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What Grows During a Crisis? Cultivating the Food Commons in Oxfordshire

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

The need for a fundamental transformation of food systems is now widely recognized. As a response to the intersecting crises facing the food system, scholars and activists have proposed to move beyond understandings of food as a commodity, instead reconceptualizing it as a commons. Drawing on political ecology, feminist theory, and diverse economies literatures, this paper focuses on the concept of food commoning, defined as the activities conducted by communities who co-produce, manage, and benefit from shared food resources. Through the case study of Oxfordshire, it explores how COVID-19 has strengthened and expanded creative practices tied to food sharing. This study's emphasis on the praxis of commoning multiplies the sites and temporalities that can be commoned, revealing the existence of commoning efforts and practices at all levels of the food chain. The findings suggest that these initiatives produce resilient entanglements grounded in reciprocity, care, and sustainability, thereby resignifying the values that govern food production, distribution, and consumption. Beyond individual food commons, I argue that building food commoning networks creates opportunities to integrate heterogenous food commons operating at all levels of the food system into a systemic alternative, which points to the possibility of (re)commoning the entirety of the food system. Highlighting their prefigurative potential, commoning assemblages are carving out spaces of possibility in the current socio-political context for the transition towards more sustainable, resilient, diverse, and just food systems.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In a world increasingly disrupted by the effects of climate change, there is growing consensus among scholars that a "fundamental transformation of food systems" is necessary (Webb et al., 2020). While food systems are under severe pressure from climate stressors, the industrial production of food itself is an important driver pushing the environment beyond its planetary boundaries (Clapp and Moseley, 2020). By revealing the vulnerability of the global food system, the COVID-19 pandemic has made the need for this transition more urgent (HLPE, 2020). As the global food regime faltered during the pandemic, however, communities across the world began to reclaim their control over food production, resulting in a flourishing of food commons (Healy et al., 2020; Leitheiser & Horlings, 2021).

This revitalization is part of a global "renaissance of the commons" (Clippinger & Bollier, 2005). In response to the advance of privatization and individualism, researchers and activists have attempted to envision different forms of exchange, production, and living together (Nightingale, 2019). As part of these efforts, the commons have re-emerged as a viable alternative to state and market structures (Dawney et al., 2016). While early scholarship on the commons was embedded in the institutional approach of Elinor Ostrom (1990, 2010), a burgeoning body of work from political ecology, critical geography, feminist theory, community economies, and anthropology conceptualizes the commons as other-than-capitalist practices, relationships, subjectivities, and imaginaries (Federici, 2012; García-López et al., 2021; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; Hardt & Negri, 2009; Singh, 2017).

This paper draws on this cross-disciplinary literature to explore the diversity and generativity of "actually existing" food commons (Eizenberg, 2012). Grounded in the case study of Oxfordshire, a county in the United Kingdom possessing a thriving alternative food network, the article analyzes the practices, values, and aspirations guiding food commoning initiatives – defined as the activities conducted by communities who co-produce, manage, and benefit from shared food resources according to negotiated rules (Bollier, 2014; Vivero-Pol, 2018). This study offers a unique perspective on the dynamics at play within and between different groups experimenting with the ideas of food commoning in response to the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Engaging with recent debates and developments in the commons literature, it explores how the political, prefigurative, and coordinating power of food commoning can contribute to generate just, ecological, and resilient commons-based food systems (Pettenati et al., 2018) and food futures at the local level, in the Global North.

Adopting and expanding the food-as-commons typology proposed by Carceller-Sauras and Theesfeld (2021), this paper classifies the food commoning initiatives operating in Oxfordshire into four different discourses: "Joint responsibility for food production," "Reducing food waste," "Safeguarding and disseminating food culture and knowledge," and "Solidarity-based redistribution." Not only does this study utilize the classification to identify characteristics that distinguish different types of initiatives, but it also employs it to evaluate the overall potential of food commons in commoning the entire local food system, analyzing the linkages and complementarities between discourses and initiatives. By bringing heterogeneous food initiatives together, the concept of food commoning could constitute a plurivocal framework for socio-ecological food justice and transformation.

The paper proceeds as follows. The following section establishes the theoretical framework, examining the diverse literature on commons-as-practice, as well as the paradigm of food-as-commons. The next section presents the case study of Oxfordshire and delineates the research methods of this work. Findings are then presented and discussed. The paper concludes by engaging with openings and challenges faced by food commoning projects in building alternative food futures and providing pathways for their expansion.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 FROM COMMONS TO COMMONING

A diverse literature examines the theoretical underpinnings and practical implications of the commons as a means to organize, manage, and govern resources, spaces, and social relations (De Angelis, 2010; Federici, 2012; Ostrom, 1990). Ostrom (1990, 2010) demonstrated that local, self-organized communities have long established institutional arrangements to sustainably manage 'common-pool resources' (CPR) without resorting to government regulation or privatization. A next generation of scholars has expanded on Ostrom's findings to apply her principles to different types of commons, including urban commons (Foster & Iaione, 2016), knowledge commons (Madison et al., 2009), and global commons (Hudson et al., 2019).

