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THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF FOOD

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Envisioning New Horizons for the Political Economy of Sustainable Food Systems^{*†}

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Abstract This article considers how political economy can expand to contribute to the contemporary study of sustainable food systems, raising new questions for researchers, practitioners, and social movement actors engaged in collaborative efforts to transform dominant foodscapes. Our discussion and analysis draw on the outcomes of a workshop of the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food) and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) on the political economies of sustainable food systems in June 2018. The workshop participants identified five cross-cutting research issues and related methods worthy of focus: *multiple forms of knowledge, technology and innovation, expansion or scaling sustainable innovations, the role of the private sector, and democratic governance*. We conclude by positing ways forward that contribute to the evolving political economy of sustainable food systems.

Keywords: food sovereignty, food studies, food systems, governance, interdisciplinary, political ecology, political economy, power, sustainability.

1 Introduction

Over the past few decades, political economy has served as a key theoretical framework for critical scholars to analyse food systems dynamics (see, for example, Bernstein 2017; Bernstein 2010; Buttel 2001; Fine 1994; Friedmann 1993). This evolving approach aims to address the differential power relations across all aspects of food systems – from harvesting and production, to distribution, consumption, and waste management – along with related influences and impacts. On 4–5 June 2018, 45 food systems academics and practitioners from different geographies and disciplines met in Brighton, UK, to participate in a workshop on the political economies of sustainable food systems, hosted by the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food) and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). The workshop focused on four themes that were intended

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to establish new directions for research and practice: diversity and innovation; the food–health nexus; the politics of consumption; and, food sovereignty and agroecology. Based on a series of presentations and discussions, the group identified five cross-cutting research issues to further advance the political economy of sustainable food systems and proposed innovative methods to address them. This article presents the key ideas that emerged from that workshop and reflects on possible contributions to the contemporary study of sustainable food systems for researchers, practitioners, and social movement actors engaged in collaborative efforts to transform the dominant foodscapes.

The article is organised into five sections. Following the introduction, we present a brief review of the evolution of the political economy of food systems, including some criticisms. In Section 3, we provide a synthesis of ideas that emerged from the workshop. The discussion in Section 4 analyses the workshop's outcomes, paying particular attention to the trade-offs of political economy approaches and the limitations of this analysis for sustainable food systems. Here we highlight key elements that underpin political economy approaches and suggest ways that they might contribute to building more equitable and sustainable food systems. By critically engaging with the outcomes of these discussions, we provide insights into how political economy approaches might contribute to addressing food systems challenges today and into the future. We conclude with some suggestions for the evolving approaches to the political economy of sustainable food systems and reflect on what is gained and lost by adopting a political economy analysis. Specifically, we argue that while there are significant gaps in the ways that political economy has addressed sustainable food systems, scholars should continue to engage with political economy in order to critically address the flows of power throughout food systems. Integrating innovative theoretical and practical perspectives along with methodological tools offers new and exciting horizons for the political economy of sustainable food systems.

2 The political economy of food systems: evolution, key themes, and criticisms

2.1 A political economy approach

Political economy is a widely used approach in social science. Despite its popularity in food studies in the last decades, many authors seldom provide a clear description of how they use the concept. Many of these analyses share a focus on power relations and the resulting socio-material inequalities. A useful starting point to anchor this approach is provided by Collinson (2003) who points out that political economy analyses concentrate on 'the interaction of political and economic processes in a society: the distribution of power and wealth between different groups and individuals, and the processes that create, sustain and transform these relationships over time' (*ibid.*: 10). Adopting a similar definition, Bernstein (2017) summarised the primary concerns of a political economy analysis into four key questions: Who owns what? Who does what? Who gets what? What do they do with it? Here, he highlights the

analytic utility of these questions, which can be applied ‘across different sites and scales, from individual farming households through village, local and national socioeconomic units of investigation to the world economy’ (*ibid.*: 8). Moreover, these questions aim to uncover the key relations of power in respect to social interactions and the ways they impact and influence decision-making across food systems.

