In the midst of debates over the expansion of the European Union’s (EU) Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) to future member states in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), Franz Fischler, the European Commissioner for Agriculture, Rural Development, and Fisheries, stated that introducing the CAP to accession countries “could induce a reluctance to change, hindering the development of sound agricultural structures” (Fischler, 2000). This statement alludes to the power dynamic that shaped the EU accession process for post-socialist nation-states in CEE (Blumberg and Mincyte, 2019; Dzenovska, 2018; Klumbyté, 2011; Kuus, 2004; Smith, 2002). The underlying assumption articulated by Commissioner Fischler, but also circulating in popular discourses, was that existing agricultural structures in this region were not ‘sound.’ This assumption was based on a deep and persistent association between eastern Europe and ‘backwardness’ that has long figured in the western European imaginary (Wolff, 1994). This kind of developmentalist thinking has real practical implications because it manifests itself in models, policies and theories that originate in ‘advanced’ places and are to be applied in ‘backward’ places.

This chapter uses a geographical political ecology of food systems approach to question this kind of developmentalist thinking, which positions the ‘East’ as inferior to and needing to learn from the ‘West.’ It starts with an overview of the agrarian question from the early-twentieth century, wherein eastern Europe figured prominently as a locus of theoretical debate and development. The next section shows how analyses written in and on eastern Europe produced generative
scholarly insights globally as academic debates were launched about agrarian change and peasant studies with the decline of the European colonies in the twentieth century. Many scholars working in this tradition, which came to be called agrarian political economy, aligned themselves with neo-Leninist Marxism (Bernstein, 2010). As Marxian approaches faced increased critique towards the end of the twentieth century, new theoretical perspectives gained prominence (Buttel, 2001), but the declining influence of Marxism brought about a similar decline in understandings of capitalism in the food system. The end of the section therefore argues for a renewed agrarian political economy approach as part of a broader geographical political ecology of food systems. Building on these insights, the penultimate section takes inspiration from early work on the agrarian question and outlines how a geographical political ecology of food systems in eastern Europe could contribute to broader debates in agrarian and food studies, but also shape geographies of hope, contestation and responsibility in the region. First, it demonstrates the significance of understanding the food system within the context of a ‘more-than-capitalist’ world. Second, it shows how a geographical political ecology of food systems approach helps explain key developments in food systems in the region. Third, it highlights how scholarly interventions in CEE are pushing theories in agri-food systems in new directions. A geographical political ecology of food systems approach offers the intellectual space for this kind of theoretical development.

The Classic Agrarian Question

In the late-nineteenth century, scholars and activists were confounded by the pace and form of capitalist development in European agriculture. While capitalist industry rapidly transformed urban space and concentrated production at increasingly larger scales, the pace of transformation in rural areas seemed to subside. To the surprise of many, the small-scale peasant or family farm persisted as a dominant organisational form in agriculture in the late-nineteenth century. To socialist revolutionaries, the persistence of peasant agriculture was seen as an impediment to the development of a two-class society of capitalists and workers, which itself was needed to hasten the advance of the communist revolution.
This conundrum prompted detailed study of what became known as the “agrarian question.” In his analysis of that subject, Karl Kautsky (1988) found that the persistence of the small farm in the late-nineteenth century did not imply its continued autonomous existence. In fact, Kautsky analysed the manner by which the small (peasant) farm may form a functional relationship with large-scale agriculture, a relationship created and spurred on through capitalist development (not in opposition to it, although the presence of peasant farms may superficially suggest that). Various European states had indeed used incentives to promote the establishment of ‘undersized’ peasant plots and to prevent a potential agricultural labour force from migrating abroad or to the cities (Kautsky, 1988). This arrangement was functional to the extent that the small- and large-scale farms did not compete with each other and that small-scale farms offered a market—and more importantly, a source of labour-power—to large-scale producers. Alternately, according to Kautsky, in the face of competition from large-scale producers, peasant family farms could overexploit their own labour-power. Although ‘free peasants’ appeared to persist, Kautsky argued that they were increasingly dependent on factories, which had become the only outlet for their production. With the industrialisation and capitalisation of food processing, producer-processing cooperatives struggled to compete with capitalist firms.

