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Research Article

"You want my money? Dance!": Consumers, the state, and a just transition in the food system

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Abstract

An understanding of the role of consumers will be essential to academic and practical efforts to contribute to a just transition in the food system. In this article, I argue for the importance of examining consumers' role, not only in terms of individual or household behavioural change, but also with respect to broader potential political-economic developments. By providing a schema for possible consumption-related approaches that would feature varying degrees of state involvement, I encourage reflection on the extent to which justice may be realized as climate change is addressed through food system interventions. I emphasize that hybridized approaches may be possible, and that initiatives that may be constrained within a capitalist political-economic framework nevertheless hold the potential to showcase trajectories toward longer-term post-capitalist food futures. On balance, some restraints on individual freedoms regarding food consumption habits may be inevitable if structural transformations are to be achieved that will adequately support climate-change mitigation, yet justice-oriented considerations will need to be weighed in terms of how such restraints would be pursued. I base these observations on research that included interviewing farmers and representatives of alternative food organizations in Ontario and Québec. Themes covered include public and government views on local food and ecological agriculture, challenges related to initiatives such as Community Supported Agriculture, the complexity of dietary transitions, and various possibilities for the state to help reshape producer-consumer relations.

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Résumé

Comprendre le rôle des consommateurs sera essentiel dans les efforts académiques et pratiques déployés en vue d'une transition juste dans le système alimentaire. Dans cet article, j'invoque l'importance d'examiner le rôle des consommateurs, non seulement sur le plan des changements de comportements des individus ou des ménages, mais aussi par rapport à de plus vastes évolutions politico-économiques potentielles. En proposant un schéma d'approches possibles de la consommation qui comporteraient différents degrés d'implication de l'État, j'encourage à réfléchir sur la mesure dans laquelle la justice peut être assurée lorsque les changements climatiques sont traités à travers des interventions sur le système alimentaire. J'insiste sur le fait que des approches hybrides sont possibles et que les initiatives qui peuvent s'avérer limitées dans un cadre politico-économique capitaliste ont néanmoins le potentiel d'exposer des voies vers l'avenir alimentaire post-capitaliste à plus long terme. Tout bien considéré, certaines restrictions des libertés individuelles concernant les habitudes de consommation alimentaire pourraient être inévitables si l'on veut parvenir à des transformations structurelles qui soutiendront de manière adéquate l'atténuation des changements climatiques, mais les considérations de justice devront être prises en compte dans la manière dont ces restrictions seront mises en œuvre. Je fonde ces observations sur une recherche qui comprend des entrevues avec des agriculteurs et des représentants d'organisations d'alimentation alternative en Ontario et au Québec. Les thèmes abordés comprennent les points de vue du public et du gouvernement sur l'alimentation locale et l'agriculture écologique, les défis liés à des initiatives telles que l'agriculture soutenue par la communauté, la complexité des transitions alimentaires et les diverses possibilités pour l'État d'aider à remodeler les relations entre les producteurs et les consommateurs.

Introduction

Increasingly, countries of the global North are witnessing evidence of the climate chaos that has been experienced for decades by countries of the global South, the majority world. With agricultural production being variously impacted by unpredictable weather, heat waves, droughts, floods, and forest fires, a range of actors—from researchers to philanthropic foundations and governments—are paying attention to both agricultural producers' collective ability to adapt to the climate crisis, as well as help mitigate greenhouse gas emissions. Given the scientifically documented need for profound changes within the food system to contribute to climate change targets, including those established through the Paris Accord (Clark et al., 2020; Wollenberg et al., 2016; Zurek et al., 2022), it is not surprising that awareness of food-climate links seems to be increasing. This includes government efforts to financially support initiatives that will help reduce overall emissions linked with agricultural production (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2022).

Relatedly, discourses that incorporate the concept of a "just transition" in the food system are also on the rise, both in terms of academic literature (Kaljonen et al.,

2023) and public engagements (Anderson, 2019; Chemins de Transitions, n.d.). With the historical focus of this concept being associated with principles of fairness in supporting workers move out of polluting industries (particularly the fossil-fuel sector) and toward more environmentally benign employment opportunities (Eaton, 2021; Heffron & McCauley, 2018; Newell & Mulvaney, 2013), it is not surprising that related food-system analyses very often focus on the role of agricultural producers. The role of consumers in contributing to sustainability-related goals has also been discussed extensively in the literature (Baumann et al., 2017; Bentsen & Pedersen, 2021; Giampietri et al., 2016), however there is room to further explore their specific role in contributing to a just transition in the food system, particularly in light of increasing concerns about climate change impacts.

This article highlights the importance of considering the role of consumers in contributing to (or inhibiting) such a transition in the food system. I argue that their role must be analyzed not only in terms of individual or household behavioural change, but also with respect to broader potential political economic developments. In the Discussion section, I offer a schema for considering possible consumption-related approaches that may contribute to greater or lesser degrees to just outcomes in terms of a just transition, and that would feature more or less involvement of the state. On balance, varying restraints on individual freedoms regarding consumption habits will need to be considered if structural transformations are to be achieved that will adequately support climate change mitigation. Furthermore, initiatives and approaches that may be constrained within a capitalist political-economic framework nevertheless hold the potential to showcase trajectories toward longer-term post-capitalist food futures.

In developing this analysis, I draw primarily on interviews conducted with ecological farmers (and some representatives of alternative food distribution organizations), all of them based in either Ontario or Québec, Canada. My methods, which are described further below, were focussed on understanding the potential for practical approaches and state intervention to expand alternative food marketing and distribution as a means to increase ecological food consumption and production. As such, whereas there are many scholarly articles that capture consumer opinions on "ethical" or "responsible" food habits (Abid et al., 2020; Aprile et al., 2016; Baumann et al., 2017), the approach here is to analyze the perspectives of farmers and those involved with alternative food distribution on producer-consumer relations. The quote incorporated into the title of this article, which I elaborate on below, is suggestive of the difficulty many producers experience in trying to meet the expectations of their clientele through alternative food marketing approaches. More broadly, farmers' perspectives on varying possibilities for achieving structural food-system change through modified producer-consumer relations contributed to inspiring the analysis presented in this article.

In the next two sections, I review the relevant literature that informs the discussion that follows, covering just transition works related to food studies, and literature on producer-consumer relations. I then present the methods used to gather and analyze the data that informs my argument. I relay key results that inform my perspective on these matters across the following three sections, covering: recent trends regarding local food consumption; challenges that are continuing to render alternative food distribution marginal; and dietary considerations as well as potential approaches for transforming production-consumption dynamics. I then offer a discussion of diverse political-economic approaches that relate to just transition strategies involving consumers and varying state-level interventions.

A just transition in the food system

Although the just transition concept dates back to the 1970s, when organized labour groups began expressing concern over strategies to support workers whose livelihoods would likely be negatively affected by increased environmental legislation, it is in recent years that the concept has gained attention in both academic and policy circles (Kaljonen et al., 2023; Stevis & Felli, 2015). The latter includes at the level of the United Nations climate negotiations. Specific analyses of the necessity for a just transition in the food system have notably increased in the last several years, with Blattner (2020), for example, drawing attention to the potential impact of climate change policies on livestock producers, and Dale (2020) linking the concept with the potential for strategic alliances in society to advance agroecology. Additionally, James et al. (2021) highlighted the potential for just transition approaches to contribute to a post-pandemic recovery with regard to the food system. A recent special issue on a just food system transition continued this trend, with contributors covering both conceptual insights and case studies from various geographic contexts (see Kaljonen et al., 2023).