A political economy approach for food systems is distinguished by its analysis of food as part of both political and economic processes. Moreover, the dynamics of food systems are understood in terms of relations of power and not simply material goods and outcomes. Political economy approaches incorporate a wide historical and geographical perspective, helping to explain why and how power changes over time, and how the activities of one group affect others (Collinson 2003: 10). As such, when applied to food systems, political economy approaches are used to understand the economic and political dynamics that affect issues such as access, availability, production, harvesting, and consumption.

2.2 The evolution of political economy and food systems

Political economy was adopted as a key approach in food studies in the 1980s when scholars began to explore dominant food systems and the myriad relationships between people, capital, and space that contributed to ill-health, inequity, and ecological degradation (Buttel 2001; Marsden *et al.* 1996; Friedmann 1982). A political economy approach has also been mobilised to understand food systems processes at different scales, with a particular focus on agriculture, such as the study of farmers’ strategies through a range of structuralist approaches which include exploring the *agrarian question* and the class position of farmers (Watts and Goodman 1997). Over time, food studies scholars have adapted political economy approaches to address a range of gaps and emerging issues. Some of these shifts have been consistent with specific disciplines and study areas, while others have been unique to the studies of food systems. For example, in the early-1990s, the consumption turn in food studies (part of the broader cultural turn in geography and other disciplines) offered new approaches and tools for analysing power relations and addressed questions of value and quality across the food chain.

Along with the emergence of post-structuralist trends in food studies, the consumption turn highlighted gaps in the political economy scholarship that had been focused primarily on a structural analysis of agricultural production (Buttel 2001). Many critics reported an insufficient engagement with feminist theory, postcolonial theory, critical race studies, and social constructivism (Galt 2013). Adapting to the new perspectives, political economy approaches began to directly address the agency of food producers, retailers, and consumers, along with the role of culture and identity within food politics (Goodman and DuPuis 2002; Lockie and Kitto 2000). These approaches expanded the scope of political economy by stressing the need to address issues of identity and incorporate behavioural perspectives. In so doing, they provided new ways of accounting for agency in theorising change.

Building from this, some scholars argued that political economy approaches had failed to appreciate new ecological conditions within the food system and had an overly passive conceptualisation of nature (Galt 2013; Boyd, Prudham and Schurman 2001). For example, Goodman (1999) wrote that the focus on human agency brought about by the consumption turn had failed to recognise the role of non-human actors in food systems and lamented an omission of nature in explaining prospects for societal change. Many of these critical elements are addressed by the increasingly popular field of political ecology (Perreault, Bridge and McCarthy 2015), which more fully integrates ideas of nature into its analysis and is expanding in many directions including themes such as urban political ecology, feminist political ecology, and the political ecology of food. Recently, Moragues-Faus and Marsden (2017) identified ways that political ecology perspectives can underpin a revised critical food scholarship based on understanding place-based socio-natures, addressing the politics of scale and inequality, and co-producing knowledge and change.

While political economy approaches have been a useful tool to critique socioeconomic and political dynamics, exposing how power operating at multiple scales impacts lived experiences and reproduces inequalities and injustices, many have noted that critique alone is insufficient to transform current food systems (Leff 2015; Walker 2006). Other tools and engagements are required to nurture more sustainable and equitable food systems. As we expand upon below, some political economists have recognised the importance of hybrid approaches championed within post-structural and cultural geography to understand food system dynamics, and have expanded to other thematic areas beyond food production. These more symmetrical perspectives included the use of Actor Network Theory to supersede structure/agency dichotomies (Wilkinson 2006; Lockie 2002; Busch and Juska 1997) and embracing socioecological perspectives and related concepts such as socio-natures or metabolisms to bridge society and nature (Moragues-Faus and Marsden 2017). However, critics have cautioned to avoid bypassing socioeconomic and political issues and actively reproducing social inequalities (Gibson-Graham 2006b; Winter 2003; Gregson 1995).

