

Transcending binaries: a participatory political ecology of the Faroese foodscape

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Abstract: This paper discusses some methodological aspects of a participatory research project on political economic dynamics of food in the Faroe Islands, in particular how to balance between the critical perspective and an affirmative practice when doing engaged research in political ecology. Drawing from Gibson-Graham's diverse economies framework combined with the concept of food sovereignty, familiar conceptual binaries (capitalism-noncapitalism, growth-degrowth, affirmation-critique) are challenged. The paper argues that instead of remaining locked in the analytical distinction between say a 'capitalist/global food-system' versus an 'alternative/local food-system', a critical-affirmative political ecology of food would ultimately have to entail a transcendence of such binary thinking. In particular, it would put more attention on the complexity and queerness of the foodscape, take more notice of the 'in-betweens' and the nuances that do not fit such categorisation. Participatory research with local activists is suggested as a fruitful and ethical methodology to facilitate such a process as it emphasises the *doing* of research and engages with the situated knowledge and experience of local activists.

Keywords: participatory research, Faroe Islands, affirmative political ecology, food sovereignty, diverse economies

Introduction

For decades the discourse of ecological modernisation (Hajer 1995) and 'eco-efficiency' (Martinez-Alier 2002) have dominated mainstream environmentalist rationality with the idea that climate change and the global environmental crisis can be fixed through institutional reform and technological advancement without changing the ways we organise the economy. Parallel to this, critical environmental social scientists (incl. many political ecologists) have deconstructed this worldview arguing that the root cause of the global

environmental crisis is to be found in capitalism's dependency on continuous economic growth (e.g. Hornborg 2001). Here studies in ecological economics that measure the energetic and material flows in the economy (e.g. Haber *et al.* 2011) have been key for helping us understand and analyse the biophysical interactions and dynamics between the economy and the environment.

Although this perspective has rarely been taken seriously by those in position of political and economic power, several events this past year suggest that we are currently at a historical turning point

where the hegemonic doxa of economic growth is also (finally) being challenged in mainstream policy-making circles and powerful institutions. One example of this was the Postgrowth Conference held in the EU-parliament on the 18-19th September 2018. Another example was when Diana Urge-Vorsatz, Vice Chair of working group 3 in the IPCC, on the 12th October 2018, suggested that the issue of degrowth will be addressed in the next IPCC synthesis report¹.

How such a re-orientation of the economy is going to happen and what it might look like are therefore arguably some of the most acute issues to address for critical social science in the 21st century. We are increasingly in need of alternatives to the growth dependent economy and creative ways of thinking about the future which do not involve more ‘business as usual’. For this task the concept of affirmative political ecology invites for an exciting discussion on what such a research approach might look like. While affirmation

¹ “...the only solution is some kind of, well, challenging the economic growth paradigm, but it is very difficult to do this in the IPCC, as many of our member countries are still with very low levels of development and certainly, they don’t want to think about reducing growth and so on. But to the credit, you have certainly influenced me definitely a lot and I have followed a lot your conferences. I invited several of your keynote speakers to have a big review paper in annual review of environment and resources, which is going to come out now. And also I sneaked into the next report, degrowth. So, it was me who pushed that into the sixth assessment report. So in the outline, in the end it is not as such in the outline, because governments did not like, most many governments did not like the word, but implicitly it is there and we have a fantastic team who is going to write that chapter, and they are definitely going to address the issue of degrowth and the whole issue of consumption, so thank you for your point.” (Urge-Vorsatz (2018), *own transcription from min 60*).

can be interpreted in different ways, this paper draws upon key dimensions of affirmative political ecology as explored in this thematic issue: an orientation to creative action that is hopeful, heterogeneous and life-affirming – seeking to transcend the limits of critique whilst also not shying away from it where necessary (Sirviö & Alhojärvi 2018). In particular this essay explores what methodological considerations we need to make when researching non-capitalist political ecologies (Burke & Shear 2014), doughnut economies (Raworth 2017) and heterogeneous degrowth pathways (D’Alisa *et al.* 2014; Paulson 2017). For instance, how can we support alternatives to development and growth through an engaged and affirmative research practice while staying committed to the critical perspective? Or as the editors of this special issue ask, “How can critiques, negotiations and antagonisms feed into creative and ‘care-full’ modes of thought and practice – and what kind of critical practices do affirmative political ecologies need in order to avoid idealized ‘affirmationism?’” (Sirviö & Alhojärvi 2018).