As a framework for proposing and evaluating just food system transitions, scholars have drawn connections to environmental justice literature (Kaljonen et al., 2021; Tschersich & Kok, 2022). To summarize, and somewhat simplify, some of these framings, including by Tribaldos and Kortetmäki (2022), *Table 1* captures key dimensions and considerations worth noting.

Table 1: Key dimensions and considerations related to a just transition in food systems, summarizing key literature (Blattner, 2020; Kaljonen et al., 2021, 2023; Kuhmonen & Siltaoja, 2022; Tribaldos & Kortetmäki, 2022; Tschersich & Kok, 2022).

A JUST TRANSITION IN THE FOOD SYSTEM	
DIMENSION	**CONCERNS AND RELATED PRINCIPLES**
Distributive justice	• Farmers' livelihoods are maintained or improved through the process of decarbonizing food production • Food security and resilient supply chains are assured at a global level (cosmopolitan justice) • The needs and well-being of future generations are not compromised (intergenerational justice)
Procedural justice	• Food-system governance related to transition processes are transparent and inclusive • Decision-making activities address existing power imbalances in the food system • Reliable information is made available to those involved in climate-related decision making, including regarding dietary transitions

Recognition-based justice	• Indigenous and other traditional knowledge systems contribute to guiding the transition (epistemological justice), and diverse foodways are respected in the process • Equity is prioritized (e.g. based on gender, age, and ethnic diversity) in terms of the needs of actors across the food system • Ecological concerns extend to non-human nature (e.g. considering the rights of non-human animals, and the need to preserve biodiversity, healthy soils, and clean water)

As indicated, such justice-oriented framings can draw attention to both spatial and temporal elements that would be essential to a fair climate-oriented transition in the food system. It is also clear that the diverse needs and positionalities of agricultural producers are at the forefront (e.g., Kuhmonen & Siltaoja, 2022), however some scholars are also giving consideration to matters of food security and dietary transitions for consumers (Kaljonen et al., 2021; Schübel & Wallimann-Helmer, 2021).

The political economic realities associated with trying to achieve a just transition in a global food system that is dominated by capitalist tendencies and the motivations of corporate actors is an understated current that runs through much of this literature. Just as earlier, more general scholarship on just transitions have emphasized the need to assess the political economy of moving away from fossil-fuel economies (Newell & Mulvaney, 2013), so too have scholars underscored the need for a political analysis (and politicized responses) in relation to food system transformation (Klassen et al., 2022; Rosol et al., 2022; Wilson & Levkoe, 2022). Examples include critical assessments of Climate Smart Agriculture and similar techno-managerial or market-based responses that may serve to co-opt efforts to render food systems more ecological (Clapp et al., 2018), and works that have evaluated the potential for the philosophies and actions associated with food sovereignty and agroecology to steer societies in a post-capitalist direction (Dale, 2023; Edelman et al., 2014; Rosset & Altieri, 2017).

Producer-consumer relations

Food studies literature on producer-consumer relations is also highly relevant to the discussion that follows. Scholarly debates dating back over twenty years helped to critique the often-simplistic lenses through which food scholarship can view consumers, with the political economy of production often garnering a priority standpoint (Goodman & Dupuis, 2002). These discussions challenged the assumption that consumers should be solely considered from the perspective associated with some Marxist analyses that sees them as powerless to affect political economic change, limited by commodity fetishism and/or the confines of bourgeois purchasing of niche products (Goodman & Dupuis, 2002; Guthman, 2002). While consumer activism may not overthrow capitalism, it could be argued, it does have the potential to influence socio-economic trends, and, following Actor Network Theory, consumption can be viewed in relation to an assemblage of, e.g., cultural practices, institutional processes, and technological developments that

emphasize the contingency and complexity of production-consumption relations (Fine, 2004; Lockie, 2002, 2009).

More recently, scholars have demonstrated how these forms of analysis remain relevant today (Carolan, 2022; Evans, 2022). Beacham and Evans (2023), for example, caution about trying to "reconcile" production and consumption, yet encourage continued research and theorizing that will develop the integrative agenda that was established approximately twenty years ago. They assess the various factors that may determine to what extent alternative proteins are embraced in production-consumption processes, raising conversations about the geographies of edibility (such as with insect proteins), the socio-economic qualification processes that influence which foods (including novel foods) are valued, and the visceral politics of consumption (i.e. with regard to the embodied relations of eating that are intertwined with broader political economic processes) (Beacham & Evans, 2023). Such an analysis of alternative proteins is particularly relevant to just transition literature regarding food system change given the heightened attention scholars are paying to the scientific and political discourses suggesting meat consumption and industrial livestock production will need to be substantially curtailed in order to achieve greenhouse-gas reduction targets (Katz-Rosene, 2020; Tobler et al., 2011; Topcu et al., 2022; Veeramani et al., 2017).

Related scholarly works on the topic of sustainable consumption practices draw attention to the efforts made to "responsibilize" consumers, bringing in questions of governance and the role of both the state and corporations in production-consumption relations (Bowness et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2017). After more than four decades of neoliberal capitalist trends in many countries, much has been written about food system governance in an era of restrained state intervention (Bernstein, 2014; Desmarais et al., 2017; MacRae & Winfield, 2016). Yet governments continue to intervene in agri-food policy development, even if this is often focussed on promoting productivist agriculture as an economic strategy (MacRae, 2022). With food sustainability concerns largely being relegated to the marketplace and consumer-corporation interactions, less governance space is available for movements organizing for more structural change (Dale, 2021). This challenge is augmented by the fact that many agrarian/food movements are confronted with increasingly authoritarian and populist socio-political conditions in which to operate (Scoones et al., 2023). What is key is to consider the potential for structural, political-economic shifts that will enable or constrain new producer-consumer relations, just as some scholars have undertaken such high-level analysis with regard to climate change governance (Wainwright & Mann, 2013, 2015).

As will be discussed below, the free-market capitalist framework contributes to an array of difficulties regarding the establishment of producer-consumer relations that will support a more sustainable food system. In addition to neoliberal approaches that centre the individualized consumer as holding responsibility for ethical eating (Guthman, 2008), the elitism that can often be associated with alternative food initiatives must be considered (Wilson & Levkoe, 2022), as well as ongoing questions about the price of foods that have been more ecologically grown and distributed (Donaher & Lynes, 2017; Headey & Martin, 2016). In short, whether through mainstream supply chains, alternative grocers, or direct marketing, there is an ongoing tension between fair livelihoods for farmers and accessible prices for consumers of ecologically grown foods.