Writing about the agrarian question in the Russian context in the early-twentieth century, Lenin (2004 [1899]) undertook a similar analysis of the development of capitalism in agriculture. He found that class-based differentiation between peasants was already taking place: the peasantry had ceased to exist as a (feudal) class and was constituted by internally differentiated positions of the rural bourgeoisie and the rural proletariat. Although a few of the remaining ‘middle peasants’ would join the bourgeoisie, Lenin predicted that they would generally be flung into the masses of the rural proletariat by undergoing a process of de-peasantisation. The rural bourgeoisie were defined by their employment through wage labour and their possession of larger holdings. The Russian rural proletariat, in contrast, typically farmed on small allotments. Lenin maintained that this appearance of ‘peasant’ production was misleading and underscored the fact that agricultural holdings did not preclude dependence on wage labour for survival. He
also analysed different paths of capitalist development: for example, the American path, led by free peasants; and the Prussian path, led by the landed nobility with their large estates (Bernstein, 1996). He maintained that although capitalist transitions occurred differently over space and manifested themselves in different forms, the ultimate result everywhere would be differentiation into two classes: bourgeoisie and proletariat. In addition to Lenin’s theoretical analyses on the Russian context, Alexander Chayanov offered another influential view on the Soviet peasant economy in the 1920s. Before forced collectivisation, Chayanov and other agrarian economists (or social agronomists) set out to thoroughly study the peasant household, even if such a study entailed bracketing and isolating certain phenomena for the purposes of theoretical abstraction (1986). Although his views evolved in other work (1991), Chayanov showed how social differentiation in the countryside was a function of demographic change in the life-cycle of the household. He also attempted to distil the unconscious logic that propelled the peasant household economy in times of crisis as well as in times of abundance. Like Kautsky, Chayanov argued that the family farm’s competitive power is fueled by self-exploitation, or the capacity of peasant families to work more (and harder) in order to satisfy their needs. Therefore, in an economy of declining prices for agricultural goods, capitalist firms have to cut back on production, but peasant farms actually work more to make enough income (and thus maximise total income, not profit).

Faced with the growing militancy of peasant movements in the Third World in the 1960s, including the rising prominence of Maoism, scholars of development studies sought to apply the insights of Lenin, Chayanov, and others on agrarian transitions to capitalism outside of Europe and Soviet-controlled territories. Challenged by the realities of different socio-spatial contexts, scholars refined concepts to account for the complexities they encountered and the scholarly trajectory around the field of agrarian political economy grew. In the following section I discuss some of these contributions, highlight subsequent critiques of agrarian political economy, and formulate a new approach based in political ecology that draws upon the insights of agrarian political economy while addressing some of its criticisms. I demonstrate how the insights of these early scholars of the agrarian question continue to have
relevance today by providing a way to understand processes such as de/re-peasantisation taking place throughout CEE.

From Agrarian Political Economy to a Geographical Political Ecology of Food Systems

The writings of Lenin and Chayanov provided the theoretical foundation for a generative field of social research on agrarian transitions, which has produced insights globally. In this section I highlight some of these contributions and their associated debates before going on to detail some internal and external critiques of agrarian political economy. I conclude the section by describing a geographical political ecology of food systems approach, which includes a renewed agrarian political economy that accounts for these critiques.

