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ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY

On the Significance of Alternative Economic Practices: Reconceptualizing Alterity in Alternative Food Networks

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abstract

In heterodox economic geography, there is an ongoing debate as to how our economic, social, and environmental needs may be better addressed by organizing the economy differently, through more equitable and more sustainable practices. This calls for further studying and discussing alternative economic practices in a diverse economy. In this article, existing alternative economic practices within agrifood systems—specifically alternative forms of connecting producers and consumers—are explored, primarily on a conceptual but also an empirically grounded level. The article makes two conceptual contributions: First, it offers a comprehensive review of the literature and, with an emphasis on contributions by economic geographers, clarifies the meaning of *alterity* in alternative food systems. It reveals the hitherto limited focus on either alternative products or alternative distribution networks. In light of this limitation and the ongoing incorporation of characteristics of alternative food by conventional food industries for profit purposes, second, it extends those insights by reconceptualizing alterity—namely, by introducing alternative economic practices as an important third pillar of alternative food networks (AFNs). Empirically, by presenting two newly emerging models of AFNs from Berlin and Frankfurt—which go beyond just offering alternative food stuffs or using alternative distribution networks and instead aim at decommodifying the food system—the article provides a closer view on existing alternative economic practices, highlighting the ways in which they think and perform the economy otherwise.

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For a long time ridiculed or ignored, alternative food is rapidly gaining the attention of the corporate food sector and financial investors. Most major food companies have offered organic brands for some time (for an early critique of conventionalization, see Guthman 2004). Together with venture capital–backed start-ups, these companies now also increasingly cater to conscious eaters, for example, by offering vegan and presumably healthy and ethical products, as well as increasingly alternative proteins (or alternative meat), to expand markets and increase profits (Forcum 2014; Clapp and Scrinis 2017; Phillipov and Kirkwood 2019; Sexton, Garnett, and Lorimer 2019). Seeing powerful food corporations mimicking aspects of alternative food systems brings the question of what actually defines the alterity of alternative food prominently back on the agenda.

What makes food or food systems alternative has been debated for some time (Watts, Ilbery, and Maye 2005; see also Winter 2003b; Maye, Holloway, and Kneafsey 2007a). An important intervention by economic geographers Watts, Ilbery, and Maye (2005) distinguishes between alterity based on the kind of *products* offered, and alterity based on different *distribution systems*. I argue, that in the face of the growing interest of the world's largest food and beverage manufacturing companies (i.e., Big Food) in alternative food, this distinction is now insufficient, and new ways of discussing alterity are needed. Even though (with the emphasis of Big Food on fortification, functionalization, and food engineering [Scrinis 2016]) it may also be necessary to look at the specific products offered again, I propose shifting our focus toward the economic practices that underpin such food systems. I will develop this argument by focusing specifically on alternative forms of connecting producers and consumers, discussed in the literature as alternative food networks (AFNs). They are of special interests to economic geographers, because they represent economic actors and processes in a narrower sense (for a more extensive review, see Rosol 2018a; see also Rosol and Strüver 2018). In broad terms, AFNs can be conceptualized as alternative economic networks that seek to transform production-consumption relations by providing a spatial, economic, environmental, and social alternative to conventional food chains (Renting, Marsden, and Banks 2003). Established AFN models include farmers' markets, weekly box

delivery schemes, and community supported agriculture (CSA)[1] (Watts, Ilbery, and Maye 2005). While geared toward economic feasibility, they are also guided by noneconomic goals.

My proposed reconceptualization of alterity ties in with the larger debate in economic geography on alternative economic practices in a diverse economy. This debate has recently been spurred by increasing global economic and political instability, triggered or reinforced by the global financial crisis of 2008 and its subsequent mitigation attempts, and by urgent problems of environmental degradation, climate change, and staggering levels of social inequality that can be summarized as the multiple crises of capitalism (e.g., Brand 2016). As societies experience growing tensions between the pursuit of economic growth and the ability to care for people and ecosystems upon which they live, there is a renewed interest by economic geographers in alternative economies, their potential, and their spatial characteristics (e.g., Fuller, Jonas, and Lee 2010; Zademach and Hillebrand 2013; Chatterton and Pusey 2019; Gibson-Graham et al. 2019; for an earlier, comprehensive account, see Leyshon, Lee, and Williams 2003). Those inquiries explore how our economic, social, and environmental needs may be better addressed by organizing the economy differently through more equitable and sustainable practices. They do so by studying existing, developing, or desired economic alternatives, and thus noncapitalist or postcapitalist forms of socialization.

Such studies are underpinned by a variety of theoretical approaches—some complementary, some conflicting. The most influential within geography has been the diverse economies approach, initially developed by feminist economic geographers Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham. They seek to make visible those "marginalized, hidden and alternative economics" (Gibson-Graham 2008, 613) in order to promote new ways of thinking in economic geography as well as inspiring real world transformations.

Alternative agrifood systems, the focus of this article, are an important empirical and conceptual field for such explorations for at least three reasons:

1. Our current agrifood systems cause severe environmental, economic, health, and social problems. The ways we produce and consume food are not only a leading cause of severe environmental degradation and climate change, food production is also already tremendously impacted by it (IPCC 2019). As the 2008 UN world agricultural report concluded: "Business as usual is not an option" (IAASTD 2009; see also Beck, Haerlin, and Richter 2016). Change is needed, and this change must necessarily be based on economic transformations. This calls for a better economic understanding of causes and impacts, and also proposed solutions, such as AFNs, the topic of this article.
2. As mentioned previously, big agrifood industries increasingly discover alternative food stuffs and alternative distribution systems as new sources for profits. Such developments make the previous definition of alterity—based only on the specific characteristics of a product (e.g., organic, vegan) or the products distribution systems (e.g., direct marketing)—questionable. I suggest that the economic practices underpinning alternative food systems deserve closer scrutiny.

[1] A CSA can be defined as a "direct partnership between a group of consumers and producer(s) whereby the risk, responsibilities, and rewards of farming activities are shared through a long-term agreement. Generally operating on a small and local scale, CSA aim at providing quality food produced in an agroecological way" (European CSA Research Group 2016, 8; for an example, see Rosol and Schweizer 2012).