Furthermore, while a wide variety of consumers, producers, and intermediaries are making efforts to

contribute to short food supply chains, at times overcoming existing challenges (Aprile et al., 2016; Baumann et al., 2017; Bentsen & Pedersen, 2021; Enthoven & Van den Broeck, 2021), proponents that emphasize local food continue to risk falling into the "local trap" (Born & Purcell, 2006). This "trap" is evident when geographic proximity is unreflexively associated with superior ethical and/or ecological qualities, whereas local production and consumption patterns clearly do not inherently address social injustices, inequalities, or the proliferation of unsustainable agricultural practices (Born & Purcell, 2006; Enthoven & Van den Broeck, 2021).

As Woods (2021) demonstrates though, it must also be remembered that producer-consumer roles do not necessarily fall along binaries in general terms, nor do they implicitly need to through a just transition in the food system. Developing rural-urban links can include the increased participation of city dwellers in urban agriculture initiatives, just as some urbanites are choosing to relocate to the countryside, where they will engage to varying degrees in subsistence or commercial food production (Woods, 2021). As indicated below, many of these issues and themes were raised over the course of my research.

Methods

The data that contributed to this article was gathered over more than three years, within the framework of a larger research project on pandemic-related food-system changes and cooperative efforts in farming and food distribution. The data collection included, in 2020 and 2021, interviews completed with participants in Ontario (two farmers market managers and twenty farmers, including two farmers who were engaged in mid-sized food distribution initiatives). In 2022, interviews focussed on participants in Québec: nine farmers and seven representatives of organizations involved with a variety of food initiatives (focussed on, e.g., distribution, food security, or rural economic development). In 2023, interviews were extended to twelve producers regarding an initiative of the Québec government to incentivize production using season-extension infrastructures (such as greenhouses). Participants were recruited through the support of existing networks that were established through previous projects, and through "cold" contacts identified through research into seemingly innovative alternative food distribution initiatives. As suggested above, the goal was to develop an understanding as to how strategies to expand such initiatives may lead to an increase in ecological food production and consumption. Generally, farmers interviewed were involved in small-scale operations, focussed on ecological production (with some being certified organic) and direct-marketing approaches (typically selling through, e.g., farmers markets, Community Supported Agriculture programs, and farm kiosks). Interviews were semi-structured, with questions centering on challenges and opportunities that arose as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, effective approaches to marketing and distribution that hold the potential to expand ecological food production and consumption, and key elements of the food system that may need to change in order to increase long-term resiliency.

Interviews were almost entirely completed remotely over video calls, with audio recordings being transcribed so that they could be analyzed through the use of *NVivo*. While thirteen key themes were identified (as "codes," through manual coding), those most

relevant to this article were *consumption*, *just transition*, *systemic change*, and *affordability*. As the other codes dealt more with specific pandemic-related experiences, and with farm and marketing infrastructure, those themes have been delineated as out-of-scope for this article. While almost all of the codes were established based on the framework of the research and interview questions (as etic codes), it is worth noting that an unexpectedly high number of references emerged under the theme of *consumption*, hence the focus of this article. Interviewees are identified by name in the text below for those who provided permission to do so, whereas anonymity has been respected for those participants who preferred that quotations not be attributed to them by name (or be attributed by first name only).

In addition to the fifty interviews that contributed to the analysis that follows, media and document analysis was also completed as a means of capturing the essence of popular and government discourses, related trends, and analyses developed by non-profit and grassroots organizations. It is important to acknowledge that the geographic focus of this research means that the results, and subsequent discussion to follow, are most likely to be of relevance to similar global North contexts, where industrial agribusiness and corporate retail have established a stronghold over the last several decades (Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011; McMichael, 2009). At the same time, the scope of the data collection allowed for diverse perspectives to be captured over a temporal period that spanned from the early months of the pandemic (summer of 2020) to the time when it was officially declared over by the World Health Organization in the spring of 2023 (United Nations, 2023).

Food "autonomy": Where is the just transition?

Research participants were consistent in remarking on the striking increase in interest in local food in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was particularly noticeable in terms of increased subscriptions to Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs, which in Québec jumped from approximately 20,000 subscriptions pre-pandemic to 28,000 in 2020 (Proulx, 2024). For individual farmers with whom I spoke, this often entailed increasing their CSA subscription by 50 to 100 percent. Gabriel Leblanc, a vegetable farmer in Québec's Bas-Saint-Laurent region, indicated that in the summer of 2020 there was a dramatic difference in the number of people frequenting their farm kiosk, with his team struggling to keep up with the demand. "I felt like I was flipping burgers at McDonald's" he said, noting that he did not have time to speak to customers at the counter because there were so many people there; "It was intense!"[1] (Interview, June 16, 2022). Yet, while farmers from both Ontario and Québec described an increase in revenues as a result of this shift in purchasing habits, for many it also came with significant stress, as they had to rapidly modify their production and marketing plans that had been developed over the course of the winter. For some, this meant cutting out farmers market engagements in order to dedicate harvests to CSA programs. "We went from being a 200-person CSA to a 400-member CSA...basically completely replacing all the dollar value we would have had seen from our [farmers] markets," explained Ontario farmer

[1] Quotes from interviews conducted in French have been translated to English by the author.

Stephanie, who noted that they also faced a major drought and the late arrival of their two migrant workers that spring (Interview, March 26, 2021). For those who had had a significant portion of their sales channels dedicated to contracts with restaurants, the stress and demand for improvisation were even more significant.

It is clear, however, based on various media reports and government documents, that consumers were not operating in a vacuum as they took up local consumption in larger numbers. Government pandemic-related initiatives and discourses both in Ontario and Québec had a role to play. The Province of Ontario, for example, helped to financially support farmers as they shifted toward online marketing and distribution channels, while also promoting local food (Government of Ontario, 2021). The Québec government, for its part, was even more pronounced in its response. It adopted a *Stratégie nationale d'achats d'aliments québécois* (a strategy for local food procurement within public institutions) in September 2020, while in October 2021, the minister responsible for agriculture, fisheries and food launched "*le Défi 12 $*", which challenged consumers to spend 12 dollars per week on local food that would have otherwise been spent on imported foods (Gouvernement du Québec, 2020b, 2021). Québec also increased its support for *Aliments du Québec* (the organization responsible for branding food produced/harvested/processed within the province) and introduced an online portal in April 2020 called *Le Panier Bleu* (the Blue Basket), which, while not limited to food products, was geared at facilitating purchasing that would support Québec producers (Gouvernement du Québec, 2020c, 2020d; Morissette, 2024).

What is important to note about both Ontario and Québec is that their governments' behaviour concerning local food consumption during the pandemic did not depart from their traditions of treating the subjects of local agriculture and food in an economistic, capitalist-oriented manner. In Québec, there is an added nationalistic tone that can be associated with the government's promotion of the concept *autonomie alimentaire* (food autonomy), and related terms like food self-sufficiency, which clearly resonated with the public in the wake of pandemic-related concerns over supply chain disruptions (Mundler, 2021). While interviewees (Interviews, June 7, 2022 and July 21, 2022) and organizations in the province both use the term food autonomy (Équiterre, 2023), some farmers are also clear about the need to distinguish between food autonomy and food sovereignty. On this topic, one farmer suggested that the entrepreneurial mentality has to change so that "we stop seeing food as a source of profit, but rather as a source of nourishment" (Interview, June 16, 2022), whereas a homesteader based in the Mauricie region named Catherine Gingras also expressed that she did not see the government of Québec as taking real action to become food sovereign. "If it were the case," she stated, "the government would be doing a lot more to encourage the development of small farms" whereas agricultural rules and policy and finance frameworks are geared toward large, industrial-scale farms (Interview, July 8, 2022). She added that food sovereignty is not aligned with "continuing to compact soils with large machinery, eroding the very thin layer of arable soil [which] is deplorable."

