

Agency is not enough: obstacles to back-to-the-land and agri-food downscaling

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Short abstract

From a degrowth point of view, organic farming, re-localization of production, alternative supply-chains are part of a socio-ecological transition in agri-food systems to reduce social metabolism. Similarly, back-to-the-landers choosing a simpler, autonomous, and close-to-nature agrarian life are seen as practitioners of that transition by re-working the imaginaries, building other food regime, and “escaping” labor alienation. I argue that these normative aspects are based in a simplistic understanding of how agri-food downscaling and back-to-the-land works. From a case-study in the Basque Country with back-to-the-landers engaged in agro-ecology and alternative food networks, I show that any transition is constrained by conditions as the access to land or the general costs of living. Those barriers also limit “escaping” labor alienation. I conclude that this implies obstacles to individual agency and that any transition depends on the success of political networks to change the institutions that govern access to land and costs of living.

Key-words: Back-to-the-land, agri-food downscaling, degrowth transition

Narrative step: Building strategies for transformation

Long abstract

Agriculture produces food, a basic need, and it is deeply dependent and impactful on biophysical elements. Moreover, food regimes changes involves ecological and social disruption, besides carrying the transgression of tastes and bodies. These make agriculture and food central in any debate on socio-ecological transitions.

Agriculture and food enters degrowth debates through its core ideas of social metabolism and volunteer individual change. The first regards material downscaling of agrarian and food systems and integrates proposals to shift to organic farming, to change consumption patterns towards seasonal diets, and to re-localize food production and consumption. But in doing those proposals, it lacks an understanding of the political-economy drivers and relations influencing how food regimes are formed, evolve or shift. The second focus is the individual agency of producers and consumers to set in practice this transition by restructuring the way food is produced, distributed and consumed. Back-to-the-landers who choose an agrarian lifestyle based in an intimate relation with nature, non-wage labor, non-profit orientation in the production process and lower consumption needs, fit well this capacity of individuals to restructure the agri-food systems. Moreover, by their choice, back-to-the-landers are individuals that can “escape” mainstream labor, production and consumption relations, taken by degrowth literature as the engines of a “growth” economy and of an “artificial” separation between nature and human beings. In sum, back-to-the-landers can be considered through a degrowth frame as privileged actors of a degrowth transition by re-working the imaginaries, putting in practice another food regime and “escaping” labor alienation.

In this article I argue that the degrowth perspective on the socio-ecological transition in agri-food systems based on volunteer change offer a simplistic understanding of how material downscaling and back-to-the-land works. From a case-study in Bizkaia, Euskadi (the Basque Country), with back-to-the-landers engaged in agro-ecology and alternative food networks, I show that any agri-food degrowth transition is constrained by broader political economy conditions as the access to land or the general costs of living. Those barriers also limit “escaping” labor alienation relations through adopting a radically new agrarian lifestyle.

The case-study is based in qualitative methods of research. Between October and December of 2013 I made participant observation and semi-structured interviews with 26 back-to-the-landers located

in Bizkaia. All of them practice organic farming in small farm holdings, have no dependency on external inputs, and commercialize directly to consumers through alternative food networks (AFN). In some of the AFN the prices of food are determined conjointly by producers and consumers and the risks of production are shared with consumers.

From my case-study it was clear that the main barrier to back-to-the-land is access to land, a basic asset to agriculture. Without any other institutional intervention on land property rights, prices and land-uses, access to land has to be made according to the existing land structure and is dependent on land-owners decisions. In Bizkaia, the process of access and is difficult, slow and frequently based on precarious agreement conditions with the land-owners.

Bizkaia is a densely populated territory and has a difficult orography. These combined with a residential preference for rural areas makes land a scarce resource. In a context where atomized private property predominates, the main problems pointed by back-to-the-landers were high prices and private land-owners reticence. Both relate with the way land use and urban policies have (i) favoured urbanization of agrarian land, converted farm holdings into residences, fragmented property property by inheritance, and (ii) not prevented prices speculation, land abandonment or its use for rentier purposes. To these dynamics of urbanization, conversion of holdings and high prices contributed the last decades patterns on urban-to-rural migration and the way capital followed them, both creating on private land-owners an expectation on land-valuation. Even with the recent economic crisis, prices of land have not turned down. At the same time, land private owners are very reluctant to make their land available or they do it at high prices based on their land-value expectations. These are broader barriers to back-to-the-land, to which might contribute the demand for farm holdings by degrowth practitioners only motivated by co-housing or self-sufficiency ends. The conditions to access land determine the chances of adopting an agrarian lifestyle and of make a living from farming. But land is not the only factor. There are limits to autonomously determine production-consumption relations outside the broader social relations of production. This has implications in building a socio-ecological transition able to democratize access to food or to sustain back-to-the-landers economically.

Producers and consumers relations are mediated by the price of food. Through alternative food networks it is possible to determine social prices outside market criteria ensuring an income to producers and non-elite prices to consumers. In this way the producer is not forced to expand production or reduce costs of production, neither he has to compete with other producers. Equally, consumers can have access to affordable high quality food. But this determination is limited by the purchasing power of consumers and by the system of needs of producers. Both depend on the broader costs of living. In Bizkaia, even if back-to-the-landers have a reduced system of needs due to their new lifestyle, they have difficulties in living from farming or they have unstable incomes that involve high rhythms of work. When expenses with children or housing are involved, usually the other member of the family has a non-agrarian job to ensure a stable income. In sum, dealing with farm viability and food accessibility through the prices of food is an unstable equilibrium influenced by determinants beyond the producer-consumer relation. For instance, broader labor relations (e.g. wages) or the cost of money (e.g. inflation) restrict the autonomy of those practices. The direct exchange between producers and consumers in alternative food networks does not occur without political-economy mediations.

One of the ways to make food affordable is not to enter with all labor-time in the price of food. This is a common practice in family farming pushed by competition in order to survive. This is not the case of back-to-the-land labor-intensive agroecological projects in Bizkaia. Price of food intends to ensure a “just” income to the producer and not to remunerate the costs of labor by the same market token. But because prices of food are constrained by broader market factors, even if they are socially determined, abstract labor-time does not disappears. For instance, producers might have to reduce their costs of production by additional working hours in order to maintain non-elite prices. This implies increased working hours to ensure the self-reproduction of producers, not by “choice” but by the effect structural factors. In this way, labor alienation does not disappear even if producers

work for themselves, their production decisions are non-profit orientated and organize their own time of work and leisure. Because labor is not free from constrains and it is not totally self-determined, it is not de-alienated.

The way political-economy mediates access to land and the general costs of living shows that the degrowth approach based on individual agency has limitations, besides the re-working of the imaginaries. I conclude by saying that these political-economy barriers imply obstacles to individual agency to perform this transition and that the transformative potential of back-to-the-land project depends on the success of its political networks of organization to change the institutions that govern access to land and public infrastructure and govern the costs of living.