3. The agrifood sector seems particularly open for testing new ways of performing the economy otherwise. As such, agrifood systems are not only the place where we vividly experience the convulsions caused by the current capitalist system but are also a laboratory for solutions. Not surprisingly, AFNs have frequently been chosen as an important case for the study of diverse economies and alternative economic practices (e.g., Gritzas and Kavoulakos 2016; Chatterton and Pusey 2019; Chiffoleau et al. 2019).

Correspondingly, Le Heron (2009) identifies AFNs as one of the most important economic geography research areas within agrifood studies today. Yet, to better understand the ways in which these networks think and perform the economy otherwise (see Leyshon and Lee 2003), we first must clarify what kind of alternatives they envision, enact, and represent. This is in line with other scholars' calls for better definitions of key terms, ultimately a theoretical elaboration of the concepts underlying AFN research (e.g., Tregear 2011). This article addresses these questions mainly conceptually but is also informed empirically. Following this introduction, I will situate AFNs through a comprehensive review of the pertinent literature, with an emphasis on contributions by economic geographers, and clarify the meaning of alterity. This will reveal the hitherto limited focus on either alternative products or alternative distribution networks. In light of this limitation I will extend those insights by reconceptualizing alterity, namely, by introducing *alternative economic practices* as an important third pillar of AFNs that is complementing the other AFN pillars of the *product* and the *network*.

To illustrate what this third pillar might look like, I will subsequently present two cases of emerging AFN models and discuss them with reference to Gibson-Graham. The case studies are based on original empirical research in Berlin and Frankfurt, Germany, from 2017 to 2019, drawing on evidence from semistructured interviews with key actors; participation in meetings; and analysis of websites, media coverage, grey literature, newsletters, reports, and more. The case studies were chosen from a larger sample of urban-based food initiatives and AFNs because of their explicit goal of de-commodifying the food system. Specifically, I present an agricultural land purchasing cooperative (*Ökonauten*) and a newly formed food co-op (*Futterkreis*). By presenting emerging AFNs, which differ from the relatively well-established ones mentioned earlier, I will also bring attention to current challenges for alternative food systems such as difficult access to land.

I will close with an outlook on economic geography research perspectives on agrifood systems. Overall, this article seeks to facilitate a deeper engagement by economic geographers with the geographies of alternative food, particularly in regard to alternative economic practices, while also disseminating important economic geography insights to advance the debates on alternative food.

Alternative Food Networks as Alternative Economies? Conceptualizations and Critique

Growing interest in alternative food is connected to what Winter calls the "re-politization of food" in the Global North (2003b, 508). In geography, research on alternative food developed beginning in the late 1990s in response to the growing demand for and supply of high-quality, healthy, ecologically, fair, and more transparently produced food (Whatmore and Thorne 1997; see also Goodman and Watts 1997;

Maye, Holloway, and Kneafsey 2007b). Most research under this umbrella focuses on North America and Europe (for exceptions see Maye, Holloway, and Kneafsey 2007b). Geographic research on food has strong links to economic geography, and there are several reasons why (alternative) agrifood systems warrant the attention of economic geographers. First, if we look at the diversity of food-related processes and activities, at the flow of goods and services, it becomes evident that almost all parts of the food system are based on economic activities. Such a food system approach,[2] the basis for agrifood studies, brings attention to the relationships amongst usually separated areas of economic geography such as agrarian geography, logistics, rural development, and retail geography (Winter 2003a). Second, and more recently, food production, consumption patterns, and the potential of alternative food systems for more sustainable (rural) economic development have gained attention as important fields of inquiry in environmental economic geography (EEG) and within discussions on de-growth (e.g., Braun, Oßenbrügge, and Schulz 2018). The study of alternative economic practices within the food economy represents a third link and the focus of this article.

Reconceptualizing Alterity: From Products and Networks …

Alternative agrifood systems can be understood on a basic level as alternatives to the conventional or industrial food system in response to environmental, health, justice, and ethical concerns.[3] However, acknowledging that the alternative versus conventional binary is rarely that clear-cut; we need to further dissect the term *alternative*. Based on debates in economic geography, Watts, Ilbery, and Maye (2005) introduce a helpful distinction between alternative *food* (1) and alternative *networks* (2).

The first variant (1) denotes alternatives to inferior *foods*, rich in empty calories, fat, additives, salt, and sugar, highly processed, and conventionally produced. These alternative foods include, for example, organic or high-quality products. Regional products and regional labels, for example, protected designation of origin labels, also play a special role (see, e.g., Parrott, Wilson, and Murdoch 2002). The focus is on the *turn to quality* (Goodman 2003), triggered in part by various food scares. Corresponding research often approaches the topic from the consumption side (Goodman and Goodman 2009; Barnett et al. 2010). The definition of quality is, of course, highly contextual and may include different factors such as taste, origin, animal

[2] A food system is a "set of activities and relationships that interact to determine what, how much, by what method and for whom food is produced and distributed" (OECD definition cited in Whatmore 1995, 37; see also Ericksen 2008).

[3] In general, these concerns refer to, first, environmental problems such as environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity and soil fertility, climate change, water waste, soil and water pollution caused by industrial, export-oriented monoculture agriculture. Second, concerning health issue for consumers and farm workers, they refer to the use of pesticides and the heavy processing of food. Economically and politically, the lack of governmental regulation is being criticized, which allows for the externalization of social and environmental costs, exploitative labor conditions, and the enormous (power) concentration of transnational food corporations, which enforce price pressure on farmers while not being able to eliminate hunger and malnutrition (for an overview, see Friedmann 1993; McMichael 2009; Wiskerke 2009; Galt 2013; De Schutter 2014; Holt Giménez 2017). The alarming state of our current food and agricultural system has been extensively documented by more than 400 experts from 110 countries in the 2008 UN world agricultural report (IAASTD 2009; see also Beck, Haerlin, and Richter 2016). The report concludes in the drastic words of IAASTD Director Professor Robert T. Watson: "If we do persist with business as usual, the world's people cannot be fed over the next half-century. It will mean more environmental degradation, and the gap between the haves and have-nots will expand. We have an opportunity now to marshal our intellectual resources to avoid that sort of future. Otherwise we face a world nobody would want to inhabit" (quoted in Greenpeace 2009, 6).

welfare, agroecological practices, local food, absence of additives and genetic engineering, safety of production and processing, and environmentally friendly packaging.

