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Article

Collective Agency in the Making: How Social Innovations in the Food System Practice Democracy beyond Consumption

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Abstract
As the deleterious impacts of conventional food systems on areas including public health, environmental sustainability, and farmers' livelihoods are progressively unveiled, citizen-led initiatives have ubiquitously sprouted, collectively building what is now known as the alternative food system. Despite recent academic interest in the role of alternative food initiatives in countering a narrow view of democracy based on market-based purchasing power, little attention has been paid to a specific democratizing feature that allows for collective expression beyond consumption, that of collective agency. This article argues that it is precisely by focusing on collective agency as the driving force for food systems' change that we can recognize the diverse contributions of social innovations to the democratization of food systems. By engaging with the reasonings of consumer sovereignty proponents, building on academic literature on the concept of collective agency, and drawing from empirical work with over a hundred local social innovations of the global North, this article proposes an agency typology that allows for parsing out its different dimensions, highlighting social innovations' key role as agency enablers and agents of change in the democratization of food systems.

Keywords
alternative food systems; collective agency; food democracy; social innovations

Issue
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1. Introduction

As the deleterious impacts of conventional food systems on areas including public health, environmental sustainability, and farmers' livelihoods are progressively unveiled (see, e.g., De Schutter, 2014a; IPES-Food, 2017; Narula, 2013), citizen-led initiatives have ubiquitously sprouted, collectively building what is now known as the alternative food system. Over the past decade, social innovations have been increasingly recognized as a means to regain control of collective issues and lead a kind of development "from below" (Chiffoleau & Prevost, 2012, p. 16). In contrast with a traditional approach to innovation, based on competitive markets and technology, social innovations are directed at meeting human needs in terms of social relations (MacCallum, Moulaert, Hillier, & Vicari Haddock, 2009), contributing to the enhancement of social diversity and heterogeneity in the transition towards more democratic food systems (De Schutter, 2017).

There exists a growing body of literature that engages with the contribution of collective action to the expansion and improvement of democracy through a focus on food democracy/democracies (Hassanein, 2008; Lang, 2007; Moragues-Faus, 2017; Renting, Schermer, & Rossi, 2012). Thus seen, democracy in the food system involves enhancing diversity, heterogeneity, and embeddedness, and redistributing power through the increased proactive engagement of local communities in shaping their own food systems. In contrast with this view, the proponents of consumer sovereignty have historically advocated for a market-based, consumer-centered food sys-

tem where citizens are expected to remain within patterns of passive consumption. "Voting with your wallet/fork" and ethical consumerism in its various strands are presented as people's best, but often only, voice.

Yet it is increasingly recognized that consumption alone, however critical, has a limited capacity to address power differentials or contribute to societal change due to its individual nature (Carlson & Chappell, 2015; Pleyers, 2011b). Instead, it has been argued that expanding food democracy can allow citizens to move from individualized, passive consumption to collective, active citizenship (De Schutter, 2014b), which raises the question of how this transition can occur. While previous works on food democracy have focused on identifying strengths and weaknesses in alternative food initiatives regarding their "democratic characteristics" (Hassanein, 2008, p. 308), I contend the need to further unpack the concept of collective agency by addressing the question of how it is enacted and continuously reproduced by the actors involved. This article illustrates how social innovations, by creating spaces "beyond the market" (cf. Wittman, Dennis, & Pritchard, 2017), provide opportunities for citizens to transition from patterns of passive, individual consumption to evolving, complex forms of collective agency in the alternative food system. Ultimately, these experiences show that the democratization of the food system must involve enabling other means of collective expression and engagement beyond consumption.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews and critiques the approach of consumer sovereignty, contrasting it with the contribution of social innovations to food democracy through collective agency. Sections 3 and 4 respectively present methodology and results of mixed-method fieldwork conducted with members of 104 social innovations of the alternative food system. Section 4 examines the strategies set forth by these initiatives to create contexts where different dimensions of collective agency can be reproduced. I argue that a transition between agency dimensions, which I describe as "agency in motion," can contribute to a more proactive engagement of local communities in shaping their local food systems, and therefore to food democracy. I conclude in Section 5 by resituating the proposed collective agency framework into a critique of consumer-focused food systems and by pointing at further questions about the role of public policy in supporting food democracy.

2. Democracy in the Food System: Beyond Consumer Sovereignty, towards Collective Agency

This section, first, outlines the problematic consequences of consumer sovereignty, as the skeletal principle of conventional food systems (Section 2.1). Second, it contrasts this view with social innovations' contribution to food democracy by providing a framework of collective agency in the context of alternative food systems (Section 2.2).

