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Reskilling for sustainability: A perspective from comparative ethnography on collective food procurement

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We complete this thematic issue's contribution on skill, food, and sustainability with a team report based on ethnographic research which focuses on reskilling for sustainability in multiple European locations and involving diverse social actors and stakeholders. The *Food Citizens?* project (2017-2024) is a comparative ethnographic analysis of collective food procurement networks and phenomena in European cities. Three Ph.D. candidates, two post docs, and one principal investigator – all trained as anthropologists - have worked on it in various phases and roles – from developing the project framework and conducting fieldwork to designing the project's i-doc (www.foodcitizens.eu). The project's principal investigator (Cristina Grasseni) has co-edited this *kritisk etnografi* thematic issue 'Is Europe skilling for sustainable food?', and one team member (Maria Vasile) is among the article authors. Team research had four foci of analysis – diversity, solidarity, skill and scale – and sought to explore them ethnographically, in the cities of Gdańsk (Poland), Rotterdam (the Netherlands) and Turin (Italy) in particular. Each of the team members brought ethnographic experience to the research process, including previous and ongoing research on solidarity economies, alternative food networks, and food heritage in European regions such as Croatia, Catalonia and northern Italy.

Skill was one of the main research foci, asking which societal formations emerge or become visible around food provisioning (particularly at the level of urban foraging, short food chains and local food governance), and what roles skill and enskilment play in them. For the purposes of the project, skill was explored as the acquisition, transmission and performance of relevant expertise – as well as its absence or loss – not only in growing food, but also in managing food chains, setting governance agendas and collaborating within and across food networks. Skills were analysed as something that developed in relation to context-specific cultural, political and economic phenomena and as a means to observe these in terms of their practical unfolding. Operationally, ethnographic investigation was led by specific questions, namely: Which relevant skills do participants in collective food procurement have, and which do they lack? Which skills repertoires do their networks develop, and which expertise do they need for it? Do food procurement networks make

existing or novel relevant expertise (such as homesteading) available in a collective? How? Do collective food procurement networks obviate imperfect intergenerational knowledge transmission of relevant skills? Are existing skills (e.g. from ongoing allotment gardening practices) overlooked or endangered through gentrification? Are (newly acquired) skills considered transformative of the participants' lifestyles, and if so, how? Are skills pertaining to foraging (e.g. growing, sharing, cooking and selling) made relevant to short food chains (e.g. managing, selling and pricing) and governance (e.g. liaising, planning and negotiating)? How? In sum: how do members of contemporary societal formations organised around food provisioning produce, distribute or consume food collectively? Do they have adequate expertise, and how do they acquire it, from which fields (for example growing, sharing, cooking or selling food)? How do they learn and disseminate their expertise?

What follows summarises the most relevant completed and work-in-progress research results and insights that the *Food Citizens?* team can contribute in (partial) response to our project framework questions – and in addition to them. These insights were gained through independent research prior to and during the project, and we wish to profile them here as a collective harvest about reskilling for sustainable food in Europe.

Federico De Musso's ethnographic research builds on participant observation in both fieldwork and film-making in Catalonia and Southern Italy. In his work on Italy's Solidarity Economy Network, for example, he examines a travelling farmers' market initiated by collaborations between orange growers and solidarity purchase groups named GAS (<https://vimeo.com/53209804>). Networking with consumers and fellow farmers required multiple skills, ranging from creating an online infrastructure to managing communication and logistics, to finetuning the political message the market would bring to the different market squares it visited. Farmers had to hone their networking skills to juggle diverse commitments that gravitated around political solidarity-related to the issues of fair labour, environmentally sustainable farming, and fair prices to producers. Fatigue results from these intensive socioecological engagements, which demand multiple skills on multiple fronts. This, in turn, raises questions about how sustainable such efforts to promote sustainable food provisioning really are. Farmers strategically prioritise skills according to the social environment in which they find themselves. Moving from town to town with their travelling market, farmers evaluated how each square responded to their market and implemented different types of skills accordingly. The customers' flow affected how the market day felt to the farmers and how they, in turn, acted. In a "fast" flow, farmers concentrated on quickly teaching customers how to recognise good products to emancipate them from standardised supermarket product aesthetics. If a market square felt "slow," with fewer customers coming through the day, farmers focussed on relational skills to attract customers to the solidarity economy – or to keep the farmers' network together.