While academics recognize Ostrom's crucial contributions, her work has been criticized for advancing managerial solutions to challenges posed by the governance of shared resources, as well as for its

overreliance on rational choice theory and incapacity to transcend nature-culture dualisms (García-López et al., 2021; Singh, 2017). Institutionalist approaches thus fail to consider the political potential of the commons in fostering radical alternatives to the extractive and productivist logic of capitalism (Caffentzis & Federici, 2014).

Challenging institutionalist approaches, a growing and diverse body of scholars (De Angelis, 2010; Escobar, 2015; Federici, 2012; García-López et al., 2021; Helfrich, 2015; Linebaugh, 2008; Singh, 2017) conceptualizes the commons as socio-spatial relations and practices rather than set resources within a bounded territory. These scholars view the commons as alternative and counter-hegemonic forms of (re)production (Caffentzis & Federici, 2014) that foster other-than-capitalist community economies, relations, subjectivities, and imaginaries (García-López et al., 2021; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; Nightingale, 2019; Singh, 2017). Accompanying this conceptual shift, Linebaugh (2008) proposes to consider the commons as a verb instead of a noun: it is the praxis of commoning which confers to a resource its commons nature (Dardot & Laval, 2017). Commons do not simply exist, they must be actively produced and reproduced so that they continually adapt to the actions of those who constitute them and to socio-economic and environmental changes (Fisher & Nading, 2021; Montenegro de Wit, 2019).

Feminist scholarship on the commons (Nightingale, 2019, p. 24; Singh, 2017) views the commons as sites where the creative and dynamic energies of humans and more-than-humans join, cultivating "affective socio-nature relations and subjectivities of 'being in common' with others." This highlights the embeddedness of the commons in nature and society, meaning that they exist and emerge within particular historical, political, socio-economic, and ecological contexts (McCay, 2002). Additionally, commoning is about creating and sustaining relationships – between humans and non-humans, and past, present, and future generations – to generate communally-governed systems for just and sustainable lives (García-López et al., 2021). This entails sharing resources in a collective manner, supporting local needs and economies, and (re)producing human and more-than-human communities, while also transforming socio-ecological relations in ways that are able to respond to our intersecting contemporary crises (Fisher & Nading, 2021; García-López et al., 2021; Johnson, 2021; Valle, 2021).

This paper builds on this scholarship, examining how communities in the Global North are experimenting with creative ways of being-in-common, while simultaneously prefiguring postcapitalist imaginaries to transform the food system. This capacity to summon alternative futures into being (Van de Sande, 2013) points to the temporal dimension of the commons, revealing how the future can be practiced as a shared commons (Dawney et al., 2016).

2.2 (RE)COMMONING FOOD AND FOOD SYSTEMS: A DISRUPTIVE PARADIGM SHIFT

In recent years, research has revealed that food production and distribution are major drivers pushing the environment beyond its planetary boundaries (Steffen et al., 2015): currently, the global food supply chain generates 26 percent of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions (Poore & Nemecek, 2018) and relies extensively on fossil fuels and chemical inputs. The push to make complex global supply chains increasingly 'efficient' through industrial food production, specialization, and concentration has also hindered the overall resilience of the international food system (Garnett et al., 2020). Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the structural vulnerabilities of this system by disrupting supply chains, exacerbating food insecurity, and undermining livelihoods for food workers (Clapp & Moseley, 2020).

In the face of these systemic issues, scholars (Vivero-Pol, 2017a; Vivero-Pol et al., 2018) have begun advancing the idea that food can be understood, governed, and valued as a commons – an essential resource generating social benefits whose meaning and (re)production include all members of the community (Rossi et al., 2021). This nascent conceptual framework attempts to create a convergence between the fragmented solutions to the food crisis, turning them "into a viable transition with shared values and multiple but convergent praxis" (Vivero-Pol, 2018, p. 30).

In policy debates, the idea of food-as-commons is emerging as an alternative to the dominant, post-exceptionalist narrative premised on food being a commodity (Carceller-Sauras & Theesfeld, 2021; Daugbjerg & Feindt, 2017). This implies re-valuing the attributes tied to its use, including food as a human right, a cultural determinant, and a natural resource (Vivero-Pol, 2017a). Highlighting this shift, the Group of Chief Scientific Advisors of the European Commission (2020) recommends conceiving food as a common good to achieve greater food system sustainability. The Science Advice for Policy by European Academies (SAPEA) consortium also engages with the idea of food as commons in its report "A sustainable food system for the European Union" (2020), identifying policy intervention areas including regional food strategies, rural-urban food coalitions, and polycentric governance structures.

Outside the policy sphere, empirical research on food commons and commoning has been conducted on seeds (Montenegro de Wit, 2019), genetic agricultural resources

(Frison & Coolsaet, 2018), urban community gardens (Eizenberg, 2012; Tornaghi, 2017), mutual aid networks (Ruiz Cayuela, 2021), home gardens (Valle, 2021), and safeguarding traditional agricultural knowledge (Reyes-García et al., 2018). Communities are experimenting with growing, sharing, and consuming food together, producing new and post-capitalist ways of being-in-common (Valle, 2021). Motivated by reciprocity, inclusiveness, and socio-environmental justice (Rossi et al., 2021), these groups seek to expand access to food in a way that is equitable to both producers and consumers, while also creating community and stewarding agrobiodiversity. At the local level, grassroots initiatives are employing the paradigm of food commons to resignify food, question underlying power structures, and explore innovative practices, policies, and legal frameworks for the food system (Ferrando et al., 2021; Rossi et al., 2021).

