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Joining the ideational and the material: transforming food systems toward radical food democracy

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This paper presents a conceptualization of radical food democracy (RFD) which links the diverse economies approach of Gibson-Graham with Tully's notion of diverse citizenship. Despite its invaluable contribution to theorizing the role of alternative food networks (AFNs) in transforming unsustainable industrial food systems, the diverse economies scholarship has been criticized for essentializing the autonomy of alternative economic practices—hence risking to confound emancipatory social change with punctuated forms of "local," "quality," "organic certified" products, which nevertheless remain embedded in market-mediated capitalist relations, and displacement and/or deferral of negative impacts. This paper aims to address such critiques, contending that the realization of RFD requires both (1) the experimentation with new economic practices that carve out food economies alternative to the working logic of capital accumulation, and (2) the cultivation of new political subjects capable of universalizing these particular struggles. After situating various existing practices associated with food democracy in a framework of various modes of democratic citizenship, we underpin our understanding of RFD with a theory of change informed by Bob Jessop's strategic-relational approach to social structures, agents' reflexive actions, and their contingency. Following a critical scientific approach to the social role of academics, this theoretical framework is illustrated using a case study from Germany. The empirical work draws on participant observation and semi-structured interviews with leaders of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) cooperatives and Food Policy Council (FPC) networks conducted in Cologne, Berlin, and Frankfurt in 2018–2020. To conclude, this paper argues that the emancipatory potential of food democracy should cultivate both lighthouse alternative economic practices that are connected with people's everyday lives, and political imagination that dares to critically engage with existing institutions. Likewise, RFD praxis requires a constant back and forth between the ideational and the practical, the abstract and the concrete, the actionable and the analytical, to challenge both the symbolic-discursive and the material dimensions of capitalist agri-food systems.

KEYWORDS

radical democracy, food democracy, diverse economies, alternative food networks, strategic-relational approach, citizenship, transformation, agroecology

1 Introduction

Food democracy (FD) has been mobilized, in theory, as a lens for analyzing contemporary food systems and, in practice, as an organizing principle for transforming the dominant industrial agri-food system (Bornemann and Weiland, 2019; Behringer and Feindt, 2023). A variety of practices have been framed within the FD discourse, ranging from individual actions (e.g., ethical consumption, domestic cooking, or kitchen gardens) to collective organizations, like food cooperatives or Food Policy Councils (FPCs) (Bornemann and Weiland, 2019; Leitheiser et al., 2022a).

In line with other articles in this Research Topic, our paper draws attention to the (often made but under-theorized) link between food democracy and diverse economies of food, by also incorporating James Tully's notion of "diverse citizenship" (Tully, 2008a,b) via a theory of social transformation instructed by Bob Jessop's strategic-relational approach (Jessop, 2005, 2007, 2016). We argue that a move toward radical food democracy requires not only the cultivation of alternative economic practices, but also a simultaneous enactment of political imagination to engage with, re-politicize, reform, and transform the institutional frameworks in which those practices operate.

The diverse economies approach was developed by Gibson-Graham (2006) to explore alternative (i.e., post-capitalist) economic action and practice. The aim of this approach is to demonstrate existing possibilities for organizing *community economies* around interdependence (i.e., shared needs) through ethico-political negotiation. Gibson-Graham (2006) articulates this approach as a "politics of language," built on methods such as deconstruction and re-framing, which aim to create conceptual space in which community economies (i.e., negotiated spaces of economic interdependence) can flourish. Research on diverse economies of food has applied this analytical lens to the theorization of the role of alternative food networks (AFNs) in transforming unsustainable industrial food systems. Here, scholars use the diverse economies lens to support an understanding of AFNs as having transformative potential in the face of an industrial global food system dominated by powerful corporations, nation states, and multi-lateral institutions. The starting point of such work is "not simply to tally the number of ethically or ecologically oriented versus profit-oriented food practices," Sarmiento (2017, p. 489) argues, "but rather to be wary of theorizing conventional food systems in a way that obscures their contingency […]." Put differently, scholars aim to demonstrate that the transformative potential of local AFNs is not inherently neutralized by the dominant global system.

Neither, however, do these alternatives necessarily translate into systemic change or even rupture with hegemonic modes of socio-economic organization. Accordingly, scholars have raised concerns about the emancipatory potential of AFNs (Guthman, 2008; Tregear, 2011; Bonanno and Wolf, 2018), and the food democracy discourse more broadly (Tilzey, 2019). Critiques of AFNs resonate with Kelly (2005) argument that the diverse economies approach fails to reckon with the inherent limitations of localized alternatives—namely, that the exertion of instituted political economic power often deprives them of their basis for reproduction. Resistance efforts—ranging from territorial markets to urban gardens, to social movements' championing of peasant agroecology—are seen by some to be futile as they all fail to vanquish corporate domination in food systems (Bonanno and Wolf, 2018). By essentializing the autonomy of alternative economic practices, there is a risk of confounding emancipatory social change with punctuated forms of "local," "quality," "organic certified" products, which nevertheless remain embedded in market competition, displacement of negative impacts (and their deferral in time), and capitalist relations of production. In short, the alter-hegemonic shall not be confused with the counter-hegemonic (Tilzey, 2018, p. 170).

This paper aims to build on strengths of diverse economies while also addressing such critiques. To do so, we advance a conceptualization of food democracy beyond a "language of diversity." Hereafter, we refer to *radical* food democracy (RFD) mainly for two reasons. First, unlike more general qualifiers like "transformative," "true," or "just," RFD eschews notions of positive change toward an inevitably better future (Blythe et al., 2018). In other words, social change is historically cumulative but does not necessarily progress in a linear fashion. Second, in an era described by many scholars as post-democratic (Crouch, 2004; Swyngedouw, 2007), RFD denotes a radicalization of substantive principles of freedom and equality "through a critical engagement with the existing institution" (Mouffe, 2018, p. 25). It thus draws from the political theory tradition of radical democracy, as a horizon of agonistic contestation of institutionalized inequality, hierarchy, and domination. Accordingly, the exercise of RFD orchestrates the counter-hegemonic potential of existing alternatives exhibited in diverse economies of food. The aim is to move toward agri-food systems that exhibit more distributed, "collective and diverse forms of ownership with much greater levels of participation and scrutiny than exist at present" (Cumbers, 2020, p. 61). In this paper, we contend that the realization of RFD requires both (1) the experimentation with new *economic* practices that carve out food economies alternative to the working logic of capital accumulation and market-mediated commodification, and (2) the cultivation of new *political* subjects capable of universalizing these particular struggles to transform wider institutional frameworks (of, e.g., states and international economic law).

This argument also resonates with the second and third forms of fundamental social freedoms identified by Graeber and Wengrow (2021): the freedom to disobey (i.e., the freedom to exert agency), and the freedom to re-imagine and enact new ways of organizing society (i.e., the freedom of structuration).[1] RDF praxis, therefore, asserts the freedom to disobey the economic imperatives of mass retailers, the food industry, the Big Four of the seed oligopoly, outrageously wealthy philanthropists, commodity brokers in Chicago, and other players in the global market economy. Simultaneously, it also claims the freedom to reimagine social relations and experiment with alternative systems of food provisioning. To acquire counter-hegemonic force, however,

1 The first freedom that the authors identify is the freedom to move and roam, which is less relevant for the scope of this paper. The reason for identifying only these as fundamental freedoms, reflect the authors in a footnote, is that "many of what we consider to be quintessential freedoms—such as "freedom of speech" or "the pursuit of happiness"—are not really social freedoms at all. You can be free to say whatever you like, but if nobody cares or listens, it hardly matters" (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021, p. 624). This observation is key to distinguish between formal and substantive freedoms and, as such, it is central to our argument as well.

RFD should operate in a dialectic tension between the ideational and the material, engaging both reformist and revolutionary tactics in a trial-and-error experimentation with new modes of provisioning and new social arrangements (Jessop and Sum, 2016). This entails both the experimentation with new economic practices and forms of ownership, and the cultivation of political subjects in the form of increased participation and scrutiny of institutional frameworks.

