognizing a multiplicity of interpretations and practices (see also Tully, 1989). Here we can again highlight the importance of phronetic knowledge against the technocratic desire to remove contextual human judgement from the public debate about interpretations of the common good. In asking questions like: “Where are we going? Is it desirable? What should be done?”, (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 63) in dialogue with citizens, phronetic social science can contribute to (not determine) public debates about the common good, and the legitimacy of particular acts of citizenship.

The goal of this critical ethos is not to induce some state of perpetual conflict or deconstruction. The purpose is to hold power to account, and in the event that current hegemonies limit capacities for addressing and meeting socio-ecological problems and needs, to widen the field of political possibilities. The critical ethos safeguards the ever present risk of *Democracy, Justice and Rationality* being invoked to legitimize practices of governance that are not democratic, just or rational (Mouffe, 1996).

The following section gives an analysis of the contemporary political context, which has implications for the types of democratic citizenship that may prove effective in pursuit of democratic counter-movements against commodification.

### 1.5 Contextual analysis for contemporary counter-movements: a strategic relational approach to the state

The contextual analysis in this section is grounded in a relational understanding of state institutions and powers (Jessop, 2016), which has implications for the types of counter-movements that may prove both effective and durable in the context of the democratic crisis discussed above. It also provides insight for how such counter-movements could strategically relate to the question of the state. In a strategic relational approach, the state is not understood to have a particular essence. It is seen as a social relation: an institutional ensemble that has specific capacities to contingently favor particular agents and interests over others, depending on the balance of forces within a given polity (Jessop, 2016). At any given time within a particular state there are always a plurality of competing hegemonic visions, which define the “nature and purposes of the state” (Jessop, 2016, p. 58), and state projects, which unfold a “coherent template or framework within which individual agents and organs of the state can coordinate and judiciously combine [...] policy and practices, and also connect diverse policies to pursue a (more or less illusory) national interest, public good, and social welfare” (Purcell 2013, p. 85). The contextual analysis of neoliberal state hegemony, informs my approach to answering the question, “what can we do now, in these circumstances?” (Gokmenoglu, 2022, p. 3).
1.5.1 Counter-movements against commodification: three possibilities and historical lessons

As market society subjects all things and relations to the de-contextualizing logic of the commodity form, counter-movements arise as a form of protection from the excesses (i.e. the ‘negative externalities’ for economists) of commodification in market society. There are generally three possibilities for a counter-movement against commodification (Patomäki, 2022, p. 39). First, the harmful effects of market society can be mitigated by a territorial state power (e.g. command and control, technocracy). Second, the market society can be made to continue functioning through force (e.g. through fascism, expansionism, or colonialism) (cf. Harvey, 1974). Third, market society can be transcended through radical democratization of the social relations of (re)production (which some have referred to as socialism or radical democracy). All three of these possibilities have historically emerged in 20th-century counter-movements. The first two have been realized in practice, while the third has largely been suppressed.

Building on the argumentation of several theorists (Block and Davis, 2015; Palumbo and Scott, 2018; Wolff, 2012), I understand the shortcomings of the former two possibilities as creating the conditions in which a renewed cycle of commodification was realized as neoliberalism, as a particular state formation, became hegemonic. Here neoliberalism is not understood as a retreat of the state, but as a form of statecraft in itself – a different application of state power (Palumbo and Scott, 2018). Neoliberalism is understood a flexible program of government: although it has been deployed in variegated forms around the world, it generally displays the interrelated trends of state-sanctioned privatization, liberalization, and marketization of formerly public assets and commons (Palumbo and Scott, 2018; Brenner et al., 2010). In these terms, neoliberalism can be understood as an iteration of the second type of counter-movement described above, in which the state is mobilized as a protector of market society from democratizing forces (cf. Mitchell and Fazi, 2017).

In working to mitigate the so-called side effects of the movement towards commodification throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries – e.g. the Great Depression – counter-movements of the first variety described above (territorial state power) re-established historical forms of social insurance into state institutions. States instituted, among other things, pension funds, social security, and other forms of social benefit and labour legislation to those ends. In doing so, they created new sorts of commons which differed from traditional commons (the various forms of immaterial and material social insurance or shared resources in which communities would provide each other with reciprocal mutual aid in difficult times) in a crucial way. The ‘commons’ of the state were administered by a centralized state apparatus of professionals and experts, rather than a community which was constituted by mutual reciprocity among members. Given their relatively large scale, these ‘commons’ abstract mutual reciprocity into what Anderson (1981) has called the imagined community. This, in turn, paves the way for increased individualization, shirking of one’s responsibility to others, and self-interested behavior (cf. Bookchin, 1992). Arguably, such factors were significant in creating the conditions in which Margaret Thatcher’s claim that ‘there is no such thing as society’ resonated amongst many citizens of liberal democracies. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, the ensuing Washington Consensus presented global neoliberal capitalism as the end state of history (Harvey, 2005), and neoliberal policies became, not only electorally successful, but equated with common sense (Higgins and Larner, 2017).

Without romanticizing pre-modern forms of the commons, which certainly had their issues and inequalities, one may accept that making individuals dependent on a distant and centralized state apparatus for social protection and insurance creates vulnerability. As increase in state organization and supervision also creates the conditions for technocratic post-politics, which is well described by Wilson and Swyngedouw (2015, p. 6). They argue that,

In post-politics, political contradictions are reduced to policy problems to be managed by experts and legitimated through participatory processes in which the scope of possible outcomes is narrowly defined in advance. ‘The people’ – as a potentially disruptive political collective – is replaced by the population – the aggregated object of opinion polls, surveillance, and biopolitical optimisation. Citizens become consumers, and elections are framed as just another ‘choice’, in which individuals privately select their preferred managers of the conditions of economic necessity.

Post-politics, in this sense, is more akin to law enforcement (Rancière 2011, p. 9), or the management of ‘the population’ by a class of experts. As the movement towards commodification in market society was first initiated through a coalition of state and market forces, a sole reliance on the redistributive capacities of the state to ameliorate the negative effects of commodification is subject to a dismantling through a counter-movement that rekindles a state-market coalition.

1.5.2 Contesting the organized irresponsibility of neoliberalism

According to Palumbo and Scott (2018), a re-kindling of the state market alliance is exactly what happened with the onset of neoliberalism in the 1980s. The neoliberal state allied with capital in pursuit of further enclosures (Harvey, 2005; Huron, 2018) – this time expanding beyond turning common pool resources into standing reserve commodities, to the ‘financialization of everything’ (Swyngedouw,
legitimacy, and possibilities for a democratic counter-movement (see e.g. theory, including the work of post-democratic and post-political theorists, one
If one takes seriously the analysis above, and the work of contemporary critical
maintenance of a plausible deniability of responsibility. Echoing the thesis of Nicol
of statecraft that entrenches central power and control (outlined above), while
void’, the state is off the hook when something goes wrong. This shift represented,
created the conditions for further commodification. In an international economy,
dominated by transnational bureaucracies and multinational corporations, there is
what Beck (2010, p. 173) has called an organized irresponsibility, in which
accountability for protecting society against harms and negative externalities of
market activity, ostensibly, belongs to no one (cf. Brown, 2013; Graeber, 2015).
Why is the cobalt in phones harvested using child slave labour in the Congo? Why
does the lithium in electric car batteries have devastating socio-environmental
consequences in South America? Why are foods sprayed with carcinogenic
chemicals, and optimized for profitability instead of health?
When confronted with such questions, our leaders can simply throw their
hands up and claim that these problems are out of their jurisdiction. It is easy to
rationalize that these problems are all in the hands of the individual consumer.
Yet Palumbo and Scott see this organized irresponsibility as, in part, a form of
deliberate statecraft that has allowed central government authority to escape from
democratic accountability. Under what Hajer (2003) has called the ‘institutional
vacuum’, the state is off the hook when something goes wrong. This shift represented,
for Palumbo and Scott, a move to a “market on a leash” (see p. 100-105): a form of
statecraft that entrenches central power and control (outlined above), while
maintaining a plausible deniability of responsibility. Echoing the thesis of Nicol
(2010) discussed above (see also Wolin, 2008), Palumbo and Scott (2018) write,

[...] what is being hollowed out by neoliberal reforms is not the state and
its system of government, but the constitutional framework that established
democratic side-constraints and mechanisms of supervision on government
action. (p. 100)

If one takes seriously the analysis above, and the work of contemporary critical
theory, including the work of post-democratic and post-political theorists, one
is left with a bleak, if not dystopian, picture of the current state of democratic
legitimacy, and possibilities for a democratic counter-movement (see e.g.
Agamben et al., 2011; Miller, 2020; Swyngedouw, 2019). Yet with the perspective
of radical democratic citizenship, we can see that many struggles for democracy are
already emerging in civil (or as Tully would say, ‘civic’) society (Purcell, 2013).
As the American activist and novelist Wendell Berry (quoted in Baker and Bilbro,
2017, p. 193) has put it,

[...] a counter movement to greed and waste and the dominance of
corporations is already happening. It is happening simply because a lot of
people have seen things needing to be done and are doing them. They are
at work without grants, without official instruction or permission, and mostly
unnoticed by the politicians and the news industry.

Looking back to the twentieth century, we can see that the various welfare
programs listed above first emerged because, as Berry says, there were people
who saw things that needed to be done and set off doing them together. Motivated
by hardship and forged out of necessity, experiments with organizational forms
based on mutual aid and solidarity emerged at a distance from the state in civil
society (e.g. voluntarily among communities, church groups, or worker’s unions)
(Horowitz, 2021). When these institutions were universalized in some nation
states, it was not simply due to the benevolence of elites in government. They
were built from the ground up and then institutionalized through hard-fought
political struggle in which the state was understood as a terrain of contestation
for hegemony.

This leads me to suggest two things that will be further explored in this thesis. First,
civic initiatives which emerge at a distance from the state can act, not only as living
indicators for what problems are being experienced by people (Kaika, 2017; Ulug
et al., 2021); the forms of organization they generate can also serve as models or
prototypes for more general application (i.e. as with the welfare state programs
in the 20th-century). Second, as these prototypes are brought to scale, a simple
outsourcing of the model to management by a state agency is neither desirable,
nor durable over time. Rather, what is needed are prototypes that work to broaden
the culture of democracy as a way of life, in the sense of people gaining capacities
and resources to manage their own affairs together (Purcell, 2017). Instead of
centralization, which abstracts community and reciprocity in institutions of social
insurance, the goal of a remade counter-movement could be setting into motion
a “self-expanding circuit of radical democratic self-governance” (Milburn and
Russell, 2019, p. 3). The point is not that the state has no role to play – it is that the
counter-movement, and the process of radical democratization, cannot end (and
likely, will not begin, for reasons spelled out above) with the creation of new state
institutions. That is why I focus on the counter-movement as a gradual process of
commoning institutions of governance in which people can become democratic citizens who are engaged in civic activities. These civic activities are always a part of either reproducing or transforming existing institutional structures. My argument can be understood in line with the third counter-movement possibility spelled out above: a radical democratization of the social relations of (re) production, in which other values are able to contest and usurp market ideology in the organization of social, economic and political life. This brings me to the third aim of five in this research: to demonstrate how these seeds of civic activity are already being scattered all around us by everyday people, waiting to be nurtured into robust counter-movements.

1.6 Commoning the counter-movement

Traditionally commons have been understood as a noun, a shared ‘common-pool resource’. Elinor Ostrom and institutional economists have defined the commons as (1) a resource, (2) a community who uses and benefits from the resource, and (3) a set of rules that the community devises to care for the resource (cf. Bollier, 2009). In this research, I generally understand commons, not primarily as a noun, but as a civic activity of commoning.

The notion of commoning is understood as a constitutive practice of creating and maintaining a community, which together, shares in management of a resource (Helfrich, 2009; Huron, 2018). As such, it is a direct counter-movement against commodification. The extensive empirical work of geographer Amanda Huron has suggested that commoning is a “dialectical relationship between commons formation and community formation” (Huron, 2015, p. 170). In other words, it is difficult, or even impossible, to determine whether the commons (qua resource) precedes the community, or vice versa. Commons and community are co-constitutive. Or, as anthropologist Stephen Gudeman suggests in resonance with the work of Palumbo and Scott’s analysis of the erosion of commons/community in the 20th century: “[w]ithout a commons, there is no community; without a community, there is no commons” – while “[l]osing away the commons destroys community, and destroying a complex of relationships demolishes a commons” (Gudeman, 2001, p. 27, cited in Gibson-Graham et al., 2016). Commoning is defined by J.K. Gibson-Graham and colleagues as a “relational process – or more often a struggle – of negotiating access, use, benefit, care and responsibility” (Gibson-Graham et al., 2016, p. 195). Commoning places a particular focus on the community formation and maintenance that is inherent to a commons. A recognition of struggle accepts that community and communal values are not something that come naturally or without work; these must be taught and renewed continuously (Linebaugh, 2014; Ostrom, 2005).

Commoning is the civic act of recognizing and negotiating interdependence with a community (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013, p. xix). But what happens when our interdependence takes us beyond our local civic reach? Do global problems not require ‘big’ global solutions?

Huron wrestles with these contradictions in her understanding of commoning. In line with the UPE project, Huron (2018, p. 176) argues that,

[...] the forces that shape the city are, increasingly, global forces. And the challenges of commoning in the city—of working with strangers, of operating in contested environments, rife with inequality— are the same challenges that we face at the scale of the globe. Thus to tackle the problems of the global commons—the commons of the atmosphere, the seas, outer space—we might first begin by training ourselves in the urban commons: the tangible, the here and now.

Her insights do not only apply to the ‘urban’ commons, but to civic activity taking place in any particular locality – whether it is in the peri-urban commons, the rural commons, or even in the context of the university. Learning to common, and thus learning to recognize interdependence and negotiate ‘the good’ with community, is a practice that needs to be continuously honed.

Huron does not shy away from the contradictions contained in her conclusions about commoning. Like Maria Kaika (2018), she embraces the generative capacity of contradiction that comes from “connecting struggles over particular places and particular resources […] to struggles over other places and resources” (Huron, 2018, p. 176). This calls for a counter-movement that is grounded in place, while remaining conscious of and coordinating with others working on projects of radical democracy around the world. It also spells out a role for academics to develop theories of the commons and commoning that connect with struggles in other places, and extrapolate local or ephemeral alternatives into a basis for wider institutional frameworks or networks of translocal solidarity. With an ecological perspective on political organization and action (Nunes, 2021), different roles and relationships – from the building of strong local nodes to the coordination and expansion of networks – all must be taken into account.

1.6.1 Cosmo-localism as a frame

A concept that is useful in this regard is cosmopolitan-localism, or cosmo-localism. Cosmo-localism was a concept developed by scholar Wolfgang Sachs
in the early 1990s, that has been revived by scholars working at the crossroads of commons and technology, such as Michel Bauwens and Jose Ramos (Bauwens and Ramos, 2018; Ramos et al., 2023; see also Tully (2014) on ‘glocal’ citizenship). Both ‘cosmo’ and ‘local’ have positive and negative connotations, and like the definition of citizenship that was spelled out above, their combination attempts to both draw on strengths and incorporate criticisms. Cosmopolitanism implies universality, international solidarity, and openness to diverse people and places. On the other hand, it is (disapprovingly) associated with neoliberal policies of globalization that have disadvantaged working class populations and subsistence economies (see e.g. Hebinck, 2018; Shiva, 2016). Moreover, it is linked with elitism and a smug air of cultural superiority – all of which have contributed to the rise of regressive populism in western countries (Fraser, 2016). Localism, on the other hand, implies a preference for economic localism and community, which, again, are favorably associated with democracy and resilience. However, there is also a dark connotation to localism that is seen as backwards, parochial and close-minded (see e.g. Purcell, 2006; Silver et al., 2010). The danger in localism is that it may pit the well-being of the local against the well-being of people in other places.

Cosmo-localism is neither narrowly focused on a particular locality, nor lost in a placeless globalization that erodes difference, particularity, and (degrees of) local sovereignty. Instead of a mistaken idea of the universal that imposes one particularity on all people and places (i.e. a narrowly defined notion of “the good”, one hegemonic vision and homogenized ideology) (McGowan, 2020), cosmo-localism is based on a pluralistic understanding of the universal (or the pluriversal (Gibson-Graham, 2019)). Rooted in openness, cosmo-localism “emphasizes community, commons and conviviality” (McCallum, 2021, p. 159), and is more bottom-out (in the sense of horizontal and multi-polar connections) than bottom-up (in the sense of vertical connections that converge on a single point). As McGowan (2020) argues, it is only with such a pluralistic stance that we approach true universality, as the only thing that is common amongst all members of humanity is an irreducible non-belonging to an ‘in group’. In broadening beyond the local gaze, viewpoints are multiplied, and “a larger number of beings, cultures, phenomena, organisms, and people” are taken into account (Latour, 2018, p. 37). As it makes room for plurality and local difference, cosmo-localism acknowledges that social and ideological homogeneity are unlikely to scale (cf. Nunes, 2021). In this sense, a cosmo-localist politics calls to mind Wittgenstein’s signpost analogy: a cosmo-orientation towards commoning and radical democracy coordinates a plurality of local practices and interpretations of this orientation.

Cosmo-localism is both a lens for analysis used in this research, and a political project that aims to coordinate local strategies for building collective resilience amongst networks of citizens that collaborate beyond their local context. This research is cosmo-local to the extent that I am primarily focused on localized practices and strategies in western Europe – places where I have social ties – while I keep in mind a global perspective, and the uneven distribution of crises.

Two examples may illustrate the political project of cosmo-localism more clearly. One is the international peasants movement, La Via Campesina (LVC). As an organization that is made up of 182 chapters across 81 countries, LVC represents approximately 200 million small-scale farmers, fishers, and other landworkers (Norberg-Hodge et al., 2021, p. 173). It has a definite cosmopolitan focus. This is crucial as LVC positions itself to fight and lobby against global agribusiness and international trade policies that harm small-scale farmers in favor of multi-national corporations, such as those discussed above. However, LVC’s members are also very much locally-embedded and focused on practical projects, like agroecology training schools and seed saving campaigns. Based on the campesino a campesino methodology of farmer to farmer cooperation and exchange (Holt-Giménez, 2006), LVC can also be seen as a “campesino-organization” to “campesino-organization” movement in the sense that locally-based organizations exchange and cooperate with each other in various ways (Rosset and Valentín 2019, p. 262) that ultimately generate practical and dispersed outcomes.

Another example is the Fearless Cities and ‘new municipalism’ movement. While municipalist politics in general have a very old history, new municipalism is a more modern impulse in which municipal government is seen as a lever or a vehicle - a means of grasping and exercising power - for pursuing social change (Russell, 2019a). The desire for new municipalist politics can be seen to have grown in the context of the recent movement of the squares. In 2011, groups of people across the world occupied public squares – from Tahrir in Cairo, to Syntagma in Athens, to Zuccotti Park in New York City – with a general goal of spurring discussions about economic and political inequality, and building more radical forms of participatory democracy. Many groups were formed around the revolutionary impulse of creating new autonomous and horizontalist institutions, modeled after the camps that were formed in the occupied space. While these impulses did not lead to the promised revolution, the squares movement planted a seed for radical change, that has ultimately contributed to the new municipalist movements that have been gaining traction ever since. Recent years have been filled with the growth of new municipalist movements which have marked a strategic shift from “occupying squares to occupying institutions” (Thompson, 2021, p. 5). Initiatives such as Massa Critica (in Naples, Italy), Ciudad Futura (in
Rosario, Argentina), Beirut Madinati (in Beirut, Lebanon), Zagreb Je Nas (in Zagreb, Croatia), and the Jackson-Kush Plan/Cooperation Jackson (in Jackson, Mississippi) have since sprung up over the globe3, and developed translocal networks of solidarity and cross-pollination of ideas. This includes meeting at networking events, sharing strategies, and grouping and mapping themselves as “Fearless Cities”. Gerardo Pisarello, a member of Barcelona’s new municipalist movement Barcelona en Comú, describes the movement as “decentralized, diverse, and radically pragmatic” (Barcelona en Comú et al., 2019, p. 7). Barcelona en Comú (BeC, Barcelona en Común) has been conducting an ongoing experiment in pragmatism, discovering what happens when a new municipalist movement attempts to enter into local electoral politics. The citizen platform, BeC, was launched in 2014 with the aim to unite a diverse coalition of citizen interests, classes, and activist groups and bring more open and participatory democratic modes of governance to the city. Despite strong critiques (see for example the work of Manuel Delgado, outlined in Charnock and Ribera-Fumaz (2018, p. 196-197)), BeC continues to inspire debate and civic action in and beyond Barcelona.

Both of these examples display various levels (and notions) of success, and a diversity of strategies. One commonality is that they go beyond conventional modes of participation in political parties and the nation state. While they are locally rooted and organized around practical projects, they do not remain isolated. They engage in a strategic relational way with existing state formations (or supranational institutions) in a contentious manner and in a plurality of ways depending on the context. From the perspective of this research, one thing is clear. Such strategies which not only go beyond what is offered by the state and the market (as they currently exist), while simultaneously working to engage and transform existing institutions, are on the cutting edge of contemporary radical democratic praxis. As such civic actors conduct the necessary experiments to forge counter-movements in the contemporary contest discussed above, they can also serve as living indicators, and as the basis for developing cosmo-local prototypes that may either be applied by citizens and groups in other places, or creatively supported by policymakers or those in positions of power and influence who wish to champion democratic counter-movements. Discerning, recognizing, and amplifying such socially innovative practices (as the seeds of civic activity) that are germinating within the cracks of contemporary neoliberalism and post-democracy is the fourth aim of five in this research.

1.7 Research journey and case study selection

To reach the aims and answer the questions of this research, this thesis has drawn on three empirical studies and one reflective analysis of what it means to pursue transformative research as an early stage researcher in the context of contemporary academia. The ‘golden thread’ (Smith, 2015) that ties these case studies together is outlined in more detail below. Case studies were selected based on the theoretical framework introduced above. Case selection was further influenced by the importance of social relationships to the research approach. This will be discussed further in the methods section below. In formulating my methodological approach, I was initially inspired by the approach of James Tully (2008a, 2008b), in his two volume series, Public Philosophy in a New Key. Tully defines this public philosophy as a civic task of addressing common affairs and the fundamental concepts and categories of politics, together, in dialogue with civic activists as equals. The approach is described as a critical attitude (or an ethos) towards historically analyzing the present. In this analysis, the researcher is a part of the demos, rather than above and outside of civic life (as a purportedly objective observer in the ‘ivory tower’). The critical approach articulated by Tully has a strong focus on practice and engaging with actually existing civic struggles (Armitage, 2011; Tully, 2002). The aim is to establish an open-ended dialogue and co-learning relationship with civicly-active citizens (Tully, 2008a, p. 3), and integrate civic activity together with science and policymaking. My approach is oriented towards transformative research and action research, both of which contain a potential for “a deeply critical quality that seeks to […] experiment with more sustainable and socio-environmentally just forms of knowing and acting” (Jhagroe, 2018, p. 65). Here, the fifth and final aim of this research emerges: to explore and reflect on the role of academic researchers in bringing about democratic sustainability transformations.

1.7.1 Is there room for food in The Smart City?

The choice of empirical studies requires a thorough explanation. These investigations follow my (winding) journey from critically studying ‘Smart City’ strategies in Faridabad, India and Cologne, Germany during my MSc research at the University of Cologne; to exploring the possibilities of German food policy councils in commoning governance; to working the fields with small-scale Dutch farmers in an attempt to understand the strategies that allow them to survive, and even expand, in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds.

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3 See: https://roarmag.org/magazine/municipalist-movement-internationalism-solidarity/

4 As the journey is winding, I ask for patience from the reader in letting the logic unfold.
During my MSc, I had the opportunity to travel to Faridabad, India, a major city in the Delhi National Capital Region. Just as I was delving into UPE literature, I was able to conduct field work in Faridabad where the Government of India was working to implement one instance of its national ‘100 Smart Cities’ mission. The landscape of Faridabad was one marked by transition. Driving down the city’s main highway, I observed a peculiar mix of ‘pop-up’ real estate agencies and small-scale farmers working fields and tending to livestock – all amidst a backdropped horizon filled with massive, high-rise construction projects. The flow and metabolism discussed by UPE theorists was tangible here. We could feel urbanization’s transformation of what was left of subsistence farming society in Faridabad. After spending time in the city and interviewing local farmers, residents, experts, and members of the government’s regional urban development agency, I came away with a critical view of The Smart City project. Advertisements scattered around the city promised a ‘green’ and technologically ‘smart’ Faridabad, that would allow citizens to ‘live with nature’. This was all while displacing (sometimes forcefully) small farmers who already were living with nature in the way that they and their ancestors had for generations. The plan seemed to be to implement a top-down vision of ‘the good’, driven by eco-modernist ideas of a techno-utopian future, detractors be damned.

Well beyond Faridabad, there seems to be a consensus in public, private, and non-governmental centers of power that The Smart City (as a global imaginary) is a sustainable city, and that the pathway to sustainability is paved with high-tech, big data, and market-based solutions (Kaika, 2017). Cities around the globe have increasingly been enticed by the charm of The Smart City imaginary (Vanolo, 2016; White, 2016), which promises ‘green’ economic growth and ‘shiny’ new technologies as one-size-fits-all solutions to a variety of urban problems (Verrest and Pfeffer, 2018). Upon returning to Cologne, I saw local plans for the city’s Smart City Cologne (SCC) project through new eyes. I wondered, despite being in a very different context, was SCC similar to what I had seen in Faridabad? Was it really about tackling climate change and forging pathways to sustainability and energy transition like the local marketing suggested? How open was it to citizen participation and social innovation, as the project website and city officials claimed?
As I set off investigating these questions during my MSc research, I also came across a 2015 symposium hosted at the Technical University of Berlin called *Beware of Smart Peoples!: Redefining The Smart City Paradigm towards Inclusive Urbanism* (Stollmann et al., 2016). The symposium began with an understanding that two trends were emerging. On the one hand, was the Smart City paradigm spelled out above – a largely technological approach to solving problems of resource efficiency in cities. On the other, was the rise of actions by citizen initiatives and (urban) social movements, which called for more participation and involvement in decision-making, especially in regard to questions of inequality and sustainability. While accepting the widespread critiques of the Smart City discourse, conference participants acknowledged the potentials that were opened up by a globally-coordinated recognition that cities needed to be transformed in the face of 21st-century challenges. The point of departure for the proceeding is summed up in the following prompt:

> Are these two discourses – the discourse on The Smart City and the discourse on the urban commons– irreconcilable antagonists or do they share a common ground which needs to be uncovered, developed and advocated by us – the people? This question is by no means merely theoretical. It is also a very practical question which pertains to the management and distribution of the resources we depend on. It is a very political question as it demands negotiation and the taking of sides. And it is an ethical question in that it relates to how we respect and stand up for each other – our fellow human beings and also the non-human nature for which we are responsible (Stollmann et al., 2015, p. 6).

As I began the RECOMS project titled *Citizenship and Responsive Governance*, these two trends greatly interested me, and I was curious if and to what extent they could be reconciled. Taking the global Smart City imaginary as a representation of top-down, eco-modernist discourse, and the embodiment of elite strategies for sustainable transformation (cf. Kaika, 2017), I aimed to first gauge the extent to which top-down and bottom-up approaches could be reconciled, both locally in Cologne, and beyond. **The result of this investigation is presented in chapter two.**

### 1.7.2 Food as a lens

One result of my investigation into Smart City Cologne, was that it was framed and defined from the top-down by the initiative founders in government and industry. This framing did not include a multitude of ideas and actions developing from the bottom-up in Cologne's civil society which were also working towards similar goals as SCC, including, for example urban mobility concepts and the idea to develop a regionally-based sustainable food system put forth by Cologne's Food Policy Council (FPC). Just as The Smart City seemed to be a global imaginary for elite institutions, I began to understand initiatives like the FPC, along with broader alternative food networks (Barbera and Dagnes, 2016; Rosol, 2018) and movements (Almeida et al., 2000; Borras, 2019) as radical imaginaries that were inspiring civic activity in localities across the world. The question of whether there was space for this food-inspired civic activity in The Smart City imaginary became a question that lingered in my mind. The image of small farmers in Faridabad working their fields in the shadows of high-rise luxury condo construction projects stayed with me. The choice to focus on food in two of my case studies (in chapters three and five) – when I could have focused on other resources like water, housing, or energy – was made for two reasons:

First, food is an accessible lens through which to view complex metabolic processes. This is why David Harvey has continuously asked his students where their breakfast came from when discussing the complexities of modern industrial capitalism. Everyone needs to eat. If we are lucky, we do it several times a day. Food is a precondition of life which affects each person in one way or another. Due to its reach into nearly every aspect of social, political, and material life, food systems are a useful lens for grounding analysis into everyday lived experience (Steel, 2020). There is something about the intimacy of food that can make complex analyses more digestible and concrete. We can see that what we eat is impacted by, on the one hand, material things like climate and soil conditions, and on the other hand, by immaterial things like norms, values, institutions, and laws that quickly take us from the local and particular to the global and universal.

Not only is food the “readiest metaphor” for complex socio-natural processes, according to Carolyn Steel (2020, p. 2), it is also a “powerful tool for thinking and acting together to change the world for the better” (Steel, 2020, p. 2). Independently of Harvey, citizens around the world are also asking how the food on their plates got there – or why it did not – and understanding that these processes are major drivers of climate change, biodiversity loss, social injustice, and other ills around the globe. La Via Campesina and Brazil’s Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (Landless Workers’ Movement—MST) have struggled for decades to fight the injustices of global neoliberal capitalism, and a focus on food, agriculture and land has been at the center of their fight for radical democracy (Almeida et al., 2000; von Redecker and Herzig, 2020). Likewise, many others have taken action by building alternative food networks (AFNs) which form the basis for community resilience. Yet these more recent struggles, rooted in food, do not represent a novel phenomenon. Food has long been a focus of civic activity for those struggling to gain more control over their lives. It is not the end point of this activity, but a basis of resilience on which to build wider struggles. The work of White (2018, p. 143) documents how food and “liberatory agriculture” have...
served as both a radical imaginary and common project at the center of building collective agency and community resilience over four hundred years of African American struggles for freedom in the United States – from gardening, hunting and foraging during slavery, to organizing farming cooperatives during the civil rights movement, to food policy councils and community gardens today. These struggles resonate, not only across place, but across time, with other community projects aimed at building economic autonomy and resilience in the face of varying degrees of social, political and economic oppression. As the infamous American geopolitical strategist, Henry Kissinger, is credited with saying, “Control oil and you control nations, control food and you control the people” (Zurayk, 2013, p. 7). It is clear that food is, indeed, a linchpin of control and domination on the one hand, or freedom and sovereignty on the other.

1.7.3 Reflective analysis

In addition to using research to inform a theory of change in sustainability transformation, my orientation to transformative research and scholar activist aspirations made it important to take time to reflect critically on my own personal positionality and institutional context. This includes the funding and sponsoring of my doctoral research. The latter is the subject of chapter three, while the former is discussed further below in section 1.4.5. The reflective analysis (in chapter three) published as Leitheiser, Vezzoni, and Hakkarainen (2022) follows from the motivation to embark on this project. That is, not only aiming to understand problems with citizenship and governance in the context of sustainability and transformation, but to participate in finding pathways that democratize transformation. During the first year of my PhD research my eyes were opened to many of the tensions faced by early stage researchers like myself, who came into academia with the idea of ‘making a difference’ (Franklin, 2022). The reflection was an attempt by two RECOMS colleagues and myself to better understand our own positionality and agency within our respective institutional contexts. This critical inquiry was a key part of making sense of our surroundings, and helping us to understand how we could participate in navigating democratic pathways to sustainability more effectively.

1.7.4 Ethnographic and qualitative methods

The empirical data that informed this thesis was collected in urban and peri-urban contexts in Germany and the Netherlands over the period of 2017-2021. The main reason for selecting cases in these contexts did not come from a desire to compare them in any systematic way. They were rather purposively selected based on their particular scope and focuses, which fit with the theoretical framework outlined above. In the case of Smart City Cologne, the emphasis on facilitating citizen participation in pursuit of sustainability made the case relevant for sub-question one. In the case of German FPCs (chapter three) and Dutch farmers (chapter five), the focus on building alternative food systems from the bottom-up was the motivating factor for selection. Case selection was done in an iterative process, and I was open to possibilities as they arose. The latter became especially important as the COVID-19 pandemic forced a major change of plans in the middle of the research. Moreover, particular cases and locations were also selected based on the importance of social relationships to the research approach and methodology.

My research has aimed to gain in-depth insights into civic activity by establishing dialogue about contemporary problems with civic actors who were working to address those problems on the ground. Representativeness was not a goal of this research; instead the aim was to develop in-depth insights from particular cases that were purposively selected. To this end, I have drawn on ethnographic and qualitative research methods, including participant observation (Watson and Till, 2010), and both semi-structured and informal interviews (Leavy, 2017).

Here it is also crucial to underscore the transformative and scholar-activist orientation taken in this research. This orientation has been implicitly discussed above, but needs to be clearly explicated here. Scholar activism begins through reflexivity: a conscious recognition of the performative role – i.e. the tangible social and political consequences – that scientific research plays in society (Gibson-Graham, 2008b). I would argue that this is true regardless of whether or not one desires this role for the academy (see Sayer, 2011). Those who recognize this reality, and in turn, perform their work in service of radical social and political change can be called scholar activists (Brem-Wilson, 2014; The Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010). Although there are quite often clear conflicting interests between academics and radical change, scholar activism can be seen as an attempt to, as much as possible make “academia relevant to social movements” (Brem-Wilson, 2014, p. 127). Here I broaden this to include the goal of making academia relevant to those engaged in civic activities, whether big or small, that may form the basis for wider change. A scholar-activist orientation has particularly gained traction amongst researchers allied with the food sovereignty movement (Duncan et al., 2021; Levkoe et al., 2019), and my research has aimed to make a relevant contribution in this regard as well. The latter was done by taking a politicizing stance in publications, writing an additional ‘viewpoint’ opinion article on how planners should think about and respond to issues of food insecurity in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Leitheiser and Horlings, 2021) along with other blog posts. Furthermore, I co-organized a food policy event with German FPC leaders in summer of 2021. The event, called ‘Scientific dialogue on sustainable municipal food policy: Creating sustainable food systems together’
(in German, Wissenschaftsdiskal nachhaltige kommunale Ernährungspolitik: Gemeinsam nachhaltige Ernährungssysteme schaffen) brought together scientific experts (who were selected by myself and the FPC leaders), citizen activists and practitioners, and policy makers from German ministries and municipalities. The explicit goal of the event was to explore the question of how city-regions could cooperate in developing more sustainable and resilient food systems. However, the event also had scholar-activist implications as it contributed to ‘warming up’ the idea of FPCs to municipal governments, which my research had indicated was difficult in some cases without some form of legitimation.

Tully’s approach mentioned above includes ethnographic methods that approach civic actors and organizations as “knowledge-generating epistemic communities from which the scholarly community can learn” (Tully, 2013, p. 230). “Urban ethnography is becoming more relevant for researchers looking to do such work, and situate micro-scale and granular case studies into wider systematic analyses” (Hurron, 2018; Swanson, 2014). Urban ethnography or ‘geo-ethnography’ (Swanson 2014) differs from traditional ethnographic norms in anthropology or sociology to the extent that they direct their analysis across various scales, explicitly collapse global and local binaries, and “explore complex local-global interconnections” (Swanson, 2014, p. 57; cf. Peck and Theodore, 2012). This back-and-forth between the ‘perspective of the frog’ (granular, zoomed-in) and the ‘perspective of the eagle’ (macro-political, zoomed-out), was used throughout this research (Kaika, 2018).

A key method used in ethnographic research is participant observation. Here, researchers embed themselves into a group and become personally involved and invested in the interaction. Participant observation can be conducted by joining in community events or projects and striking up informal conversation with people about what they do and experience. As the researcher spends time with people in the group of study, they also take time to step back, critically reflect and analyze interactions and events, and zoom out to put the analysis into a wider context (Swanson, 2014). In the case of German Food Policy Councils, this was done with the use of a field diary and blog posts (Leavy, 2017). In the case of Dutch farmers reflections included regular volunteer work at a peri-urban agroecological farm, semi-structured discussions about issues of land access for new entrants, and participation in sessions at the 2021 Farming Conference organized by the group Toekomst Boeren, which is the Dutch organization associated with La Via Campesina. Ethnographic research is successful to the extent that the researcher is able to develop relationships and build rapport in the field (Leavy, 2017, p. 135). For this reason, this research has drawn on case studies in locations where social relationships and networks were already established. Below, I will chronologically explain the iterative process that led to the case selection.

During my MSc I had connections to city employees working with Smart City Cologne through the International Master of Environmental Science program at the University of Cologne in Germany. My thesis supervisor (and co-author of the article published in chapter two), Dr. Alexander Follmann, was active in and connected with several citizen initiatives in Cologne. He, along with other contacts at the University of Cologne, helped introduce me to citizen initiatives, and gain access to interviewees involved in Smart City Cologne. I also first learned about the Cologne FPC via Dr. Follmann, who has been involved in the FPC leadership for several years. Attending meetings in Cologne (2017) and Berlin (2018), helped me to learn more about FPCs and establish contacts.

