

# ***"It's all about sharing": Can circular initiatives be autonomous food spaces?***

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## **Abstract**

In this article I place into dialogue the challenges of the circular economy (CE) with political ecology by using the notion of autonomy. I examine two circular food initiatives in the capital city region of Brussels, Belgium, a cooperative supermarket and a surplus food redistribution project, with a framework of autonomous food spaces. Inspired by post-capitalist debates on the economy I argue that these spaces are cases of the diverse economy mobilizing autonomous practices and imaginaries. My analysis shows the heterogeneity and complexity of these spaces. It illustrates how urban circular food projects offer examples of possible economic activities that rely on cooperation, solidarity and conviviality instead of profit. It explores the diversity of practices and imaginaries that prefigure a viable and alternative future, and sheds light on our understanding of diverse and circular economies by focusing on the social and political dimensions of CE.

**Keywords:** political ecology, circular economy, autonomous food spaces, diverse economies, imaginaries, Brussels

## **Résumé**

Dans cet article, je mets en dialogue les enjeux de l'économie circulaire (EC) avec ceux de l'écologie politique en mobilisant la notion d'autonomie. J'examine deux initiatives alimentaires circulaires dans la région de Bruxelles, en Belgique : un supermarché coopératif et un projet de redistribution des surplus alimentaires, à travers le prisme des espaces alimentaires autonomes. Inspiré-e par les débats post-capitalistes sur l'économie, je soutiens que ces espaces constituent des exemples d'économies diverses mobilisant des pratiques et des imaginaires autonomes. Mon analyse met en lumière l'hétérogénéité et la complexité de ces espaces. Elle illustre comment des projets alimentaires urbains circulaires peuvent offrir des exemples d'activités économiques fondées sur la coopération, la solidarité et la convivialité plutôt que sur le profit. Elle explore la diversité des pratiques et des imaginaires qui préfigurent un avenir viable et alternatif, et éclaire notre compréhension des économies circulaires et diverses en s'attachant aux dimensions sociales et politiques de l'économie circulaire.

**Mots-clés:** écologie politique, économie circulaire, espaces alimentaires autonomes, économies diverses, imaginaires, Bruxelles

## **Resumen**

En este artículo pongo en diálogo los desafíos de la economía circular (EC) con la ecología política, utilizando la noción de autonomía. Examino dos iniciativas alimentarias circulares en la región de Bruselas, Bélgica: un supermercado cooperativo y un proyecto de redistribución de alimentos excedentes, a partir del enfoque de los espacios alimentarios autónomos. Inspirándome en los debates poscapitalistas sobre la economía, sostengo que estos espacios representan ejemplos de economías diversas que movilizan prácticas e imaginarios autónomos. Mi análisis muestra la heterogeneidad y complejidad de estos espacios. Ilustra cómo los proyectos alimentarios urbanos circulares pueden ofrecer ejemplos de actividades económicas basadas en la cooperación, la solidaridad y la convivialidad en lugar del lucro. Explora la diversidad de prácticas e imaginarios que prefiguran un futuro

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viable y alternativo, y arroja luz sobre nuestra comprensión de las economías circulares y diversas al centrarse en las dimensiones sociales y políticas de la economía circular.

**Palabras clave:** ecología política, economía circular, espacios alimentarios autónomos, economías diversas, imaginarios, Bruselas

## 1. Introduction

This article considers the emergence of alternative circular food economies, and it analyses the practices and imaginaries associated with them. It shows that 'autonomy' is a fruitful approach to evaluate both the transformative power of circular food initiatives, and their limitations. It places into dialogue debates drawn from food studies and diverse economies with those of the Circular Economy (CE). The CE debate has largely focused on the material aspects of food systems (Hamam *et al.* 2021; Harder, Giampietro, & Smukler 2021) emphasizing waste reduction and resource efficiency. However, it has paid little attention to the social and political dimensions that shape these systems (Kebrowski *et al.* 2020; Merli, Preziosi, & Acampora 2018; Blomsma & Brennan 2017; Sauv , Bernard, & Sloan 2016). At the same time, Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) provide important frameworks for rethinking food production and consumption in more socially embedded ways (see for instance Lamine *et al.* 2012), yet they seldom engage with the closed-loop ideal of Circular Economies. Moreover, the very notion of "alternatives" in AFNs has been criticized for its own limitations (Jones *et al.* 2009). AFNs have been challenged for having uneven outcomes in terms of justice and equity, particularly with respect to their accessibility and their potential to reinforce class, racial and spatial divides.

Political ecology has offered a useful approach to unraveling "the socio-natural processes that (re)produce inequalities, exclusion and injustices between people and places" (Moragues Faus & Marsde 2017, 276). Political ecologists have studied AFNs in detail (Galt 2013), and urban political ecology examines the urban metabolism and how flows that create the city also create inequalities (Broto *et al.* 2012; Swyngedow 2006). Despite this, political ecology scholars have yet to apply this critical lens to CE itself (see, however, Demaria 2023 and Joxe & Bahers 2024).