3 New directions in the political economy of food: insights from IPES-Food and IDS workshop

The establishment of IPES-Food in 2015 was rooted in the ongoing challenges of finding new ways of thinking about research, sustainability, and food systems. IPES-Food is made up of interdisciplinary scholars and practitioners from across the globe that engage in policy-oriented research and action to shape the ongoing debates about food systems reform.⁵ In June 2018, IPES-Food partnered with IDS to organise a two-day workshop, held at the University of Sussex, on the political economy of sustainable food systems. Academics and practitioners from across the globe were invited to participate and share their expertise and experiences. Based on a series of presentations

and thematic discussions from leading food systems thinkers, the workshop served as a forum to share existing research and perspectives and solicit critical feedback with an aim of enriching emerging political economy approaches.

In advance of the workshop, the organising committee identified four themes that were intended to establish new directions for the political economies of sustainable food systems. These included: diversity and innovation; the food–health nexus; the politics of consumption; and, food sovereignty and agroecology. Building on these themes at the workshop, two open-space sessions provided an opportunity for critical engagement and interactive discussions. In these sessions, participants identified key elements missing from the initial agenda and suggested five cross-cutting research issues to advance political economy of sustainable food systems debates: multiple forms of knowledge; technology and innovation; expansion or scaling sustainable innovations; the role of the private sector; and, democratic governance. Through a series of discussions focusing on these five issues, the group identified key challenges and new research questions, as well as innovative methods and research processes that could be mobilised to move them forward.

In what follows, we present a synthesis of the four themes proposed by the IPES-Food organising committee, followed by a presentation of the five cross-cutting research issues that emerged through the workshop. Our analysis in the following section builds on workshop documents recorded by the IPES-Food Secretariat and from the three authors who also acted as the lead organisers and facilitators of two open-space discussion sessions.

3.1 Four themes for the political economy of sustainable food systems

Building on the evolving debates surrounding political economy and sustainable food systems, in advance of the workshop, IPES-Food identified four themes to highlight the opportunities and challenges of research on sustainable food systems while also considering how to affect food systems change. First, *diversity and innovation* were identified as fundamental to sustainable food systems and that further research should focus on both the positive and negative impacts of different food production systems as well as the power relations that maintain the dominance of industrial agriculture. A political economy approach enables an assessment of the historical trends related to diversity and innovation while also remaining mindful of the way more marginalised groups innovate and make use of those innovations. Presentations also noted that a political economy approach could help to understand how designers of innovation control and/or influence the ways that environments are shaped. In addition, participants put forward that it was crucial to develop a framework for assessing new technologies, highlighting that innovations relating to digital technology can be leveraged to promote open source and citizen science.

The second theme, *the food–health nexus*, aimed to address the health impacts of food systems and the multiple, interconnected pathways that generate human and economic costs (see also IPES-Food 2017). This includes the food system's effects on vulnerable communities as well as their linkages with other socioeconomic processes reproducing inequality. Power is at the core of the food–health nexus and political economy can help to uncover relationships between public health concerns, food industry interests, and determining which interests are prioritised in policy spaces. The ensuing discussion highlighted that political economy approaches are useful insofar as they ask questions about agency and structure, also providing useful tools to confront neoliberalism, multistakeholderism, and public–private partnerships that skew decision-making and limit democracy. Beyond only material interests when it comes to the food–health nexus, theories of knowledge, the politics of knowledge, embodied knowledge, and political ecology are key to understanding change and to analysing what information is privileged and prioritised, and what is ignored.

