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*Ezafun*



## EL FUTURO DE LA ALIMENTACIÓN Y RETOS DE LA AGRICULTURA PARA EL SIGLO XXI:

*Debates sobre quién, cómo y con qué implicaciones sociales, económicas y ecológicas alimentará el mundo.*

## THE FUTURE OF FOOD AND CHALLENGES FOR AGRICULTURE IN THE 21st CENTURY:

*Debates about who, how and with what social, economic and ecological implications we will feed the world.*

## ELIKADURAREN ETORKIZUNA ETA NEKAZARITZAREN ERRONKAK XXI. MENDERAKO:

*Mundua nork, nola eta zer-nolako inplikazio sozial, ekonomiko eta ekologikorekin elikatuko duen izango da eztabaidagaia*

### ***Youth Producing Food for an Alternative Society: Insights from the Basque Country***

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## **Youth Producing Food for an Alternative Society: Insights from the Basque Country**

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Integrating more youth into agriculture and peasant/small-scale farmers' movements is a priority for many rural organizations involved in food sovereignty. The key international documents that define food sovereignty and articulate strategies for food system transformation often recognize both women and youth as unique social categories with particular needs and interests (Nyéléni 2007; La Vía Campesina 2008, 2013). The interests and concerns of rural youth, for example, are among the priorities of La Vía Campesina, the transnational agrarian movement that first introduced a peasant vision of food sovereignty in 1996.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, La Vía Campesina has created specific political spaces for youth to exchange experiences, engage in dialogue and debate, develop a collective analysis, define strategies, and ultimately engage in collective action (Nyéléni Newsletter 2014).<sup>2</sup> The result has been enthusiastic youthful exuberance and creativity often infusing La Vía Campesina gatherings, debates, and actions. While this is the organized, highly politicized, and more visible face of rural youth engaged in food sovereignty, there are other more quiet and day-to-day pathways by which youth engage in food sovereignty.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter sheds light on more hidden expressions of food sovereignty by analyzing the motivations and experiences of Basque youth who have chosen to make a radical change of life by living as new agrarians and/or taking part in growing food to engage in self-provisioning. The activist experiences that we analyze have less to do with the politics of public protest than with prefigurative politics – that is, effecting change in the 'here and now' by creating alternative social structures and new ways of living, and by relating to one another while engaging in counter-hegemonic projects. As Carl Boggs (1978) reminds us, prefiguration is "the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal" (5) and anticipate the future liberated society. These Basque activist experiences shed light on the importance of paying attention to the cultural dimensions of social movements that include, among other things, generating ideas, creating symbols, and introducing alternative narratives (Johnston and Klandermans 1995).

Hence, our discussion shifts away from the role of states and social movements in defining public policies for food sovereignty to focus more on what we think might be a necessary step toward food system transformation. That is, we look at the importance of personal individual change that can occur through engagement in collective spaces. As David Harvey (2000) asserts, “no one can hope to change the world without changing themselves” (235). He further stresses the need for the “collectivization of the impulse and desire for change” (ibid. 238). Thus, we go beyond the ‘personal is political’ to also comment on the significance of defining practices or rules of engagement for collectives intent on social transformation. We argue that this, what Harvey (ibid.) calls the “politics of collectivities” (238), might also be considered a form of institutionalization critical to social movements’ struggles for social change.

The chapter is based on qualitative research involving 12 group interviews with 46 Basque youth between the ages of 15 and 29 who were organized into collectives (agro-assemblies and other self-organized young spaces). Some of those interviewed were already well-established peasants while others were in the process of establishing themselves or working the land for their own consumption. We supplemented these with 10 individual interviews with people between 25 and 45 years of age who were already established on the land. Most participants did not come from the rural sector. All those interviewed were from the four provinces of Euskal Herria, located in the Spanish state (Bizkaia, Araba, Gipuzkoa and Navarra), and the collectives (agro-assemblies and other self-managed youth spaces) were located in distinct sociological realities: some had an important agricultural sector but had also diversified into tourism, while others had a marked industrial economy. All the interviews were carried out in Euskera (the Basque language).

The chapter begins with a brief explanation of some objective conditions that shape food sovereignty struggles in the Basque Country. Next, we discuss the new food sovereignty spaces that youth are creating, based on *autogestioa*.<sup>4</sup> These are practice-oriented, alternative, and radical spaces that cultivate transformative subjects who engage in food sovereignty. We then explore the youth’s perceptions of food sovereignty and how these are linked to critiques of capitalism. We conclude by examining the limitations, paradoxes, and potential of these lifestyle projects.

### **Food sovereignty in the Basque Country: A bit of context**

Food sovereignty, in general, centres on peoples’ struggles for self-determination of life and society. In the Basque Country, the idea of sovereignty is associated with the Basque people’s political struggles for self-government, self-determination, and/or independence – that is, the right to decide the future of the country through a process of deepening democracy. These understandings of sovereignty infuse and give more power to the ways in which food sovereignty is conceptualized and practiced in the Basque Country, and are also at the heart of the alternatives that we analyze in this chapter.