Agrarian political economists writing in Asia (Akram-Lodhi, 2005; Zhang, 2015), Africa (Bernstein, 1979; Levin and Neocosmos, 1989), and Latin America (de Janvry, 1981; Kay, 1981) who based their work on Lenin’s insights, argued that farmer livelihoods are bound up within the dynamics of capitalism, producing a changing and differentiated social landscape (see Bernstein and Byres, 2001 for a more comprehensive analysis of this literature). Class analysis yielded meaningful insights into this differentiated social landscape and aided in the recognition, often against the claims of farmers’ movements, of farmers’ disparate interests. Even the classification of a ‘small’ or ‘mid-sized’ farmer is an analytically weak one that says nothing about the position of that farmer in a socially, economically and ecologically differentiated world (Bernstein, 2010). Following Lenin, who pointed out that the transitions from feudal class relations to capitalist relations vary across space, scholars have also documented the multiple paths that agrarian transitions have taken (Bernstein, 2010). What is common in all of them is the commodification of subsistence, which may not be total (i.e. labour may not be commodified), but which still forces peasants to depend in some manner or another on commodity relations for subsistence. Finally, this research also recognised the significance of studying existing patterns of capital accumulation in a structurally heterogeneous world economic system, a system that produces differences between central and peripheral nation-states (de Janvry, 1981). In other words,
conditions labelled as ‘backward’ came to be understood as produced thus through uneven development.

Many scholars sought alternative explanations to make sense of peasant responses to the expansion of capitalism by applying Chayanov’s theories. These scholars argued that peasant production constituted a unique mode of production within capitalism, one governed by its own logic (Vergopoulos, 1978), putting them at odds with others who drew more directly from Lenin. In the subsequent so-called Lenin-Chayanov debate (see Banaji, 1976; Bernstein and Byres, 2001; Bernstein, 2009), Lenin and Chayanov were cast as theoretical adversaries (Bernstein, 2009). Other scholars sought to reconcile Chayanovian and Marxist approaches. In her history of simple commodity production, Friedmann’s approach (1978), since labeled Chayanovian Marxism (Buttel, 2001), argued against the predominant assumption that simple commodity producers will always lose out to capitalist producers.

Although Chayanov assumed an ontology that was different from that developed by Lenin, what binds the work of Lenin and Chayanov is their common concern with the social relations of production (capitalist or non-capitalist) and their privileging of an economistic understanding of agrarian transitions and change. While the focus on the relationship between class dynamics and agrarian change and more broadly on the social relations of production remained dominant in peasant studies and agrarian political economy in the mid- to late-twentieth century, critiques began to arise about the narrowness of this focus. In particular, feminist scholars drew attention to the significance of patriarchal relations in the household and to gender relations more broadly in the food system (Razavi, 2009; Ramamurthy, 2000).

Other scholars criticised the focus on the social structure of agriculture and argued for the need to understand the relationship between nature and agriculture. For example, Goodman, Sorj, and Wilkinson (1987) reconsidered the role that nature plays in preventing the transformation of agricultural production into a unified industrial process. Farming systems are based in biophysical processes, which shape and constrain production. For example, weather, pests, and diseases may exact a considerable and unpredictable toll on production, which itself cannot be fully controlled because of the seasonality of agricultural production. However, the authors argue that industrial capital has been able to adapt
to natural constraints by employing strategies of “substitutionism”,
accumulation from the processing of agricultural outputs, and
“appropriationism”, when value-generating activities move out of the
direct sphere of the farmer, effectively commodifying farm processes.

By the end of the twentieth century, the new global reality of agro-
food systems had become a major focus of research in agrarian political
economy (Watts and Goodman, 1997). For example, the concept of
“food regime” was created to historicise the global political economy
of food by attempting to account for the multiple factors that contribute
to periods of stability, transition and crisis in capital accumulation
(see McMichael, 2009 for a genealogy of food regimes). Studies also
focused on the growing power of transnational corporations (TNCs),
their organisational and operational structures, and their relationships
with nation-states and other governing bodies (Bonanno et al., 1994).
The rise of TNCs went hand in hand with the growing dominance of
neoliberalism (Watts and Goodman, 1997).