The politics of consumption was identified as the third theme for a political economy of sustainable food systems. Consumption is a broad concept that includes challenges to current food systems (i.e. both over- and under-consumption) as well as possible pathways for sustainable food systems (i.e. conscious consumption). Under-consumption of food was thrust back onto the political and research agenda following the 2007/08 food price crisis. Here, a political economy approach proves useful for analysing, 'namely the confrontations between how "the elite" vs "the masses" meet their food needs (e.g. as it relates to forms of invisible power)' (IPES-Food Secretariat 2018: 10). The gendered component of consumption, and by extension, food practices, can be exposed when applying a political economy approach by expanding the measurement of value of work beyond income. The ensuing discussion highlighted that a political economy analysis can also help to 'situate the politics of consumption within broader socioeconomic trends while also allowing for the inclusion of an international relations analysis' (*ibid.*: 7).

The fourth theme was *food sovereignty and agroecology*, identifying the growing influence and impact of social movements and civil society groups in both the research and practice of sustainable food systems (see also IPES-Food 2016). These concepts represent sets of practices and movements and have become a prominent focus of agrarian political economy (Galt 2013; Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010; Wittman, Desmarais and Wiebe 2010; Perfecto, Vandermeer and Wright 2009). A political economy approach allows for a relational approach that recognises 'that what farmers do in one part of the world is heavily influenced/dependent on what is going on in other parts of the worlds' (IPES-Food Secretariat 2018: 18). This allows for coherence between research methods and objects of research, given that food sovereignty as a concept, framework, and movement highlights the agency of marginalised groups and those usually seen as powerless to advance the transitions they wish to see.

3.2 Towards a new research agenda: cross-cutting research issues

In this subsection, we present the five cross-cutting research issues that emerged as key to advancing a political economy of sustainable food systems. These issues were not necessarily new, but were identified as priority areas requiring more focus and research.

The first cross-cutting research issue was related to the need for recognition that there are *multiple forms of knowledge*, and that further political economy of sustainable food systems research should speak in terms of co-created knowledge rooted in diverse epistemological positions and worldviews. For example, academics are increasingly engaging practitioners through sustainable food systems research that puts communities first (Levkoe *et al.* 2016). The discussion highlighted the opportunity to understand this through the framework of ‘ethnospheres’ (meant to parallel the biosphere) – the cultural web of human existence, or the totality of human ideas, stories, inspirations, intuitions, and so forth, and how they related to ways of knowing and being. Today, the ethnosphere is being severely compromised through a loss of languages, cultural diversity, and other factors that restrict human possibilities. While knowledge is often presented as static, in actuality, it is mobile and in a constant state of change. In turn, research needs to better understand, enact, and study culture and knowledge as dynamic.

The second cross-cutting research issue was related to *technology and innovation*. Participants highlighted the need for political economy of food systems research to consider technologies that enhance control for those most marginalised by the dominant food system and that serve human needs rather than driving change for the sake of technology itself. The group also identified a need to recognise that all technologies are not necessarily appropriate or sustainable for all types of farming. Moreover, technology is not viable unless it is understood and adapted by farmers/fishers/harvesters themselves. A deeper investigation of what food producers/harvesters want and how technologies can better serve communities will enable better choices and technological adaptations.

Along similar lines, researchers can draw attention to current threats to public research, which is being replaced by private sector interests and funding (e.g. to open new markets and expand the reach of capital) and stimulated by intellectual property rights through patents. More public (and democratic) research funding is needed to explore a greater diversity of technologies and innovations and to ensure they meet the needs and contexts of food producers. Here, political economy tools can be effectively used to expose the politics of technological development. This is evident, for example, in Kloppenburg’s (2005) critical analysis of plant breeding and biotechnology through the political economy of science and research.

The third cross-cutting research issue was linked to questions of *expansion or scaling sustainable innovations*. When it comes to food systems sustainability, innovation needs to consider the possibilities of going

deeper, rather than simply expanding. While these options are not mutually exclusive, it remains unclear whether they can be done simultaneously. For example, some agroecologists are in favour of scaling up infrastructures and landscape transformations. It was also noted that producer movements have attempted to scale out with context specificity, using shared principles while also implementing governance mechanisms to maintain diversity (see, for example, Claeys and Duncan 2018). The discussion raised further questions such as: What are the core values and relationships that need to be scaled? Can you scale up while retaining values of community production relations? Addressing these questions requires more research and meaningful consultation and will prove central to advancing a political economy for sustainable food systems.