In this paper we reflect on some of these questions in relation to my² postdoctoral research on food political dynamics and visions for change in my home-country the Faroe Islands. Specifically, we consider the usefulness of

² This article takes the somewhat unconventional step of using both ‘I’ and ‘we’ pronouns. Both the original idea for the paper and the empirical material emerged from Elisabeth’s PhD research in the Faroe Islands and therefore ‘I’ is used to signify those places in the text which relate directly to Elisabeth’s voice and experience. However, both of us were involved in developing the overall shape and argument of the paper and hence ‘we’ is used elsewhere to indicate this collaborative dimension.

moving beyond binaries and oppositions (for example, capitalism-noncapitalism, growth-degrowth, critique-affirmation). However, before doing so it is instructive to examine the ways in which recent research is trying to transgress boundaries between the ‘alternative’ and the ‘conventional’. This will set us up for the second half of the paper, in which we consider my project specifically and demonstrate how a participatory research methodology can be helpful in moving beyond binaries towards a more engaged and affirmative political ecology (Batterbury 2016; Batterbury & Horowitz, forthcoming).

Transcending the binary – diverse food economies

In his textbook introduction on Political Ecology, Paul Robbins characterises political ecology as “a *community of practice* united around a *certain kind of text* ... that can be understood to address the condition and change of social/environmental systems, with explicit consideration of relations of power.” (Robbins 2012: 20, original emphasis). Political ecology “...explores these social and environmental changes with an understanding that there are better, less coercive, less exploitative, and more sustainable ways of doing things.” (ibid.)

Robbins explains this normative ambition of political ecology with the metaphor of a ‘hatchet’ (political ecology as critique) and a ‘seed’ (political ecology as equity and sustainability research). In spite of this ambition, we would argue that there seems to be a tendency in most political ecology texts to have a stronger emphasis on the

‘hatchet’ than the ‘seed’. At a time where there is no lack of bad news and critique, this special issue calling for an exploration of an explicitly affirmative political ecology is thus a welcomed encouragement to attempt transcending the critical perspective (although not abandoning it).

Similarly, in food research there is a tendency to construct a binary between an affirmative practice, e.g. through participatory and other engaged research with ‘alternative local food initiatives’ (e.g. community gardens, farmers’ markets, agroecology, alternative food networks) and a critique of ‘the conventional global food system’. However, there is seldom acknowledgement of the fact that many food economies are somewhere in between these two extremes. In this paper we argue that while such binary categories can be useful for analysing and identifying inequalities and injustices in food systems, they fall short when it comes to explaining actual dynamics on the ground, which tend to be much more complex and contextual.

To capture this, we draw inspiration from Gibson-Graham’s (2006) work on diverse economies and, in particular, their non-capitalocentric approach which argues that the visible, ‘conventional’ parts of the economy do not exist in isolation to a whole host of diverse – and potentially very transformative – economic practices (such as caring for children, voluntary work, cooperative business models etc.) (see Figure 1). In this way, their argument is that the binary of capitalism-noncapitalism is only helpful as a preliminary discursive construction that can serve to make sense of and deconstruct the differences and similarities between the two, and that



Figure 1. The Diverse Economy Iceberg. Source: communityeconomies.org/key-ideas.

ultimately such a deconstructive process “explodes the binary, yielding a queer or radically heterogenous landscape of economy and a new ground for pluralistic

economic politics” (Gibson-Graham 2006, xxi–xxii). This is where the extensive case study research stemming from Gibson-Graham and scholars

affiliated with their work is so instructive³.

In relation to food specifically, Gibson-Graham's work has been taken up by a number of commentators whose research is attempting to explore the potential connections which exist between those areas of the food system which, on paper at least, appear almost irreconcilable. For example, Jonathan Beacham's UK-based work on the role of alternative food networks in times of austerity uses a diverse economies framework to consider the many ways in which apparently disparate food initiatives such as small-scale, organic agriculture and food banks, for example, may have wider lessons for us which further destabilise the idea of a binary. He writes:

"...when contrasted against the mainstream, many accounts continue to narrowly interpret AFNs, painting them simply as oppositional and reactive against hegemonic political-economic structures. A more contextually-aware interpretation (following Calvário and Kallis, 2017) helps us to understand the ways in which AFNs are not merely 'against' capitalism and/or austerity, but themselves generative of diverse economic logics and practices, altering wider relationships to food..." (Beacham 2018: i)