To understand struggles for food sovereignty in the Basque Country, it is important to consider certain basic characteristics of the country. Euskal Herria, as it is known in the

Basque language, is a group of seven provinces (four in the Spanish state and three in the French state) that connect about three million inhabitants. There is a marked contrast between the rural provinces, especially those located in the French state, and the others – especially the provinces of Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa – that are characterized by high urban density. Yet, even though the Basque Country has a highly industrialized economy, for many Basques the rural is not an unknown space, nor is it geographically, socially, or culturally distant. There is an important horticultural/agricultural tradition in the region that is practiced by many who have small farms or gardens on the outskirts of small and medium-sized towns. Consequently, there is much interaction and closeness between urban and rural worlds, so that in most of the Basque territory, engaging in food production in rural contexts does not necessarily represent a separation or disconnection from urban social, cultural, and material processes (Calvario 2017). Given the physical proximity between the rural and urban, youth initiatives in agriculture are often compatible with daily contact with or even living in an urban setting.

The Basque agrarian sector has suffered severe economic blows in recent decades as a result of the processes of industrialization, mechanization, capitalist development, and subsequent rural exodus.<sup>5</sup> For example, between 1999-2009 in the Autonomous Basque Community (the provinces of Bizkaia, Gipuzkoa and Araba), the number of farms fell by 33.5%, with agriculture now representing only 0.49% of total the Gross Domestic Product (European Union Reporter 2015; European Commission 2015) and 1% of the Basque active population. Currently, only 10% of farmers are under 40 years of age and there are important concerns related to generational succession (ibid.). In contrast with these trends, there has been a notable explosion of processes, agents, and experiences connected to food sovereignty in the region in recent years. This includes the creation of consumer groups and cooperatives; the articulation of peasant and consumer networks, educational initiatives, and diverse NGOs; and the consolidation of an increasingly more visible and broader food sovereignty movement including new organizations like Etxalde, EHKOlektiboa, and Baserria XXI.<sup>6</sup> All of this has contributed to a growing discourse around, and significant cultural presence of, food sovereignty in different sectors of Basque society.

Youth are a critical part of the food sovereignty movement in the Basque Country. In recent years, the number of youth interested in settling in the countryside has increased notably, and more than 1,000 of them have taken agricultural training courses organized by the farmers' union, Euskal Herriko Nekazarien Elkartasuna (EHNE-Bizkaia). Both the EHNE-Bizkaia and its French Basque sister union, the Euskal Herriko Laborarien Batasuna (ELB) which is the Basque branch of the Confédération Paysanne, are convenors and leaders of Etxalde; both organizations defend local and peasant agriculture involving small-scale, diversified, agroecological production methods and emphasize the need to integrate more youth into agriculture.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, some argue that the region may be experiencing a modest process of “re-peasantization” of the countryside by youth (Calvario 2017).

## **Building new nodes for food sovereignty: Agro-assemblies and other (radical) youth spaces**

There is no simple way to define the new social and political spaces that the youth in the Basque Country are creating. Some are involved in agro-assemblies; others participate in alternative youth spaces that include *gaztetxes*; and still others have become peasants, some of whom were involved in agro-assemblies while others had no affiliation with the food sovereignty movement. Our discussion primarily concerns the agro-assembly and the alternative youth spaces.

The local agro-assembly is a new and innovative phenomenon in the Basque food sovereignty movement. Some agro-assemblies consist only of *baserritarras* (the Basque term for peasants) and focus more on practical and operational issues; here, participants are primarily interested in creating markets and other practical initiatives to market their products. Other agro-assemblies bring together both producers and consumers; this model has a more political profile. These are spaces comprised mainly of *baserritarras* and citizens who want to produce and consume critically and responsibly, are generally interested in agroecological transformation in the rural world, cultivate gardens for self sufficiency/ subsistence, and/or simply aim to strengthen food sovereignty strategies in their region. In spite of this diversity, most local agro-assemblies promote local markets, organize encounters between consumers and producers, seek to transform school cafeterias so that school children can consume local and organic products, pressure local administrations to establish policies that promote food sovereignty, and develop proposals for agricultural extension and training activities.

The other alternative youth spaces that we analyse emerged from the *Gaztetxes*. These are social centres created by youth in many Basque municipalities; they are normally self-managed spaces—some of them occupied—in which entertainment and political radicalism are combined. Their history is strongly associated with an anti-systemic and anti-institutional spirit. Although this more radical profile has softened somewhat, *Gaztetxes* continue to organize many alternative cultural activities such as concerts, theatre, popular kitchens, counter-information events, and diverse educational workshops. In addition, some *Gaztetxes* formed small groups consisting of between four and twenty people to focus specifically on food production. Some of these self-governed youth spaces were located in distinctly urban areas (for example, two of the groups we studied are in a neighbourhood in the heart of Bilbao), while others are in smaller communities of between 1,000 and 12,000 inhabitants.