Related to the issue of scale, there are research challenges when it comes to assessing the impact of innovations. There is a great deal of pressure, notably from funders, to demonstrate impact which is usually presented in terms of scales and numbers. For this reason, new technologies tend to be appealing because they can be easily scaled through universal applications. Participants recognised that more effort was needed to develop reliable tools for measuring a diversity of impacts, particularly with regard to community-led innovations which are often overlooked.

The fourth cross-cutting research issue related to *the role of the private sector*. Of particular interest in terms of future research was the trend of large corporations working towards sustainability. It was noted that there is a need for stronger political support for, and research on, possible pathways for these actors to pursue, along with ongoing analysis of the implications of industry-led sustainability. At the same time, participants called for more research into possible incentives to tackle path dependencies, to help mainstream private sector actors shift their practices (e.g. branding, market differentiation, risk management, and so forth), and related implications. On the other end of the spectrum, more research needs were identified around policies to foster social business investments. It was noted, for example, that at present, social enterprises are not rewarded for increasing positive externalities, and thus are not incentivised to develop into sustainable business, often reverting towards a charity model. In turn, political economy research is needed to highlight the contributions (economic and otherwise) of social enterprises as well as support systems to ensure their continuation.

At the same time, concerns were raised that in the growing number of participatory food policy processes, from the local level through to the global, the private sector and civil society are assumed to be equal participants. This, despite the fact that the private sector already holds a great deal of power and influence in determining food system outcomes. Participants called for careful reflection and investigation into the implications of the organisation, outcomes, and implications of these platforms. Further research and testing of governance mechanisms that enable desired representation and ensure diversity are also needed,

along with expanded definitions of actors that fall under the label of the private sector, including small- and medium-scale businesses.

The fifth cross-cutting research issue identified was related to the importance of *democratic governance*. Key here is the idea that decision-making processes at all scales must be participatory and transparent, but also include mechanisms to mitigate power imbalances and ensure equity of voice – specifically ensuring space for civil society. However, it was also noted that governance has become an overly technocratic concept and too often serves as a catch-all idea. Participants argued that research into food systems governance often falls back on an apolitical network analysis of the key actors informing policymakers (e.g. the market, state, and civil society) while failing to address issues of power and agency. Governance research aiming to build sustainable food systems must acknowledge that evidence-based policymaking does not always work and, moreover, not all evidence is considered equal. Moving forward, a key task for researchers is to better understand the multiple interactions between actors, resources, knowledge, and contexts that lead to (un)successful policies.

3.3 Methods and approaches

The lines of political economy are increasingly blurring its contours. We note the continued use of established political economy tools (i.e. food regimes) but also a recognition of the need to continue to expand and evolve the approach, as illustrated above. In what follows, we review some of the methods and complementary approaches that emerged at the workshop and which are deemed fundamental to a future sustainable food systems research agenda.

First, discussions around an expanding political economy approach for sustainable food systems reinforced the importance of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research. This offers a primary way of accounting for different knowledges and learning from experiential knowledge alongside academic knowledge. There is also the need to value historical approaches that map cultural flows and layers of accumulation, and which help to elucidate how narratives and socioecological conditions are created (and how to get rid of those that do not serve normative objectives).