In his wider analysis, Beacham goes on to argue that transgressing such binary thinking allows us to recognise "the powerful role that AFNs can play in articulating more positive relationships to food, and with it wider reconfigurations of both civil society and the foodscape beyond the austere here-and-now." (i)

³ See e.g. the CERN network: <https://www.communityeconomics.org/ce-research-network-cern>

Equally, Cameron's (2010) work on food economies in Newcastle, UK and Melbourne, Australia uses the diverse economies framework to underpin an analysis of insightful and in-depth case studies of varied food initiatives which goes beyond established binaries of 'alternative-conventional' to explore the seeds of potentially nourishing and transformative practices in the everyday, small-scale and (often though not necessarily) local. She writes:

"What is so powerful about this diverse economies framework is that it gives us a way of talking about how people are taking back the economy through various food initiatives. So 'the economy' features not as something 'out there' that is the domain of mainstream businesses or 'the market' or 'globalisation' or 'capitalism', but as something that we all can make in ways that are people and environment centred." (Cameron 2010: 8)

In this way, Cameron argues that if we stop thinking of the economy as an external, separate entity, we increase our possibilities to reshape it in more generative ways: "'the economy' features not as a bounded entity but as an open space of ethical decision making that is limited only by our imagination, our creativity and our will to 'take back'." (8)

In thinking about the transformative potential of going beyond binaries in our analysis of the food system, it is also useful to consider the impact that the concept of food sovereignty has had here. Food sovereignty, as originally coined by the international peasant organisation La Via Campesina in 1996, is now frequently

applied in critical agrarian and food study analyses. The most applied definition of food sovereignty can be found in the 2007 Declaration of the Nyéléni Forum:

“Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations.” (Nyéléni 2007)

Reading this definition, and reflecting on the ways in which it has been applied by scholars, adds an interesting dimension to our discussion of binaries since, on the one hand, its origins as a ‘grassroots concept for sustainability’ (Martinez-Alier *et al.* 2014) lends it an oppositional flavour, most notably in arguing for a more radical and politically transformative future than its better known cousin, food security, which has often been accused of propagating a strong ‘business as usual’ (often ‘productivist’) approach to the food system (Mooney & Hunt 2009). However, this is not the only way in which the concept can be approached, with many activists and academics trying to employ it in less oppositional ways. For example, instead of approaching food sovereignty as an outcome, Schiavoni (2017: 3) conceptualises it as a “historically embedded, continually evolving set of processes that are interactively shaped by state and societal forces, reflecting competing paradigms and approaches.”

This is a more dynamic approach to the concept, which focuses on the praxis of *doing* food sovereignty and makes ‘either/or’ distinctions less important.

However, while a focus on the *process* of food sovereignty appears to make thinking in binaries less helpful, it would be a mistake to argue that it makes binaries irrelevant altogether. Indeed, food sovereignty is interesting because it calls for a transfer of power to the producers and consumers normally marginalised within the ‘conventional large-scale capitalist’ food system, explicitly stating that these actors should have the right to determine their own food systems. This requires that researchers wishing to work in this area need to listen to – and enter into dialogue with – the meanings and desires that their participants bring to the table (Guthman 2008). This can make for a complex and interesting set of discussions, actions and negotiations between researchers and participants, since there may be situations when binary or oppositional understandings of the food system feel both appropriate and necessary (for example, in order to defend farmer livelihoods in the face of a specific threat). However, on other occasions, a deeper understanding can be gained from all concerned coming to recognise that what seemed like a clear-cut distinction is, in fact, more nuanced and blurred. Therefore – and as we will argue in the second part of the paper – when considering food sovereignty, it may be more accurate to say that *transcending* binaries involves thinking both *across* and *beyond* them, rather than abandoning them altogether.

Having explored some of the literature which exists on binaries and how we

understand the project of transcending them, we will now move to a consideration of how these issues are relevant for my research. This discussion will establish the groundwork necessary for considering how a PAR research methodology can be a productive way of moving beyond binaries.

We start by describing the foodscape of the Faroe Islands, drawing attention to its sometimes contradictory character and thus bringing us to consider the potential binaries that I have to navigate in my research.

Food-political dynamics in the Faroe Islands

The Faroe Islands (or the Faroes) is a semi-autonomous country within the Danish Realm. The subarctic archipelago situated between Iceland and Norway consists of 18 islands with a total landmass of approximately 1400 km² and is populated by approximately 51.000 inhabitants.