Autonomy is a search for self-governance, self-organization and emancipation, a form of radical democracy (Baschet 2016). This article argues that it helps to identify the non-capitalist dimensions of practices and diverse economies. Autonomous spaces are those that sit outside the circuits of the economy and with a looser grip from market logics (Chatterton & Pickerill 2010). Nevertheless, in their quest for autonomy, some initiatives may fail to resist commodification, while others may produce or reinforce existing inequalities (Blumberg *et al.* 2020). I argue that for circular food projects, maintaining autonomy allows for an emancipatory and collective socio-ecological transition. These experimentations are fueled by a "mobilizing hope" (Baschet 2016, 155), or a "radical imaginary" (Chatterton 2005, 547). Autonomous practices and imaginaries prefigure together an alternative future based on values of community, solidarity and cooperation. I focus on the specific practices of two alternative food projects across the fields of territorial, material, social and imaginative autonomy, in order to account for their attempts to escape market logics. How are these initiatives imagining and practicing autonomy and diversity? How do they address questions of justice (Cadieux & Slocum 2015)?

The article continues as follows. Section 2 reviews the nexus between circular economy, political ecology and food studies to highlight what we can learn from these fields. It pinpoints how using the notion of autonomy contributes to these different fields. Section 3 presents the case of Brussels and the two case studies selected, and my ethnographic research methods that were structured around field observations and interviews. Section 4 presents my findings as analysed through an autonomous food space framework. Section 5 discusses the limits to autonomy, and section 6 offers conclusions.

## 2. Autonomy in circular food systems

The circular economy has become a "federating slogan" (Monsaingeon 2017, 179) that brings together very diverse actors from international institutions to big corporations and local organizations such as NGOs or municipalities (Kebrowski *et al.* 2020). It proposes a model based on functional economy (i.e. when customers pay for the use of a product, they do so for its function and not for its possession) and argues closed production

systems can avoid using natural resources and producing new products, thus preserving the natural environment. Waste therefore becomes a resource. There are different approaches and narratives of circular economies (Friant *et al.* 2020, Lambert 2023) ranging from growth-driven, exemplified by the Ellen MacArthur foundation (Lambert 2020) to ones based on degrowth (Arnsperger & Bourg 2016, Lambert 2020, Savini 2023). There are different scales at which circularity can be scrutinized. At the global level, a CE future is one that envisages the use of technology to solve global problems and to conserve resources (Monsaingeon 2017, 202). Eco-industrial parks have been the focus of industrial ecologies and with 'industrial symbiosis', as exemplified by the well-known Kalundborg in Denmark (Boons & Janssen 2004). At the city level, where all eyes are turned, policies focus on waste management and aim to reduce and recycle as much as possible (Petit-Boix & Leipold 2018). At the local scale, the focus is much more on zero-waste and simpler technologies appropriate at that scale (Monsaingeon 2017). These different CE policies and strategies do not always address equity and justice issues and the approach "contains largely ecomodernist and individualized environmental narratives" (Rask 2022, 11).

In parallel, the food question in cities has risen to forefront of urban debates over the last decade (Morgan 2015) and the Covid crisis has exposed shortcomings of our global supply chains. Overproduction of food and waste has become the norm, and health scandals linked to fraud and contamination have multiplied in recent years. In the Global North, and over the past twenty years, sales of organic products have been steadily increasing. This context has been leading policymakers to draft plans and strategies (from Vancouver's Food Policy to the London Food Strategy, Bristol's Food Equality Strategy and Brussels' Good Food strategy). Corporate actors have improved organic product ranges, and farmers have converted their farms. Urban dwellers have launched various initiatives such as shared gardens, associations for the maintenance of peasant agriculture with peri-urban producers, cooperative supermarkets and various surplus food redistribution projects.

In the literature, these diverse projects and initiatives are brought together under the umbrella terms of Alternative Food Networks (AFNs), Alternative Food Geographies or Alternative Food Initiatives. Yet, they typically do not engage with notions of circularity (but see Cronin & Halog 2022 and Ragueb 2016). This study critically examines the circular food economy at the urban level, engaging with ongoing debates on defining alterity within AFNs and determining whether they truly differ from conventional food systems – a question that scholars have discussed widely and contested (Hedberg 2015, Misleh 2022), including among political ecologists (Galt 2013, Blumberg *et al.* 2020). How can CE actors imagine truly alternative ways of governing collectively the urban food system? How do autonomous and circular food practices re-imagine ways of producing, distributing and consuming food in urban settings?