Beyond the commoning of food, there has recently been growing interest in the possibility of (re)commoning the entirety of the food system (Ferrando et al., 2021; Pettenati et al., 2018; Rossi et al., 2021). This stems from the claim that food cannot truly be a commons when the rest of the network is still structured around the commodification of nature, labor, water, seeds, and land (Ferrando et al., 2021; Pettenati et al., 2018). A commons-based food system, then, is the set of resources and practices which enables the collective governance of all elements essential for developing a food system based on regeneration, direct democracy, and equitable distribution of food and revenues (Ferrando et al., 2021; Vivero-Pol, 2018). On a larger scale, commoning the food system could herald an agroecological transition where the ecological, social, cultural, and political attributes of food predominate over economic logics (Rossi et al., 2021).

Despite COVID-19's significant impact on food systems, few analyses have been conducted to analyze its effects on food production, distribution, and consumption patterns using the conceptual framework of the commons (Healy et al., 2020; Leitheiser & Horlings, 2021). As a result of their diversity, capacity to adjust to changing environments, and ability to diffuse detrimental impacts (Ostrom, 2010), the commons are able to recover from shocks rapidly. Because they form local and self-organized structures – key characteristics of resilient agri-food systems (HLPE, 2020; Worstell and Green, 2017) – the commons are capable of re-embedding food production in local socio-ecological relationships and developing new communal market arrangements that can bypass the global food system (Caggiano & De Rosa, 2015). Building on this research, this paper investigates the immediate potential of commoning practices in responding to the food crisis caused by the pandemic, as well as their long-term prospects in creating more resilient local food systems.

3. METHODS

Oxfordshire is a county situated in southern UK. While annual incomes in Oxfordshire are higher than the national average, this masks stark inequalities: 8 to 10 percent of households in the county – or 55,000 to 69,000 people – are estimated to be food insecure, while 5 of its 86 areas are among the country's 20 percent most income deprived (Good Food Oxford, 2021). This precarity is reflective of the larger UK foodscape, which is a space rooted in colonial legacies marked by stark inequalities resulting from state withdrawal and financial austerity since the Thatcher administration (Ferrando et al., 2021; Power, 2022). These themes are manifest in Oxfordshire, which saw a surge in grassroots activity during COVID-19 to support those experiencing food insecurity (Good Food Oxford, 2021). Across the country, food insecure households were most likely to be Black and minority ethnic (Food Foundation, 2021), but the majority of commoners interviewed in this study were white and middle class. The racial distribution of food insecurity reflects the UK's colonial past and the impact of structural racism on food access (Ferrando et al., 2021); at the same time, the demographics of the commoners indicate the white privilege (Slocum, 2007) and "race and class-based disparities" (Cohen et al., 2012, p. 81) prevalent in the wider UK food movement – which is further discussed in following sections.

This paper is grounded in the case study of ten food commoning initiatives in Oxfordshire. A case study approach was chosen as it allows the analysis of complex and context-dependent phenomena (Flyvbjerg, 2006). This paper draws on data from fieldwork conducted between June and August 2021, comprising of participant observation, in-depth interviews, and informal conversations with members of ten food commoning projects (Table 1). During that period, 16 in-depth interviews were conducted. Participants included one man and 15 women – a split which reflects the gendered inflexions of care work and the central role played by women in sustaining the commons (Federici, 2012). Interviewees were asked about the functioning and aims of their food commoning initiative, their success in responding to COVID-19, and their vision for the future of food systems. Interviews were semi-structured, allowing for detailed insights into participants' involvement with commoning projects (Turner, 2010). I also conducted participant observations by volunteering with various commoning groups: Oxford Mutual Aid, Botley

Community Fridge, Oxford City Farm, and Kitchen Garden People. This allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of how social spaces, in this case food commons, are constituted, giving me an insight into the lived experiences and affective worlds of commoners (Watson & Till, 2010). Finally, content analysis of policy documents and research reports was conducted (Schreier, 2014), serving to triangulate the collected data and situate findings within a larger reference frame.

Employing the data gathered during the fieldwork process, this paper builds on and expands the typology established by Carceller-Sauras and Theesfeld (2021), which proposes four different food-as-commons discourses: "Open source inputs in agriculture," "Joint responsibility for food products," "Reducing food waste," and "Safeguarding food culture and knowledge." Carceller-Sauras and Theesfeld categorize initiatives underpinning each of these discourses according to the following characteristics: type of resource; whether the initiative is centered around the allocation of a resource unit or provision of the resource system; property rights regime (open access (OA), private property (PP), state property (SP), and common property (CP)); perceptions of food (food as: (a) a basic human need, (b) a human right, (c) a cultural determinant, (d) a marketable product contingent on fair trade and sustainable production, and (e) a global common good) (Vivero-Pol, 2013); food system level at which they operate (production, processing, packaging, distribution, retail, and consumption) (Marshall, 2015); main level of social change aimed (norms and culture, formal institutions, governance structures, and resource allocation) (Williamson, 2000); and ideas driving the initiatives (Schmidt, 2008).