2.1. Consumer Sovereignty and Democracy in the Food System

Discussions around the concept of consumer sovereignty started during the early exchanges on the role of consumer preferences after World War I and continued during and after World War II. These discussions were directly based on Adam Smith's writings, where the role of consumption was deemed paramount:

> Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production; and the interest of the producer ought to be attended to only so far as it may be necessary for promoting that of the consumer. The maxim is so perfectly self-evident that it would be absurd to attempt to prove it. (Smith, 1776/2009, p. 390)

The notion of consumer sovereignty, as such, was introduced by William H. Hutt (1940, p. 66), and some scholars have used it to characterize consumer power as an expression of democratic values. For instance, economist Ludwig von Mises affirmed that "the capitalist society is a democracy in which every penny represents a ballot paper" (von Mises, 1951, p. 443), while, for politician Enoch Powell, "in a free economy, not even the poorest is disfranchised, we are all voting all the time" (Powell, 1969, p. 33).

Consumer sovereignty involves improving effective consumer choice through competition and trade liberalization (Averitt & Lande, 1997), which are in turn the foundational principles in classical economics that paved the way to the industrialization of food systems. Consumer sovereignty materialized, first, in the mercantile-industrial food regime through a "cheap food" policy and a food-as-a-commodity approach that created the modern, manufactured diet (Friedmann, 2005a). More recently, through global sourcing of foods (McMichael, 2009, p. 150), the corporate food regime is also representative of consumer sovereignty in that it privileges consumer demands, however unsustainable, thereby furthering the divide between rich and poor eaters (Friedmann, 2005b, p. 228). As a result, consumer sovereignty has led to a kind of structural violence (cf. Galtung, 1969) in which privileged populations have profited from increased information access, expanded choices, and better quality and healthier foods, while disenfranchised communities, subjugated to enduring gender, race, and class disparities, remained imprisoned in a reality of poor information access, limited choices, and lower quality, frequently unhealthy foods. While consumer sovereignty promotes the idea that consumers can "vote" for more sustainable or healthy food systems by, for instance, buying organic foods, it is now acknowledged that this choice does nothing to alter power differentials that characterize conventional food systems or to improve the food environment of communities with limited income (Carlson & Chappell, 2015, p. 6).

In that consumer sovereignty overlooks a number of systemic factors that affect consumers' decisions, I argue

that it does not expand but instead constrains democracy in the food system. It underplays how class, location, and culture-based imbalances in information access can influence the preferences of consumers, making some "votes" freer than others. In fact, socio-economic conditions determine key factors in consumer choice, including taste (Bourdieu, 1979), the perceived versus actual distance to food (Caspi, Kawachi, Subramanian, Adamkiewicz, & Sorensen, 2012), and the economic affordability of just and healthy food (PolicyLink & The Food Trust, 2013; Treuhaft & Karpyn, 2010). Through a focus on individual market-based choice, consumer sovereignty curtails the possibility for more complex forms of engagement in the food system, beyond individual, passive consumption. Instead, I wish to argue here that social innovations of the alternative food system create spaces and practices "beyond the market" (cf. Wittman et al., 2017) where more voices can be heard through people's collective agency, and not through the limiting criterion of one's purchasing power. If we are to move towards more democratic food systems, we must first recognize, and then support and bolster, the diversity and heterogeneity of engagement opportunities that social innovations provide.

2.2. The Role of Social Innovations in Democratizing Food Systems

Socially-innovative, citizen-led local initiatives have proliferated in recent years, building alternatives to the conventional food system (Renting et al., 2012; Whatmore, Stassart, & Renting, 2003). Their members display varying dimensions of agency by integrating new ways of expressing oneself beyond consumption and redistributing power in the food system through its re-localization (Pleyers, 2011a). The fact that a community organization is grassroots or "bottom-up" does not mean that it is inherently democratic (Born & Purcell, 2006; Drake, 2014; Joseph, 2002). However, I argue here that, collectively, these new voices push beyond the limitations of a model based on consumer sovereignty, towards one based on collective agency, where one's relation to food is not determined by one's purchasing power nor reduced to mere consumption. While only a few can "vote with their wallet," social innovations can allow many to collectively act in the food system, effectively contributing to the democratization of food systems.

In the last decade there has been an increased interest in unpacking the meanings of democracy in the food system. First, food democracy was defined in opposition to "food control," in the form of an "inclusive approach to food policy" where genuine debates between opposing opinions are held (Lang & Heasman, 2004, p. 279) and as a "method for participation," where all members have knowledge and opportunities to shape their food system (Hassanein, 2003, p. 83). Later on, it was defined "in opposition to the corporatization of the organics' movement" (Johnston, Biro, & Mackendrick, 2009, p. 510). Other authors have continued to frame the debate of food democracy in terms of "localism" (Brecher, Costello, & Smith, 2000; Lappé & Lappé, 2002; Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007), while others frame it as "the problem of commodity fetishism or, put differently, *a lack of transparency* in the food system that obscures how relations of production are socially produced rather than naturally given" (Johnston et al., 2009, p. 511, emphasis added).

To these definitions, this article adds the ability for social innovations to create contexts where collective agency can be exercised and reproduced, and where acting collectively, and not individuals' purchasing power, becomes central to the expansion of democracy in the food system. Connected to collective action (Hassanein, 2008) and a capacity to act politically in the food system (Moragues-Faus, 2017), I contend that food democracy is more related to a collective action-based democracy than to a market-based democracy, making collective agency a key feature of social innovations' democratizing efforts in the food system.