Besides fisheries (wild and farmed) which account for 90-98% of all Faroese exports (Hagstova Føroya 2019), the Faroes has a rich variety of other food economic practices. In addition to traditional practices that are rooted in communitarian and 'kin-ordered' modes of production from the past, the past 3-5 years have also seen the emergence of new alternative food initiatives. Examples include initiatives to grow plant-based foods (specifically more grains and vegetables), awareness raising and innovations to reduce food waste, hydroponic systems to grow salad, wild food foraging, as well as a citizen/consumer led push for a more sustainable, local, just

and healthier food system. On the one hand this growing politicisation of food manifests itself on supermarket shelves with an increased range of e.g. organic, fair-trade, vegan produce. On the other hand, the global environmental crisis has arguably also led Faroese people to reflect upon meanings and values embedded in some of the traditional economies that are still part of the Faroese foodscape (Bogadóttir & Olsen 2017), and encouraged Faroese people to experiment with grassroots food innovations inspired by dynamics happening elsewhere in the world (e.g. urban farming, no-packaging, no to food waste, food co-operatives).

The Faroese foodscape thus makes an excellent case for researching local community economies that potentially undermine capitalocentric understandings of the economy, i.e. "the tendency to situate capitalism at the centre of development, thus tending to devalue or marginalize possibilities of noncapitalist development" (Gibson-Graham 2006: 41).

Certainly these local food economies easily fit theorisations of an emerging "economic ethics for the Anthropocene" (Gibson-Graham & Roelvink 2010), i.e. a shift to a new economic ethics where human beings are "learning to be affected" and ultimately "transformed by the world [of the Anthropocene] in which we find ourselves" (ibid: 322) which in turn generates more socially just and environmentally benign economies. However, a political ecology lens would quickly problematise such enthusiasm underlining that the Faroese foodscape remains deeply entangled in global capitalist dynamics - not only through food imports, but also through

the large-scale extractive economy of wild and farmed fish for export, the profits and externalities of which are unevenly distributed.

The following section describes this potential contradiction in more detail and charts my journey into the territory of affirmative political ecology.

Beyond the binaries: An affirmative critical research practice emerges

Initially, the purpose and objective of my doctoral research was to support and engage with local food dynamics in the Faroe Islands that challenge the ‘growth economy’. Thus, during my exploratory field research phase (from October 2017 to January 2018) I was exclusively focused on food practices that do not follow a capitalist logic, which meant that I ended up focusing on traditional community economies and emerging grassroots alternatives, most of which are land-based. I reflected on Faroese food habits and culture as I had experienced these throughout my lifetime and the changes that I had noticed in recent years. I had informal conversations with friends and acquaintances about the topic and more formal and focused interviews with civil society actors, such as local peasant-farmers, the Faroese peasant-farmer association, a community vegetable growers association called *Veltan*, Slow Food Faroe Islands, a local environmental NGO called *FNU (Føroya Náttúru og Umhvørvisfelag)*, and a newly established eco-social food cooperative called *Vístgrøði*. In all cases I enquired into the hopes and visions for

the future of Faroese agriculture and food system in general, and challenges to get there. I found that many of the people I spoke with expressed critical awareness of the relationship between the economic system and global environmental problems, while also finding themselves entangled in these. For instance, one farmer said that:

“...we have caused so much damage on the earth/land [jorðina] for so many years with this attitude that you have to always optimise everything and rationalise everything natural away just so that you can obtain more profits. And I think that this attitude is enemy number one of the earth/land and nature.”
(own translation from Faroese)

However, while it was motivating to learn that these perspectives and attitudes figure between many Faroese people, it was equally discouraging to be reminded through media and general political discourse that what matters most to Faroese political economy and society are activities happening in the ocean: large-scale industrial fisheries and a booming fish farming industry. Hence it became clear to me that doing research on food political dynamics in the Faroe Islands would also have to reckon with these ocean-based food economies or risk ignoring what amounted to be a huge ‘elephant in the room’.

On closer inspection, engaging with this ‘elephant’ has stimulated a deconstructive process of not one but three conceptual binaries. These are hard to disentangle and hence they are all described here.

The first is what we might call ‘a foodscape binary’. The preceding discussion of the Faroese foodscape highlighted the construction of an apparent opposition

between two competing food systems. On the one hand a **land-based/local/subsistence-oriented** food system and, on the other, the apparent polar opposite: namely a food system which is **ocean-based/global/export-oriented**.