While Carceller-Sauras and Theesfeld employ this typology to evaluate the success of individual discourses and initiatives in influencing policy, this paper adopts it to assess the overall potential of food commons in commoning the whole food system, by examining the interconnections and complementarity between and within discourses and initiatives.

Focusing explicitly on the activity of commoning, this paper adapts Carceller-Sauras and Theesfeld's framework by removing the categories of "resource type" and "allocation/provision," replacing them with "type of food commoning initiative" and "commoning practice." This emphasis on praxis expands the scope of what can be held in common, leading me to broaden the "Safeguarding food culture and knowledge" discourse. Defined by Carceller-Sauras and Theesfeld as mainly referring to recipes and traditions tied to preparing food, I enlarge it to include all practices and initiatives focused on educating communities about food culture and knowledge – renaming it "Safeguarding and *disseminating* food culture and knowledge." As there were no initiatives focused solely on agricultural inputs in Oxfordshire, I do not include the "Open source inputs in agriculture" discourse in the classification I propose.

Departing from Carceller-Sauras and Theesfeld's policy-centric approach and allowing for greater consideration of the commons' political power in creating radical alternatives (García-López et al., 2021), this study proposes a supplemental food-as-commons discourse: "Solidarity-based redistribution," which encompasses initiatives that function as emancipatory spaces seeking to generate forms of togetherness premised on solidarity, like mutual aid networks (Ruiz Cayuela, 2021).

4. RESULTS

4.1 CONCEPTUALIZING THE FOOD COMMONS IN OXFORDSHIRE

In Oxfordshire, the four different food-as-commons discourses and the initiatives that fall under them are characterized by idiosyncratic ideas and structures but also convergent practices (Table 1), which in turn generate specific subjectivities and relations (Singh, 2017). These joint practices include sharing resources (including land, tools, seeds, water, energy, services, time, and food) in a participatory and inclusive manner, illustrating what Gibson-Graham et al. (2016, p. 193) call a "politics of commoning."

The first discourse, "Joint responsibility for food production," encompasses initiatives like community-supported agriculture (CSA) schemes and cooperatives. These groups deepen the relationship between producers and consumers by sharing the financial risks of production, increasing consumer involvement in the food growing process, and establishing direct distribution channels between growers and eaters. In Oxfordshire, the Kitchen Garden People CSA functions by having farmers and members share the responsibilities, risks, and benefits of farming, encouraging the latter to spend time on-site. Another example is Cultivate, an Oxford-based cooperative that acts as an intermediary between local farmers and consumers, creating shorter supply chains by bypassing retailers and supermarkets. These initiatives, which operate at all levels of the food chain, challenge the idea of a food system based on competition, in which food prices are determined by market dynamics, instead advocating for "close relationships between growers and consumers, based on trust" (Interviewee 2), and "different ways of working economically" (Interviewee 1).

The "Reducing food waste" discourse is made up of initiatives that tackle food waste and repurpose and revalue food surplus, like community fridges. These initiatives,

DISCOURSE	INITIATIVE	TYPE OF FOOD COMMONING INITIATIVE	COMMONING PRACTICE	PROPERTY-RIGHTS REGIME	PERCEPTION OF FOOD	FOOD SYSTEM LEVEL	MAIN LEVEL OF SOCIAL CHANGE AIMED	IDEAS
Joint responsibility for food production	The Kitchen Garden People	Community-supported agriculture (CSA)	Sharing of food, time, labor, financial risks	CP; PP	a, b, e	Production; processing; retail; packaging; distribution	Governance structures; resource allocation	Sustainability; proximity; community-based food production; good food for everyone; consumers as co-producers; sovereignty
	Cultivate	Food cooperative	Sharing of food, time, labor, financial ownership	CP	a, b, e	Production; processing; retail; packaging; distribution	Governance structures; resource allocation	Sustainability; proximity; community-based food production; good food for everyone; fair income for producers; justice; sovereignty
Reducing food waste	Cherwell Collective	Community enterprise	Sharing food surplus, knowledge, time, seeds, supplies	PP	a, b, e, d, e	Production; distribution; consumption	Governance structures; resource allocation	Redistribution; communality; sustainability; repurposing food surplus
	Botley Community Fridge	Community fridge	Sharing food surplus, time, labor	OA	a, b	Distribution; consumption	Resource allocation	Redistribution; tackling food waste; sustainability
	The Mix Community Fridge	Community fridge	Sharing surplus food, time, labor	OA	a, b	Distribution; consumption	Resource allocation	Redistribution; tackling food waste; sustainability
Safeguarding and disseminating food culture and knowledge	Oxford Community Farm	Community farm	Sharing of knowledge, tools, labor, time, food	CP	a, b, c, e	Production; distribution; consumption	Norms and culture; resource allocation	Sustainability; proximity; good food for everyone
	Hogacre Common	Eco park	Sharing of knowledge. seeds, tools, labor, time, food	CP	a, b, c, e	Production; consumption	Norms and culture; resource allocation	Sustainability; proximity
	Stonehill Community Garden	Community garden	Sharing of knowledge, seeds, tools, labor, time, food, skills	CP	a, b, c, e	Production; distribution; consumption	Norms and culture; resource allocation	Sustainability; proximity; good food for everyone
	Incredible Edible Oxford	Food growing network	Sharing of knowledge, seeds, tools, labor, time, food	SP	a, b, c, e	Production; distribution	Norms and culture; governance structures; resource allocation	Sustainability; proximity; reclaiming access to public spaces
Solidarity-based redistribution	Oxford Mutual Aid	Mutual aid network	Sharing of food, time, labor, distribution infrastructure	CP	a, b, e	Distribution; consumption	Norms and culture; resource allocation	Redistribution; justice; solidarity; dignified access to food