From the workshop, there was consensus that a political economy approach focusing on the dynamics of power is useful for analysing and deconstructing dominant discourses and to identify and challenge power structures across food systems. Specific strategies identified for researchers seeking to address power relations included: confronting dominant actors; leading by example; strengthening the ‘power base’; supporting food democracy to empower communities; making visible invisible forms of power (e.g. occupying digital public spaces); defining new narratives that value social innovations; researching how diversity can dilute/moderate power; and, waiting for the system to collapse which would enable new forms of power to emerge (IPES-Food Secretariat 2018: 4). Towards this

end, Gaventa's (2005) power cube was proposed as an innovative tool to analyse the effects of various forms of power to monitor and evaluate change in power dynamics over time. The use of this tool could help to build awareness of what drives various processes, and to find entry points for action. By recognising various forms of power (i.e. visible, hidden, invisible) as well as various spaces and scales of power, the power cube provides a clear analytic tool to support a political economy approach.

Power maps (see, for example, Schiffer 2007) were also identified as useful tools for reflecting on behaviour over time. These maps support a better understanding of interactions between various systems' actors and processes; help to identify leverage points; and, develop a vision for alternative pathways and how to achieve them. They can also be used to make predictions and test assumptions by modelling interactions, in turn, leading to systems modelling. During the workshop, it was demonstrated how systems modelling and political economy analyses can be complementary, as power is often absent from systems thinking (IPES-Food Secretariat 2018: 20).

Subject-centred methods such as interviews were also highlighted as a traditional but still relevant method for expanding political economy. For example, research by Hossain and Scott-Villiers, as part of the 'Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility' project,⁶ uncovered how people adjusted to higher food prices after the crisis in 2007. The authors made use of yearly return visits to 23 urban and rural communities in ten countries, and analysis of national and international food data.

Given new social-technical trends, critical digital studies (see, for example, Kroker and Kroker 2008) were also cited as offering useful tools to support a political economy analysis. Critical digital studies support a political economy approach by introducing methods for researching the relations between technology and society, and providing a way to think about the potential of digital platforms to shape food systems.

Finally, transformation labs, also called living labs (see, for example, Voytenko *et al.* 2016; Bal *et al.* 2014) were cited as a way of creating an enabling environment for scaling innovations. These projects are designed as user-centred, open-innovation platforms, often operating at a local or territorial level (e.g. city-region), and aim to integrate research and innovation processes in real time through academic–community relationships.

These methods could be further complemented by other critical approaches. Workshop participants highlighted five key examples that could further enrich a political economy analysis:

- 1 Post-capitalist and diverse economies:** Gibson-Graham's (2006a, 2006b) work on post-capitalist politics has bloomed into a diverse and community economies approach that proposes an economic

and political language to understand and assess innovations outside capitalist parameters (Gibson-Graham *et al.* 2017; Community Economies Collective 2001). Increasingly, the diverse economies framework has been utilised in food studies to avoid reproducing neoliberal narratives (Larner 2003), and to inspire new political opportunities (Sarmiento 2017; Cameron and Wright 2014; Crossan *et al.* 2016; Harris 2009).

- 2 **Feminist perspectives:** Feminist perspectives have enriched food studies and political economy perspectives for decades. The feminist focus on everyday practices, affective/emotional relationships, and micropolitics of control can help to elucidate the multiscalar co-constitution of inequalities, from the body to the community or international level, as well as contribute to understanding the reproduction of neoliberal globalised food systems (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2013; Elmhirst 2011; Truelove 2011). Participants identified feminist approaches as being particularly useful to explore embodied ways of knowing. Recent debates situate the focus on the intersectionality of gender, class, race, and other subjectivities as a key prism to understand the historical constitution and current reproduction of foodscapes (Moragues-Faus and Marsden 2017).
- 3 **Co-production of knowledge and nature:** Co-production is championed by diverse theoretical perspectives, from political ecology to social innovation. In the workshop, participants were particularly aware of the need to mobilise this concept as a means to incorporate nature more fully in political economy debates. For that purpose, political ecology perspectives were considered particularly useful, along with other concepts such as socio-natures, insofar as they examine the historically situated process through which nature and society are materially and discursively co-productive of one another (Aeberhard and Rist 2009; Alkon 2013).
- 4 During the discussion, participants spoke about how a political ecology framework can help us better understand how human interactions relate to all things (e.g. other species, environment, and so forth), leading to less anthropocentric studies of planetary dynamics (Zimmerer and Bassett 2003). Along these lines, participants also reflected on the usefulness of panarchy as a conceptual framework to study how economic growth and human development depend on ecosystems and institutions (Gunderson and Holling 2002). The framework can account for contradictory characteristics of complex systems (e.g. stability and change).
- 5 Finally, participants discussed ways that political economy might better incorporate a decolonising approach to research that recognises the impact of dominant food systems on indigenous peoples and traditional territories (Grey and Patel 2015; Kepkiewicz and Dale 2018). When discussing food systems, it is essential that researchers acknowledge that political economy approaches are