Human agency is used in a variety of disciplines to refer to concepts as disparate as action, motivation, personhood, intentionality, or resistance. Modern sociology first explored agency within the historical structure-agency debate (Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1979) through "seek[ing] to explain relationship(s) that obtain between human action, on the one hand, and some global entity which we may call 'the system,' on the other" (Ortner, 1984, p. 148). Despite the richness of the debate, a number of authors pointed at the problematic blind spots to which the lack of autonomy between the two concepts led (Archer, 1988, p. 80), eventually questioning their ability to explain resistance and social change (see, e.g., Ahearn, 2001; Sewell, 1992) and the very interest of the debate itself (Wallerstein, 2004, p. 317). Sociologists and social theorists in the late 1990s and early 2000s explored paths beyond the collapse of human intentionality (agency) and the historical process (structure) into one another, some calling for the transcendence of the opposition (Fuchs, 2001; Sztompka, 1994), others proposing we overcome the dichotomy by looking closely at language and the linguistic form (Ahearn, 2001; Leipold & Winkel, 2017).

Importantly for this study, typologies or dimensions of agency could be more explanatory than its mere relationship to structure, "to account for variability and change in actors' capacities" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 968). Alkire (2005, p. 226), for instance, notes that "agency is exercised with respect to distinct dimensions and indeed it is precisely the dimension-specific agency levels that may be of interest." While authors have distinguished different types of agency (Ortner, 2001, p. 79) and used temporal understandings (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) to capture these distinct dimensions, they missed what Moulaert and colleagues explain is needed to analyze agency: factors such as "practical consciousness," drivers of individual agency including efforts to promote

new values and interests, organizational agency (capacities and goals), and the role of inter-organizational collaboration (Moulaert, Jessop, & Mehmood, 2016, p. 171).

Recent research has identified that socially-innovative collective agency is simultaneously multi-faceted and iterative (Ling & Dale, 2014) and that it leads to the creation of contexts where collective action can have a potentially transformative impact (Haxeltine, Avelino, et al., 2016). Despite this, little attention has been devoted to unpacking the concept in the context of alternative food systems. Contributing to this literature, I propose we understand collective agency as a relational method that citizen groups put in practice both inwardly (exercising agency within a collective endeavor) and outwardly (stimulating or enabling agency in others). To substantiate this assertion, I draw on what prior literature has identified as enabling organizational features of collective agency while restricting the subject within the bounds of viable empirical exploration. Specifically, I propose an agency typology of four dimensions in order to understand how social innovations enact and continuously reproduce it in the food system: consciousness, individual voluntary action (IVA), cooperative agency, and agency feedback loop.

"Consciousness" is based on Moulaert et al. (2016) and Giddens's concept of "practical consciousness," the second of the three stages of consciousness (Giddens, 1986, p. 41), also known as "tacit knowledge" (Lippuner & Werlen, 2009, p. 39), which refers to the "reflexive monitoring of conduct by human agents" (Giddens, 1986, p. 44). In the context of alternative food systems, it is also generally referred to as a first step in active engagement (De Bouver, 2011, p. 172). "Consciousness" refers here to the internalization of the need to act, to transform oneself in conjunction with others. Because this transformation is ongoing, consciousness in this study was present and continuously enhanced as individuals transitioned from one agency dimension to another.

"IVA" was designed to refer to the "drivers of individual agency includ[ing]…efforts to promote new identities, values, and interests" (Moulaert et al., 2016, p. 171), capturing the idea of an individual who voluntarily participates in a collective project but does so as a passive participant. This characteristic is based on idea that there can be active participation, as detailed in research on food activism (Crossan, Cumbers, McMaster, & Shaw, 2016; Seyfang, 2006), but also passive participation, defined by research on political action in social media as "engaging in a platform while being subject to processes of decision that happen outside of one's control" (Casemajor, Delfin, Goerzen, & Delfanti, 2015, p. 856). IVA refers to a passive engagement within a collective endeavor, typically without a leading role.

Bandura developed measures of collective agency, namely agency that pertains to outcomes "achievable only through interdependent efforts," pointing out that perceived collective efficacy is not simply the sum of the efficacy beliefs of individual members (Bandura, 2000, pp. 76–77). Taking this into account, the dimension "cooperative agency" was framed to simultaneously capture "organizational agency, that is, organizational capacities and goals" (Moulaert et al., 2016, p. 171) and notions of active participation detailed above, where actors take on and lead specific initiatives or projects and make their active involvement a key part of their lives.

Lastly, the dimension "agency feedback loop" was designed to capture Kirchberg's combination of Giddens' and Bourdieu's models into an "agency-structure feedback loop" where individuals reevaluate their positions or routines and improve their situation or structure (Kirchberg, 2007, p. 120). This feedback loop is considered "the prerequisite for strategies of social transformation towards sustainability" (Kagan, 2011, p. 119). In this dimension, as an enabling organizational feature, actors collectively exercise agency to further create new capacities for action, helping others create their own initiatives and eventually enable other dimensions themselves, as a feedback loop.