Table 1 Typology of food commoning initiatives in Oxfordshire.

Adapted from Carceller-Sauras & Theesfeld (2021, p. 373).

which concentrate on the distribution and consumption side of the food system, are driven by environmental values, proposing alternative and communal social arrangements to govern food waste. For instance, many food commoning initiatives in Oxfordshire possess kitchen spaces, enabling participants to cook collectively for the community using surplus food. In another instance, when pandemic lockdowns were lifted, the Cherwell Collective "opened a surplus cafe to provide a safe space for people to reunite over food" (Interviewee 13). Hence, these groups do not simply reduce food waste, but also contribute to fostering "communities of care" (Interviewee 10).

Initiatives that fall under the third discourse, "Safeguarding and disseminating food culture and knowledge," include community farms, gardens, and food forests, which are primarily geared toward the commoning of knowledge, skills, and information, at all levels of the food system. Driven by values of communality, sustainability, and proximity, these groups aim to provide "diverse and active spaces where people can be in nature, while also learning about growing food, sustainable farming practices, and eco-literacy principles" (Interviewee 1). More motivated by the commoning of knowledge than self-sufficiency (Tornaghi, 2017), these projects have established channels for creating and disseminating practical skills, including free workshops and school visits. This continuous expansion of the "network of sharing and collaboration" is crucial to the reproduction of food commons, as it sustains existing commons and creates new ones (Stavrides, 2015, p. 13). Moreover, by allowing the constant and spontaneous exchange of knowledge, ideas, and practices, these initiatives create a "proximate togetherness" among members (Pikner et al., 2020), as well as "affective ecologies" that extend a logic of care to plants, animals, and more-than-human communities (Singh, 2017).

Finally, the last discourse, "Solidarity-based redistribution," comprises initiatives driven by social justice, cooperation, and horizontality, like mutual aid networks. Working to alleviate situations of social disadvantage or exclusion, these groups tend to have more overt political aims, thereby challenging the modes of functioning of capital (Ruiz Cayuela, 2021). They operate at the levels of food distribution and consumption. In Oxfordshire, one of such groups is Oxford Mutual Aid (OMA), which redistributes healthy and culturally appropriate food for free and functions by flattening the differences between donors and receivers of food. By refusing the gatekeeping practices of public aid and charities and encouraging all participants – including food receivers – to be actively involved, OMA fosters relationships forged on mutual aid and care, whereby everyone participating becomes a commoner. The commoning of food, in this sense, produces what Federici (2012, p. 228) calls "a common subject."

Despite their differences, Oxford's food commoning initiatives have all emerged as a response to the inefficiency and destructiveness of the dominant industrial agri-food model, redefining food practices and relationships premised on reciprocity, social justice, and ecological sustainability (Rossi et al., 2021).

4.2 BEYOND INDIVIDUAL FOOD COMMONS: AN ASSEMBLAGE OF FOOD COMMONING INITIATIVES

Moving beyond individual initiatives and their discourses, the case study of Oxfordshire reveals the importance of reading the typology in an integrated manner, by analyzing *assemblages* of food commons and their interconnections. As Table 1 shows, food commoning initiatives in the region operate at different levels of the food system, across a multiplicity of property rights regimes. Rather than forming a series of fragmented entities, they constitute a resilient network of divergent yet complementary initiatives, working together to provide local, just, healthy, ecological, and culturally appropriate food to the county's population. This points to the possibility of expanding commoning processes on a larger scale – in this case the regional level.

While various initiatives were already connected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the food crisis it provoked provided the impetus for these groups to self-organize in a coherent and coordinated way. Because the market and state were unable to provide a sufficient response to the disturbance, food commoning initiatives stepped in to give rise to an entirely "different, alternative food system" (Interviewee 11) based on commoning. While these entities retained their identities, organizational structures, and values, they coalesced into a larger network, allowing them to work in a collective and decentralized way. This coordination was facilitated by the efforts of Good Food Oxfordshire, a pre-existing and institutionalized network of sustainable food groups working in the county.

As a result of their diversity and complementarity, these initiatives were able to respond to the crisis in a systematic manner:

> "There was an ad hoc mishmash of different groups responding to the same problem in different ways so that if pressures caused one of those to fail, there were enough set up differently that they could continue functioning" (Interviewee 5).