rooted in colonial knowledge, and uncritical use can risk further epistemic violence (Teo 2010). This means addressing the power relations inherent in the control and ownership of land, water, and seeds that has been appropriated from indigenous peoples through violence and disposition, displacement, and genocide. The history of the dominant food system is synonymous with the history of colonialism and consolidation of power (Mintz 1986). Furthermore, colonial structures (i.e. settler-colonialism) and exploitative relationships are reproduced in everyday practices – including through research. Decolonisation must involve a process of supporting indigenous resurgence, self-determination, sovereignty, and nationhood, the repatriation of indigenous land, and the reimagining of all our relationships to land and water (Corntassel 2012; Tuck and Yang 2012). Researchers of sustainable food systems must better recognise and address this.

4 Discussion: political economy as a tool for sustainable food system change

In the last decades, political economy has provided a fertile ground for food studies to flourish; however, more efforts can be made by food systems scholars to further unpack the power relations that make up unsustainable and unjust food systems, as well as the agencies to transform them. By and large, political economy has been limited by its abilities to provide and explore potential solutions and alternatives to the dominant food system (Walker 2006): unveiling power relations is not enough to transform socioecological systems and their related foodscapes. This limitation could be overcome if political economy practitioners actively engage with more diverse theories of change, not only tracing power relations but also contributing to greater methodological diversity and actualising more just and sustainable futures.

The trade-offs associated with a totalising approach to capitalist relations, as is often the case with political economy, calls for a greater recognition of diversity – that is, acknowledging and empowering diverse forms of knowledge, bodies, cultures, actions, contexts, and socioecological relations that make up food systems. Along the same lines, political economy has been widely influenced by structuralist theories to explain socioeconomic transformations which devalue other forms of agency and agents, such as nature (Robbins 2012; Walker 2005). A political economy for sustainable food systems might look beyond specific Western and human-centric worldviews that tend to exclude a wide range of perspectives and cosmologies, such as those enacted by indigenous ways of knowing (Leff 2015).

The structuralist focus of a political economy has contributed to pin-pointing the failure of individualistic neoliberal approaches to socioeconomic development; however, in order to overcome the trade-offs associated with this structuralist approach, political economy research could rework a new structuralism that embraces diversity and postcolonial perspectives, as well as acknowledge the co-constitution of

society and nature. This means developing ways to create productive connections between structural approaches, collective action, and the politics of identity. New forms of structuralism could critically engage with more fluid understandings of transformations such as those posited by community economies (Gibson-Graham *et al.* 2017) and assemblage theory (Kennedy *et al.* 2013), and contribute to devise new ways of fostering sustainable and just food innovation.

Reinforcing our call to engage with the diverse economies framework, and recognising that political economy tools can help to foster reflexive practices within social movements, it is also important to be aware of how political economy research might also feed capitalocentric narratives – the idea that capitalism is everywhere and therefore impossible to escape (Cameron and Wright 2014). In other words, we must be cautious not to fall into a deterministic or reductionist understanding of power and capitalist relations when undertaking political economy research. In applying a political economy perspective, we need to acknowledge the broad range of alternative food initiatives as well as everyday forms of resistance seeking to transform current unjust and unsustainable foodscapes, as highlighted by feminist and post-capitalist scholars (Gibson-Graham 2006b; Truelove 2011).