Drawing upon the notions of diverse economies (Gibson-Graham 2008, Slocum & Gowan 2015), autonomy (Chatterton 2005; Pickerill & Chatterton 2006; Chatterton & Pickerill 2010) and imaginaries (Lambert 2024, Lambert 2023), I give insights from two cases in Brussels: a cooperative supermarket called Beescoop and a surplus food redistribution project called Collectmet. I respond to Hobson's (2016) call to contribute to CE debates by "paying close attention to spaces where disparate forms of the CE may emerge and/or be fostered in forms and ways that current analyses of the CE omits or at least obscures from view" (p. 12). These 'generative spaces' and practices embody a diverse circular economy. More specifically, I draw from political ecology to critically examine how urban circular food projects create spaces where alternative economic practices emerge, and how capitalist processes in the conventional food sector can affect these spaces (Blumberg *et al.* 2020). The cases generate new insights into the diversity of CE in the Brussels Capital Region (BCR) and show how CE practices and imaginaries can encompass a radical critique of the established order.

While CE has been criticized for being merely a techno-fix solution and a growth-driven project (Savini 2019, Corvellec *et al.* 2022), an emerging but limited literature has critically examined how CE can lead to a truly fair and just economic, social and ecological transition. Some are combining CE with a degrowth approach to counter CE focus on growth (Arnsperger & Bourg 2016, Lambert 2020) or focusing on the social and solidarity economy to counter a dominant profit and business perspective (Moreau *et al.* 2017, Pål 2022, Miret 2022). Others have focused on an intersectional reading of the circular economy, whereas posthumanist (Rask 2022) or environmentalist (Wuyts & Marin 2022) scholars call for "justice for *all* humans *as well as* a responsibility and ethics of care for living (and non-living) beings and things" (Rask 2022, 2). There have also

been uses of the commons literature (Swagemakers *et al.* 2018) to counter the commodification and privatisation of food systems.

In this article, I follow an alternative economy approach that is useful to counter the capitalist-centric view of CE (Holmes 2018, Lekan *et al.* 2021). For example, Holmes (2018), following Gibson-Graham's work on diverse economies (1996) studies the practices of sharing and circularity. She focuses on materiality "trying to understand how the objects and materials of provisioning move into, through and out of these endeavors through circulating and sharing" (p. 140). By immersing herself in a surplus food redistribution initiative she finds that "circularity and sharing intertwine and it is not entirely clear where one practice begins and another ends" (p. 142). She shows that "ordinary practices are embedded in the social relationships created" by the project (*ibid*).

A diverse economy framework can capture and illustrate the heterogeneity of economic spaces and practices. It challenges the view of capitalism as a totalizing force, and instead proposes a new picture with 'cracks' (Bergeron 2016) that need to be uncovered and rendered visible. Examining diverse economies and non-capitalist political ecologies contributes to building alternative futures (Burke & Shear 2014). Gibson-Graham challenged capitalist hegemony by "1) deconstruction of familiar economic representations, 2) production of different representations of economic identity, and 3) development of different narratives of economic development" (2002, 2). They inform the study of alternative economies, such as gifting and sharing, alternative sectors such as the social and solidarity economy and alternative initiatives such as cooperatives and non-profits. Recognition of diverse economies, meaning that a capitalist logic does not predicate the course of everything we do, opens space for imagining and doing things 'otherwise.'

Food-related circuits of value are often grouped under the AFN category (Gritzas & Kavoulakos 2016, Slocum & Gowan 2015). They represent non-capitalist form of production, transformation, distribution and consumption of food, sometimes referred as community economies too, for example in relation to food surpluses (Ulug & Maarja-Trell 2020). Similarly, Alternative Food Geographies (Maye *et al.* 2007) is an umbrella term for alternatives to the conventional industrialized agro-food system. AFN concentrates on the production stage of the food system and reinforces a simplistic dichotomy between the alternative and the conventional (Wilson 2013). As Wilson summarizes, "the framework of alternative does not encourage a critical analysis of the power relations within food-provisioning activities, nor does it help to make visible non-capitalist possibilities in food" (2013, 5). Instead, following the notion of autonomous geographies developed by Chatterton (2005), Wilson proposes an Autonomous Food Spaces framework for analysis. This notion "brings considerations of power relations and equity to the forefront and situates food within the broader context of non-capitalist communities seeking to build relationships of mutual aid and non-market exchanges" (Wilson 2013, 9). Aligned with a diverse economy perspective, "a focus on autonomy is simultaneously a documentation of where we are, and a projection of where we could be" write Pickerill and Chatterton (2006, 731). It enables the study of practices and imaginaries that taken together become prefigurative politics. "Prefigurative politics strives to embody alternative forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, belief systems and direct experience" (Monticelli 2021, 112).