3. Methodology

The above typology was applied to design a questionnaire-interview implemented in 104 mixed-method interviews that lasted between one and three hours and were conducted with an equal number of social innovations of the global North between 2015 and 2017. My goal in this study was to understand the perceptions and interpretations of each agency dimension by members of social innovations of the food system, the means and messages used to attempt to enable or stimulate each dimension, and the challenges encountered in terms of perceived effectiveness. In so doing, however, my goal was *not* to empirically verify a change in individual or collective behaviors or a change at the societal level as a result of particular messages or mechanisms, as this would have necessitated both the use of psychological methods and a temporal (before and after) assessment of the effectiveness of the said strategies. Instead, the contribution of this article lies in exposing the organizational strategies that social innovations use to create a context where collective agency can be enabled and, critically, where a transition between dimensions can be made possible—a phenomenon I termed "agency in motion" (explained in Section 4).

Interviewed social innovations were located in six regions of the developed Northern hemisphere to be able to compare them easily under similar historical, socioeconomic, and political realities (see Table 1). These regions were chosen due to the high concentration of socially innovative initiatives, my previous personal connection with them, and the absence of language barriers to access these sites.

To determine the sample size, I followed the approach of mixed-method studies, balancing qualitative considerations (favoring small samples) with quantitative considerations (favoring larger samples; González

Table 1. Interviewed initiatives by location (n = 104).

Belgium		Germany		Italy		Japan		Spain		United States	
Brussels (region)	13	North Rhine-Westphalia	11	Lombardy	16	Tokyo (region)	12	Madrid (region)	17	San Francisco Bay Area, California	20
Wallonia	2	Hessen	3	Emilia-Romagna	1	Chiba	3				
		Rhineland-Palatinate	2			Kanagawa	2				
		Saarland	2								

Castro, Kellison, Boyd, & Kopak, 2010, p. 343). While in purely qualitative studies a practice is to "reach data saturation," criteria for defining "saturation" are often intuitive and inexact and promote smaller sample sizes, which may be antithetical from a quantitative perspective (González Castro et al., 2010, p. 343). By setting the number of initiatives sampled at between 15–20 per country from the outset, I avoided the perils of *p*-hacking or "optional stopping," in which researchers select subjects until they obtain significant results and then stop collecting data (Lindsay, 2015, p. 1828). To reach that approximate number, I combined a purposeful sampling strategy to initially select a small number of sites in each country (characteristic of qualitative research), and then followed it by probabilistic sampling involving randomly choosing initiatives (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 111; Yoshikawa, Weisner, Kalil, & Way, 2008, p. 349) but always based on the following criteria:

- They are collective, citizen-led initiatives: Although government-led initiatives were excluded from this study, hybrid initiatives (e.g., citizen-led but government-funded) were selected if the degree of freedom of citizens vis-à-vis the government was sufficient, measured by the degree of intervention/guidance of the government after funding was provided;
- They are local initiatives: Their field of action was relatively small, regional at most. While country-wide organizations were definitionally excluded, some initiatives were local chapters of a nation-wide umbrella organization, and some selected organizations also developed programs outside of their geographic scope (e.g., local chapters of international organizations with solidarity programs with the Global South). This did not pose problems because interviews were explicitly limited to actions within the local, immediate areas;
- They are food system actors: Initiatives were not required to solely focus on food and agriculture (this could be one of their many fields of action), but it had to be at least *equal* or *superior* to their other goals—if food and agriculture was only a minor part of the initiative, they were excluded, and if they had other branches (e.g., climate, energy, waste), then during the interview it was clarified that answers should be restricted to their work within the food system;
- They share a vision of sustainability: While the definition of sustainability can be controversial, interviewees shared a vision of contributing to a more sustainable future, in social, economic, or environmental terms.

Interviewed organizations were further limited to the following five broad categories (defined in Table 2), said to represent an important part of food activism today in the global North (see Alkon & Guthman, 2017), the geographic scope of this article. The large number of initiatives interviewed inevitably led to a high variability of organizational foci as well as policy and political contexts. However, a detailed account of these variations (part of structure, as opposed to agency) lies outside the scope of this article.

Social innovations were initially contacted with an explanation of the practical relevance of the research project for their daily actions, and interviews were scheduled to match moments where several interested initiative members (frequently formal or informal spokespeople) would be present. Before, during, and after interviews I was also invited to participate and observe in meetings and/or activities of the organization, which allowed me to collect additional data on members' interactions and different perceptions (conceptions) of agency.