In the remainder of the paper, we present a theory of social change based on a collapse of the agent-structure divide, as a context-dependent, strategic, and reflexive agency-within-structure (Jessop, 2005). Here, we also introduce various understandings of democratic citizenship and situate existing practices of food democracy according to Tully (2008a,b) conceptualization of modern and diverse citizenship, and into Forman and co-authors' (2022) retention of this theoretical framework. We find that both Tully and Jessop are complementary in their focus on *freedom* (i.e., the capacity to exert agency), making their work essential to our understanding of RFD. Tully (2008a,b) explicitly focuses on freedom in the face of imperial domination, whereas Jessop more implicitly frames a space for human agency within the recursive and reflexive maintenance (or transformation) of social structures. Furthermore, drawing on Foucault, both theorists extend relationships of governance beyond the legitimated centers of social control (e.g., sovereign states) to any relations where power is exercised in society. This perspective is crucial for an understanding of the various modes of food democracy we will describe below. We draw on these works to address our pre-analytic understanding of the long-standing structure-agency problem—i.e., the discussion about the space for agents to act within, to maintain, or to transform social relations.

Accordingly, in section 4 we argue that RFD praxis should not only work to contest and modify macro-institutional frameworks (i.e., of capitalism), but should also be connected to and rooted in the messy business of building concrete alternatives that satisfy people's everyday material needs (Mouffe, 2022; *cf.* Huron, 2018). This is also consistent with Wright (2010) post-capitalist theory of transformation, which favors a combination of interstitial (i.e., developing alternatives in the cracks of the current system), symbiotic (i.e., strategically using current institutions to support those alternatives), and ruptural/revolutionary strategies (i.e., overthrowing current institutions).

To illustrate our theory of transformation, section 6 draws on an empirical case study of a German network which encompasses Community Supported Agriculture (CSA, *Solidarische Landwirtschaft* in German) cooperatives, an initiative called CSX which aims to build local economies based on the CSA model, and territorial food policy councils (FPCs). Finally, we reflect on existing opportunities for a shift toward radical food democracy, that is, building "better" institutional frameworks based on existing alternative practices.

2 A strategic relational approach to democracy and citizenship

> "There is no critique as powerful as one whose time has come" (Jessop and Sum, 2016, p. 108).

Conceptualizations of citizenship and democracy do not only serve analytical purposes. They are also components of a theoretical toolkit that can be used to problematize and bring alternative governance relationships into being (Mouffe, 1992; Tully, 2008a,b). Such a contribution, we argue, also requires a theory of social transformation—that is, an understanding of how societies evolve, mutate and remodel themselves over time; and what forces, strategies, ideas, or coalitions bring about purposive transformative action. In other words, purposely enacting change requires an explicit pre-analytic conceptualization of what society is in the first place, as well as an explanatory framework of how (and what kind of) social change takes place.

2.1 The strategic relational approach

As a distinct position within critical realism, Bob Jessop's strategic-relational approach (SRA) advances a dialectical method to understand the co-evolutionary coupling (involving mechanisms of variation, selection, and retention) of structure and agency in space and time (Jessop, 2007, Ch. 1). As such, the SRA lays the groundwork for our theory of social transformation. It suggests that due to structures being strategically-selective—i.e., limits on agency are consciously imposed and instituted through social organization, e.g., of the state apparatus—agents are structurally-bounded—i.e., there is limited space within instituted organizations in which freedom can be exercised. And vice versa, since agents are reflexive about their strategies, structure's maintenance (or transformation) is action dependent.

In other words, "change is seen to reside in the relationship between actors and the context in which they find themselves" (Hay and Wincott, 1998, p. 955). Their actions, therefore, are both path-shaping and path-dependent, and unfold differentially according to conjunctural features, such as available resources, collective coordination, technical possibilities, competing interests, or subjugation to external authority. The ways agents reflexively understand themselves in relation to their structural context informs strategies and tactics for action. In Jessop's words, "the SRA is concerned with the relations between structurally-inscribed strategic selectivities and (differentially reflexive) structurally-oriented strategic calculation" (Jessop, 2005, p. 48). Put more simply, the SRA explains social change by focusing on how and why modes of social organization create conditions that constrain or enable different possibilities for people to act—to both exert agency *within* structure, and *over* the structure itself. This is an ever-present relationship, although it plays out over different timeframes in different territorial spaces.

According to Jessop and Sum (2016), it is by exposing the inconsistencies of sedimented social imaginaries that critical turns can "open the space for proliferation (variation) in crisis interpretations, only some of which get selected as the basis for "imagined recoveries" that are translated into economic strategies and policies" (Sum and Jessop, 2013, p. 402). This has both ideational and material significance. The re-politicization of discourse (i.e., the "semiotic" angle in Jessop's and Sum's approach to cultural political economy) throws a wrench into the instituted exercise of power. This creates space for variation which may lead to selection and, eventually, retention of new imaginaries, ideas, narratives, and discursive horizons of action. This is fundamentally a *learning process*, characterized by the development of new social practices which can

partially transform the context in which future strategic action will take place. We contend that it is in this feedback mechanism that civic modes of food provisioning can articulate a reorganization of structural selectivities. Alternative food practices that, at least temporarily, can dodge the demands of market-mediated capital accumulation effectively introduce patterns of incoherence into the reproduction of incumbent food systems.

In short, doing things differently changes the circumstances in which things are considered *different* in the first place; and while not *every*thing can possibly be carried out at any time, *some*thing can be always and iteratively changed.

2.2 Theorizing change in food systems

Section 2.1 has laid the groundwork for a theory of transformation based on Jessop's SRA yet, taking the unsustainability of the current world agri-food system as a starting point, the question remains: what should change? How? And who should carry out the change?

The answer put forward by the diverse economies scholarship is to look at "*what we have here at hand*" to address the "challenges of *now*, of "thinking the world" and enacting change" (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski, 2020, p. 3, *emphasis original*). This approach is reminiscent of prefigurative politics, a recurrent theme also in critical agrarian studies, as "an illustration of action-oriented radical practices that build components of a desired future in the present" (Tornaghi and Dehaene, 2020, p. 595). In the tradition of social anarchism, prefiguration performs a politics of interstitial transformation, to work out alternatives "in the cracks of dominant social structures of power" (Asara and Kallis, 2023, p. 59; *cf.* Wright, 2010).

However, this "will to change" requires, first, a conjunctural understanding of the context in which these practices are envisioned and enacted. Second, it also asks for a tactical vision on how particular instances which question an undesirable, oppressive, or unequal status quo can be universalized (Swyngedouw, 2007); in other words, how alternatives can go from ephemeral or niche, to mainstream. This requires what Mouffe (2000, 2018, 2022, *passim*) calls the articulation of "chains of equivalence," i.e., the construction of an "us," or a coalition built across diverse fragmented democratic struggles. Without meeting these two conditions, prefigurative politics remains at risk of voluntarism.[2]

The danger is not only, borrowing from Gramsci, to glorify the "optimism of the will" at the expense of the "pessimism of the intellect." There is also a risk of failure to appreciate the messy contradictions, cleavages, and disaggregating tendencies affecting "alternative economies," on the one hand, and dominant social structures and groups on the other hand. The latter point aims to avoid the tendency to exaggerate structural coherence that is shared by most Marxist social-scientific analyses (Jessop, 2016, p. 119). Since the reproduction of capitalist social relations does not proceed on autopilot, the reflexive capacity of alternative food networks (e.g., CSA, food policy councils, etc.) should take account of the differential privileging within their context of action. Following the SRA, the strategies, interests, tactical adjustments, and material possibilities emerging from the relational interplay of structurally-oriented agents are dependent upon their specific spatial and temporal horizons of action.