To provide a sense of the diversity of collective experiences among the youth, we provide below a description of five of the groups to which our interviewees belonged. In doing so, we offer glimpses into their perceptions and visions of food sovereignty as well as their efforts at implementing it.

### *Uribe Kosta*

The Uribe Kosta agro-assembly was created in 2012 by a group of young people who were concerned with the growing absence of farmers in the region and the need for a more environmentally-friendly and community-based agricultural model. Consequently, with equal participation from men and women, they created an assembly even though none of them was a *baserritarra*. Many of the youth involved were experienced activists having already participated in a *gaztetxe* or other alternative social movements. They spent an entire year defining the objectives of the agro-assembly and created different working groups to address key issues such as access to land, education, organizing workshops and consciousness raising. While defining the role of the assembly, they also organized local markets and spaces for open debates with the broader local community.

During this process the agro-assembly participants realized their objectives were impossible without the existence of local agroecological *baserritarras* thus prompting some to start farming. Interestingly, in this case, the political work to promote food sovereignty came first, followed by the initiative by some members to become peasants. Later on, the assembly was opened to any citizen committed to working for food sovereignty and consisted of farmers, consumers, and “those ready to defend Mother Earth, and people who believe in the recovery of the philosophy of *auzolan*. ”<sup>8</sup>

### *Ortuondo*

The Ortuondo *gaztetxe*, located in the municipality of Galdakao on the outskirts of the city of Bilbao, is particularly significant because of its more critical anti-capitalist stance. It was formed by a group of thirteen youth – all male students or unemployed members of the local youth assembly movement, with no previous agricultural experience – who became increasingly interested in gardening for self-provisioning as a path to transformation. Their initial actions involved occupying sufficient land to create a dozen gardens. Subsequently, as a result of on-going collective reflection on their experiences, they then opted to escalate their involvement by seeking to create a way of life that would go beyond capitalism.

The group’s goal was to build a communal economy outside the capitalist market, based on sharing what they produced. They sought to control the means of production and to produce for themselves. While some members of the group started to engage in agriculture by producing wheat, beer, pigs, sheep, cheese, honey, vegetables, and preserves, they sought not to exclude other sectors, given that their objective is sovereignty not only of food, but comprehensive *autogestioa* of all aspects of life.

This goal, however, is not without contradictions. Throughout their experience, the group faced tensions in reconciling the needs of the individual and the collective. That is, while they collectively occupied and prepared the land for production, and also pooled resources to acquire tools, each individual had his own garden. Also, the group rejected learning more about organic agriculture by arguing that the concept had been appropriated by the market. Self-identifying as peasants, they preferred not to label their

method of production. Nor have they taken advantage of EHNE-Bizkaia's training since their aim is to be self-sufficient and to learn from the wisdom transmitted by the elders in the community who have decades of experience working on the land. The idea is to create a communal space disarticulated from the logic of the market, thereby recovering what they consider to be the disappeared figure of the peasant. However, they are conscious of the difficulty in totally emancipating from such logic and monetary exchange, and carry out a mixed formula through what they call a "tactic" of producing a certain amount for the communal space and another for the market (which provides them with resources to cover costs and some money for each member's subsistence), with the hope of eventually broadening the communal economy.

### *Ortuzabala*

The Ortuzabala group is comprised of four young women who work the land and distribute vegetables to various families in Oñati, a town of some 11,000 inhabitants that has a very high employment rate due to the significant presence of the industrial Mondragon co-operatives. None of the women had previous experience in growing food. As one participant put it: "We didn't think much about objectives, we wanted to live off the land and were especially interested in practice. We needed to do it, and just started doing it."

The group emphasizes the social and political dimensions in their work by establishing spaces for regular interaction and discussion thus developing strong ties with the nineteen families who purchase their food baskets. For example, in addition to distributing the baskets in a public centre every week, the group organizes a meeting every three months with the families involved to discuss any issues of interest or problems that may be arising. They also organize special days so that any of the families who are interested in more direct involvement can spend the day working in the gardens. The collective addresses the political by raising public awareness about food sovereignty and agroecology through disseminating information and engaging in debates via the media, organizing public talks and round table discussions, and one on one exchanges. The group feels that addressing the social and political dimensions of their work is critical to effecting change and they expressed some frustration at not having sufficient time to do more of this kind of work.

### *Tosu*

In contrast, the Tosu group – based in the wealthy coastal city of Getxo (population 78,000) and characterized by a more urban profile – emerged from a struggle to stop the public administration's development plan to construct 8,000 homes and a big parking lot on a large piece of land that was surrounded by small farms. The land was the only remaining green zone for agriculture in one of the city's neighbourhoods. Although the housing development was abandoned (at least temporarily) in large part because of the economic crisis, construction of a parking lot for commuters who go on to travel by train from Getxo to Bilbao was scheduled to continue. In an effort to stop this development, in 2011, the group consolidated itself and decided to occupy the land.<sup>9</sup> They began by

growing food on eight individual parcels and cultivating one common garden for their own consumption.