Despite efforts to shift the focus of agrarian political economy to
issues beyond the social relations of production, in the last decade of the
twentieth century, the theoretical influence of agrarian political economy
declined (Buttel, 2001). Scholars increasingly critiqued agrarian political
economy as a theoretical perspective, arguing that it overlooked the
agency of nature, did not adequately theorise consumption and
culture, and neglected peasant agency as potentially transformative
and politically meaningful (Buttel, 2001). According to some critics,
by focusing exclusively on capitalist transformations, existing and past
scholarship had privileged certain economic practices over others and
therefore neglected to adequately consider the importance of a wide
spectrum of non-capitalist practices (Gibson-Graham, 1996; Whatmore
and Thorne, 1997). Critics of ‘capitalocentrism’ have further argued
that an exclusive focus on global capitalism and conventional food
chains deflects attention from already existing alternatives, which
could otherwise be recognised, strengthened and sustained (Whatmore
and Thorne, 1997). Furthermore, because discourses are themselves
productive of the worlds they seek to represent, scholarship that
represents food systems as globalised and exclusively capitalist helps
to produce a world in which seeing and supporting alternative food
systems becomes more difficult. To call attention to alternatives and
to thereby help shape a world that fosters alternative food systems, Whatmore and Thorne (1997) suggest an approach in which they are made visible and meaningful.

Scholarship in agrarian political economy has also been accused of applying a restrictive understanding of nature and materiality (Bakker and Bridge, 2006). Even when scholars actively took an interest in nature, it was represented as an obstacle or constraint (Goodman, Sorj, and Wilkinson, 1987; Mann, 1990), or as a vehicle for capital accumulation (Boyd, Prudham, and Schurman, 2001). This critique has extended to Marxist approaches more broadly, which have been criticised not only for restricted understandings of nature but for anthropocentrism and for reproducing problematic dualistic divides (Castree, 2002).

The focus on production in agrarian political economy reflects the assumption by Marxists that the sphere of production is the sole locus of political agency and potential transformative power. This is where labour meets capital, where surplus value is extracted from workers through the labour process. Consumption, merely a component of the sphere of exchange, has been generally relegated to a lesser, or even invisible, position. While consumer movements driven by environmental and other concerns made their presence felt in the food chain in the late-twentieth century, scholars had not developed concepts that could provide a more nuanced account of a kind of consumption that was clearly “more than merely a niche marketing opportunity” (Goodman and Dupuis, 2002: 18). For consumers, who were otherwise absent from the productive locus of power, political engagement could only be pursued through the unveiling of commodity fetishism. Consumers were not the only agents lacking transformative power according to agrarian political economists. The insistence that peasants did not form a distinct class (neither completely capitalist, nor completely proletarian) led scholars to dismiss or criticise movements that rallied on behalf of peasants. However, peasant movements remained prominent globally, even exerting political agency (Edelman, 1999).

To explain consumer and peasant movements, and to seriously evaluate possible alternatives to the conventional food system, scholars began to use multiple theoretical perspectives, from convention theory to post-humanist approaches (Blumberg et al., 2020; Goodman et al., 2012; Le Velly and Dufeu, 2016; Murdoch et al., 2000; Ponte, 2016; Wills and
Arundel, 2017). These theoretical approaches have become especially prominent in the study of ‘alternative food networks,’ which encompass the direct-to-consumer marketing outlets, such as farmers’ markets, which have grown in recent years (Blumberg et al., 2020; Goodman et al., 2012). Research on the broader alternative geographies of food, from farmers’ markets to urban agriculture, has produced significant insights on the strengths and limitations of these initiatives. To fully understand the source of these limitations, some scholars have insisted on the on-going relevance of political economy approaches, including agrarian political economy. For example, in her study on organic farming in California, Guthman (2004) demonstrated that capitalist dynamics were transforming the organic sector in a way that was compromising some organic ideals. Similarly, Galt (2013b) drew upon agrarian political economy to analyse farmer earnings in community supported agriculture, and he found high rates of self-exploitation. Despite the ubiquity of alternative geographies of food, capitalist dynamics have continued to influence the food system, from the proliferation of unhealthy dietary patterns (Otero, 2018), to the global expansion of land grabbing (Hall, 2013), to the more recent devastation unleashed by the coronavirus pandemic and other emergent diseases (Wallace et al., 2016; Wallace, 2020).