This last quote raises questions related to governance and a just transition in the food system. While food sovereignty is strongly interconnected with agroecological production methods (Edelman et al., 2014; Mundler, 2021; Rosset & Altieri, 2017), the discourses identified here that emphasize local food and food autonomy are representative of the "local trap" (Born & Purcell, 2006). The governments of Ontario

and Québec do not demonstrate signs of supporting a just transition in the food system. Discussions of energy transitions are limited to other sectors, such as supporting electrification in the automobile industry, whereas support for more ecological farming methods are meagre (Gouvernement du Québec, n.d., 2020a; Government of Ontario, 2020, 2022). The latter is evidenced by Québec supporting the organic sector and pesticide reduction initiatives in ways that do not substantially challenge the industrial agricultural models that are perpetuating, e.g., the heavy use of fertilizers in crop production, or the unsustainable livestock management practices, both of which are problematic across the country (Gouvernement du Québec, 2020a).

Consumers also appear to not be prioritizing climate-change concerns in making decisions about purchasing local and/or ecologically grown food. Farmers and organizational representatives with whom I spoke in both Ontario and Québec suggested to me that health-related concerns seem to be one of the most significant reasons for participating in CSA programs or otherwise buying from ecological producers. As Owen Goltz, a vegetable farmer in Ontario's Peel Region, stated,

> I've always said, forget about climate change.... Pushing climate change...as a topic on its own is a complete waste of time, because no one's going to buy it. The consumer isn't going to buy it. But what consumers will do [is] make changes that [are] directly related to their health (Interview, July 27, 2020).

He suggested a communications strategy of making links between human health and the inherent need for ecological growing conditions, so that indirectly "climate change will be a secondary winner that doesn't even have to be brought up conversation." Another farmer in the same geographic area raised a related point when she said, "We've been too [focussed on] fear tactics instead of talking about what could be and giving people a clear picture of what we could move towards," emphasizing the need to prioritize hopeful messaging whereas climate change discourses can be psychologically overwhelming (Interview, July 29, 2020). These quotes are reflective of studies that have indicated that consumers tend not to prioritize environmental concerns as a sole or key factor when making food purchasing decisions (Abid et al., 2020; Aprile et al., 2016; Baumann et al., 2017; Tobler et al., 2011), just as people generally tend to focus on more immediate concerns, shutting out climate change as an issue (Marshall, 2014), which is consistent with recent surveys of Canadians (Ipsos, 2022; Parisien, 2023).

Alternative food distribution in the margins

Similarly, solidarity with farmers does not seem to be a central motivation for consumers of local/ecologically grown food. As Judith Bonnard of Estrie, Québec's Marché de solidarité régionale (Regional Solidarity Market) indicated, "Solidarity with producers, it's unappreciated; it's poorly understood," despite the efforts that they make as an organization to promote this as a topic (Interview, June 20, 2022). This point was perhaps the most clearly reflected in the precipitous decline in local food purchasing that occurred in 2022, as pandemic-related restrictions eased. Leslie Carbonneau, in her role as agri-food service coordinator for Brome Mississquoi, Québec, described how this was not just a "return to normal," given that small-scale farmers in the region were seeing sales *below* pre-pandemic levels: "This year [2022], most farmers are at

75 percent of their normal customer base. With the fact that people can start to travel again, plus inflation, the infatuation with buying local has fallen off" (Interview, July 21, 2022). This trend was reported across Québec (Coopérative pour l'Agriculture de Proximité Écologique [CAPÉ], 2022; CBC News, 2022; Léouzon, 2022), which was alarming for producers who had planned for an abnormally high demand based on consumer habits in the first two years of the pandemic, and who were now facing surpluses that would perhaps be sold at a loss or not harvested at all. "It's as if people felt that they had done their duty, which was to support local producers for a year or two, and now they have moved on to other things," remarked Sylviane Tardif, a farmer who runs a CSA program in the Estrie region (Interview, June 2, 2022). Another producer, Nathalie Martin who farms southeast of Montreal, emphasized that a similar shift happened politically, "During the pandemic, the government said, 'Oh my god, we need to feed people locally'...and they loudly proclaimed that it was absolutely necessary to buy local; and then a year later you didn't hear anything more about it" (Interview, April 10, 2023).

Unfortunately, although other factors are also at play, this sudden increase and then drop in local food demand has had drastic economic repercussions for farms. Media reports have highlighted both the financial difficulties that farmers are experiencing, with many facing bankruptcy, as well as the concomitant psychological distress that has been mounting in recent years (Luft, 2019; Pamou, 2020). One interviewee, Christian Duchesne, expressed that he is concerned that two farmers he knows may not just go out of business in the near future, but rather die by suicide (Interview, July 8, 2022). Yet, while a farm income crisis was evident across Canada before the pandemic (Qualman, 2019), participants varyingly emphasized the severity of the problems at hand, describing, for example, an "agricultural system that is on intensive care" (Interview, June 2, 2022).

Neoliberal economists may suggest that such fluctuations are natural occurrences as free markets respond to variables and adjust themselves. However, climate-friendly farming is often associated with direct marketing techniques and alternative food initiatives, and many of these, such as CSA programs, have been described as incorporating non-capitalist logics (Bücheler & Bosch, 2023; Feola et al., 2023; Si et al., 2020).

A key benefit of CSA programs, for example, is that they offer farmers increased financial security, given that members paying up-front at the start of the season allows them to focus on meeting demand, with planning and marketing becoming less of an ongoing concern. Multiple research participants acknowledged that such alternative food initiatives require more commitment, planning, effort, and adaptability on the part of customers. Yet the more flexible CSA programs become in order to face the challenges of attracting and retaining customers (Si et al., 2020)—such as by offering the ability to "pause" their CSA box distribution, customize box contents, receive home delivery, or pay in instalments over several months—in turn makes these initiatives more difficult for producers. Hilary Moore, a pork and vegetable farmer near Ottawa, Ontario, lamented this shift in the functioning of CSA programs, arguing that these trends represent a "co-option" and "a dilution [of] the power of the CSA movement in some ways" (Interview, March 5, 2021). She described how traditional CSA models offered an opportunity to educate customers (e.g., on the realities of crop failures), and to "train" them (such as by having them take on the responsibility to find someone else to pick up their box and use the vegetables if they were on vacation). Moore discussed the competition that has come with the growth of the

CSA movement, including with the emergence of home delivery meal kits with pre-packaged recipe ingredients. "I don't know if [the traditional CSA model] stands out quite as much anymore," she said; "I just find people shop around a lot and...you know, they make you dance for it. 'You want my money? Dance!'" (Interview, March 5, 2021). In short, CSA programs are potentially being rendered less "alternative" (and less based on non-capitalist economic principles), as consumers increasingly adopt a neoliberal mentality that associates power with purchasing decisions.