Another strategy that I have used to establish contacts and build rapport has been through volunteering my time. As I aimed to gain contacts in German FPCs in more cities, I offered to volunteer at the 2018 FPC networking congress in Frankfurt. At the event, I helped with setting up, translating for non-German speakers during the event, and cleaning up after. I also took advantage of a ‘Couchsurfing’ arrangement that the Frankfurt FPC had organized for the event that allowed me to stay with a member of the FPC steering committee during the course of the weekend. These co-working experiences helped me to develop a degree of reciprocity when I later asked contacts that I met at the event to participate in interviews. In addition to data collected for chapter three, I also helped to co-organize a food policy event with leaders in the German FPC movement in June of 2021. The latter event brought together scientific experts, citizen activists and practitioners, and policy makers from German ministries and municipalities to explore the question of how city-regions could cooperate in developing more sustainable and resilient food systems.
Volunteering as a participant observer was also central to developing my research in the Netherlands. After I met Merlijn and Tjeerd, the owners of the peri-urban farm, De Stadsakker in 2019, I expressed my desire to learn more about farming, and offered to help out with small jobs. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck in 2020, I had been planning to travel to the United Kingdom for interviews with members of the Landworkers’ Alliance. As travel became impossible, and conducting many online interviews seemed both unappealing and inappropriate in regard to developing relationships, I shifted my focus more locally to Groningen and De Stadsakker jumped out as an obvious possibility for a case study. Along with a group of friends, nicknamed the ‘Planting Department’ (a play on the Planning Department at the University of Groningen that connected several of us), I found solace in working the fields at De Stadsakker during the pandemic. Spreading compost, building fences, weeding, planting and harvesting kept us all grounded during the overwhelmingly digital times of lockdown. In the years that followed, I continued to work at De Stadsakker on a weekly basis, helping along with interns on Mondays or Wednesday, and/or harvesting and packing up the weekly vegetable boxes on Friday mornings. Working alongside other interns allowed me to develop further relationships and draw on their knowledge and networks of other farms around the Netherlands. This network also allowed me to build relationships and volunteer with other farmers. Other experiences included a day volunteering at Fruittuin van West outside of Amsterdam, and being actively involved in the establishment of a new self-harvest community garden (De Blije Bodem) in Groningen’s Westpark, beginning in late winter of 2022.

In addition to ethnographic methods, I have also utilized in-depth, inductive interviews in this research. In-depth interviews allow participants to express themselves in their own words, and provide thorough accounts in their responses (Leavy, 2017). In-depth interviews provide opportunity for “purposeful coproduction of social data” (Peck and Theodore, 2012, p. 26), structured by questions formed by the researcher in advance. Semi-structured interviews offer more opportunity for coproduction of data, as the conversation may be directed to topics that the interviewer had not planned on in advance. While leaving room for openness the semi-structured interview format provided a supplement of planned questions and topics to the relatively spontaneous and unstructured participant observation data for chapters three and five. Semi-structured interviews also provided the bulk of data for chapter two. With the aim of evoking motivations, rationales, political underpinnings, etc., I used semi-structured interviews that were tailored to particular interviewees. For example, interviews with civic actors (data in chapters two, three and five) were approached differently than interviews with ‘policy elites’ (data in chapter two) as described more below. In addition to
interviews that were incorporated into published articles in each chapter. I carried out semi-structured interviews with several initiative leaders in Germany and the Netherlands involved in establishing land cooperatives (see Table 3 below). While this data was not explicitly used in any of the chapters, these interviews were carried out in an iterative process which helped in developing my understanding of ‘cosmo-local prototypes’ that will be explored more in the discussion and conclusion.

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>FIELDWORK PERIOD</th>
<th>CASES &amp; LOCATIONS</th>
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<td>2</td>
<td>April - September 2017</td>
<td>Policy elites, SmartCity Cologne, 4 Citizen initiatives (Cologne, Germany): Köln kann auch anders, Tschö RheinEnergie, Grüne Lünge Köln, Köln Mitgestalten</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews, Discourse analysis, Participant observation</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>November - February 2020</td>
<td>3 Food Policy Councils: Berlin, Germany, Cologne, Germany, Frankfurt Germany</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews, Document analysis, Participant observation, Field diaries / blog posts</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>March 2020 - November 2021</td>
<td>5 Dutch farms / farming initiatives: De Stadsakker (Groningen), De Ommuurde Tuin, Bodemzicht, Fruittuin van West, Aardemakers</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews, Participant observation</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>March 2020 - November 2021</td>
<td>4 Land cooperative leaders from the Netherlands, Germany and USA: Aardpeer, Kulturland, Solawi Genossenschappen (and CSX), Agrarian Trust</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews</td>
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Table 3: Methods and cases

The decision to take different approaches was largely made based on the distinct sets of power relations amongst the interviewee and interviewer. Cochrane (2014) identifies two major risks in terms of power relations when using interviews in research. One is that the interviewer may shape the interview process in a way that could leave the interviewees in a subordinate position – projecting their own views and serving to “limit rather than enable” voices other than the researcher’s own to be heard (Cochrane, 2014, p. 50). The second is that relatively powerful and eloquent elites in government or business may be highly persuasive in influencing the researchers’ perceptions and agenda. Researchers, like Raco (1999), have used interviews to interrogate the legitimacy of elite decision making in urban development projects, and thus noted that academics may be well positioned to empower community members with alternative viewpoints or critiques that may otherwise go unheard. For such reasons, and based on the theoretical framework outlined above, interviews civic actors were approached with an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) framework (Cooperrider et al., 2008), while interviews with policy elites were informed by a critical discourse analysis framework (Hastings, 2014).

1.7.5 Ethical considerations, data analysis, and reflections on methodology

All interviews were recorded with informed consent based on the understanding that they were voluntary and could be stopped at any time. Interviewees all agreed to the use of their names in publications in advance, but further permission was obtained for attribution of particular interview quotes in the context of each chapter. Articles were sent in full to participants for comment before they were submitted to journals. Additionally, the research was formally approved by the Faculty of Spatial Science’s research ethics committee at the University of Groningen.

Transcriptions and coding were both done manually. Data were coded with an inductive approach. First coding was done using an in vivo strategy. In vivo utilizes the exact language of participants to generate code, and allows code to develop organically (Leavy, 2017, p. 151). Direct quotes from participants were drawn on heavily in empirical results sections, and were then used to make connections to existing literature and theoretical frameworks, which were developed in each article. Further details on data collection and analysis are discussed separately in each chapter.

The choice of methodology and the data produced during research are always influenced to a degree by the values of the researcher and those of the institutional ecosystem in which they work (Sayer, 2011). Cognitive biases stemming from, inter alia, personal background, beliefs, and demographics of the researcher may influence this to a degree (Leavy 2017). This is particularly the case in political...
argumentation compared to general social science studies (George and Bennett, 2005). However, normativity, or “offering valuations of social phenomena” (Sayer, 2011, p. 24) was not shunned in this research, but consciously embraced. Values and reason are not understood as antithetical, but constitutive of one another. In a typical conversation about ‘what matters to people’ and why, one can see that values inherently shape human reasoning, and reasoning, likewise, underpins and justifies values (Sayer, 2011). It is not values, as such, that pose a problem for social scientists, but dogmatically held views that are impervious to reason and empirical evidence (Anderson, 2004). Dogmatism is certainly not limited to values – many ‘facts’ are often framed in public discourse in a ‘crypto-normative’ manner that purports objectivity beyond contestation (Habermas, 1987; Sayer, 2011). All political and economic institutions contain constitutive norms and valuations of ‘the good’ (Graeber, 2001; Mouffe, 2000; Tully, 2008a). Social objectivity and ‘common sense’ (things which can be stated without justification or reason), are largely formulated through power relations (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Shying away from these critical realities is something that is new in the 20th century in the sciences (Sayer, 2011; Wolin, 2004). My research unabashedly takes a politicizing stance, and contains an explicit aim of building and amplifying capacities for people to work towards self-determined notions of the common good, freedom, and equality. Responsibility for flaws and limitations in this work is taken wholeheartedly by the author. I acknowledge that my positionality as a fortunate, white middle-class man, working and living in western Europe has likely influenced my particular approach and conclusions in this research. Such a position has likely made my insights partial and not representative of a full range of experience.

1.8 Summary of the chapters

Chapter 2: The social innovation–(re)politicisation nexus: Unlocking the political in actually existing smart city campaigns? The case of SmartCity Cologne, Germany


The key question discussed is: Is there potential in The Smart City for reconciling top-down and bottom-up approaches to co-produce truly smart and sustainable urban futures?

This chapter explored this question, both theoretically and empirically. Theoretically, we argue that the social innovation often promised by top-down sustainability approaches, like the global imaginary of The Smart City, is not possible without a re-politicization of hegemonic logics and discourses. In other words, it is not possible to act differently without expanding the possibility of thinking differently, and vice versa. Empirical data was collected in interviews with government and industry leaders involved in Cologne’s Smart City (SCC) strategy, and with local civic organizations who were working towards similar goals (i.e. sustainability, participatory governance, etc.).

We found that, in the case of Cologne, dissenting (or ‘Andersdenkenden’) civic initiatives were not incorporated into the SCC project umbrella. This is despite a strong rhetorical commitment to fostering civic participation among SCC leaders, and a plethora of existing initiatives working toward parallel goals. This exclusion was not the result of The Smart City imaginary as such. It was rather a policy decision by relatively powerful local actors in government and industry who were...
defining and designing SCC in line with their own interests and understandings of problems, which left more radical alternatives out of SCC’s scope. We argue that elite plans for sustainable transformation need to embrace the generative capacities of conflict from dissenting groups and those who think differently (i.e. re-politicization), for true social innovation to be possible.

**Chapter 3: Toward the commoning of governance**


The central question addressed in this chapter is: How do civic initiatives attempt to common governance?

This chapter explores these questions, both theoretically and empirically, in the context of a perceived crisis in representative democracy. Theoretically, we outline commoning as a process of re-designing institutions to serve the ‘common good’. Empirically, we look to food policy councils in German cities as an example of citizens re-claiming the democratic imaginary, and working to enact a counter-movement by developing new and community-led governance institutions at the municipal scale. Here we demonstrate that existing institutional ideologies, including normative understandings of citizenship and democracy, can act as barriers to productive government collaboration with such counter-movements. We argue that the concept of commoning, and institutional designs like the Public-Commons-Partnership, could serve as a (re-)politicizing framework for creating more generative relationships between established state/market institutions and civic initiatives.

**Chapter 4: Painting Outside the Lines: Transgressing the Managerial University, Avoiding Forced Creativity**

Published as: Leitheiser, S. et al. (2022) ‘Painting Outside the Lines: Transgressing the Managerial University, Avoiding Forced Creativity’, in Franklin, A. (ed.) Co-creativity and engaged scholarship, Palgrave Macmillan.

This book chapter discusses the following questions: What are the constraints that contemporary academia places on researchers interested in contributing to sustainability transformations? How might researchers navigate these tensions?

This reflective analysis, published in the book Co-creativity and engaged scholarship (Franklin, 2022), explored the institutional context in which researchers aim to implement (co-)creative and transformative methods. We argue that this context is dominated by corporate managerialism that has been transforming universities into ‘factories’ of knowledge production that prioritize externally and pre-defined metrics in research. In order to be truly effective, we argue, creative and transformative methods in the research process need to fully acknowledge and consciously confront the institutional constraints caused by trends of managerialism and commercialization in academia. We call for academics to reflect on possibilities for transformative engaged scholarship with eyes wide open, and to fully engage with those working towards transformation in practice.

**Chapter 5: Regeneration at a distance from the state: from radical imaginaries to alternative practices in Dutch farming**

Forthcoming as: Leitheiser, S et al. ‘Regeneration at a distance from the state: from radical imaginaries to alternative practices in Dutch farming’, Sociologia Ruralis.

This article addresses the questions: How do new entrant proto-regenerative farmers in the Netherlands imagine and engage in the construction of regenerative socio-ecological relationships? What strategies do farmers use to carve out spaces of regeneration?

In answering these questions, this chapter begins with a zoomed-out, political economic analysis of a Dutch agricultural system increasingly confronted with contradictions. Here it is argued that the mainstream debate about modern industrial agriculture’s environmental contradictions are still pursued within the industrial modernist paradigm, however with a new ‘eco-twist’. Next, we zoom in to qualitative research describing various farmers who are busy navigating towards their own solutions to these contradictions on the ground.

We argue that navigating towards an emancipatory socio-ecological future – in agriculture and beyond – in the twenty-first century cannot be done with twentieth-century tools, methods, and questions alone. Building blocks for doing things differently exist all around in the form of civic activity, undertaken by citizens at a distance from the state. A major challenge for academics is to narrate these radical imaginaries as not just anecdotes, but as the raw materials of a systemic alternative which can inspire a new intellectual project for agriculture and rural development. Moreover, participatory action research agendas are a crucial tool for helping these ‘seeds of change’ grow into robust systemic alternatives. Building on the argument of chapter four, we argue that a shift towards such research agendas would require a shift in the organizational structure of public universities.
CHAPTER 2

The social innovation–(re)politicisation nexus

2.1 Introduction

As a powerful and influential discourse, The Smart City has become a seductive panacea for the shaping of urban futures (Herrschel, 2013; Hollands, 2015; Luque-Ayala and Marvin, 2015; McFarlane and Söderström, 2017; Vanolo, 2014; Viitanen and Kingston, 2014). Yet, despite its performative impact, there remains a general ambiguity of what The Smart City exactly is, what sort of futures its vision is creating, and who has a say in shaping them (Hollands, 2008; Luque-Ayala and Marvin, 2015).

Critics point to the top-down and technocratic nature of smart policy discourse (Wiig, 2016), and the low or non-existent engagement of citizen participation, even when participatory decision making is promised (Cardullo and Kitchin, 2019b; Crivello, 2015; March and Ribera-Fumaz, 2016). Yet, while The Smart City often emerges as top-down and technocratic, smart strategies are never fully top-down, but are always negotiated and translated into place-specific contexts (Stollmann et al., 2016). When applied locally, the general discourse of The Smart City becomes grounded in a variegated implementation, or what Shelton et al. (2015) call the ‘actually existing’ smart city.

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In Germany, we see that as a recent proliferation of primarily top-down smart city strategies are embedded locally, they encounter a growing bottom-up activism seeking to reclaim the urban commons (Baier et al., 2016; Follmann and Viehoff, 2015; Hatzelhoffer et al., 2012; Stollmann et al., 2016). Reclaiming the commons is a discourse focused on transforming governance practices, policies and infrastructure away from capitalist logics, and towards a more democratic, community-based control. This discourse has manifested in Germany in a variety of bottom-up social movements in which actors from civil society are demanding more inclusion in decision making, and pursuing alternative forms of urban governance, including democratic control of municipal energy provision (Becker et al., 2017), and circular regional food economies (Thurn et al., 2018).

With the understanding that the present is a moment of unprecedented opportunity and necessity for theorizing and constructing policies and practices for radical transformations to sustainability (Blythe et al., 2018) we ask: is there potential in The Smart City for reconciling top-down and bottom-up approaches – in Germany and elsewhere – to co-produce ‘truly smart and sustainable urban futures’ (McLaren et al., 2015, p. 3-7)? To answer this question, we must first examine how smart and sustainable futures are currently defined in mainstream, top-down approaches.

In a proposed comprehensive definition of The Smart City by Dameri (2017, p. 137), it is noted as equally important to define smart by including “smart activities,” but also excluding “initiatives out of scope”. Accordingly, what is smart is also defined by what is not-smart. Since the smart label is not fixed, but produced and constituted through discourse, the defining of ‘smart’ is a site of struggle for the creation of meaning (Gibson-Graham, 2002). Strategic interventions which pursue smart and sustainable futures do not emerge as inevitable or apolitical; their inherent normativity, rather, underscores the need for ethical debate, political negotiation, and pluralistic inclusion of diverse (and critical) voices (Blythe et al., 2018). Given that, we will argue that smart city strategies do contain potentials for radical transformations; but with qualifiers – following the lead of Maria Kaika’s (2017, p. 99) ‘real smart cities’ and Duncan McLaren, Julian Agyeman and Robert Gottlieb’s (2015, p. 2) ‘truly sustainable and smart cities’.

The emphasis on these qualifiers (real and truly) underscores the risk of smartness and sustainability to fall into the post-political trap (McLaren et al., 2015). The trap acknowledges critiques that transformations to sustainability run the risk of
being co-opted into business as usual trajectories, or disciplined by ‘apolitical’
constraints by neoliberal and financialization market logics (Blythe et al., 2018;
Paidakaki et al., 2018; Swyngedouw, 2007; Vanolo, 2014). However, the use of
these qualifiers also insists that transformations in pursuit of smart and sustainable
futures do have the potential to be ‘real’ and ‘true’. Our aim in this paper,
therefore, follows the calls of (among others) Hollands (2015) and McFarlane and
Söderström (2017). These scholars have highlighted the need to move beyond
a mere critique of smart urbanism, setting new parameters of debate for what
governance practices, methods and policies could lead to a smart and sustainable
urban future. It is to such a task of intervention in the smart urbanism discourse
that we hope to contribute.

The remainder of this paper is made up of two main parts: the first develops a
theoretical framework, and the second is an empirical case study of SmartCity
Cologne (SCC). The theoretical section begins with a brief overview of critical
literature on The Smart City. It discusses how smart city strategies have
e externalized innovation, meaning that socio-political innovation is foreclosed
as existing configurations are seen as inevitable. Next, we develop a theoretical
framework which deconstructs this inevitability, and carves out spaces in
which alternative visions could gain traction in The Smart City. Drawing on
Swyngedouw’s (2018) ‘post-politicization’ concept (which we explain below),
our framework argues for a pluralistic and open stance to heterodox approaches
and practices in governance, which include the possibility of innovating socio-
political configurations (i.e. institutional arrangements, power asymmetries,
participation processes, etc.). We call this the social innovation–(re)politicization
nexus (SIRN) as we argue that real social innovation cannot be achieved without
re-politicization, and vice versa. The nexus represents the meeting point of
these two concepts, resulting in a ‘bottom-linked governance’ (Eizaguirre et al.,
2012) which aims to synthesize the tensions between the conceptual extremities
of top-down policies and bottom-up practices (Baker and Mehmo, 2015)
by internalizing conflict and making space for heterodox alternatives within
institutionalized democratic governance.

In the empirical section, we illustrate an example of the opportunities and
challenges that emerge for the unpacking of the SIRN. We do so by translating
The Smart City into an actually existing smart city in Germany: SmartCity Cologne
(SCC). In particular, our analysis of Cologne’s smart city politics, first, provides
a particular insight into how actually existing smart city actions and policies
are assembled locally (Vanolo, 2014; White, 2016). Second, we document an
additional case of contrast between actually existing processes of decision/policy-
making and the citizen-centric rhetoric often associated with smart cities (Cardullo
Finally, we focus attention in the latter discussion of our paper on opportunities
and challenges for unpacking the SIRN – in Cologne, and beyond to other smart
city strategies and urban governance practices.

2.2 The Smart City: the critique

“Much of the sustainability argument has evacuated the politics of the
possible, the radical contestation of alternative future socio-environmental
possibilities and socio-natural arrangements, and silences the radical
antagonisms that are constitutive of our socio-natural orders by externalizing
conflict.” (Swyngedouw, 2007, p. 26)

For a growing body of critical literature, The Smart City is understood as “the
technological version of a sequence of neoliberal-infused new urban visions”
(Kitchin, 2015, p. 132), whereby existing trajectories of capitalist growth are
reinforced as the primary means for driving urban development (Cugurullo,
2018; Grossi and Pianezzi, 2017; Viitanen and Kingston, 2014). Innovation in The
Smart City is, therefore, mostly limited to technological and digital advancements
rooted in market-economic logics, while foreclosing more general socio-political
innovation (Taylor Buck and While, 2017; White, 2016). Specifically, as smart
cities have been mobilized to deliver urban sustainability, approaches and
strategies have focused on the “promotion of efficiency and growth, the control
of individual and household behavior, and the mediation of consumer culture”
(Martin et al., 2018, p. 276).

Following these critiques, we see The Smart City’s innovation to be generally
externalized, which here means two things. First, by considering existing politico-
institutional configurations and economic trajectories as inevitable, innovation
is directed towards visions of apolitical ‘techno-utopian’ solutions (Luque-Ayala
and Marvin, 2015; Taylor Buck and While, 2017). Here it is assumed that smart
technologies alone will lead to better urban futures. Second, smart policymakers
have valued external expert knowledge over local citizen knowledge (Shelton
et al., 2015; Söderström et al., 2014). In doing so, policymakers focus on the
materiality of the city and its competitive position relative to other cities, rather
than the materiality of the citizens and their place specific needs and capacities
(Bauriedl, 2017).

In line with these visions, The Smart City has not only internalized the ecological
modernization agenda of sustainable development, it also epitomizes the link
between entrepreneurialism and (a kind of) environmentalism which opens up
new waves of (private) investment for city governments and new opportunities for profit-making in the private sector. We interpret The Smart City, then, as an ‘urban sustainability fix’ (While et al., 2004). While et al.’s (2004) notion of the ‘urban sustainability fix’ is defined as an institutional strategy for safeguarding growth trajectories in the wake of industrial capitalism’s long downturn, the global ‘ecological crisis’ and the rise of popular environmentalism’ (p. 551). The ‘fix’ of The Smart City allows cities to position themselves as green forerunners in the context of global inter-urban competition for capital investment and funding schemes, while selectively targeting environmental problems (Herschel, 2013; Rosol, 2013; Temenos and McCann, 2012).

In so far as many smart city strategies continue to follow these developments, The Smart City enters urban policy-making as an updated “technology of austerity urbanism” (Pollio, 2016) or a re-framing of “neoliberal ideology” (Cardullo and Kitchin, 2019a; Grossi and Pianezzi, 2017). Therefore, The Smart City has often been integrated into already existing apolitical governance tendencies (Béal, 2012), and resonates with the “post-democratic” and “post-political” debates (MacLeod, 2011; Mouffe, 2005; Swyngedouw, 2007). In particular, Mouffe (2005) has warned that consensus politics are a serious danger to (urban) democracy. This danger has been described by Beal (2012) as a process by which elite coalitions first select and prioritize what they view as urban problems; and, secondly, compose a decision-making network and substantive policies based on the interests of elite coalitions, rather than democratic representation. In this process a hegemonic consensus is constructed, while contestation and conflict, along with grassroots actors, are externalized (Swyngedouw, 2007).

Indeed, cities are not made smart on behalf of citizen requests (Stollmann et al., 2016). Critics have, rather, seen The Smart City as a “top-down, technocratic policy discourse” (Wig, 2016, p. 4). Furthermore, empirical studies have shown that actually existing smart city projects are planned and implemented without public participation (Cardullo and Kitchin, 2019b; Crivello, 2015; Stollmann et al., 2016). Although participatory decision-making processes are often promised as part of smart city agendas, participation is often limited to the creation of new technological advancements including digital E-governance tools (Afzalan et al., 2017), without attention to existing power asymmetries.

Yet, we argue that smart urbanism is not inherently top-down – even if “corporate storytelling” suggests this (Söderström et al., 2014). Local implementation is, rather, always politically contested and can even shift from strictly top-down to more bottom-linked. Although smart city platforms often do emerge as apolitical and top-down, they are always negotiated and translated into place-specific contexts (Stollmann et al., 2016). This has been seen recently in Barcelona, where Cardullo and Kitchin (2019a) detail the re-politicization of The Smart City project: away from domination by state and private interests and towards the inclusion of citizen interests, communities and civic social movements. Therefore, smart city politics emerge as context-specific and the smart label as dynamic.

This moment of translating The Smart City into the ‘actually existing’ smart city is a site of struggle with potential for the creation of meaning. Smart urban futures can either be discursively constructed into existing apolitical governance tendencies, or the approaches and methods for constituting smart and sustainable development can be repurposed and re-politicized (Gibbs et al., 2013; Hollands, 2015; Kaika, 2017; Martin et al., 2018; McFarlane and Söderström, 2017). Yet, more detailed empirical studies of actually existing smart cities are needed to carve out different variants. In particular, it is yet to be determined if and how, actually existing smart city initiatives can be re-politicized. And, likewise, how counter-hegemonic voices of environmental movements, subaltern groups and ordinary citizens can be incorporated into and empowered by actually existing smart city strategies. The next section proposes a framework for beginning to unlock political potential within The Smart City.

2.3 The social innovation-(re)politicization nexus (SIRN): carving out political potential in smart urbanism

The Smart City embodies the potential to transform urban futures. However, as we have argued above, the inherent normativity of transformation requires a re-politicization of The Smart City discourse. Re-politicization necessitates a simultaneous internalization of innovation; breaking from The Smart City’s predominantly externalized conception and practice of innovating. Internalization means that social relations – including governance arrangements, processes, methods, and approaches – are incorporated into the scope of smart innovation, with a stance of openness to heterodoxy. As we consider re-politicization and social innovation to be co-constitutive, we call this the social innovation-(re) politicization nexus (SIRN).

2.3.1 Re-politicization: deconstructing post-political inevitability

For Swyngedouw (2010), post-politicization is a particular form of de-politicization by which hegemonic (urban) governance arrangements and principles are increasingly seen as outside of the realm of democratic politics. The post-political, in other words, is seen to equate arbitrary constraints with social objectivity (cf. Mouffe, 2000). The constraints, as such, become taken for
gifted assumptions beyond historical contingency – creating an illusory ‘end of history’. Politics is, in this way, ‘economized’, as mainstream economic logics (e.g. neoliberal-economics and financialization) become fixtures of social reality with political agency and the ability to transcend ethical debate and political negotiation (Swyngedouw, 2018, p. 32). In short, the post-political economy, disembodied from the messiness of social relations, can make decisions for us.

Following these perspectives, we see the political as a space of democratic struggle and negotiation, and a moment in the process through which ‘normal politics’ is transformed (Swyngedouw, 2018, p. 56). Yet, re-politicization is not an end in itself – as the political is not “more important than actually existing instituted politics” (Swyngedouw, 2018, p. 56). The aim of re-politicization is, rather, to transform politics in instances where existing hegemonies limit capacities for addressing and meeting social problems and needs. We emphasize that there can be neither a blueprint normative vision of The Smart City – nor a script of intervention for its re-politicization (cf. Gibson-Graham, 2006).

A process of politicization, Swyngedouw (2018, p. 24-25) tells us, begins with an “inaugural event” of staging democratic disagreement, which cannot be named in advance by social theory. This leads us to social innovation, a concept that we see as an approach through which citizens generate alternative plans when mainstream state- and market-led solutions do not meet local needs.

### 2.3.2 Social innovation: generating alternatives

As an in-vogue concept, social innovation has generated an “admittedly confusing debate”, as it has been mobilized in various ways by different groups, from public and state entities to radical democratic theorists (Paidakaki et al., 2018, p. 12). Critics have argued that since institutional discourse on social innovations in governance have been confined within narrowly market-economic terms, the concept is doomed to fall into the post-political trap and further exclude marginalized groups (Swyngedouw, 2005). Yet, social innovation remains useful (again with the qualifier of re-politicization) for framing transformative social change and generating context-specific alternatives to dominant urban development models and approaches (Blanco and León, 2017; Nyseth and Hamdouch, 2019), like those assumed inevitable in The Smart City. We follow here Ulug and Horlings (2019, p. 14) who clearly define social innovations as being comprised of, on the one hand, a process (i.e. new rules or organizations of social relations); and on the other hand, a product or end result, i.e. satisfying unmet social needs and making social contributions, including the empowerment of communities (Baker and Mehmood, 2015).

Blanco and Léon (2017), in particular, have documented how confrontational social innovation can lead to a “process of political empowerment” (p. 2185), through their case study of the negotiation of a new affordable housing policy in Barcelona. This case displays the potential of conflict for shifting power relations in urban governance among civil society (especially marginalized actors), the market, and different levels of government (González et al., 2010). Besides confrontation, movements to reclaim the urban commons can offer opportunities for disruptive social innovation through reconstructions of physical spaces and infrastructures towards community-ownership and operation. We see such commons-oriented movements to include political urban gardening (Certomà and Tornaghi, 2015; Follmann and Viehoff, 2015) and food movements (Thum et al., 2018), as well as re-municipalization of urban service delivery and energy democracy (Becker et al., 2017; Cumbers and Becker, 2018). All of these examples display “painstaking efforts” (Kaika, 2017, p. 99) of intervention, in which needs – e.g. sustainability or social justice – are so urgent that citizens are driven to take on new ‘do-it-yourself’ (Baier et al., 2016) roles in urban governance processes. As such civil society movements in physical urban space are often supported by (translocal) digital communities, smart technologies could be seen as a potential facilitator of disruptive, community-empowering social innovations (cf. Martin et al., 2018). If smart city strategies were open to such innovations, smart technologies could become a key driver by which “individuals and groups come to see themselves as shaping/governing economic processes rather than as simply subjected to them” (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, 2009, p. 35).

As with re-politicization, however, we emphasize that social innovation cannot be understood as “normative recipe for solving all human and social problems in any context” (Nyseth and Hamdouch, 2019, p. 2, emphasis added). Many may argue that past attempts to reclaim the commons with public ownership have been “disappointing, if not disastrous” (Cumbers, 2012); or that breaking away from fixed policy paths contains too much risk and uncertainty (Nyseth and Hamdouch, 2019). We would not dispute such arguments. Yet, we argue the benefit of social innovation, lies rather in its ability to keep ‘windows of democratic dialogue’ open (Nyseth and Hamdouch, 2019, p. 4). This includes using pluralism and heterodox thinking to break from path dependency when necessary; and reflexivity for when plans fail and need to be adjusted (cf. Cumbers, 2012). As such, social innovation is seen as a way for empowered citizens to generate and experiment with governance alternatives – if and when plans or models proposed by the state and private market limit the capacities for addressing place-specific needs and problems. This brings us to the nexus: ‘bottom-linked’ governance, which aims to synthesize the tensions between bottom-up practices and top-down policies by internalizing conflict (Eizaguirre et al., 2012).
2.3.3 The nexus: internalizing conflict with bottom-linked governance

The concept of ‘bottom-linked governance’ forms the nexus of the SIRN as it combines the focus on institutional innovation in re-politicization, with the focus on bottom-up alternatives generated through social innovation (Eizaguirre et al., 2012). As such, bottom-linked governance is a method for incorporating ‘invented’ spaces of participation into ‘invited’ institutional channels (Miraftab, 2004). The result is a dynamic process of participation (Silver et al., 2010) in which bottom-linked governance is “materialized through constant and varied interactions between socially innovative actors and institutional structures” (Paidakaki et al., 2018, p. 14, emphasis added).

Bottom-linked governance has emerged in response to a perceived paradox in contemporary multilevel governance, in which the institutional imperative of citizen participation has not necessarily coincided with citizen empowerment (Eizaguirre et al., 2012, p. 2009). Several authors have, thus, identified the need for invited participation in urban governance to make space for invented spaces of conflict, contestation and antagonism, which for democratic theorists like Mouffe (2000, 2005) define democratic politics. Eizaguirre et al. (2012) articulate a bottom-linked governance that is closely related to Mouffe’s (2005) agonistic model of democracy. While recognizing the opportunity for ‘real’ participation in invited institutional policy-making, Eizaguirre et al. (2012) stress that bottom-linked practices require institutions to develop capacities and procedures for an ongoing engagement with conflict, dissent and disagreement (p. 2010). However, the strength of bottom-linked governance can be found in its emphasis of avoiding the ‘local trap’ (Purcell, 2006), i.e. the attempt to solve all problems at the local level or give a priori preference to, e.g. purely horizontal organizational models. Informed by these perspectives, we move next into our empirical case study of Cologne.

2.4 Data collection and methods

Empirical data on SCC was collected through various qualitative methods in 2017 and 2018. The research began with a review of publications by actors involved in SCC project management (Möhrendick, 2017), websites of SCC project management (www.smartcity-cologne.de) and funders7, a study which included SCC project management interviews (Brandt et al., 2016), and a more general review of coinciding development plans for the city of Cologne (e.g. Bauweisen-Adenauer and Soënius, 2009). Based on this review we identified actors in the project management team for interviews. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted with six members of the SCC project management team (see Figure 1, p. 21) from private and public sectors. Questions focused on the history of the actor’s organization, their roles in SCC, an interpretation of what ‘innovation’ meant for SCC, and encountered and anticipated difficulties. These interviews all lasted from forty-five to sixty minutes.

Further interviews were conducted with five leaders of citizen initiative groups in Cologne. These groups were selected based on their activism in areas consistent with goals of SCC, namely, climate and environmental protection and citizen participation. Semi-structured questions were developed in advance for these interviews, but discussions were more open-ended and ranged from forty-five to ninety minutes in length. These interviews focused on motivations underlying activism, and gauged the extent to which active citizens saw SCC as open to and productive for engagement. Participants in all interviews agreed to be recorded in advance and transcripts were made in all cases. Follow up personal communications with participants have also been included as data. Finally, participant observation, including informal interviews and detailed notes on presentations and discussion sessions, was conducted during the SmartCity Cologne Conferences in 2017 and 2018. All qualitative data was analyzed using a critical discourse and narrative approach, which focused on how language was used to create meaning.

2.5 Cologne’s smart city platform

2.5.1 Locally framing smartness

SmartCity Cologne (SCC) was founded in 2011, in a joint partnership between the municipal energy provider, RheinEnergie (RE) and the city of Cologne. We see the implementation of SCC to have been influenced by two main trends in the German context: austerity-inclined fiscal policies at various levels of German government, and the federal government’s Energiewende (Energy Transition) policy. In line with recent global trends of intensified fiscal austerity (Peck et al., 2009), German municipalities have experienced a steady increase in indebtedness and a decrease in leverage to impose taxes on trade (Gewerbesteuer), and land (Grundsteuer), due to an amplified competition among cities to attract businesses and private capital (Keller, 2014). As it began to face de-industrialization in the 1980s, the city of Cologne became focused on facilitating economic growth and building a strong job market, through public-private partnership and cost-efficiency considerations in planning (Mattiske, 2008).
These factors, among others, have resulted in a policy of fiscal discipline and
doing as well. To maintain budgets under declining tax revenue, German municipalities have implemented
corporatisation of municipal utility companies, which have been traditionally
in the city’s administration. In the “Koordinationsstelle
“Integrated Concept of Action for Climate
change”. Therefore, the municipal energy sector has always played a multifunctional role for
city governments. While corporatization and European competition
does not correlate with the close connection between municipal governments and ‘their’ utility
companies remains (e.g. senior members of city government sit on supervisory
boards of municipal corporations).

In parallel to these developments, the German Energy Transition policy and
resulting market changes, have put municipalities which rely on the profits of
‘their’ energy utilities under threat of a “massive loss of market share, revenues,
and profits” (Richter, 2013, p. 1226-1227). Since Cologne is, partly through
city-owned subsidiaries, the majority shareholder of RE at 80% ownership
(RheinEnergie, 2017, p. 29), the municipal energy supplier’s steady profits are a
major supporter of the city budget. RE is, accordingly, an exceptionally powerful
actor with regard to city financing and the implementation of the Energy Transition
in Cologne. For this reason, the company has been the main driver of SCC from the beginning.

Due to the inertia (i.e. long-term capital assets, networks and holdings) of
conventional power production with fossil fuels, it is in the financial interest of
RE’s profitability to resist radical transformation, and operate with a business as
usual approach for as long as possible, while at the same time slowly building up
capabilities for renewable generation (Richter, 2013). This creates a profitability
paradox for the city in the energy transition: maintain revenue streams, while
facing the imperative to transform power production. Based on these influences,
we argue the local framing of smartness in Cologne can only be understood based
on the close connection between the city government and the energy provider
RE, and the profitability paradox, which both actors are facing under the Energy
Transition.

2.5.2 Origins, structure and goals of SCC
Smartness in Cologne is framed as a central and multi-faceted approach to transform
Cologne into a sustainable/climate friendly city. The key goal of SCC is climate
protection, as it is viewed as “the linchpin of a sustainable and resilient city” and
defined as the major urban challenge in the coming decades (Möhlendick, 2017,
p. 26). Thus, SCC is framed as an urban environmental governance ‘platform’
by its founders; not as an urban development agenda. Consequently, SCC is
managed by the coordination office for climate protection (“Koordinationsstelle
Klimaschutz”), which is institutionalized within the city’s administration, in
the department responsible for social, integration and environmental affairs rather
than urban planning. It is further framed as a supplementary/complementary
action for climate protection beside other activities outlined in the “Integriertes
Klimaschutzkonzept Köln 2013” (Integrated Concept of Action for Climate
Protection).