The second variant (2) refers to alternative *distribution channels and production-consumption relations*, which defines AFNs in a narrower sense.[4] This variant is regarded by Watts, Ilbery, and Maye (2005) as the stronger alternative. AFNs have been a topic for geographic research since the late 1990s. However, the roots of these networks go back to the environmental movements of the 1970s, or even to the consumers and workers cooperatives established in the nineteenth century (e.g., Watts 2017). AFNs can be understood as a critique of and a practical alternative to the currently dominant industrial food (distribution) system. Thus, unlike in conventional food supply chains, wholesalers and retailers play a subordinate role or no role at all. Countering the highly complex and now mostly global value chains and supply relationships, AFNs aim to connect consumers, whose food consumption is guided ethically or ecologically (Clarke 2008), directly with food producers via short food supply chains (SFSCs). SFSCs are food chains with less actors involved, shorter and more direct connection between producers and consumers, and shorter connections between the locale of production and that of consumption (for more detail on SFSCs, see Renting, Marsden, and Banks 2003). They thus "resocialise or respatialise" (Renting, Marsden, and Banks 2003, 398) relations between food producers, usually farmers, and consumers.

AFNs are often based on trust and personal interaction (Jarosz 2008). Producers are mostly from rural or peri-urban areas and depend on urban demand from nearby cities (Jarosz 2008). The proximity of production and consumption (i.e., *short* in the spatial sense) is therefore typical for SFSC. For this reason, some forms of urban farming and gardening are also seen as AFNs (Mincyte and Dobernig 2016; Rosol 2018b). While occurring over longer spatial distances, AFNs also include the Fair Trade sector, which provides direct sales channels and bypasses conventional middlemen (see e.g., Malpass et al. 2007). SFSCs can thus be understood both spatially and functionally (see also Watts, Ilbery, and Maye 2005).

Participating producers are able to charge higher prices and retain a larger part of the value created (Hinrichs 2000; Follett 2009). From a producer's point of view, AFNs are geared toward economic feasibility in order to secure livelihoods. Indeed, to move into or create alternative niche markets is often a reaction to the competitive conditions within conventional food supply chains with their low profit margins (Goodman and Goodman 2007). However, at the same time, AFNs are guided by the normative idea of a more ecological, and more direct, small-scale food production, distribution, and consumption cycle.

… to Economic Practices

In order to address the ongoing incorporation of characteristics of alternative food by conventional food industries for profit purposes, I argue that we need to look beyond definitions based on products or distribution systems alone. By now, aspects of alternative food (e.g., food safety and health, organic, regional, and Fair Trade

[4] The term *AFN* is often used for the whole of alternative agrifood systems (e.g., Goodman and Goodman 2009). Based on Watts, Ilbery, and Maye (2005), I advocate for a narrower definition of AFNs as alternative networks of food provision. For political as well as charitable organizations, I prefer the term *alternative food initiatives (AFIs)*, although the terms *AFIs* and *AFNs* are often used interchangeably (e.g., Allen et al. 2003). Note that in this article with its focus on AFNs and the need for producers *to make a living*, other alternative food practices, like gleaning or dumpster diving, are also excluded.

products) have been appropriated by conventional producers and retailers, and most sales of organic products are achieved in conventional retailing (Bernzen 2014). Other goals, such as living wages, fostering small-scale, sustainable agriculture, and improving soil fertility, however, are not covered to the same extent, and the problematic socioeconomic relations and production conditions of the current industrial food system are mostly ignored (Follett 2009; Goodman and Goodman 2009). This leads to the proliferation of class-based diets and a widening gap between privileged and disadvantaged consumers (Friedmann 2005; see also McMichael 2009). Friedmann (2005) observes the emergence of a *corporate-environmental food regime*. The massive entry of large companies into now-lucrative organic markets, referred to as the conventionalization of organic agriculture (for California, see Guthman 2004; for Austria, Grünewald 2015; see also Goodman and Goodman 2007) is testimony to the limits to such individualized consumerist framings, which neglect social and economic conditions of production and consumption. Furthermore, local food or geographic indications of origin are now being discovered as profit generating not only by large supermarket chains but also by conventional food producers (for the German pork industry, see Klein and Tamásy 2016). The label *local* or *regional* can be just as easily commodified as the label *organic* (Goodman and Goodman 2007).

For this reason, Watts, Ilbery, and Maye (2005) emphasize that the sole focus on the quality of the products and the neglect of the networks that put them into circulation, make the systems vulnerable to conventional food supply chains (FSCs). It degrades them to mere niche products with little capacity to counter the problematic trends within the industrial food sector, rendering their alternativeness questionable. The authors thus propose fostering alternative distribution channels, namely, AFNs (Watts, Ilbery, and Maye 2005).

However, even a focus on AFNs in the narrower sense does not guarantee that these can, want to, or do counteract the currently dominant food system structurally. Consequently, in this article I enhance the analytical distinction proposed by Watts, Ilbery, and Maye (2005) by adding the dimension of the economy itself. Specifically, I propose to add the pillar of *alternative economies* (3) (see Table 1). Instead of speaking of two *types* of AFNs, as Watts, Ilbery, and Maye (2005) do, I propose to distinguish between different *dimensions* or *pillars*. This also allows for a more precise empirical analysis of existing food systems. With help of this conceptualization we are better able to consider whether the alterity of a concrete AFN relates to the products, to

Table 1

Pillars of Alternative Food Systems with Examples

(1) Alternative Food	(2) Alternative Networks	(3) Alternative Economies/ Economic Model
• Organic food	• Direct marketing (e.g., farmers' markets, box schemes)	• Social enterprises
• Quality and specialty food	• Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)	• Cooperatives (land, food co-ops)
• Regional/local food labels and marketing	• Urban agriculture	• Solidarity economy
• …	• Fair Trade	• Food sharing
	• …	• Volunteer and in-kind labor
		• …

Source: Author, building on Watts, Ilbery, and Maye (2005) with alternative economies added.

the production-consumption relationships, or to the forms of work and enterprise organization—or to what extent all three dimensions of alterity may work together.