Clearly, despite the presence of alterity in the food system, it remains important to understand how capitalist dynamics influence the sustainability of food systems. As a result, Galt (2013b) has argued for the continued relevance of agrarian political economy, but he also acknowledges its weaknesses (Galt 2013a). To address these shortcomings, Galt (2013a) draws inspiration from the field of political ecology, and he argues that insights from agrarian political economy could be harnessed and integrated into a ‘political ecology of agrifood systems.’ By focusing on everyday lived environments, the politics of food production, struggles over the commons and many other related topics, political ecology has drawn connections between power relations and environmental change (Galt, 2013a).

While much political ecology research has focused on the local scale, it is not inimical to multi-scalar analysis (Engel-Di Mauro, 2009). Building on Galt’s (2013a) initial model, Blumberg et al. (2020) argue for the need to integrate a geographical approach to the political ecology of
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food systems through spatial concepts, such as Massey’s understanding of space as a heterogeneous multiplicity (2007). Understanding space as a multiplicity of processes, and thus as always in process, constituting and being constituted by flows, problematises developmentalist thinking that positions some places as ‘behind’ others, just as eastern Europe has often been cast as ‘behind’ western Europe. Space is also laden with power-geometries because the multiplicity of trajectories that constitute space are not equal in their capacities. As Massey explains, “understanding space as the constant open production of the topologies of power points to the fact that different ‘places’ will stand in contrasting relations to the global. They are differentially located in wider power-geometries” (Massey, 2005: 101). In their conceptualisation of a geographical political ecology of food systems framework, Blumberg et al. (2020) draw upon Massey’s conception of space as a heterogeneous multiplicity to demonstrate how capitalist dynamics intermingle with other trajectories to make space. However, any use of agrarian political economy must address limitations surrounding its core ontological foundations.

Agrarian political economy has been focused on class analysis and differentiation because in Marxist theory the proletariat plays an important role in overcoming capitalism. “As is well known, for Marx the possibility of transcending capitalism lay in the hands of the class that it created: only the proletariat, a class free from the ownership of the means of production and free to sell its labour-power, was capable of eradicating class society and ending exploitation” (Akram-Lodhi and Kay, 2010: 181). In this manner, agrarian political economy resembles what Moishe Postone calls ‘traditional Marxism,’ which includes “theoretical approaches that analyze capitalism from the standpoint of labor and characterize that society essentially in terms of class relations, structured by private ownership of the means of production and a market-regulated economy” (1993: 7).

A significant amount of scholarship has been devoted to critically assessing traditional Marxism, especially by heterodox Marxists who remain committed to the critique of capitalism, but understand the necessity of providing alternative conceptualisations of its overcoming (Clough and Blumberg, 2012; Postone, 1993). Socialist and Marxist feminists in particular have demonstrated the significance of social
reproduction as an analytical site to analyse how capitalism depends on social reproduction even as it destroys its basis (Federici, 2012; Katz, 2001). Like traditional Marxism, agrarian political economy has privileged the study of class dynamics, without taking seriously the forms of domination that have emerged in capitalist society. A shift away from ‘traditional’ Marxism, and in my application away from ‘traditional’ toward a ‘renewed’ agrarian political economy, does not discard all of traditional Marxism’s insights. Instead, it situates these insights within an alternative, but still Marxist perspective. Capitalism remains a contradictory, crisis-ridden system, prone to overproduction and underproduction. A renewed agrarian political economy allows us to account for consumer and peasant agency, to take alterity and nature seriously and to understand the importance of capitalism without relying on reductionism.

In the contemporary context, more and more consumers are concerned about food safety, and they seek to secure healthy, organic food. Likewise, more producers are willing to grow this food. However, “what characterizes capitalism is that, on a deep systemic level, production is not for the sake of consumption. Rather, it is driven, ultimately, by a system of abstract compulsions constituted by the double character of labor in capitalism, which posit production as its own goal” (Postone, 1993: 184). These abstract compulsions that cause producers/farmers to intensify production result in only short-term increases in surplus value generated. Once increases in productivity become socially general, the value generated per unit decreases. Even alternative agricultural production is only partially driven by the needs or desires of the local consumer; ultimately, it is driven by production for accumulation.