The organizational structure of SCC is notably top-down, which is reasoned by the
city government to be necessary for the initiation phase (Möhlendick, 2017). It is,
however, unclear how long this phase will last, since there have been no structural
changes since the strategy began in 2011. At present, SCC has three main levels
of hierarchy through which goals and financing are developed and projects are
implemented (see Figure 1 below). At the top, a steering committee is led by the
mayor of Cologne, three members from the city administration and four board
members of the Stadtwerke Köln GmbH (the city-owned corporation holding the
RE-shares). Second, is an advisory board made up of local universities, research
institutes and corporations giving scientific counsel for projects and policy. Finally,
at the implementation level, various projects – which are proposed and carried
out by a variety of entrepreneurial actors – are then coordinated by a project
management team, made up of employees from RE and the city of Cologne.

SCC began with five projects in 2011, and today about forty-five projects have
received the SCC label8. Projects are either developed specifically for SCC, or
existing projects are promoted and given the SCC label, providing that they
conform to the SCC fields of action, which include climate protection, energy
efficiency, innovation and an integrated approach to governance.9 Much of SCC’s
focus thus far has been on energy efficient technologies and carbon emission
reduction. Additionally, multiple benefits for sustainable urban development are
projected as quasi by-products of SCC policies and projects (see Figure 2). Yet, it
remains opaque why certain initiatives are labeled smart, while others not.

8 Dr. Möhlendick is Cologne’s Climate Coordinator & part of the SCC project management.
9 Projects are listed at: http://www.smartcity-cologne.de/index.php/projekte.html
2.6 Elite post-politics of smart city austerity

Our interviewees consistently revealed that the greatest difficulty facing SCC and the city of Cologne, is that all projects and goals must be pursued on a stressed municipal budget (Möhlendick, 2017, p. 26). For example, in an official notice of the city administration outlining the concept of the SCC to local politicians in 2012, the SCC coordination office argues that

> in view of the limited availability of municipal resources and the intended positive publicity, the economic viability of the measures carried out is of great importance. Projects that could only be realized through massive subsidies would miss the goal of positively motivating Cologne’s citizens and companies. However, in the sense of a role model function [...] pilot and lighthouse projects must be realized which can only demonstrate indirect profitability [mittelbare Wirtschaftlichkeit].

Interviewed city officials further voiced concerns that “everyone wants to see the city [...] push climate protection forward, but there is usually not enough money to do so, there are not the right laws to do so [...]. Climate protection for a city in Germany is not mandatory [...] only when a certain task is mandatory is the city receiving funds from the state or from the federal state [...]. So basically, all [city staff] payment and activities are free, and Cologne is not a rich city.”

The understanding that, without private funding SCC “would not work at all”13, is widespread, despite some city officials being aware of contradictions posed from reliance on private funding – even in the case of SCC co-founder RE. According to SCC staff, “RheinEnergie has the aim to make profit, so they have other interests than the city hall. [...] This can be very challenging.”14 The conflict of private funding was additionally noted by RE’s project management, who stated that the difficulty of finding firms to fund projects, due to limited profitability, was perhaps SCC’s greatest challenge.15

The reliance on outsourcing solutions to private companies causes a focus on the demand side (i.e. changing consumer/household behavior), while the supply side is fixed (cf. Cardullo and Kitchin, 2019a; Martin et al., 2018). Mediation on the consumer side can lead to economic difficulties, which was outlined by a city official as follows: “If we want to implement new technologies to get our households and buildings more energy efficient, it brings costs. And where do the costs end? Usually at the tenant, or the owners”.16

For example, in the case of the SCC project, Grow Smarter – a European Union-sponsored retro-fitting of a 1950s-built low-to-middle class neighborhood called Stegenwalsiedlung, with new smart-climate technologies – the same official stated: “It’s really a tough problem because such a topic like climate protection innovation is so far away from the daily life of these people [...] they only have in mind how do they get through the next month with their money”.17

As a consequence of these economic difficulties, interviewed SCC experts expressed the need to convince citizens that smart-climate technologies are for their own good. RE officials convey this challenge in terms of the Climate Street project: “We have implemented all of the possible climate protection technologies in a confined space [the Climate Street project], in order to bring [technologies] closer to the citizens so that they can also see that we can use new technologies without bringing harm to them, i.e. financially”.18

So, clearly SCC actors are well aware of the economic challenges residents face. Yet, the involvement of residents in top-down projects like Grow Smarter is closer

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13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Interview, RheinEnergie SCC Project Management, August 29, 2017.
17 Ibid.
18 Interview, RheinEnergie SCC Project Management, August 29, 2017.
to being informed about, rather than being included from the start in the decision-making of, how ‘their’ houses will be made climate-friendly. One city official acknowledged a need for improvement in participation efforts, stating “when it comes to implementation the people are not questioned anymore”.19

Deficits in participation are, however, viewed as unavoidable in the current setup due to the limited staff and financial resources of the city, which further underlines the dominant logics of austerity.20 Thus, despite efforts to limit rent increases in the Grow Smart project21 and make office hours available for resident consultation22, citizen engagement and participation in SCC projects is mainly conceptualized in terms of consumerism, rather than the contribution to decision- and policy-making.

2.7 Opportunities for citizen engagement beyond elite post-politics?

“The public participation is a central point of SmartCity Cologne: Cologne’s residents have the opportunity to get involved and to noticeably impact the lifestyle of their city.”23 (SmartCity Cologne Website).

The SCC website invites everyone to participate and a bottom-up approach is stated as a goal.24 However, the ‘actually existing’ extent of measurable citizen participation is limited to 15-minute brainstorming sessions during the annual SmartCity Conference, where citizens are invited to express their concerns or ideas based on predefined questions. Additionally, two contests have been held for idea generation (one at a local university, and one at an elementary school).25 Yet, so far there has been no example of a citizen idea or initiative being included under the SCC label in the first eight years.26 Interviews with citizen activists even suggested that awareness of SCC is low, despite a lively network of grassroots initiatives and action in related fields. One citizen activist was, indeed, surprised to learn that SCC was addressing climate protection.27 Another lamented, “[SCC] is public relations. It is a RheinEnergie ‘image thing’ […] it’s not going to move on climate change.”28 Seemingly, SCC aims to raise “greater acceptance and greater commitment to the implementation of measures by improving cooperation with citizens,”29 rather than developing new ideas with them. Thus, the situation is not much different than in other European smart cities (Cardullo and Kitchin, 2019b; Crivello, 2015; March and Ribera-Fumaz, 2016).

However, there seem to be several differences in Cologne. Not only does the SCC leadership display a clear commitment towards public participation30, Cologne’s mayor has established a city-wide dialogue aiming to develop guidelines for public participation and continue structural reforms within the city administration. One city official stated that, “a change of governance and a change of processes within the city” is a major component of SCC.31 As part of the emphasis on facilitating participation, the mayor of Cologne has established a paid position within the city administration that is solely dedicated to structurally reforming the city administration and generating social innovation. One example is found in monthly meetings between citizens and the municipal government. These meetings aim to facilitate collective cross-learning, called a ‘Schlaumacherei’32, which literally translated means ‘making-clever workshop’. Therefore, we see a structural potential for alternative framings of Cologne’s smart city discourse within the city administration.

Adding to this, local grassroots organizations want to participate and bring in their ideas to make Cologne more sustainable and climate friendly. However, so far, their ideas and actions are not labelled as being part of SCC even if they deal with very similar issues. One example of Cologne’s lively citizen groups is the umbrella initiative AGORA Köln.33 The initiative was formed in 2013 by civil society organizations (including environmental groups), creative artists and local businesses, and today comprises more than 130 groups. AGORA is engaged in several bottom-up projects and policy-initiatives, including an alternative mobility concept, and an action plan for re-organizing Cologne’s food system.

19 Ibid.
20 Personal communication with SCC staff member, June 19, 2018.
21 Interview, real estate company, July 5, 2017.
22 Personal communication with SCC staff member, June 19, 2018.
26 Ibid. In the process of writing, “Honig [honey] Connection”, a project by Cologne’s beekeeping association, has been awarded The Smart City label in October 2018.
27 Interview, citizen initiative, August 1, 2017.
29 Notice of the city administration to the political committees, June 2012 (Mitteilung 1996/2012). Translation by authors.
30 Interview, citizen initiative, July 18, 2017.
Thus, opportunities for SCC to benefit from grassroots inclusion exist – and there are signs that such integrations are beginning to take shape. Most recently, AGORA was invited to present its activities at a stall during the Cologne Smart City Conference 2018. Therefore, we see the potential for alternative framings of Cologne’s smart discourse through the widely proclaimed willingness of the local government to facilitate citizen knowledge. As declared by one city official, “I always emphasize that we are in a process and everyone can have an influence on this process. We are not determined at all to go in this direction”.34

2.8 Discussion – opportunities and challenges for a re-politicization of The Smart City

So, what potentials exist within Cologne’s platform; and where do we see opportunities and challenges for a re-politicization of Cologne’s smart city approach towards transformative social innovations? Bringing the SIRN to the politics of SCC, we here spell out what the SIRN could look like in Cologne. Our analysis shows that in Cologne – like elsewhere – “no straightforward narrative about The Smart City” exists beyond RE’s and others “corporate storytelling,” as the other actors’ motives are diverse and “politically variegated” (Söderström et al., 2014, p. 318). Alternative visions need to deconstruct hegemonic storylines about what The Smart City is in the case of Cologne. They also need to formalize bottom-linked procedures for co-producing smart and sustainable transformations. In Cologne, we see several opportunities and barriers in this context.

First of all, as long as SSC is narrowly viewed as an urban environmental governance approach for climate protection and is not reframed as a more holistic urban strategy, its impacts remain limited. In particular, other municipal departments – like urban planning – are hardly involved at present. The above outlined administrative changes show a potential for change. However, the broadening of SCC to become a mainstream strategy for urban transformation in Cologne would require a strategic process. This would entail a diverse range of stakeholders, from inside and outside the city administration, to participate and redefine what ‘smart’ means for urban development in Cologne. Such a participation process could be modeled after the inclusive stakeholder participation that took place at the beginning of Vienna’s smart city initiative (Exner et al., 2018; Fernandez-Anez et al., 2018). As the current organizational structure of SCC would be challenged, this would likely produce resistance from within the administration and RE. At the moment, we only see limited scope for such an opening and re-politicization of the SCC from within as the SCC actors’ willingness to reduce power asymmetries is low. Moreover, SCC activities remain largely unchallenged, as public and political pressure for a re-visioning of the SCC is generally absent.

Beyond administrative changes, there are several examples of social innovation in Cologne that, due to de-politicization, have been seen as irrelevant or unrealistic. Accordingly, a re-politicization is necessary to invite Cologne’s active grassroots scene into SCC – which is meant to be a platform for transformative social innovation based on citizen participation. This could begin to change the perception of SCC as an impotent space for developing alternatives, which is held by some of Cologne’s socially innovative activists.35

For example, although the existing public-control over RE emerges as a possible entry for more bottom-up engagement, the publicly-owned firm has also suppressed critical public voices. Currently, the city of Cologne controls 80% of RE’s shares while the other 20% is controlled by Innogy SE, a subsidiary of RWE Power AG which is Europe’s largest producer of lignite coal. Decentralization of energy production is a central part of RE’s plan for new business models in the coming years (RheinEnergie, 2017). However, decentralization here refers to the means of production and consumption – not decision-making. One interviewed citizen group named Tschö RheinEnergie36 – literally meaning ‘goodbye’ RE – has called for a re-municipalization of the energy provider RE as a part of their campaign to pursue progressive climate action in the city. The group argues that re-municipalization could decouple RE’s energy investments from the corporate imperative of high returns, and, consequently, allow for bolder transformations of Cologne’s energy production in line with trends across Germany (Becker et al., 2017; Cumbers and Becker, 2018).

However, in its efforts to develop a political dialogue about RE’s business model and practices – namely, continued reliance on lignite coal – the citizen initiative has encountered difficulties. For example, RE has filed a court injunction against the group’s leader for distributing a critical petition.37 This left the citizen activist facing a team of corporate lawyers and two hundred and fifty thousand euros in

34 Interview with Municipal SCC Project Management, May 8, 2017.
36 http://tschoe-rheinenergie.de/
legal penalties – which he perceived as an attempt to silence his confrontational activism. Moreover, Tschö RheinEnergie has been portrayed as naïve (called well-intentioned, but counter-productive by the city’s Green Party) or difficult to deal with (very difficult to agree on numbers) when it challenges the depoliticized arrangements of Cologne’s energy politics. Therefore, major barriers for the realization of SIRN remain – namely power asymmetries – despite the public-private liaison around the municipal energy supplier and an active grassroots scene.

In particular, we have shown that under austerity politics and given the fact that climate protection is a “not mandatory” budgetary item in German cities, urban climate protection still relies on higher-level public (e.g. EU Grow Smarter) and private funding on a project basis. SCC has been successful in applying for EU Grow Smarter funding as SCC’s public-private partnership setup and actions are in line with the existing EU-funding schemes. However, Cardullo and Kitchin (2019a) have outlined how EU funding schemes, underpinned by the constraint of “neoliberal ideals”, reinforce “[subservience] to the interests of state and market,” rather than “reflecting and serving the interests of citizens” (p. 13). As shown for Cologne, these funding schemes delimit local possibilities and predefine relevant interlocutors. Cologne is not alone in this regard, as these issues seem to pervade many, if not most, smart cities (see e.g. Cardullo and Kitchin, 2019a; Dameri, 2017; Wiig, 2016). In ‘Amsmarterdam’ – which to some extent served as inspiration for Cologne – the balancing of smart power asymmetries also emerges to be difficult. Like in Cologne, although Amsterdam considers citizens as the “final stakeholders” of its smart urban strategy, the platform’s structure is also (still) closed and driven by the founding core group of actors (Dameri, 2017, p. 126).

To summarize the challenges that remain for an unpacking of the SIRN in Cologne (and beyond): Specifically in Cologne’s urban politics, we have noted a structural potential in which leaders are making efforts to engage citizens into participation. Moreover, a number of citizen groups, like the umbrella initiative AGORA, are demanding real engagement and empowerment for co-producing a sustainable urban future. Recent developments (bottom-up initiatives and administrative reforms) open general opportunities for the SIRN being realized in Cologne. However, what is missing in Cologne is both an openness to politico-institutional re-politicization and a public pressure to generate social innovation within SCC – which are again inseparable – to shift the process of innovating smart transformations towards the inclusion of alternative visions.

2.9 Conclusion - unlocking political potential in the actually existing smart city

Our goal in this paper has been to intervene in The Smart City’s influential development narrative on what approaches, methods and governance processes constitute the transformations to smart and sustainable urban futures. Theoretically, we have agreed with the many critiques of The Smart City as a technocratic and top-down discourse. At the same time, however, we have also advocated for an openness to possibility – not only from the top-down ‘invited’ spaces of participation making space for dissent, but also from the bottom-up ‘invented’ spaces, by engaging with opportunities in the actually existing smart city. We have argued that this requires a simultaneous re-politicization of politico-institutional arrangements and economic trajectories considered inevitable in mainstream urban development discourse. It also requires a willingness of policymakers to engage with heterodox approaches and solutions generated through social innovation. We have argued that the nexus formed by these two concepts could be found in an agonistic bottom-linked (Ezquerra et al., 2012) approach to governance, that establishes an ongoing engagement with conflict and makes room for dissent (Silver et al., 2010).

Empirically, we have shown a distinct case of how smartness takes shape locally and illustrated the difficulties and opportunities for the SIRN to emerge in Cologne. The German context is unique in the extent to which city governments have relied on municipal energy companies to play a multifunctional role, with e.g. cross-subsidization. This context sets the stage for Cologne, where SCC is thus far confined to a narrow focus on climate change and Energy Transition. Moreover, these foci are interpreted and tailored to the interests of the public-private liaison around the municipal energy supplier RE. As such, The Smart City discourse in Cologne perpetuates ‘no alternative’ logics and consequently, the reinforcement of elite post-politics. Although SCC is distinct, its still-closed actor constellation parallels other smart cities (e.g. Dameri’s (2017) account of Amsterdam) and the limited scope and possibility of citizen participation draws many parallels to other...
cities more generally (as shown also for other cities by Cardullo and Kitchin, 2019a; Späth and Knieling, 2020).

However, de-politicized logics (in the sense of dependencies and restrictions) do not derive from smart city platforms or technologies as such. Rather, as we have shown in Cologne, they are rooted in municipal financial restrictions, discursive framings, and elite-consensus; namely, the existing post-political governance arrangements which smart city labels are incorporated into. Therefore, The Smart City is clearly not inherently top-down or apolitical. It is rather specific powerful actors which depoliticize actually existing smart city approaches, based on hegemonic discursive framings. In Cologne, we see this as the public-private liaison around the municipal energy supplier framing SCC with specific discourse in Germany – the Energy Transition and municipal austerity – to foreclose alternative possibilities and potentials for radical transformations.

Based on the outlined nexus between social innovation and re-politicization, we conclude that there will be no re-politicization of smart city strategies without social innovation, and vice versa. Going forward, (smart) city leaders are, thus, tasked with questions of how to formalize procedures of bottom-linked governance that democratically define urban problems, co-produce social and technological innovations, and transform the technologically-heavy smart urbanism to a platform for knowledge, innovated jointly by empowered communities, the state and private companies. However, as a necessary precursor, it remains a policy decision by urban governments (supported by city administrations) to open up actually existing smart city platforms for a wider range of actors and ideas, and allow for a bottom-linked engagement with dissent in smart city visions.

While our empirical analysis of the politics surrounding SCC is limited to one case, it gives a detailed picture of how smartness is constructed in a distinct way locally. Further, our approach does not operationalize any measurement of the impact smart city strategies have on sustainability (see e.g. Yigitcanlar and Kamruzzaman (2018) for carbon emissions in UK smart cities). While such impact measurement studies could be beneficial for future avenues of smart city research, we see the deconstruction of The Smart City discourse as a key method for re-politicizing smart urbanism and future research is needed on two interrelated issues: The first involves a comparative analysis of smart city discourses and the deconstruction of the depoliticizing ‘no alternative’ logics of actually existing smart city initiatives. The second involves the analysis of whether the inclusion of social innovation into smart city strategies – as argued and conceptualized in the SIRN – can actually open up spaces for democratic dialogue and facilitate the making of truly smart and sustainable urban futures.
3.1 Introduction

‘The commons are back ... if they were ever gone.’ (Vivero-Pol et al., 2019: 3)

The commons, indeed, are back. In the face of urgent social and ecological issues, commons have increasingly re-emerged as an important concept for scholars and activists around the globe (Brinkley, 2020; Cumbers, 2015; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; Harvey, 2012; Huron, 2018). Commoning has also gained traction as a central part of the “return” of the commons. Instead of looking at the commons as a noun, or a ‘thing’ with innate properties, commoning is seen as a verb, or a ‘process’ in which institutions are (re-)designed to serve the common good (Gibson-Graham et al., 2016; Martorell and Andrée, 2019). As a particular form of politicising how governance takes place, commoning foregrounds (radical) democracy, solidarity, and re-embeds resource management into local ecology. At its core, commoning claims the right for people to have more of a direct say in governance; not only in choosing their preferred mix of conventional policies deemed acceptable by political and corporate elites for them to decide upon, but in co-determining the very norms and rules to which they (the people) are subject (cf. Tully, 2008a). In doing so, it makes space for radical and emancipatory political imagination.

While theoretical work on the commons is important, several authors have called for more empirical perspectives that analyse actually existing commons and processes of commoning as they take place on the ground, and move across different scales (Cumbers, 2015; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; Huron, 2018). There is a lack of empirical perspectives on commoning, as theoretical work often sees commons as mutually-exclusive to ubiquitous states and capitalist markets. In such work, the commons are defined by their contrast to a seemingly all-powerful capitalist imaginary (Gibson-Graham, 1996), in which the radical content of commons is inherently co-opted or neutralized in interactions with conventional state and market institutions (Cumbers, 2015). While the danger of co-option is undoubtedly pervasive, a number of scholars have encouraged a more open approach to recognizing transformative practices and radical possibilities that emerge in everyday political praxis (e.g. Cumbers, 2015; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; Huron, 2018). Such scholars identify the task as bringing budding possibilities to light: making them ‘more real and more credible as objects of policy and activism’ (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 613), and ‘add[ing] gravitas to […] emerging imaginaries’ (Kaika, 2018, p. 1722). Taking on this task, we combine a macro-political, zoomed out ‘perspective of the eagle’, with an on-the-ground, zoomed in empirical ‘perspective of the frog’. Guided by this approach, we ask the question: how do civic initiatives attempt to common governance?

The paper begins with the eagle’s perspective in which we make a case for going beyond the stale State/Market dilemma (Kaika, 2017) and centring governance around commoning and self-determined notions of the common good. The perspective of the frog follows with a case study of three German Food Policy Councils (FPCs, called an Ernährungsrat in German) in Berlin, Cologne, and Frankfurt where citizens are actively engaged in struggles to transform local and regional food systems toward sustainability and justice. FPCs are civic networks which bring various actors (from civil society, government, food producers, local retailers/restaurants, etc.) who are involved in local/regional food systems together. In addition to organizing practical food initiatives in cities (like public procurement of local/organic food, or urban gardening projects), FPCs also provide ‘spaces of deliberation’ (Moragues-Faus and Morgan, 2015), where groups can give body to their political thoughts and create governance alternatives based on self-determined narratives.

The FPCs in Germany were selected as a case study for two main reasons. First, other than recent work by Sieveking (2019), Doernberg et al. (2019), and Hoffmann (2019) there has been no published research on the German FPC network. This is significant as the FPCs have ignited new political dialogues about food, which have been markedly absent from planning and policy discourse...
in Germany (Stierand, 2014). While the FPC is still in the beginning stages of developing a coherent organizational model, especially in Germany (Hoffmann, 2019; Sieveking, 2019), many have celebrated the potential of FPCs to scale up and out, and bring more radical forms of democratic control to food systems at the local level and beyond (Harper et al., 2009; IPES-Food, 2019). Second, the German FPCs are unique in their political and community-led character as they organise around a discourse of ‘Food Democracy’ that spells out an active role for citizens in governance. This presents an opportunity to evaluate the viability of a bottom-up pathway to transforming food policy as a ‘real utopian’ possibility (Wright, 2010). Real utopias explore institutional designs or theoretical models that may not exist fully in practice, but as a latent and feasible alternative for doing things differently. In this regard, the case study documents several FPC actions that fit in with various ‘domains of transformation’ to agroecology as a fundamentally different way of organizing food systems and making food policy (Anderson et al., 2021). We highlight the budding potential German FPCs display across key areas of intervention, including (1) networks, (2) knowledge, (3) systems of economic exchange, and (4) discourse. Our case study does not intend to make the claim that FPCs have achieved the commoning of governance in German cities. What we do intend to show, however, is their achievement in contributing to a reclamation of the democratic imaginary as a political arena – in which the language of democracy and the common good are mobilised by citizens in pursuit of more sustainable and just futures. In a time of urgent social and ecological crises, we contend that such thinking on the edge of what is currently possible and imaginable is increasingly necessary (Wright, 2010). Our discussion in the latter part of the paper aims to provoke public and academic debate, examining the barriers that keep commoning efforts marginalised, and levying the challenge for states to re-centre their claims to legitimacy around enabling practices of commoning.

3.2 The Tragedy of the State/Market dilemma

Throughout the twentieth-century, two ideal forms of organizational governance have dominated political thought and practice: on the one hand a centralised and bureaucratic State; on the other a decentralised and self-regulating Market (Cumbers, 2012). This dualism – of state vs. market; command-and-control vs. market-based; public vs. private; hierarchy vs. network; representative leadership vs. individual choice – continues to dominate the spectrum of conventional political thought and practice today (Palumbo and Scott, 2005). So much so, in fact, that governance is often conceptualized as a zero-sum game between states and markets. In this line of thinking ‘any extension of the market is necessarily at the expense of the state’ and vice-versa (Palumbo and Scott, 2018: 3).

The critiques of both State and Market approaches to governance, which presuppose the ideal form of the other, are well rehearsed, and we draw on several critical discussions (for some key texts, see Cumbers, 2012; Palumbo, 2015; Swyngedouw, 2018). Yet these approaches, along with their proponents and critics, often presuppose each other as the only possibilities. In turn, the State and the Market have also come to be valued in and of themselves. Rather than being used as tools to serve the common good in a generative relationship (i.e. states and markets are used to create and maintain commons), institutions of governance and their political and corporate elites can also form an extractive relationship with the commons (i.e. states and markets are used to exploit the commons) (Bauwens et al., 2019; De Angelis, 2017). We see these as twin possibilities that exist within each approach. In other words, our argument for commoning rests on the understanding that state bureaucracies and market systems are only legitimate to the extent that they serve the common good (cf. Palumbo and Scott, 2005). Although the common good cannot be universally defined, it is a ‘vanishing point’ concept that must be constantly referred to and mobilised when designing and legitimising relationships of governance (Mouffe, 1992). We contend that it is through the process of commoning that a common good can be articulated and constituted, as communities are dialectically formed around (conditionally) shared needs and desires (Gibson-Graham et al., 2016; Huron, 2018).

To paraphrase Paidakaki et al. (2018), if the larger political economic framework (of neoliberal and financial market logics) is challenged in interactions with hegemonic institutions, real social innovation is possible (cf. Leitheiser and Follmann, 2020). In other words, if counter-hegemonic actors engage with existing institutions, transformative potential is determined by their political underpinnings and ability to resist co-option into the status quo. On the one hand the power of states to address general and comprehensive problems, and institutionalize (i.e. scale up and out) alternative practices should not be overlooked (Mitchell and Fazi, 2017); on the other, extractive capitalist markets should not be seen as overbearing monoliths that alternative economic production and exchange cannot circumvent (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013). We argue that the tragedy of the State/Market dilemma does not stem from these institutions as such, but rather from the normative dismissal of real democracy that underpins their dominant forms in theory and practice – that is, democracy in its traditional sense of self-governance by and for the people. For example, this dismissal formed the foundation of Garret Hardin’s (1968) famous tragedy of the commons.
In Hardin’s tragedy, externally-governed authorities and systems – the State and the Market – were prescribed to restrict the agency and decision-making power of the people, who if left to manage their own affairs would give rise to ecological catastrophe. While we do not dispute that tragedy is one possible outcome of a commons, we do strongly dispute the notion that tragedy is the inevitable outcome of commons. We argue, instead, that Hardin’s prescriptions have contributed in part to their own tragedy: that of the State/Market dilemma he proposed. This is most evident in the prevalence of unaccounted externalities and myopic and zero-sum rationalities (e.g. short-term competitive election cycles, careerism, and extractive profit) that run rampant in hegemonic practices of governance today. The tragedy of the State/Market dilemma is the result of exploitation of the commons by the (crony) capitalists, politicians, and bureaucrats who have used the power of the State and set the rules of the game in the Market to maintain the status quo, or serve their own narrow self-interests (De Angelis, 2017).

Even if moral arguments for democracy are put to the side, there are grounds to support the claim that the State/Market dilemma gives way to tragedy by covering up possibilities for more effective approaches to governance. On the one hand, we can look to the Nobel-prize winning work of Elinor Ostrom (1990). Ostrom, and many others since (see the Digital Library Of The Commons, n.d.), have displayed rigorous empirical evidence that societies around the world have functioned successfully for millennia, and continue to function, with institutional organizations that resemble self-governed commons – not bureaucratic states or technocratic market systems. On the other hand, we can look to the extensive theoretical work of James Scott (1998), who has demonstrated that centralised planning failures often result from the rigid institutional homogeneity that is associated with state bureaucracies and large-scale capitalist markets. In order to cover a broad scale, highly-centralised authorities must apply a simplified logic that often results in contradictions and failure on the ground. Scott convincingly argues that this could be averted if more attention were given to plasticity, distributed and de-centralised capacities to adapt, and the use of practical and tacit local knowledge in the institutional design process.

Nevertheless, despite the diligent insights of Ostrom and Scott, among many others, elite State/Market modes of governance remain hegemonic in both theory and practice. Repudiation of self-governance, like that of Hardin’s and more recently populism (see e.g. Frank, 2020), continues to be prevalent. Citizens and their communities, in turn, remain spectators: more subjects – to bureaucratic (State) and/or systemic (Market) rule – than they are agents who democratically co-determine their own destinies (Tully, 2008a). If we recognize that this subordinating approach to democratic citizenship may be embedded into the structural norms and rules of the institutions of the state as it currently exists, we can then attempt to develop new norms and rules that could support new capacities for citizens and communities.

3.3 Keeping the rabble in line with liberal theory: communities as spectators

Democratic deficit and participation are increasingly problematized in light of recent developments, exemplified by the multi-scalar restructuring of governance-beyond-the-state (Svynge¬douw, 2018). Yet, democratic deficit is hardly new. Liberal theory – which underpins conventional understandings of State and Market institutions – has always been wary of democracy in its historical sense of the self-governing rule by the people (Barber, 1988; Palumbo, 2015). Indeed, a fear of the “common people”, a demos-phobia, is deeply embedded in liberal philosophy (Barber, 1988).

Despite the virtues of liberal citizenship (e.g. civil rights and liberties, universal suffrage, etc.) (see Mouffe, 1993 for an outline), there are many critics who argue that its philosophical foundations form a mere baseline of ‘low intensity’ democracy (Marks, 2000; Tully, 2008a, 2008b). In the liberal tradition, citizenship is defined primarily in a passive sense, as a legal status for individuals, not in an active sense, as the civic/community participation in public affairs. In other words, the prevailing liberal understanding of democracy is as a thing that is already achieved – a formal set of existing procedures and institutions – not an activity, or an ongoing process of defining the ethico-political ideals of liberty and equality and designing institutions that reflect those ideals (Purcell, 2013). In societies with extreme inequalities (of e.g. power, time, wealth and other resources) these ‘low intensity’ understandings of democracy run the risk reducing democracy to a façade; a ‘veneer of formal equality and procedural correctness’ (Marks, 2000: 64). As such, systems of governance that are formally democratic may conceal their antidemocratic tendencies (Wolin, 1992).

Looking through the veneer reveals that the capacity for citizens to exert political influence is, in most purportedly democratic societies, limited at best (Miller, 2020). Dissenting from the status quo, and organising to effect change involves a great deal of risk and high-cost barriers to entry (namely resources like time, knowledge, and capital). This is especially the case in societies where lobbying has become more a professional than civic activity (Bitonti and Harris, 2017). The outcome of this professionalisation is displayed in the grossly uneven capacities of influence in setting political agendas and controlling policy. The prevalence
of private interests who often exercise tyrannical control, leaving citizens with a feeling of powerlessness. Just as the “common good” is not fixed and pre-given, the will of the people is, in part, articulated through the process of deliberation (Landemore, 2020). Representative leaders, big-budget think tanks, and profit-driven media outlets play a significant role in constituting the will of the people, and in giving credibility to certain political imaginaries while discrediting others (Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Laclau, 2005). As such, representation does not merely embody an aggregate of bottom-up wills. It also, in part, delimits from the top-down what is considered to be a “realistic” or “reasonable” will in the first place. In order to address democratic deficit and participation, it is, therefore, important to interrogate, on the one hand, the very rules and norms of democratic institutions and procedures that may foreclose certain forms of participation; and on the other the material capacities of influence that constrain certain possibilities and enable others.

One distinction that is useful here is between ‘invited spaces’ of participation and ‘invented spaces’ of participation (Miraftab, 2004). The two are different in their degrees of freedom. The former (invited spaces), are restricted; their scope and limits predetermined by existing ideologies or ways of doing things. Invited spaces imply a passive role for citizens, which needs to be affirmed from the top-down. Citizens are invited to participate, provided that they stay within the bounds of the norms established from above. In contrast, invented spaces imply agency for people to create their own forms of self-organisation based on self-determined notions of the common good.

3.4 Toward the commoning of governance: citizens as sparring partners

There are many different schools of thought on what is meant by a commons (see Vivero-Pol et al., 2019 for a more detailed discussion). Instead of seeing the commons as having any intrinsic ontological properties that can be “discovered” by social theorists, here we develop a political perspective of the commons as an institution, and commoning as a democratic process of negotiating institutional rules and norms to serve the common good and foster solidarity and ecological sustainability (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; Ostrom, 1990). This view does not see the designation of a particular resource as a commons as based on anything innate – like conventional economic theory which seeks to objectively determine whether or not a resource is rival or excludable. Nor does it necessitate a particular type of ownership (e.g. public, private or collective). The designation of commons is rather based on the ethical and political considerations of a community, and the institutional rules and norms that they decide to organise (Vivero-Pol et al., 2019). Put simply, commoning is an ongoing process of designing institutions to serve the common good.

Commoning emerges when the people of a community claim the right to define the common good. As Foucault (2007) has underscored, “the people are those who, refusing to be the population, disrupt the system” (cited in Swyngedouw, 2014: 171, emphasis added). Applied to commoning, the community is made up of those, who when their unmet needs and desires become so great, refuse their role as spectators and claim an agentic role as sparring partners. It is different from conventional State/Market approaches in (1) the way that decisions are made (i.e. in organisational form, procedures, and processes designed to foster solidarity and radical democracy), and in (2) the way that value is defined (i.e. in epistemology, or form of reason that is used to make decisions). If we follow the definition of commoning laid out here, we can see that many practices of commoning are already occurring. Despite operating within existing institutions and the wider State/Market dilemma that frames mainstream political discourse, many practices – for example, cooperative enterprise, land trusts, community supported agriculture, mutual aid, etc. – actually go against the ideal norms and rules of State/Market approaches to governance (cf. Tully, 2008b). These practices may, and often do, develop better methods for meeting people’s basic needs (Kaika, 2017). However, more often than not, these practices remain marginalised.

A new raison d’être for state institutions could be seen as a tool for amplifying commoning. While co-option of counter-hegemonic movements by the state is always a danger, the state (with a small ‘s’) is merely an assemblage of heterogeneous organizations and individuals; a political arena where the forces of civil society meet to struggle for hegemony (Wright, 2010). With this perspective, state institutions are not inherently mutually exclusive to commoning. Rather they can be generative to commons if new roles and relationships are institutionalised (Angel, 2017; Pazaitis and Bauwens, 2019), and invited spaces of governance are open to integration with invented spaces. We see two concepts as being useful in this regard: the Public-Common Partnership (PCP) and new municipalism.

The Public-Common Partnership (PCP) offers a way to radically rethink the role of the state and its relationship with commons (Milburn and Russell, 2021). The PCP stands in contrast to the Public-Private Partnership (PPP), which can be critically understood as often resulting in elite-driven policy making (Béal, 2012; McCann, 2001), or using the state to create new markets for private capital accumulation. Instead, the PCP sees commoners partner with the state to create new commons. Investment risks are assumed by the state in the PCP, while communities take control over ownership and governance and accumulate their own capital. Rather
than facilitating and expanding the reach of corporate power and financial capital, the PCP can enable new forms of democratic possibility through the centrifugal expansion of community ownership and direct participation in governance. The enrichment of democratic subjectivity among the community, along with the accumulation of community-owned capital, creates a basis on which further commoning projects can be built (Milburn and Russell, 2021). PCPs can, in other words, create ‘self-expanding circuit[s] of radical democratic self-governance’ (Exner et al., 2021, p. 15). Empirical examples of PCPs are few and far between, as such governance innovations carry a stigma of political risk (see Russell (2019b) for a case study). In other words, for such projects to be initiated in the first place, the public half of the partnership needs to be willing to engage and cede control. Openness to take on such political risks will likely require that sufficient social force is mobilised (Angel, 2017), or that commoning movements engage more with electoral politics. This brings us to the next concept, ‘new municipalism’, a growing grassroots approach to electoral politics that has seen civic social movements across the world attempt to enter into local politics (Russell, 2019a) – a move from occupying squares to ‘occupying institutions’ (Thompson, 2020). In this sense, the urban or municipal level can be viewed as a strategic scale in which electoral politics can be more effectively engaged in ways that are not possible at other scales, and in which the logic and practice of the commons can be extended (cf. Bianchi, 2019). Such a framework poses a direct challenge to dominant understandings of citizens as spectators in democracy.

The task for policy makers, spatial planners and scholars, in response is to recognize commoning as a right (both formally and informally), and develop creative ways of integrating ‘invented spaces’ of commoning into the ‘invited spaces’ which are currently available in existing institutions (cf. Mirafath, 2004). The task for activists and social movements is to take the state seriously as a vehicle for facilitating commoning, and attempt to engage more with electoral politics towards those ends. We contend that the concept of commoning can (1) call upon institutions re-centre their legitimacy around serving the common good (rather than abstractions such as GDP or the Market); (2) help scholars, activists, and policymakers to think in this process-oriented and integrated way, recognise citizens as agents and leaders with the ability to self-organise, and re-design existing institutions in the pursuit of more just and sustainable futures.