In addition, the agency framework was presented to actors as a way to think about their daily work and activities, and a dialogue was established about its usefulness and interest. Many reported that conceiving of their work in terms of the stimulation of the agency dimensions was helpful, sharing their thoughts about how their initiative developed (or not) activities to instill each dimension. However, aware of the tendency to provide social desirable answers and to avoid dispositional mood states and tendencies on the part of interviewees to acquiesce or respond in a lenient, moderate, or extreme manner, I obtained predictor and criteria measures from different sources (Podsakoff, Mackenzie, & Podsakoff, 2011, p. 548). I randomly selected some initiatives to have an in-depth conversation with about the agency typology, whereas with others I was not so ex-

Table 2. Interviewed initiatives (n = 104).

Category	Definition
Community garden projects (16)	Established organization or informal group of citizens who coordinate a plot of land within an urban environment in which food is grown for personal or collective use.
Farmers' associations (13)	Associations of farmers or food processors, in the form of a network, platform, or cooperative or an ad hoc farmers' market.
Producer-Consumer Partnerships (PCPs) (26)	PCPs include consumer groups, Community Supported Agriculture groups (CSAs), online food distribution portals, food cooperatives, and second-level CSAs (food cooperatives focused on distribution).
Transition towns (10)	Local chapters part of the Transition Town Network, founded by Rob Hopkins in 2006.
Slow Food convivia (8)	Local chapters part of Slow Food International, founded by Carlo Petrini in the 1980s.
Community organizations (31)	Formal organizations or informal citizen groups formed to solve an issue of importance for its constituency, such as food banks, consumers' rights organizations, and advocacy organizations involved in the food system.

plicit. This allowed me to see whether the typology was truly applicable, making it more difficult (although not impossible) to have socially desirable answers.

Data from interviews were analyzed following a triangulation method (cf. Hesse-Biber, 2010) of: (1) qualitative data, including discursive data and data regarding activities of selected initiatives resulting from open-ended questions, qualitative comments provided to closed-ended questions, and additional data collected through participant observation; and (2) aggregated quantitative data from closed-ended questions (using a Likert scale). This combination of quantitative and qualitative data allowed me to develop a more nuanced understanding of actors' lived experiences than a purely quantitative study would have, while at the same time allowing for comparison across regions, a more difficult endeavor when using only qualitative data. To maximize the likelihood that the questionnaire and interview data aligned, I ensured interview prompts and questionnaire items were highly similar across initiatives, but, because this alignment comes at the cost of losing the richness of mixed methods, during interviews I accounted for differences in organizational types and adapted the questions accordingly (Harris & Brown, 2010, pp. 11–12).

While, in a coordinated design, methods are 'mixed' at the end when drawing conclusions, this research followed an "integrated design," where points of interaction between the different evaluation methods were planned throughout the duration of the study, and so results are less a report of findings from each method, and more a synthesis of all study data (Greene, Benjamin, & Goodyear, 2001, p. 31). Qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis techniques with a directed approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) with the help of the software package Atlas.ti, and quantitative data using Excel and STATA. Through clustering analysis, particularly useful for identifying patterns in complex data (Macia, 2015), in the following section I highlight the strategies perceived as most effective and reported by actors of initiatives particularly invested in enabling each dimension.

4. Collective "Agency in Motion": Working towards Democracy in the Food System

This section discusses the relevance of four dimensions of collective agency for the interviewed members of 104 social innovations. It shows that enabling collective agency means enabling a transition between agency dimensions—I call this "agency in motion." I draw on the strategies described by these actors ("strategies" understood as organizational mechanisms put in place by social innovations to create a context where collective agency can be enabled and reproduced) to illustrate how social innovations enable this transition between dimensions (see Figure 1, explained throughout the section). I argue that collective agency, when enabled in motion, constitutes an important feature of food democracy in that, contrary to consumer sovereignty, it allows for a proactive, continuously evolving engagement of local communities in shaping their own food systems.

4.1. Consciousness

Stimulating consciousness was a goal shared across a variety of initiatives and was related to two aspects: improving information about nutrition, environmental protection, farming practices, and new forms of producer-consumer relations, and increasing control in everyday food-related decisions (e.g., what to eat, where to eat, when to eat, how much to spend on food). The founder of a Japanese community garden and educational organization explained what enabling consciousness in others

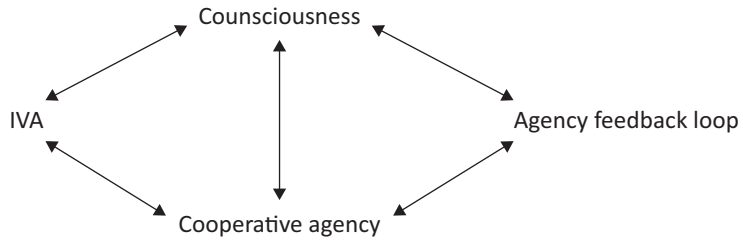

Figure 1. Relationship between agency dimensions.

means, in their view:

> People don't produce food, nature produces food, and we just help that process. That awareness is a revolution….We're helping people build that awareness. I'm trying to get people out of this role of consumers, which is very disempowering.