Drawing upon Moishe Postone’s work, Noel Castree (1999: 141) argues that: “capitalism can be seen as a constitutively ‘open’ system which, while structured, global and hegemonic, is nonetheless constantly infused by its putatively ‘non-capitalist’ exteriors.” In short, capitalist development does not cancel other logics and one can conceptualise a systemic capitalism without reducing all logics to capitalist logic. In this system, non-commodified and commodified labour may exist side-by-side: there is no linear progression to more and more commodified labour, or fewer and fewer peasant or household producers. Indeed, a
geographical political ecology of food systems approach underscores that circuits of capital structure practices, but they do not homogenise concrete labours or space.

In the following section I apply a geographical political ecology of food systems approach in an analysis of eastern European food systems since the late-twentieth century. The goal is not to provide a comprehensive overview of the multiple and complex changes that have occurred in food systems throughout the region. Instead, I connect these changes with the consolidation of neoliberal globalisation in the 1990s and the production of uneven geographical development and social inequality, both of which are important for understanding the geographical political ecology of food systems and have long been concerns within agrarian political economy. Harking back to Chayanov (1986), I also recognise the existence of multiple logics, some of which are making pathways towards more sustainable development in the region. Finally, I demonstrate how and why a geographical political ecology of food systems approach is useful in understanding both the possibilities and limitations inherent in these alternative food geographies.

Geographical Political Ecology of Eastern European Food Systems

Eastern European food systems have undergone radical transformations since the collapse of state-socialism in the late-twentieth century, and these changes exemplify both the expansion and consolidation of neoliberal globalisation, as well as the complex shaping and reshaping of non-capitalist logics, including those governing subsistence food production. Neoliberal policies implemented through shock therapy in the 1990s, the expansion of the European Union, and austerity policies following the 2008/09 financial crisis have transformed food production and consumption (Stuckler and Basu, 2013; Caldwell, 2009; Jung et al., 2014; Woolfson and Sommers, 2016), and rural geographies more broadly (Bohle and Greskovits, 2007; Burawoy et al., 2000; Burawoy and Verdery, 1999; Creed, 1998; Leonard and Kanef, 2002; Verdery, 2003). As a consequence of the European Union’s adherence to neoliberal policies and global competitiveness, uneven geographical development
has also reshaped the landscape (Agnew, 2001; Dunford and Smith, 2000; Hudson, 2003).

Since the 1990s, the agricultural sector was negatively affected by cheaper, subsidised food imported from western Europe (Blumberg and Mincyte, 2019; Engel-Di Mauro, 2006). Indeed, the power-geometries that span space, shape capitalist development in profound ways. For example, writing about the Polish sugar beet industry, Kim (2011; 2012) documented the negative effects of increasing competition and privatisation: in an effort to attract foreign investment and modernise plants, factories were sold to corporations based in western Europe. Many of these factories were later closed by those corporations, in part because of new EU policies that provided compensation for limiting sugar production (Kim, 2012). Farmers were adversely affected, while also facing rising costs and fluctuating prices.

Faced with these difficulties in conventional supply chains, many farmers have turned to supply consumers directly through local or alternative food networks. This phenomenon has been growing throughout CEE (Balázs et al., 2016; Benedek and Balázs, 2016; Bilewicz and Špiewak, 2018; Grivins and Tisenkopfs, 2015; Mincyte, 2012; Smeds, 2015; Spilková et al., 2013; Spilková and Perlín, 2013; Syrovátková, 2016; Syrovátková et al., 2015). Nevertheless, alternative food networks are still shaped by competition, which is rarely conceptualised and theorised in the literature on alternative food networks. In a case study in Lithuania, Blumberg (2015; 2018) documented how a dramatic fall in milk prices and the global financial crisis both enhanced interest in local food among consumers and enhanced competition for farmers seeking to provide that food to the local market. As a result, the promotion of alternative food networks has only furthered differentiation between farmers, as many mid- and large-scale farmers were able to take long-term advantage of these opportunities (Blumberg, 2018).