Inspired by anarchist thinking and practices, Chatterton (2005) developed the notion of autonomous geographies to show how they "are made and remade at three overlapping levels" (p. 546). At the territorial level, an autonomy lens highlights "a temporal-spatial strategy: between and beyond globalization-localisation" (Pickerill & Chatterton 2006, 735). Autonomous spaces attempt "to challenge globalization through changing everyday practices", they tend to be "grounded in particular places" with (re)localization as a common thread (*ibid*). Yet, networking is important to "share and build ideas and tactics" (p. 736). There are "networked and connected spaces, part of broader transnational networks, where extra-local connections are vital social building blocks" (*ibid*). Chatterton points to "the emergence of loosely networked autonomous neighborhoods" (2005, 546) by the Argentinian Movement of Unemployed Workers. With direct action these networks build an autonomous politics of place. This place autonomy is geared towards a "militant pluriversalism" (*ibid*) trying to avoid the pitfalls of "an exclusionary localist politics" (*ibid*). This place autonomy "is complex, relational, pragmatic and selective, representing both an opening and closure to the outside world" (*ibid*). According to Wilson (2013), who applies this framework to AFN, "territorial autonomy can be temporary and shifting, leaving it open to a diversity of arrangements and models, acknowledging the realities of compromise and

contingency" (10). Thus, "exploring the territoriality of autonomy gives increased emphasis to the local processes and interactions."

At the material level, an autonomy lens identifies "new economies and exchanges outside the formal capitalist economy" (Wilson 2013, 10) which enables work and social relations to be redefined. This solidarity economy is "oriented to meeting community needs while reducing dependency on the state and exposure to the market" (Chatterton 2005, 555). Diverse economies intend to stay away from market logics. Thus, the decommodification of food (Ginn & Ascensao 2018; Tornaghi 2017; Vivero-Pol 2017) appears as a crucial strategy that attempts to resist commodification and privatisation.

At the social level, an autonomy lens brings to light emancipatory social interactions. New social identities are created "beyond the state, trade union, family and church" and "transform everyday life" (Chatterton 2005, 546). Autonomy as a collective project is based on "a collective and utopian spirit which rejects individualism in favor of mutual aid, solidarity and collective experience." (*ibid*) Autonomous practices encourage autonomous individuals (p. 557) and foster new identities, "which can rebuild solidarities and teach about the multi-scalar workings of economic globalization" (Pickerill & Chatterton 2006, 736). In the context of food initiatives, autonomous practices attempt "to forge new relationships and collective identities beyond the typical categories under capitalism of workers, producer, consumer and owner (Wilson 2013, 11).

Autonomy is also about hopes and desires, the imagining of an alternative future. It is "a desire for freedom, self-organization and mutual aid" (Chatterton 2005, 545), "a radical imaginary, the urge to imagine an 'other' society." (547) It contains "a critique of capitalism and a desire for something different" (Wilson 2013, 10) and echoes utopian imaginaries (Lambert 2020, 2023). Both desire and hope are important aspects of utopia (Levitas 2017). Autonomy, like utopia, is about prefigurative practices, these shared ideas about how the world ought to be that become "attempts to live out in this world the relationships and practices that might characterize an imagined better future" (Levitas 2017, 7). Diverse economies can be framed as diverse imaginaries built and applied in practices, as distinct imaginaries are "sources of heterogeneity" (Roux-Rosier *et al.* 2018, 7; see also Lambert 2024). It sits well with the lens of imaginaries and an autonomy perspective that looks within, against and beyond life under capitalism. It can help to "open up new political imaginaries essential for pressing cities and tackling injustice and transforming urban life beyond capitalism" (Pusey & Chatterton 2017, 63). According to Baschet, utopian alternative initiatives imagine "a society free of the logic of value, of production for profit and work for survival" (Baschet 2016, 89). For Levitas "utopian experiments are attempts to live collectively according to a different ethic" (2017, 13) and with an autonomy lens this means collectively self-governing ourselves. Autonomous food spaces "have a commitment to dis-engage from these (capitalist) systems and ways of being to imagine and create new social and economic realities" (Wilson 2013, 10). As such, an autonomous food space framework searches for both autonomous practices and imaginaries, the two being irremediably intertwined.

### 3. Cases and methodology

#### *The case of the Brussels Capital Region (BCR)*

In the Brussels Capital Region, the food system is based on a linear economy model (Papangelou *et al.* 2020). The industry mainly consists of small-scale food processing that relies on imported food, and agricultural production in the city limits is marginal (less than 1% of the land), not unusual in the Global North. Most food is sold in a highly concentrated retail sector and short supply chains are a very small segment of it (SUFISA 2016).