In a similar manner we have a second ‘economic ethos binary’ binary around **noncapitalism/non-growth** versus **capitalism/growth**. The whole growth/non-growth debate is a clearly established ‘battle line’ in academia, politics and civil society which goes much broader than food (see for example Kallis *et al.* (2018)). The reason for bringing it up here is because it has formed such a crucial subtext to the discussions that I have had with the participants.

As previously described, my research originally sought to engage fairly exclusively with the land-based/local/subsistence-oriented element of Faroese agriculture which also resonates with a noncapitalist/non-growth oriented economic ethos. However, my work with local stakeholders, much of which kept coming back to bigger questions around industrial fisheries, export and the growth economy – led me to realise that the two were entangled in more fundamental ways. For instance, in Faroese cultural memory fisheries continue to figure as an important source of survival and subsistence. Here the local concept of *útróður* (literally translated to ‘rowing out’) denotes the practice of rowing out for a boil of fish, and while this practice still figures in the Faroes it does so in somewhat contradictory ways. On the one hand the concept is used to denote one of the vessel groups in the Faroese fishery fleet where the catch is primarily sold to the

export market. On the other hand, *útróður* is also still used in its original meaning – going out fishing with your small boat for own subsistence or leisure, thus also here invoking contradictory relations of social and cultural class, rural-urban dynamics, etc. between those owning a boat for leisure, and those owning a boat because of their belonging and/or pursuing a more ‘archaic’ lifestyle (typically in more rural areas).

In 2018 *Bakkafrost*, the largest Faroese fish farming enterprise (registered at the Oslo stock exchange) officially announced plans to build a biogas plant that will produce energy and fertilisers out of the waste from their own industry and from local dairy farms. This ‘environmental corporate social responsibility’ move is in no way surprising as it fits perfectly with the current ‘circular (blue) economy’ trend. However, it also exemplifies why it makes sense to move beyond the binary distinction between land-based (local) food dynamics and ocean-based (global) food dynamics, and instead pay closer attention to their interconnection and fusion. Another example is an initiative by a Faroese fish export company which has started to host a regular local food market on their factory premises – an event which is stimulating local and alternative food dynamics in the country.

I am thus finding that it is important to also engage with the ‘capitalist’ and export-oriented dimension to obtain a more holistic understanding of the Faroese socio-ecology. In this way, bringing the concept of food sovereignty together with the diverse economies framework allows for a noncapitalocentric analysis of the Faroese foodscape that nevertheless

emphasises where resistance needs to go, what needs transformation and what needs building. In this way, I am also focusing on the *doing* of food sovereignty in the Faroes – and exploring the way in which this is an active process constantly in motion which involves the economy and society in the broadest sense.

Indeed, expanding on the case of the Faroes, it is possible to see that, alongside concerns for profit and growth most visible in discussions on fisheries and ocean governance, there are also many other concerns at play, e.g. sustaining (meaningful) livelihoods, which are entrenched in cultural economic practices that are not part of the official economy (Bogadóttir & Olsen 2017). As Cameron's (2010) paper demonstrates, 'growth' in the conventional sense may be dependent on these broader cultural economic practices, but the same does not necessarily apply vice versa. Whilst the scope of our actions, is, in many ways, constrained by the more visible parts of the capitalist economy, there are also clear examples of ways in which Faroese people are practicing economies which are about much more than just economic growth in the 'conventional'²⁴ sense. So again, following Cameron (2010) the question is about how to nurture the kinds of connections and practices which are supportive of these more diverse ways of being within the economy, and I see this as an important focus of my research.

However, a crucial yet much less acknowledged part of the jigsaw for my research concerns a third, much less

²⁴I use speech marks to indicate the fact that it remains hard to write outside of these established binaries, even while the practices 'on the ground' remain more diverse than this!

obvious, 'methodological binary' between **affirmation** and **critique**, which relates to the ways in which we practice research and activism. In recent years the '**critique** versus **affirmation**' debate has become an important subtext to a diverse range of intellectual contributions – all of which coalesce to a certain extent on the bigger issue of hope and the question of how to live well in the Anthropocene (Lear 2008; Gibson *et al.* 2015). To a greater or lesser extent, all these contributions wrestle with the challenges we face in living in a society that is very much in crisis ecologically, socially and politically. The contradictions and challenges can be expressed in many different ways but, to follow the pertinent and practical example used by Cameron (2010), we might want to ask: How can we move beyond binaries so that we can maintain faith in, **affirm** and nurture the generative potential of small-scale food system initiatives and 'alternatives' whilst also maintaining a commitment to **critique** of all too deeply entrenched neoliberal ways of being and doing?