Some have argued that previous research has focused too heavily on alternatives, such as grass-roots food initiatives, alternative food networks, and/or re-localisation projects (Sharzer 2012). Taking these suggestions seriously, it is essential to conduct additional research into where power is concentrated, but also to approach alternatives with a more critical lens, to better understand the impact and implications of these projects in communities, along with internal power relations and the potential reproduction of forms of exclusion and/or exploitation of specific groups (Guthman 2008). Towards this end, political economy researchers could engage further with community-based and participatory approaches as they provide opportunities to critically assess the power dynamics inherent in the research processes itself. Researchers could also stress the need to reflect on the ways that action research might support or limit progress towards more sustainable and equitable food systems, along with the need to incorporate other types of research approaches to unpack food system dynamics (Levkoe, Brem-Wilson and Anderson 2018).

Alongside this research, more work on these and other powerful actors is needed (George 2015), and could build off existing research exploring the power of corporate actors in the food system (Howard 2016; Fuchs and Clapp 2009). Political economy analysis raises questions around how and what knowledge is produced as well as contestation around the processes through which knowledge is legitimated and appropriated by different interests. This leads to further questions related to co-production, such as, how do we conduct research with/on the powerful? Are action research or co-productive processes the best approach to research in every circumstance?

The recognition of everyday politics and actions as a force for transforming food systems leads to a reassessment of the key roles of the state, private sector, and social movements as championed by political economy perspectives. When undertaking related studies, researchers may need to move beyond the limits of the state either standing back or stepping in. Here it could be useful to think in terms of 'third spaces' that exist 'between the horizontality of the market and the verticality of the state, a commons managed by communities; a new planned economy but not state led' (IPES-Food Secretariat 2018: 18). This is not to suggest a limited role for the state, but a more fluid understanding of the state's agency and its relations with different actors, especially civil society. States play, and should continue to play, a fundamental role in ensuring human and economic resources for transition.

5 Conclusions

Political economy has played a fundamental role in the evolution of food systems research. At the same time, as an approach, it has continued to evolve, but not without critique. In this article, we have demonstrated that while there are gaps in the ways that political economy has addressed sustainable food systems, food systems scholars should continue to engage with political economy in order to critically address key relations of power. More specifically, we have presented cross-cutting research issues that emerged from a workshop of food systems experts that serve to not only address some of the critiques, but also to posit a research agenda that expands the scope of the political economy of sustainable food systems. This agenda can draw heavily from political economy, but the complexity of contemporary food systems requires expanding beyond a traditional political economy approach towards a more hybridised methodology and set of tools. As we progress in developing this refreshed political economy of sustainable food systems agenda, we should be aware of trade-offs associated with this lens, as identified throughout our analysis in this article. Mainly, we need to devise ways of conducting critical analysis of all food system actors to uncover power relations, while avoiding the reproduction of a totalising perspective of capitalism that does not engage with alternatives and overlooks diverse perspectives and approaches. This means building on the strong tradition of focusing on power dynamics and agency in all its forms and contexts while better accounting for a diversity of worldviews, scalar relations, embodied and historic experiences, and intersectionality to devise more sustainable and equitable food systems.

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- † This *IDS Bulletin* represents a collaboration between IDS and IPES-Food. Both organisations are committed to holistic, sustainable, democratic approaches to improving food systems, and to applying excellent research and political economy approaches in working towards these goals. We hope this *IDS Bulletin* represents the breadth

of debate at the 2018 workshop we co-sponsored, on ‘Political Economies of Sustainable Food Systems: Critical Approaches, Agendas and Challenges’, and that it contributes to the sharing of knowledge in the name of sustainable and equitable food systems.

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- 5 See www.ipes-food.org/about/.
- 6 See www.ids.ac.uk/projects/life-in-a-time-of-food-price-volatility.

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