The Importance of Alternative Economic Practices in a Diverse Food Economy

Most AFNs are not alternative in terms of their economic practices. On the contrary, many involved actors are usually companies that—and here I follow the analytical categories provided by Gibson-Graham[5]—like conventional enterprises, are geared toward economic viability; treat food as a commodity; and are based on wage labor, private property, and classic financing methods (Watts, Ilbery, and Maye 2005). AFNs must maintain economic considerations precisely because their actors seek to make a living and sustain their lives (Lee 2000). However, since their social and environmental goals and commitments go beyond economic profitability, they can be referred to as alternative market based. Some distribution forms, such as farmers' markets, are also referred to as alternative markets (Hinrichs 2000). Lee (2000) speaks of companies that operate within the market logic but outside the capitalist norm of sole profit orientation.

Nonetheless, AFNs that practice *alternative economies* do exist, and the following empirical section will illustrate this in more detail. They may seek to de-commodify food by distancing it from the means of its production (such as land), from market forces, or from market-based value systems. They may be characterized by other forms of economic transactions (e.g., barter, donation, gifting, collecting, production for self-consumption), working practices (e.g., unpaid work of members, equal pay for all employees regardless of rank), forms of economic organization (e.g., cooperatives, collectives) and forms of financing (e.g., member loans, cooperative shares, crowdfunding, and others).

Those kind of noncapitalist practices are precisely what the diverse economies approach seeks to uncover, based on an understanding of AFNs "not as isolated aberrations, non-capitalist islands in a sea of '*the* economy' viewed as monolithically capitalist, but as ongoing experiments in (potentially) ethical economic relations scattered across a landscape that is already economically heterogeneous" (Sarmiento 2017, 486, emphasis in the original). The aim of the diverse economies approach is to show the diversity of economic forms that already exist—acknowledging that not all of the approaches are more progressive or desirable—and to explain them in the light of the dynamic relationships between different places and geographic scales. Proponents of the diverse economies approach precisely choose to make "the plethora of hidden and alternative economic activities that contribute to social well-being and environmental regeneration […] the focus of our research and teaching in order to make them more 'real', more credible, more viable as objects of policy and activism" (Gibson-Graham 2008, 618).

There is some tension between the term *alternative* and the diverse economies approach. The understanding of AFNs as alternative to the conventional food system may be precisely what J. K. Gibson-Graham initially tried to deconstruct as a *capitalocentric* framing, since it may automatically subordinate those alternatives to the mainstream, affirming the dominance of the capitalist economy (see Cameron and Wright 2014, who argue thus for the term *food diversity* instead of *food alternatives*; see also Wilson 2013). However, as Gibson-Graham carefully argue discussing

[5] In order to untangle hybridity and explore alternative-capitalist and noncapitalist economies, their heuristic framework focuses on five economic categories: enterprise, labor, property, transactions, and finances (Gibson-Graham 2006a, 2008; Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2013).

the term *alternative* (and they also speak of alternative capitalist and noncapitalist enterprises for example): "every term has its dangers" and "what's problematic (may not be) the word itself, but the idea that it will always work for us […], context-free." (2006a, xxiii).[6] This is precisely why this article, instead of abandoning it, attempts to clarify and contextualize the well-established term *alternative* theoretically and empirically.[7]

Thus, and although the language of alternativeness conflicts partly with the diverse economies philosophy, this approach is an important reference for alternative food geographies (see also Sarmiento 2017 for a recent review). Using the diverse economies approach, scholars investigate, for example, buying clubs such as food co-ops (Little, Maye, and Ilbery 2010); the idea and practice of the *100 miles diet* (Harris 2009); autonomous food spaces (Wilson 2013); diverse food landscapes in an Australian city (Cameron and Wright 2014); unpaid work in urban agriculture (Drake 2019); and corporate-driven as well as civil-society alternatives in the diverse food economies (Dixon 2011). In the spirit of the community economies scholarship, Morrow (2018) analyzes food sharing in Berlin as a way of building the urban food commons. Empirical studies inspired by the diverse economies approach focus decidedly on "modest beginnings and small achievements […] which […] start where we are" (Gibson-Graham 2006b, 196) in order to examine the conditions, rather than the limits, of postcapitalist politics in the here and now (see also North 2014). It is in this spirit of hopeful yet realistic postcapitalist politics within the diverse economies project that in the following empirical section I will appreciate the potentialities of existing alternative practices in the food sector—without neglecting its limits.

Exploring the Third Pillar of Alternative Food: Alternative Economic Practices in Berlin and Frankfurt

The preceding literature review revealed that economic practices of AFNs need to be thoughtfully considered. In order to explore possibilities and limits of envisioning and enacting the economy otherwise, in what follows, two cases are presented that go beyond just offering alternative food stuffs or using alternative distribution networks. Both are innovative models of AFNs that try to de-commodify parts of the food system and entail new roles for intermediaries. One is starting from the production side; the second is more oriented toward consumption. The case presentation is organized around three themes: first, the mode of operation, detailing the differences compared to a capitalist enterprise; second, background and motivation; and third, activities to scale up the model, demonstrating potential beyond a mere niche economy. After providing a brief description of the cases, in "Discussion: *Ökonauten* and *Futterkreis* as

[6] I am a bit more wary of their term *community economies* (amongst others, Gibson-Graham 2008; Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2013) for its potentially parochial scope and scalar trap (Born and Purcell 2006), the idealized imagination of community and its appeal to neoliberal policy makers for *governing through community* (Rose 1996; see also Rosol 2013, 2015). Dixon (2011) suggests the term *commons/commoning* (something that Gibson-Graham also see as part of postcapitalist politics; see Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2016) as a more accurate and empowering notion. Nevertheless, this also involves certain traps and limits. As McCarthy (2005, 2009) points out, the rejection of the state and the privileging of communities as most appropriate for the organization of social reproduction within the commons movement bears an uncanny resemblance to neoliberal ideologies that they claim to reject (see also Blackmar 2006; Rosol 2018b; Chatterton and Pusey 2019).