Throughout its trajectory the group has had many ups and downs. Like the Ortuondo *gaztetxe*, the Tosu group had to tackle the question of an individual vs communal approach. Indeed, this is one of the critical, long-standing, and energy-draining debates also faced by other groups and agro-assemblies. Given that the individual parcels functioned better than the communal ones, in 2012 participants of the Tosu collective sought ways to strengthen a culture of working the gardens collectively. Once they established conditions, there was significant improvement on communally-worked land. Faced with threats of eviction, the encampment strengthened its sociopolitical activities by organizing various workshops, courses, public talks, and agricultural training activities; this work culminated in 2014 when seven youth deciding to live on the occupied land permanently as an act of resistance. They established good relations with those living in the neighbourhood, the agro-assembly, youth assemblies, and other social organizations in the area. They also developed ties to EHNE-Bizkaia, the EZLN platform in Bilbao, and other anti-developmental organizations and self-organized groups.

Through agroecological farming and raising chickens, the group (at the time of the interview) was self-sufficient and also sold produce. The collective saw growing food as one of the central axes to constructing another model of development and a new way of living. The group links food sovereignty with practical and tangible things: eating locally and seasonally, reducing purchases as much as possible, growing different varieties, etc. As one participant put it: “[We’re interested in] the capacity of producing locally and in the ways we want, in small groups and directly, using a sustainable model.” They understand that “agroecology isn’t an objective, it is a way of life”: it is a model that considers working conditions, the natural environment, autonomy of labour, and nonhierarchical human relations.

Thus, with the Tosu group, what began as a protest involving a temporary occupation of a parcel of land became a major project of creating a small peasant community in the context of increasingly limited access to farmland. Some members opted to live on the land so that it could remain in the hands of the people and be cultivated for food rather than used for a kind of urban development that effectively inhibits young people from establishing themselves in the countryside. The struggle over this land is ongoing and it remains occupied by members of the Tosu group.

### *Mendillori*

Mendillori, a Pamplona neighbourhood built in the 1990s, is home to many youth (aged 19 and 20) experiencing high unemployment and drug use. Feeling abandoned by the public authorities, the community conducted an assessment that clearly showed a need and interest in revitalizing the neighbourhood through self-organization. Subsequently, they launched a movement of young people between the ages of 14 and 32 that brought together a total of 120 youths.<sup>10</sup> Functioning as an assembly, the movement created a number of subgroups to work on various themes such as ecology, culture, and how to

integrate self-determination (*autogestioa*) into many different aspects of life and society. But the garden group was by far the most successful, thus making food production and self-provision central to the assembly's work.

The main political principle of the youth movement is self-organization and they also promote the idea that food is not a business. One of their first activities, initiated by 10 youth, was to occupy land, with the help of older residents who were experienced in horticulture, and grow a communal garden to provide food for marginalized families with few resources living in the neighbourhood. Three days after the planting had begun, the municipal police removed everything from the garden and established a police presence through persistent threats and harassment. The youth, with the help of neighbourhood elders and the participation of small children, responded with non-violence by replanting the garden. The entire community participated in the project, thus creating cohesion and a strong sense of community. Faced with this, the police were powerless.

Although the assembly does not talk of food sovereignty nor agroecology, they have a marked feminist and anti-capitalist discourse. As one participant stated that “change comes when each neighbourhood, each local community starts to organize to create alternatives (...) If each community is self-organized we won't have to depend on the municipality nor on capitalism.” From this perspective, change begins with the local and involves co-existing and creating strong community. However, there is also recognition that change is also always in flux within the group, with ebbs of flows of interest and activity.

### **Forging new social structures and ways of being**

The functioning of the agro-assemblies and other alternative youth spaces differs considerably. When the interviews were conducted, some maintained an intense weekly meeting practice while others met only when needed. The creation of an assembly can be planned and conscientious in some cases, while other assemblies occur somewhat spontaneously and gradually. For example, intentionality was clearly evident in one case when a youth proposed to work land inherited from his great-grandfather and the rest of the group eventually chose to help him. What started out as an individual pastime became transformative collective labour: “...people told me they would come with me to help, spontaneously, because they were curious/concerned and interested, and in the end the land has become everyone's.” Some of the agro-assemblies were created for fundamentally practical reasons: to create spaces of connection between producers, self-help, bulk purchasing, knowledge exchange, training, etc. In other cases, such pragmatism led to more political work aimed at implementing food sovereignty at a local level. However, there are also cases involving a process of depoliticization. For example, in a *gaztetxe*'s anti-hegemonic political vision, food and agriculture are seen as the vehicles for social change, but as participants shift all their energy and efforts toward working at producing food, there is less overt political action.

*Food sovereignty: A central element of counter-hegemonic activism*

All of the youth we interviewed, in one way or another, linked food production and agriculture with a larger goal of social transformation; their paths to social change were diverse, dynamic, and constantly evolving. Throughout the research, participants linked food sovereignty to ideas of power, autonomy, and/or self-determination of life and society. However, some groups and assemblies had more interaction with the notion of food sovereignty than others.