Interviewees reported that the pandemic strengthened the connections between food commons, creating new spaces for collaboration. One way in which this occurred

was the creation of Community Food Networks (CFNs) during the pandemic:

> "We convened CFNs in each district at least once a month, sometimes fortnightly, enabling the City and County councils to hear what was going on. Food services were then able to share resources more effectively, collaborate, and connect people" (Interviewee 6).

Highlighting the durability of these connections, CFNs continue to meet regularly, pointing to commoning's long-term potential in generating more resilient local food systems.

The fluidity of commoning groups also allowed them to adapt to changing social and political conditions. When the UK entered into lockdown, limiting in-person contact, these groups quickly reorganized themselves to respond to the crisis. For instance, an interviewee "set up a vegetable box scheme in 48 hours, to ensure that farmers could still find a market for their produce and local people had safe access to food" (Interviewee 11). Similarly, the Kitchen Garden People and Cultivate expanded their vegetable box schemes, allowing households to have undisturbed access to food via at-home deliveries. When several initiatives – like community farms and gardens – had to stop operating because of lockdown orders, others were able to fill in the gap, ensuring the continued existence of Oxfordshire's alternative food system. The resilience of Oxfordshire's food commoning network can thus be seen in its capacity to self-organize, experiment, and innovate, exemplifying how assemblages of food commons can go "beyond markets and states" (Ostrom, 2010, p. 641) to rebuild food systems around horizontal subsidiarity (Pettenati et al., 2018).

When asked if they felt their response to the food crisis had been successful, participants unanimously answered in the affirmative. This language of success departs from the narratives of dispossession and failure that characterize early debates on the commons (Dawney et al., 2016). By contrast, the optimism expressed by interviewees attests to the commons' "power to move and inspire, to inform hope, and to speak of other worlds" (ibid, p. 23).

4.3 COMMONERS' VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE

This section examines commoners' visions of food-futures, exploring the ways in which they imagine alternative worlds and directly enact the ideas driving their initiatives. Participants most frequently invoked ideas like communality, proximity, sustainability, redistribution, and justice (Table 1), which can be classified into three broad areas of concern: ecological, economic, and political.

At the ecological level, commoners shared that they envision and are simultaneously developing a food system based on ecological integrity, which "has positive impacts on [the environment and biodiversity]" (Interviewee 6). Respondents stressed that this entails transitioning away from fossil fuels and artificial inputs, and towards regenerative farming practices, which requires "designing agroecological systems that provide food while creating spaces for humans and wildlife to flourish" (Interviewee 1). Additionally, a number of participants placed great importance on ensuring that no food is wasted during the production, distribution, and consumption process. These sustainability-centric ideas were held by participants of initiatives categorized under the "Joint responsibility for food production," "Reducing food waste," and "Safeguarding and disseminating food culture and knowledge" discourses.

Economically, interviewees expressed the wish for a stronger localized food system, which reflects the idea of proximity and highlights the strong connection between food commoning and localism (Pettenati et al., 2018). This idea of proximity was most strongly expressed by participants of groups under the discourse "Joint responsibility for food production." To foster a "vibrant local farming system that supplies locally" (Interviewee 6), participants emphasized the need, first, to increase the amount of food grown locally, and second, to create a strong local economy able to absorb this production. This resembles what Magnaghi (2012, p. 4) describes as a "return to the territory," namely the re-appropriation of place-based forms of life and production systems in response to processes of globalization. However, participants emphasized that their vision for food relocalization did not support exclusionary practices, instead advocating for "reflexive localism" (Goodman et al., 2012): "It's not defensive localism, it's just localism – celebratory localism maybe – which happens with non-abusive levels of international trade" (Interviewee 9).

At the political level, members of initiatives falling under the "Joint responsibility for food production," "Solidarity-based redistribution," and "Safeguarding and disseminating food culture and knowledge" discourses called for the realization of a democratic and distributed food system, in which all individuals have a right to "access affordable, culturally appropriate food, in the quantities needed to be nourished" (Interviewee 6). This is reflected in Table 1, which shows that participants of food commoning initiatives in Oxfordshire all perceive food as a basic need and a human right. While participants are involved in enacting these changes locally, they also stressed the importance of a more equitable global food system, in which the rights of communities across the world are

protected. The language of equity reflects Vivero-Pol's (2018, p. 30) claim that the vision of food as commons is based on "reflexive democracy, participation, community-based development, and rights-based approaches." Several interviewees noted that their vision for food futures was rooted in improved livelihoods for food producers, emphasizing the importance of establishing and expanding networks of supportive cooperative infrastructures like CSA schemes and food cooperatives.

As these research findings show, rather than hoping their ideal food system will materialize in a distant future, commoners in Oxfordshire are experientially actualizing their visions in the "here and now" (Van de Sande, 2013, p. 230), at a local scale. Aiming to transform the food system at the level of norms and values, governance structures, and allocation of resources (Table 1), these groups prefigure an agroecological transition based on the principles of ecological sustainability, solidarity, and justice.