3.5 Data collection and methods

Our case study looks at the rapid spread of FPCs in Europe’s German-speaking region, which began in Germany in 2016 and has since become a network of more than 40 cities throughout Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Switzerland and South-Tyrol43. All empirical data – including interviews, document analysis, and observation at two FPC events – was collected and analysed by the first author using over the period of 2018-2020. In order to get a contextual picture of the German FPC movement as a whole, a document analysis of media publications and FPC self-publications was conducted. An interview was also conducted in 2018 with a German FPC expert who has been active in inspiring the formation of FPCs in Germany, and in researching and documenting German FPCs ever since. Document analysis included secondary source interviews, and publications released by FPC leaders such as books (see Thurn et al., 2018 and Wißmann, 2019), letters of correspondence with local government, policy recommendations, and a magazine article (see Hoffmann et al., 2019).

Leaders from FPCs were also met with at the 2018 FPC networking congress (Vernetzungskongress) in Frankfurt. After meeting in person at the congress, several FPC leaders were asked to participate in one-on-one interviews. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted with six FPC leaders from Cologne, Berlin and Frankfurt (two leaders from each city). These three cities were chosen as they have been influential in the movement as a whole. Berlin and Cologne were the first cities to found FPCs in 2016, and Frankfurt was the host of the 2018 networking congress. These cities are also the only three German cities that have signed the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (MUFPP). By signing the MUFPP, the governments of these cities had already committed in 2015 to generating policies that transform food systems towards sustainability. These commitments in turn provide a further opportunity to reflect in our discussion on the contrast between policy promises and practice (Cretella, 2019) that contribute to citizens taking matters into their own hands. Interviews were conducted in either English or German, and translations from German were done by the first author. All interviewees have agreed to use of their names in accordance with informed consent. The empirical section proceeds as follows: first, we outline the positions of FPCs in Germany as a movement to common governance with a new municipalist strategy. Next, we document FPC actions in various domains of transformation to an agroecological food system. A discussion of the barriers and opportunities follows.

43 See https://ernährungsraeto.org/ for a regularly updated map of the network. (last accessed 01.02.2021).
3.6 Forming communities of commoning

Since the first FPC was founded by a group of citizens in Knoxville, Tennessee in 1982, there have been countless iterations of FPCs emerging in towns, cities, and regions all over the globe. Despite local diversity, FPCs are similar in that they are platforms to coordinate collective action among territorially-based stakeholders who are interested in changing policy and building new institutions in the food system. Whether members motivations to enact change stem from concerns of sustainability, local economic development, climate change, social justice, or health, all of these individuals and groups share a vision for a de-commodified food system. In principle, de-commodification means that governance decisions are not based purely on speculative profit making. Instead other socio-environmental values are brought to the fore. In other words, FPCs are organized to pursue ‘food democracy’, which means normal people (whether food eater or growers) move beyond a role as passive consumers, and into a role of active citizens who co-determine the values and economic structures that shape, for example, more sustainable agricultural practices and just supply chains (Hassanein, 2003; Renting et al., 2012; Wald, 2015). Food democracy is here seen as a process of commoning governance in the sense that existing state and market institutions are the target of (re-)design and transformation. As such it can be seen as a politics that aims to work within and against the state with the goal of extending democracy beyond that which is currently offered in invited spaces.

Anna Wißmann, a leader in the FPCs in both Cologne and Bonn, has been involved in the formation of food policy councils in Germany since the beginning. She explained the need for creation of the FPC as a new institution in Germany, as there are simply no existing formal structures, or invited spaces, in place to meet these desires:

_You’re not supposed to be doing this [...] If you have a farm you’re supposed to apply for funding to convert it to organic. If you’re a local citizen’s initiative you’re supposed to run little projects and get funding maybe for two years and then the project is done and everyone’s happy and everyone goes home._

_That’s not what an FPC is at all. It is an institution that wants to be built [...] Because, yeah – what are you trying to do? You’re trying to change some of the very basic ways of operating. You’re going well beyond tweaking._

As Wißmann explains, the lack of existing institutional channels necessitates inventing new spaces of governance. As FPCs aim to change some of the ‘very basic ways of operating’ in the food system, they must chart their own territory and operate within and against the conventional state/market system of governance. Although they engage with these hegemonic institutions, they do so with the goal of re-designing them.

As the FPCs have spread throughout Germany, they have taken on locally variegated forms. Each city is a bit different — as Janina Steinkruger, a leader in the Frankfurt FPC explained, ‘From its citizens, to its politics’. This can be seen in the way that the organisational models of German FPCs vary from city to city. For example, Berlin’s FPC has a direct democratic structure, in which members of a plenary assembly elect a speaker’s circle. The Berlin FPC is an independent, purely civic organisation that attempts to operate with consensus decision making, and actively attempts to seat women, immigrants, refugees, and non-academic members into leadership roles. In Cologne, the FPC is more closely connected with the city government, and tries to also involve more members from “industry” (small retailers and farmers, but even some super markets). A coordination team is elected by the active members of the working groups, and ten members from government are appointed by the sitting mayor. Each FPC has a “core group” who are consistently active in attending meetings and working groups. This can range anywhere from 10 to more than 100 members, depending on the time and place. General meeting attendance also varies, but can reach several hundred, again depending on time and place. The membership base also varies by city. Participants include activists, to those involved in previous or ongoing food initiatives, to concerned parents, to farmers and small business owners. Many FPC leaders and members would be considered “experts” even within mainstream institutions (e.g. universities, think tanks, NGOs). Some have graduate and post-graduate degrees in food policy and agricultural sciences; others have experience working with international NGOs and at the European Union level in Brussels. However, all have developed a theory of change that understands the transformative potential of civil society and grassroots initiatives.

3.7 FPCs as Platforms for Food Democracy: Charting actions in key areas of intervention

Here we highlight various FPC initiatives in several ‘key areas of intervention’ that Anderson et al. (2021) have identified as ‘domains of transformation’ to agroecology. These areas of intervention are overlapping and non-linear, but are loosely grouped into categories of networks, knowledge, systems of economic exchange, and discourse (Table 4).
**Chapter 3: Toward the Commoning of Governance**

### 3.7 Networks

The FPCs in Germany can be best understood as a networking of various networks. An overarching FPC network serves as an “umbrella” organization for bringing together a variety of groups focused on food systems change, which themselves have also organized into local FPCs. At the local level FPCs are organized into various working groups that focus on a particular concrete project, including themes from communication, to food education, to public procurement. This difference from city to city can be seen in many facets of the FPCs including member base and working group themes. Despite local differences FPC members have recognized that as a network coalition they have a greater capacity to build a resource and knowledge base, and generate political will for change at regional, national and EU scales. To this end, the network office, which is led by Anna Wischmann in Bonn, aims to serve as a figurehead for the FPC movement, and represent the network to the outside world in media communication and lobbying projects. While the network is still in formation at present, its members have plans of growing beyond the context of Germany alone. One FPC working group, made up of members from across the network, aims to develop a manifesto in order to articulate the common policy aims of the German FPCs. The FPC manifesto will draw on international inspiration including, among others, the Voedsel Anders manifesto (Food Otherwise, a movement in the Netherlands and Belgium), the U.K.’s ‘People’s Food Policy’[44], Sustain’s Manifesto for a Better Food Britain[45], and the Italian Network for Local Food Policies manifesto[46].

FPCs have an annual networking congress to foster exchange among the various initiatives. Beginning in 2017, three of these events have brought FPC participants together in Essen, Frankfurt, and Bonn, to discuss strategies, theoretical underpinnings, and highlight best practices – not only from the German context, but from all over the world. At each congress, the host city signs up to organize speakers, but the flexible BarCamp schedule and content format leaves plenty of room for spontaneous exchange.

### 3.7.2 Knowledge

FPCs act as facilitators of knowledge processes, and provide a civic alternative to those of mainstream institutions like agricultural universities and policy think tanks (Anderson et al., 2021). Knowledge that is produced and shared is not only in regard to agricultural practices, but also governance practices and democratic citizenship. The Berlin FPC has been exemplary in this regard. One example can be seen in their Regional Excursion program. In this program, the Berlin FPC rents a bus and bring together canteen operators from the city (including representatives from municipal water, transport, and cleaning authorities) to visit regional producers and learn about their practices and working conditions.

The Berlin FPC has also facilitated horizontal learning through its “All at one table!” program, which organizes community dinners for people with a migration background. Here they aim to reach people that would not normally attend their meetings, and learn about their experiences in the food system. Christine Pohl explained,

> ‘We tried to interview people a bit about what they want from the food system, or what they want from food, or what matters to them. [...] the idea is to make that into a report or a basis for advocacy work as well. [...] we want to make other people’s voices heard. So first we are trying to hear them ourselves and find them! [...] because we think that democracy is not just always the same people talking.’

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44 [https://www.peoplesfoodpolicy.org/about-a-peoples-food-policy](https://www.peoplesfoodpolicy.org/about-a-peoples-food-policy)


All of these examples display FPCs as facilitators of knowledge exchange in which the role between teachers and learners is blurred; between canteen operators and producers, and between those who already view themselves as democratic agents and those who may not.

3.7.3 Systems of economic exchange

Helping to facilitate market access for small, regional, and organic farmers is viewed as a major focus for all FPCs. In particular, public procurement is seen as a political instrument that can be used to create a more regular and constant demand for seasonal, regional and organic produce, which can in turn create a demand for more regional organic farmers, and an infrastructure network to connect them to the city. In all three cities, the main targets so far have been schools.

One example comes from Berlin, where the FPC organized a “Regional Week”, which provided more than 60,000 students in 275 Berlin schools with organic and regional meals for one week in 2018. The FPC also developed educational modules for the students to learn about the food and where it came from, and coordinated with media to report about the pilot project that aimed to demonstrate the transformative potential of public buying power. Cologne’s StErn Kita program and Frankfurt’s Main Mittagessen working group also target the procurement methods of schools and other public facilities, and develop educational programs to teach children about food and agriculture.

3.7.4 Discourse

FPCs have created a public space in which citizens can come together to formulate a civic framing of policy debates and action in food systems change. Contrary to top-down framing of policy that views citizens as passive consumers who need to be nudged or coerced into making “better” choices (Gumbert, 2019), FPCs claim a role as citizens who contribute to public discourse and shape governance practices, not merely consumers who can “vote” with their purchases. In other words, as counter-hegemonic actors they engage with mainstream institutions as ‘sparring partners’ rather than ‘spectators’. Christine Pohl, a leader in the Berlin FPC’s speaker circle, exemplified the sparring partner role when she added:

“I think our role is to, whenever the Senate comes forward with something, it’s our role to say, “That’s great. But now you have to do this and that.”

We want to prevent them from just leaning back and saying, “Ah, we did something great. This is it.” We keep pushing, because we’re still not where we want to be.”

Henrike Rieken, another leader in the Berlin FPC, underscored this, emphasizing:

[The FPC] can carry the political ambition of our ideas into politics and policy [...] It offers a platform. It gives the voices a space where we can come together and bring our message to politics. So we can work on translating these demands into reality. So they are reacted to by politicians and can be actualized. So that they don’t say, “We can’t do it.” On the contrary! Yes we can.

These quotes display the ways in which FPCs politicise their role in the food system – that is from consumers with a purchasing choice to citizens with a political voice that can invent new spaces for citizenship in governance.

One example of this sparring partner role can be seen in the Berlin Senate’s development of a “Canteen Future Berlin” project, which aims to advise and support public canteens in procuring more organic, regional and seasonal foods. The Berlin FPC had been an early advocate of a project for transforming public procurement of food in the city, and had provided the initial impetus for the city to commit to developing such a project in the first place (a so-called “House of Food”, based on the model of Copenhagen). Consulting work and the training of cooks that work in urban canteens is an important intervention in transformation, as Copenhagen has showed (see Martinez (2015) for an overview). Yet the Berlin FPC had envisioned a holistic approach that would go above and beyond the Copenhagen model, and urged the Senate to focus on the city’s food system as a whole. The FPC vision viewed the project as an open space of learning which would focus on facilitating regional and organic food provision for all people in the city, not just those who cook and eat at canteens. They wished to create additional institutions that would assist small farmers in accessing land, develop a logistics network to enable regional and organic farmers to sell their produce in the city at a price affordable for all, and educate people of all ages and backgrounds about food, cooking, and procurement. However, when it came time to choose to project leader, the Senate decided not to cede control of the project to the FPC, but rather to a private developer. In this case, the private developer took a more narrow approach that according to Pohl, did not offer many real possibilities for public participation and only effected those who cooked or ate in city canteens. While the Senate’s Canteen Future Berlin provided an important contribution, interviewees from the Berlin FPC expressed that they would have liked to see more courage from the Senate. In particular, they could have formulated the call for the project much more openly, and opened up space for thinking more broadly about what a House of Food could accomplish, beyond just being a place to train cooks.

Although the FPC’s vision ultimately lost out in the end, this example displays the possibility that FPCs create for developing a conscious sparring partner role:
a critical voice outside of existing institutional channels that seeks to both hold institutions to account, and push them to go further in achieving goals.

FPCs continue to build their own discourse about food system transformation through various mediums including social media, magazine articles, a book (see Thurn et al., 2018), and a podcast. This has also begun to influence policy discourse through the development of Urban Food Strategies (UFSs). UFSs are comprehensive vision documents that aim to coordinate various urban actors towards measures and policies that lead towards more desirable food futures (Smaal et al., 2020). Although UFSs have been designed all over Europe in recent years, many have been critiqued for being merely rhetorical – existing in promise, but not in practice (see also Cretella, 2019). For example, mayors in Cologne, Frankfurt, and Berlin have signed the MUFPP in 2015, which clearly states in one of its commitments:

We will review and amend existing urban policies, plans and regulations in order to encourage the establishment of equitable, resilient and sustainable food systems47.

Yet these commitments have remained rhetorical, and none of the city governments took it upon themselves to actually develop, ratify, and implement an UFS. Writing an UFS and building the political will to get it accepted by municipal governments remains a goal for all FPCs in Germany. However, only the Cologne FPC has managed to accomplish this so far, thanks to funding received from sympathetic actors in the city’s administration. Anna Wißmann informed us that the food strategy project, which took more than two years to develop, was very open and participative. Although the city of Cologne was a ‘co-host’ in the process, the FPC had free reign in the project design. This was important, particularly in regard to citizen participation because as Wißmann explained,

[...] it wasn’t the city calling for participation, it was the FPC [...] the municipality, they have all sorts of models and formats and rules for how citizens can participate in their processes, and they are often not so successful. They are very limited in their scope.

While unable to explain exactly why Cologne had managed to develop a more successful relationship with the city than other FPCs, Wißmann underscored that they could serve as an example for other FPCs to point to in their efforts to engage with municipalities.

3.8 Discussion: empirical barriers, theoretical possibilities

Our case study gives a snapshot of the painstaking efforts that citizens have gone to in their attempts to common food governance in German cities. While we have shown that FPCs have managed to organize a number of diverse and promising interventions based on self-determined notions of the common good, we have also observed a process of struggle. In particular, interviewees outlined how FPC members have been subject to the burnout that is often associated with precarious civic initiatives. As Florian Sander, a leader in the Cologne FPC, explained,

Some of the founding members of the working groups are gone now, because [...] yeah, doing volunteer work for four years and you don’t see any results!
That’s quite tough.'

Although FPC members may begin with a burning desire to transform food systems, their efforts are often stymied or frustrated due to lack of resources and capacities to exert political influence.

Our case study also indicates that state actors actively reinforce the role of citizens as spectators. Returning to Berlin and the Senate’s “Canteen Future Berlin” project, we can see that although a bottom-up pathway for the project was possible, state officials remained stuck in the State/Market dilemma that gave control to a private developer, which maintained a more narrow focus. In turn, the FPC’s more holistic and deeply transformative vision was foreclosed. In this regard, as the state became involved, the radical or transformative content of the project was held in check, as the State/Market dilemma covered up alternative possibilities for community control.

Anna Wißmann corroborated that the role of citizens as spectators is reinforced as politicians defend inaction with appeals to ‘no alternative’ logics. In discussions with state actors in North-Rhine Westphalia, she reported that:

People just get on the stage and they say, “Well yeah, we see all these problems, but we really can’t do anything about it, it’s all up to the consumer.”
They are very much stuck in that discourse. They even enforce that discourse.

Despite having real chances to exert political influence and “pave the way” for civic efforts to common governance, state actors often remain stuck in the discourse that the state is powerless in the face of wider unaccountable forces, e.g. consumer demand, globalisation. Although this indicates that efforts to common existing institutions may often be tedious and frustrated, it also implies

47 http://www.milanurbanfoodpolicypact.org/text/
that they are not inherently impervious to change. These observations indicate that a strategy for commoning existing institutions should focus both on mobilising a broad social support base, but also on engaging more with electoral politics in line with new municipalist movements. This dialectical approach can focus on bringing new ways of thinking and acting into existing institutions, and providing state actors with the cover to take more political risk. If we can recognise that feasible alternatives are often covered up or rendered invisible by established ways of thinking and acting, concepts like commoning may be able to provide the political imagination necessary to break free of the narrative that ‘there is no alternative’ to the State/Market dilemma.

3.9 Conclusion

Major social and ecological problems are urgent and widespread. Yet institutions continue to approach these problems with the tired solutions of the State/Market dilemma (cf. Kaika, 2017). In this paper we have argued that the tragedy of the State/Market dilemma can be seen in the covering up of alternative possibilities for organisation, and underpinning the anti-democratic idea that citizens and communities cannot be trusted in self-governance. However, we have also argued that State/Market institutions can be commoned – that is (re-)designed to facilitate the creation and maintenance of commons, based on self-determined notions of the common good. We have stressed, in particular, the importance of democracy in (re-)claiming the commons, which we see as a pre-condition for other aspects of commoning practices, including the generation of collective benefits and de-commodification.

Policymakers and spatial planners are, in turn, called to re-centre their responsibility around generating commons and enabling such practices of commoning (Brinkley, 2020). That means both revisiting normative understandings of citizenship and democracy, and creating or re-designing formal institutions organized around principles of de-commodification and collective benefit. Inspiration can be taken from the many examples of commoning that already occur within and against the norms of conventional State and Market, and from innovative concepts like the Public-Common Partnership and new municipalism that detail a new raison d’être for state institutions. These examples can in turn provide encourage new and radically democratic imaginaries for solving urgent social and ecological issues.

Our paper began by arguing that the concept of commoning can help in finding creative solutions to widely acknowledge problems. Our case study of German FPCs detailed the formation of a translocal civic network, which has struggled to organise interventions focused on transforming food systems at the municipal level and beyond. We showed that existing institutional ideologies, including normative understandings of citizenship and democracy, often act as constraining barriers to commoning. However, we have also argued that FPCs have contributed to a reclamation of the democratic imaginary as a political arena where more sustainable and just futures can be developed. Additionally, we have shown that real, albeit theoretical, possibilities for commoning do exist at municipal scales, provided that officials are open to a shift in perspective and enough social support is mobilised. This suggests that civic initiatives should more strategically engage with electoral politics in order to open up opportunities for new roles and relationships, e.g. the Public-Commons Partnership. Further research is needed to continue to document and recognize the emergence of commoning; including the institutional barriers that keep efforts marginalised, and the opportunities for amplification.
CHAPTER 4
Painting outside the lines

4.1 Introduction

The act of creation is, I have said, the same in science as in art. It is a natural, human, living act. (Bronowski, 1968)

Jacob Bronowski arrived in Nagasaki in 1945 as a mathematician who had worked to develop efficient British bombing strategies during World War II. After being sent to document the destruction of the atomic bomb with a team of fellow scientists, he left Nagasaki as a humanist philosopher who would go on to devote his remaining career to foregrounding the importance of human-created values in science, and the fundamental connections between imagination, science, and the arts (Bronowski, 1956; Bronowski et al., 1964). Seeing the wreckage that his field of scientific work had contributed to, Bronowski was faced with the reality that science is not a purely mechanical, neutral, or indifferent collection of observed facts. Instead, he would come to understand science as a creative and imaginative system of knowledge, underpinned by human values, with a blurred, rather than clear-cut line between production and use. Deeply affected by his experience in Nagasaki, Bronowski experienced first-hand the danger of disconnecting science from human values and judgement. He would come to argue that, in achieving its greatest discoveries and usefulness, science had always been humanistic. For Bronowski (1985), science at its best was (1) anti-authoritarian; (2) rooted in human experience; and (3) interconnected with and immersed in nature. It was only when scientists, and more importantly the institutional wholes to which they were part, lost touch with these value-based roots that science could become a “bag of tricks” deployed in the service of a callous bureaucracy intent on preserving its status quo (Bronowski, 1985, p. 264).

Bronowski’s story illustrates the complex interaction of lived human experience with subjectivity and understanding of science. It shows the dynamic interplay of experience, values, and worldviews, and in turn, how this shapes approaches to scientific inquiry. This interplay marks the difference between whether one views science as a mechanical set of indifferent facts, or something that is creative, informed by values and context, and conditioned by its use. Just as our human values influence the ways in which we seek to understand the world through science, reason and the things we learn about the world through the scientific method also influence our values and particular normative valuations and prescriptions (Sayer, 2011).

The main theme of this collective book, creative methods (CMs), represents an attempt to contribute to critical discussions on how the process and pursuit of research may be more conducive to (1) making people question established ways of thinking and acting; and (2) building a more inclusive approach to research in which unheard voices are empowered. However, as an approach to conducting research and exchanging knowledge, CMs, just like any other methods, are embedded into human value systems which influence how they are used to produce knowledge, and how that knowledge will be applied (or not applied) in practice (Harré, 1981; Longino, 1990). Here we wish to highlight the reflexive character of scientific investigation, which is particularly prominent in the case of humanistic and social sciences. The personal beliefs, motivations and expectations of the researchers play a role in determining what gets discovered and for what purpose, e.g. what kinds of questions are asked and what kind of evidence counts as valid to confirm a hypothesis, across disciplines. Value assumptions, whether epistemic, moral, or political, shape the content of science and its application. Yet this normative shaping of scientific inquiry does not end with the individual researcher, but is mediated through the wider social environment (Sayer, 2011). In particular, we contend that the content and application of science in society is influenced by the institutions that employ researchers and the funders that provide the basis for their material existence. Therefore, a critical discussion of CMs would be incomplete without a structural analysis of the values embedded...
into the wider contextual environment in which CMs emerge: university systems that are increasingly managerial (Deem et al., 2007; Lešiute, 2015; Shepherd, 2018).

Managerialism is an ideology which is predicated on the universalized application of private sector values and practices, and namely corporate-style management, into all spheres of society (Chauvière and Mick, 2013; Deem, 2001). Management becomes “hyper-management” in which “management, as a form and as a process, becomes an end in itself, a self-serving entity” (Barberis, 2012, p. 327). Applied in a university setting, managerialism colonizes (Kilkauer, 2015) the values traditionally associated with higher education (e.g. truth, autonomy, democracy, or the public good) (Giroux, 2010). Below, we outline what we identify as the main values of the managerial university, which are sustained through four major driving forces: an environment of funding scarcity; a logic of competition to secure funding; the implementation of accountability metrics to rank competitors; and the creation of incentives for obedience. But first, a few disclaimers. We acknowledge that managerialism is not a uniform blueprint, but is rather a pattern in which a more general organizational approach has been applied in various local contexts across the globe (Deem, 2001; Pusser et al., 2011). Nor is the managerial ideology ubiquitous among all academic staff (see e.g. Connell, 2019). Nevertheless, its system of ideas, ideals, manners and thoughts has been applied by many sitting in influential positions, and mediates academic work, even for those individual academics who may work to resist (Anderson, 2008; Evans, 2020). Finally, we have nothing against management as such, just hyper-management, where its application is counter-productive or inappropriate.

The aim of our critique is to point to how the values and practices of managerialism embedded into universities place inherent constraints on those wishing to bring creativity – as in originality and imagination – into the academic process, regardless of whether it is in the research process itself or in its application. Moreover, as many researchers who are interested in CMs may also be motivated to achieving transformative real-world outcomes (to fostering e.g. sustainability, resilience, etc.), we wish to highlight the tremendous uphill battle that they face within the confines of managerial universities. We do not do this to promote feelings of hopelessness, but to rather shed illusions, and warn about the ever-present danger of co-option. This applies even in the case of novel research approaches that may, on the surface, appear to be different and subversive, of which CMs are an illustrative example. Bringing in creativity may just as easily be used to affirm the status quo as to challenge it (Mould, 2018). By highlighting the managerial university’s constraints, we wish to motivate strategic thinking for political action and coalition building outside of and beyond academic work. This chapter provides the analytical grounds on which collective practices can derive strength and cohesion. However, our reflections do not fall in the binary trap ‘don’t act, just think’. Beyond provocative statements à la Slavoj Žižek, our approach is more that of Noam Chomsky, who in a recent interview suggested to “look around, analyze the problems, ask yourself what you can do and set out on the work!”48. Our task in this chapter is to organize our analysis of the problems, and motivate ourselves and others to reflect on possibilities for action.

If one views individual researchers who use CMs as painters who sketch out original and imaginative ways of approaching and disseminating research, our chapter provides an analysis of the canvas on which they are painting: university institutions. We argue that the managerial university is not a blank canvas on which creativity can be painted. Rather, the canvas of managerialism is defined by a particular set of values that discourages painting outside the lines. In other words, managerialism produces structural impediments to CMs (Bullen et al., 2004; Connell, 2019). Failure to recognize that CMs are simply tools, free to be co-opted and stabilized into this restrictive context, may amplify the latent risk of CMs being reduced to a nice-sounding bag of tricks, that reinforces the status quo under a new coat of paint. We call this latent risk the danger of forced creativity49, which we provide two illustrative examples of: artwashing and funding tricks. We do not wish to suggest that these dangers are particularly unique to CMs as such. Similar challenges are certainly faced by a variety of heterodox thinkers who wish to generate new approaches in science and higher education, or even to hold onto old traditions (Brown, 2010). Our contribution also aims to contribute to this wider discussion, and debates on the role of the university in society. However, in this context of this book, we wish to use the example of CMs to illustrate that even those approaches that may appear to be novel and radical are not inherently resistant to the managerial university’s distorting influence. We contend that CMs will only be truly creative to the extent that they are able to resist the trends of the managerial university, which aim to co-opt and appropriate their heterodoxy or stabilize their transformative character. If researchers truly wish to address power relations in the research process, give a voice to the voiceless, and break free from the shackles of the strictly positivist paradigm in social sciences, their efforts must be extended beyond the processes of data collection and dissemination of research, and towards building wider coalitions to intervene in technocratic and managerial takeover.

48 Interview by Zeit Campus, 14th of June 2011.
49 The inspiration for this concept comes from Graeber (2018) who uses the term in his book ‘Bullshit Jobs’.
The chapter begins with a historical context that has contributed to the institutionalization of these managerial values in the universities across the globe, after which we outline the values of the managerial university (accountability, competition, and obedience) that find fertile ground in an environment of funding scarcity. Next we move on to define our understanding of forced creativity and give two illustrative examples. We suggest that those interested in CMs also bring creativity into the transgression of established academic protocols that bring about the risks of forced creativity.

### 4.2. The managerial university and the de-politicization of the public sphere

_The reason why it may be wise to distrust the political judgement of scientists qua scientists is [...] precisely the fact that they move in a world where speech has lost its power._ (Arendt, 1958, p. 4)

The Western university as an institution has its roots in the millenary field of political philosophy (Arendt, 1958; Wolin, 1960). In this traditional understanding, the political is an open public realm in which a plurality of possible visions for organizing social and ecological relations are formed, contested and debated (Swyngedouw, 2018). The pluralistic character of healthy democratic politics is nurtured by the diversity of interpretations of social existence. Forms of governance can be said to be democratic to the extent that they allow this diversity to thrive. Although dissent may always be challenged, it is never suppressed. The space where this process of political deliberation occurs has traditionally been referred to as the public sphere by democratic theorists (e.g. Habermas, 1990); a domain of civic thought and normative discussion on matters of general interest that is seen to as the public sphere by democratic theorists (e.g. Habermas, 1990): a domain of civic thought and normative discussion on matters of general interest – were becoming increasingly narrowed in society at large (Arendt, 1958; Bronowski, 1956; Wolin, 1960). As autonomous and free inquiry are a central component of an open democratic society, universities were a major part of this closure (Giroux, 2009; Holmwood, 2017).

Managerialism draws many similarities with Taylorism, Fordism, technocracy and other traditions of techno-scientific standardization and social homogenization, which of course did not begin in university institutions (see e.g. Scott, 1998 for a broader, more detailed historical perspective). Here, we trace the modern origins of the managerial ideology into institutions of higher education back to the early 20th-century in the United States, where in the 1910s, an intense debate was waged over educational reform. David Snedden’s social efficiency approach (rooted in vocationalism and the production of obedient workers for the capitalist economy) was here pitted against John Dewey’s liberal approach (rooted in a desire to create free citizens empowered by independent thought) (Labaree, 2010). The social efficiency approach saw education as a form of training – “something like filling a vessel with water”, or imparting pre-existing knowledge on passive subjects (Chomsky, 2012, p. 56). The liberal approach, on the other hand, saw education more like the nurturing of a tree, or “providing the circumstances in which the normal creative patterns will flourish” (ibid.). While Dewey’s name and approach may be more recognizable in the present day, Snedden’s social efficiency approach would go on to be much more influential in shaping education policy for the remainder of the 20th century (Labaree, 2010). In the context of a rising working class consciousness at the end of the 19th century and early 20th century (Chomsky, 2012; Goodwyn, 1978; Ware, 1929) Snedden’s approach resonated strongly with powerful coalition of state and capitalist elites. Not only did they view social criticism and moral and political philosophy of the liberal approach as a threat to the status quo, they also were keen to have the burden of training obedient workers covered by public subsidy (Labaree, 2010). This also helps to explain the trend of prioritizing STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) subjects vis-à-vis humanities (namely moral and political philosophy) in many university institutions (Palumbo and Scott, 2018).

In the post-World War II era, the social efficiency model for the university was increasingly globalized. Managerialism moved beyond the United States, as universities became increasingly viewed as tools for driving global economic development in the broader context of the Cold War and European reconstruction (Adler et al., 2007; Palumbo and Scott, 2018; Schrum, 2012). During this time, the Rockefeller, Carnegie and Ford Foundations partnered with the American
state to steer the evolution of universities in the so-called developing world50, which effectively established a relationship of dependency and instituted a global system of training (rather than education) in line with metropolitan development (Connell, 2019). Business schools rose to power in universities around the world, and an administrative and behavioral approach to social science became more and more hegemonic (Pettigrew et al., 2014; Schrum, 2012). Approaches which foregrounded human-values and judgement, creativity and imagination – e.g. liberal arts, or moral and political philosophy – were thus displaced by a quest to systematically model human behavior with unified general theories, based on (a perversion of) physical sciences (Klikauer, 2015; Schrum, 2012; Wolin, 1960). According the Wolin (1960), the expansion of and fragmentation social science into disparate disciplines throughout the 19th and 20th centuries was predicated on an eclipse of moral and political philosophy: “While one flourishes, the other flounders in uncertainty of what, if anything, constitutes its subject-matter” (p. 288).

As social sciences became increasingly separated and siloed, i.e. into categories of sociology, economics, psychology, etc., and detached from philosophy they also began to distance themselves from the normative critiques that had been attached to positive description in social sciences during (and before) the Enlightenment (Sayer, 2011). Moreover, evaluation and judgement became largely taboo for (social) scientists in general (ibid.). This included the evacuation of meaningful critiques of dominant (corporatist) ideologies (Chomsky, 2000), and debates over the fundamental role that universities should play in society (Deem and Eggnis, 2017a; Pusser et al., 2011). Consequently, foundational dissent has to great extent been marginalized in wider public debates, with the academy positioned as a central node in the military-industrial-academic-complex (Giroux, 2015). In light of this history, we understand the managerial university as a prime contributor to the de-politicizing the public sphere and stabilizing the status quo.

As anticipated in the introduction, knowledge creation is not a value-free process and the society-science relation is not linear (Turnhout, 2018). Since science does not exist above and outside of society, science qua institution can also not be said to be completely politically neutral. Like in a jury trial, the role of scientific expertise is to augment and sharpen democratic, ethical and political discourse through technical fact-finding and bias mitigation; it is not to give a fixed decision-making blueprint to a passive population (Follett, 1930; Hansson, 2004). On the contrary, in political debates science can (and should) inspire a democratic discussion of what constitutes the most desirable direction (Sayer, 2011). The democratic character of discourse is amplified by the extent to which different interests are taken into account, including that of those generations that are yet to be born or that of non-human species. Scientific findings can elucidate this multiplicity of positions and augment our collective intelligence.

The unwillingness to recognize the political aspects that influence the institution of science paradoxically expose it to appropriation by those in relative positions of power in society. Following Bronowski’s definition of science laid out above, higher education and research, and the university by extension, cannot be truly scientific without being anti-authoritarian – that is maintaining an environment of radically open and critical thought, using different lenses and approaches to investigate truth in understanding society and its relationship with the natural world, and exploring the possibilities for alternative ways of thinking about and organizing socio-natural relations (cf. Deem and Eggnis, 2017). In this sense, science can be seen as a ‘deeply democratic principle, since it rejects all claims to absolute certainty and insists on open, undominated dialogue as the basis for correcting errors and advancing knowledge’ (Wright, 2006, p. 94). The difference between these formulations of science and dogmatic scientism is the capacity to critically engage with the ideologies and values of the wider social environment that guide and mediate scientific inquiry (Chomsky, 2008; Popper, 1979). In the case that institutions of knowledge production fail to embody open democratic principles, they run the risk of propagating a mythical Science (i.e. anti-scientific scientism), which – as the sole and infallible arbiter of truth that can objectively conduct human decision making from the outside – can be contorted to suit the whims of powerful agendas: e.g. ‘we [the people] have no choice but to do X, because Science has told us [the techno-managerial elite] Y.’ In short, science can also become the bag of tricks Bronowski (1985) has warned us about above: deployed in the service of a callous bureaucracy in order to narrow the spectrum of valid thought and debate in the public sphere.

A failure to recognize these risks becomes more problematic as researchers are increasingly called to engage in real world processes to facilitate the application of scientific knowledge and address the wicked and complex problems which humanity is currently facing (e.g. climate change, the destruction of the biosphere, peak oil and peak soil, global inequality) (Blythe et al., 2018). In this socio-environmental context, there is an increasing need for researchers to develop the philosophical underpinnings of action-orientated knowledge production whilst being able to produce actionable knowledge (Nagatsu et al., 2020). This necessitates that researchers challenge their own biases and assumptions related to the public sphere.

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50 We emphasize ‘so-called’ here in order to distance ourselves from the normative view that depicts most of the world’s countries as lacking “development” and celebrates the progress achieved by relatively few countries which has come at the expense of negative environmental and social externalities that are mostly experienced by those living in other parts of the world (see also Gibson-Graham et al., 2013).
to global changes. It also includes insulating science per se from perversion by the same forces that may be driving such problems (Shrivastava et al., 2020). These issues have been brought into the spotlight in several fields of research, including e.g. sustainability science (see e.g. Clark et al., 2016; Kates et al., 2001; Miller, 2013), in which the position of researchers as detached and objective observers of facts is already well established as false (Wittmayer and Schäpke, 2014). In this context, many researchers are increasingly reflexive to the implications of their own positionality and the normative stances they imply in the pursuit of actionable knowledge (Hölscher et al., 2019; Wittmayer and Schäpke, 2014). However, even in fields of research which would ideally carry this reflexive awareness, attempts to escape the de-politicized landscape of the public sphere have been unsuccessful (Nagatsu et al. 2020). For example, Fazey and colleagues (2018) point out that although the need for transformative research is recognized, the majority of resources and attention are directed towards more conventional approaches. Radical approaches or innovations are often seen to be co-opted into old patterns, and realign with, rather than challenge, existing trajectories and power dynamics (Blythe et al., 2018; Fazey et al., 2018; Kläy et al., 2015). Although change and innovation are encouraged as a central part of managerialism in universities (Barberis, 2012), the trajectory and boundaries of change are determined by unaccountable forces (e.g. philanthropic foundations, market forces, the European Commission). Ultimately this points us back to the managerialist framework (the canvas), which encourages the production of checklists and simplified results that can be easily operationalized, and discourages the nuanced complexities of political realities and social differentiation (Blythe et al., 2018; Soones, 2009). Therefore, if originality, a willingness to deviate from norms, and explorative thinking that deviates from traditional paths are the essence of CMs (Kara, 2015; Richards, 2010) the approach of individual researchers is not the only thing that need to become more creative. It is more importantly the creative approach to the organization and funding of knowledge production in universities, and the processes through which their roles in society are negotiated, that must be challenged. Since we have identified de-politicization (i.e. control and sterilization of the public debate) as the crucial barrier to creativity and CM, the next section spells out in more detail the particular value characteristics of control that we believe should be confronted.