Luxemburg (1899) classic argument that cooperatives operating within a capitalist framework will eventually either evolve into competitive and exploitative tendencies, or dissolve (Bauwens et al., 2019) has been challenged recently (see, e.g., Bretos et al., 2020; Unterrainer et al., 2022). However, the gist of the argument remains: many cooperatives are not (at least entirely) able to evade the influence of capitalist competition on their modes of operating. Indeed, alternative forms of enterprise are not alone a *sufficient* condition for challenging and transcending exploitative relations. Yet we understand these alternatives as *necessary* in the meticulous (but slow) pursuit of a radically alternative institutional framework that is connected to the concrete needs of people's everyday lives (*cf.* Mouffe, 2022). To the extent that workers-owned cooperatives contribute to this struggle for institutional alternatives as part of an ecology of wider relations (Nunes, 2021), Luxemburg's argument applies only provided that the environmental conditions (i.e., "the capitalist framework") remain coherent in the long-term.

Societal change is the exercise of breaking with the habitual patterns reproducing social power configurations "in terms of the changing "art of the possible" over different spatiotemporal horizons of action" (Jessop, 2016, p. 55). In a sense, the cultivation of discontinuity with mnemonic patterns of social behavior goes to the core of the political, as the art of imagining the impossible by changing the conditions of what is conceived as possible in the first place (Swyngedouw, 2007). Practical efforts to build radical food democracy, therefore, should be understood as an act of re-politicization of the evolutionary dynamics shaping incipient food systems.

However, while acknowledging that "the future remains pregnant with a surplus of possibilities" (Jessop, 2005, p. 53), political action should remain cognizant of the strategic-relational constraints exerted by contextual elements. It is here, we argue, that diverse forms of FD practice can converge toward a food provisioning system organized around the contextual satisfaction of equally relevant material needs, in dialogue with the biophysical possibilities of the host ecosystem.

3 Political theoretical approaches to democracy and citizenship

> "The way we define citizenship is intimately linked to the kind of society and political community we want" (Mouffe, 1992, p. 225).

3.1 Modern and civil vs. diverse and civic citizenship

Here, we bring in Tully's distinction between modern/civil and diverse/civic citizenship. While Tully uses these terms interchangeably, we will refer to modern and diverse citizenship to avoid confusion.

2 Voluntarism here refers to the stereotypical view according to which society is solely the product of individual agency (Bhaskar, 1979). "If structuralism is one extreme," writes Spash (2018, p. 142), "then the other is pure voluntarism where actors are able to fully realize their intentions."

Tully challenges us to broaden our understandings of what citizenship is to create more space for agents to practically resist oppressive structures. Accordingly, not only is "another world" possible. Alternatives to imperialist relations can already be found in a multitude of social practices that exist around the globe if one accounts for the varying ways that "[c]itizens participate by 'having a say' and 'negotiating' how power is exercised and who exercises it" (Tully, 1999, p. 169). Understood as such, democratic citizenship incorporates a variety of practices in civil society in which citizens develop their own modes of organization as alternatives to the structurally-inscribed norms and rules of dominant institutions (e.g., the institution of "fair trade" in opposition to free trade; or the organization of cooperative enterprise).

Democratic governance, for Tully, describes any relationship where there is some form of power sharing and consent of the governed (that is, some mode of legitimizing the exercise of power, whether codified or otherwise). In this re-description, Tully aims to go beyond what he refers to as "modern citizenship": a narrowly legal-juridical status of individuals within an institutional framework (e.g., a constitution). He articulates diverse citizenship as a relational activity that is constituted not through a centralized code, but through distributed action carried out in accordance with others. Diverse citizenship is, therefore, not a relationship between state and individual—it is a relationship between a "free citizen of the "free city": that is, any kind of civic world or democratic "sphere" that comes into being and is reciprocally held aloft by the civic freedom of its citizens, from the smallest deme or commune to global federations" (Tully, 2014, p. 272). This includes a variety of organizational forms, spanning from cooperatives to civic associations, from global social fora to place-bound popular resistance to capitalist expansion.

Drawing on Tully (2008a,b) framework of modern and diverse citizenship (see Figure 1), Forman et al. (2022) outline five modes of democratic practice that span across what we frame in Figure 2 as the broader modern-diverse spectrum. Crucially, we understand this as a spectrum and not a normative dichotomy where one is better than the other. We draw inspiration from Mouffe (1992, 2000) and Forman et al. (2022) to present these modes as co-constitutive in an ideal form:

> Our starting point is based on the Aristotelian, Arendtian, and Gandhian premise that healthy and sustainable pragmatic representative democracies are grounded in and grow out of healthy and sustainable everyday participatory democratic relationships in which citizens acquire democratic ethical skills of interaction through trial-and-error practice and guidance by exemplary citizens. In brief, *civil democracy must be grounded in the civic democracy* (Forman et al., 2022, p. 440, emphasis added).

Modern democracy (as structurally-inscribed government strategies) ideally provides a framework in which diverse citizenship (as a way of life) can emerge, spread, and even flourish (Dewey, 2016; *cf.* Mouffe, 2000; Peter, 2021). In turn, practices of diverse citizenship, based on the republican ideal of freedom from domination, are necessary to hold modern democracy to account and ensure legitimate, non-arbitrary representation (*cf.* Bellamy, 2023). Here we find a dialectic tension between a relatively fixed (but never finally closed) modern constitutional framework and the transformative potential of diverse practices of free citizens.

3.2 Modes of citizenship and food democracy

The distinctions drawn in Forman and colleagues' conceptual framework are useful for outlining a wealth of political theoretical approaches to democracy and citizenship. Likewise, they also provide context to the various understandings and practices of FD. This should, again, contribute to a practical toolkit for those wishing to contest, reform and transform existing systems of food provisioning. In the next paragraphs, we draw on purposively selected examples of practices to illustrate the scope of the theoretical framework. In line with the SRA, the selected examples are historically specific, rather than ideal. Below, we review the five modes in the chronological order used by Forman et al. (2022)—spanning from (1) indigenous democracies, to (2) representative democracies within modern nation states, to (3) community-based democratic organizations beyond the state, to (4) movements for democracy against the state (i.e., attempts to further democratize Mode 2), and finally (5) earth democracy or "Gaia" democracy, which extends civic citizenship to life in general (i.e., incorporating non-human life into a relational participation in civic life).

3.2.1 Mode 1: indigenous forms of community-based (networked) democracies

Mode 1 is the world's oldest form of democracy, and is understood as democracy that is distinct from and not subsumed into modern Western norms. The essence of republican democracy—freedom from political-economic domination, consent of the governed, demanding legitimacy from authority, and self-determination—can be found in many indigenous cultural traditions, e.g., the Igbo (Ekpo and Chime, 2016), the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) Confederacy, or the Gandhian concept of *swaraj*. In a more modern context, Forman et al. (2022) identify nationalist liberation movements throughout the past centuries and into the present as included in Mode 1, as people attempt, in various ways, to claim a fundamental right to self-determination against (settler-) colonial states.

A case in point is the popular government of Thomas Sankara in Burkina Faso (1983–1987). Inspired by anti-imperialism, Sankara's revolution led the country away from food aid and toward self-reliance based on agroecology (Iyabano et al., 2023), with the understanding that food sovereignty is a linchpin of independence. This historical case also resonates with the lived experience of millions of farmers around the world practicing agroecology, many of whom are involved in the La Via Campesina (LVC) movement for food sovereignty. While certain elements of LVC, such as the contestation of international economic law, fit more into Mode 4 (which we will see below), the movement's axiomatic principle of food sovereignty as an inalienable right to self-determination over food and its means of production fits here into Mode 1.