Other interviewees emphasized the marketing efforts required to attract and retain customers. Nathalie Martin, whose family runs a CSA program and an on-farm store that is open year-round, described how they have to work "very, very, very hard in order to not be forgotten by [their] clientele." She specified that she needs to do this through newsletters, Facebook, and Instagram engagements, being physically present such as through public talks, and generally being socially involved (Interview, April 10, 2023). While such trends may be connected to a growing supply of local and ecologically grown food through various initiatives, or to affordability concerns consumers have in the face of inflation, research participants provided various examples of other contextual factors that must be considered. For example, Colin Sober-Williams, who operates a CSA program in Kawartha Lakes, Ontario, noted that "the market [for these programs] is one percent of the population.... It is very niche right now" (Interview, August 13, 2020), and this approximate market share is supported by data from Québec (Proulx, 2024). Benjamin Chabot who farms near Bromont, Québec, similarly noted that the market for local food seems to be somewhat flooded, reducing the prices that farmers can get for their products (Interview, April 25, 2023), however a substantial increase in consumer demand would evidently resolve this matter and move alternative food initiatives out of the margins of the food system.

In terms of the affordability of climate-friendly food as an issue, interviewees raised inequality and related topics that arguably must also be taken as important contextual considerations. As Sarah Bakker, a livestock farmer near Bobcaygeon, Ontario remarked, "Is it housing costs [that are making food unaffordable]? Is it debt load from student loans? If you focus solely on food, then it becomes a farmer problem as opposed to a big picture piece, and it's complicated" (Interview, September 2, 2020). She also paralleled sentiments of other research participants who challenged the apparent societal assumption that food—including ecologically grown, local food—should be cheap: "I don't want to talk about making food affordable. I want to talk about making people able to afford food," Bakker stated concisely. Some research participants pointed to the possibility for a Basic Income Guarantee to help in this regard, mirroring studies that have been increasing in recent years on this topic in relation to the food system (Lowitt et al., 2024; Power et al., 2021; Power & McBay, 2022). Others questioned the priorities of consumers, with some interviewees remarking that people do not seem to have trouble spending on their pets or on wide-screen televisions, while cheap food remains an expectation (Interview, April 21, 2023). Brenda Hsueh, who raises pastured sheep in Grey County, Ontario, indicated that she was sympathetic about the troubles people have covering inflated housing prices, but also noted:

> I've seen...middle-class families paying like $500 a month for everybody to have a freaking cell phone and data and stuff like that.... And, you know, it'll be a complaint that they have to spend like $200 a week to feed all those people as well. Right?.... It's just, our society in general has messed up their priorities (Interview, September 2, 2020).

Hsueh added that she did not feel farmers should "take the hit" to maintain cheap food prices when banks and speculative investors are profiting enormously from high housing prices and related trends. As an important complement to these remarks, Mélina Plante and François D'Aoust, who farm in Québec's Montérégie region, noted that many people prioritize purchasing organic food even if they are not very affluent, whereas, as Plante observed,

> Then there are those who are rich who are always looking for the cheapest foods possible, even though they wouldn't have any worries about buying good quality food. It doesn't seem fair. And I have the impression that it wouldn't be enough for us to lower our prices. It seems that a popular education is really what's necessary for people to change their priorities (Interview, June 7, 2022).

In sum, just as the drop in consumer interest in local food seems to have happened in parallel with a decline in related government discourses after the first two years of the pandemic, producer-consumer links and state initiatives are relational more generally. A free-market approach leaves CSA and other alternative food initiatives at the margins, whereas broader concerns about affordability, inequality, and cultural priorities raise questions about the kind of interventions that could contribute to a just transition in the food system.

Dietary transitions and production-consumption relations

For those people who do have an awareness of the environmental reasons to prioritize ecological food consumption, translating that awareness into action becomes a complicated affair. Antonio Gomes, who operates a mixed farm in York Region, Ontario, described how he is "only one generation removed from people who had a pretty healthy ecosystem and basically have watched the ecosystem collapse in many senses" (Interview, July 27, 2020). Yet he adds that:

> I find [that] a lot of different people, [from] different walks of life…think the food system is very important and are distressed about what's at the [grocery] store or see that we're going the wrong way…. It's just [that] they don't know what to do with [their interest in food], or what action they can do to participate in it (Interview, July 27, 2020).

Dominic Lamontagne, a homesteader and activist based in the Laurentides region of Québec, echoed these sentiments. As an author and person who engages in public debates on the food system (Lamontagne, 2015; Lamontagne & Dubé, 2022), he indicated that he feels climate chaos is central to many people's interest in ecological agriculture, yet that there is a connected mental-health component to consider as well:

> Anti-anxiety medications are selling well because people are hungry for meaning…. Taking concrete actions like feeding yourself, that provides a lot of meaning for people, and that gives them a sort of fallback plan…. You feel less dependent on a system over which you have no control. And there's nothing so stressful as being dependent on a system over which you have no control (Interview, June 2, 2022).

Growing one's own food is a theme to which I will return below, but an important point raised by Lamontagne is that most people do not feel they have control over their food system, which relates to Gomes' observation that people often do not know what to do in the face of climate change and related challenges.

As Lamontagne articulated during our interview, many consumers are choosing vegetarian or vegan diets

given that personal eating habits are within their control, and as there are both scientific and popular discourses about the links between animal agriculture and greenhouse gas emissions (Blattner, 2020; Willett et al., 2019; Zurek et al., 2022). He finds though these trends can be "very, very dangerous" as they can involve simplified perspectives that, for example, "demonize red meat" while corporations "like Nestlé and Conagra have jumped on the opportunity to remove animals from the food system, which are clearly much more complicated to manage than a field of industrial corn or soy" (Interview, June 2, 2022). Lamontagne adds that "animals play an integral part in agriculture" and that an agroecology without animals would be completely unbalanced, whereas alternatives like Beyond Meat and non-dairy cheeses and milks can often be promoted in ways that are very colonial. Evidently, finding ways to reduce unsustainable livestock practices, while maintaining or expanding on those that are sustainable, is incredibly complex in terms of consumption patterns.

On the topic of dietary transitions, research participants commented that eating seasonally and locally is often simplified or overlooked as an issue. While eating according to seasonal variations may not be the most important component of a climate-friendly diet (Macdiarmid, 2014), many consider this to be a key aspect of localizing food consumption, which is a priority when considering that some estimates suggest global food miles account for nearly 20 percent of food-system-related greenhouse gas emissions (Li et al., 2022). Judith Bonnard explained that building awareness about seasonal eating is a key part of their work at the Marché de solidarité régionale in Estrie, noting that "seasonal eating is part of changing our habits" along with the kind of weekly planning that can be involved with accessing an alternative food initiative such as theirs (Interview, June 20, 2022).