The ideal is *autogestioa* of life.<sup>11</sup> This idea of autonomy is closely linked to self-realization and the satisfaction that comes from control over one's own life. One participant stressed that "To self-manage and know how to produce what you consume is a huge self-realization," while another said "it's about making something yourself, being autonomous, turning reality on its head and being happy." It is not a question of carrying out a political activity aimed at convincing people about one's own truth; instead it is about transforming one's own life and demonstrating by example that there are alternatives. As one participant said

"We don't want to convince anyone; I like that less and less. We want to propagandize by example. By doing it and demonstrating that it is dignified to live from and look after the land people see that we are happy; and that we work the land and that it is possible to be a peasant. People who see that we're happy and live well from the land will realise that it is the path forward."

This bottom-up approach to change resembles what Geoffrey Pleyers (2011) identifies as a culture of activism that effects change at a local scale and emphasizes the importance of experience and experimentation. As Haiven and Khasnabish (2014) demonstrate, in prefigurative praxis, the emphasis is on "experiments in living otherwise" (62). This is also consistent with the pre-figurative spirit of social change, that is of "getting on with it, here and now" (Holloway 2010, 259) and doing so in ways that "consolidate, proliferate, and diffuse . . . perspectives and collective conducts" (Yates 2015, 19). As yet another participant stressed: "We like working the land because we didn't want to work on someone else's project, we wanted to create our own, and at the same time to infect others with another way of living." Therefore, far from isolating themselves, participants seek to spread the deep disruption of existing modes of living through "contagion, emulation, or resonance" (Holloway 2010, 78).

For many youth, engagement with the countryside is closely related to the idea of self-sufficiency, self-management, control of one's life, and personal and collective sovereignty. Autonomy is the political signifier *par excellence* and group members stated that this means, among other things: "not depending on anyone", "moving away from the large industries, doing it with our own hands, empowering ourselves", "[making it so that] control isn't in the hands of the multinationals but in ours, the citizens', so producers can live with dignity". As Di Masso and Zografos (2014) state in their study of food sovereignty activism in Catalonia, Spain, this "do it now and do it yourself" aspect of the self-management discourse "presents an exemplary case of an agency-based approach to social change" (170).

It is important to stress the significance the youth placed on the value of sovereignty, understood as individual/personal and collective autonomy or self-sufficiency. Autonomy is not understood as an individualistic space but as having freedom of action and decision-making about one's own life and as emancipation from dependencies related to public administration or hegemonic socio-productive structures. Importantly, autonomy is infused with a strong social sentiment as it entails the collective construction of social and affective networks that arise from a successful project.<sup>12</sup> While acknowledging the long-term nature of struggles for autonomy, the youth are using both realism and pragmatism; as one participant put it, it is about "being independent at [any] level you can." And importantly, they are not getting lost in a fantasy of utopia. Instead, they are working towards it gradually and persistently, starting with something that is central to life: food. In the words of a young woman: "I relate food sovereignty to autonomy, liberating yourself from dependency. We can reach autonomy through food. [While it] is a far-away objective, we began right from the start, with food."

For the young people in this study, food has become a fundamental vehicle for social change. Indeed, growing gardens has gained increasing prominence in the transformational agenda for many of the Basque *gaztetxes*, along with other historical issues such as youth problems associated with work precariousness, housing, and other social rights. This shift to youth activism centred on self-determination in food represents a new and innovative development in the history of the youth movement in the Basque Country with more youth now looking to the countryside as a key site of resistance and social change. This is accompanied by a notable cultural change regarding the perception of what is rural. The garden and the rural, far from representing the past and backwardness, represent a better (personal and collective) future and are being converted into important counter-cultural spaces by alternative and anti-systemic urban groups. Closely linked to this, food sovereignty helps shape the imaginaries of the Basque youth, gains cultural power, and in the process emerges as a central political determinant in the project for the radical transformation of society.

If food sovereignty is the political goal, as one group member said, "agroecology is the means or the path." On this, there appeared to be consensus among the groups, with participants, defining various elements of the agroecological model as follows: "producing ecologically and without chemicals", "working in dignified conditions", "getting the right seed", "having control within the distribution chain", "establishing direct contact with the consumer", "not harming ourselves or Mother Earth", and "relating oneself transparently with the earth and society". In essence it is "autonomous, social, and sustainable agriculture" that consists of "non-elitist production" directed to the needs of the popular classes and accessible for all society. "

### *Necessity or vocation? Creating new ways of living*

The youth's motivations for cultivating the land have a clear political character. While questioning and rejecting the hegemonic economic model, the protagonists of these experiences seek to subvert the dominant order by initiating change within the context of

their own everyday lives. For some, the countryside becomes a new way of living that begins with personal fulfillment and through which identities and values are expressed.<sup>13</sup> A young woman expressing her motive for change put it like this:

I wanted to have a way of life that was coherent with my own criteria. I worked doing surveys – what a lot of effort and dedication for something that didn't make sense! It's not good to invest so much effort in a job you don't believe in and doesn't make sense, [a job] has to be fulfilling.