As I show in the following subsections, consciousness is a distinct agency dimension because, while it can be the beginning of a person's involvement in an initiative, it is in constant evolution and can in fact be acquired *after* joining a collective endeavor.

Aside from education and awareness-raising community initiatives (30 of the 104 interviewed initiatives), consciousness was emphasized as a goal by Slow Food convivia (8), farmers' markets with specifically education as a goal (5), and "healthy-food" PCPs (12). The last group is characterized by low levels of political engagement and a high interest in healthy, local food, where discussions often revolved around individual health and nutrition, as opposed to collective aspects of food (which I refer to as "solidarity" PCPs). Transition initiatives and farmers' associations, on the other hand, reported a lesser interest in stimulating consciousness (3 and 2, respectively).

For members of interviewed Slow Food convivia, while consciousness was crucial for individual behavioral change, it was framed as consumer education regarding purchasing options, which may be at odds with a collective agency approach to food democracy: "Our vision is the sustainability of the food system…where consumers are aware, they become co-producers, and they vote with what they consume." This focus on "voting with your fork" ties one's ability to act to one's purchasing power, de facto negating the agency of those without the economic means to "vote." While consumer education for an "informed voting" is done through events and gatherings, it is this self-appointed role of impartial judge that allowed Slow Food to not take positions, as a convivium member suggested: "I don't think Slow Food takes a stance regarding many issues because there is a lot of gray area." Despite its effort to bring varied audiences together to discuss, critics have pointed at the problematic results of their gatherings in terms of equity, including for being insensitive to food justice claims such as farmers' debt and food affordability (Greenaway, 2012) and for implicitly situating European culture and tradition as a superior lifestyle and benchmark (Gaytán, 2004). Although some are free, not only can events be expensive (sometimes costing up to $200), but convivia can additionally set their own annual membership fees, ranging from $30 for its youth network to $250 for donors. While Slow Food's ability to create a wide range of options for participation was observed in the present study, the emphasis of the organization on consumer, market-based solutions and its inattention to questions of equity meant its approach to food democracy was more related to consumer sovereignty than to the collective agency perspective proposed here.

A different approach to consciousness was highlighted by members of other initiatives that either developed broader messages to discuss food-related issues with their participants (including environmental matters, climate change, and development), or tied food and agriculture to broader issues such as solidarity, gender equality, and capitalism. On one hand, some initiatives reported that instilling curiosity in an audience with related but separate interests (e.g., climate change) can be a first step to convey a message about current food system challenges. On the other hand, tying food and agriculture to wider social or political issues can also provide an opportunity to put ideas in practice, for instance by connecting urban gardening with values such as sustainability and diversity.

In order to convey consciousness in an effective way, community-based and farmers' organizations expressed the need to build relationships with local communities, as expressed by a U.S. community organization:

> If you knock on people's doors and talk to them you'll also build relationships and you'll get to know what's motivating people, if they have a family, or they're sick, or whatever, building that relationship is what's going to allow you to figure out what's motivating them and where are they going to connect to the work that you're trying to do.

Although several initiatives reported using a strategy of "meeting people where they are at" in order to build those relationships, a U.S. farmers' organization described the disconnect between universal awareness discourses and the reality of low-income communities:

> If you have people living in concentrations of poverty, where there is police brutality, they can't find housing, if someone is facing an eviction, trying to connect to a

> farm-to-table program is probably not the highest priority…if people are getting shot by police, they probably don't care about having whole foods in their diet.

To address this problem, initiatives reported the need to create an environment where participants can be where they are in terms of consciousness, authentically engaging with them, which in turn involves entering into a dialogue where both parties can change as a result of the interaction.

More informed participation is always good for democracy, even in a consumer sovereignty model. But these experiences show that the foundations for a greater democratic system, beyond ethical consumerism, lie in enabling consciousness through practice in and empathic discussions about values that go beyond food itself, such as community, poverty, or personal relationships. This, however, raises questions regarding how to ensure a transition from practical consciousness to engaged action.

4.2. Individual Voluntary Action

A Berkeley-based agricultural project illustrated this transition as follows:

> People come here because they see something good that is aligned with their values, that there are activities that they are drawn to and that they can participate in…but they're not necessarily seeing this as part of a personal agenda to transform the food system.

Enabling IVA means providing opportunities for individuals who wish to turn consciousness into actions for a specific project, promoting involvement through volunteering or attending events. Certain types of PCPs (5) with coexisting agency dimensions (such as CSA networks, which can include both highly engaged participants and casual volunteers), Slow Food convivia (8), community gardens (13), and Transition towns (6) emphasized the importance of welcoming people without prior awareness about issues that those initiatives consider important. For example, while in small consumer groups it is easier to actively engage in organizational activities (e.g., farming, book-keeping, or helping with deliveries), larger networks tend to include passive consumers whose participation is limited to paying a subscription fee and to picking up their food basket.