4.3 The values of managerial knowledge production: Don’t bite the hand that funds you

As Bavington (2002) has shown, the roots of the word ‘management’ stem back to the Italian word maneggiare, which in the XVI century originally referred to the rearing of wild horses. Likewise, we have defined the managerial university as rooted in control – keeping research and higher education on a leash, and ultimately marginalizing meaningful dissent in the public sphere. The process of bringing managerial practices and values into universities has been sustained by four major driving forces: an environment of funding scarcity; a logic of competition to secure funding; the implementation of accountability metrics to rank competitors; and the creation of incentives for obedience. In looking closer at these forces, this section will explain more specifically how control is maintained. We do this by deconstructing the narratives used to justify New Public Management (NPM) reform, and providing evidence to suggest that these reforms are, in essence, about keeping academia on a leash.

Managerialism has relied on a marketization approach to funding public institutions, which is consistent with general NPM reforms (Izzik, 2007; Palumbo and Scott, 2018). In this approach, universities act as corporations in a competitive market, instead of functional parts of a whole (Connell, 2019). This has made competing to maximize – or at least maintain – access to resources the driving organizational force of university governance (Palumbo and Scott, 2018). The market-based approach has fostered a culture of ruthless competition for academics amongst and against each other in order to fund their work (and consequently, their economic survival). In order to rank the competitors and determine who would receive funding, managers from states, supranational institutions, and university administrations have standardized measurement of individual academic and university performance (Lynch, 2015). Muller (2018) has referred to the resulting system as a tyranny of metrics: a faith in objective and quantifiable measurability as a replacement for subjective and qualitative human judgement. The tyranny of metrics can also be described with what Deem and colleagues (2007) have described as an institutionalized distrust, rooted in a pervasive suspicion that seeks to strictly monitor staff, curtail their room for autonomy and improvisation, and have them constantly justify their work and activities (Adler and Borys, 1996; Graeber, 2018). As we have stated above, the claim that such ‘objective’ measurements are devoid of social values is illusory (cf. Sayer, 2011).

These metrics are, in fact, defined from above in line with the values and material interests of states, supranational institutions, corporations, and private philanthropic foundations who have the capacity to allocate grants and other resources to fund research. While funding institutions may claim impartiality, a closer look shows that many – private foundations and corporations in particular – are not as politically-neutral as they may purport (Lynch, 2015). Apart from governments, none of these institutions are subjected to democratic control, and may be driven by private
interests that are indifferent or even antithetical to public or common interests (Irzik, 2007). The lack of oversight for these funding institutions is particularly concerning in the case of private philanthropic foundations. Private foundations have been described as black boxes, immune from public oversight, with largely unrestricted hyper-agency – i.e. “the ability to shape socio-political frameworks and matrices in which networked governance occurs” (Jung and Harrow, 2015, p. 49). It is argued that many of these private foundations are driven by philanthro-capitalism (Garcia-Arias, 2019; Mediavilla and Garcia-Arias, 2019; Silver, 1998).

In this sense, the hyper-agency of philanthropists can be used as a sort of masked lobbying51. That is, facilitating the production of knowledge that is ostensibly in the public interest, but is primarily driven by private agendas. The opaque nature of foundations allows them to bypass society’s democratic structures and advance an “economic model of investment and political model of control” under the guise of generosity (Shiva and Shiva, 2018, p. 120). One example is the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which funds research and development programs for public health and agriculture around the world to the tune of billions of dollars per year (Biovision Foundation for Ecological Development and IPES-Food, 2020; McCoy et al., 2009; Shiva, 2016). The foundation’s approach to funding research leads to the promotion of certain paradigms (e.g. centralized industrial agriculture, privatization of medical systems, etc.) at the expense of others (see also Vanloqueren and Baret, 2009). In fact, all funding institutions exert some measure of control over science policy and research content (Glaser and Laudel, 2016). Funders effectively hold the reins of control to direct society’s production of knowledge and are the factual managers of the managerial university (Lynch, 2015).

In line with corporate governance, which aims to give shareholders more control over management, funders exert their control through top-down monitoring and assessment. This has a disciplinary effect on dissent for academic staff, in line with the old adage, ‘don’t bite the hand that feeds you’. It creates barriers to levying independent foundational critiques of funding institutions (Pusser et al., 2011), and incentivizes and selects for the perpetuation of dominant ideological paradigms – e.g. those in power within the current system self-select for those who share their worldview and values (Mitchell and Fazi, 2017). This perpetuation is further reinforced by a growing reserve army of precarious academic laborers (e.g. PhDs and post-docs) who work on short-term contracts without job security (cf. Ginsberg, 2011). While the numbers of these precarious laborers continue to grow by many estimates (e.g. the number of doctoral graduates in OECD countries grew by 40% from 2000-2009), the secure and tenured positions do not (Worms and Boman, 2017). Academic labour, in turn, becomes devalued and easily replaceable, creating a further incentive for staff to toe the line in a positional competition game, or simply take their skills to the (corporate) private sector where earning potentials are higher, or at least more secure.

Three main rationalizations are used to justify NPM reforms promoting accountability and competition. First, they are said to foster societal engagement and innovation by eliminating freeriding privileges for ‘ivory tower’ academics with tenure. In this narrative, NPM reforms are carried out in order to provide more value for the taxpayer who assumes the role of shareholder. Value is understood in economic terms as a return on investment (Halfmann and Radder, 2015), and science is evaluated based on its ability to facilitate the creation of wealth or jobs (Jasanoff, 2005). However, instead of eliminating privileges for ‘freeloaders’, such collaborations have created a new set of privileges for (corporate) actors in the military-industrial-academic complex. These private actors – unbeknown to any notion of the public good or wider social responsibilities – have in turn been able to leverage their funding capacities and thus outsource the risk of research and development (R&D) to publicly subsidized universities, while privatizing the benefits (Mazzucato, 2011; Palumbo and Scott, 2018; Schugurensky, 2006). A prime example of this is the U.S.’s Bayh-Dohl Act (1980) which allowed inventions discovered with public funds to be patented for private gain (Irzik, 2007). In effect, this has created a system of technology transfer from the public to the private sector (Irzik, 2007; cf. Mazzucato, 2011), under the guise of ostensibly ‘societal engagement’.

Another argument for the reforms is that they control for quality in research. In reality, there is evidence to suggest that the opposite is true. Competition has actually led to a race to the bottom: spreading the work of academics increasingly thin, subjecting them to higher levels of stress and anxiety, and therefore negatively impacting the quality of their work (Berg, 2015). While any person may win the competition of being the best scholar, not every person can win this competition. The zero-sum logic of competition (again not only for prestige, but institutional funding, and economic survival of individual researchers) requires the acceptance that while some may win the competition, others will lose. Obviously, this is not a new dynamic, as any attempt to make use of limited resources (e.g. funding, jobs positions) involves a certain degree of competition. What we are highlighting are the dangers of placing competition as a core principle of the academic life. For example, a survey of more than four thousand U.K. academics conducted by the Wellcome Trust showed that only 32% of respondents agreed that “healthy competition” was encouraged in their working environment, while 78%
agreed that competition had created unkind and aggressive research conditions (Wellcome Trust, 2020). Managerialism has accelerated the trend of relentless competition, the influence of which has been multiplied by the increasing hordes of a ‘reserve army’ of junior academic staff. With the introduction of these high stakes, academics are incentivized to produce scientific knowledge at an increasingly rapid pace in order to stand out from their competitors. Today, the average academic publishes approximately six times as many papers as if she was to work one century ago (Larsen and von Ins, 2010). This increased production has come with a detriment to the substance of scientific output. The phenomenon has been referred to as ‘scientific salami slicing’ (Ding et al., 2019), which describes how academics separate research articles into the minimum publishable unit with the goal of maximizing the number of publications they can achieve from the same study (cf. Halffman and Radder, 2015). Moreover, duplicate publications are also common practice. A recent study shows that up to 20% of new publications in certain fields of research have reported the same results as in previous publications (Lai et al., 2020). Rather than sharpening quality, managerial reforms have engendered a situation where ‘knowledge’ is overproduced. Is the latest article motivated by a piercing new insight? A novel contribution to knowledge? Or is it intended to pad the authors curriculum vitae due the coming expiration of their temporary contract? Ultimately, this overproduction devalues quality work by leaving researchers to search for the needle of quality in a seemingly infinite haystack of overproduced publications.

A prime example (but by no means the only example) is the journal Sustainability. At the time of writing, the journal has planned over 150 special issues for 2021 alone, and in 2018 had more than 200 issues. Standard issues, which in 2019 were bi-monthly, often include more than 500 articles. Additionally, at the time of writing the “Article Processing Charge” for Sustainability was more than €1700 per paper. This fantastic amount of papers could hardly be thoroughly digested by even the most astute of readers who is interested in keeping up on all of the latest debates in sustainability and sustainable development.

One is left to wonder, who and what are all of these papers for? What is actually motivating their authorship and publication?

According to a blog post from Arjen Wals’ (2019), a sustainability researcher in the Netherlands, contemporary academia’s publish or perish culture has led to a troubling paradox, in which “everybody is writing while nobody seems to be reading, really, which means that everybody is writing for nobody.” This is, in our view, a race to the bottom: the illogical result of a university system based on managerial values and practices that incentivize quantity of publications over quality, and facilitate the commodification of publicly-funded knowledge for private accumulation of profit.

Finally, reforms have been justified on the basis that they produce efficiency. However, there is (even more) evidence to suggest that many of the outcomes have been quite inefficient. Academic staff are subjected to a great deal of box-ticking rituals in which they must constantly assess and justify their own work (Graeber, 2018). This can result in a paradox in which more university time and resources are allocated to monitoring and applying for further funding, than in doing actual research and education. For example, one study in the Netherlands estimated that approximately one quarter of the research budget for a federal subsidy programme for Dutch universities is spent on “overheads of writing, reviewing, and allocating” applications for the budget itself (Halffman and Radder, 2015, p. 169). “Ironically,” under the tyranny of metrics, Muller (2018, p. 75) emphasizes, “in the name of controlling costs, expenditures wax.” Following a recent study, European universities spend approximately €1.4 billion every year to fund failed grant applications53. If efficiency is the goal, wouldn’t it actually be more expedient to make resources available to responsible and autonomous academics in the first place?

To conclude, the expansion of competition has found fertile ground in shrinking public budgets and precarious funding conditions for students and employees. These dynamics have been reinforced by a standardized accountability system that rewards obedience and filters out dissent through groupthink and fear of being replaced. The managerial university relies on a simplification of parameters to quantify research output, which ends up prioritizing quantity over quality. Time consuming and thorough investigations of complex issues are devalued, as scholars are encouraged to ‘publish or perish’. For academics, we argue that these values encourage what we have called forced creativity. The danger of forced creativity is that, while CMs may be different on the surface, they fail to break from the chains of the institutional context within which they operate, leaving their creativity forced, and substantively hollow. Although research activities have been extended to involve actors outside of academia, the pursuit of unspecified impact can come with undesirable consequences, which hardly have been recognized and studied as a result of more action-oriented research projects (Laulder et al., 2021). The problem starts from the profoundly diverse

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4.4.1 Artwashing

Michel Foucault famously explained that the point of his critique was not that "everything is bad", but rather that "everything is dangerous" (Galliers et al., 2011, p. 4). Likewise, our message here is not that CMs are inherently bad. It is rather that, especially in the context of the managerial university we outlined above, CMs are dangerous: their use can be co-opted into a coercive maintenance of the status quo, as much as they can to liberating empowerment. In order to raise awareness about the dangers, we provide two practical examples of forced creativity. In doing so, we intend to outline the major risks that researchers thinking of using CMs should be aware of.

4.4.2 Funding tricks

External funding conditions in the larger political economy described above often come with an imperative of constant innovation, novelty, and adjustment (Palumbo and Scott, 2018). Funding tricks, in which creativity is performed for the sake of helping one stand out in comparison to other funding applicants, are an inevitable danger of responding to these incentives. Moreover, as funding calls mostly require that applicants fit within a format that is predetermined by funders who expect certain outcomes, funding tricks are particularly prone to propagating forced creativity.
The research funding strategy of the European Commission, through the European Research Council (ERC), is a good illustration of it. Access to funding is granted according to a specific jargon and sophisticated rules. This creates incentives for the formation of a specialized body of experts whose aim is not to write meaningful research applications, but to work as intermediaries between the source of the funding and the researcher. This incentivizes the production of nice-sounding proposals that embellish and ‘dress up’ business-as-usual responses to funding calls (cf. Cornwall and Brock, 2005). If one must ‘sell’ their research proposal in order to avail in competition, they are incentivized to employ deceptive tactics used by marketers or public relations firms (Frankfurt, 2009). This practice is common enough that it has found expression in at least two European languages. A German word, Förderantragsjargon (funding application jargon) describes the practice of creating token participation in response to the EU’s Smart City funding calls (the EU requires participation, so applicants include it in the proposal without intent to actually incorporate it) (Follmann et al., 2020). An Italian term europrogettazione, in use since the late 1990s, describes a specific discipline which literally translates into “European project-making". Several higher education courses are nowadays available for those who want to master the litanies of EU funding applications. When the content of the research has a similar or even secondary relevance compared to the jargon used to present it, forced creativity may grow in the guise of CMs. It is the stratified governance of highly bureaucratic organizations such as the EU that is inevitably entailing a certain degree of resistance to innovation (Banchoff, 2002). This institutional inertia creates niches of privilege. This is what Hoenig (2018) defines the ‘new scientific elite’, which emerges according to center-periphery-structures due to historical path-dependency and accumulation of knowledge in certain geopolitical locations.

4.5 Conclusion

[...] if ‘the revolution will not be televised’, it certainly won’t be peer-reviewed (Davies et al., 2021, p. 5)

So far, we have offered a critical review of the managerial university, its embedded values, and the dangers of employing CMs in such an environment. As we noted in the beginning of this chapter, CMs have been framed as an individual responsibility of a researcher, to fulfill the new multi-faceted role of knowledge producer, knowledge translator, communicator, co-designer and implementers of action (Horlings et al., 2020; Freeth et al., 2019; Wittmayer and Schäpke, 2014). Although individual reflexivity and understanding one’s own normative position as a moral and political agent in a changing world may be crucial, we ask for understanding CM in the light of the greater structures of academia. We wish to stress that the picture we have highlighted is one of a collective problem that cannot be addressed through a purely individual struggle. An understanding of the wider context – which we have earlier referred to as the canvas on which researchers paint – and a willingness to creatively transgress established academic structures and protocols (Temper et al., 2019) are of utmost importance if we as academics wish to move towards truly creative academic practice while avoiding the latent risks of forced creativity. In other words, one cannot be truly creative in a transgressive manner if one does not know exactly what they are transgressing. Transgression of the managerial university that enables an environment of creativity will have to include various radical interventions into its sustaining forces – namely, funding, competition, and obedience.

In preparing this chapter, both in conceiving it and drafting it, we were further persuaded by several one-on-one discussions with scholars who, despite coming from very different contexts and backgrounds, described the same feeling of working in a deteriorating environment where much of their activities made little sense (see also Berg (2015) who conveys a similar experience in the long process of writing his critical article on neoliberalization of universities). For us, the awareness that we are not alone in feeling somewhat lost and hopeless in the halls of the managerial university is comforting and empowering. This more realistic, even stoic understanding of the institutional setting can give young researchers who may be looking to engage in heterodox and transformative approaches a more coherent picture of what they are up against. By no means do we wish to chastise the individuals who are not willing to engage in this struggle. But we do hope that other young academics who are disillusioned by their institutional environments to dedicate themselves to further political action and coalition building beyond the constraints of the managerial university.
5.1 Introduction

Modern industrial agriculture is increasingly confronted with social and environmental problems and contradictions. Glaring problems are widely acknowledged, but have not spurred a major shift towards a sustainable agricultural future. Meanwhile, many individual citizens, farmers and collective initiatives are, themselves, already busy navigating towards solutions. The role of ‘ordinary’ citizens, small-scale farmers, and alternative food networks in building food sovereignty has been widely discussed in the literature, and is acknowledged by scholars as crucial in navigating towards sustainable and agroecological food systems (Anderson et al., 2021; Duncan et al., 2020; Marsden et al., 2018; Vivero-Pol et al., 2019). Despite this potential, the practices of these individuals and groups have not yet been able to gain significant traction as part of building a broader, systemic political alternative in public discourse and policy making (Desmarais et al., 2017; IPES-Food, 2019; Marsden et al., 2018; Van der Ploeg, 2020). Instead, they have persisted in the margins with minimal support or recognition from governments and scientific institutions (Anderson, 2019; Anderson and Bruil, 2021; Vanloqueren and Baret, 2009). Mainstream political debates on the direction of food system change too often overlook these ‘seeds of change’ that are scattered all around them, dormant, and waiting for the right conditions to grow into robust alternatives.

Agrarian political economy has long served as an important lens through which the complex processes that shape food systems can be understood (Buttel, 2001; Friedmann, 1993; Friedmann and McMichael, 1989). Traditionally, this scholarship has focused primarily on a critical analysis of the ways in which market dynamics and the modern state structure the organisation of agri-food systems (Bernstein, 2017; Tilzey, 2019). As food-system-related crises intensify, some scholars have identified a need to expand political economy scholarship beyond expert analysis to include a role of co-constructing, or ‘co-theorising’ (Carolan, 2013) alternatives, with citizens engaged in political praxis (Duncan et al., 2021; Levkoe et al., 2020). That is, in other words, a more post-structuralist agrarian political economy (and ecology), grounded in critical dialogue with social movements, civil society organizations, and citizens who are confronting norms and conventions in practice and building alternatives (Leff, 2015).

Following from the need to broaden and connect such perspectives, this paper combines a ‘zoomed-out’ political economic analysis of Dutch agriculture with a more ‘zoomed-in’ empirical exploration of farmers working to build new food systems from the ground up. The main questions we address are: how do new entrant proto-regenerative farmers (a term which we explain below) in the Netherlands imagine and engage in the construction of regenerative socio-ecological relationships? What strategies do farmers use to carve out spaces of regeneration?

We draw on in-depth ethnographic work on one Dutch farm and further interviews with five ‘proto-regenerative’ farmers. We define ‘proto-regenerative’ farmers as those whose practices are, to varying degrees, driven by regeneration of social and ecological well-being, even though some do not explicitly define themselves as regenerative. This includes agroecological practices which are still developing, or coming into being. Proto-regenerative imaginaries are understood in line with Castoriadis’ (1987) concept of the radical imaginary, which is defined as a symbolic narrative that broadens an existing framework of political possibility to include “something that does not actually exist yet, something that is still in the making” (Castoriadis, 1987, cited in Kaika, 2011, p. 971). A radical imaginary is an orientation through which alternative concepts and visions can be formed,
and ultimately built and developed into real practices and institutions. To be clear, proto-regenerative imaginaries do not refer specifically to on-farm practices associated with regenerative agriculture (e.g., less or no tillage). Nor do we suggest regeneration as an alternative discourse to agroecology—it in fact, we observe that these discourses are often used interchangeably by practitioners. While agroecology is a science, a practice, and a movement, we refer to ‘regeneration’ as a more general holistic framework, rooted in a paradigm of care, in which productive activity reproduces the conditions necessary for socio-ecological well-being (Bauwens et al., 2019; Duncan et al., 2020; Gibbons, 2020; Gordon et al., 2022; Kelly, 2012). Regeneration, as such, is understood as a framework for socio-natural relations, of which agroecology is a central part. As a sort of prototype, proto-regenerative imaginaries form the building blocks of such a framework.

We find that there are a plethora of proto-regenerative imaginaries in farming emerging in practice from the bottom-up in the Netherlands, at a distance from the state in civil society. We aim to highlight the paradox in which institutional frameworks continue to largely undermine regenerative practices (in agriculture and beyond) which re-produce the conditions for life and well-being (cf. Bauwens et al., 2019), while extractive practices that erode the conditions for life and well-being are supported by policies. Our macro-analysis explores how policy debate and practice in Dutch agriculture have largely remained within a narrow (eco-)modernist paradigm (Horlings and Marsden, 2011) that does not significantly depart from the axioms of the modern industrial paradigm, while relying heavily on technological solutions, intensification, scientification (Van der Ploeg, 1987) and a strong top-down role of the state. The contradictions of the industrial modernisation paradigm are no longer ignorable, as demonstrated by the intensification of the nitrogen pollution crisis. Our analysis highlights three interrelated processes which we see at the root of socio-ecological harms: (1) a modernist social imaginary, which ontologically separates humans (and agriculture) from nature; (2) the dis-embedding of food production from place (Wiskerke, 2009), a relationship to land and community, and ecological constraints; and (3) the commodification of land as a financial asset and food as a standardised object to be bought and sold on the global market. The state’s pursuit of solutions within a framework of post-politics, and the absence of regenerative imaginaries in the mainstream discourse, has created a sustainability deadlock (cf. Swyngedouw, 2022). We see regenerative imaginaries as those practices and strategies that form the raw materials of an alternative institutional framework of regeneration (Harvey, 2000), based on a holistic understanding of humans as interdependent and in relation with each other and natural systems (Duncan et al., 2020; cf. Capra and Mattei, 2015; Peter, 2021; Shiva, 2016). Our discussion explores collective action and engaged scholarship as pathways for navigating towards regeneration. The remainder of the paper begins with an overview of the empirical work, followed by the zoomed-out analysis of Dutch agriculture, results of the empirical section, and discussion.

5.2 Empirical Work

As Maria Kaika (2018) has argued, the gravity of contemporary challenges creates a need for a ‘scholarship of presence’. In line with work of others like Gibson-Graham (2006, 2008), Huron (2018), and Wright (2010), Kaika calls for scholars to help add gravitas to local alternative practices, narrating them as budding radical imaginaries which can compete with capitalist-technocratic discourses about how socio-ecological problems and change should be understood and addressed. This is a form of engaged scholarship, which “as a form of praxis” is “driven not simply by a desire to interpret and understand the world, but also to change it” (Franklin, 2022, p. 3). In this work, there is both a need for what Kaika calls the perspective of the frog (a zoomed in analysis of particular alternatives), and the perspective of the eagle (a zoomed out analysis of the contextual backdrop, which may help different institutional frameworks come into view) (cf. Huron (2018)). This analysis is important as it heeds wider constraints and enclosures of neoliberal globalisation, while not falling into a ‘capitalocentric’ trap that obscures and covers up local possibilities and capacities for doing things differently (Gibson-Graham, 1996). In short, an investigation of how and why local opportunities for change emerge is contextualised into an understanding of macro-dynamics and structural drivers of socio-environmental problems. The former emergent alternatives are understood as ‘living indicators’ (Kaika, 2017): illustrative examples which signal urgent needs and desires of citizens, and demonstrate possibilities for doing things differently. They are what Harvey (2000) has referred to as the “raw materials to grow an alternative” (p. 193). We acknowledge that our focus on farming strategies ties into community resilience and resourcefulness theory (Franklin, 2018; White, 2018). However, we choose to focus more on the ways in which these strategies can provide heuristics for new institutional frameworks because we aim to contribute to relevant and topical public debates.

Our empirical work is partly based on extensive ethnographic work carried out by the first author at one peri-urban farm in Groningen, the Netherlands called the Urban Farm. Our analysis of the agrarian political economy context has been to a large extent, inspired by this immersion into ethnographic work, dialogue with participants, and publications by their associated organisations (see for example Van Veen et al., 2019). This ethnographic work was oriented towards a dialogue...
about the kinds of practices, strategies and institutions could make a food system based on regeneration more viable. As such, analysis of our empirical data was done with an “ethos of appreciation” (Moriggi, 2022, p. 133) associated with appreciative inquiry. The latter focuses on bringing forth a positive, strengths-based analysis of the proto-regenerative strategies found in our data.

The Urban Farm is a two-hectare biodynamic farm which grows a variety of vegetables and fruits, and raises chickens and ducks. The business model of the Urban Farm is based on community supported agriculture (CSA), and produce is sold in a shop in the city centre. The farm is explicitly not certified by an external auditor (e.g. organic), but is rather unofficially certified by the CSA community, as in participatory guarantee systems (Montefrio and Johnson, 2019). The farming practices used at the Urban Farm are not very typical in the Netherlands compared to other European countries (e.g. in Germany there are over four-hundred CSAs in the SoLaWi network)55. At the time of writing these are approximately one hundred CSA farms in the Netherlands, and about twenty-five food cooperatives that are connected to CSAs56. While the share of organic farming, and the trend of CSAs, have been gradually increasing in recent years, the percentage of organic farming in the Netherlands remains one of the lowest in Europe at four percent, less than half of the EU average (Hofstede, 2022).

In addition to growing vegetables, the Urban Farm also prides itself as an incubator for new entrant farmers, who mostly come to work for a period as interns as part of their training at the biodynamic agricultural school Warmonderhof. The first author worked alongside interns at the Urban Farm over the course of the 2020 and 2021 growing seasons (an average of one day per week from late winter-late fall). Here he was able to gain various insights through participant observation and dialogue. Many casual conversations about issues faced by new entrants were complemented with more structured discussions about problems faced by the farmers. The latter included an organised meeting in June 2021 with a representative from a government sponsored project (Toekomst Oogst van Groningen) which is focused on promoting regional agriculture in the province of Groningen57. The group’s efforts to influence the project were largely disbanded after it was concluded that their main concern – land access – was too political for the project, and therefore considered out of scope. These discussions helped

the first author to identify main issues and concerns faced by the farmers and their colleagues, and also complemented our analysis of the current state of Dutch agriculture.

Inspired by his work at the Urban Farm, the first author also sought interviews with other farmers connected to the farm’s network through the Warmonderhof and the Dutch chapter of La Via Campesina called Toekomstboeren (‘Future Farmers’ in English). In selecting interviewees, we did not focus on any particular characteristics or a representative sample of (agroecological) farmers, but searched for new entrant farmers who were involved in what we perceived as proto-, or explicitly, regenerative projects (see Figure 1). The small sample size is compensated for by the depth of the work at the Urban Farm, where insights were also gained by working closely alongside three trainees who have since started their own farms. The first author has also been involved in brainstorming and labour of setting up one of these farms, beginning in winter of 2022. New entrants are here defined as farmers who have less than ten years’ experience in farm management and did not inherit their farm from a previous generation. Experienced farmers are those with more than ten years’ experience. This selection was made as new entrants are in general more likely to be inclined towards alternative food systems, and face many barriers to entry. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six farmers (five new entrants and one experienced farmer) at various farms throughout the Netherlands. In most cases a farm visit was not possible, and three interviews were conducted online, largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. However, farm visits were possible in two cases, in addition to the extensive work at the Urban Farm. Also, the first author participated in a day of volunteering at the Fruit Garden near Amsterdam, where he worked alongside Warmonderhof graduates.

Interviews were all conducted in English, and were geared around questions of motivation, barriers, and how institutions might better support the farmers regenerative work. Prior to the interviews, research aims and intentions were explained to all participants in advance and informed consent was obtained for the use of all quotes. Due to the politically sensitive nature of responses pseudonyms have been used for participants and their farms. Participants were sent quotations to confirm their permission in advance of article submission. Recordings and transcripts were made in four cases. The first author also attended the Boerenlandbouw Conferentie (Farming Conference), hosted by a network of Dutch farming organisations in the fall of 2021, where several interviewees were also present. Here participant observation during conference sessions and informal conversation with conference participants also contributed to data and analysis.

CHAPTER 5
Regeneration at a distance from the state

Table 5: Empirical data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FARM/INITIATIVE</th>
<th>INTERVIEWEES/PARTICIPANTS</th>
<th>LOCATION</th>
<th>TYPE OF DATA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Urban Farm</td>
<td>Meike (new entrant) Trainees</td>
<td>Groningen area</td>
<td>Participant observation Interview Volunteering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Walled Garden</td>
<td>Eva (new entrant)</td>
<td>Wageningen area</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soil Vision</td>
<td>Alena (new entrant)</td>
<td>Nijmegen area</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Fruit Garden</td>
<td>Kees (experienced farmer) Trainees</td>
<td>Amsterdam area</td>
<td>Interview Volunteering Participant observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Earthmakers</td>
<td>Jan and Bram (new entrants)</td>
<td>Appeldoorn area</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.3 The sustainability deadlock in Dutch farming

“The risk we run in Europe is that the bill for the necessary ecological transition [...] will be paid for by the poor. In the case of the agricultural sector, family farmers (both entrepreneurial and peasant-like farmers) will be the losers. They not only face ever lower incomes but also new swathes of environmental restrictions that will be imposed in the transition [...] In this context, there is an urgent need to develop an agroecological proposal that builds on, and unites, the many ‘pockets’ of peasant agriculture and that, at the same time, deals in an integrated way with the socio-economic and environmental problems of an industrial agricultural model that is no longer fit for purpose [...] If not the countryside will become a bastion of the extreme right” (Van der Ploeg, 2020, p. 603)

As both a worldview and an intellectual project, agricultural modernisation has effected a major transformation of agriculture in the latter half of the twentieth-century across Europe (Karel, 2010). In the Netherlands, agricultural modernisation was embedded into a food regime based on a neo-corporatist alliance of Dutch ministries, industry, agricultural schools and universities (Frouws, 1994). This alliance formed an institutional regime called the ‘Green Front’, in which “policy, research and extension services worked in unison”, promoting agricultural modernisation as synonymous with rural development (Horlings and Hinssen, 2014, p. 126). In the Netherlands, and elsewhere, modernisation meant ‘de-peasantisation’, as farm labour and traditional knowledge were increasingly replaced with capital-intensive technologies and techno-scientific knowledge, also referred to as ‘scientification’ (Van der Ploeg, 1987). Between 1950 and 2015, agriculture in the Netherlands has undergone a near threefold increase in units of energy required to produce food, and a decrease of 407,000 full-time-equivalents in direct farm labour (Smit, 2018). As farming became more geared towards specialisation and global market integration, farmers lost much of their autonomy and became dependent on market exchange and external institutes like extension services (Horlings, 1996).

On the one hand, the agricultural modernisation paradigm has been incredibly successful in the Netherlands. Per unit of land, the Netherlands stands as the most productive and efficient producer of agricultural products in the EU (Van Grinsven et al., 2019). As one of the most densely populated countries in the world, it has policies are implemented from the top-down through elite post-politics – i.e. without possibility for disagreement or an explicit debate over who pays and who benefits – a reactionary backlash is, in our estimation, an unsurprising outcome. In the Netherlands, we see an ongoing deadlock in the mainstream sustainability debate over nitrogen pollution between elite post-politics on the one hand, and reactionary populism on the other. Although the Dutch government has rightly recognized the need to mitigate ecological problems caused by industrial agriculture, its failure to overcome the trap of post-politics has largely pushed costs and responsibility onto family farmers. In turn, many farmers have become indignant (for example, on a drive through the Dutch countryside in the summer of 2022 one will notice many national flags being flown upside down). As no path forward for agriculture has been articulated at the institutional level, these discontents have been mobilized in defence of the status quo (Van der Ploeg, 2020). We will elaborate on the current nitrogen situation further below, but first, this section aims to provide a brief historical contextualisation of the development trends that have contributed to the nitrogen crisis, which provides a zoomed-out framing for our empirical work.
become a global leader in the agricultural market, recording 95.6 billion Euros of exports in 2020. The Dutch have been heralded internationally for their efficient agricultural production: Called the “tiny country that feeds the world” by National Geographic (Vivano, 2017), and celebrated by the likes of David Attenborough as a model for sustainable agriculture (Oudman, 2020). However, while it created a great deal of new knowledge, the modernisation paradigm has “also resulted in large and new areas of ignorance” (Van der Ploeg, 2018, p. 236). For example, modernisation has eschewed care for the soil (which cannot be standardized or commodified) that comes from being bound to and working closely with the land. As such, the modernisation paradigm and its social imaginary have been the driver of the interrelated processes of dis-embedding of food from place and the commodification of land, as mentioned in the introduction.

Practices associated with agricultural modernisation have long been connected to environmental harms, and the waning legitimacy of the agricultural modernisation paradigm has been discussed for decades (Goodman, 2004; Van der Ploeg et al., 2000). While particular problems have been politicised in an isolated manner, wider systemic root causes have not. The above-mentioned trends have created path-dependencies, lock-in, and the covering up of possibilities that make a meaningful departure from the modernisation paradigm. This lock-in has impeded the institutionalisation of a truly “new developmental model for the agricultural sector” (Van der Ploeg et al., 2000, p. 392), which has long been understood as needed.

In the face of increasing urgency, including pressure from scientists, farmers, citizens and social movements, there have been some shifts towards a practice and discourse of ‘nature-inclusive farming’ (‘natuurinclusieve landbouw’ in Dutch) both at the government and farm levels in the Netherlands (Runhaar, 2017). A notable prioritisation of agricultural sustainability is (at least rhetorically) detectable at various levels of Dutch government (Ministry of Agriculture, 2019; Sibbing et al., 2021; Smaal et al., 2020). Nature inclusive farming is a Dutch concept which generally includes farming practices that attempt to “avoid a negative impact on biodiversity” (Westerink et al., 2021, p. 61). There are three ‘levels’ that the Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality has identified for nature-inclusive farming, the most advanced of which includes a “fully integrated agro-ecological farming system” (Westerink et al., 2021, p. 61). Yet these remain unspecified visions, and it is not clear at this time how many farms in the Netherlands fall into these three categories. In practice, nature inclusive farming has not thus far triggered a significant shift from business as usual. As subsidies are largely rewarded on a per-hectare basis, incentives for farmers remain aligned in the direction of economies of scale and modernisation; ‘get big’, mechanise, specialise, intensify, etc. (Poppe, 2020). Dutch farmers also hold a great deal of debt with banks that limits their autonomy. In recent years this debt has been estimated to be in excess of thirty billion Euros – which is “10-15 times as much as the total agrarian income in normal years” (Van der Ploeg, 2018, p. 239). This creates a dependency in which farmers are “bound to a script defined by others, notably the food industry, trading companies, input delivery industries, banks and state bodies” (Van der Ploeg, 2013, p. 81; see also Benvenuti, 1982). Integration into the world market is still the predominant mode of agricultural development promoted and administered in the Netherlands. Although EU policy is not the focus of this analysis, it is important to mention that these developments in the Netherlands are taking place in a European context where sustainable agriculture is increasingly becoming a priority. Green Deals, the Farm 2 Fork Strategy, the European Innovation Partnerships-Agri Operational Groups, Horizon 2020 (which involves a multitude of multi-actor projects), and the current Horizon Europe programme all represent a shift towards fairer, healthier, and more environmentally-friendly food systems. Yet as a collective response from food sovereignty scholars to the Farm 2 Fork strategy underscores, most of these developments at the European level remain firmly entrenched within the “(green) economic growth paradigm”.

Food is still viewed as a commodity and capital-intensive forms of innovation like digitalisation are prioritised, which will likely promote further dependency for farmers. Looking at the allocation of funding, the fact remains that the majority of institutional responses to the problems in the food system have remained “locked into the current system which focuses on increasing productivity and global market opportunities, following a technologied and largely top-down agricultural development logic” (Anderson and Bruil, 2021, p. 3). In short, even when environmental concerns are confronted, it seems to be mostly done in a superficial way that does not address the root causes of unsustainability in industrial agriculture and the global corporate food system.

Again, we identify these root causes as comprising of three interrelated elements (1) a modernist social imaginary, (2) dis-embeddedness, (3) and commodification. A modernist social imaginary is understood as the backdrop which connects various meanings and structures that steer both individual subjectivities and collective action and institutions. Modernism is based on the assumption of ongoing linear progress, economic growth, and the replacement of human labour, which comes

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about through industrial development and techno-scientific. Dis-embeddedness refers to disconnections in: space and time between food production and consumption; a relationship to land and community; local ecological conditions and biophysical constraints; and between raw materials and end products. Commodification, which is always on a spectrum and never fully commodified or de-commodified, subjects food to market principles, as opposed to non-market forms of organisation such as reciprocity or social obligation (Zerhe, 2019). This erodes other values of food, including social, cultural, ecological ways of determining how food is produced, consumed and allocated. The corporate food regime continues short- and long-term socio-ecological harms as ‘negative externalities’ – costs which are detached side-effects of the production process (Friedmann, 2005; Vivero-Pol et al., 2019). Where these are accounted for, it is commonly done in a way that seeks to minimise the impact of agriculture – a ‘less of the bad’ approach. A system built on these foundations eschews problems that fall outside of its narrow focus on short-term profits or achievement of metrics defined from the top-down (Scott, 1998).