For many of the youth that we interviewed, food sovereignty is understood as a pathway of *autogestioa* that, importantly, also entails self-realization, personal fulfillment, coherence, and identity. Work is part of life, and beyond its merely instrumental values (sustenance and monetary resources), it becomes an element of coherence and personal development. However, it is about much more than just work. Choosing the countryside is part of one's identity and it is about constructing an alternative life project. This means finding congruency between the ideological (strong questioning of the current social reality) and everyday practice whereby ideological visions are integrated into the most intimate areas of, and thus helps shape, people's lives. As one activist said,

You spend a few years as a militant and ask yourself, what do I want to do and how can I reflect that in my life? Until now, we have been in the street fighting against capitalism, from the left in the *gaztecte*, and active in youth organizations. But everyone developed their own way of living [apart from activism]. Now we are also thinking about how to place the personal in the economy.

The economic crisis in Spain certainly did lead to a loss of jobs, labour instability, and a lack of opportunities, especially for youth. Although this crisis appears to have triggered a migration of youth to the countryside, in many cases it might not be *the* determining factor. We say this because many of the protagonists we interviewed did not come from precarious situations, in the sense that they had enough capital – economic (many were from middle-class families), social (well integrated), and educational (most had a university degree) – to be able to choose among other possibilities. It is in these cases where it is particularly evident that opting for the countryside and staying there has a lot more to do with the desire for more control over one's life.

The affective/ideological link to the countryside goes beyond instrumental motivations. As one participant stated: "It is living what you believe. For me it would be difficult to be on this path if I didn't believe in it. It feels like it's something that fills you from inside." It is this component that makes the chosen path a liberating option rather than a sacrifice. As a *baserritarra* (peasant) activist said,

People ask me, isn't the *baserri* a slave? And I say, isn't there a lot of slavery to have to clock in every day when you don't want to, always waiting for five o'clock or for Friday to come? Here I enjoy the 365 days of year because it is something that completes/satisfies me.

Importantly, the discourse of self-realization, empowerment and the response to alienation from wage-based society acquires a special relevance when linking social change with the pleasure and enjoyment of an alternative way of life. One participant put it:

One of the reasons could be because it is dignified work that is fulfilling and doesn't make you feel as though you're [just] another piece in the production chain. You're someone and you're creating something, something different (...) It's beautiful to have a good and transparent relationship between consumer and producer; that way life is different, nicer, more pleasant, unhurried, based on trust...

The experiences analyzed here illuminate the work and lives of people seeking to alter the cultural practices and values that are at the heart of the hegemonic system. Questioning dominant practices and values helps shape the personal, politicizing everyday life and lifestyles, and contributes to reconnecting daily life and communities to the biophysical world in ways that highlight peoples' dependence on and interactions with both other people and the land/nature. This critical vision has a direct impact on the entire individual, in his/her subjective, relational, and material dimensions. There is a direct correlation between the everyday, biographical stories and social transformation: participants feel that they are at the same time coauthors of their lives and agents of social change. In some ways, they represent a cultural advancement that not only highlights the existence of alternatives to the enormous civilizational crisis created by the processes of material accumulation, globalization, and continued economic expansion; it also allows people to experience the alternatives directly, everyday, even in a joyful way.<sup>14</sup>

### *Between reproducing and transforming logics*

The individual and collective experiences that we examined sought to articulate alternative economic spaces – that is, circuits of production, distribution, and consumption that disrupt capitalist logics. These initiatives constitute a diverse landscape of resistance that tries to balance apparently adverse elements including: professional agricultural activities and voluntary political activism; productive initiatives that require economic viability and those geared to social change; non-commercial activities and market transactions; private ownership or rental of land, and strategic occupation of land; assistance from public administration and direct confrontation with state entities; and collective practices and individualistic tendencies. In spite of their diversity, these are counter-hegemonic paths in the sense that they integrate different values, new relations with one another and with nature, and they are clearly geared to break with the logics of the dominant system. Importantly, all participants in the agro-assemblies and other self-governed youth spaces that we interviewed had previous experience with and/or were actively participating in other social movements. They are committed to different forms of activism and for the most part, the newly created nodes of food sovereignty have relationships with other social movements or political platforms in the area.

Nevertheless, there are some limitations in some of the collective experiences we examined, perhaps the most important one being a lack of on-going connection with the

social actor responsible for bring food sovereignty to the Basque Country: the peasant union and Via Campesina member EHNE-Bizkaia.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, many members of the agro-assemblies have participated in training courses offered by EHNE-Bizkaia. Not only does the union provide agro-ecological training for members, it also promotes mutual self-help strategies, helps build connections between different producers, and in some cases, it was the catalyst for creating agro-assemblies to unite producers at the local or county level. In spite of this, the majority of those interviewed were not affiliated with EHNE-Bizkaia, and many of those who are union members do not participate in the organization. In many cases, contact with EHNE-Bizkaia remains limited to receiving training while agro-assembly members concentrate efforts on transforming the more local sphere. This lack of connection with EHNE-Bizkaia has contributed to a weakening of food sovereignty efforts in the region.