In the BCR, each year, approximately 126,000 tons of food waste are produced (De Muynck *et al.* 2018, 16). Part of this, collected in separate bags, is bio-methanized.<sup>2</sup> Another part is recovered in garden and neighborhood compost (0.4% of total food waste). The largest percentage (79%) is still treated on an industrial scale and burned at the regional incinerator (De Muynck *et al.* 2018, 17). Of this food waste, some estimate that

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<sup>2</sup> Biomethanization is a process in which microorganisms decompose the organic matter through anaerobic digestion. The biogas from this process may be then used as fuel.

two thirds of it is still perfectly edible and nutritious. A circular food economy means that food waste is prevented or transformed into a resource for re-use for human food, is re-used for animal feed, and is eventually returned to agriculture to enrich the urban and peri-urban land of the BCR. Only in the last resort should it be incinerated or discarded.

In parallel, the cost of food is increasing, placing strain on household budgets (Statbel 2021). In Brussels, 30% of the population lives below the official poverty line and thus many are forced to rely on food aid as food is an 'adjustment variable' in the budget of many households. The number of food aid recipients is estimated to be 600,000 across Belgium and 70,000 in the BCR.<sup>3</sup> Between 2004 and 2014, their numbers increased by 25%, and with the Covid crisis they exploded again. For example, a recent survey (Noyon 2022) found that 1 in 10 students are now in food insecurity.

This complex context has led the BCR authorities to adopt a Good Food strategy, that is part of its Circular Economy Program (PREC 2016) that aims to reduce food waste by 30% and also produce 30% of fruit and vegetables locally. Following this, the Regional Resource and Waste Management Plan (PGRD 2018) developed a zero-waste approach. The BCR offers a good study of initiatives that attempt to respond to these challenges. Indeed, in response to the linear, industrialized, and unfair conventional food system, organic farming<sup>4</sup> and AFN have been spreading across Belgium. As Pleyers (2017) reminds us, the resurgence of these local AFN since 2000 happened alongside alter-globalization activism. In Brussels, a multitude of small-and medium-scale projects try to foster democracy and social justice, to reclaim the commons and claim the 'right to the city' (Kebrowski *et al.* 2020; Lefebvre 1968). Local food initiatives include vegetable box schemes developed by the Purchasing Solidarity Groups of Peasant Agriculture (Groupes d'Achat Solidaires de l'Agriculture Paysanne, GASAP) since 2006, organic shops, farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture (CSA) schemes, food cooperatives, food surplus redistribution projects and community gardens.

These numerous initiatives take place against a backdrop of socio-spatial polarization. The two case studies are located in neighborhoods that are emblematic of uneven socio-spatial dynamics (Figure 1). Beescoop is a cooperative supermarket, a direct descendant of the consumer cooperatives and working-class grocery suppliers that appeared in England and France in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There has been a resurgence of food-related cooperatives around organic food, shorter-supply chains and alternative to the agri-food industry (Dohet 2018, 6) and Beescoop is a telling example. Several other cooperative supermarkets have been opening in Belgium and France. Beescoop is a cooperative and its main feature is its organization. Except for a few employees, all day-to-day store management is done by co-operators (members who have bought a share of the cooperative) who can shop in exchange. Currently, there are about 1,400 co-operators and 9 employees. As a result, cost minimization decreases the prices of the products and as a cooperative, all profits are re-invested.

Collectmet is a food redistribution initiative hosted by the social organisation Cultureghem. Cultureghem is a social-oriented organisation that was set up in 2012 in very close collaboration with Abattoir. Abattoir is a public limited company that hosts the historical Brussels' slaughterhouse, the biggest outdoor food market of Brussels, an indoor food market, a rooftop urban farm and several CE initiatives. Cultureghem's aim has been to occupy the Abattoir-owned market space on non-market days with activities for local residents and schoolchildren. They collect food surplus from Abattoir's food market and distribute to locals, as well as to food banks, social grocery outlets and restaurants that will then cook or redistribute it.

Both projects are included in the CE circuit and aim to foster social cohesion through food, and despite having some circular objectives they do not present themselves as 'circular projects.' The circular framing allows better access to regional subsidies. Both involve volunteers and are inspired by pre-existing initiatives. Beescoop's founders went to New York to visit the Park Slope Food Coop (PSFC), founded in 1973. Cultureghem went to meet the founder of la Tente des Glaneurs, a redistribution project in place since 2010 in a food market of Lille, in the north of France. Both projects took several years to become established: Beescoop

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.fdds.be/fr/concertation-aide-alimentaire/laide-alimentaire-en-belgique>

<sup>4</sup> Between 2019 and 2020, the number of organic farms increased by 4.9%, which corresponds to an increase in converted and ongoing conversion areas of 6.4%. Organic farming now represents 7.2% of the farmed area in Belgium. Some 90.8% of this is in Wallonia, with is largely French-speaking and does not include Brussels (<https://statbel.fgov.be/fr/themes/agriculture-peche/agriculture-biologique>)



to open its supermarket and Collectmet to develop its present model. The projects differ in a number of ways, including their status, their activities, and their audience. They also prefigure alternatives to the capitalist system differently. I highlight their commonalities and differences.