Yet, while Bonnard finds these kind of behavioural changes "very achievable," they are not necessarily consistent in local food initiatives. Farmer Sylviane Tardif, for example, commented that she agrees with the Québec government's efforts to subsidize season-extension infrastructure such as greenhouses, yet she feels there should be limits to what should be grown and how:

> As for growing tomatoes or peppers in the middle of winter in Québec, I don't think it's taxpayer money that should [pay for that]. I think people are going to have to realize that they can enjoy tomatoes in the summer, but that they may have to go without in the winter.... It can be done...but the thing is, people are so used to having everything, all the time. That's the trouble (Interview, April 21, 2023).

Nathalie Boisclair, a vegetable farmer near Bromont, Québec, raised a similar point, stating that:

> If you want to have spinach, kale, or the like growing in a non-heated greenhouse, then yes, absolutely [we should encourage season extension. But... is it smart to produce year-round heating with propane?... I'm not in favour of growing strawberries in greenhouses in January, for example. Environmentally speaking, it doesn't make sense (Interview, March 17, 2023).

These quotes exemplify how discourses and initiatives on local food or food autonomy can vary greatly in terms of ecological assumptions and impacts, and with regard to what is expected of consumers.

Regarding the extent to which the state is ready to intervene in encouraging more localized and seasonal eating, it is interesting that some producers mused about what forms this could take. Nathalie Martin, for example, suggested that there should be a "rule" that when foods such as strawberries are being grown in Québec, companies should not be allowed to import them into the province: "The government has us follow

production standards.... We have to do water tests; we have to prove that we're [following certain guidelines]. Why is it that what we import doesn't have the same kind of rules?" (Interview, April 10, 2023). Sarah Bakker expressed a similar idea, although expressing skepticism about the political feasibility of such an approach:

> Can we make it so that if Canadian food is in season, like carrots and tomatoes, [then] Sobey's and Loblaws can't sell U.S. tomatoes or [other] non-Canadian food [being grown here]? The government would never go for it [though].... This is all daydreaming and not something that I think will actually happen (Interview, September 2, 2020).

Apart from dietary transitions and trade rules, there were two other consumption-related themes raised by participants in terms of areas in which governments could be much more involved: restructuring production-consumption relations, and food-system education.

On the theme of restructuring production-consumption relations, multiple interviewees discussed getting involved with homesteading as a way to both grow food and reduce their environmental footprint. Catherine Gingras, for example, lamented that government subsidies and other supports only exist for commercial farmers, even if one works at growing their own food on a full-time basis: "It's pretty strange because, in the end, I think we're also contributing to combatting climate change by growing our own food. But all that, it's not recognized" (Interview, July 8, 2022). Apart from non-commercial production, Antonio Gomes mentioned that you could incentivize more people to get involved with farming by paying people a salary to cover their basic needs as "that might give them enough of a runway to actually start farms" (Interview, July 27, 2020); whereas Stéphanie Wang, a producer near Frelighsburg, Québec, similarly suggested that the government could at least subsidize farmers' salaries rather than subsidizing agri-food business and export-oriented production (Interview, April 3, 2023). Yan Gordon, who farms near Sutton, Québec, also in the Estrie region, took the idea of government intervention even further, suggesting that food should not be a consumer product. "The government should provide food stamps, so that everyone would be equal," he argued. "That way, someone earning $10,000 [per year] would have the same purchasing power, when it comes to food, as someone making $300,000" (Interview, March 23, 2023).

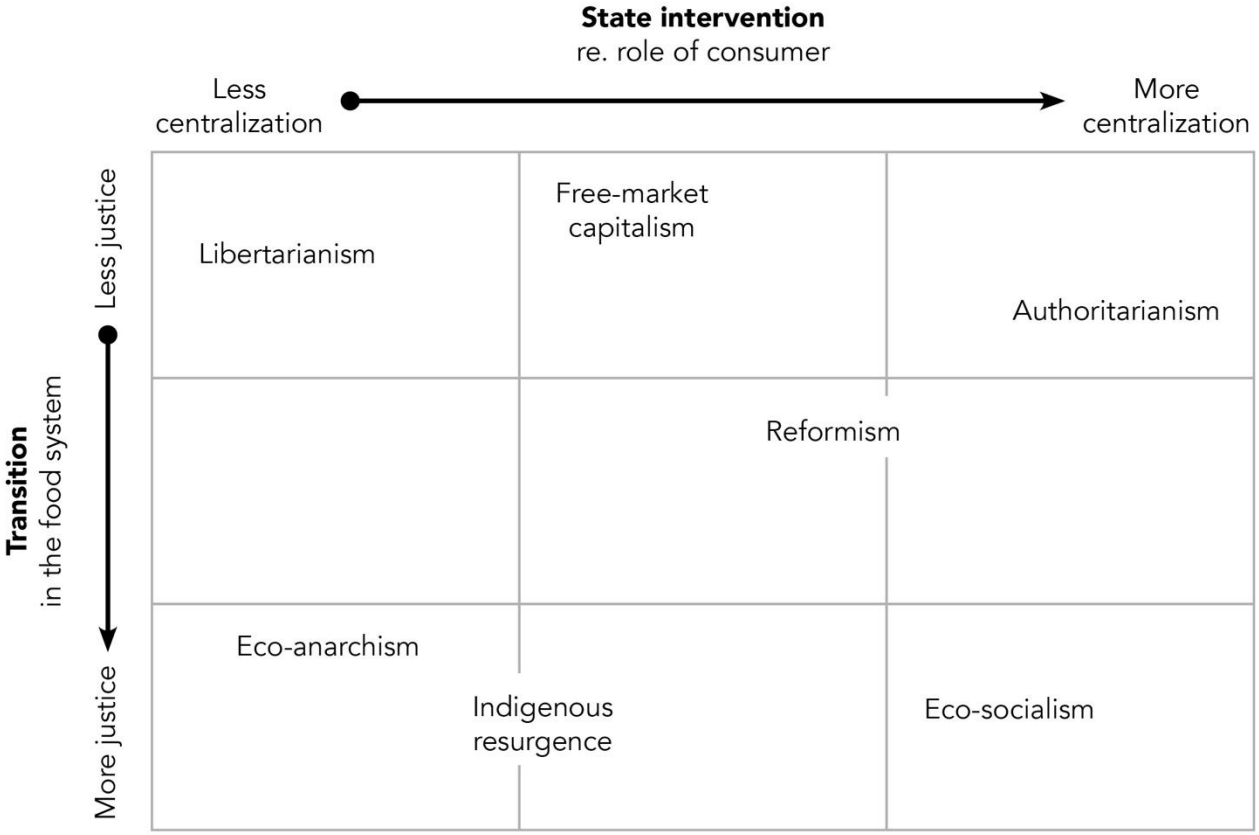
To complement these provocative ideas raised by interviewees, increased government intervention was evoked on the topic of food-system education. Gabriel Leblanc was one producer who discussed the fact that school groups will visit their farm, "from the viewpoint of increasing awareness about local agriculture" (Interview, June 16, 2022). Yet while this can involve children and youth of various ages, as well as workshops on important topics like food sovereignty, he indicated that these engagements are typically either organized by individual teachers or by partnering non-profit organizations. A vegetable farmer who runs a CSA program northwest of Toronto articulated how governments could potentially be not just supporting or leading these kinds of initiatives, but rather mandating that young people learn more about food and agriculture: "I believe every single high school student in this country, who is a Canadian citizen, should work in the [sector] for [perhaps] six months on a farm, six months in the [food] service industry" (Interview, March 18, 2021). She added that this would help with both developing a general understanding around food systems as well as "valuing the people who work in food [and] valuing the land that grows the food."