5. DISCUSSION

In reaction to the conditions of crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, resourceful practices and initiatives tied to food sharing have (re)emerged in Oxfordshire, generating new and creative ways of existing, creating, and being-in-common outside of the circuits of capital (Dawney et al., 2016). Adapting the typology proposed by Carceller-Sauras and Theesfeld (2021), this article classifies these initiatives into four distinct food-as-commons discourses. While these discourses reveal that commoning initiatives are driven by a plurality of distinct ideas and operate at different levels of the food system under various property rights regimes, they also converge around congruent practices. Focusing on the *praxis* of food commoning opens up and multiplies understandings of what can be kept in common, transcending the dichotomies of urban and rural, public and private, social and natural, and material and immaterial (Bresnihan, 2016). As the Results section of this paper shows, this emphasis enlarges the scope of commoning beyond the production of common pool resources to entanglements between humans and nonhumans based on reciprocity, care, and socio-ecological solidarity (Fisher & Nading, 2021; Singh, 2017). Commoning thus entails a continuous process of mutual transformation and co-becoming (García-López et al., 2021), while simultaneously fostering new imaginaries regarding the economy, the commons, and the food system.

The diversity of food-as-commons discourses that exist in Oxfordshire does not signal a lack of identity, but rather reflects the heterogeneity of commoning efforts, opening up productive opportunities to create the "pluriverse" – the Zapatista vision of "a world where many worlds fit" (Escobar, 2015). While the ontological struggle to defend multiple worlds against the neoliberal project of a singular, globalized world is rooted in the activism of Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and peasant communities in Latin America, ongoing efforts to defend and rebuild the commons in the Global North can be interpreted as analogous terrains of resistance (Escobar, 2020). As the case study of Oxfordshire reveals on a micro-scale, a "pluriverse" of ideas, practices, and discourses exists regarding food systems change in the Global North. The political and creative power of the commons can thus serve as a convergence paradigm between diverse movements, including degrowth, food sovereignty, and agroecology (Ferrando et al., 2021; García-López et al., 2021, Rossi et al., 2021). The case of Oxfordshire exemplifies this unifying power, with participants repeatedly noting that the pandemic brought sustainability and social justice groups together for the first time:

> "These two narratives that weren't doing a very good job of speaking to each other are starting to see opportunities for working together and the necessity of doing so, because both of those issues need to be solved quickly. [The pandemic] has probably set the local food system on quite a different course" (Interviewee 11).

The food crisis triggered by COVID-19 consequently generated productive coalition networks that have successfully connected disparate food groups and movements. By bringing into conversation diverse voices of people seeking to tackle different issues within the food system, the concept of food commons holds the potential to generate a plurivocal and integrated framework for socio-ecological food justice (Coulson & Milbourne, 2021).

Despite the transformative potential of the commons, there is a risk that these initiatives could be co-opted, with a recurring point of tension centered around the concept of "welfare from below" (De Angelis, 2007). Commoners in Oxfordshire recurrently evoked the fear that their efforts could absolve the government of its responsibilities, echoing Pettenati et al.'s (2018) claim that overly relying on bottom-up processes for commoning food may serve as a justification for public actors to sidestep their responsibilities in the domain of food security and environmental sustainability. The affirmation of commoning practices should thus be tempered by the critical recognition that commons may be co-opted by neoliberal state policies eager to delegate responsibility

to communities (De Angelis, 2013) or corporate powers seeking to appropriate their innovative potential (Rossi et al., 2021). One potential avenue to counter this takeover is to shift away from individualized food commons prone to appropriation, and work towards building assemblages of commoning initiatives that can converge into systemic alternatives, as communities in Oxfordshire have started to do.

In line with this, a growing number of scholars are proposing to "use the de-commodifying power of the commons to redefine (i.e. subvert) the entirety of the food system" (Pettenati et al., 2018, p. 43), based on the recognition that food cannot truly constitute a commons when the rest of the network rests on the commodification of nature as well as non-ecological, socially unjust practices (Ferrando et al., 2021; Rossi et al., 2021). Commoning the food system entails adopting a holistic and systemic approach to its transformation, involving all of its actors, sites, phases, and aspects (Pettenati et al., 2018). Transitioning towards a commons-based food regime also necessitates breaking the private and public sector duopoly over food production and distribution to create a tricentric governance system, under which the third pillar would be the self-organized food commoning initiatives that are (re)emerging across the world (Ostrom, 2010; Vivero-Pol, 2017b). This is exemplified by the case study of Oxfordshire, where a sudden socio-economic disturbance gave rise to an organized network of commoning initiatives with distributed agency and a shared objective. Beyond transcending the public-private dualism, developing a commons-based food system will also require all participants to engage in a democratic and reflexive process of co-creation, including carefully defining and allocating responsibilities, establishing spaces for deliberation and decision-making, and altering expectations around each node of the food system (Pettenati et al., 2018).