It should, however, also be acknowledged that Dutch farming remains heterogenous. As we have outlined above, throughout the post-war era, farmers’ options have become increasingly limited as institutional frameworks have strived for and incentivized agricultural modernization. Many (but not all) farmers have taken this ‘entrepreneurial’ route of scaling up and integrating into global markets, yet farming in the Netherlands remains variegated among different styles (Horlings, 1994; Van der Ploeg, 2013). The existence of alternative food networks, peasant farming (Van der Ploeg, 2013), localised speciality food, and short-supply chains has long been noted in the Netherlands (Renting et al., 2003). Farmers of all sorts still incorporate practices of ‘farming economically’, which essentially means cutting down on costs by using less external inputs (Van der Ploeg et al., 2019). More recently, there have been indications that even those farmers who have modernised their operations also want to build better relationships between agriculture and nature. Voluntary and self-initiated conservation efforts of individual farmers and a large amount of farmer’s associations have been on the rise in the Netherlands since the 1990s (Horlings, 1996; Renting and Van der Ploeg, 2001), as farmers of all sorts seek to provide more ecological function on their land (e.g. making space for enhanced biodiversity) (Runhaar et al., 2018). An extensive 2018 opinion survey of Dutch farmers conducted by Wiskerke, called the State of the Farmer (‘Staat van de Boer’ in Dutch) found that more than eighty percent of farmers, the vast majority of whom practice conventional farming, wanted to transition to nature-inclusive methods (Bouma and Marijnissen, 2018). “More than half” felt that the focus should not be on export-driven business models and “three quarters” were willing to work with “critical green movements” (ibid., translation by first author). However, the report also revealed that many farmers felt unsupported in making any change (by both government and consumers), dissatisfied with their representatives, and anxious about the future. This discontent is likely exacerbated by hierarchical and bureaucratic regulatory schemes which have constrained farmers’ ability for maneuvering and experimenting with alternative sustainable practices (Horlings and Marsden, 2011; Marsden et al., 2010; Van der Ploeg, 2008). In the face of pressure that is perceived as unempathetic, many farmers feel cornered (“in de hoek gezet” in Dutch) by politicians, media, supermarkets and environmental organisations who misunderstood them as the problem, as opposed to the system (Bouma and Marijnissen, 2018).

This situation came to a head in September of 2019. A Dutch National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) committee had then determined that, due to excessive nitrogen emissions, a rapid solution was necessary. A major political party, D66, then introduced a proposal to halve the number of livestock in the country60. In response to this and other grievances, farmers took to the streets all over the Netherlands in a widespread demonstration of discontent. Many perceived this proposal as a direct attack on their livelihoods and way of life, and in turn set out to defend themselves – occupying public space, shutting down roadways with tractor blockades, and threatening politicians. The RIVM policy bolstered underlying sentiments of antagonism toward political representatives amongst farmers, and triggered an instinct to defend the status quo. This included a denial of problems. In a follow up of the 2018 State of the Farmer survey, conducted in the wake of the protests in 2019, approximately seventy three percent of farmers stated they did not believe the nitrogen problem actually existed (Bouma and Marijnissen, 2019). As the handling of the nitrogen problem was delayed after the protests, some observers saw these movements as mobilising the many (farmers who were already generally disaffected) in defence of the interests of the few (farmers who were benefitting from the status quo) (Van der Ploeg, 2020). At the time of writing, the controversy over the nitrogen problem has once again reached a tipping point. As discussions of land ‘buy outs’, which would compensate farmers to cease their operations (Rutten and Kuiper, 2021), have escalated, farmers have once again erupted into discontent as tens of thousands of farmers have used their tractors to block off highways and distribution centres in protest. Fears of mass farm closures and land seizures have enflamed the situation with increasingly radicalised farmers, like those in Farmers

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Defence Force, many of whom are intensely distrustful of their representatives. As a farmer and leader of the organisation Agraractie, is reported to have said at a recent farmer protest, “The State of the Netherlands is at war with the farmers’ republic” (DutchNews.nl, 2022).

In disregarding politically-sensitive questions, mainstream debates (e.g. surrounding nitrogen pollution) fail to recognise and address the underlying root causes of contemporary agriculture’s environmental problems. In doing so, they have exacerbated the discontent of family farmers, many of whom have already been negatively impacted by modernisation. (It has long been noted that farmers who have most closely followed the prescriptions of the institutional regime (again, the state, agro-industry, and science) are the most disillusioned in moments of unrest (Eizner, 1985; Van der Ploeg, 2018)). Thus, as the state pushes to solve problems of modern agriculture with technocratic solutions that place the burden on family farms, discontents are absorbed into a regressive populist politics (Van der Ploeg, 2020), consistent with the situation in other European countries (Hajdu and Mamonova, 2020; Mamonova and Franquesa, 2020). This creates a deadlock, which overlooks a diverse landscape of possibilities and avoids an analysis of the root causes of unsustainability and discontent in the modernisation paradigm (Bilewicz, 2020). Conflict over the system itself is externalised, while the terrain of struggle remains within the axioms of the existing system. This ties into the de-politicisation thesis that Erik Swyngedouw, among others, have argued is central to the eco-modernist sustainability discourse.

To review, it is not that particular issues (e.g. nitrogen pollution) are de-politicised. It is rather that the overarching modernist imaginary, linked to the dis-embeddedness and commodification of food and land, are not brought into political debate – neither by the majority of farmers nor by the state. favouring a techno-scientific fix rather than a reflexive analysis of root problems, narrow eco-modernisation sets arbitrary limits on political possibilities. For example, paying farmers to stop farming is discussed regularly in the media, while a fully integrated agroecological farming system that begins to flatten the distinction between nature and farming is not seriously pursued. Avoiding political conflicts that would make such a programme possible (e.g. over issues of ownership, land access, subsidy and support, business models, social relationships with nature etc.) does not make these latent antagonisms disappear (Mouffe, 2005). It pours fuel onto the flames of discontent, contributing to regressive populism as in other European countries (Hajdu and Mamonova, 2020; Mamonova and Franquesa, 2020). When farmers feel blamed and misunderstood, rather than supported and heard, those willing and eager to transition toward sustainability can quickly become radicalised against environmental measures, as the survey conducted by Wageningen University and Research (WUR) suggests (Bouma and Marijnissen, 2018). This results in a political deadlock in which no ‘real’ progress toward sustainability can be made (see Oosterlynck and Swyngedouw, 2010). Crucially, our analysis of the present state of Dutch political economy is not completely new or unique. This underscores the urgent need to “change tools, methods, questions” and interlocutors (Kaika, 2017, p. 6) in order to pursue a more socially just and ecologically sustainable future. The next section sets out how the notion of regeneration can provide an alternative to the modernist social imaginary, and frames our analysis of how proto-regenerative farmers are already busy building the foundations of a regenerative paradigm. Our empirical work then demonstrates how new strategies of re-embedding and de-commodifying agricultural development are already being built under this imaginary on the ground. However, as we will show, without collective action and the wider engagement of public institutions, these potential seeds of change are likely to remain dormant.

5.4 Carving out space for regenerative food systems: Food as an arena for regenerative action, citizens (and farmers) as radical imaginaries

Scholars are increasingly questioning the limits of sustainability as a science, practice and movement (Gibbons, 2020; Gordon et al., 2022; Swyngedouw, 2007). As sustainability is associated with “incremental change” and “addressing symptoms rather than causes”, scholars are turning to other notions, like regeneration, which are perhaps more capable of bringing a transformative paradigm into view (Gibbons, 2020, p.1). The notion of regeneration is catching on, and is increasingly seen as adding a useful framing by both farming practitioners (Perkins, 2019; White, 2020), academic scholars and activists (Duncan et al., 2020; Shiva, 2020). Regenerative agriculture is associated with a variety of practices and discourses, which range from a radical and holistic way of thinking about and re-designing human-nature relations, to slight variations on industrialism that aim to use less tillage (Gordon et al., 2022). Of course, a change in terminology does not guarantee a change in substantive content and the concept of regeneration is just as open to co-option, contestation and greenwashing as is the term ‘sustainable’. However, we concur that “it is clear that we need better concepts and new stories that position us as part of nature; not as sustainer of nature, but as active participants in an integrated cycle of regeneration” (Duncan et al., 2020, p. 4). We use the concept of regeneration in

this spirit, and see it as underpinning a changing story of socio-natural relations in an age of unsustainability that can inspire new practices and institutional design.

While it remains a contested concept, we see a regenerative paradigm as creating radical imaginaries that challenge the view of humans and nature as separate and at odds. Nature is neither an object of exploitation nor a pristine and untouched wilderness, but is rather the basis of life with which humans are in an interdependent relation. Humans can even be understood as a ‘keystone species’ – an organism that holds the ecosystem together (Kay and Simmons, 2004). Regenerative imaginaries draw on indigenous and practical environmental knowledge, including stewardship, concern for future generations and non-human animals, and the mimicking of natural processes. Such practices are understood to have contributed to the emergence of symbiotic socio-ecological configurations in the past, and are increasingly seen as a model for inspiring future sustainability (see e.g. Anderson, 2005; Armstrong et al., 2021; Smith, 2009). This foregrounds the notion that the relationship of humans to natural systems is not inherently extractive or harmful, but can be generative in a symbiotic sense. This is, as Gibbons (2020, p. 1) argues, “inherently more inspiring and motivational” than an austere sustainability discourse that puts the blame on individuals. Proto-regenerative farmers are just one group of actors who are busy building the foundations for a regenerative shift in socio-natural relations.

As food and agriculture are re-embedded into natural systems, they are also de-commodified – the use-values of land, food and the labour that produces it are brought to the fore in place of exchange-values (Matacena and Corvo, 2020). This marks a shift away from a system driven by atomisation and extracting profit at any cost, and towards a relational system based on cooperative productive activity that also reproduces the conditions necessary for individual and socio-ecological well-being (Bauwens et al., 2019; Duncan et al., 2020; Kelly, 2012). This also changes the relationship to work. Technology becomes a means rather than an ends in the labour process. An example is the French cooperative l’Atelier Paysan, which is an organisation of farmers who collaborate openly in the development of various methods and practices that help them reclaim skills and self-sufficiency in their use of farming tools and machinery. This is regenerative as it repairs alienation from the labour process, and the loss of agency experienced by farmers. As we move onto the empirical results section, we analyse the data using the key elements of (1) radical imaginaries, (2) embeddedness and (3) de-commodification already introduced above.

5.5 Strategies: Carving out spaces of regeneration

5.5.1 Changing stories of farming and food: Regenerative farming as radical imaginaries

From our perspective, regenerative farming is not so much about ‘applying regenerative practices’. Rather it entails a fundamental cultural and spiritual transition in which we – as European farmers – move from a colonial and extractive worldview and its practices, towards a regenerative paradigm of care. This involves acknowledging and acting upon the histories and specificities of place, and reconnecting in a fundamental way with land, communities, ourselves and all other living beings. (Alena, Soil Vision)

Perhaps the biggest change that the proto-regenerative farmers we interviewed were able to demonstrate is the creation of a radical imaginary; a new story about what farming is, what it can be, and what role farmers can play in the process of regeneration. These narrative shifts, exemplified by the quote from Alena above, were evident in the motivations, ways of thinking, and values that brought our interviewees to begin farming in the first place. Many of these individuals have recognised both their own alienation, and the wider predicament of wicked socio-ecological crises, and have, in turn, set off carving out their own spaces of regenerative relation-building through the practice of farming. In doing so, many experience a personal transformation and challenge conventional ideas about the role of farmers and citizens in achieving a more sustainable society. They also expand notions of what is possible, and push the boundaries of political imagination. Several quotes from our interviews show the ways in which food and farming is seen as an opportunity for both (1) re-imagining socio-ecological relationships, and (2) putting them into practice with new economic models rooted in a regenerative framework.

Eva, a farmer from the Walled Garden articulated a common attitude among interviewees about the role that farmers take in pursuing regenerative socio-ecological relationships. That is namely, a role of active agents of regeneration working on discovering viable pathways, not as passive subjects waiting for elites in government or industry to solve problems. She explained,

\[ R \] gives me more energy to really do it in practice instead of always trying to wait for the government to come up with something, while you know that
then in the back there is always a lot of lobby and stuff like that [...] it's really not my thing. I really like to work with people like the grassroots movements. And I see it happening a lot, like so many people are trying all these things - regarding land, regarding food, regarding climate change, regarding so many things. So yeah - it's really nice to see these initiatives and I'm really happy that it's happening.

Here Eva shows a common desire amongst proto-regenerative farmers to reclaim autonomy in the face of government inaction, or frustration with hierarchical and bureaucratic systems. Meike, a farmer at the Urban Farm paralleled these sentiments when she explained her motivations for starting her small farm, which were, in large part, to prove that it can be done, despite the odds, as much of the system has fallen deaf and blind to the possibility and viability of small-scale and locally-integrated farming. She explained,

I wanted to prove that it could be done. And the only way to prove that it is working, is doing it [...] Food is only food when you can use it as food. [...] And we have real big farms, just far away and if you harvest that it's going to a barn and it just waits for the good prices. It's not food in the barn, it's just an [investment object]. [...] If you read the book of Vandana Shiva about who is feeding the world, it's small-scale [farmers], women, and not the big [farms]. It's even with normal ordinary seeds instead of the GMOs and the 'high-quality', 'high-tech' expensive seeds.

Within the axioms of the conventional system, farms like Meike's should be in the process of being phased out; not beginning anew, or even proliferating. Her motivations stemmed from a desire to demonstrate in practice that the conventional belief in 'get big or get out' was not the only way, and that other farming styles were not only possible, but provided a path forward for creating food systems that are both regenerative and economically viable. She also highlights inspiration of scholar and food sovereignty activist Vandana Shiva, who challenges popular notions that industrial agri-business feeds the world. Furthermore, in touching on the role of women, she transcends the historically masculinised understanding (at least in Europe) (Brandth, 2003) of farmers.

Alena from Soil Vision described the regenerative imaginary that led to the creation of her farm:

What I'm looking into is how you can combine cutting edge ecological innovative insights, and this self-reflective process we need as human beings of asking, “What does it mean to be a human being in the Anthropocene?” with the farm practice itself. [...]
5.5.2 De-commodification with solidarity payments

Farmers who use a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) business model, like farmers in general, often work for below the minimum wage if their hours are accounted for in a traditional model of full time equivalence (Paul, 2019). Eva, a new entrant farmer working at the Walled Garden who we have quoted above, shared that she and her colleague were, in the past, earning about half of the minimum wage when all of their hours were added up. The concept of ‘Solidarity Payments’ is a strategy she developed in partnership with students from WUR’s rural sociology group to address this issue. Solidarity Payments begins with the premise that food is free. Instead of paying for the product, Eva asks customers to set the wage of farm workers. She explained,

“We are not selling product anymore, because then you target the consumer inside of us who wants to go for cheap. But in asking for a fair wage we are targeting more of the citizen inside us – the human side – that wants that it should be fair and equal.

Payments are not only made in solidarity with producers, but with others in the community who are getting their food from the Walled Garden. ‘Quality’ or organic food is often perceived as more expensive and out of reach for those who are not rich. Eva explained further,

I don’t want to grow food only for rich people. I want to grow organic food for everyone. If you want to give me a one euro wage because you have a really, really, really low income, and you’re a single mom for example, and you really don’t have a lot of money, it’s fine. And if you want to give me a hundred Euros for a veggie box, that’s also fine.

As the costs are covered by pooling the resources of a community as whole, each can carry their share and allow the farmers to produce in a way that both regenerates land for future generations and better integrates farming within the constraints of natural systems. Solidarity payments represent a ‘partial de-commodification’ (Matacena and Corvo, 2020), as they still operate within a market-based paradigm of production and exchange. However, they also work to shift customer subjectivities and bring the use-value of food to the fore for those involved. The appeal for customers to determine farmer wages has been successful, as even those who are economically precarious (e.g. on government benefits) have offered the minimum wage for their vegetable boxes. Despite an instinct to spend as little as possible on food, these customers have also joined in reciprocal solidarity to pay the minimum wage – as Eva explained, “They start to think differently” about the price and value of food, thereby allowing her and her colleague to earn a living wage.

5.5.3 Reciprocal relations: “We are colleagues, we are not competitors”

Working together as a farming community is a strategy that is important in several regards. One of these points of support is labour. As achieving a living is a struggle for many proto-regenerative farmers, paying for extra labour help is often unfeasible. This presents a problem to solve, as small-scale organic farming requires more human labour than industrial scale (which makes up for the difference using, for example, debt, fossil fuels, herbicides, etc.). Several strategies are implemented by proto-regenerative farmers in this regard, but, like Solidarity Payments, all contain elements of pooling efforts and resources.

One strategy for labour support is trainee- or internships, namely for students attending the Warmonderhof. The Warmonderhof is a vocational school for biodynamic farming and gardening based in Dronten, with current and former students forming a network across the Netherlands. Most of the proto-regenerative farmers we spoke with were former or current students at the school. It is especially an important network for new entrants who do not acquire farming knowledge passed down from older family generations. After students learn the practical basics of planting, weed control, milking and feeding animals, they undertake short- and long-term placements at biodynamic farms across the Netherlands, and sometimes abroad. The farms in turn receive a small government subsidy for hosting these students, which for most small farmers is the only subsidy they get (the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy supports only applying to farms larger than 5 hectares). Host farms also get labour support throughout the season from traineeships (some of which are paid, some of which are in exchange, e.g. for vegetables) and build their network of farmer-to-farmer support afterwards. Meike from the Urban Farm described the exchange that is maintained beyond traineeships

We have contact with all kinds of small scale farmers on the [WhatsApp group], and on email, and we are having soup together […] We help each other, we are colleagues, we are not competitors.

With the goal of proving that small-scale organic farming is still possible, Meike has been especially proud of the success her trainees have achieved after completing their work experience at the Urban Farm. In six years of participating in the trainee program, she has had five students start successful farms. “I’m really proud about the fact that a couple of my trainees started farms for themselves,” she explained. “Because that’s one of our goals as well. We grow veggies and
we grow farmers. As they go on to begin their own farming enterprises, these farmers remain part of the community that also includes practices like sharing farm equipment, helping each other out through big jobs or busy work periods, and trading surplus crops for vegetable boxes.

Many, but not all, members of these networks are also active and formally organised in the association called Toekomstboeren (Farmers for the Future). According to their website, Toekomstboeren, is an initiative that wants to make visible and strengthen the growing and flourishing movement of sustainable and socially responsible agriculture and food production. Our goal is to bring closer the future of a broadly supported ecological and social agriculture. That is why we have set up our association: for and by Toekomstboeren.

Many of Toekomstboeren members are new entrants with little to no background in farming, and much effort is focused on helping them share knowledge and get started. Regular conferences and farmer campfires (‘burenvuren’ in Dutch) connect farmers to each other for knowledge exchange, peer-to-peer support, help with finding land, joint political advocacy, and sharing success stories.

Eva, who was a member of the core initiating group of Toekomstboeren, shares what the organisation and the international connections she has made at various conferences and meetings, have meant to her,

Sometimes when you are on the farm and you feel maybe a bit isolated from the world - like what am I doing? I am working so hard and not earning any money. But when you know that there is this movement, like in my case, La Via Campesina, I feel always really, really part of it. And sometimes you read a story or you see some pictures, or you see a little video, and then yeah you feel really connected. And that’s for me really important to keep up with the work.

Aside from practical and strategic help, Toekomstboeren keeps the energy and enthusiasm alive for proto-regenerative farmers.

5.5.4 De-commodifying land access: Public and cooperative strategies

Eva, who commutes from an urban apartment to her job at the Walled Garden told us, “I would really love to live on a farm, but it’s impossible for me to buy land. It’s really impossible.” Liberalisation of the Dutch agricultural land market has seen the price of land in the Netherlands rise by 450 percent from 1963 to 2018 (Van Veen et al., 2019). Most recent available statistics show that the average price of land per hectare in the Netherlands is, by nearly a factor of two, the highest in Europe – hovering around 70,000 Euros, and up to 120,000 Euros in some regions. This represents a commodification of land, where exchange values are predominant, and land is used as a financial asset (Ward, 2019). Land access is a major issue for small scale farmers as earnings are hardly enough to cover land rent or mortgage payments, and major government subsidies are still based on the amount of hectares under production, which leaves many small farmers out of their scope. One may think that this forecloses possibilities for proto-regenerative farming for anyone who is not already financially well off – namely many in the category of (especially young) new entrant farmers. But despite these barriers, several strategies, which remain a struggle, are underway to counter these issues of access.

One such strategy is the lease of publicly owned municipal lands. Several examples display the possibilities, but also the complications that are currently in place. In terms of success, Kees, an experienced biodynamic farmer who started the Fruit Garden near Amsterdam in 2014, shared that he has established a good working relationship with the municipality of Amsterdam in renting six hectares of municipally-owned land. He described their interactions as positive, and was pleased with the long-term lease that he was able to sign in order to make long term investments in his extensive fruit orchards. Yet we found that not all of these working relationships were without complications.

The Urban Farm is based in Groningen, a city which has (at least rhetorically) committed to supporting small farmers with land access and doing their part in building a more sustainable food system (see also Smaal et al., 2020). As Meike and her partner began looking for a piece of land in and around the city for their farm, they asked the municipality if there were any sites that were available. After identifying several potential sites themselves – including the ultimate location of the Urban Farm, an old football field on the outskirts of the city – they brought their proposal to the municipality. Despite this common interest in supporting local food initiatives, the process of leasing the land from the municipality took four years. Meike elaborated on the complicated relationship with the municipality,
They ask the highest rent price they are allowed to. Once a year the rent prices of the land are determined. And they choose the highest one. And they don’t give any guarantees that you can stay longer than a year. [...] It inhibits us to truly invest in this place. One of the first things we did was to plant a tree here. And it’s a nut tree that will only really get fruit in ten years. It was a little bit of a gamble, weirdly enough. [...] If we were certain we could stay here, the [high] rent would be observed quite differently.

While their security to rent the land has not been guaranteed, Meike shared that the city has given them a verbal commitment that they could stay for twenty years and a written commitment that there are currently no plans for selling or developing the the Urban Farm’s land. However, the lack of a long-term contract leaves them feeling vulnerable. At the time of writing, Groningen is a rapidly growing city with a severe housing crisis, which puts a great deal of development pressure on peri-urban lands like the Urban Farm, and means that the market value for the Urban Farm’s land will likely continue to soar. It is perceived that the city would like to keep this land for potential urban development, and therefore will not commit to a longer-term lease.

While the complications of working with governments remain stressors for many small farmers, renting municipally-owned lands is still a strategy that enables land access for farmers like Meike. Many of our interviewees acknowledged that the opportunity of including more possibilities for small farmers to use public lands in the zoning plan (‘bestemmingsplan’ in Dutch) is a major need to facilitate more small farming. Meike explained that she was eager to work with the city on this in the beginning,

In Groningen we have a city [bell ringer] – that’s the one who plays the clocks in the Martini Tower. And we have a [city beekeeper] for the bees. And we have all kinds of city people. Maybe we can [create] a city farmer who is promoting small-scale [farming] around the city. If they changed the [zoning plan], that’s a big step.

However, her efforts to collaborate with the city led to frustration. For example, Meike explained that some years back, the city of Groningen had received a European subsidy to “figure out what the government should do to grow all kinds of [initiatives like hers]”. She participated in several consultations in which city employees inquired about how there could be more projects like the Urban Farm in Groningen, for which she received no remuneration. In the consultations, she told them about the need for access to land and identified several potential sites on the map, explaining that she had a network of young farmers from the Warmonderhof just waiting for a piece of land. As time went by, Meike lamented,

I [didn’t] see any more farms. So now I thought that I needed to ask money for the hours that I spent consulting with them. Well that was the last time that I ever heard from them [...] they didn’t even come back with the results of their investigation.

“Basically,” she said of working with the city, “it was a completely one sided activity.” This example highlights the separation between promise and practice that is often observable in urban food strategies across Europe (Cretella, 2019), and also opens discussions of on what terms research (whether academic or governmental) with initiatives should be conducted, as it can often tend towards an extractive relationship (Kouritzin and Nakagawa, 2018; Leitheiser, Vezzoni et al., 2022). Despite previous frustrations, Meike’s efforts to help her trainees find land continue, and at the time of writing she is in the process of setting up one of her former trainees on a small piece of land at the University of Groningen’s Zernike Campus.

Another strategy that is more developed elsewhere, but beginning to proliferate in the Netherlands is the land cooperative (cf. Burjorjee et al., 2017). Land cooperatives are seen as a major opportunity for new entrants. The concept is associated with commoning governance (Leitheiser, Trell et al., 2022) and a new form of the commons by many of those involved. Eva explained,

I’m really interested in the idea of commons to access land. There are all kinds of initiatives. Land van Ons, Stichting Aardpeer, which is new. The idea of Aardpeer is like that it’s an old vegetable, but it’s also “aard”, meaning earth, and “peer” from the English word. There is also of course Herenboeren.

All of the initiatives Eva mentions above function somewhat differently. Yet they all mobilise the resource pooling power of communities – not only of capital, but of labour, time and knowledge – in order to achieve the goal of building regenerative food systems.

5.6 Discussion

In this paper we have combined a zoomed-out, political economic analysis of a Dutch agricultural system increasingly confronted with contradictions, with a zoomed-in analysis of individual farmers who are busy navigating towards
their own solutions on the ground. We have argued that the mainstream debate about modern industrial agriculture’s environmental contradictions are still pursued within a modernist paradigm, however with a new ‘eco-twist’. Many of the proposals and actions taken to counteract negative effects of industrial agriculture remain blind to political possibilities that address root causes, including a modernist social imaginary, commodification and dis-embeddedness. Yet a diversity of strategies allow proto-regenerative farmers to address these root causes themselves, as they carve out spaces of regeneration in practice. These strategies are, at the moment, mostly operating at a distance from the state. That is, they exist outside of the mainstream agricultural discourse in the Netherlands, and are thus largely invisible and illegible to a configuration of regulatory and subsidy frameworks which are still designed to support an industrial agricultural paradigm (Poppe, 2020). Ironically, even as it acknowledges environmental harms, this reductionist paradigm continues to incentivise extractive activities that undermine common goods, while penalizing or ignoring regenerative activities that create and repair them (cf. Bauwens et al., 2019).

Eva’s sentiments that she is “not so focused on the government” because “in the back there is always a lot of lobby[ing]”, is common amongst proto-regenerative farmers, many of whom perceive the state as a road-blocker to pursuing socio-ecological well-being. Empirically, we also saw examples of the state being a road-blocker, rather than a road-paver, for those wishing to carve out spaces of regeneration. As many are disillusioned by state bureaucracy and perceived incompetence and/or corruption, regenerative strategies mostly evolve at a distance from the state in civil society. Moreover, as Van der Ploeg (2022) points out in a recent analysis of the newly intensifying farmers’ protests, the state’s response is “enlarging the ranks of its opponents” to include many of the regenerative farmers who are actually creating proto-types for a wider solution to the nitrogen problem in practice by de-commodifying food and land, and re-embedding agriculture into local ecology and community. This stems from a failure to articulate a vision for a sustainable agroecological future.

While we understand these frustrations of attempting to work with the state in this context, we also see the need for more collective organisation and processes for determining and pursuing the representation of common interests in the public sphere (cf. Van der Ploeg, 2020). Such collective organisation is beginning to take shape in the form of the Federation of Agroecological Farmers (in Dutch, the Federatie van Agro-ecologische Boeren), which unites several farmer-led organizations including among others, Toekomstboeren. At the time of writing the Federation has made a meaningful intervention in the public debate over the nitrogen problem by putting out a ten point ‘Green Farmers Plan’ (Federatie van Agro-ecologische Boeren, 2022), which was signed by more than two thousand five hundred farmers and nine farmers organizations, and supported by eleven social enterprises, institutes and foundations, some of which we have mentioned in this article.

We have seen that specific roadblocks vary across different contexts and places, yet general and overarching problems that frame all roadblocks remain. If we understand the state as “the organisation of the public, effected by officials, for the protection of the shared interests of the members” (Wolin, 2004, p. 510), or an assemblage of heterogenous organisations and individuals, we can begin to identify opportunities for strategic collective action that may take the first steps in generating more comprehensive effects. As an overarching framework, regenerative imaginaries could inspire a political economy in line with a pluralistic Chayanovian model (Bernstein, 2009; Clark, 2016), and the La Via Campesina slogan ‘more farmers, better food’. This can be envisioned as state support for a wide variety of bottom-up alternative food networks and practices: from assisting conventional farmers with transitioning towards agroecological practices through education and financial support; to enabling land access for cooperatives, independent small farmers, neo-peasants, and those building de-commodified economic relationships and aligned with the food sovereignty movement; to encouraging prosumers (Veen et al., 2021). This would also include facilitating the co-creation of a comprehensive infrastructure to support these practices, including small-scale abattoirs, processing facilities, and transportation connecting farmers to urban markets, and education, among other things. While a diversity of strategies and approaches are necessary to support such a transition, a major strategic lever of intervention is knowledge and engaged scholarship (Andersson et al., 2021). All of the proto-regenerative farmers that we interviewed were in some way connected to universities or other knowledge institutes – including WUR’s rural sociology department, Het Nieuwe Instituut (an art and design museum in Rotterdam), the Warmonderhof and the Nuffield International Farming Scholarships Trust. A common thread in these institutes is a deviation from the worldview put forth by modernist agriculture, and a re-imagining of socio-natural relations. A major challenge for academics (along with civic leaders, farming organisations, and sympathetic politicians, among others) is to narrate these radical imaginaries as not just anecdotes, but as the raw materials of a systemic alternative which can inspire a new intellectual project for agriculture and rural development.

One major barrier that remains is a regulatory and administrative regime organised around measurable, quantitive, and legible criteria – what James Scott (1998) has called, ‘seeing like a state’. Regulators are used to dealing with standardised
and specialised farms that operate on economies of scale, which as we have mentioned early eschew qualitative and tacit knowledge about, for example, soil biology. Regenerative farmers who work closely and carefully with a complex system – polycultures with many species and varieties of fruits, vegetables, and animals – are simultaneously subject to nearly all agricultural rules and regulations (which are applied by sector), and excluded from subsidies for their practices that generate public goods like social and environmental well-being. This can be explained with what Muller (2018) has called a tyranny of metrics – a belief in the supremacy of objective and quantifiable measurement, and an inability to grapple with the complexities of qualitative analysis and human judgement. The tyranny of metrics also lends itself to a coercive environment based on institutionalised distrust, the opposite of co-creation, which restricts room for autonomy and improvisation (Adler and Borys, 1996). Escaping the reductionism of the modernist imaginary is key in this regard. How could other values beyond the commodity form of food be institutionally supported? What would a framework of public administration that does seek to not eliminate complexity and local difference look like? And how could scholars, and perhaps more importantly, public universities, engage with and support regenerative practices in a process of co-creating a new institutional framework?

Such questions will undoubtedly require a diversity of strategies to answer, and knowledge will play a central role. Doing as we have attempted to do in this paper, which is again, narrating, and adding symbolic weight to radical imaginaries in Dutch farming, can be useful in this regard (Gibson-Graham, 2008; Kaika, 2018). Yet this scholarly work remains limited in its scope, and too detached from the practice of experimenting with various alternative strategies. At the individual level, most (early stage) researchers remain economically precarious, and too tied to the standardised outputs expected from their funding institutions (again, under the tyranny of metrics) to be able to carry out such extended, in-depth, and action-oriented projects in practice (Anderson, 2020; Leitheiser, Vezzoni et al., 2022). Scaling this task up from the work of individual researchers to the level of public university research programs, and insulating both from distorting influences of the market is crucial in this regard.

A beginning point is for academics to search out radical imaginaries in practice, and begin to build networks of community solidarity, collaboration, and mutual support, and to join in battles against commodification and managerialism in universities (Leitheiser, Vezzoni et al. 2022). Such interventions could in turn, serve as an overarching framework for creating new knowledge paradigms, which could in turn make space for more particular strategies in regard to issues like land access and collective organisation for proto-regenerative farmers.

5.7 Conclusion

We have argued that the mainstream debate about modern industrial agriculture’s environmental contradictions are still pursued within a modernist paradigm, however with a new ‘eco-twist’. Many of the proposals and actions taken to counteract negative effects of industrial agriculture remain blind to political possibilities that address root causes, including a modernist social imaginary, commodification and dis-embeddedness. We have empirically demonstrated that, despite a great deal of barriers, proto-regenerative farmers are finding various ways to carve out strategies of regeneration in practice. We have outlined several such strategies pursued by proto-regenerative farmers to address root causes of unsustainability in the industrial modernisation paradigm of agriculture. These include the building of regenerative imaginaries, working to de-commodify land, labour and food, reciprocal relations through the cooperative pooling of resources and farmer-to-farmer exchange. These particular strategies can serve as prototypes – building blocks, or ‘seeds of change’ (Horlings, 2016) – for more universal application, for example by partnering with the state or public universities. Crucially, universal application should not be understood as eliminating difference and particularity, but as creating a framework that enables experimentation with prototypes (e.g. the land cooperative) that can be translated and adjusted into particular contexts. Further work is needed in connecting and building reciprocal and pedagogical collaborations, not only with proto-regenerative or agroecological farmers, but also with conventional farmers. Developing a means by which in-depth, extended, and collaborative experiments can be universally enabled is a priority going forward. Navigating towards an emancipatory socio-ecological future in the twenty-first century cannot be done with twentieth-century tools, methods, and questions alone. Repurposing, or ‘commoning’ (Leitheiser, Trell et al., 2022), such tools by integrating with a more localised, democratised, and civic approach offers a path forward in connecting horizontal and vertical approaches and proceeding with a diversity of strategies (Nunes, 2021). New methods, tools, questions, and interlocutors, can in turn build on and augment more traditional approaches, like we have attempted to do with political economy in this paper. Support of transdisciplinary and participatory action research – which allow for space complexity, social and political difference, uncertain outcomes, plasticity and experimentation in the research process – by public universities, is a key terrain of struggle for further work in this regard.
Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This final chapter outlines the main findings and contributions of this thesis. The chapters weave through the iterative research journey that I have taken over the past years. They document my empirical and theoretical research and demonstrate how my thinking about navigating sustainability transformations in the midst of democratic crisis has evolved.

In addition to the findings presented in each individual chapter of this research, my conclusions draw on other personal experiences, theoretical insights, and data collected throughout the course of the PhD. Empirically, I have aimed to gain in-depth insights into civic activity by establishing dialogue about contemporary problems with civic actors, activists and organizations who were working to address such problems on the ground. I have also aimed to, as much as possible, make my research relevant to those engaged in civic activity. This was done by, among other things, participating in relevant public debates through my work, and volunteering my time to assist in practical activities and events.

The decision to focus on and amplify civic activity with the frame of commoning is motivated by an analysis of the shortcomings of 20th-century counter-movements, spelled out by, among others, Palumbo and Scott (2018) in their book Remaking Market Society. The vulnerability of a counter-movement that ends with outsourcing management of commons to the state has also been demonstrated by the erosion of public assets and welfare programs over decades of neoliberalism, in which statecraft has become (more or re-)intertwined with private interest (cf. Crouch, 2004; Wolin, 2008). This analysis implies that the goal of a durable counter-movement could be to initiate a centrifugal diffusion of political and economic power (i.e. away from the center), while nurturing capacities for self-determination and enabling democratic culture from the bottom-up.

Moreover, in contrast to the stagnation of institutional actors in addressing social and ecological crises in recent decades, which climate scientist Kevin Anderson has referred to as a “litany of technocratic fraud” (Anderson et al. 2022, p. 123), civic actors are busy working towards sustainability transformation in practice, finding innovative strategies for re-organizing ways of living, working, and defining value together.

As the farmer, novelist and activist, Wendell Berry has observed:

[…] a counter movement to greed and waste and the dominance of corporations is already happening. It is happening simply because a lot of people have seen things needing to be done and are doing them. They are at work without grants, without official instruction or permission, and mostly unnoticed by the politicians and the news industry (quoted in Baker and Bilbro 2017, p. 193).

The civic actors that I have interviewed and worked alongside have demonstrated inspiring resolve in their work of building counter-movements from the ground up, largely without attention from mainstream institutions (and in fact, often with resistance from the latter). The common thread that binds their efforts is the desire to build economic and political alternatives – different ways of living, working, and defining value together – based on relationships of reciprocity, which simply means “when you take, you always give” (LaDuke, 1997, p. 26). As they aim to re-embed social and natural relations in place and context, these counter-movements movements cut directly through the logic of commodification. This implies (various degrees of) localization of capacities for radical democratic participation. It has been my goal to both learn from and amplify the painstaking work of civic actors working to forge such counter-movements in practice, with the hope that their visions, practices and strategies could form a basis for building wider change, and alternative institutional frameworks.
6.2 Summary of findings

6.2.2 Chapter 2

Is there potential in The Smart City for reconciling top-down and bottom-up approaches to co-produce truly smart and sustainable urban futures?

The Smart City is a prominent discourse that is shaping urban policy around the globe. Smartness is increasingly associated with sustainability, but it remains unclear exactly what makes a city smart, and what and who are meant to be included in shaping smart city projects. While there are many critiques of The Smart City – as both a global imaginary and as particular sets of variegated policies and practices that are translated into local contexts – some still acknowledge potentials for re-purposing this imaginary and its pursuit of innovations in governance towards ‘truly’ sustainable ends (McLaren et al., 2015; McFarlane and Söderström, 2017).

This chapter develops a theoretical framework, called the social innovation–re-politicization nexus (SIRN). Social innovation is a contested concept in general, but is here understood as generating civic alternatives to state and market plans that fail to meet citizen needs and desires (Bock, 2016; Paidakaki et al., 2018). We understand social innovation as a corrective to institutional pathologies, lock-ins and path dependencies. Re-politicization is understood here as deconstructing the inevitability of hegemonic logics in urban politics (i.e. path-dependency, lock-ins) and framings of problems and solutions that disavow radical alternatives. Our investigation aims to understand if and how counter-hegemonic voices and civic actors could be incorporated into and empowered by smart city initiatives.