Similarly, community gardens and Transition initiatives may allow for this kind of passive participation through certain activities that do not require high levels of engagement. In fact, it may be critical for the survival of some of these groups to allow for and indeed encourage both low and high levels of engagement and seek heterogeneity in order to create a "wide door" for participation where anybody can become an actor at their own pace. This, in turn, can help initiatives to survive through participants' evolving motivations, life changes, and asymmetric time commitments.

This "wide door" was also considered by PCPs and community gardens as an asset in avoiding homophily, or the tendency to join groups with similar characteristics to their own (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). Political discourses, in this sense, were perceived as both an obstacle and an opportunity. On the one hand, a political stance on capitalism or food sovereignty was reported to be potentially alienating for those without (or with different) political interests: "We know our discourse is not for everyone from the moment we start talking about anti-capitalism," as a member of a Madrid-wide platform put it. On the other hand, Transition towns reported that providing a simultaneously intrinsically motivated and enjoyable way of participating allowed them to remain politically neutral and thereby attract more diverse groups of participants. As a member of a Japanese Transition initiative expressed: "Instead of saying 'let's save society,' we just try to say, 'try growing some rice, it's fun."'

However, it was also understood by some initiatives that using individual discourses, such as health, as a main motivator can stand contrary to the interests of the broader alternative food movement (see Moragues-Faus, 2017), and may run up against concerns of equity and privilege (Guthman, 2008; Guthman, Morris, & Allen, 2006). As a Spanish CSA member asserted:

> For people who have two jobs and four kids and who can buy 3€ chicken nuggets, paying 50€ for a box of veggies that are dirty and full of slugs is not something they want or a high priority for them.

Although this issue remains unresolved, interviewees reported different solutions to the question of how to seek heterogeneity in a more equitable way. These included providing mechanisms so that economic and class status do not become structural, economic barriers to participation; providing realistic expectations about the actual impact of the initiative so that motivations can be sustained over time; developing mechanisms to encourage ownership over the project; and managing varying and evolving motivations throughout participants' lives.

These strategies therefore point at further ways to enact "egalitarian food democracies," that is, developing new ways of being in common by bridging the gap between individual and collective action (Moragues-Faus, 2017, p. 457). Purposefully creating "wide doors" for participation can in turn lead to increased diversity within and across initiatives, an important ingredient of a more democratic food system, by creating spaces for more inclusive practices and attitudes in terms of the political and economic profile of current and prospective participants.

4.3. Cooperative Agency

Recent research has shown that social innovations may first attract members through flexible requests, then

stimulate active participation through building connections with others (Haxeltine, Jørgensen, et al., 2016, p. 15). IVA provides an important steppingstone towards higher levels of engagement such as cooperative agency, as part of the "agency in motion" approach argued here, and this transition was described as a critical step in the ability of initiatives to effect systemic change. Four types of initiatives emphasized cooperative agency: "solidarity" PCPs (such as community-supported agriculture groups) and food cooperatives (17) where members share and often rotate responsibilities, thus acquiring new skills and transferring knowledge to participants exercising other agency dimensions; Transition towns (9), which are often a breeding ground for new initiatives to sprout due to their innovative methodologies, as well as for particularly active individuals who tend to concentrate in these areas and work together; community organizations interested in broader community participation processes (8); and initiatives involved in broader networks (12), a category cross-cutting community organizations, PCPs, and community gardens.

Actors in this study reported that enabling a transition from IVA to cooperative agency requires the development of spaces where conversations about individual *versus* collective choices and coherence in areas beyond food can be held, so that senses of powerlessness can be addressed, as a member of a community garden expressed: "It's very beautiful to see coherence as communicative channels: If you start with food, why not be coherent in energy, in finance, etc.?"

However, there exist barriers at the individual level that inhibit the capacity for a participant who is already engaged in an initiative to think they can influence or change the system through their own behavior, which may in turn lead to apathy and disengagement. Although this question involves psychological and behavioral factors that lie beyond the scope of this article, initiatives used a number of strategies to engage with this issue. Strategies included developing personal relationships with and among participants, designing activities for an active involvement, engaging participants on an individual level, and acknowledging and managing conflict as a natural part of the life of a group.

Although the direction of motion that was most common was from IVA to cooperative agency, it is also possible to transition directly (without going through IVA) from consciousness to cooperative agency. This is particularly true when it comes to individuals who have developed a strong, internalized awareness of the need to act (consciousness), but instead of joining an initiative as a spectator, without a leading role (IVA), they join others to co-develop a project in which to collectively put consciousness in practice (cooperative agency). A member of a Spanish agricultural project explained:

> Maybe at that time, at least myself, I felt like I took part in debates and conferences, and I read a lot, but I needed a project to put all the theory into practice, a practice with a global ideology but working on something as everyday-like as food, health, the way in which we are a part of what surrounds us, things like that, and we came up with this collective project.

In this line, fostering a sense of collective identity through a shared endeavor, either in a new or an already established initiative, is an important ingredient for enabling a transition towards cooperative agency. If a more democratic food system is characterized by an increased diversity in the modes of engagement ("beyond the market") that are allowed for by social innovations, then these experiences are contributing to a more heterogeneous, democratic food system by enabling cooperative agency, as part of the *agency in motion* approach argued here.