In Ola Gracjasz's research in the Polish port city of Gdańsk, food preservation skills such as pickling and fermenting link the present with the past, combining the rediscovery of Polish culinary tradition with urban reskilling (<https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/foodcitizens/news/reflections-from-the-field-poland>). In Poland, practices of food self-production are maintained despite economic growth (Smith et al. 2015). Interestingly, these practices are not connected to a shortage economy nor to a peasant background, but rather are cultivated by the middle classes and working women. For example, in *Ziemiosfera* - an emerging vegan-cum-zero waste shop-and-café in Wrzeszcz, a hip neighbourhood of Gdańsk,

Gracjasz experienced pickling and fermenting workshops as an urban trend connected with health and environmental awareness, self-advancement and possibly rural nostalgia.

Additionally, during her ethnographic research at two food markets in Gdańsk (*Bazar Natury* in *Garnizon* and *Polanki* in *Oliwa* neighbourhood), Gracjasz observed an attempted reskilling of farmers and food producers. *Bazar Natury* is a novel type of food market within the Polish context, offering specifically ‘local’ and ‘organic’ (as well as artisanal and exotic) produce for considerably higher prices, thus catering to more affluent consumers. On the other hand, *Polanki* is a food market with more than 50 years tradition that is undergoing a process of revitalization. These physical and spatial transformations are accompanied by changes in personhood, similar to what Elizabeth Dunn (2004) described in relation to the effects of privatization on factory workers in south-east Poland in the 1990s. Owners of *Bazar Natury*, and the members of *Inicjatywa Miasto (City Initiative)* who are responsible for the revitalization of *Polanki*, instruct farmers and sellers to change the ways in which they present their stands and relate to customers, in order to increase sales and fit the new vision of food markets as friendly, elegant and orderly. Again, like in the example of pickling and fermenting workshops, urban skills are being promoted and combined with some of those traditional to food markets, such as direct contact with farmers and producers.

Principal Investigator Cristina Grasseni’s work with heritage cheese makers in northern Italy and urban gardeners in the Netherlands focusses on (re)skilling and (re)scaling. The issue and politics of scale and skill transpire from the story of an almost forgotten recipe for a mountain cheese called *Strachitunt* made in the summer high pasture of Bergamo by transhumant dairy farmers. For contemporary *Strachitunt* cheese refiners, *Strachitunt* centres on their vision of the local landscape as accommodating unique non-human inhabitants that are crucial to their cheese, such as moulds, grass and cows. A Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) deploys EU legislation on geographical indications to protect the very local economy of *Strachitunt* in the competitive, world-wide market of heritage cheeses. By turning *Strachitunt* into a certifiably local resource, PDO use the market as a way of ensuring the continuity of local cheesemaking skills. Yet while PDO is meant to protect and possibly increase the marketing value of “food heritage”, it is applied without questioning how this repositions cheese in a competitive, potentially global market (Grasseni 2021). Elsewhere, Grasseni elaborates on the interconnection between local communities’ ideal(ised) scale and the skilled vision accompanying it, analysing for example apprenticeship in urban gardening practice as a ‘re-alignment’ of visual perception in the learning environment – with other senses, including technical apparatuses, and with human and non-human others (Grasseni 2022).

Robin Smith’s longitudinal ethnographic research in Istria, Croatia reveals how networks of solidarity among neighbouring winemakers are woven not so much out of hopes for reciprocity, but rather out of the need to keep their community of practice resilient in the face of myriad challenges. Rather than burden themselves with the administrative aspects of formalizing organizations, young farmers skilfully organize informal groups of friends to resolve shared winemaking issues so they may each make ends meet and scale up their businesses in their own, diverse ways – this despite institutional roadblocks and historically rooted reticence to formalizing collective work (Smith and Grasseni 2020; <https://www.leidenanthropologyblog.nl/articles/community-in-economic-kriza>).

In their efforts to muddle through, winemakers have also doubled down in local

solidarity through their individual engagement in traditional, informal favours and helping relationships in their villages that sometimes go back generations. This requires adeptly navigating diverse relationships and interests. Indeed, lightening the load through sharing work and helping neighbours sometimes means helping competitors, reflecting the local value of solidarity, of putting community first (Smith 2023). More broadly, discussions of community values around the economic governance of their territory, especially the farmland upon which their livelihoods depend, and their role in this, have become central in winemakers' minds as new fiscal norms are adopted and their associated compliance regimes intensified. These new regimes have also led to collectively questioning their trust in those governance institutions – their motives, decision-making and behaviour – and what economic agency winemakers have in challenging them (Smith 2020). In the face of major structural changes, what is central to the art of getting by in Istrian winemaking, and crucial to stabilizing the livelihoods of their neighbours, is their skill for informal organizing into solidarity groups to resolve short-term needs with an eye to their collective long-term strength and resiliency.