The local level constitutes a key site where this transformation could take place, giving rise to novel forms of governance by enabling civil society, local authorities, and economic entities to co-determine food policy (Rossi et al., 2021). Scholars have pointed out that the relationship between commoning initiatives and public institutions has the potential for mutual benefit (Pettenati et al., 2018; Vivero-Pol, 2017b): food commoning initiatives could be supported, resourced, and enabled by a renewed, participatory, and democratic state. This is currently the case in Oxfordshire, where commoning initiatives retain their autonomy but maintain a symbiotic relationship with local governance bodies, attesting to the commons' fluidity. This partnership between the commons and local government could take multiple forms, including food policy councils, integrated local and regional food strategies, or more radical forms of food alliances (Rossi et al., 2021; SAPEA, 2020). Local authorities could also assume a coordinating role to facilitate decision-making and cooperation between commoning initiatives. Furthermore, they could leverage their financial and legal resources to facilitate land access and encourage the development of alternative ownership structures like cooperatives and community-supported agriculture, as participants of this study have called for. The Community Food Networks established in Oxfordshire during the pandemic, which enabled food groups and local authorities to convene and collaborate regularly, also point to the importance of creating informal spaces for dialogue and co-organizing, as they allow these various actors to experiment with innovative governance arrangements and practices (Rossi et al., 2021). Combined, these advances could be conducive to the coordinated establishment of place-based, resilient, and just foodscapes, paving the way for a larger, commons-based transformation of the food system.

Through everyday practices, commoners in Oxfordshire are thus conceiving, testing, and actualizing this alternative food system on a small scale, attesting to the prefigurative power of the commons (Brigstocke, 2016). This allows commoning initiatives to form de-commodified spaces within the current neoliberal landscape, as well as "counter-hegemonic projects" that disrupt and challenge dominant power structures (McCarthy, 2005). In spite of this, numerous participants of this study reported that commoning constitutes a continuous struggle between "'feeling' capitalism and its power relations, and developing autonomous self-sustaining initiatives" (García-López, 2020, p. 170). Because they emerge under conditions of hegemonic capitalist ideology and praxis, the "actually existing commons" like those featured in this study are often partial and imperfect (Eizenberg, 2012). Yet, in 'feeling' capitalism while re-thinking food practices based on principles of mutualism, affect, and solidarity with more-than-human communities, commoners in Oxfordshire are experimenting with a different way of *sentipensar* – a term employed by Latin American activists to express ways of knowing that do not uncouple thinking from feeling (Escobar, 2020). Through thinking-feeling novel practices, relations, and imaginaries, they show that "alternatives do exist" (De Angelis, 2003, p. 2), laying the groundwork for a reweaving of communal life based on radical relationality (Escobar, 2020).

However, commoning as a social process is not exempt from contestations, disputes, and contradictions. While food commons are driven by an ethic of cooperation and solidarity, producing a commons always implies a

degree of enclosure, meaning they are only as inclusive as the groups managing them (Nightingale, 2019). With the exception of Oxford Mutual Aid, which was formed by LGBT and trade union organizers and whose members come from a diversity of socio-economic backgrounds, a majority of participants in this study were white and middle-class, reflecting the chronic whiteness of alternative food movements (Slocum, 2007). The ability of Oxfordshire's commoners to imagine and experiment with alternative food practices thus partly stems from their access to privilege, resources, wealth, and education, as well as past and present geographic proximity to centers of capital (Ferrando et al., 2021). These dynamics demonstrate the necessity of integrating histories of oppression in food transformation discourses (including that of food-as-commons) and of recognizing the colonial and capitalist roots of the global food chains that feed the Global North (Ferrando et al., 2021). Despite these barriers, all initiatives reported a desire to diversify the communities they work with. Hence, as Ferreri (2016) notes, instead of viewing these dynamics as a failure of commoning, they may be understood as an inevitable point of departure for practices that generate greater reflexive ties between comparatively privileged groups and more vulnerable populations.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has aimed to contribute to ongoing debates about food systems transformation as well as to the expansion of a more critical food scholarship. In light of the climate crisis and the susceptibility of the conventional food system to diverse shocks, including the pandemic and the recent food price crisis, the alternatives prefigured by food commoning projects like those in Oxfordshire merit attentive consideration.

This study's focus on the praxis of commoning uncovers the existence of heterogeneous food commoning efforts and practices, which generate resilient entanglements based on care, reciprocity, and sustainability. Beyond individual initiatives, this paper also reveals the importance of building food commoning networks, giving rise to the possibility of integrating and merging food commons operating at all levels of the food chain into a systemic alternative. The concept of food commoning could thus form a convergence paradigm for socio-ecological food justice and transformation (Coulson & Milbourne, 2021).

This study further points to the willingness and ability of communities in the Global North to build localized food systems based on commoning that are more just, sustainable, and resistant to shocks – laying the groundwork for the possibility of (re)commoning the whole food system (Pettenati et al., 2018). To achieve this, this paper joins other scholars (Pettenati et al., 2018; Rossi et al., 2021) in arguing for a partnership between commoning initiatives and the public sector, which could create a political and socio-cultural context favorable to the protection, maintenance, and expansion of food commons. This association could empower local communities and authorities to co-create local food policies and sites for knowledge sharing and production, fostering an environment conducive to exploring alternative practices, structures, and governance arrangements. Through cross-regional cooperation, these could be replicated in other localities, allowing the coordinated establishment of place-based food systems centered around commoning principles.

By shedding light on alternative approaches to producing, distributing, and consuming food, this paper has sought to "bring them to visibility" (Dawney et al., 2016, p. 22) and increase their legitimacy as a way of reimagining the food system. Further research and experimentation is needed to assess the possibilities and limitations of commoning in creating more resilient, just, and regenerative food systems.

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