Looking at the Smart City Cologne (SCC) project, we can see that many barriers remain if top-down and bottom-up visions and approaches to sustainability are to be reconciled. Smart City Cologne is presented as a multi-faceted approach to transforming Cologne into a sustainable and climate-friendly city. Yet, stemming from what is described as a stressed municipal budget, the approach of SCC leaders assumes a necessity for projects under the SCC umbrella to be profitable. This creates a reliance on outsourcing solutions to private companies, or applying for EU funding, both of which come with strings attached and restrict possible pathways. We found a strong rhetorical commitment on the part of SCC founders to foster citizen participation, and a plethora of existing civic-led initiatives that are developing alternatives to problems that SCC is also concerned with (including climate, citizen well-being, etc.). However, to the extent that such initiatives challenge existing institutional frameworks and ways of operating, they are not included into SCC. While advertising itself as a transformative platform, Smart City Cologne, as with other smart cities, has served to reinforce elite post-politics, and a narrowly technological and elite-driven vision of the future.

Despite this critique, we have also noted that The Smart City imaginary is always variegated and translated into place-specific contexts. We have argued that in the process of this translation, possibilities for alternative directions and pathways may be opened-up as the implementation of smart city visions remains an urban policy decision, and is determined by local actors. In Cologne, several individual actors in the city government expressed interest in bringing more radical approaches or ‘social innovation’ to SCC, but indicated that their hands were tied by, among other things, the lack of municipal funds, the interests of industry founders, and the requirements of funding institutions like the EU which necessitated the fulfillment of pre-determined deliverables and pathways. These constraints meant that, in practice, SCC leaders were only interested in innovation within the confines of existing institutional modes of operating. This finding is also corroborated by other authors (Cardullo and Kitchin, 2019a), and was discussed further in an article published throughout the course of this PhD (Follmann et al., 2021). It was concluded that true social innovation (featuring a wider range of actors, ideas and practices), and the nurturing of citizen capacities for radical social innovation would not be possible in such smart city visions without an explicit re-politicization of existing institutional frameworks.

While the case of Cologne did not display such re-politicization, other developments observed in Barcelona (through secondary literature, and my participation in co-organization of a doctoral school that is discussed further below) have shown that it may indeed be possible to re-purpose The Smart City imaginary and digital technologies from external corporate control towards radical democratic ends (March and Ribera-Fumaz, 2016; Ribera-Fumaz, 2019). I contend that these lessons can also be applied beyond Barcelona to provide insights into general strategies of how to make use of the scaling capacities of ‘top-down’ approaches, while maintaining the socially innovative capacities of ‘bottom-up’ approaches. What is crucial to recognize in the case of Barcelona, is that the re-purposing of The Smart City imaginary towards support of civic activity was only possible due to an ecology of radical politics and grassroots social innovation which already existed in the city prior to The Smart City strategy being introduced. In using the term ecology here, I draw on Nunes (2021) understanding of political organization as a “distributed ecology of relations” (p. 163-164). Here, Nunes argues that effective organization draws strength from a diversity of organizational forms and action, in which various individuals and groups, even those who are not intentionally coordinated, can occupy complementary roles. In other words, plurality – in which some pursue critical engagement with existing institutions...
while others develop socially innovative alternatives in practice – is not seen as something to be overcome and organized into a single form, but as a strength to be embraced.

This ecology in Barcelona is supported by, on the one hand, the existence of a strongly rooted base of “contentious politics” in the city (Charnock et al., 2021, p. 583), which ultimately led to the creation of a radical citizen’s political party (Barcelona En Comú) that has had success in several municipal elections. On the other hand, the city has a local culture of politically-oriented entrepreneurship and organization aimed at building convivial and cooperative institutions that are aimed towards socio-ecological goals. The latter focus on the problems, needs and desires of local people (e.g. quality and affordable housing and food), and therefore are able to generate a broad participation and support that has been directed toward electoral success. In the winter of 2021, I was able to gain further insights about the political culture in Barcelona by participating in the organization of an online doctoral school, ‘Creating Alternative Urban Imaginaries: From Ideas to Practices and Back’ in Winter of 2021, along with fellow colleagues from the European research consortium RECOMS (an acronym for Resourceful and Resilient Communities). The school featured talks and discussions with several Barcelona-based (scholar) activists, cooperative groups, and members of the Barcelona En Comú political party. It became clear that the relative successes in injecting radical democracy into Barcelona’s smart city project cannot be separated from the conditions of contentious politics (geared towards re-politicization of existing institutions) and a local culture of social innovation. This underscores the conclusion that a re-politicization of top-down approaches to sustainability goes hand in hand with a locally-embedded culture of experimenting with radical alternatives, and mobilizing popular support for contentious politics by focusing on local problems and needs (Barcelona En Comú et al., 2019).

Key takeaway: Joining social innovation with re-politicization. If social innovation is explicitly paired with re-politicization – i.e. opening up the possibility for radically different ways of organizing governance or economies – it can be generative of radical democratic solutions that empower citizens as co-creators of (urban) futures. Reconciling top-down approaches to sustainability goes hand-in-hand with a locally-embedded culture of experimenting with radical alternatives, and mobilizing popular support for contentious politics.

6.2.3 Chapter 3
How do civic initiatives attempt to common governance?

To answer this question, I first formulated an understanding of the notion of ‘commoning governance’ (Martorell and Andrée, 2019). Commoning governance here means that, commons are not only a shared resource or type of ownership. Commoning is a process through which institutions are re-designed to serve the common good and to extend democratic capacities beyond what is currently offered. Commoning does not mean that responsibilities are simply off-loaded to citizens (as in Rosol, 2012), but rather that existing state and market configurations are politicized as the target of an organizational (re-)design that centers radical democracy, ecological sustainability, and cooperative solidarity.

The theoretical section of this chapter argues that, in contrast to the idea of the ‘tragedy of the commons’, we can observe a ‘tragedy of the State/Market dilemma’ in contemporary governance. The State/Market dilemma starts from the theoretical work on post-democracy and the post-political condition, which generally argues that political possibilities in recent decades have largely been limited to choosing between state bureaucracy and market systems (or the market state) – the norms and rules of which are pre-determined before ‘normal’ citizens are invited to have a say. Garret Hardin (1968) famously prescribed either control by a state bureaucracy or privatization into a market as two remedies for the tragedy of the commons, an ecological catastrophe which he thought would be the inevitable result of leaving everyday people to manage their own affairs. The tragedy of the commons was said to stem from self-interested behavior and a shirking of one’s responsibility to the collective, which Hardin assumed were natural and rational human conduct. The tragedy of the State/Market dilemma argues that this tragedy qua ecological catastrophe has, in fact, emerged from the governance of both the state bureaucracies and market systems that Hardin prescribed. This is not because of any inherent traits of a ‘state’ or a ‘market’, but because in practice, these institutions have been configured to serve the interests of the few and not the many. Using the notion that citizens and communities cannot be trusted to participate (without external mediation) in self-governance, self-interested actors have been able to exploit these institutions (and the commons) in the interest of the few. In addition to exploitation, imposition of standardization and commodification (which are key in overly-centralized authorities in large-scale capitalist markets and highly-centralized state bureaucracies) flatten out complexities that, and result in contradictions and failures on the ground.

While Hardin’s analysis is not completely wrong (a commons can of course succumb to tragedy if it is exploited by self-interested actors), the anti-democratic
sentiments that stemmed from the prescriptions in his seminal article are erroneous. Namely, state and market enclosure of the commons cannot inherently prevent tragedy. These institutions must also be subject to accountability and oversight by those affected in order ensure that they are legitimate. Legitimacy can here be measured by the extent to which they serve the common good, rather than extracting from the commons. The common good is a ‘vanishing point’ (Mouffe, 1992), something that can never be finally articulated into an end state. Defining the common good requires continuous and ongoing ethical negotiation and deliberation in a political community. In other words, it requires radical democracy, which is built through commoning institutions. The tragedy of the State/Market dilemma can be seen in the covering up of alternative possibilities for organization, and underpinning the anti-democratic idea that citizens and communities cannot be trusted in self-governance.

The empirical work in this chapter presents an illustrative analysis of the struggles that citizen-led Food Policy Councils in three German cities are going through in the attempt to common food governance. The case study does not demonstrate that the commoning of governance has been fully realized in these cities. But it does show that citizens have come together in FPCs under the banner of ‘Food Democracy’ to reclaim the democratic imaginary as an open political arena, rather than an already existing set of institutions. In addition to organizing practical food initiatives in cities, FPCs have also built spaces of deliberation (Moragues-Faus and Morgan, 2015) that aim to challenge institutionalized politics to move beyond that which is currently seen as possible. Citizens become sparring partners rather than spectators in governance. Our study found that the contentious role for citizens is not well understood in German governments, and actors in city administrations, even when sympathetic to the work of FPCs, do not always know how to respond to these demands. We call on those with ears to hear (in government and academia) to recognize a wider understanding of citizenship and democracy, and to appreciate the generative potential, and perhaps the necessity, of commoning governance for dealing with social and ecological crises.

One practical result of the research that went beyond the publication of the article in chapter three, was that I helped to co-organize a food policy event along with FPC leaders in the summer of 2021. The event, called ‘Scientific dialogue on sustainable municipal food policy: Creating sustainable food systems together’ (in German, Wissenschaftsdialog nachhaltige kommunale Ernährungspolitik: Gemeinsam nachhaltige Ernährungssysteme schaffen), brought together citizens, activists and practitioners involved in alternative food networks, social scientists, and members of municipal government to discuss the possibilities for building more sustainable regional food systems. This event may have helped (albeit, perhaps in a small way) to warm governments up to the idea of citizens inventing their own spaces of participation. It could also serve as a model for how academics may begin to help commoning initiatives bridge the gap of communication with municipal government, on the way to establishing new organizational structures.

Key takeaway: Commoning governance. Markets and states do not have any inherent value in and of themselves, and solutions to problems do not automatically emerge from actors who hold power in these institutions. Applied to practices of governance, commoning is a process of (re-)designing institutions to facilitate the creation and maintenance of commons, based on democratically defined notions of the common good. Commoning re-politicizes the organizational norms and rules of governance, and demands a broader understanding of democracy, citizenship, and participation.

6.2.4 Chapter 4
What are the constraints that contemporary academia places on researchers interested in contributing to sustainability transformations? How might researchers navigate these tensions?

The reflective analysis in this chapter stemmed from a desire that I and other RECOMS colleagues had to more deeply understand the institutional context that we were operating within, in order to act more consciously and effectively. RECOMS has aimed to support “vulnerable communities to become more resourceful and resilient by strengthening people’s capacity to adapt and transform in the face of social and ecological crises” 65. I and my colleagues identified strongly with this mission. Yet in the first year of our research projects, we could not help but recognize the many contradictions between this vision and the actual work we were expected to perform within our given academic institutions. For example, the primary goal of my work seemed to be to publish four peer-reviewed articles in a three year period; if any support to communities was achieved, it was only tangential to this goal. While the focus in ‘transformative research’ is often directed at the research approach of individual academics, we wished to foreground the constitutive role of universities and their funders in how academic labor is organized, how research is carried out, and towards what ends. This chapter was an attempt to better understand our own institutional situations and

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roles as researchers who were on the one hand, called to be “change agents”67, and on the other, asked to turn what is often messy and unpredictable work with communities into standardized publication outputs in a relatively short period of time. We aimed to communicate to other early stage researchers what we perceived as the dangers associated with the academic domain of sustainability transformation, and highlight the importance of a critically-engaged approach.

To understand the constraints of our institutions (and of the academy more generally), we undertook a literature review and theoretical investigation. Here we recognized many of the themes that came up in critical discussions amongst ourselves and other colleagues at conferences or other academic gatherings (not necessarily in official sessions, but over dinner or a beer). We then outlined an understanding of managerialism – the application of neoliberal and corporate sector values and practices – that has increasingly become the raison d’être of university administrations. The managerial university is defined as being sustained by four driving forces: (1) an environment of funding scarcity; (2) a logic of competition amongst researchers to secure limited funding; (3) a set of standardized accountability metrics to rank competitors against each other; and (4) the creation of incentives to stay within a narrow margin of thought and practice that is shaped by funding institutions. Building on this understanding, we sketch out a definition of forced creativity and illustrate how the dangers of transformative research might appear in practice. These include ‘art washing’ and ‘funding tricks’. Both of these spell out the risk for the creativity and imagination of researchers to be more directed towards ends that are only tangentially associated with transformative goals, if they are at all. That is, for example, going towards any form of novelty that may help one to acquire funding or build their own academic career. This is, of course, neither a blanket condemnation of these approaches to research, nor to those who wish to build successful careers in academia. It is a rather humble a call for academics (if they recognize our sentiments and feel called to) to (1) reflect deeply and critically on what and who their work is for, and (2) to consider finding creative ways to transgress or go beyond the norms and limitations of the managerial university if they are interested in pursuing sustainability or societal ‘impact’ in research. The latter can be done in big or small ways, and examples are abound of academics who struggle to perform their work in service of real people and communities. Examples of and potentials for civic activity in academia will be discussed more in the final section of the conclusion.

Key takeaway: Transgressing institutional protocols, from within, or outside.

Actors working within institutions that purport to serve the common good or pursue socio-ecological goals may notice that their institutions have vested interests in maintaining business as usual. In these instances, challenging institutional protocols, or engaging in civic activity with other citizens outside of and beyond institutional roles, could contribute to bringing institutional promises and rhetoric more into line with their practices.

6.2.5 Chapter 5
How do new entrant proto-regenerative farmers in the Netherlands engage in the construction of regenerative socio-ecological relationships? What strategies do farmers use to carve out spaces of regeneration?

This chapter combined a ‘zoomed-out’ political economic analysis of Dutch agriculture with a more ‘zoomed-in’ empirical exploration of small new entrant farmers working to build and join alternative food networks. Proto-regenerative farmers are defined as those farmers whose work is driven by a desire to contribute to social and ecological well-being, including some who do not self-define as ‘regenerative’. The use of the term ‘regenerative’ does not imply just the use of practices associated with ‘regenerative agriculture’ (e.g. no tillage methods), but to regeneration as a holistic framework rooted in a paradigm of care in which productive activities go hand in hand with the reproduction of social and ecological well-being. Regeneration is understood as changing the story of how humans and nature relate, and aims to bring a more transformative paradigm into view which can inspire new practices and institutional designs.

In our political economic analysis of Dutch agriculture, I acknowledge that there are many recent policies in the Netherlands and in the European Union that aim to address the harms of the modern industrial food system. Yet the policies that have been implemented, and much of the public debate, remain confined within the limits of an eco-modernization paradigm. Particularly issues, like nitrogen pollution, are politicized, while the wider systemic framework that gives rise to these particular problems is not. The focus remains more on doing ‘less harm’ than ‘more good’. Meanwhile, mainstream approaches and suggested policies mostly work to maintain, and sometimes even accelerate, the separation of humans and nature; the dis-embeddedness of food production from place, a relationship to land, and biophysical constraints; and the commodification of food as a standardized object to be bought and sold on the market (or perhaps even rationed and administrated by the state).

Despite this state of affairs, our empirical study demonstrates that there are proto-regenerative farmers in the Netherlands who are working to carve out their own spaces of regeneration. Data comes from an ethnographic study on a peri-urban
farm in Groningen that began during the COVID-19 pandemic, and expanded to other farms and initiatives within the network. Strategies used by farmers to carve out these spaces of regeneration include de-commodification of their produce through ‘solidarity payment’ schemes, the forging of reciprocal relationships and networks with other farmers, and the use of cooperative resource pooling and municipal resources to access land. All of these strategies help proto-regenerative farmers to implement radical alternatives to the current mainstream in agricultural production.

Such examples, which are not necessarily new (see, e.g. Wiskerke et al., 2003), show that the building blocks for building a new paradigm in agriculture (and beyond) exist all around in the form of civic activity. This activity is undertaken by citizens, and is too often at a distance from the state. A major challenge for academics is to narrate these radical imaginaries as not just anecdotes, but as the raw materials of a systemic alternative which can inspire a new intellectual project, supported by a state framework for agroecology, rural development, and beyond. Moreover, participatory action research agendas can serve as a crucial tool for helping these ‘seeds of change’ grow into robust systemic alternatives. Building on the argument of chapter four, I argue that a shift towards such research agendas could go hand-in-hand with a shift in the organizational structure of public universities.

**Key takeaway: Socio-ecological regeneration.** Mainstream approaches to sustainability (those most promoted by governments, universities, media, and industry) remain confined within a modernist social imaginary that sees humans and nature as separate and at odds, and solutions as technological or managerial objects to be innovated for profit in the market, or administered by the state. Assuming a zero-sum relationship with nature, these approaches seek to ratchet up control of ‘unsustainable’ behaviors, which are defined by authorities. Regeneration offers a different way of approaching sustainability crises, shifting from a ‘less of the bad’ approach to a ‘more of the good’ approach. Citizens are not seen as problems to be controlled and managed, but as potential agents of socio-ecological- (and self-) repair, and co-creators of a new order rooted in generative socio-ecological activity. Drawing inspiration from indigenous and traditional knowledge, a regenerative paradigm would foster productive activities that re-produce (rather than undermine) the conditions for life and well-being.

### 6.3 Answering the main research question:

**How can existing civic practices and strategies contribute to the democratization of sustainability transformations?**

I suggest that ‘smaller’ and locally-rooted civic activities have a central role to play in fostering democratic transformations to sustainability. These activities can help citizens to develop capacities for negotiating reciprocal relations (which in individualistic cultures must be cultivated). As reciprocal relations are developed through practical collaborations around shared needs, they can form a resilient basis upon which a wider re-politicization of constraining conditions can addressed at a broader scale. Community formation around a particular issue or provision of needs can begin a self-expanding circuit of radical democracy in which more and more relations are organized reciprocally. In other words, if and when people form a community around shared immaterial and material needs and work towards common goals, their efforts can expand into other projects and political platforms.

A multitude of practices aiming towards democratic transformations to sustainability are emerging in the civic activity of citizens, including many activities observed beyond my own empirical work (see among others, De Moor, 2013; Hasanov, 2021; Horlings et al., 2021; Ulug, 2021). Cooperative and social enterprises, citizen councils and associations, and community supported agriculture already show that alternative ways of thinking are spreading through communities and inspiring action. They demonstrate that, in civic activity, democratic transformations to sustainability involve (sometimes small) transformations of how people live, work, consume, and define value together. Through such civic activities, many people are working to realize their desires for another world, and discovering in practice how those worlds can be brought into being. My suggestion is that these practices, and the strategies for bringing them into being can serve as a starting point on which to build wider institutional frameworks for sustainability transformation. The latter could aim to tend to these ‘seeds’ – that is, to nurture and amplify instantiations of civic activity, which although they may be ephemeral and fragmented, are working to navigate transformations toward sustainability.

Extending the metaphor of this dissertation’s title – tending to seeds of civic activity – an ecology of relations is necessary to help civic activities grow into robust counter-movements. Various eco-system functions emerge:
The seeds of civic activity store the potential for a new plant, here understood as a counter-movement against commodification.

The flowers that make these seeds represent radical imaginaries, which are ideas and visions for doing things differently.

The pollinators that facilitate fertilization and spread of the plant represent community leaders, organizers and activists, scholar activists and action researchers.

The roots of the plant which absorb nutrients and hold the plant in place represent locally-embedded institutions, such as cooperative enterprise, citizen councils, land trusts, etc.

Finally, the soil in which the plant grows represent the constraining and enabling conditions set by the structures of power in society. As various plants grow and die, they are transformed into compost that can create more fertile conditions for future plants to grow in, which underscores the need for experimentation.
6.3.1 Cosmo-local prototyping as frame for commoning
A frame that could be useful for translating these principles and organizational patterns across difference and into various contexts is cosmo-local prototyping. Prototyping is not to be confused with the building of machine blueprints. Here prototyping can be thought of more as an (co-)evolutionary process, or biomimicry of living organisms (cf. Boelens and de Roo, 2016). As particular prototypes live and die, new iterations can learn from past failures and successes in developing their own ecology of relations. As living and evolving entities, cosmo-local prototypes draw on inspiration from other organizations that have emerged across place and time, and translate these examples into the (re-)design of institutions that shape the way people work, live, and make collective decisions. The recurring patterns of reciprocal relations – embedding life and work into local ecology and community – and the collective agency that is cultivated by the building of institutions based on reciprocal relations, can be thought of as recurring principles for institutional design in navigating democratic sustainability transformations. While particular organizations are highly context dependent, they are connected by a desire to re-organize life and work around reciprocal relations. Here cosmo-local prototypes are understood as forms of organization that:

1. Counter commodification by re-embedding relations into local ecology and community.

2. Exist as a node within a wider ecology of relations, as a circuit of expanding radical democracy.

3. Have a plurality of iterations which differ based on local context

Recurring organizational patterns with these characteristics have already popped-up in very different contexts – both in the present and throughout history (see White, 2018) – in order to counter the negative effects of commodification and build collective agency. This understanding was supported by an experience I had at a farming conference, hosted by Toekomstboeren, the Dutch chapter of La Via Campesina in the fall of 2021. The conference featured a delegation from the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) out of Chiapas, Mexico, who were touring Europe to build networked alliances in a struggle against global capitalism and imperialism. EZLN is famous for its armed revolt against the Mexican government to protect indigenous control over local resources, largely in response to the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1994. In the preliminary session of the farming conference, a representative from the Dutch Extinction Rebellion organization gave an impassioned presentation that pointed to the urgency of moving away from an economic system that is fundamentally based on plunder – accumulating wealth through enclosure and exploitation of people, nature and future generations. After this speech, a member of the EZLN delegation shared that he was moved to hear that people in Europe were talking about, and fighting for the same problems as they were in Chiapas, albeit in their own context-specific ways. The contrast between the Netherlands and Chiapas, and the individuals in these places, may seemingly have nothing in common. In fact, as EZLN members pointed out, in some ways they are polar opposites. Yet the members of these two groups found solidarity in their resistance to the homogeneity and conquest of global capitalism and imperialism (which of course has uneven geographical impacts), and their very different but united struggles to build a better future in their own localities. As soon as the conference sessions shifted to talking about various on-farm practices, the differences began to melt away, highlighting the importance practice-based work as a way to cut across difference.

6.3.2 Addressing potential critiques and limitations of commoning and cosmo-local prototyping
The civic activities of commoning, ‘small’ localized practices, and cosmo-local strategies may be seen by some as inadequate in the face of the large crises that confront those of us who wish to build a more sustainable and democratic future. Do big problems not require large scale solutions? I do not wish to foreclose the possibility of ‘big’ undertakings and visions. Ajl’s (2021) A People’s Green New Deal, provides a great analysis of what is lacking in current Green Deal proposals that are circulating in the Global North, and points to the importance of addressing climate/ecological debts owed to the Global South, and transforming global agricultural systems toward agroecology. The national question and reclaiming the state are crucial objects of focus and activism in this regard, and we likely cannot speak of a truly democratic transformation to sustainability that does not marshal assistance with migration and resettlement from ecological and climate displacements. Civic activity alone likely cannot accomplish such feats. Yet the question of political will and social mobilization for such interventions weighs heavy. If I could lobby the policy makers, or vote for the political party who would fight to implement a People’s Green New Deal I would do so with haste. But even if such a platform could gain popular support, and be implemented tomorrow, the wicked puzzle of transforming daily life and work to be more convivial, ecologically-embedded, and less-energy-intensive would still remain. As I’ve noted in chapter one in reference to The Smart City, even big global visions must always be translated into local, variegated contexts. ‘Big’ transitions would still need to be accompanied with ‘small’ civic activity and transformations at the level of everyday life.
My suggestion is that beginning with and building upon the civic activity that already exists in communities, and working to intervene at the level of these local contexts, especially the municipal scale where radical democracy is much more attainable, is as good of a place as any to start. As people are confronted with new ways of living and working locally, they may also be more receptive to new ways of thinking globally. I can only speak to the contexts that I am familiar with, in the Europe and the United States, but there I see groups of individuals coming together to form communities around shared material and immaterial needs. In places as different as Jackson, Mississippi and Munich, Germany, such communities are being formed – cooperating to meet local needs, within the limits of ecology and in solidarity with people in other places. Civic actors are working to build a different future, without first speaking truth to power or asking permission. They are not waiting for politicians, philanthro-capitalists, universities, NGOs, or the United Nations Conference of the Parties to save the day. Whether their desires for change stem from urgent material needs, their own values, or something else, they find resonance in acting together. As desires are channelled into civic activity, people claim the right to have a say, and begin putting things into motion. Although not everyone may have the capacities to begin such projects, it is my contention that practical, and seemingly small, actions can go a long way in mobilizing popular support and beginning to enact a transformative vision of a different world for all.

6.3.4 Illustrating the argument with concrete examples

To be clear, these examples are not meant to be blueprints. As Schumacher (1973) has observed, if one is trying to navigate an uncertain territory, one would be less likely to pay close and careful attention, and remain flexible to changing and unpredictable circumstances. In short, there is no one ‘correct’ map for navigating democratic transformations to sustainability. The way to transformation is discovered in and through practice. My suggestion is that these examples of civic activity can provide heuristics for navigation. These examples are hardly unique, and I have not represented the diverse iterations that such organizations have taken. Yet these examples, which I have come across throughout the course of my research, are representative of the recurring characteristics of cosmo-local prototypes listed above.

1. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and Community Supported ‘Everything’ (CSX)

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is an organizational model for building a community of eaters connected directly to local food producers. The CSA model is said to have first developed in Japan in the early 1970s under the name Teikei, and has since emerged across the world on nearly every continent⁶⁸. CSA forms a direct relationship for exchange – consumers of food share in the risk of the harvest and ensure that the producers are paid a sufficient wage, and producers ensure that consumers receive a share of food that is produced in a healthy and ecological fashion. CSAs focus on building local communities around relationships between producers and consumers, not on prices. While there are no fixed or rigid guidelines for organizing a CSA – they are translated into various local contexts around the globe – the essence of bringing reciprocal and cooperative relations to food exchange are what unites them across difference.

In Germany, CSAs are called Solidarity Agriculture (Solidarische Landwirtschaft, or SoLaWi for short). I interviewed Simon Scholl, a leader from the SoLaWi network in the spring of 2020 and learned how the essence of CSA has inspired organization far beyond food and agriculture. In 2019, Scholl developed the idea of ‘Community Supported X’ (CSX), as in the variable X that can be filled in with virtually ‘everything’ – whichever economic relations a community decides to include. Scholl envisions CSX as translating the CSA model to all basic needs that members a community may have (called Grundversorgung in German). The CSX model is already being used by many enterprises involved Scholl’s network. These include food enterprises like bakeries, cheese and wine makers, coffee roasters and beekeepers, but also basic needs and services like energy, clothing, bike and home repair, transport, and recreation. The goal is to form the basis for community-supported, locally-embedded economies where citizens cooperate toward the practical goal of meeting their daily needs together. As the idea continues to expand, there is an ambition to include many more needs, such as housing and child care, with the idea to build CSX neighborhoods where inhabitants cooperate to meet the basic needs and provide basic services for the community. This is a good demonstration of how participating in one instance of community building (forming or joining in a CSA) around shared needs and values can develop collective agency and expand reciprocal relations and democratic self-governance beyond one need (i.e. food).

2. Land cooperatives

Land cooperatives are legal entities that purchase agricultural land in order to lease it to small-scale farmers at an affordable price. Like CSAs, land cooperatives have many different iterations. They are united by the act of pooling community resources in order to purchase agricultural land, thus taking it off of the market and preserving it for regionally-based agroecological production. The land is meant to be preserved in perpetuity, which is done by securing it into a sort of land trust, depending on the particular country’s legal context. Also like CSAs, land cooperatives have emerged in many different countries in response to a common problem of soaring land prices, and people’s desire for regional agroecological food production. The European Access to Land network, a group of grassroots organizations working to secure land for agroecology, lists seventeen member land cooperative organizations in nine European countries.

Land cooperatives come in various sizes. Some organizations, like Agrarian Trust (AT) in the United States, work at a national scale to raise money and purchase land. The governance of the land is devolved to local subsidiary organizations, which AT calls Agrarian Commons. Farmers, as a part of the Agrarian Commons, are essentially leasing the land from themselves and a board of other stakeholders from the area who ensure that the land use is making room for ecology and providing the region with nutritious food. Others like the SoLaWi Cooperatives in Germany, or Herenboeren in the Netherlands, are more localized in their resource pooling, so that those who are involved in a CSA pool their money to purchase land for a farmer who will grow their food. In speaking with leaders from several land cooperative organizations, I learned that it is often the case that land cooperatives grow out of an CSA community, or a group of people who wish to become a CSA. Here we see again that, out of CSAs, other forms of reciprocal relations may develop, as people pool their resources to secure land for community benefit.

3. Food Policy Councils (FPCs)

The first FPC was formed in Knoxville, Tennessee in 1982, and since the model has spread in different iterations to cities across the globe. The character of particular FPCs is highly dependent on the local context. What all iterations generally share is a convening of citizens and stakeholders from food systems who develop practices and strategies for local food policies – for example, developing local and organic food procurement schemes for schools. FPCs are open to all citizens who wish to directly participate in the development of policy that can shape food production, distribution and consumption in their cities and regions. Importantly, this participation is shaped by the citizens themselves, as FPCs are (for the most part) citizen-led and citizen-created councils. The ability of FPCs to inspire a radical departure from the status quo certainly differs from place to place. My case study of German FPCs highlights some key lessons for contesting wider structures of power that set constraining and enabling conditions.

Although FPCs are a novelty in Germany, citizen-led food initiatives are certainly not. Urban gardens, the SoLaWi network, Slow Food organizations, and the online Food Sharing platform (www.foodsharing.de), are just a few examples of the numerous citizen-led organizations that have been working on food and sustainability issues across Germany for years. Among these groups, there was a general feeling that the plurality of initiatives were operating in parallel to each other despite having similar goals. There was also a growing sense that a coordinated strategy for food system transformation was necessary. FPC leaders attempted to organize this change at the lowest political level – municipalities – for purely pragmatic reasons. City governments are much more accessible for direct democratic action. In my case study, I developed the understanding that FPCs were a space for citizens to develop a ‘sparring partner’ approach to engaging with institutional actors in their municipalities. In the words of Henrike, an interviewee from Berlin’s FPC,

*It offers a platform. It gives the voices a space where we can come together and bring our message to politics. So we can work on translating these demands into reality. So they are reacted to by politicians and can be actualized. So that they don’t say, “We can’t do it.” On the contrary! Yes we can.*

FPCs provide a space for citizens to develop a collective agency for contentious politics – to begin to push governments beyond what was considered possible. While my work did not demonstrate any widespread transformation of local food systems spurred by FPCs, it did demonstrate that citizens brought food to the political agenda in many municipalities, and were cultivating collective agency while doing so. The FPC network connected citizens beyond their local contexts as well. Yearly conferences featured speakers and community leaders from several different countries, and translocal working groups were focused on developing a common set of demands to various levels of politics. As FPCs have continued to spread around Germany, they are also becoming networked with CSAs and land cooperatives, also beginning to form an ecology of social innovation combined with a contentious politics that aims to create conditions in which alternative economic and political models can thrive. As Simon Scholl told me, “I think it is absolutely essential and predestined that FPCs are the interface to represent SoLaWi organizations in municipal politics.” In other words, FPCs could become
(and already are beginning to) a way to represent the interests of CSAs and land cooperatives in local politics, and when networked, to build coalition networks at regional and international scales as well. This represents an ecology of relations in which some take the role of developing socially innovative alternatives, while others take the role of politicizing the wider institutional configurations and conditions that constrain or enable those alternatives from taking root.

4. Public-Commons-Partnerships (PCP) and Community-University-Partnerships

The PCP is a concept that elucidates how these various instances of social innovation forged through civic activity could better interface with the state, and contribute to re-politicization and commoning governance beyond a particular initiative. It is suggested that PCPs offer a way for rethinking institutional design beyond the State/Market dilemma (Milburn and Russell, 2019). Departing from the well-known Public-Private-Partnership, the PCP is envisioned as a model of ownership and governance that is shared by a ‘Common Association’ (here understood as a cooperative enterprise or organization, community group, civic initiative, etc.) and a public authority (e.g. a municipal council, or as I will explore below, a university) (Russell et al., 2022, p. 5). As such, PCPs can offer a way to counter the privatization and commodification of public infrastructure or service delivery, without simply outsourcing them to a public authority. It can serve as a model for bringing together social innovation and re-politicization: as community-led spaces of governance are integrated and legitimized by public authorities, they could also begin to redirect the culture and norms of the state, (much as the integration of private enterprise into PPP-governance has done under neoliberalism). As such, the PCP could be applied to re-politicize existing institutional strategies (like The Smart City, which often claims to be a platform for citizen participation and social innovation) as they are translated into local contexts. The capacities for collective agency generated through direct participation, along with the surplus acquired through ownership, can be used to help start up other commons associations (through seed capitalization and knowledge sharing), thus expanding radical democracy beyond a local context (Russell et al., 2022).

The PCP remains mostly theoretical, and its utility will need to be tested through application in various contexts. Perhaps the biggest barrier is that it requires commitment from state actors (from politicians to bureaucrats) to engage in and respect the process of experimentation, thus changing ideas about what democracy and citizenship (could) mean, which is likely not an easy feat. This again highlights the importance of a grassroots social innovation culture that, in building community around meeting local needs, can mobilize a social basis for re-politicizing or intervening to shift politics at and beyond the local scale in this direction.

However, there are also opportunities to begin developing PCPs outside of electoral politics if one broadly understands ‘the public’. Namely, universities and academics can play a role in facilitating or building PCPs. A central reason that public universities exist is to serve societal well-being. As I have argued in chapter four, this role is not always realized. This is especially the case as managerialism has seen many universities become ‘factories’ of knowledge production that are concerned with metrics that are defined, not by ordinary people, but, among others, technocratic or private funding institutions. Scholar activism, transdisciplinary and participatory action research, and other ‘transgressions’ to the norms of managerialism are useful tools to re-orient the activities of public universities. But without recognition of this work, such efforts can also be ephemeral and fragmented, as the primary concern of many academics (particularly early stage researchers without tenure) is economic survival and job security. Working within university departments (which in many contexts can still have a good deal of autonomy) toward a recognition of these activities could go a long way to forging PCPs and making the civic activity of citizen legible to public support and incentivization, without compromising its socially innovative potential. In other words, academics and public universities could act as a bridge between social innovation and re-politicization of public institutions more broadly. Some examples can help to illustrate.

Nascent is a transdisciplinary research collaboration among German CSAs (SoLaWi), and researchers at the Universities of Siegen and Oldenburg that began in 2015. The project sought to develop practical recommendations for action that were relevant to the CSAs, and understand how the transformative economic model presented by the CSA could spread horizontally. Researchers from the nascent project have also partnered with CSX, articulating it as a community-supported economic model for meeting socio-ecological challenges (see Rommel et al. 2020; Rommel and Koch, 2021).

A concept that is useful for understanding and promoting such collaborations is the Community-University-Partnership (lyon et al., 2021). Lyon and colleagues use this notion to explore the various ways that public universities in Canada and the United States are helping grassroots initiatives work towards seed sovereignty. Seed sovereignty is a movement aiming to return plant seed ownership and use to community and farmer control. It has emerged as a reaction to the century-long process of commodifying seeds, which was officially sanctioned with the
World Trade Organization’s Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights Agreement (1996). Various seed sovereignty activists and organizations have built long-term collaborations with researchers at the University of Wisconsin and the University of British Columbia, working towards, among other things, community education, preservation of legal access for common use of seeds, and the development of regional seed exchanges (Lyon et al., 2021). Long-term is the key word here, as such relationships are messy, iterative, and not possible to standardize or predetermine (Anderson, 2020).

Researchers have the potential to leverage university resources to foster collaboration, and build bridges to develop PCPs with municipal councils, city administrations, and other public actors and institutions. As mentioned in the review of chapter three, my work in this thesis to co-organize a food policy event with FPC leaders in the summer of 2021 is an example of how this could work. During my research, I learned that there were citizens who wished to begin FPCs and collaborate with municipal governments in some German cities, but that government actors were not really sure what to make of their requests. After speaking with FPC leaders, we hypothesized that organizing an ‘official’ event which brought policymakers into dialogue, not only with citizens, but academics affiliated with large universities and officially sanctioned consortiums (like RECOMS) that we could begin to legitimize the idea of citizen-led FPCs in the eyes of those in government. We organized an online-event, called a ‘scientific dialogue on sustainable municipal food policy: Shaping sustainable food systems together’. It brought together 220 participants including eighty-five members of German city administrations and municipalities and academics, farmers, entrepreneurs, activists, and citizens from all over Europe. The event featured a morning debate on topics from my research, including theoretical discussions about participation and democratic citizenship, the role of municipalities and FPCs in transforming regional food systems, and the various municipal structures and departments that affect and are affected by food. The afternoon was organized in a ‘barcamp’ fashion that allowed participants to propose a workshop, and host a formal presentation and/or informal discussion about a topic. Here there were best practice examples that aimed to share knowledge and success stories (including a presentation on CSX), discussions about active citizenship, and insights about possibilities for international (or translocal) collaboration, among other things. As the event fit in with RECOMS’ deliverables, we were also able to direct resources to civic leaders from German FPCs for their work in organizing the event. While it is difficult to gauge ‘impact’ at this point, the event may have helped to warm municipal governments up to the idea of citizens inventing their own spaces of participation. It could also serve as a model for how academics may help commoning initiatives bridge the gap of communication with municipal governments, on the way to establishing new organizational structures, or gain access to municipal resources.