3.2.2 Mode 2: representative democracies within modern nation states

In Mode 2, democratic citizenship is primarily understood as a legal status for individuals who are guaranteed rights and protections through formal rules and procedures (Mouffe, 1992; Tully, 2008a; Peter, 2021). Democratic participation in Mode 2 can best be understood as an "invited space" (Leitheiser et al., 2022a) for

Citizenship	Modern / Civil	Diverse / Civic
Status	Legal-juridical, within an institutional framework	Relational, state of being in common with others who negotiate their practices and activities in context
Relation to other citizens	Axiomatic independence; relations are codified through law, contracts, and formal consent. Accordingly, some govern, while others are governed.	Axiomatic interdependence; being in common is the starting point for all citizens, and citizenship is constituted through negotiation with other citizens
Understanding of freedom	*Freedom from* subjection to the unruly will of others. Civil liberty to participate in society without interfering on others' freedoms (e.g. private property)	*Freedom to, of and in* participation with other citizens. Civic liberty to contest and modify social rules and cultural norms
Point of departure	Institutional framework / Constitution	Relational activity of citizens
Modes of practice	2, 4	1, 3, 4, 5

FIGURE 1
Tully's framework juxtaposing civil to civic, modern to diverse modes of citizenship and democratic organization. Modes of practice are explained in more detail in section 3.2.

"restricted" participation: officially sanctioned procedures grant citizens a choice within a scope of possibilities and norms that are often defined without democratic participation. In the current conjuncture, Mode 2 politics democracy is hierarchical and "rule-directed" *management* within the consensus of "economic growth, full employment, [and] social security" (Beck et al., 1994, p. 36) and grand narratives of "modernization, good governance, democratization, human rights or civilization" (Tully, 2008b, p. 228).

Various actors assume their legitimized roles in the management of public-affairs, but do not radically challenge the above consensus: citizens vote at the ballot box among choices that generally range from neoliberals to social democrats (Tully, 2008b); consumers vote with their wallets; economic actors maximize self-interest in pursuit of the general good (growth in aggregate economic output); government and experts are responsible for policymaking and acting in the public interest with various technological and managerial approaches to State and/or Market governance (Kaika, 2017; Leitheiser et al., 2022a).

Insofar as it is conceptualized within this tradition of democracy, FD is widely understood as a movement in which citizens work (either individually and/or collectively) to influence existing institutions of agri-food governance *within* established procedures and roles (e.g., lobbying representatives or ethical consumption). The general goal is to push states to assume a more responsible regulatory role and provide a public counterbalance to protect consumers from too much corporate control (Lang, 2005; Bornemann and Weiland, 2019). For example, here it may be assumed that informing the relevant political authorities of an issue (e.g., agriculture's effect on biodiversity loss) through scientific publication and lobbying will be sufficient to make needed changes. Mode 2 FD practices range from top-down FPCs (i.e., those that have a strong basis in government; Schiff, 2008), to "nudging" of consumption choices by states (Baldy and Kruse, 2019; Gumbert, 2019), to the funding of scientific research on sustainable food systems like "climate smart" agriculture or agroecology. As can be seen in Figure 2, we include FPCs in both Mode 2 and Mode 4. The distinction between more "top-down" and more "bottom-up" FPCs emerged in interviews with participants as some described themselves as more "purely" civic led, while others were more driven by integration into city government. The distinction between re-politicization and sedimentation qua institutionalization may be useful here—some FPCs are focused more on challenging and pushing institutions, while others may be more focused on building a more integrated working relationship from the start. Beyond

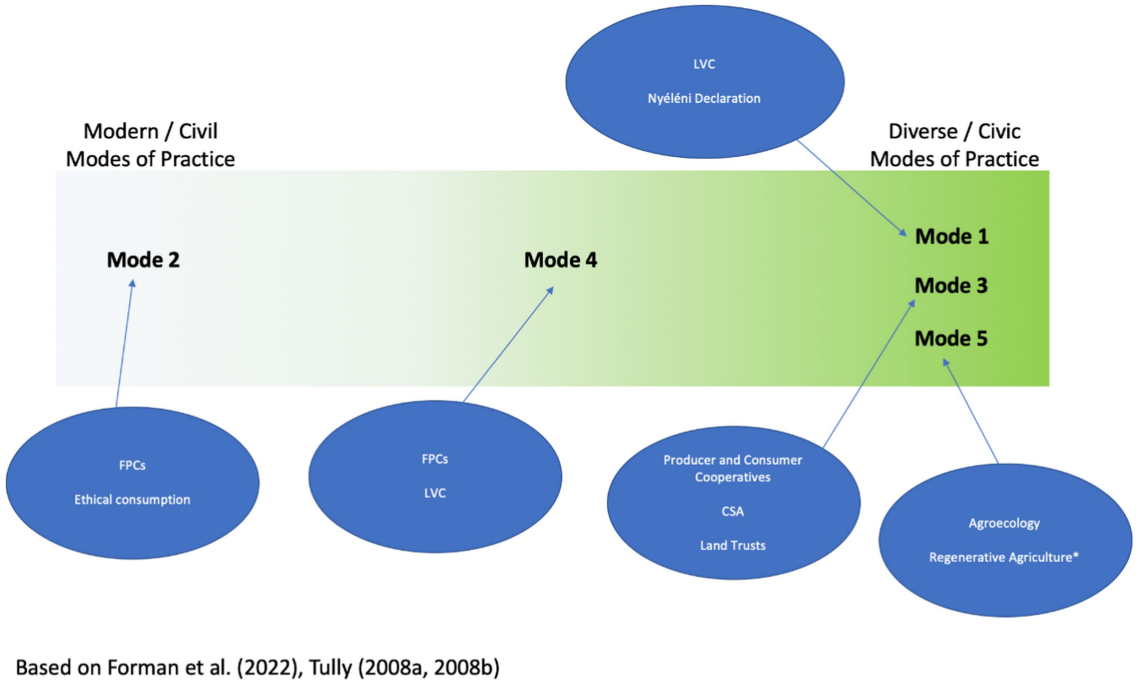

FIGURE 2
The different modes of democratic practice display along a spectrum ranging from Modern/Civil Citizenship to Diverse/Civic Citizenship. For more information about La Via Campesina (LVC), see: https://viacampesina.org/en/; and Nyéléni see: https://nyeleni.org/. We acknowledge that both agroecology and regenerative agriculture are being mobilized in various ways, leading to concerns of co-optation and "watering down." Here we define them broadly as agriculture based on ecological stewardship, as described in "Mode 5" above.

Germany, in some American and British cities, FPCs have been initiated by city government. These clearly fall into Mode 2. In other cases, FPCs have been driven by re-politicization in a more Mode 4 fashion, and after some time, ended up institutionalized in Mode 2, e.g., in Toronto. As noted by one interviewee, these politics are dependent upon the initiators and the local culture. This flexibility of the FPC model over time highlights its potential as a vehicle for building radical reforms.

3.2.3 Mode 3: direct participatory democracies beyond the state

This mode can be understood as a critical response to the perceived failures, or democratic deficit, of Mode 2. In contrast to the "invited space" of Mode 2, Mode 3 is an "invented space" (Leitheiser et al., 2022a) of governance in which people organizing alternative systems of material provisioning to meet community needs. It can be understood as a form of commons governance (Ostrom, 1990) and includes organizational models like cooperative enterprise, land trusts, and various forms of mutual aid.

Community supported agriculture (CSA) is an example of mode 3. CSA forms a direct relationship of exchange—consumers share in the risk of the harvest and ensure that the producers are paid a sufficient wage, while 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 of mutual provisioning between producers and consumers, not on prices. While there are no fixed or rigid guidelines for organizing a CSA—as 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. Other examples include land trusts and producer and consumer cooperatives in alternative food networks (AFNs), which despite much diversity share "central principles: voluntary membership, democratic control (one vote per member rather than per share), promotion of interests of its members, self-help, solidarity, and collective ownership" (Rosol, 2020, p. 61).