While the dynamics of capitalist accumulation help explain these transformations, they cannot fully account for the way political, social and cultural geographies also shaped these processes (Aistara, 2011; Kovács, 2015; Schwartz, 2005, 2007). By integrating an understanding of the more-than-capitalist world, a geographical political ecology of food systems approach helps explain key developments in food systems in the region. For example, longstanding practices of subsistence
food production are part of the social geographies that have helped households manage social reproduction during times of dramatic changes (Mincyte, 2011; Mincytė et al., 2020). In the 1990s, when Polish rural communities were beginning to feel the impacts of market integration, they responded by relying more heavily on what appeared to be older social arrangements of producing food, such as intensified subsistence peasant production (Zbierski-Salameh, 1999). Although certain social practices may bear resemblance to older forms, in post-socialism, their causes were actually novel (Burawoy and Verdery, 1999). Rather than being signs of ‘backwardness,’ or relics of the past, they are partially products of expansionary capitalism characterised by social domination, increasingly fragmented labour and globalised agri-food networks that have enforced rationalisation and industrialisation of the production process. These processes of differentiation were accelerated and promoted through the application of the EU’s CAP and stringent food safety legislation.

The financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequent implementation of austerity policies throughout the Central and Eastern European region also had a profound impact on consumers. As in the past, economic hardships encouraged practices like subsistence food production and exchange as part of larger informal economies (Blumberg and Mincyte, 2019; Smith et al., 2008; Staddon, 2009; Smith and Stenning, 2006). While explanations for the persistence of household self-provisioning have long featured in academic literature (Czegledy, 2002; Hann, 2003; Seeth et al., 1998; Humphrey and Mandel, 2002), only recently have scholars considered how alternative food production, procurement and marketing practices provide possible sustainable development pathways (Ančić et al., 2019; Blumberg and Mincye, 2019; Blumberg, 2018; Brawner, 2015; Jehlička, 2021; Jehlička et al., 2020; Pungas, 2019; Smith and Jehlička, 2013; Spilková and Vágner, 2018; Yotova, 2018).

The ubiquity and complexity of alternative food practices in the region is pushing scholarship on alternative food networks in new directions. Rather than assuming the universality of concepts such as ‘local food,’ ‘alternative food networks,’ or ‘farmers’ markets,’ scholars have documented how concepts travel, merge and are transformed in local contexts (Bilewicz, 2020). These concepts are part of the trajectories that make space (Massey, 2005). For example, Goszczyński
and colleagues (2019) highlight how concepts related to alternative food networks have travelled and been adopted and adapted in Poland, while Fendrychová and Jehlička (2018) examine the travelling concept of a farmers’ market in Czechia. In both cases, the authors show how meaning and understanding cannot be presupposed, and how the historical geographies of food provisioning and marketing influence and transform travelling concepts. Writing about these historical geographies in CEE, Goszczyński and colleagues (2019) propose the concept of ‘invisible alternativeness’ to capture the fact that everyday and embedded non-industrial food production, distribution and consumption practices have the potential to remake food regimes, even though they may not be viewed as unique or alternative locally. Similarly, in their study of food self-provisioning in the Czech Republic, Jehlička and colleagues (2019) demonstrate that food self-provisioning can be considered as a form of resilience that counters neoliberalism and enables transformations in the food system.