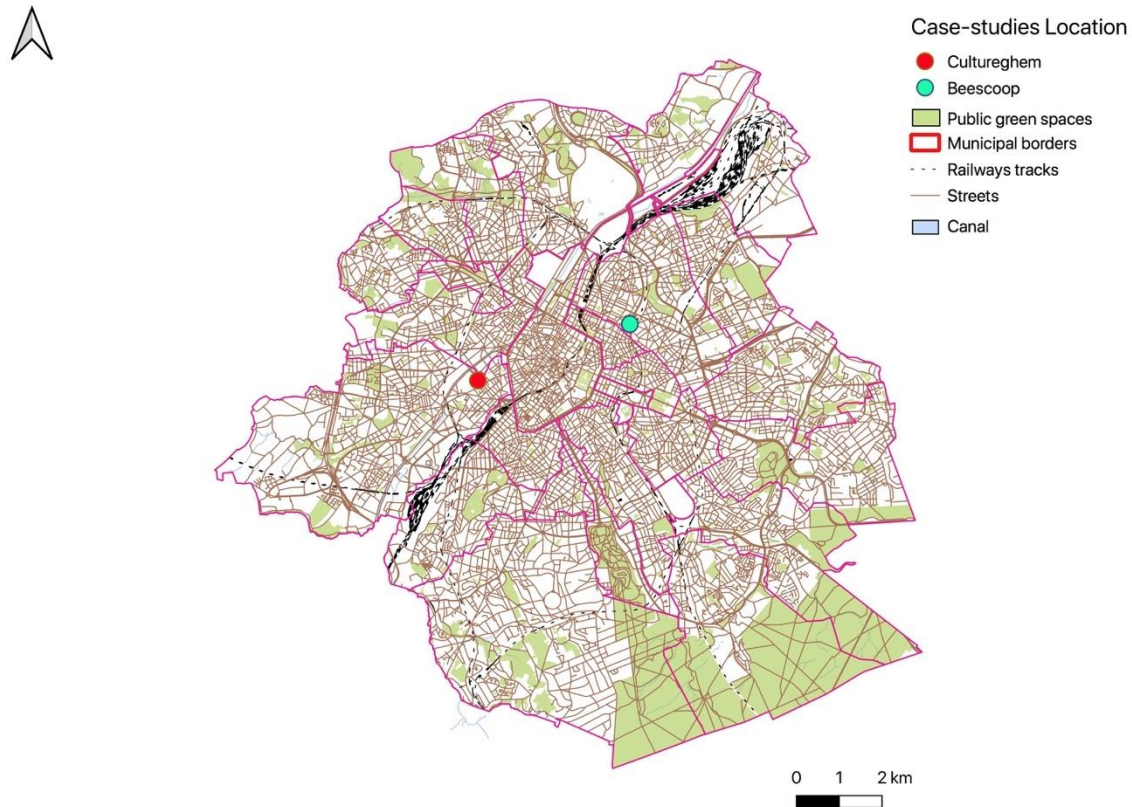


Figure 1: Location of case-studies in the BCR, either side of the city center (credit: Deborah Lambert, using QGIS)

#### *Ethnography-inspired methods*

My methodology combined interviews, documentary analysis and observations. As part of my field research, I was an active member of Beescoop and I worked in the supermarket 3 hours per month during the period of the research (2018-2022). I was also a member of a committee in charge of the organisation of its general assemblies (GA) for one year. This immersive role enabled me to observe and understand governance and decision-making processes, and the different roles and responsibilities of volunteers. I was a participatory observer of the Collectmet food collection and Kookmet cooking in Abattoirs in April-May 2022. In addition, I conducted 14 semi-structured in-depth interviews with projects holders and users. I collected more material for Beescoop but my field experiences also included a number of informal discussions with various actors, and periods of participant-observation enabled me to understand the different tasks, practices and interactions during organised activities. In addition, I organised a follow up interview with Cultureghem to discuss and challenge my results.

### *An Autonomous Food Spaces framework*

The Autonomous Food Spaces framework developed by Wilson (2013) was a useful tool for analysis. I paid attention to the physical spaces (territorial dimensions) where these initiatives took place, their networks, and local processes and interactions. To evaluate their material autonomy, I followed Gibson-Graham's diverse economy framing (2014) that investigates transactions, labor and organizational practices in relation to market logics. This included an analysis of whether food was seen as in terms of the market or as a common good. Social autonomy was expressed in the agency of the different actors, systems of governance and practices of reciprocity and solidarity. Practices taking place in autonomous food spaces are ideas translated into action, so I also looked for autonomous imaginaries – shared ideas, values, beliefs and visions about the future, "futures in the present" (Cleaver 1979 cited in Chatterton & Pickerill 2010), coming from a rejection of the political and economic system (Chatterton 2005). In autonomous spaces, these imaginaries are realized as prefigurative practices, visible here as efforts to de-commodify, de-grow and re-imagine an urban food system.