For example, the creation of new agro-assemblies that connect producers to consumers has occurred in some cases without consideration of the substantial work of EHNE-Bizkaia on this issue: namely, the community supported agriculture network called Nekasarea. In creating Nekasarea, EHNE-Bizkaia pioneered the successful direct marketing of food baskets between producers and consumers in the region. The network developed rules of engagement (in the form of a contract) aimed at ensuring the security and meeting the needs of both the producer and the consumer; it also outlined obligations and responsibilities. As such, the network helped ensure a market and guaranteed price for the farmer, and constant prices and supply to the consumer. And, if for some reason food provision was compromised, for example by damage to greenhouses due to climatic conditions, then the associated group of consumers would help repair the greenhouse and the other producers provided the food baskets until the affected farmer was able to continue production. Likewise, if a consumer could not cover the costs of the food basket, it was both producers and consumers that covered for that person based on the idea that locally-grown healthy and safe food is not a privilege but a human right. These practices functioned to collectivize problems and also acted similar to a union resistance/strike fund. In 2013-2014 there was a significant change: the urban networks (usually made up of people belonging to social movements) independently began to contact new farmers or those who were transitioning into farming. Some of these parallel structures that had little or weak connections with EHNE-Bizkaia emerged without the conditions, guarantees, and mutual support mechanisms of Nekasarea and actually contributed to a weakening of the collective strategies of the network.

Although the spontaneous emergence of these networks has been very positive, as is the case with some of the agro-assemblies and other youth spaces, in some instances they have suffered from a lack of experience and global vision, and reproduce the historical problems of the sector. That is, there is no solid commitment made between the producer and consumer and consequently the prices of the food baskets are often too low to provide a dignified income for producers.

In this way, some of the experiences involving youth who are returning to the countryside centre more on individual transformation than on broad structural change. Under these conditions, the youth as new peasants can remain trapped in the conditions of

entrepreneurial production, individual responsibility, and the logics of the market. As Trott (2016) reminds us, prefigurative politics seek “to transform the macrostructure by altering micro-relations” (277), but the opposite (that is, assimilation of alternative experiences by the macrostructure) may happen if creating alternative modes of living is not accompanied by strategic organizing.

Thus, our research reveals experiences of individual and social transformation but it also sheds light on the danger of locking oneself to a limiting logic of self-sufficiency. Even though there are transformative aspects to these alternatives, they can also lead to reproducing social structures that reinforce the status quo. Therefore, far from being pure and idealistic, these experiences are *necessarily* paradoxical and contradictory. It is precisely this quality that makes them so interesting – “thinking strategically ...about what to change and where” while continuing ‘to live in this world’ as Harvey (2000, 233) has described it.

### **Some preliminary conclusions: Preparing the ground for transformational possibilities**

Theoretically, one could say that of the various alternatives examined in this chapter, the collective examples are more transformational by the simple virtue of being collective. However, the reality is more complex. On the one hand, the youth involved may be considered as actors in a diversified strategy of socio-ecological change towards a sustainable future as they work to build alternative economies by creating spaces outside of capitalism and resisting capitalism’s ideological hegemony. On the other hand, while they are opening, exposing, and filling gaps in the dominant system, these experiences remain small, marginal, and temporary (Trauger 2017). The question is whether or not these alternatives can move beyond being merely palliative, something more than a minority economy for those who might be in a critical situation, and become something more akin to systemic transformation.

Our study demonstrates that the youth spaces enable collective experiences but the results are often limited to self-provisioning of a very few youth, resulting in little if any transformation of the conventional food system as a whole. On the other hand, there are many individuals in the Basque Country who may be generating greater impact. That is, not only are they contributing to the repeasantization of the countryside (Calvario *forthcoming*), but they are also provisioning many more families and doing so in ways that are effectively fostering a disarticulation from conventional capitalist food chains as they focus on establishing new relations between consumers and producers. Similarly, if the criteria include the number of people that are being fed, then the growth of communal urban gardens since the economic crisis has also contributed in modest ways. Perhaps a more important measure is the number of people that have now become involved in agriculture and are more aware of the problems associated with the industrial food system.

At this point in time, it is not clear what direction these experiences they will take. There is a risk that they could fall into a ‘mainstream frame’: short-term temporary options with

only minor social impacts that only fill the cracks and are complementary to mainstream activities. On the other hand the alternatives could be a vector, that when further established and reinforced, gain power and momentum and help revitalize rural life, repeasantize society, and strengthen food sovereignty. But what conditions are needed for these alternatives to flourish and persist over time, while at the same time being socially relevant and having a transformational impact? We do not have the answers to these questions, but we would like to offer some reflections that might help advance the debate.