6.4 Reflections on positionality and methodology

“Sapere aude! ‘Have courage to use your reason!’ – that is the motto of the enlightenment.” (Kant (2007 [1784]) cited in Clegg et al., 2014, p. 276)

This section provides final reflections on my positionality as a researcher, and how the methods that I used have impacted my conclusions and research process. First I will discuss my perspective of objectivity and subjectivity in the research process.

6.4.1 Objectivity and subjectivity

As made clear in the first chapter’s discussion of methodology, in my understanding, the line between objectivity and subjectivity is not so clear cut. As Freire (1970) has put it: pure objectivity is an attempt to understand and describe the world independently from the embodied human experience; while pure subjectivity is an attempt to understand and describe embodied human experience independently from the world. In reality, I would argue that these perspectives cannot be separated from each other, but are co-constitutive – our ‘subjective’ worldviews both influence and are influenced by our ‘objective’ understanding of the world. Put another way, “rationality is always situational rather than transcendent” (Clegg et al., 2014, p. 289). Situatedness of knowledge always includes the context of human subjectivity. Particularly when attempting to understand and describe the social world, researchers have a limited ability to grasp the infinite complexity of causality, and are always influenced by their positionality (Wolff and Resnick, 1987). With an understanding of ‘overdetermination’ in the social world, variables can never be completely isolated or independent, such that an ultimate cause, essence or universal law can be fully determined (Gibson-Graham, 2006). The perspective of overdetermination accepts that all theories are partial in their analysis (i.e. there cannot be a complete or final explanation of social phenomena). Yet, accepting that there can be no a priori privileging of a certain theoretical analysis is not the same as denying that there are sources of causation and structure that can be analyzed by a researcher (Ward, 2019), which can in turn influence praxis (Flyvbjerg, 2001). The difference is that researchers following a perspective of overdetermination recognize that their theories are performative – not only are they models for understanding and explaining the world; they also shape the world in turn. With this understanding, the researcher selects an approach to analytical thought that has a selective focus on particular
objects of study which are oriented towards social goals (Wolff & Resnick, 1987). The approach to analysis in this research has been centered around the question of, “What kind of world do we want to participate in building?” (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 615), and the social goals I have defined are supporting and amplifying transformations to sustainable ways of living, centered around radical democracy.

The approach should not be seen as a disapproval of the potential usefulness of researching matters of fact, or reductionist studies which attempt to understand and pinpoint causal relationships, particularly in the natural sciences. It rather acknowledges the inadequacy of matters of fact alone – i.e. without the social, political, and ethical lens of matters of concern (Latour, 2004). It is my perception that matters of concern are often foreclosed in public discourses on sustainability, resilience and resourcefulness (Sawyerdow, 2007, 2018). The intent of bringing matters of concern into scientific discourse is not to get away from empiricism, but to get closer to it (Latour, 2004). To restate the quote from Kant’s essay on ‘What is Enlightenment?’ at the beginning of this section, using normative and critical judgement – and phronetic inquiry (Flyvbjerg, 2001) – has gone hand-in-hand with positive description, during (and before) the Enlightenment (cf. Sayer, 2011). It is only more recently in the 20th-century, that normative judgements and matters of concern have become taboo in the social sciences, which exacerbates the risk of hiding bias and embedded assumptions of researchers, and excluding the possibility for disagreement and dissent (Wolin, 2004). This in turn can conceal possibilities for thinking and acting differently, and contribute to lock-in and path-dependency.

6.4.2 Positionality

Beginning this PhD research as a member of the RECOMS consortium, I had a particularly strong interest in contributing to democratic transformations to sustainability and amplifying alternative ways of thinking and acting in regard to these matters. My project fell under the RECOMS research theme of ‘Unlocking and Empowering’, in which I was encouraged to use creative and transdisciplinary methods, including working together with communities of practice. This framing for my inquiry made my research less critical and evaluative of the individuals and groups that I researched, and more constructive and collaborative as I saw our goals as aligned. These were people devoting their free time, or their entire lives, to build a better world for themselves and others. My goal was to, as much as possible, make my research relevant to their work. In several cases, especially locally in Groningen, research participants were or became my friends. However, this did not prevent me from taking a critical step back to reflect on what these cases meant in the bigger picture of things. We did not always have the same politics or have uniform ideological alignment, but our differences fell away as we worked together on concrete and practical projects. Through disagreement and dialogue, I was forced to challenge and refine my perspectives and theoretical understandings of problems and possible paths forward.

6.4.3 Methodology

With the aim of gaining in-depth insights into civic activity my methodology was geared towards establishing dialogue about contemporary problems with those working to address those problems on the ground. To this end, I have drawn on ethnographic and qualitative research methods, including participant observation (Watson and Till, 2010), and both semi-structured and informal interviews (Leavy, 2017). I also approached my research with a scholar-activist orientation, in which I aimed to perform my work in service of radical social and political change. To reiterate the above point, this stance is not purely ‘subjective’, but co-constituted by ‘objective’ empirical observations about the current state of affairs in modern society, and socio-natural relationships. My orientation toward radical change is only in relation to these observations, which are also increasingly becoming mainstream in public discourse on sustainability and transformation, albeit often without a critical or politicized perspective.

In my estimation, these aims and orientations were reasonably achieved throughout the course of this research. Shortcomings may be inevitable if one sets off to work with and for communities. I think that this was especially the case with my ambitious orientations to the research, given the events of the past four years and the general constraints of academia discussed in detail in chapter four. Often I had to make pragmatic decisions, weighing the trade-offs of completing required research outputs within deadlines with the length of time I was able to devote to data collection and collaboration with research participants. The COVID-19 pandemic forced me to adapt and be flexible in terms of where and how I conducted my research, as many plans needed to change on the fly. In addition to these practical impacts, the mental and emotional difficulties in working on this project have become more acute since the spring of 2020, when living and working in foreign country separated from family and friends by an ocean developed a much different meaning. These factors, in addition to time constraints and financial realities of being an early stage researcher and an expecting father, all have contributed to the ‘winding’-nature of my research journey that I have described in chapter one, which may at times seem disjointed. With less precarious working conditions, I have little doubt that my empirical work would have been much more robust and rigorous.

While I accept responsibility for any shortcomings that I have overlooked, the ability of early stage researchers to conduct critical, in-depth research with
communities under short-term precarious contracts should be looked at with more scrutiny in general. A research consortium like RECOMS brings young, idealistic people in with what sounds like (and to some degree is) mission-oriented and for-social-benefit work. Yet, as my colleagues and I noticed — and especially as circumstances of the pandemic exacerbated problems with timing and traveling — such consortiums are still very much embedded in rigid institutional frameworks that restrict the possibilities for achieving real-world ‘impact’ through work, and for supporting individuals throughout the course of their research journeys. At the time of writing, the vast majority of RECOMS colleagues are not close to finishing their PhDs, and many have had to find jobs outside of academia. Again, in the event that governments and universities wish to subsidize the work of research consortiums like RECOMS, they should be open to supporting researchers throughout a messy and uncertain process. A three year contract that requires someone to move to a new country as part of its terms and conditions, and in that time to complete a PhD project that (to some extent) collaborates with community groups, is not realistic in retrospect.

Another difficulty in the research process that applies to qualitative research more broadly, is that many civic initiatives and communities are already over-researched (Button and Taylor Aiken, 2022). I have found that several of them are jaded from bad experiences they have had in the past. For example, one participant shared that she had been involved in several interviews and consultations with researchers and government. After hours of meetings, the researchers never shared with her the findings of research, and in her estimation, governments never followed up on their promises to ‘help support more initiatives’ like hers. This background made the barrier to establishing contact higher. In approaching individuals and groups with a collaborative and helpful stance, I was able to overcome this type of resistance — at least in most cases. Some groups that I approached bluntly shared that their policy is to not participate in research anymore. To establish trust and mutual respect, I always offered to help or volunteer in exchange for the time of interviewees. For example, at the FPC event in Frankfurt, I arrived early to help with the set-up and volunteered as a translator for non-German speakers during the event. In the Netherlands, interviews with farmers were done after or during farm work, or in the event that I could not make it to the farm, I did other things like spreading flyers for an agroecology course hosted by one of the farmers throughout the city of Groningen. While these collaborative actions are useful in building trust in particular cases, I believe that this should also be addressed at a more general level. Namely, in the manner that research about communities or civic initiatives is carried out. It is not the sole responsibility of individual researchers to overcome the resistance of relevant initiatives to participate in research. As was discussed in chapter four of this thesis, the responsibility also lies in “the whole manner in which academia burgeons in productivity, outputs, and publications” (Taylor Aiken, 2022, p. 8). In my estimation, the over-research fatigue comes from the pressure for academics, and in particular, early stage researchers to publish or perish, and in doing so continuously reach out to individuals and groups engaged in interesting projects in order to write about them. If governments and university institutions are truly interested in subsidizing research about initiatives, they also need to be open to the fact of providing the conditions in which researchers can carry out research with those initiatives — i.e. working on practical, real-world experiments and projects. In other words, many of these individuals and groups are tired of being written about in academic journals (many of which are not even open-access), and see their time as too valuable to be mentioned in another thesis or paper. Yet, if they are (or were to be) approached in a collaborative manner, where they can be co-creators of practical action research projects, many would be more than open to participation.

6.5 Suggestions for policy and future (action) research

Looking at the painstaking efforts of civic actors explored above, I would suggest that the experimental knowledge for confronting contemporary crises is being generated, too often, outside of the halls of academia and government. The question remains whether or not the latter institutions will take a stronger role as co-producers and facilitators of this knowledge generation, or continue to serve as gatekeepers and administrators of the status quo. To the extent that civic activities are working towards these ends, and working to create, repair, and regenerate common goods, they should be stimulated by state support.

Policy recommendations are based on the assumption that “meaningful political interventions in society [can be] be facilitated by speaking to the relevant political authority.” (Hajer, 2003, p. 181). Despite the institutional void that exists in the organized irresponsibility of global capitalism, nation states still have the capacity to make meaningful political interventions (Mitchell and Fazi, 2017), and I have suggestions for those in political parties or governments with ears to hear. First and foremost, the importance of candid speech that does not deflect or minimize the gravity of contemporary crises cannot be overstated. This is not a historical moment for careermism or myopia. Championing some of the interventions proposed in Ails’ (2021) vision of a People’s Green New Deal at the national and European levels would be a great start. These include de-growth and large-scale reductions in energy consumption in the Global North, climate/ecological debts and reparations for colonial and neo-colonial relations in the Global South, and a widespread transformation of agricultural systems toward agroecology (entailing
not just a shift in farming practices but land reform and labor re-organization), in which many more people find meaningful work in farming and food.

While alternatives to growth in the Global North, and a reduction of per-capita energy consumption are of the essence, pursuing these within the framework of post-politics – i.e. top-down, techno-managerial policies that aim to monitor, control and coerce individuals – will more than likely, not be electorally successful; if such policies are imposed by force, they are likely to be met with a counter-movement of emboldened reactionary forces. Material de-growth in the Global North may be seen as regressive, but it can in fact be progressive if carried out in a democratic way, as there is plenty of room for growth of other sorts: growth and quality of community; growth of craftmanship, artisanship and locally-embedded economies; growth of purpose and meaningful work; growth of well-being and health. Highlighting these as a positive rather than punitive vision of the future, policymakers could spur a paradigm shift towards regenerative economies, including a valuation of quality over quantity, and locally-embedded economies that promote meaningful modes of living and working while repairing communities and commons.

Recognizing what is already happening locally, and building upon that is as good of a place as any to start. Interested policymakers could begin by looking to an existing vanguard of civic actors and distributed leadership (Nunes 2021), and establishing a dialogue about how their mission, principles and activities (like starting a CSA or other social/cooperative enterprise) may be better facilitated, made accessible to more people, and linked to a wider institutional framework of support (e.g. land reform, universal benefits, etc.). More specifically, a strenuous review of food sanitation rules, and regulations that prohibit land access for small-scale farming and enterprise should also be conducted in order to determine which are unnecessarily restrictive of informal economies. Instead of paving the way for corporations, government policy, regulation, and procurement should protect and incentivize more locally-rooted, small-scale, and cooperative enterprise.

Building on what is already there, state actors, together with academics, could begin to develop public administration frameworks that allow for subsidiarity, difference, experimentation and complexity, while creating the conditions for a broader, deeper change. Gilbert (2016) documents the ‘intended New Deal’ in the United States (a program that ran for several years but was eventually disbanded for political reasons), which brought together farmers, public administrators, adult-educators and social scientists in an effort to democratize the ‘big’ federal New Deal programs through bottom-linked local community organizing. This could serve as a prototype for implementing such large scale programs at a human scale, and mitigating the unintended consequences that come about with any endeavors of change. Researchers interested in existing Green Deal platforms (such as those discussed in Europe and the United States) and democratic sustainability transformation are called to draw inspiration and begin prototyping such collaborative action research programs in their own contexts by connecting with civic actors and organizations in their localities and beyond.

Academics working in the general domain of sustainability transformation/transition are implored to actively resist what has been provocatively called ‘scholarly bullshit’ (Kirchherr, 2022). Kirchherr (2022, p. 2) defines scholarly bullshit as, in essence, “scholarship that does not contribute to the advancement of scientific knowledge on a subject at question. However, because of the current set-up of the academic system, the scholar feels obligated to pretend otherwise and to continue churning out this kind of work.” Resistance here means that despite working within a system that “mistakes publishing many highly cited papers for the advancement of science” (Kirchherr, 2022, p. 5), researchers find ways to make their work relevant and meaningful in pursuit of generating knowledge, and working to, for example, bridge the gap between civic actors and government in regard to practical issues. In no way do I wish to diminish the importance of theoretical work, I just wish to highlight that much of this work is not novel, and appears to be motivated by metrics rather than new insights that advance debates. In particular, those with tenure or secure positions should help enable early stage researchers to carry out meaningful work, as the latter are much more subject to the whims of the hyper-competitive and precarious academic job market that incentivizes what some may call ‘bullshit’.

6.5.1 Opportunities for agroecological transformation in Germany and the Netherlands

There is, at the moment, a significant opportunity to begin a widespread transformation of agriculture towards agroecology in both Germany and the Netherlands.

In the Netherlands, there is a truly Polanyian moment emerging, as the Dutch government has been forced to find a solution to excessive nitrogen pollution, and has been floating the idea of large scale government buy outs of agricultural land, in which farmers would be (at least for now) given the option to cease their operations in exchange for payment. A recent news article portrayed such a buying out of farmers as “unavoidable” in regions like the Geldsere-Vallei, where high levels of nitrogen pollution are leaking out into surrounding nature reserves (Klumpenaar and Kuiper, 2022). In response, farmers are worried that this will further de-populate rural areas and destroy their livelihoods and ways of life.
These recent developments add to the latent disaffection amongst Dutch farmers that was displayed in the 2019 protest mobilizations (and the emerging protests of 2022 that are intensifying at the time of writing). As van der Ploeg (2020, p. 603) rightly points out, if the costs of these ecological policies are pushed down to the weakest (in this case family farmers), the countryside will continue to become a “bastion for the extreme right”.

While many farmers are indignant with the way that the government is handling the nitrogen situation, there are indications that a majority of farmers are open to developing more nature-inclusive or agroecological methods, provided that they are not left to make such changes on their own (Bouma and Marijnissen, 2018). There are signs that at least some voices in the public debate are beginning to recognize alternative economic models like CSA and self-harvest subscriptions as a possible solution to help farmers transition to more nature inclusive farming methods (van der Storm, 2022). Moreover, the biodynamic farming school Warmonderhof has so much interest from people looking to work in nature-inclusive farming that its waiting list for enrollment is filling up as quickly as it is opened. There are many farmers, both conventional and aspiring new entrants, who want to work within ecological constraints while producing healthy food. There is also a political will to change farming methods at the national level, although at the moment of writing mid 2022, it is not clear how this will be realized.

A framework of land reform (Calo et al., 2021), partnering together with citizen-led organizations (e.g. Toekomsboeren, the Federation for Agroecological Farmers, food policy councils, land cooperatives, etc.) to make land available to new entrant farmers, crafting programs to support them with a living wage, and expanding educational opportunities could be a great start towards a truly sustainable agricultural transformation in the Netherlands. A relatively small change that could have large impacts is the inclusion of agroecological farming in municipal zoning plans. By including agroecology in the zoning plan, space for community gardens, CSAs, self-harvest gardens, and other models could accelerate already expanding trends of community building, local resilience and improvement of ecological and social well-being. This would also be an opportunity for municipalities to experiment with establishing organizational structures for community groups to have a say over questions of land and asset ownership and management.

In Germany, an ecology of relations among citizen-led institutions – from FPCs to SoLaWi, to a network of several land cooperatives – are filling different roles in pushing food systems towards a sustainable transformation. SoLaWi cooperatives, in which members share ownership and governance of land, alone comprise more than five thousand (and counting) members. There are an additional four hundred SoLaWi’s organized as more standard CSAs, and FPCs have been formed in forty-five German cities. Making connections with individual researchers and research programs like nascent, further opportunities are arising for bridging the gap between such civic organizations and governments. Similar to the Netherlands, the discontent of conventional farmers with environmental agricultural policy that is merely punitive, is on the rise, demonstrated by intensifying protests in Berlin. Building on the alternative economic models presented by these civic organizations, German government could develop an agricultural transformation policy that simultaneously supports small farmers and pursues environmental sustainability.

6.6 Final remarks

This thesis has framed sustainability transformations through the lens of counter-movements against commodification. I have argued that, if such transformations are to be democratic, they should be rooted in commoning – building community and collective agency around concrete projects, meeting shared needs and desires. In these final remarks, I would like to again reiterate the importance for academic institutions and individual researchers to confront contemporary crises not only with a detached rationality, but as active and embodied participants in an ecology of relations, and generating experimental knowledge by tending to seeds of civic activity.
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TENDING TO THE SEEDS OF CIVIC ACTIVITY

Navigating democratic transformations to sustainability

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English summary

Calls for societies to become more ‘sustainable’ are becoming increasingly urgent in the face of mounting social and ecological crises. At the same time, many representative democracies are experiencing crises of legitimacy, as anti-establishment movements have gained in popularity around the globe (Crouch, 2019; Mouffe, 2019). Both of these crises are understood as outgrowths of a drive of industrial market society to commodify more and more aspects of nature and human life (Palumbo and Scott, 2018; Polanyi, 2001). While governments, multilateral institutions, and corporations make pledges and promises to address unsustainability, they mostly put their eggs in the baskets of technological innovation, efficiency, and ‘green’ growth. Often, these efforts double down on, rather than confront the trends of commodification. Meanwhile, more researchers are highlighting the necessity of forging radically alternative ways of meeting material needs in the face of biophysical realities (see e.g. Hall and Klitgaard, 2012; Spash and Smith, 2019). Tired of waiting for ‘the state’ and ‘the market’ to come to the rescue, many civic actors and organizations have taken it upon themselves to get busy building such alternatives (see e.g. Kaika, 2017): finding sustainable ways to meet their daily needs, work, make decisions, and define value together.

This PhD was driven by a desire to explore what can be done, given the circumstances, together with civic actors who are working to address these pressing problems on the ground. ‘Tending to seeds of civic activity’ aims to understand the ways in which nurturing practical citizen experimentation with alternative modes of governance and material provision could kill two birds with one stone: providing heuristics for transformative pathways toward a sustainable future, while repairing and building the capacity for people and their communities to play an active role in democratic governance. The main question researched was: How can civic practices and strategies contribute to the democratization of sustainability transformations?

In order to answer the above question, the researcher used ethnographic and qualitative research methods, including participant observation (Watson and Till, 2010), and both semi-structured and informal interviews (Leavy, 2017). The aim was to develop in-depth insights from particular case studies, which were purposively selected. Civic actors and organizations were approached as “knowledge-generating epistemic communities from which the scholarly community can learn” (Tully, 2013, p. 230), and research was inspired by the goal of making academia relevant to those engaged in civic activities, whether big or small, that may form the basis for democratizing social and ecological change. Policy elites were also interviewed as part of the SmartCity Cologne study in chapter one, informed by a critical approach that was positioned toward amplifying alternative viewpoints and dissenting initiatives in Cologne’s urban politics (cf. Raco, 1999). It should also be noted that the methodology was informed by a perspective that the values of the researcher and reason are not antithetical, but co-constitutive. That is, reason informs values, just as reason is embedded in value systems that shape scientific inquiry (Sayer, 2011). It is not values, as such, that pose a problem for social scientists, but dogmatically held views that are impervious to reason and empirical evidence (Anderson, 2004). All political and economic institutions contain constitutive norms and valuations of ‘the good’ (Graeber, 2001; Mouffe, 2000; Tully, 2008), and one aim of this thesis was to explicate common understandings of citizenship and democracy in order to widen the political imagination of those working to address social and ecological problems.

This PhD has made contributions to theoretical debates on citizenship, social innovation, commoning, and radical democracy. It has also argued for a wider institutional acceptance of and support for scholar activism and participatory action research that makes academic work (more) practically relevant to social movements and civic actors. Research should aim to partner (more) with these actors to generate experimental knowledge for sustainability transformations.
To the extent that civic activities are working to create, repair, and regenerate common goods (such as ecological health of commons like water, air, and soil), they should also be stimulated by public institutions (including universities). Those interested in social and ecological sustainability are encouraged to support these activities both practically and intellectually.

**The chapters and findings are summarized below:**

**Chapter two** begins with a critical examination of the de facto consensus in public, private and non-governmental centers of power that ‘smart’ digital technologies, and ‘green’ market-based solutions are main drivers of positive social and environmental (urban) change (Kaika, 2017; Vanolo, 2016; White, 2016). In pointing out many of the shortcomings of an actually existing Smart City initiative in Cologne, Germany – which promises to foster citizen participation, social innovation, and sustainability – we argue that true social innovation must go hand-in-hand with a contentious politics of re-politicizing governance arrangements, approaches, and methods. We call this the ‘social innovation-re-politicization nexus’ (SIRN). Re-politicization is understood here as deconstructing the inevitability of hegemonic logics in urban politics (i.e. path-dependency, lock-ins) and framings of problems and solutions that seem to make radical alternatives unthinkable. This includes, for example, challenging the implicit notion that ‘growth’ is an inherently desirable goal. Our analysis of Cologne’s smart city politics, first, provides a particular insight into how actually existing smart city actions and policies are assembled locally (Vanolo, 2014; White, 2016). Second, we document an additional case of contrast between actually existing processes of decision/policy-making and the citizen-centric rhetoric often associated with smart cities (Cardullo and Kitchin, 2019; Hodson and Marvin, 2017; Joss et al., 2017; Wiig, 2016). Finally, we focus attention in the latter discussion of our paper on opportunities and challenges for unpacking the SIRN – in Cologne, and beyond to other smart city strategies and urban governance practices.

**Chapter three** asks the question: how do civic initiatives attempt to common governance? Commoning is outlined as a process of re-designing institutions to serve the ‘common good’. While ‘states’ and ‘markets’ are implicitly understood to serve the ‘common good’, they increasingly fail to do so. We look to citizens in German Food Policy Councils (FPCs), who are working to re-claim democracy as an arena for ethical negotiation. Not only have FPCs organized and federated a variety of practical initiatives in a growing number of German cities, they are also providing ‘spaces of deliberation’ (Moragues-Faus and Morgan, 2015) for citizens to give body to their desires for political alternatives. We argue that the concept of commoning, and institutional designs like the Public-Commons-Partnership, could serve as a (re-)politicizing framework for creating more generative relationships between established state/market institutions and civic initiatives.

**Chapter four** explores the institutional context in which researchers aim to implement (co-)creative and transformative methods. It argues that this context is dominated by corporate managerial approach that has been transforming universities into ‘factories’ of knowledge production. Managerial universities prioritize externally and pre-defined metrics in research, which is not compatible with participatory, ‘co-creative’ methods. In order to be truly effective, we argue, creative and transformative methods in the research process need to fully acknowledge and consciously confront the institutional constraints caused by trends of managerialism and commercialization in academia. We call for academics to reflect on possibilities for transformative engaged scholarship with eyes wide open, and to fully engage with these working towards transformation in practice.

**Chapter five** combines a ‘zoomed-out’ political economic analysis of Dutch agriculture with a more ‘zoomed-in’ empirical exploration of small new entrant farmers working to build and join alternative food networks. While environmental problems with agriculture are increasingly acknowledged and addressed (e.g. nitrogen pollution), the mainstream approaches and suggested policies mostly work to maintain, and sometimes even accelerate, the separation of humans and nature; the dis-embeddedness of food production from place, a relationship to land, and biophysical constraints; and the commodification of food as a standardized object to be bought and sold on the market (or administered by the state). This chapter argues that navigating towards an emancipatory socio-ecological future – in agriculture and beyond – in the twenty-first century cannot be done with twentieth-century tools, methods, and questions alone. Building blocks for doing things differently exist all around in the form of civic activity (in this chapter, shown in the work of ‘proto-regenerative farmers’), undertaken by citizens at a distance from the state. We argue that a major challenge for academics is to narrate these radical imaginaries as not just anecdotes, but as the raw materials of a systemic alternative which can inspire a new intellectual project for agriculture and rural development. Participatory action research agendas are seen a crucial tool for helping these ‘seeds of change’ grow into robust systemic alternatives.

In conclusion, this thesis suggests that locally-rooted civic activities have a central role to play in fostering wider transformations to sustainability. These activities can, in turn, help citizens to develop capacities for negotiating reciprocal relations.
De roep om een meer ‘duurzame’ maatschappij wordt steeds dringender gezien de toenemende sociale en ecologische crises. Tegelijkertijd maken ook veel representatieve democratieën een legitimiteitscrisis door, nu anti-establishment actoren en organisaties vormen voor sociale wetenschappers, maar de dogmatische opvattingen die deze dringende problemen ter plaatse aanpakken. ‘Tending to seeds of civic activity’ streft naar inzicht in de manieren waarop het verzorgen of begeven aan de democratisering van duurzaamheidstransformaties? De centrale vraag die werd onderzocht was: Hoe kunnen burgerpraktijken en -strategieën bijdragen aan de democratisering van duurzaamheidstransformaties?

Om bovenstaande vraag te beantwoorden gebruikte de onderzoeker etnografische en kwalitatieve onderzoeksmethoden, waaronder participerende observatie (Watson en Till, 2010), en zowel semi-gestructureerde als informele interviews (Leavy, 2017). Het doel was om diepgaande inzichten te ontwikkelen door middel van casestudies, die doelgericht werden geselecteerd. Burgerlijke actoren en organisaties werden benaderd als “kennisgenererende epistemische gemeenschappen waarvan de wetenschappelijke gemeenschap kan leren” (Tully, 2013, p. 230), en het onderzoek werd geïnspireerd door het doel om de academische wereld relevant te maken voor degenen die zich bezighouden met burgerlijke activiteiten - groot of klein - die de basis kunnen vormen voor democratisering sociale en ecologische verandering. In het eerste hoofdstuk van de studie over SmartCity Cologne werden ook beleidselites geïnterviewd, vanuit een kritische benadering die erop gericht was alternatieve standpunten en initiatieven in de stedelijke politiek van Keulen te versterken (zie Raco, 1999). Er moet ook worden opgemerkt dat de methodologie is gebaseerd op het standpunt dat de waarden van de onderzoeker en het verstand de volgende dimensionen: het verstand de waarden die zijn gebruikt en de van radicaal alternatieven voor de meer duurzame manieren om in materiële behoeften te voorzien, in het licht van de biofysische realiteit (zie bv. Hall en Klitgaard, 2012; Smith, 2019). Moe van het wachten op ‘de staat’ en ‘de markt’ die te redding komen, hebben veel burgerlijke actoren en organisaties het op zich genomen om dergelijke alternatieven op te bouwen (zie bv. Kaika, 2017). Daarbij vinden ze duurzame manieren om in hun dagelijkse leven behoeften te voorzien, te werken, beslissingen te nemen en samen waarde te definiëren.
ontogendelijk zijn voor het verstand en empirisch bewijs (Anderson, 2004). Alle politieke en economische instellingen bevatten constitutieve normen en waarden ten aanzien van ‘het goede’ (Graeber, 2001; Mouffe, 2000; Tully, 2008), en een van de doelstellingen van dit proefschrift was het expliciteren van gemeenschappelijke opvattingen over burgerschap en democratie om de politieke verbeelding te verbreden van degenen die werken aan de aanpak van sociale en ecologische problemen.

Dit proefschrift heeft bijgedragen aan theoretische debatten over burgerschap, sociale innovatie, commooning en radicale democratie. Het pleit voor een bredere institutionele acceptatie en ondersteuning van actieonderzoek, wat academisch werk (meer) praktisch relevant maakt voor sociale bewegingen en burgerlijke actoren. Onderzoek zou eerst gericht zijn om (meer) met deze actoren samen te werken om experimentele kennis voor duurzaamheidstransformaties te genereren. Voor zover burgeractiviteiten werken aan het creëren en herstellen van gemeenschappelijke goederen (zoals ecologische gezondheid van commons als water, lucht en bodem), moeten zij ook worden gestimuleerd door openbare instellingen (waaronder universiteiten). Zij die geïnteresseerd zijn in sociale en ecologische duurzaamheid worden aangemoedigd deze activiteiten zowel praktisch als intellectueel te ondersteunen.

De hoofdstukken en bevindingen worden hieronder samengevat:

Hoofdstuk drie stelt de vraag: hoe proberen burgerinitiatieven tot gemeenschappelijk bestuur te komen? Gemeenschappelijk bestuur wordt gezien als een proces van “Commoning”. Dit wordt omschreven als het herontwerpen van instituties die in dienst zijn van het “algemeen welzijn”. Hoewel ‘staten’ en ‘markten’ impliciet worden geacht het ‘algemeen welzijn’ te dienen, slagen ze daar in steeds mindere mate in. We kijken naar burgers in Duitse Food Policy Councils (FPC’s), die de democratie opnieuw proberen op te eisen als een platform voor ethische onderhandelingen. Niet alleen hebben FPC’s in een groeiend aantal Duitse steden een verscheidendheid aan praktische initiatieven geoordeeld en gebouwd. Ze bieden ook “ruimtes voor deliberatie” (Moragues-Faus en Morgan, 2015) voor burgers om hun wensen voor politieke alternatieven gestalte te geven. We stellen dat het concept van commoning, en institutionele ontwerpen zoals het Public-Commons-Partnership, kunnen dienen als een (re-)politisierend framework voor het creëren van meer generatieve relaties tussen gevestigde staatsmarktinstellingen en burgerinitiatieven.

Hoofdstuk vier verkent de institutionele context waarin onderzoekers (co-)creatieve en transformatieve methoden willen uitvoeren. Het beargumenteert dat deze context wordt gedomineerd door een bestuurlijke aanpak die universiteiten heeft omgevormd tot ‘fabrieken’ van kennisproductie. Managerial universities geven voorrang aan vooraf vastgestelde metingen van buitenaf. Dit is niet verenigbaar met participatieve, ‘co-creatieve’ methoden. Om echt effectief te zijn, zo stellen wij, moeten creatieve en transformatieve methoden in het onderzoeksproces de institutionele beperkingen die veroorzaakt worden door trends van commercialisering in de universiteit volledig erkennen en bewust het hoofd bieden. Wij roepen wetenschappers op om met open ogen na te denken over de mogelijkheden van transformatieve geëngageerde wetenschap, en om zich volledig te verbinden met degenen die in de praktijk aan transformatie werken.

Hoofdstuk vijf combineert een analyse van de Nederlandse landbouw met een meer “ingezoomde” empirische verkenning van kleine boeren die zich aansluiten bij alternatieve voedselnetwerken. Hoewel milieuproblemen in de landbouw in toenemende mate worden erkend en aangepakt (bijvoorbeeld stikstofvervuiling), werken de gangbare benaderingen en het voorgestelde beleid meestal aan het in stand houden en soms zelfs versnellen van de oorzaak van het probleem: de scheiding van mens en natuur; de loskoppeling van voedselproductie en de veerkracht van landbouwproductie. Hoewel de gangbare benaderingen soms verenigbaar zijn met participatieve, ‘co-creatieve’ methoden, om echt effectief te zijn, moeten creatieve en transformatieve methoden in het onderzoeksproces de institutionele beperkingen die veroorzaakt worden door trends van commercialisering in de universiteit volledig erkennen en bewust het hoofd bieden. Wij roepen wetenschappers op om met open ogen na te denken over de mogelijkheden van transformatieve geëngageerde wetenschap, en om zich volledig te verbinden met degenen die in de praktijk aan transformatie werken.
van plaats, relatie tot land en biofysische beperkingen; en de commodificatie van voedsel als een gestandaardiseerd object dat op de markt kan worden gekocht en verkocht (of door de staat kan worden beheerd). Dit hoofdstuk beargumenteert dat het navigeren naar een emancipatoire sociaal-ecologische toekomst - in de landbouw en daarbuiten - in de eeuwontvintigste eeuw niet alleen kan gebeuren met twintigste-eeuwse instrumenten, methoden en vragen. Bouwstenen om het anders te doen zijn overal aanwezig in de vorm van burgerlijke activiteit (in dit hoofdstuk in het werk van ‘proto-regeneratieve boeren’), ondernomen door burgers die op afstand van de staat staan. Dat wil zeggen, ze worden niet significant ondersteund door administratieve en subsidierichtlijnen. Wij stellen dat het een grote uitdaging voor academici is om deze radicale voorstellingen niet alleen als anekdotes te vertellen, maar als het hulpvaardig materiaal van een systemisch alternatief dat een nieuw intellectueel project voor landbouw en plattelandsontwikkeling kan inspireren. Participatieve actieonderzoeksagenda’s worden gezien als een cruciaal instrument om deze ‘zaden van verandering’ te helpen groeien tot robuuste systemische alternatieven.

Concluderend stelt deze dissertatie dat lokaal gewortelde burgeractiviteiten een centrale rol moeten spelen bij het bevorderen van bredere transformaties naar duurzaamheid. Deze activiteiten kunnen op hun beurt burgers helpen bij het ontwikkelen van capaciteiten om te onderhandelen over wederzijdse relatie (die in individualistische culturen moeten worden gecultiveerd). Wanneer wederkerige relaties worden ontwikkeld door praktische samenwerking rond gedeelde behoeften, kunnen zij een vruchtbare basis vormen waarop een bredere re-politisering van beperkende omstandigheden op een bredere schaal kan worden georganiseerd. Gemeenschapsvorming rond een bepaalde kwestie of behoeftevoorziening kan een zichzelf uitbreidend circuit van radicale democratie op gang brengen waarin steeds meer relaties wederzijds worden georganiseerd. Met andere woorden, als en wanneer mensen een gemeenschap vormen rond gedeelde immateriële en materiële behoeften en werken aan gemeenschappelijke doelen, kunnen hun inspanningen zich uitheren naar andere projecten en politieke platforms.

In de burgerlijke activiteit van burgers ontstaat een veelheid aan praktijken die gericht zijn op democratische transformaties naar duurzaamheid, waaronder veel activiteiten die buiten mijn eigen empirisch werk zijn waargenomen (zie onder meer De Moor, 2013; Hasanov, 2021; Horlings et al., 2021; Ulug, 2021). Coöperatieve en sociale ondernemingen, burgerraden en verenigingen, en community supported agriculture (CSA) laten zien dat alternatieve denkwijzen zich door gemeenschappen verspreiden en tot actie aanzetten. Zij tonen aan dat democratische transformaties naar duurzaamheid bij burgeractiviteiten (soms kleine) transformaties inhouden van de manier waarop mensen samen leven, werken, consumenten en waarde definiëren. Via dergelijke burgeractiviteiten werken veel mensen aan de verwezenlijking van hun wensen voor een andere wereld, en ontdekken zij in de praktijk hoe die wereld tot stand kunnen worden gebracht. Deze praktijken, en de strategieën om ze tot stand te brengen, kunnen als uitgangspunt dienen om bredere institutionele kaders voor de transformatie van duurzaamheid te bouwen. Deze kaders zouden zich kunnen richten op het potentieel dat in deze “zaden” besloten ligt - dat wil zeggen, op het voeden en versterken van voorbeelden van burgerlijke activiteit, die, hoewel vluchtig en gefragmenteerd, werken aan transformatie in de richting van duurzaamheid.