## **4. Prefigurative food practices in Brussels**

### *Territorial autonomy*

Firstly, autonomous projects are grounded in particular places. As one employee of Beescoop rightly explained to me: "Each cooperative must be linked to its territory, to its co-operators. We can't say we don't care and apply a model that comes from somewhere else" (2019). Both projects are located in precarious neighbourhoods. Beescoop's location was chosen for its social and cultural diversity as its first objective is to offer cheaper 'good food' to all. The supermarket is in the northeast of Brussels at the junction between a very diverse area and a wealthier neighbourhood, from which the majority of its participants tend to come. Cultureghem is located in Cureghem, an inner-city neighbourhood located in the southwest of Brussels. This industrial district has been welcoming migrants since the second half of the 19th century. Hence a large proportion of the population comes from poor or middle-income countries (Sanchez-Trenado 2020, 106). Like Beescoop, Culturgem aims to improve social cohesion. While the Abattoir location is vacant for several days a week, the surrounding neighbourhood lacks public space. Cultureghem offers a series of projects supported by volunteers to interact with the local inhabitants: a playground, temporary kitchens, and food surplus (re)distribution.

Place autonomy is "both an opening and closure to the outside world" (Chatterton 2005, 546). In this second dimension, Beescoop and Collectmet's models are quite different. People must be co-operators to shop in the Beescoop supermarket but Collectmet is completely open to anyone who wants to join their activities. Beescoop is a closed indoor space with a scanner for membership cards to check your status (in order, on alert or suspended). The screening can be seen as judgement. I witnessed a couple of times inhabitants from the neighborhood entering out of curiosity and being perplexed that a membership was required to shop. Furthermore, the gate to close the supermarket looks like a fence (Figure 2). There is an *entre-soi* that is difficult to overcome, and the price of the products is one among other barriers. In their 2021 satisfaction survey 14% of respondents said they could not shop because the products were too expensive. As one co-operator explains:

As an employee without children, I can shop at Bees but when I see the bill, it makes me feel a little sick. I'm not at the bottom of the social ladder, so if for me it's already complicated, it's not even an *entre-soi* that we're going to do, it will be a little elite. It doesn't seem to me to be sustainable; the store won't continue if we are only rich people who don't ask questions. (2019)