3.2.4 Mode 4: agonistic democracy with and against the state

Like Mode 3, this mode is characterized by a perceived failure of institutions associated with Mode 2. Mode 4 is also an "invented space" of governance, founded on contestation of those institutions that are perceived as either illegitimate or (neo-)imperialistic in their current forms. Crucially, many Mode 4 practices also *invite* Mode 2 to take their demands seriously. Forman et al. (2022) understand Mode 4 as a practice that contests global/multilateral institutions. Additionally, we would also include grassroots movements and acts of civil disobedience (Celikates, 2016) that contextually contest institutionalized regimes and actively influence the consolidation of new hegemonic state formations under Mode 4. Most important in our understanding is that Mode 4 practices aim for *creative tension* with Mode 2—straddling the spectrum of and linking modern and diverse citizenship. They are civil and civic, rather than military or revolutionary. This is consistent with Mouffe (2000) understanding of citizens in an agonistic democracy who may simultaneously be "friends because they share a common symbolic space [e.g., a "Mode 2" constitutional republic] but also enemies because they want to organize this common symbolic space in a different way" (Mouffe,

2000, p. 13, *parenthesis added*). Mode 4 is the basis for any possibility of "joining hands" between modern constitutional democracy and the civic/diverse practices of citizenship.

General examples of Mode 4 include the World Social Forum, an alternative to the World Economic Forum that works toward counter-hegemonic globalization; and the World People's Conference on Climate Change that is an alternative to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Both examples are potentially counter-hegemonic and rooted in civic society; but both also come as a challenge to transform Mode 2 institutions of governance through critical engagement. Acts of civil disobedience (e.g., non-compliance, protest, etc.) also can serve as a "dynamizing counterweight to rigidifying tendencies of state institutions" (Celikates, 2016, p. 7). As such, forms of Mode 4 should not be understood as finite political projects, but rather as processes of (re) politicization (e.g., of food provisioning: what is produced, how, for whom, and where?), re-appropriation of public debate, assertion of democratic citizenship, and hence as idealized political-economic horizons beyond current Mode 2 practices of governance.

For examples of Mode 4 in the FD discourse, we can also look to LVC's contestation of international economic law instituted in "free trade" agreements and the World Trade Organization, and its confrontation with the UN Food Systems Summit.[3] In Europe, the European Coordination Via Campesina (ECVC) writes policy documents which propose alternatives for agricultural policy and land reform. ECVC members have also delivered critical remarks at the European Parliament.[4] As explained above, we also understand some civic-initiated FPCs which are focused on re-politicization as practices of Mode 4 governance. Finally, we include scholar activists associated with food sovereignty (Duncan et al., 2021), or who aim to make their work relevant for civic actors who practice Mode 3 and Mode 4 democracy.

3.2.5 Mode 5: earth/Gaia democracy

This mode brings non-human life into the relational practice of civic citizenship. It rejects the modernist understanding of human-nature dualism and takes it as axiomatic that all life is inter-related and inter-dependent. General examples include the practical environmental knowledge of various indigenous cultures in which stewardship of land and concern for non-humans are central to ethical and political negotiation. Such practices have contributed to symbiotic socioecological relationships in the past and are increasingly seen as a model for inspiring future sustainability (see, e.g., Kay and Simmons, 2004; Armstrong et al., 2021).

The Mode 5 *ethos* can be found in the FD-associated discourses and practices of agroecology and regenerative agriculture. Both understand agriculture as a *power with* rather than a *power over* land and ecology, as in industrial monoculture production. Agroecology as a movement, practice and science blends the design of relational agro-ecosystems with Mode 1 claims to food sovereignty (see, e.g., Hrynkow, 2017). Regenerative agriculture, likewise, has been mobilized in many ways, but its "storyline" has been seen as a "stepping stone between Western and Indigenous ontologies" (Gordon et al., 2023, p. 1837) that promotes more-than-human kinship. The integration of non-humans and ecosystems into democratic negotiation keeps food provisioning systems tied to biophysical limits of host ecosystems.

4 Toward radical food democracy

As reviewed in section 3, FD is interpreted and practiced according to different modes of democratic citizenship. For instance, due to the prevalence of the Mode 2 approach, Tilzey (2019) suggests that FD's praxis has most been limited to (impotent) attempts at influencing formal democratic politics (i.e., elite representative democracy) through discourse. Representative liberal democracy assumes that food de-commodification and food democracy can be attained through the formal rejection of neoliberal discourse in the name of the "general social interest" (Tilzey, 2017). This critique of Mode 2 also points to the limitations of a diverse economies approach to "language politics" (*cf.* Kelly, 2005), in which the formal notion of the *right* to benefit (e.g., from localized, healthy, affordable, agroecological food production) often obscures the material preconditions of the *ability* to benefit (Tilzey, 2019, p. 205). This distinction resonates also with the characterization of modern vs. diverse citizenship in Figure 1.

Besides re-organizing discourse, Tilzey (2017, 2018, 2019) argues for a food democracy praxis (otherwise referred to as livelihood sovereignty or radical food sovereignty) centered on the wider material and political economic (hence, relational) foundations of global capitalism. Accordingly, RFD via substantive freedoms should squarely reject the following notions:

(i) the Weberian market-state dichotomy;

(ii) on account of (i), demands for de-commodifying food systems through the state according to a Polanyian "double-movement" (Tilzey, 2017)—since these are inconsistent with a reading of the state as a social relation, as an integral *state-cum-civil society* in a Gramscian sense (*cf.* Jessop, 2016);

(iii) on account of (i) and (ii), populist assertions which essentialize the unity of actors like "transnational capital," "the state," "the peasants" and thus overlook the materiality of social power configurations (such as class-based and colonial North–South relations), as well as the multiplicity of contextual strategies pursued by these actors;

(iv) the performative power of discourse as the Habermasian "unforced force of the better argument" which alone is entrusted to set in motion processes of societal reconfiguration (Tilzey, 2019, p. 205).

As summarized in Figure 2, civic modes of democratic practice should rest on a material and strategic-relational understanding of FD. Food systems are material, in that the fulfillment of ordinary preoccupations with food provisioning is mediated by both the biophysical properties of the environment—that is, the ensemble of soil, nutrient cycles, plants, animals (including humans), etc.—and the concrete labor requirements according to which different modes of

3 https://viacampesina.org/en/un-food-system-summit-the-un-and-green-capitalism-attack-food-sovereignty/

4 https://viacampesina.org/en/la-via-campesina-delivers-a-fiery-speech-inside-the-european-parliament-calls-out-free-trade-agreements-colonialism-and-unilateral-sanctions/

production are enabled or constrained. The concern with the generative mechanisms behind modes of production highlights also the centrality of social relations, which define how different strategies interact, evolve, prevail over time, and eventually also determine the (always temporary and spatially-defined) constitution of overdetermined collective actors like "the state," "the agri-business," "the peasantry," or "the democratic food system." This material-relational view of food systems borrows from Marxian analytical dialectics applied to political ecology, an approach which "retains the historical specificity of social systems while recognizing, simultaneously, their inescapable biophysical constitution and dependencies" (Tilzey, 2018, p. 18).

It follows that an RFD praxis would necessarily challenge both the symbolic-discursive and the material dimensions of social-property relations within capitalism. "In other words," writes Tilzey (2019, p. 208), "'political' emancipation will be less than meaningful unless undertaken in conjunction with 'economic' emancipation." This implies questioning the commodity treatment of food and land, alongside addressing the deficiencies in the material organization of provisioning systems according to the logic of market-mediated capital accumulation (e.g., organizing production around the imperatives of agribusiness corporations and large asset management firms; Clapp and Isakson, 2018). Drawing on Mouffe (2022, p. 32), we contend that in most contexts, such a challenge will be successful to the extent that it is connected to people's "lived experiences and concrete aspirations." "It is always around specific demands that people can be politicized," Mouffe argues, "and an abstract anti-capitalist rhetoric does not resonate with many of the groups whose interests the radicals aim to represent" (Mouffe, 2022). In short, "seeing [an alternative] is believing [in an alternative]," as the motto goes among Cuban farmers in the agroecology movement (Rosset et al., 2011). Borrowing from Kaika's metaphor of "the frog and the eagle," the approach advanced in this paper is intended to get messy also following the diverse economies scholarship (Huron, 2018), "into the murky waters and messiness of local struggles and conflicts" (frog-like), while cultivating the ability to extrapolate the empirical particulars, connecting them to a bigger picture (eagle-like) (Kaika, 2018, p. 1715).