The experiences we examined point to the significance of not only the practical/material conversion to peasant production, but also its relational and subjective transformation dimensions. That is, in the process of repeasantization, producing culture and peasant identities may be just as important as the production and distribution of fresh and healthy food. Intimately linked to this is the need to emphasize the creation of spaces and shared time that serve to reproduce the culture, identity and subjectivity of the peasant as a social actor. We are talking here about taking care of the materiality of human and social relations. To ensure economic, social, cultural, and political reproduction, the peasant as a social actor requires his/her own spaces and processes of institutionalization. In the sociological sense, this means developing and reaffirming norms, rituals, guidelines, rules, customs, knowledge, etc., which will help consolidate shared goals and a collective identity. The harvest celebrations and other events that succeed in releasing people from monetary, mercantilist, and individualized relations by bringing producers and consumers together in community are a good example of this. After all, it is not possible to construct a social actor where there are no social ties (Harvey 2000). It is critical then, to create a strong social fabric through allegiances, cohesion, training activities, community links, and emotions. This is especially important in a time of neoliberal domination as evidenced by the deinstitutionalization of social and community processes resulting in the creation of anonymous, sub-socialized, and thus highly malleable individuals.

Certainly, for the new peasants we interviewed, it is very difficult to escape from capitalist circuits of production. Nonetheless, their interaction with the capitalist market can be used as a political tool to consolidate a collective social actor and build community. As Johnston and Klandermans (1995) remind us, the consolidation of a movement is as much a semantic and cultural task as a material-relational one. Both are intimately linked. Defining social movements' internal institutionalization – what might also best be called norms, expectations, and 'rules of engagement' – that structures daily life away from individualist-capitalist relations, is absolute necessary in the process of repeasantization and to ensure that the peasant project reaches its potential.

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<sup>1</sup> The other seven key areas that La Via Campesina concentrates on are women, migrations and rural workers, agrarian reform and water, food sovereignty and trade, biodiversity and genetic resources, human rights, and sustainable peasant agriculture most often referred to as agroecology. See Desmarais (2007), Borras (2008) and Martínez-Torres and Rosset (2010), among others, for analyses of La Vía Campesina.

<sup>2</sup> See the declarations of various International Meetings and Youth Assemblies of La Vía Campesina at <https://viacampesina.org/en/index.php/main-issues-mainmenu-27/youth-mainmenu-66>.

<sup>3</sup> Although the context differs considerably, we found Visser et al.'s (2015) notion of "quiet" and "everyday forms of food sovereignty" discussed in their study of small-scale farmers in post socialist Russia, particularly useful.

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<sup>4</sup> There really is no one equivalent in English for this term and hence we use *autogestioa*, self-governed, self-determined, and self-managed interchangeably throughout the chapter.

<sup>5</sup> Data collected from the Basque Government report “Landa Garapenerako Programa Euskadi 2015-2020 Programa de Desarrollo Rural” which can be accessed at <http://www.reterurale.it/downloads/RDP/Spagna/rdp%20paesi%20baschi.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Information about these new organizations is available on the following websites: for Etxalde see <http://www.elikaherria.eus/> and for EHKolektiboa go to <https://ehkolektiboa.org/>. *Baserria* is the Basque word for farm.

<sup>7</sup> Both organizations are also members of La Vía Campesina. For information on EHNE see <http://www.ehnebizkaia.eus> The ELB does not have a webpage but see documentation on the Euskal Herriko Laborantza Ganbara at <http://www.ehlgbai.org/> that was formed in 2005 to bring together the farmers and ranchers of the French part of the Basque Country. This movement is the soul of peasant agriculture in the region and promoted primarily by the ELB.

<sup>8</sup> *Auzolan* is a Basque term best defined as community or communal work. It refers to a key social institution in traditional Basque society that fosters collaboration between houses or farmsteads to collectively manage services with resources shared between several households. It often involves taking care of public property such as local shrines, paths, bridges, and wells.

<sup>9</sup> Information about this struggle is available in Spanish at <https://autogestioa.wordpress.com/2014/04/28/tosu-betirako-explicacion-del-proyecto-castellano/>

<sup>10</sup> See <https://mendillorrikogaztemugimendua.wordpress.com/>

<sup>11</sup> While there is no space in this chapter to discuss the differences, we do want to point out that we found similarities, especially concerning the notion of self-determination, among the youth of the Basque Country and those discussed in Di Masso and Zografos’s (2014) study of food sovereignty in Catalonia.

<sup>12</sup> Similar meanings and mobilization of autonomy are reflected in the social movement literature (see, among many others, Teo 2016, Chatterton 2010a and 2010b, Chatterton and Pickerill 2010, Jurris and Pleyers 2009, de Souza 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Here we are talking about the political kind of self-realization and personal fulfillment based in the idea of ‘the personal is political’. As Harvey puts it, “The negotiation that always lies at the basis of all architectural and political practices is, therefore, between persons seeking to change each other and the world, as well as themselves” (2000, 235)

<sup>14</sup> In this way, our findings echo some of those reflected in what Jurris and Pleyers call “alter-activism” which they argue “represents an alternative mode of (sub-)cultural practice and an emerging form of citizenship among young people that prefigures wider social changes related to political commitment, cultural expression and collaborative practice.” (2009, 57)

<sup>15</sup> See Calvario (2017) for interesting insights on the work of EHNE-Bizkaia.

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