While this scholarship does not explicitly engage with political ecology for the most part, a geographical political ecology of food systems approach offers the intellectual milieu for broader theoretical development because it weaves together political ecology, geography and agrarian political economy. All three fields combined under this framework are particularly useful for understanding food systems in CEE. For example, political ecology research has long been concerned with the politics of the commons, especially by critiquing efforts of enclosure, whether they be led by the state or private entities (Turner, 2017). In CEE, an important example of ‘actually existing commons’ (Turner, 2017) are the forests that provide abundant resources for foraging throughout the region. Forest resources, such as berries and mushrooms, enhance food security (Łuczaj et al., 2012), provide livelihood opportunities (Sõukand et al., 2020) and serve as a reservoir to maintain ecological knowledge (Pieri and Sõukand, 2018). However, they can also be over-exploited and impacted by the expansion of industrial agriculture practices (Łuczaj et al., 2012). Agrarian political economy provides the tools to examine capitalist accumulation in the food system, and how it manifests through the industrialisation of agriculture and differentiation among producers. Writing about pork producers in Poland, Mroczyńska (2019) documents the process of differentiation, and connects it to the
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multi-scalar politics of EU agricultural policy. She finds that small-scale pork producers have been marginalised from the formal economic sphere, yet the production and consumption of pork by these farmers continues and carries a moral distinction associated with swoje/swojskie (our, familiar) food, as opposed to store-bought food (Mroczkowska, 2019). Geographic research on the politics of scale provides tools to understand the formation and implementation of policy in the food system, and its unintended effects (Blumberg and Mincyte, 2020). As calls for a new kind of food policy in Europe intensify (De Schutter et al., 2020), this kind of research is especially significant.

Conclusion

On a beautiful August day in 2010, I spent the afternoon sitting in one of Riga’s many cafes discussing the difficulties and possibilities in establishing formalised alternative food networks with Ieva (a pseudonym), a woman who was in the midst of organising a collective direct marketing initiative. Ieva’s alternative food network was inspired by the community-supported agriculture (CSA) systems that exist in other countries, but it differed from them in at least two respects: it did not require pre-payment for the whole season and it included a handful of organic farmers who offered different products. Ieva’s system was basically a collective purchasing cooperative in which consumers would place orders on a weekly basis, farmers would cooperate to deliver the products to a set location in Riga, and consumers would volunteer on a rotating basis to process the orders. The financial constraints of the participating consumers influenced the structure of the network. A CSA model with pre-paid seasonal shares was not possible because most participating consumers would not have the required money in advance. Furthermore, the idea of receiving items that were not specifically chosen (as usually occurs in CSA or box schemes) was not appealing because the consumers involved already spend at least 30% of their household income on food and they did not want to waste money purchasing unwanted items.

Within a year, Ieva’s consumer group was operating smoothly and interest had grown so much that Ieva’s group had to turn prospective consumers away. However, she did help other groups to get started.
They are able to order organic and locally-grown food for prices that are generally lower than those in stores. Collective purchasing has also fostered a sense of community among the consumers and a feeling of reconnection with producers. For participating farmers, these initiatives have brought benefits too: farmers get paid immediately and with orders in place, and they know exactly what to deliver. As a result, farmers generally welcome these new initiatives, but they have no illusion that they can exclusively rely on them for their livelihoods; thus far only a small portion of participating farmers’ total sales are made through them. Ordering also becomes more erratic in the summer months when people take vacations. This is precisely the time when farmers experience a glut in available produce. Therefore, farmers must still seek out other markets or channels, such as export markets or conventional supply chains, in order to sustain their livelihoods.

By maintaining an understanding of capitalist dynamics without reducing all phenomena to capitalism, a geographical political ecology of food systems approach helps explain the limitations of models like CSA. Through uneven geographical development, eastern Europe continues to experience higher rates of poverty and food insecurity (Davis and Geiger, 2017; Garratt, 2020). Despite consumer interest, CSAs are not ubiquitous because of their dependence on models which assume high disposable incomes. Nevertheless, these systems and other invisible alternatives (Goszczyński et al., 2019) continue to be practiced, remade and adapted.

In the twentieth century, scholars of agrarian change were heavily influenced by theoretical research on agrarian transitions in eastern Europe. While the influence of this theoretical research and the scholarship it generated has waned in the broader study of agri-food systems, it produced important insights that remain relevant in explaining problems in the political ecology of food systems, as well as pointing towards solutions. Using an approach based on a renewed agrarian political economy, which is part of a geographical political ecology of food systems, this chapter draws attention to new strands of research in the region that are once again pushing theories in new directions.
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