The diverse economies approach starts from recognizing that while modernity, capitalism, and industrial civilization possess totalizing tendencies which, to varying degrees, permeate all human communities around the world, these are not all that exists. Even within the market economy, there are relationships that can disengage "from wider circuits controlled by capital [and construct] well-operating alternatives" (Van der Ploeg et al., 2022, p. 13). This does not imply that alternatives found in AFNs, CSA, or FPCs alone represent instances of system change. Yet, they introduce sources of resistance to the system's inertia, rather than sitting and waiting for a revolution which is always "yet to come." These local alternatives are, on the one hand, lighthouses that offer opportunities for building popular counter-hegemonic support as people can "see and believe" in alternatives (Nicholls and Altieri, 2018). On the other hand, they are seeds of potential re-configuration of social relations (Leitheiser et al., 2022a) which, given their nature *in potentia*, require the adequate milieu to sprout and grow. This again, highlights the importance of a co-evolutionary and learning-based approach to change. Nevertheless, to reiterate the point about the dangers of voluntarism in prefigurative politics, the context in which the experimentation with a diversity of economic practices is unfolding should not be neglected. This points to a world system predicated on uneven and combined development of core countries in the global North and marginalized peripheral regions in the global South. Agrarian capital in the global North is largely accumulated in the form of increasingly concentrated farmland and mechanized production systems. These capital infrastructural developments and trade route relations, in turn, rely on the still-ongoing historical appropriation of raw materials, labor, land, and environmental sinks from the global South—a phenomenon known as (ecologically) unequal exchange (Hornborg, 2014; Hickel et al., 2022).

While the core has more structurally-inscribed space for agents to exert their civil freedom (e.g., relatively more possibilities to organize or elect democratic leadership), the agents living in these parts of the world are more likely to reflexively maintain and extend the structures that they are benefitting from. Vice versa, although exploited people in the global South are more likely to exert their reflexive agency toward radical transformation of social structures, democratic action and material possibilities are more limited. This might be true in an abstract sense, but we argue that a more nuanced or middle-range analysis allows for recognition of opportunities for subverting coercive order and structural domination. In our example, this would mean, on the one hand, de-linking developmental pathways in the global South from the interests of core countries (Amin, 2011) while, on the other hand, jointly articulating transversal instances of interstitial, synergic, and revolutionary change (Wright, 2010) across geographies, not only in the periphery but also in the global North (see also Patnaik and Patnaik, 2021).

RFD in high-income countries, therefore, cannot be emancipatory in scope without strategically joining hands with the agrarian struggles resisting the neo-colonial advancement of western-led capital accumulation in the global South. We thus concur with Tilzey (2020, p. 382) that "the capitalist "agrarian transition" in the global South has not generally taken the form of the full proletarianization" of peasants, since many more farmers are excluded from the circuits of capital accumulation compared to their counterparts in the global North. However, we contend that the joint articulation of re-politicizing food provisioning systems and building alternative imaginaries (whether in the global North or the global South) is not a futile enterprise. Indeed, it is a necessary step toward the subversion of the current corporate-centered industrial food system.

The transformative (or better emancipatory) potential of RFD initiatives, therefore, rests not only in their own operation, but also in their ability to disrupt the broader structures of socio-economic organization—both ideationally and materially. While potential for resistance in the global South is numerically greater (because the masses are relegated to peripheral relations with core countries), this does not rule out the possibility of parallel resistance within the global North to create fissures and moments of systemic incoherence. This "dialectic of reform and revolution" on a variety of fronts in a multiplicity of geographies, write Jessop and Sum (2016, p. 108), is what can eventually result in "fundamental changes in the structural bases of domination."

5 Data and methods

The methodological approach in this paper is inspired by Tully (2008a,b) understanding of public philosophy as a civic task of

addressing common affairs and the fundamental concepts and categories of politics, in dialogue with civic activists as equals. In line with the work of others like Gibson-Graham (2006), Wright (2010), Huron (2018), and Kaika (2018), the approach moves back-and-forth between a granular, zoomed-in perspective of particular practices, and a zoomed-out macro-political perspective. The case study demonstrates that our concept of radical food democracy was not only developed from theory, but in an iterative process of dialogue with both civically active citizens and political theory.

RFD requires a back and forth between the ideational and the practical, the abstract and the concrete, the actionable and the analytical. Our methodology follows a critical scientific approach to society (Sayer, 2009) and a renewed attention to the social role of academics (Leitheiser et al., 2022b) as public intellectuals endowed not only with the task of furthering dialogue over concepts, but also trying to make concepts "performative politically by linking the concept to contemporary practices and struggles over socio-environmental change" (Kaika, 2018, p. 1719). Accordingly, we draw inspiration also from other scholar-activists working in a dialectical fashion with food sovereignty movements (e.g., Duncan et al., 2021). In doing so, we present our case study with an "ethos of appreciation" (Moriggi, 2022, p. 133), bringing forth a positive, strengths-based analysis (in line with the diverse economies approach).

Empirical work was conducted from November 2018–February 2020 by the first author and includes semi-structured interviews (with leaders from the FPC network and the initiator of both the CSA cooperative network and the CSX initiative), document analysis, and participant observation. Six semi-structured interviews with FPC leaders from Cologne, Berlin and Frankfurt focused on the development of FPCs in German cities (locally and nationally), the motivations of participants, and the relationship of FPCs to government. Interviews were conducted in German and English, recorded with consent and transcribed. Translations from German to English were done by the first author. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of the respondents, due to the politically sensitive nature of discussions. Interview questions with the CSA network/CSX initiator focused on the network structures and ways in which they might contribute to systemic change. Additionally, the first author co-organized a food policy event together with German FPC leaders in June 2021. The latter 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. The event also included a session hosted by leaders from CSX, aimed at exploring the question of how civic initiatives like FPCs and other actors (e.g., municipalities) support the spread of CSAs.

6 Illustrating radical food democracy in Germany

Our case study illustrates how a Mode 3 (community-based democracy) practice of building a community economy around a shared need (e.g., healthy, local, sustainably-produced food) can develop collective agency that expands into diverse citizenship (i.e., the development of radically democratic political subjects) beyond that initial shared need. It is this type of co-evolutionary process of *learning toward* radical food democracy that we understand as carrying transformative potential. We sketch out some of these potentials that are emerging for diverse economies to "join hands" with Mode 4 (agonistic democracy) practices of citizenship, and ultimately link to and re-politicize Mode 2 (representative democracy).

6.1 From CSA To CSX: building community economies without market prices

"Solawi" is an abbreviation for *Solidarische Landwirtschaft*, which is translated as Solidarity Agriculture. Solawi is an iteration of CSA models (which were discussed earlier as an example of Mode 3 democratic practice) found elsewhere around the globe. The network encompasses many different types of governing arrangements—mainly so-called prosumer networks in which farms and private households form an economic community based on shared use value. Many Solawi farms are on leased land that is jointly financed by its members via shares. Moreover, many Solawi farmers consider their food as a commons (i.e., a shared good, not a commodity with a market price), produce it without operating profits, and just ask for their members to cover their costs, including a living wage for the farmer. Member contributions are often made transparent and discussed openly at quarterly or yearly general meetings where a need-oriented cost plan for the coming year is presented, and members decide together how costs will be covered.