[7] See also Le Velly (2019) who argues for its analytical value as well as the need for further conceptual clarification.

Alternative Economies," I will discuss the cases' alternative economic practices with help of the categories provided by Gibson-Graham.

Ökonauten eG: An Agricultural Land Purchasing Cooperative in Berlin–Brandenburg

Mode of Operation/Economic Model. Ökonauten eG (eG means registered cooperative) was founded in early 2015. It collectively purchases land in Berlin and Brandenburg (the German state surrounding Berlin) in order to lease it long term to farmers at a rate that reflects production capacity, not market value. Farmers must follow organic farming principles.[8] Land purchases are financed through redeemable, non–interest-bearing membership shares from citizens. Members can support regional, organic, diverse, small-holder agriculture beyond just personal grocery shopping practices. Although it is envisioned, that in the future member farms will sell their products to cooperatists at a discount, member benefits are currently nonmonetary only. By preserving secure access to the most important production factor—land—*Ökonauten* seeks to facilitate soil improvement, counter land speculation, and to some extent de-commodify farmland and food, thus protecting a common good (several graduate theses on land cooperatives analyze them from a commons perspective; see Fabjančič 2016; Burjorjee, Nelis, and Roth 2017). Internationally, such approaches are also discussed as proactive ways of achieving food and land sovereignty (e.g., Wittman, Dennis, and Pritchard 2017).

Cooperatives differ widely but share central principles: voluntary membership, democratic control (one vote per member rather than per share), promotion of interests of its members, self-help, solidarity, and collective ownership.[9] *Ökonauten* also promotes the interests of its members (farmers and nonfarmers, the latter mostly from Berlin), but beyond that, benefits sustainable agriculture, the environment, and the general public. *Ökonauten* may be regarded as a solidarity cooperative, since it promotes sharing the responsibilities of working toward socially and environmentally sustainable regional food systems between producers, consumers, and supporters. It is a model that could also be valuable to current land owners or their heirs who wish to secure long-term organic agriculture on their land driven by cooperative, nonprofit principles. The different member groups are connected not only through the financial support system but also through face-to-face meetings, farm visits, and other forms of direct exchange. The cooperative is growing but slowly. After three and a half years, there are about 120 members and four *Ökonauten* member farms with two additional ones at the planning stage.

Background: Farm Consolidation and Rising Land Value. The backdrop to this endeavor was, above all, rising land and lease prices. Land concentration, that is, ownership of land by a few dominant actors, is particularly high in East Germany, owing to historic processes (Bahner et al. 2012), the agricultural legacies from the German Democratic Republic, and the process of German unification.[10] After being relatively stable for many years, increased investments by nonagricultural players in the wake of the global financial crisis, as well as government support for biofuels, have

[8] Member farms have to adhere to standards by German organic farming associations (e.g., *Bioland, Demeter*) whose strict criteria go beyond the EU organic label rules.

[9] For details, see the International Cooperative Alliance, which promotes and sanctions those principles. https://www.ica.coop/en/cooperatives/cooperative-identity.

[10] Average farm size in Germany was 61 hectares in 2016, in the new *Länder* (federal states) it ranges between 140 hectares (Sachsen) and 275 hectares (Mecklenburg-Vorpommern) (BMEL 2017a, 7–8). The majority of agricultural land (59 percent) is not owned by farmers in Germany but leased (BMEL 2017a).

caused prices to rise significantly in the last years—from 2007 to 2016 on average in Germany from about 9,000 euros per hectare to 22,000; in East Germany from 4,500 to 14,000, that is, increased to 310 percent (Destatis 2017). Lease prices in Brandenburg almost doubled between 2007 and 2016 (Troegel and Schulz 2018). Land is now unaffordable for small-scale farmers without inherited wealth, especially those committed to agroecological principles, since it is impossible to finance land purchases through farming revenue (for a detailed calculation, see Bahner et al. 2012, 23–25). This affects existing farmers but especially new ones. Current agricultural policies on several scales of government do not alleviate this situation (for Germany, see Bahner et al. 2012; BLAG 2015; BMEL 2015; Kögl and Rudow 2014; for the international dimension, see HBS and IASS 2015; van der Ploeg, Franco, and Borras 2015; Wittman, Dennis, and Pritchard 2017).

We thus have a situation where the substantial and increasing demand from Berlin for organic food sourced regionally from small-scale farms cannot be met, because potential new organic farmers do not have access to land (Hagenhofer 2015; Opitz et al. 2017a, 2017b; Thurn, Oertel, and Pohl 2018). This is precisely what *Ökonauten* tries to address.

Scaling up through Education, Advocacy, and Partnerships. There are currently three land cooperatives in Germany, all founded recently. The pioneer, *Kulturland eG* (founded in 2013, with 410 members and 10 partner farms, owns 160 hectares) supports mostly small organic, often biodynamic farms, and is strongly rooted and engaged in the region. The biggest, *BioBoden eG* (founded in 2015, with 3,660 members and 51 partner farms, owns 2,700 hectares), was initiated by the largest ecological and ethical bank in Germany, the GLS Bank, with the support of organic food companies. Its main goal is to increase production capacity for organic food in order to reduce organic food imports to Germany.[11] *Ökonauten* is the smallest of the three and the only cooperative that exclusively focuses on a particular region. *Ökonauten* opted for the regional focus because of the importance it places on personal relations, member participation, and trust as a foundation for cooperative economies. Unlike the other two, there is no funding available to hire staff or support expenses. Membership shares are solely used for land purchases[12]

All three cooperatives are members of the *Netzwerk Flächensicherung e.V.* (Network to secure land), with *BioBoden eG* and *Kulturland eG* also being members of *Access to Land—A European network of grassroots organizations securing land for agroecological farming*, which lobbies for necessary changes in agricultural and land policies. On a regional level, *Ökonauten* cooperates with the Berlin Food Policy Council, founded in 2016. An additional regional actor and potential partner is the newly founded (June 2018) *Regionalwert AG Berlin Brandenburg*, which provides support to (new) small- and medium-sized organic farmers through nonpublicly traded citizen stocks.