In the following sections, we argue that participatory research methodologies offer a helpful (if underexplored) orientation to this debate, with potential to take us beyond the binaries and allowing us to resist where necessary, whilst also creatively bringing new possibilities into being.

Participatory political ecology

My methodological approach is influenced by political ecology's capacity to emphasise the complex and multi-scalar webs of

material as well as discursive causalities that characterise human-environmental dynamics (Paulson & Gezon 2005), herein how natural eco-systems, local socio-ecologies as well as national decision-making processes and policy making is informed and influenced by structures of the world economy (Hornborg 2001), as well as hegemonic discourses and narratives on for instance progress and development (Escobar 2011). However, in addition to this, my approach is participatory as I am dedicated to doing research which aims to achieve real outcomes with and for real people by treating research participants “as competent and reflexive agents capable of participating in all aspects of the research process” (Kindon *et al.* 2007: 14).

Although there are tensions between political ecology and PAR there are also synergies. Both are politically informed and essentially about shedding light on injustices in order to influence change. Where political ecologists often emphasise complexity, employing multi-scalar analytics to deconstruct pre-conceived ‘truths’ and shed light on environmental problems and injustices in the world, PAR encourages a constructive and community scale analytics to practically address problems and injustices in the world.

Another reason for which I am finding it meaningful to combine political ecology and PAR is because both approaches have in recent years been increasingly informed by and in dialogue with critical scholarly debates about the historical geo-politics of science and knowledge production, herein its colonial bias (Said 1979; Spivak 1988; Mignolo 2002; Escobar 2007), gender

bias (Haraway 1988; Harding 2004) and intersectional bias (Mohanty 2003).

Indeed, PAR is often credited to Freire’s (2017) thinking in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* which inspired a research praxis where scholars relate to research participants as co-researchers rather than research subjects. Although it is also true that as participatory methodologies have been mainstreamed, they have undergone critical scrutiny for not overcoming the hierarchical relation between ‘research expert’ and ‘local participants’ with the ‘tyranny of participation’ becoming a matter of great concern, particularly in the field of development (Cooke & Kothari 2001; Leal 2011). To assist me in reflecting on these and other dynamics of power in my own research process, I draw from a heterogenous range of critical literature exploring issues on power, positionality and engagement (Cameron & Gibson 2005; Sultana 2007; Cornwall 2011; People’s Knowledge Collective 2016). This critical awareness thus also informs the research methodology of this project and makes reflections upon positionality a crucial component of my approach.

Doing research ‘at home’ has both advantages and challenges. In a small society like the Faroe Islands, there are dynamics at play related to the smallness and close relations between people. As a ‘native’ researcher I find myself in situations where research participants are relatives of mine, former class-mates, and so on. This also means that my research participants either know ‘who I am’ before I approach them, and if not, they are likely to ask me directly ‘who my parents are?’ My

research participants are thus likely to situate me somewhere on their mental map of acquaintances and relatives, possibly also with assumptions about my values and politics. Similarly, I will also have some of the participants placed somewhere on my mental map. Although it is relevant to emphasise the importance of being reflexive about such dynamics, it is beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate on these issues.

Having described my general methodological approach, we will now explore some of the specific participatory methods I am using and consider how these enable familiar binaries to be transcended.

Workshopping a participatory research agenda

There is a growing literature on scholar-activism on food justice (Croog *et al.* 2018; Reynolds *et al.* 2018) and the role of academics in the food sovereignty movement also building on participatory methodologies (Levkoe *et al.* 2018). In July 2018 I had the privilege to participate in a PhD summer-school on ‘research praxis for food system transformation’.⁵

The way that the participatory element of my research process is evolving is very much influenced from discussions and collective reflections with facilitators and other course participants at this school. For instance, a dedication to transformative

research (Anderson & McLachlan 2015) has meant that I have approached two Faroese activist groups as primary collaborators in the project, and that these have been involved in designing the research agenda and plan for action. The important point in the context of the present paper is that this involves a deeper level of collaboration, with the activist groups becoming partners and co-designers of the research process, rather than merely participants in a process led entirely by myself.