Going beyond this prosumer arrangement, Solawi Cooperatives (*Genossenschaften* in German) take the notion of solidarity to a registered legal form. This means that not only do participants have a share in collectively financing the cooperative's lease or land ownership and covering operating costs; but their purchase of a harvest share also entitles them to vote in the cooperative's general assembly in which executive and supervisory boards are elected. At the time of writing, there are over 460 Solawi farms in Germany (see Figure 3).[3]

In speaking with Philip, a leader from the Solawi network in the spring of 2020, we learned how the essence of CSA has inspired organization far beyond food and agriculture. At the time of the interview, there were around 300 Solawi initiatives in Germany (which demonstrates growth in a relatively short time). For Philip, this meant that Solawi had achieved a level of success on the one hand, but that on the other hand they were not systemically relevant. As Philip told us:

> "*There's a lot of transformation potential in this idea, but I would like to help make sure that we have many thousands more of these farms […] To do so we need to also connect with other consumer-initiated initiatives that do not just stand alone. We need to connect with other supply systems around these individual farms, and build entire structures and value chains. That's why these ideas for CSA must be transferred to other supply areas.*"

In 2019, Philip took aim at this problem, as he developed the idea of "Community Supported X" (CSX). In CSX, the variable X can be filled in with virtually "everything"—whichever provisioning systems and economic relations a community decides to include, given its contextual constraints and possibilities. He envisioned CSX as having the potential to translate the CSA model extends to all basic needs that members of a community may have (called *Grundversorgung* in German). The model is already being used by

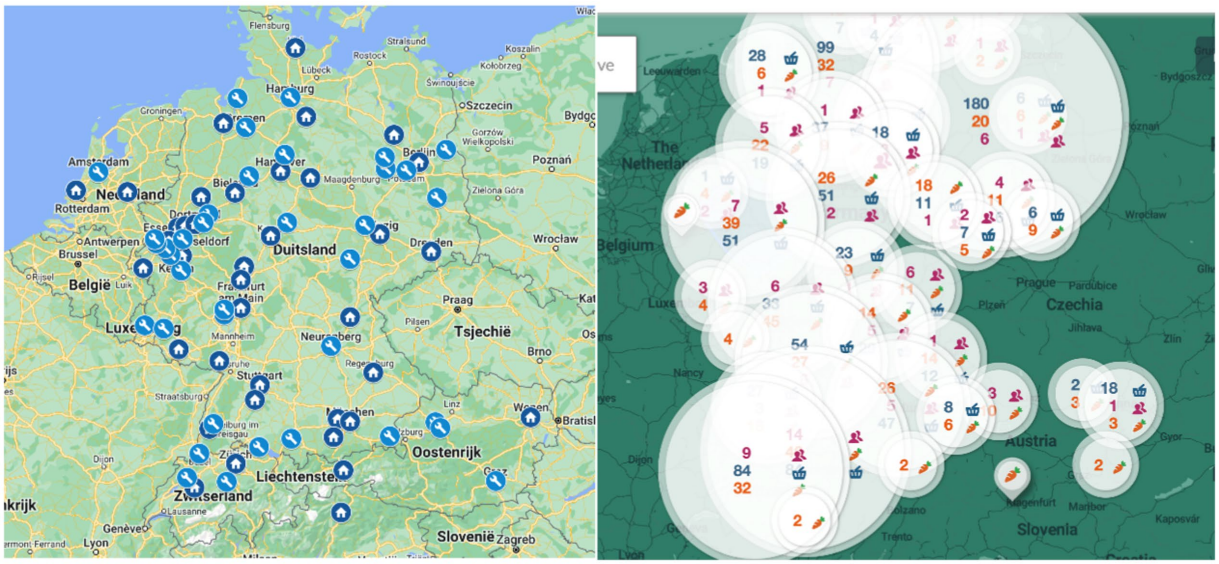

FIGURE 3
Map of German FPC network (Left): The house logo signifies an established FPC, while the wrench logo signifies an FPC in the making (source: https://ernaehrungsraete.org/, accessed 29 September, 2023). Map of German Solawi network (Right): For more information, see: https://www.solidarische-landwirtschaft.org/solawis-finden/karte#/ (accessed 29 September, 2023).

many enterprises involved in the CSX network. These include food enterprises like bakeries, cheese and wine makers, coffee roasters and beekeepers, but also services like energy production, transport, recreation, as well as clothing, bike, and home repair. 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 model continues to expand, there is an ambition to include many more needs, such as housing and childcare, with the idea to build CSX neighborhoods where inhabitants cooperate to meet the basic needs and provide basic services for the community. By providing a baseline *Grundversorgung*, which we understand in line with a "livelihood sovereignty" (Tilzey, 2019), Philip explained that CSX communities can:

> *"try to emancipate [themselves] from capitalist economic logics, growth constraints, and competitive pressures […] For me it is really the act of emancipation. We are building these structures precisely to be independent. That's why cooperation with the state, which gives subsidies, or with other initiatives, in which one then becomes quasi-dependent on the market economy must always be approached with a lot of caution—to protect this valuable independence."*

Here Philip highlights the importance of a civic citizenship and democratic sovereignty over basic needs, as essential within a civil framework of State/Market governance. The idea is not to become a closed off autarky, but to protect and maintain a set of principles from becoming watered-down. This highlights a practical case of a dialectic tension between Mode 2 and Mode 3/4 practices and, as such, a moment of potential radicalization of food democracy. In short, drawing from Jessop's SRA, the concrete outcome of networked CSX is to challenge and selectively expand the structural constraints orienting their practices.

Therefore, just as individual Solawi farms cannot stand alone, the need to connect CSX economies with wider structures and institutional frameworks is also recognized. For example, state control over land policy, taxation, and educational support, are seen as crucial levers for promoting Solawi. Concerning CSX, even more state functions come into play. For this reason, Philip sees it as "*absolutely essential and predestined that, in principle, the FPCs are the interface to the local and municipal policy representation for Solawi.*" The Mode 3 practices of CSA can thus be strategically expanded and enabled through Mode 4 and Mode 2 practices of Food Policy Councils (FPCs).

6.2 Food policy councils: creating spaces for political imagination

> *"The idea of food democracy is something that really comes out of civil society […] We are coming up with our own spaces and then inviting other citizens, but also the existing governing structures to participate there"* (interview with Ella, FPC leader).

The first FPC was formed in Knoxville, Tennessee in 1982, and like CSA the model has spread in different iterations across the globe. The character of particular FPCs is highly dependent on the local context. Since 2016, there have been more than 30 FPCs established in German cities and regions (see Figure 3). As one interviewee, Julia, told us, every city has different politics. All iterations share 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. Convening under the motto '*Food Democracy Now!*' in Germany, FPCs create a practical-political space for citizens who wish to directly participate in the

development of policy that can shape food provisioning in their cities and regions.

Our interviewees all expressed that FPCs were a model that met an existing need in Germany for addressing problems in the food system at a more holistic level. As Ella, a leader in the FPC network, told us:

> "*You have Solawi everywhere. That's had a strong growth in the last ten years in Germany. And you have various other initiatives that go in that direction. And you have various ways of people taking hold of certain aspects of the food system, but not of the governance of the whole […] that individual thing is not the model for going about transforming the whole.*
>
> *People had arrived at a point in their work where they had developed all of these different initiatives, and they had spent enough time in those initiatives to see the limitations; to come up against certain barriers.*"

However, traditional Mode 2 practices were not seen as an option for overcoming these barriers.