[11] In 2016, about 1.25 million hectares or 7.5 percent of agricultural land was farmed organically in Germany by 27,100 farms. Although Germany is the biggest organic market in Europe with regard to absolute sales (second globally after the US), the sales share of organic products is only 5.1 percent. Sales of organic products are growing rapidly by about 8 percent per annum, but domestic production has not been able to keep up with the growing demand. Thus, a significant part of organic products must be imported, which has negative effects for rural economies and for the environment. As part of its national sustainability strategy, Germany aims at 20 percent organically farmed land until 2030, but this would require major policy changes that are not yet in place (UBA and Destatis 2015; BMEL 2017b, 2018; BÖLW 2018; Troegel and Schulz 2018).

[12] For more details on all three cooperatives, see their respective websites (www.oekonauten-eg.de; https://kulturland.de/; https://bioboden.de/) as well as (Fabjančič 2016; Heinke 2016; Burjorjee, Nelis, and Roth 2017).

Whereas the *Ökonauten* cooperative only focuses on farmers and land purchase, *Regionalwert AG* includes the whole food chain within a region and helps organic businesses with credit, access to markets, and network support. Further regional partners include the *Bündnis junge Landwirtschaft e.V.*, a network and advocacy group for young farmers in Brandenburg that also runs political, advocacy, and educational campaigns to support sustainable agriculture and food sovereignty.

Futterkreis e.V.: A New Food Co-op in Frankfurt/Main

Mode of Operation/Economic Model. Founded in April 2017, *Futterkreis e.V.* (e. V. means registered association) is the only food co-op in Frankfurt. Generally, food co-ops in Germany are organizations of (urban) consumers who purchase regional organic and fair-traded food collectively. *Second wave* food co-ops emerged in the mid-1970s as the interest in organic and whole food grew in the midst of growing environmental and civic movements. In some sense, they are the pioneers of today's AFNs (see also Zitcer 2015). Their roots go back to the early consumer cooperatives of the mid-1800s. Internationally, food co-ops range from very small organizations operated out of private homes to highly professional and countrywide co-ops with warehouses and stores, often organized as registered business cooperatives. Membership ranges from 10 to 250,000 (Little, Maye, and Ilbery 2010). Food co-ops are not new in Germany (Jösch 1983); however, the revival of the food co-op idea in recent years, supported by the publication of a new guide book for food co-ops (Sense.Lab e.V 2017; see also Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Lebensmittelkooperativen e.V 2011), attest to the growing interest in direct relations with small-scale regional organic farmers.

As *Futterkreis* was formed in response to the conventionalization of organic food production discussed previously, it emphasizes small and regional sustainable agriculture and direct consumer-producer relations. Unlike most consumer purchasing clubs and some other food co-ops, *Futterkreis* only sources directly from the producer, and as local[13] and organic[14] as possible. Prices and minimum order quantities are set by producers, and there is no surcharge added.

Futterkreis mainly procures fresh foods (vegetables, fruits, eggs, milk, bread, no meat), but also organic staple items and dry goods (herbs, grains, honey, olive oil), and environmentally friendly cleaning products. Most of the products are delivered; some are collected either from a pick-up site in Frankfurt or at the producer's farm, using delivery bikes as much as possible. The focus on regional supply, although mainly justified by wider environmental and economic reasons, is thus also based on practical considerations (i.e., short transportation routes and the ability to visit producers on a regular basis).

Background: Changing the Economy through Democratic Self-Governance and Active Membership. Futterkreis's three founders view their engagement for the co-op as a form of positive action to instigate necessary change in the face of the global environmental crisis. Unsurprisingly, *Futterkreis* is motivated by a critique of mainstream economies and consumption, and has an explicit understanding of being

[13] The majority of products come from the Rhein-Main area around Frankfurt; a few products are only available from Baden-Württemberg (the longest distance being 330 kilometers for organic lentils). Food items that are not grown in the region are not offered. The only exception so far is olive oil that is procured from a cooperative in Spain. All producers are listed on the website www.futterkreis.de.

[14] Although most of their producers farm according to agroecological principles, some to the very strict criteria set by German organic farming associations, *Futterkreis* does not demand organic certification—as this is often not manageable for smaller producers—but requests ecological production methods and bans pesticides and genetically modified organisms.

noncommercial. As the founders seek to address root causes, they deliberately rejected an inevitably competitive business or store-front model, which would require organizing along the principles of cost cutting, financial viability, and consumer convenience. With its model, *Futterkreis* does not have to sell anything and does not make any profit. Instead, it is run as a members-only, self-governed collective based solely on voluntary labor. As such, it can pay producers adequately for their high-quality organic, regional, and seasonal products, while maintaining relatively affordable prices. However, price is of secondary concern for members who prioritize quality, traceability, and personal relations to producers.

While legally not a cooperative, *Futterkreis* adheres to cooperativist principles (see "*Ökonauten eG:* An Agricultural Land Purchasing Cooperative in Berlin–Brandenburg"). The co-op requires active membership. Thus, members have to participate in their own governance—democratically discuss and decide on rules, solve conflicts, deliberate what to purchase and from whom—and share the work. Apart from payments for their weekly orders, members pay a small monthly membership fee on a sliding scale that covers expenses, notably the rent for a storage room that also serves as a meeting venue. To avoid packaging, all products arrive in bulk, and members take home their shares in their own containers. To make the whole experience radically different from a supermarket experience, all members have to sort and weigh their individual orders. Rotating tasks involve organizing deliveries from producers; administering membership, website, and finances; managing the weekly orders and checking stocks; finding new and visiting producers; organizing members-only and public events; and cleaning the storage room. Evidently, running a food co-op demands time, effort, patience, and a certain amount of communication and social skills. For this reason, potential new members have to meet with a mentor before they can join.