To initiate this collaboration in the Faroe Islands, I invited the two activist groups to participate in a full-day workshop on the global food system and efforts to change it, connecting this to what is happening in the Faroe Islands. These organisations are the Faroese chapter of Slow Food and the environmental NGO, *Føroya Náttúru og Umhvørvisfelag* (FNU). They were chosen because they are currently the only two ‘civil society organisations’ in the Faroes working on food related issues. Both organisations operate according to flat decision-making structures and are run only by voluntary activists. Another reason why working with these two organisations made sense was that their perspectives and work was well aligned with the kind of perspectives I had encountered in global civil society platforms on food sovereignty and agroecology. By way of example, Slow Food Faroe Islands works on raising awareness of the environmental degradation and social inequalities inherent in the global food system and promotes the rights of small-scale food producers and preservation of traditional food knowledge and practices. FNU is active lobbying for agroecological thinking in

⁵The summer-school was facilitated by Rosa Binimelis Adell and Marta Rivera Ferre from the University of Vic and Colin Anderson, Michel Pimbert and Chris Maughan from the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience at Coventry University.

the new agricultural policy currently being drafted by the government and is also voicing critique of and advocating stricter environmental regulation of the Faroese fish farming industry.

The initial workshop was designed so that in the morning, I facilitated a discussion on what we thought was wrong with the global food system and what international platforms and movements were working to change the food system and how they were working. Although there is a rich body of literature making sense of the socio-ecological inequalities and exploitative structures of the global food system (e.g. Patel 2009; Akraham Lodhi 2013), I decided to not introduce too much theory at this stage in the workshop, as I wanted the analysis to emerge from the participants.

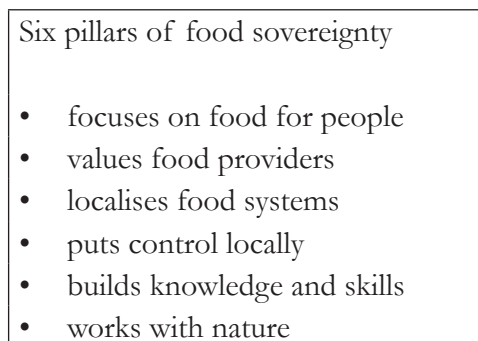
After a rich discussion, we watched a documentary from the British food sovereignty movement and discussed similarities and differences to the Faroe Islands. In the afternoon we looked at the Faroe Islands with similar goggles, but this time we took the concept of

food sovereignty as an explicit point of departure.

In the workshop, we used the six pillars of the food sovereignty concept (see Figure 2) as a framework for analysing the Faroese foodscape. We went through each pillar and discussed whether there were examples of where they had been realised in the Faroe Islands, as well as examples of how they might be realised, and lastly counter-examples (i.e. where the opposite was happening). This spurred a heated debate on the fish farming industry and its influence on the marine ecosystems and small-scale fisheries. At this point I also presented concepts such as a basic socio-economic metabolism, environmental justice, and degrowth to give further conceptual depth to the discussion. All these ideas resonated well with the participants and together with the concept of food sovereignty these gave a rich preliminary analysis of the Faroese foodscape – affirming positive dynamics and criticising socio-ecologically degrading dynamics.

After a fruitful workshop we agreed to continue collaboration, and a couple of weeks later we spent a week developing the next phase of the collaboration. During this week we sought to analyse the Faroese foodscape by drawing up a Cartesian coordinate system made up of the vertical axis ‘small-scale - large-scale’ and the horizontal axis ‘global - local’. This initial attempt at an analysis revealed that even though some food economies were situated quite clearly on one side of each of these axes, there was a diverse range of food economies that were difficult to situate, as they carried elements of both ‘small-scale’ and ‘large-scale’ and/or elements of both

Figure 2. The six pillars of Food Sovereignty (Nyéléni 2007c).



‘global’ and ‘local’ food system dynamics (for example the local food market mentioned earlier which was an initiative by a Faroese fish-export company). This revelation was only possible to arrive at because of our critical situated knowledge and own involvement in the Faroese foodscape. Thus, from starting the working week with a binary approach to food economies, the week ended with a much messier and more complex understanding, also in terms of which dynamics to criticise and which ones to empower and affirm. Since then we have decided to explore the usefulness of Gibson-Graham’s diverse economies table (see Figure 3) in the next phase of the project, which is scheduled to take place later this year. This will allow for a more grounded analysis of the Faroese foodscape, while still keeping a structure that encourages us to think ‘across and beyond’ binaries such as ‘noncapitalism-capitalism’.