Maria Vasile's fieldwork on urban gardening and food redistribution in Turin critically contextualizes various initiatives within neoliberal agendas of urban regeneration in this post-industrial and multicultural city, which shares with most growing European cities the issue of gentrification. Appreciating the diverse skills of urban gardeners, designers, and developers of new "community" gardens such as *Orti Generali* helps to bring to the surface the hegemonic power and exclusionary features of aesthetic assumptions about the urban green (Vasile and Grasseni 2022). Vasile also reports on the practices and related skills that are endangered by the regeneration of the urban green and hegemonic narratives of sustainability such as the spontaneous gardening traditions (*orti abusivi*) of old factory workers, who immigrated to Turin at the time of its productive boom, or itinerant shepherds, whose land use becomes reduced, contested and hindered.

Similarly, in participant observation with a diverse range of grassroots associations and non-profit organizations which collect and redistribute food surplus in Turin such as *Food Pride* and *Torino Solidale*, Vasile investigated the challenges and contradictions underlying the process through which volunteers are left in charge of ensuring food security, especially in times of crisis such as during the COVID pandemic wave of 2020 (<https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/foodcitizens/news/torino-from-food-to-demands>). In this context, learning with others new skills to select food surplus, prepare food aid packages and interact with food recipients also sheds light on the high degree of discretion that these new welfare configurations incorporate. Overall, due to the elevated number of non-profit organizations and initiatives encountered in Turin, the researcher also questions the new skills that their workers and volunteers need to develop to fit in the citywide private funding system of social interventions headed by the banking foundation *Compagnia di San Paolo* (Vasile, this issue).

Against the backdrop of neoliberal communitarism emerging across Europe, Vincent Walstra takes GroenGoed's *Vredestuin (Peacegarden)*, near Rotterdam's central station, as one of his ethnographic sites to investigate whether and how urban community gardens challenge dominant norms in Dutch society. The members of these social urban gardens prioritize "dwelling" in a "taskscape" (Ingold 1993) of reciprocal interhuman and human-nature relationships over producing food for economic viability. For them, the garden's value is its capacity to change relationships, including between humans and nature. Moreover, it

is a site that particularly fosters a deeper appreciation for food and provides opportunities for collective learning in the midst of one of the Netherlands' largest cities (Walstra 2022). In these settings, gardeners sow seeds – both literally and symbolically – to move the city toward investing in social and ecological sustainability.

Yet, whereas participants readily abandon capitalist rationality in the garden, in the larger context of city governance officials believe economic viability is the bottom line for funding projects and make decisions based on social entrepreneurship innovation. The urban gardens therefore evoke a discussion about a hierarchy of skill. Learning skills of growing and maintaining a garden depends upon skills of knowing how to apply for subsidies (bureaucratic skills) or to sell herbal tea made from garden plants (marketing skills). In the resulting friction between institutional norms and innovative citizenship participation, a debate emerges in which citizens and government officials reconfigure the norms and systems along which urban gardens and other non-marketable innovations are supposed to be audited in the future (<https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/foodcitizens/news/edible-cities-network>).

The first lesson drawn from this team report is that (re)skilling for sustainable food is labour intensive, both for consumers and for producers. It can lead to fatigue (De Musso) and it is a situated process in which the intensity of commitment and information exchanged and learned varies within a relational and contextual field (Grasseni). Secondly, communication and self-restyling are of paramount importance to this process. In multiple contexts, such as fresh food markets, initiatives against food waste, and urban gardens (Gracjusz, Vasile, Walstra), they can be experienced both as a form of self-enhancement but also as a marketing imposition. Finally, the role of state and local governance is paramount in facilitating, shaping or even impeding this process (Smith, Vasile, Walstra), and it has important implications for the ways in which the practice and discourse of reskilling triangulate with bureaucracy, welfare, and politics. In sum, several lessons can be drawn from this diverse palette of research results, which are in line with this thematic issue's analytical and critical findings characterising the process of (re)skilling for sustainability in Europe - namely prefiguration, conflict and 'sustainability talk'. These seem to be three recurring features of skilling for sustainable food in Europe as a multifaceted phenomenon involving multiple social actors with diverse and sometimes opposing stakes.

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