Discussion

To frame the discussion of the research results presented here, *Figure 1* offers a schema for considering possible state engagement (or lack thereof) in consumer-producer relations regarding a just transition in the food system. It is clear based on the interview data and other information summarized above that there are a wide range of existing and potential approaches to bringing about a more climate-friendly food system. There is a good deal of frustration evident in terms of ecological farming and alternative food initiatives being marginalized in the Canadian context. Interviewees often seem to respond to this frustration with ideas about how government interventions could improve the situation—from introducing income supports and educational initiatives, to disciplining markets based on the seasonal availability of local foods. In parallel, there are those undertaking approaches such as homesteading that may represent a desire to increase control over one's food system without depending on state-level involvement. Considering the political-economic frameworks that would allow for various kinds of interventions into a food system transition is a helpful exercise given the range of ideas research participants expressed about structural changes that could influence producer-consumer relations.

I will briefly describe the political-economic categorizations captured in the following figure's grid before reflecting on how these relate to the relevant literature, including conceptualizations of justice. As indicated in the literature review above, other scholars have considered such high-level questions related to governance in speculating on the political economy of diverse efforts to address climate change (Wainwright & Mann, 2013, 2015). Similarly assessing the potential for a just transition in the food system is also essential.

Figure 1: Possible interventions in regard to consumer behaviour that would have varied influence on a just transition in the food system.



Free-market capitalism here generally encapsulates the status quo, as the majority of food-system-related responses are operating within this framework. This includes the individualized, market-oriented approaches of both consumers and governments to pursue localized consumption and support ecological agriculture simply through shopping at farmers markets and membership in CSA programs. While the latter are not necessarily strictly operating based on capitalist logics (Bücheler & Bosch, 2023; Feola et al., 2023; Si et al., 2020), as described above they are increasingly competing with food distribution initiatives based less on solidarity and more on consumer convenience and business-oriented co-optation. We can also include under this free-market rubric the efforts of corporate grocery stores to capture consumer dollars for those who are motivated to purchase more purportedly environmentally friendly food (local, organic, vegan, etc.), whether that is due to health-related, climate-related, or other motivations. There is arguably the least amount of justice oriented with these approaches, as consumption habits are not making an impact on markets and production regimes in a manner that will adequately address the urgent need to rein in greenhouse gas emissions.

Libertarianism could entail an increased capture of governance processes by corporations competing to successfully pursue a green growth agenda, with reduced political oversight. Under this category we can also include, however, individualized responses such as homesteading and similar "back-to-the-land" initiatives, even if these are taken up in urban environments. These responses could potentially contribute to increased justice in the food system in terms of the resulting contributions to more ecological food production.

Reformism, in contrast, would likely include taxation or other financial changes that would incentivize the consumption and production of climate-friendly food. Increased administrative, practical, and monetary support for alternative food initiatives, such as public markets and CSA programs, could also be part of such reforms, just as governments could contribute more to guiding consumers as to how to effectively "vote with their dollar" in the spirit of a just transition (Seed & Rocha, 2018).

Authoritarianism would involve little procedural justice, with the state directing a centrally planned economy and agri-food system with little to no input from producers and consumers. However, interventions could potentially generate significant dietary shifts among populations, e.g., if governments were to dictate to what extent (if at all) people are able to consume foods deemed to have high carbon footprints. This could include, for example, severely restricting or prohibiting the consumption of industrially raised livestock products, or of highly processed and other foods made using chemical fertilizers and other energy-intensive inputs and processes (Springmann et al., 2018; Willett et al., 2019).

Eco-anarchism, on the other hand, could entail more just approaches, yet that involve minimal government intervention. Examples include producer-consumer collectives based on mutual aid, where food security, farmer livelihoods, and cultural preferences are prioritized alongside climate-related concerns. Degrowth frameworks and initiatives could make up part of such organized responses (Abraham, 2019; Couture, 2021; Guerrero Lara et al., 2023; Singh, 2019).

Indigenous resurgence is worth noting as a category separate from colonial political economic frameworks, particularly regarding the pursuit of justice and decolonization in food systems (Grey & Patel, 2015; Kepkiewicz & Rotz, 2018; Whyte, 2015). This could involve approaches to self-governance (perhaps negotiated through interactions with a colonial state) that enable the flourishing of Indigenous foodways and

the restriction of industrial processes that would inhibit those foodways. Although Indigenous resurgence was not the focus of the research findings discussed above, it is certainly a key theme to considering just transitions in a context of ongoing settler colonialism.

Eco-socialism would involve an engaged and redistributive state that would centre climate change and other environmental concerns in its governance frameworks. This could include food system (and broader) initiatives that may be relatively reformist if pursued in isolation, but that would arguably be transformative if taken up as a suite of policies. Examples include ideas mentioned by interviewees: government-led programs on critical food literacy, and "agricultural service" or similar approaches aimed at exposing students to food-related work; salaries, salary subsidies, or other financial supports for food producers (including non-commercial growers); a basic income guarantee that would support both farmer livelihoods and increased financial accessibility of climate-friendly foods for consumers; and, alternatively, decommodified approaches to food where money plays little or no role in producer-consumer exchanges, and where governments issue food stamps based on people's needs. Other possibilities include pro-poor agrarian reforms to redistribute land in a way that revitalizes rural areas and increases the number of ecological farmers by bringing non-farmers into the profession. Similarly, state support could oversee "territorial food systems" (Boulianne et al., 2021) that include organized food distribution initiatives that are not based on prioritizing profit, and that reduce or eliminate corporate control in the retail sector.

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Just as the dominant capitalist framework does not exist as a totality that prevents the development of political economic alternatives (Gibson-Graham, 2006), it is important to note that some combination of responses presented in *Figure 1* may be possible, for better or for worse. Hybrid approaches to food system reforms may shift progressive initiatives away from capitalist motivations and tendencies, toward more just outcomes, particularly if political education and longer-term strategies are implemented (Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011; Meek & Tarlau, 2016). Decentralized approaches like back-to-the-land strategies, for example, may be combined with more coordinated forms of re-agrarianization, led by localized communities and/or the state (Borras, 2016; Borras et al., 2015; Hebinck, 2018). As Wilson & Levkoe (2022) discuss, there are a multiplicity of ways through which to combine "good food" and "good politics." In short, producer-consumer relations are, and will no doubt continue to be, relational, contingent, and caught up in complex assemblages that include various cultural influences, institutional arrangements, and power dynamics (Beacham & Evans, 2023; Evans, 2022). With this in mind, we can turn to additional considerations regarding the potential for justice to be established within a transition toward a climate-friendly food system.