Scaling-up through Education, Advocacy, and Partnerships. Futterkreis currently has about forty-five members and does not intend to grow much further. Reasons for this are limited storage space; an operation based on personal interaction and trust; and because *Futterkreis* wants to remain a grassroots collective, without hierarchies and paid staff. Moreover, its growth refusal is another political statement against the growth-focused capitalist economy. Instead, the founders would like to see similar organizations emerge in other parts of Frankfurt and elsewhere and offer their practical support. Despite limiting their own growth, the founders would like to scale-up the idea of procuring organic regional food through a nonprofit co-op model.[15]

Futterkreis explicitly aims at changing "thinking and consciousness" (stated on its website) with regard to food consumption and hope to foster food sovereignty on a larger scale. Therefore, besides providing a practical service for a limited group of people, *Futterkreis* is active in education, organizing, and advocacy. As such, it provides educational videos on its website; is engaged in zero waste, sustainability, and municipal climate action campaigns; offers recycling and upcycling workshops; hosts discussions on food co-ops and sharing as part of more sustainable lifestyles; takes part in and advertise for demonstrations for agrarian change; and much more. Members are also involved with the Frankfurt Food Policy Council, founded in 2017, and cooperate with Transition Town Frankfurt.

[15] The possibility of such scaling-up is demonstrated by the Italian *Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale* or Solidarity-based Purchasing Groups movement (e.g., Brunori, Rossi, and Guidi 2012; Chiffoleau et al. 2019), which works very similar to *Futterkreis* and had in 2015 more than one thousand registered groups plus many more unregistered ones country wide (European CSA Research Group 2016).

Discussion: *Ökonauten* and *Futterkreis* as Alternative Economies

A critical literature review showed the need to reconceptualize alterity in the face of growing interest by the conventional food industry in healthy, organic, and local food. Besides alterity in regard to product and distribution channels, this article highlights alternative economic practices as a third pillar of AFNs. To further explore this third dimension, I presented two empirical cases of alternative production-consumption networks that have emerged in recent years in Germany, one originating from the production side, one founded by consumers. I conclude this section by briefly discussing their economic alterity following the diverse economies framework, discuss their potential, and point out some of the limitations (see also Table 2).

Both cases share ideas of established AFNs, namely, to foster a diverse regional, organic agriculture and direct contact between consumers and producers, but both take new approaches. By providing long-term and secure land access to small organic farmers, *Ökonauten* pursues economic (protecting a common good against financialization, decommodification of land), environmental (preserving/improving soil fertility and crop diversity), and social (connecting farmers and consumers) goals through an alternative economic land purchasing and ownership model. As a cooperative, *Ökonauten eG* is a noncapitalist enterprise, jointly owned and democratically governed by its members, which is furthermore exclusively based on noncapitalist financing and volunteer work. Most importantly, it tries to de-commodify means of production and property (land). This way, it not only provides a practical response to the question of land access but potentially also changes the discourse around property rights to allow a sustainable use of a common good. *Futterkreis e.V.*, on the other hand, directly connects urban consumers with small, regional organic producers in an explicit anti-commercial way. *Futterkreis* is a formal association based on grass-roots, democratic governance and voluntary labor by its members. Its finances and property are noncapitalist. Also, I would argue, its transactions—although money mediated—are noncapitalist, since members pay producer-set prices, and the association does not take any commission and thus does not extract surplus value.

Both cases can be interpreted as inspiring and viable responses to the disenchantment with supermarket organic (Guthman 2004) and the *environmental-corporate food regime* (Friedmann 2005). The proliferation of affordable organic food in organic and conventional supermarkets, and even discounters in Germany since the 2000s, seemed to have made AFNs obsolete. However, AFNs have experienced a revival in recent years due to the growing interest in small-scale, regional organic food (Sense.Lab e.V 2017; Opitz et al. 2017b). This new interest is expressed particularly in the recent boom of CSA in Germany[16] but is also apparent in the formation of new types of AFNs as documented in this article.

However, those models are not without limitations and constraints. *Ökonauten* originally aimed at acquiring land for two new farms per year, but its growth rate is less than it had hoped for. The most significant reason for this slow growth is the limited availability of suitable farmland in terms of location, size, soil quality, and price. Other reasons include the limited resources for land and member acquisitions of an entirely voluntarily run organization; that new farmers face many more obstacles, which the *Ökonauten* cannot resolve (e.g., access to credit and to a farmhouse property); and that Berlin offers other possibilities for consumers to support regional, organic

[16] From just under 20 by 2010 and 60 by 2014, as of fall 2018, their number had grown to 200 existing and 110 in their start-up phase (European CSA Research Group 2016; see www.solidarische-landwirtschaft.org).

Table 2

Summary of Case Studies Using the Three Pillar Model

			(3) Economic Model				
	(1) Food	(2) Network	*Enterprise*	*Transactions*	*Labour*	*Property*	*Finances*
Ökonauten	Organic (strict standard) and local/regional	SFSC, farmer and consumer members	Cooperative/ Nonprofit	Mainstream property market for land purchases; use value to determine lease amount	Unpaid/volunteer	Cooperative/ Members	Cooperative/ Members
Futterkreis	Organic (strict standard) and local/regional	SFSC, consumer members, long-term relationships with selected farmers	Civic association/ Nonprofit	Alternative market (directly sources food, producer prices without surcharge), Nonmarket (harvest stints)	Unpaid/volunteer	No property (rented storage room)	Association membership fees

Source: Author's compilation, economic model categories based on Gibson-Graham (2006a, 2008).

agriculture. Some of these issues may be problems of a relatively new organization and may be solved with a growing base of members and partner farms. The largest concern, however, will remain access to land. An organic land cooperative, even with a considerable capital base, cannot and will never be able to compete with the business models of large agricultural corporations and their related purchase power. The alarming rate of land concentration will not be solved through civic land purchases alone, not least because of quantitative limitations. All three land cooperatives combined currently own not much more than 2,900 hectares of the 16.7 million hectares of agricultural land in Germany. To counter land concentration, regulatory and government intervention on several scales will be needed, including the very important scale of EU Common Agricultural Policy. Civil society responses, like cooperative land purchases, cannot substitute these policy changes, and it remains to be seen if and how the scaling-up of existing sustainable community-based food initiatives could instigate substantive transition in current land property systems (see also Wittman, Dennis, and Pritchard 2017 for a similar conclusion in their study of civil society driven farmland access initiatives in Canada). In the meantime, and in the absence of significant governmental actions, however, de-commodifying parts of the agricultural land supply through a cooperative land ownership model that allows small-scale farmers to acquire and secure land tenure is certainly a very important practical response and a step toward a more sustainable and democratic agrifood system.