Ella explained:

> *"We have a ministry of agriculture and food at the national level that deals with exactly zero of the issues that we need to deal with […] Political imagination is something we haven't really seen in our government in recent decades […] FPCs are filling that gap, creating the space where that imagining can happen."*

Hannah, another FPC leader, echoed this point:

> *"The FPC gives our voices a space where the discussion can take place. It's where we can come together and bring our message to politics […] So that not only the politics, but namely, the companies—the agricultural and food corporations which have a great deal of influence and power—to say to them, 'No. We don't want that.'*
>
> *In this way, a FPC can capture this voice of resistance. So that not only the voices of the lobbies are heard. Rather, so that those who have no lobby, or have only a small lobby, can be heard."*

Despite acting at a strategic distance from the state, FPCs also widely desire to engage with the state apparatus—not only in a more Mode 2 passive way, but actively and agonistically as Mode 4 "sparring partners" (Leitheiser et al., 2022a). As Ella explains in the quote at the beginning of this section, members of existing governance structures are also invited to participate along with other citizens. Valentin, another leader in the FPC movement, explained the strategy in a 2018 interview:[5]

> *"Food policy councils are an attempt to tackle the food system transformation [Ernährungswende in German] at the lowest political level […] You won't find food commissions in any city council; they only exist at the state and federal level. But we believe that little will happen at that level, because the lobbies are firmly installed there, and politics is dependent on these lobbyists.*
>
> *"At the municipal level, things are different. We think that municipalities do have competencies in this area. Maybe not when it comes to setting legal limits [Grenzwerten in German], that will certainly always remain a matter for the federal government or the EU. But municipalities can, for example, shape local markets: They can support regional farmers who want to sell into the city […] intervene in school education and create nutritional awareness among daycare and school children. They can create offerings for their citizens on municipal green spaces […] In short, the lowest political level could already do a great deal. With the FPC movement, we want to use this local space for action [Handlungspielräume in German]."*

In targeting these levers and opportunities, FPCs see local action as a *means* to an *ends* for effecting a transformation in the food system, in line with a new municipalist politics of proximity (Russell et al., 2023). That is, "tending to the part of the garden one can reach," while connecting with others who can reach elsewhere. This focus on the municipal scale is not inward looking but strategically reflexive. FPC leaders have recognized the municipal scale as having more structurally-inscribed space for exerting agency, with ripple effects beyond the local. Localization is seen by FPCs as a tool for global social justice, insofar as food provisioning systems move to de-link from capital-controlled circuits (Thurn et al., 2018).

While FPCs exhibit local variation in terms of politics and organization, FPC members have recognized that together they have a greater capacity to foster popular support and political will for change at regional, national and EU scales. To this end, they have regular networking conferences where FPC leaders from different cities gather to discuss various strategies and practices. Since 2021, FPCs have also formed at the regional level in five German states (Baden-Württemburg, Brandenburg, Hesse, Lower Saxony, and North-Rhine Westphalia). Here FPC members can better pool resources and knowledge to influence food policy and politics at a wider scale. This includes both formulating political demands and policy recommendations, and informing citizens about how political parties contribute to FPC goals of sustainable food systems with an "election touchstone" (Wahlprüfstein) prior to elections.[6] More recently, a German FPC leader also spoke at the European Economic and Social Committee's public hearing "Toward a European Food Policy Council/Sustainable Food System,"[7] where she advocated for a more supportive policy environment for FPCs to act within: including paradigm shifts in the EU legislative frameworks on

5 See: https://blog.marktschwaermer.de/essen-ist-politisch/; last accessed 30 September, 2023.

6 https://www.eesc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/files/input_fpcs_a_wissmann.pdf

7 https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda/our-events/events/towards-european-food-policy-council-sustainable-food-system

competition law, the urban/rural divide, and the treatment of food as a commodity.

The above examples display how FPCs work both in and beyond "the local," and with and against the state, as they work to transform food systems toward more democratic, healthy, solidaristic, diverse economies. In doing so, their practice acts as a bridge connecting diverse economic practices with the state institutions and the set of macro-structural conditions which constrain (or enable) these practices. We have, thus, seen how various practices of Mode 3 (participatory food democracy like CSA) and Mode 4 (agonistic food democracy like civic-led FPCs) can work prefiguratively within the interstitial cracks of the system or in strategic symbiosis with them (*cf.* Wright, 2010), to reform and transform Mode 2 (representative democracy) into a more radical civic framework.

7 Discussion and concluding remarks

Our case study has illustrated a theory of transformation at work in practice: in Germany, those engaged in the construction of CSA and CSX networks (Mode 3) recognize the need to engage with wider institutional frameworks (Mode 2) in an agonistic manner (Mode 4). This process blurs the lines between diverse and modern citizenship, and between the material and the ideational. To those who work to forge alternative economic-material realities (Mode 1, 3, 5), wider political-ideational structures (constituted in Mode 2) are a clear barrier to systemic relevance. It is, likewise, true that those who engage in political-ideational work recognize the importance of "lighthouse" cases (*cf.* Nicholls and Altieri, 2018): actually existing material practices that they can point to in order to demonstrate that their ideas are tangible, relevant, and capable of catering to people's needs. Borrowing from Jessop's SRA (Jessop, 2005, 2007) and Tully's dialectics between modern and diverse citizenship (Tully, 2008a,b), we have argued that the pursuit of RFD requires a context-specific co-evolution of these grounded lighthouse experiments on the one hand, and the imaginative reform-with-transformation of wider institutional frameworks on the other hand. We do not uncritically understand these particular examples as the vanguards of a RFD that is destined to come; it is rather that these examples illustrate a learning-based approach of thinking and acting strategically, reflexively, and co-evolutionarily on the way toward RFD. It is this approach that we argue should be retained and built upon in other contexts, and critically engaged with by scholar activists interested in advancing RFD praxis.

In addition to the case study that we have presented, we see other examples of such an approach emerging more generally, beyond Germany, and beyond just food. The Public-Commons-Partnership concept details a model of ownership and governance that is shared by a "common association" (e.g., a cooperative or civic initiative) and a public authority (Russell et al., 2023), for example in public support for cooperative housing (Ferreri and Vidal, 2022). Scotland's Land Reform Act has paved the way for more community ownership of land, with the 2016 law establishing a community's right to buy land to further goals of "sustainable development" (Calo et al., 2023). The latter political-ideational reform of property law has potential to open up further possibilities for agroecological transformation (*ibid.*) Agrarian land trusts, like the French Terre de Liens, provide another case of institutionalization of alternative food systems. Active since 2003, Terre de Liens has raised funds (over €90 million) from almost 25,000 local members distributed across its 19 regional chapters. The association uses these funds to buy out farmland via its foundation, which then lends it at a lower cost to farmers committed to agroecological practices. As of 2020, the association had secured over 200 farm estates on which over 300 farmers work. This scheme, which has been replicated elsewhere in Europe (e.g., with Kulturland in Germany, Aardpeer and Land van Ons in the Netherlands) and in North America (with the Agrarian Trust in the United States), is an effective way of de-commodifying access to farming by preventing speculative purchases of agricultural land by investors.

An obvious limitation of this paper is that the case studies have been restricted to the authors' capacity to collect primary materials. While we have tried to pursue a methodologically global approach to food systems, the paper's empirical focus, admittedly, remains confined to European examples. Nevertheless, our conceptual elaborations in section 2, 3, and 4 aim for a generalizable understanding of democratic citizenship and social change; and in this vein, we welcome further contributions, case studies, or rebuttals coming from other theoretical traditions, different geographies, and diverse practices.

It is equally important to both recognize "seeds" of opportunity and keep the "hatchet" of critique sharp (Alhojärvi and Sirviö, 2019). It is only with clear and critical eyes that the emancipatory opportunities for agonistic engagement with existing institutions, which are arranged in the interests of capital, can be actualized (*cf.* Ferreri and Vidal, 2022). Some may see our optimism as a weak point, yet we stand behind the notion (also championed by Gibson-Graham) that scholars can and do participate in shaping practice through theory. In this paper, we have thus aimed to intervene in public and scholarly debates—about food systems transformation, citizenship, and democracy—and to build theoretical and practical dialogue across existing practices of food democracy. The interface of scholarship, civic activism, practice, and politics is central to the pursuit of emancipatory futures.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this study can be found in online repositories. The names of the repository/repositories and accession number(s) can be found at: https://dataverse.nl/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.34894/JGS3DV.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Research Ethics Committee Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

SL: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. RV: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's note

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