Regarding *Distributive justice*, I have implied above that possible frameworks and scenarios that would focus on more egalitarian access to food system resources (from land to food distribution networks) are likely to contribute to more just outcomes. This could benefit consumers from the standpoint of increased food security and access to food that is both ecological and culturally appropriate, as well as farmers, Indigenous communities, and fishers (the latter whose experiences were not within the scope of this research project, but who will nevertheless be central to a just transition) (Asche et al., 2018; Cooke et al., 2023; Stephenson et al., 2019). Higher levels of government

intervention will likely be more impactful in terms of coordinating food system responses that will contribute to climate change mitigation, particularly if cosmopolitan justice is to be considered. As this entails organizing fair trading relations with other countries, and coordinating solidaristic responses to ensure food security internationally, state involvement is likely essential. This is not to say that grassroots, perhaps eco-anarchist initiatives cannot contribute to international solidarity in the food system, however some level of centralization is typical of high-level strategies and actions of this nature (Burnett & Murphy, 2014). Global-scale views on "luxury emissions" versus "subsistence emissions" would also need to be taken into account in coordinating just responses (Cappelli & Di Bucchianico, 2022; Shue, 1993), which could involve the state restricting dietary choices in the aim of contributing to climate progress and food security in distant countries (Schübel & Wallimann-Helmer, 2021; Tribaldos & Kortetmäki, 2022). Finally, the stakes of distributive justice are particularly high if actors are to coordinate a just food system transition that considers the consumption needs of future generations, a central component of intergenerational justice.

Regarding *Procedural justice*, as suggested, authoritarian approaches could hypothetically have a positive impact in terms of climate-change mitigation related to food consumption, and a relatively just distribution of food-system resources, however such approaches would fall short with regard to fair governance processes. Similarly, an eco-socialist framework could also fall short if centralization were pursued undemocratically. In order for procedural justice to be realized, food sovereignty principles regarding governance would need to be prioritized (Edelman et al., 2014). This could involve, for example, the engagement of localized food policy councils across the country leading decision-making processes at various geographic scales. Importantly, the voices of those currently marginalized in food-system governance (from food insecure populations and ecological farmers to fishers and Indigenous harvesters) would need increased agency to affect policy change, rather than simply being added to processes dominated by elites. That being the case, it is important to reflect on *how* such forms of procedural justice could be actualized in order to rectify power imbalances in the food system. As farmers are a small percentage of the population, with limited political capital, consumers would arguably need to play a key role in not only participating in new just-transition-related processes but also pushing for those opportunities to be possible. Clearly, for consumers this would entail moving beyond a role involving individualized ethical eating, toward politicized community organizing (Rosol et al., 2022). Beyond state-oriented aspirations though, consumers could also help demonstrate procedural justice, e.g., by being involved in community building and initiatives that lean in the eco-anarchist direction, which often focus on egalitarian forms of participation and decision making.

Regarding *Recognition-based justice*, a just transition would clearly involve recognizing and acting on the diverse needs of those facing food-related injustices. This includes those groups, such as racialized and Indigenous communities, facing disproportionate levels of food insecurity in global North countries such as Canada (Li et al., 2023), as well as those facing gender-based and other intersecting forms of oppression. A recognition is therefore required of the realities of workers throughout the food chain and socio-economically disadvantaged populations, both of whom were not the focus of the alternative food initiatives that were discussed throughout this article. Similarly, a shift in dietary regimes that would involve more local and seasonal consumption, if it were to be

justice-oriented, would need to balance climate mitigation goals with different groups' desires for culturally appropriate foods that may be imported from afar (Burnett & Murphy, 2014). To complicate matters, recognizing the rights of nature itself, and the responsibilities of humans toward non-human nature, as emphasized by diverse Indigenous communities globally (Temper, 2019), draws attention to the urgency of addressing climate change. This is particularly relevant given climate change's concomitant consequences associated with biodiversity loss on a planetary scale (Richardson et al., 2023). It can be argued then that epistemological justice would necessitate incorporating Indigenous traditional knowledge into governance processes associated with a just transition in the food system, including with regard to diets and consumption.

To summarize, it is unlikely that a single political-economic framework will guarantee a just transition in the food system. Some approaches hold more promise than others, yet a hybrid or multifaceted strategy will likely be required in order to successfully address the justice-oriented complications associated with shifting food production and consumption in an era of climate crises. The results of the research related here suggest that producer-consumer relations must be analyzed in light of the role of the state, and the fact that climate justice will likely require interventions that are much more innovative, and perhaps challenging, than those enabled by free-market capitalism.

Conclusion

While it is positive that scholars and others are paying increasing attention to the concept of a just transition in the food system, it will be essential to consider the role of consumers in such a transition, and the extent to which the state does or does not intervene. As I have argued in this article, these factors must be analyzed in relation to not only food production and distribution systems, but also broader political economic changes that may be possible. Trends over the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated a remarkable increase in local food consumption and associated public and governmental discourses, however this interest evidently dropped of precipitously beginning in 2022. The research findings presented suggest that solidarity with producers is not a significant concern among consumers, just as climate change itself does not seem to be on the agenda for many. The governments of Ontario and Québec, for example, continue to approach local food as an economic or self-sufficiency strategy, whereas climate-related initiatives are scarce and/or of little impact.

In terms of alternative food initiatives such as CSA programs, these are increasingly becoming more convenient and flexible for consumers, while simultaneously becoming more difficult for producers. Such initiatives are important in that they hold the potential to contribute to a climate-friendly food system, yet they remain very niche. One of the reasons for this has to do with affordability concerns among consumers, however, as some interviewees implied, it is important to examine how food expenses are relational, connected to not only rising costs of housing and other expenses, but also broader inequality and related political economic factors. At the same time, while some wealthier consumers do not prioritize ecological food consumption, many of those who do orient their diets based on climate-change concerns are not sure how to make specific food choices. They may pursue vegan diets, overlooking the important role of animals

in agroecological farming, just as they may focus on local consumption without considering the environmental costs associated with, e.g., season extension strategies or other potentially energy-intensive production methods.

Multiple research participants evoked the potential for increased government intervention that would restructure production-consumption relations and substantially contribute to, for example, food-system education. Ideas evidently abound as to how a just transition could be actualized in the food system. The discussion of the broad political-economic schema captured in *Figure 1* offers ideas about how different kinds of interventions, and different levels of state involvement, may have greater or lesser impacts in terms of a climate justice-oriented food system transition.

Rather than presenting a normative argument in favour of one hypothetical path forward, I have offered this schema as a way to encourage reflection on the various, potentially hybridized approaches, that could be taken up as a just transition is pursued. It is clear that food-related initiatives associated with a given form of political economy could potentially contribute to the just transition, particularly if they are taken up as a suite of approaches. This includes strategies that could be seen as reformist in isolation (e.g., government-led initiatives on food-system education, or programs in which financial incentives support climate-friendly food consumption), yet such strategies could certainly be pulled in a more post-capitalist (and ultimately more effective and more just) direction. While cosmopolitan and intergenerational justice concerns may compel some restraints on individual freedoms in terms of food consumption habits, ultimately careful consideration of distributive, procedural, and recognition-based dimensions will be required if a just transition is to be achieved in the food system.

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