The objective of the next phase of our research collaboration is to explore what food sovereignty and food justice means in the Faroe Islands. This will involve interviews and workshops with food producers as well as a survey that will seek to understand how Faroese people access food and what their attitudes to food are. The project will culminate with a public forum to discuss future actions for food sovereignty and food justice in the Faroese context. My partner organisations are therefore not only involved in shaping the direction of the project but have agreed to be involved in all phases of the project (carrying out interviews, public engagement activities, analysis, etc.).

Conclusion: Towards an affirmative political ecology of Faroese food

In my work on the Faroe Islands, I have been struggling with how to find the right balance between the critical perspective and an affirmative practice. Recent contributions on *engaged* political ecology (Batterbury 2015; 2016; Batterbury & Horowitz forthcoming) and activism in research (Askins 2009; Askins & Blazek 2017) take us into exactly this territory and raise important questions around the *how* of affirmative political ecology. This is, we suggest, where participatory action research has an important role to play. Almost by definition, PAR involves working beyond apparent boundaries and binaries since it involves engaging meaningfully with the often messier reality that activists and food producers navigate in, as well as the diverse perspectives that they hold of the context they are in and their agency in the food system. In my case, adopting a participatory research process with local activists is proving to be crucial for developing an understanding of the Faroese foodscape that transcends binary thinking, as well as a research approach which is simultaneously critical and affirmative.

Again, however, it is helpful to reflect on the extent to which there may be a gulf between a recognised need and desire to do research in this way and the more practical question of the skills and approaches needed to do this. The kind of process described in this article – namely, an ambition to transcend binaries, engaging meaningfully with participants, and walking the tightrope of hope and despair

| LABOUR | TRANSACTIONS | PROPERTY | ENTERPRISE | FINANCE |
|-------------------|-----------------------------|--|-----------------------------|--|
| Wage | Market | Private | Capitalist | Mainstream Markets |
| ALTERNATIVE PAID | ALTERNATIVE MARKET | ALTERNATIVE PRIVATE | ALTERNATIVE CAPITALIST | ALTERNATIVE MARKET |
| Self-employed | Fair trade | State-managed assets | State owned | Cooperative Banks |
| Reciprocal labour | Alternative currencies | Customary (clan) land | Environmentally responsible | Credit unions |
| In-kind | Underground market | Community land trusts | Socially responsible | Community-based financial institutions |
| Work for welfare | Barter | Indigenous knowledge (Intellectual Property) | Non-profit | Micro-finance |
| UNPAID | NON-MARKET | OPEN ACCESS | NON-CAPITALIST | NON-MARKET |
| Housework | Household sharing | Atmosphere | Worker cooperatives | Sweat equity |
| Volunteer | Gift giving | International Waters | Sole proprietorship | Family lending |
| Self-provisioning | Hunting, fishing, gathering | Open source IP | Community enterprise | Donations |
| Slave labour | Theft, piracy, poaching | Outer Space | Feudal | Interest-free loans |
| | | | Slave | |

Figure 3. The Diverse Economies Framework (adapted from Gibson-Graham 2006).

alongside them necessitates a very *active* research process and involves skills – and, indeed, parts of yourself – which are not traditionally catered for in research training programmes. For example, in my own case, not only is the Faroe Islands a small country, I was also a member in *FNU* and I know all the participants. This means that they also know me and my background, so there is already a high level of transparency here. Nevertheless, this often makes it tricky to work out my role and function in the project. At the moment, I am feeling more like a facilitator in the research process. Yet here again, I often find myself asking how am I participating, and what kind of power dynamics are happening? While it is tempting to say that such experiences are all about reflexivity, I would argue that a truly engaged and affirmative PAR project involves a strong *relational* research process that goes way beyond this and requires a different perspective on traditional categories of researcher, activist, etc. Here, it is interesting to think about how Haraway's classic contribution on situated knowledges (1988) may come together with some of the recent writing on the role of emotions within the research process (see for example Mountz *et al.* (2015), Askins & Blazek (2017)) in a way that is thought-provoking and helpful. Indeed, it may be that these aspects – i.e. new insights on what it actually means and involves to conduct affirmative political ecology – may also prove to be an important contribution of my work. In short, there is lots to go on but, following this approach, we hope it will become more possible for researchers to be equipped with a hopeful yet also critical agenda...

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