The example of the more consumer-focused *Futterkreis* shows that even in times of widespread availability of relatively affordable organic food in Germany, food co-ops still offer something different: trust, traceability, and transparency through direct purchasing relations with small-scale regional organic food producers as well as an educative, alternative economic and democratic way or self-organizing (see also Little, Maye, and Ilbery 2010; Zitcer 2015). With its strong environmental concerns, its democratic nonprofit model that reformulates purchasing practices, with its knowledge dissemination, and other activities to reconnect more people to food production, and its aspiration to scale-up the food co-op model, *Futterkreis* goes far beyond conscious consumerism and individual choice. Engaging in such noncapitalist practices, however, may be available only to those who already enjoy a certain amount of privilege (see, for a similar observation, Gross 2009). Nonetheless, and even if direct effects may be limited to a small scale, it holds the potential to be a catalyst for broader societal impact and change through transforming economic and social relations and the way we think about food.

Conclusion and Outlook: Economic Geographies of Alternative Food

In view of the problematic ecological, social, and economic impact of the current agrifood systems and growing dissatisfaction with their practices, externalities, and outcomes, attention to the geographies of (alternative) food is highly relevant. Alternative food systems have long been a field of experimentation in alternative economies, be they cooperative or solidarity-economy enterprises. However, AFNs are not necessarily based on alternative economies. Indeed, their alterity was initially defined solely by the dimensions of the distribution channels, specifically short food supply chains. Other dimensions of alterity are often also present, for example, organically produced products and alternative economic practices as shown in the CSA model. However, the strong connection between the different dimensions of

alterity, characteristic of early AFNs, has been weakened following the growing lucrativeness of organic and local products.

Based on an extensive literature review and empirical observations, this article thus argues for the need to base alternative food economies on a third pillar of alternative economic models and practices, which complements the pillars of alternative food and of alternative distribution networks. Practical examples of how this could look do exist, and new forms of direct exchange between producers and consumers are being developed in reaction to conventionalization. As I have shown, *Ökonauten* and *Futterkreis* seek to perform the economy otherwise, creating new social and economic realities. They build alternatives that address exigent circumstances and try to de-commodify food and land. Crucially, they are also engaged in processes and networks that seek to change the dominant food system and its political regulation. With their cooperativist principles and political engagement, *Ökonauten* and *Futterkreis* envision and enact an alternative not only to conventional food and retail-driven food supply chains but also to investor-led capitalism. In times of growing interest by profit-driven corporations in alternative and local food, exploring these new—and revisiting old—forms of social organization of the economy may be more important than ever, both in research and in practice.

Economic geography has a lot to contribute to this debate. I conclude with outlining some potentials for an economic geography driven research agenda on alternative agrifood systems:

1. There are still empirical research needs in terms of real and potential social and economic benefits of AFNs. The question remains, how—under current social, political, and economic conditions, and especially the current commodification of ethical values—alternative economies, such as AFNs, can survive and what this means for their transformational or alternative aspirations (Goodman, DuPuis, and Goodman 2013). To what extent are AFNs a countermovement or an innovation of the capitalist system (Sonnino and Marsden 2006)? What relationships exist between value creation and work in AFNs? In order to clarify the extent to which AFNs *perform the economy otherwise*, it is also necessary to examine how they see their role in breaking up and changing the balance of power in food supply chains, thus pointing beyond a mere niche economy and creating a "more heterodox agri-food paradigm" (Sonnino and Marsden 2006, 194). On the whole, the relationship between the alternative and conventional food sectors, the possibilities of comprehensive agricultural transitions, and the specific geographies this entails, must be examined (Tamásy 2013).
2. Such examination would also require a comprehensive network analysis that goes beyond case studies and instead investigates regional economic governance (Watts, Ilbery, and Maye 2005). *Relational economic geography* offers helpful approaches. The potentials of network analysis and a well-founded review of embeddedness are not yet exhausted in my view. For example, the permeability and (competitive) relations between AFNs and the conventional food system, and the role of the public sector and political regulation (for example, through the EU agricultural policy), remain poorly understood. This includes further analysis of the significance of political regulation of niche markets in which AFNs arise, change, and develop, including, for example, the role of certification systems (Sonnino and Marsden 2006; Bernzen and Braun 2014).
3. Regarding the potentials of alternative food systems for sustainable (rural) development, a stronger dialogue with EEG (Gibbs 2006; Hayter 2008) may be

warranted. Even more relevant is the emerging debate on *postgrowth* (Latouche 2010; Schulz and Bailey 2014), where food is often included as an important field of action (e.g., Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2016). Economic geographers who advocate intensified postgrowth research see food production and consumption patterns (in addition to, for example, transport and energy issues) as one central and promising field of research (Schmitt and Schulz 2016; Schmid 2019).

4. Still insufficiently discussed in the literature are the effects of the financial and economic crisis since 2008 on AFNs and the increasing search for investment opportunities by nonagricultural players (see the *Ökonauten* case study presented here for one example). The resulting price hikes for agricultural land (Ouma 2014; Visser, Clapp, and Isakson 2015; Sippel, Larder, and Lawrence 2016) threaten the existence, or at least the further development, of organic farming. Further study of those developments and others connected to financialization (Martin and Clapp 2015; Clapp and Isakson 2018) offers promising connections to the field of *financial geography*.

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