4.4. Agency Feedback Loop

Lastly, agency feedback loop was designed to capture the collective exercise of agency in order to further create new capacities for action, as a feedback loop. These initiatives practice change from below, spreading through emulation or swarming (Pleyers, 2011b), exemplifying what Ling and Dale described as "the capacity to stimulate novel network formations and social innovation" (2014, p. 17). A Belgian community organization believes that supporting other groups can in fact be key for the transition towards more sustainable food systems because of the multiplying effect it can have:

> We started from the evidence that people like food-buying groups and that it's a good thing. From there, we support the creation of those initiatives, but it's just a means, part of the transition, and we see that people who belong to food-buying groups do other stuff and participate in other things, talk about it with their neighbors and inspire other people.

Initiatives operating within this dimension were farmers' associations (3) and community organizations (7) aimed at providing skills or training and at creating networks, and community gardens with a focus on job creation (3). Initiatives that had an advocacy, knowledge dissemination or job creation component, and those that were constituted as a network or a platform were most likely to strive to enable a context for agency feedback loop. For instance, some initiatives targeting specific subsets of the population (farmers of color, low-income youth, or migrant communities) provided economic opportunities for their participants to start their own projects, aimed at enabling other agency dimensions themselves. Similarly, providing training and visibility, stimulating collaborations, and providing logistics or information support were strategies reported by farmers' associations and community organizations to enable agency feedback loop as part of their swarming strategies. For instance, an Italian CSA network reported that, after their creation,

"twenty farms switched to organic, rebuilding some sectors such as bread, which now has the greatest number of farmers and GAS [CSAs] that have joined the food group." Lastly, organizations set up as a network provided support as a platform, forum, or meeting space for initiatives in an area, identifying and relieving member organizations of tasks that could be delegated, and offering a model to help other groups establish their own version of the initiative.

The democratizing influence of enabling agency feedback loop can therefore be seen in the proliferation of new modes of engagement in the food system through the creation of new projects, supporting other initiatives, providing economic opportunities and training, and stimulating collaborations through networks and platforms. Understood this way, agency feedback loop allows for the expansion of food democracy by generating novel forms of collective autonomy and mutual reliance within the food system, thereby allowing more individuals and groups to have a voice regarding the shape of the food system.

5. Conclusion

While the conventional food system, through its consumer sovereignty logic, reduces agency to individual purchasing choices at supermarkets, social innovations recreate and allow for other means of expression, much richer and more complex than purchasing power. If we accept that democracy in the food system must mean more than just choosing what to buy at the supermarket, and that social innovations provide critical ways for collective expression and engagement beyond consumption, then identifying how collective agency is enacted and reproduced by these groups may be critical for furthering our understanding of food democracy as a meaningful signifier.

In this article, I have suggested there are four dimensions of collective agency that social innovations enable (consciousness, IVA, cooperative agency, and agency feedback loop). Substantiating these four dimensions through empirical evidence, I have illustrated the non-linearity of human agency: Participating in a collective endeavor does not follow a pre-charted, linear path. In this sense, this article has shown how social innovations enable a transition from one dimension to another, a phenomenon I termed and illustrated as *agency in motion*. As illustrated in Figure 1, this transition was observed between consciousness and all the other dimensions, between IVA and collective agency, and between collective agency and agency feedback loop. The transition did not necessarily have a strict direction, but the continuous motion that social innovations enabled was a key feature in the strategies examined.

Importantly, this phenomenon of *agency in motion* allows for evolving modes of engagement, reflecting the changing nature of agency throughout the life of a group or an individual. Allowing for and encouraging an *agency in motion* may in fact be critical to the survival of many of these groups. It gives them the flexibility they require to sustain participants' motivations over time and allows them to preemptively account for the varying levels of commitment, (a-)political aspirations, and the economic capacity of their members. This, in turn, can be key for building a more equitable, diverse, and heterogeneous food system truly worthy of being called democratic.

Furthermore, although from the outside, these groups may be seen as distinct categories of food initiatives (e.g., PCPs or community gardens), when looking at them from a collective agency perspective the result can better reflect their needs in terms of policy support. For example, initiatives aimed at enabling IVA may have more in common among themselves, in terms of policy needs, than, for instance, community garden projects, due to their divergent goals. While some members of community gardens use gardening as a teaching experience or a hobby, others may use it to create economic opportunities for disadvantaged communities. Looking at these initiatives from an agency perspective allows for these differing practices to surface, practices that can in turn be publicly supported. When adopting an agency lens for policy, supporting the efforts of social innovations to seek heterogeneity in a more equitable way, through the strategies illustrated in this article, suddenly becomes possible; the capacity of these groups to provide knowledge and opportunities for citizens to change the ways they consume but also relate to food more generally, can then be bolstered. In this way, government institutions can engage in innovative policy-making to reinforce the agency-enabling efforts of these groups, and therefore to support food democracy.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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