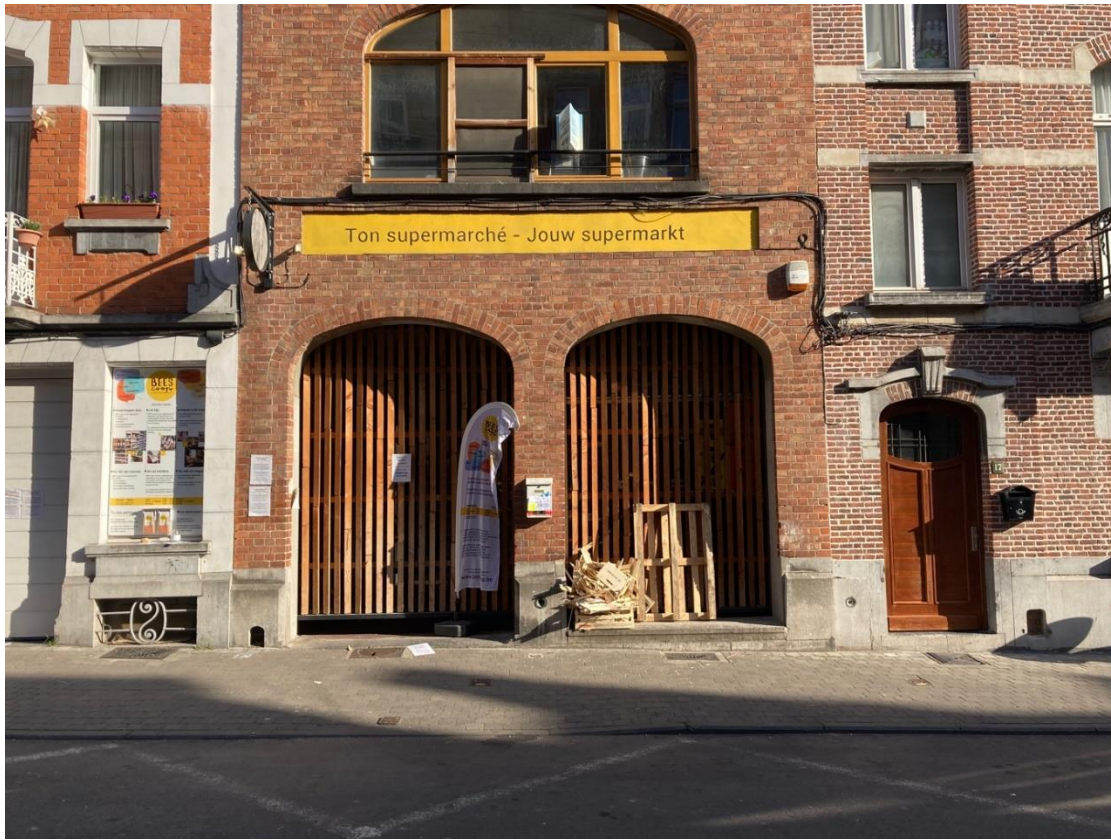


Figure 2: Beescoop closed supermarket entrance (Picture by the author)

Beescoop has been aware of this enclosure issue and was working on its accessibility, first with the hiring of an employee to develop kitchen activities with social organizations from the neighborhood. Potential members can try shopping for one month in order to 'test' the supermarket, and there is a mentorship system to foster the inclusion of new members. The coop is inspired by solidarity principles and was implementing solidarity shareholdings and a way to exchange shifts in the store. More recently, they have been part of a pilot project with the local public social action center.<sup>5</sup> A group of around twenty isolated senior citizens on social welfare, living in the area around the supermarket, have become co-operators and were paid a monthly fee to do their shopping there.

Collectmet inhabits a large open space and co-exists with other activities in a very lively and bursting market with a mix of street vendors, shopkeepers, shoppers, social workers and gleaners. The atmosphere is, as a result, very different from Beescoop. Atmospheres "work as a medium through which people read and assess a certain space or social situation. They may be felt as welcoming, alienating, safe or unsafe." (Löfgren 2015, 68). Löfgren suggests paying attention to questions of trust, forms of sociability, "elusive processes of gatekeeping and subtle forms of inclusion and exclusion" (p 69) and the "interaction between people, spatial properties and materialities" (p. 72). As one employee of Abattoir explained in an interview:

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<sup>5</sup> CPAS (Centre Public d'Action Sociale).

...the goal is really to open the site completely so that it is almost accessible 24 hours a day, so it is really also to allow people to feel, that the site becomes an integral part of their neighborhood. (2020)

People "from all over the place", vulnerable people in need such as "Moroccan mothers from the neighborhood" as well as expatriates who want to participate in local social life, workers who want to get involved in the community and people "against food waste" (interview, 2019) come together. In that sense Cultureghem, with Abattoir's support, attempts to provide a kind of "urban commons that represent open meeting places, where people with very different backgrounds might mingle" (Löfgren 2015, 87).

Thirdly, autonomous projects attach great importance to networking and connection with others. Beescoop has been part of a movement to foster cooperative supermarkets and takes this very seriously. It is an item of every general assembly (GA) agenda. For its specific "spin-off" mission, it supports individually emerging cooperative supermarkets in Belgium<sup>6</sup> whose projects leaders can train and work at Beescoop. It is also involved in several initiatives in the Belgian social economy and cooperative movement, such as FinCommon, a Belgian financial cooperative and *komunigi* which brings together 12 European cooperative supermarkets to share the operating and development costs of their IT systems. There are also on-going logistic and transport discussions with the 5C collective to improve short food supply chains in Brussels. With regards to Collectmet, it is intertwined in a network of social organisations and is in a process to "create more synergies to work better together." They launched a series of projects to steer more interactions with the social organisations benefiting from food redistribution. They want to avoid becoming a "a sort of food bank." On the contrary, they want "to create a form of sharing, cooperation" and "give a role to the organisations" (2019).

In sum, exploring territorial autonomy brings to light the projects' temporal-spatial strategy. Both projects are intensively local and by seeking to strengthen social cohesion, they are reinforcing their embeddedness in their respective neighbourhoods (Lambert *et al.* 2022). They are also part of broader actor networks, but Beescoop has a much more advanced commitment to networking through its involvement in the cooperative movement.

### *Material autonomy*

Autonomous food spaces create "new economies and exchanges outside the formal capitalist economy to collectively meet the needs of a community" (Wilson 2013, 10). Gibson-Graham's diverse economy framework assists in understanding the material autonomy of the two initiatives by assessing their disengagement with market and capitalist logics across five descriptive dimensions: enterprise, labor, property, transactions and finance (Table 1). I add a food and market dimension. In Table 1, Beescoop and Collectmet's characteristics are indicated according to these dimensions.

Beescoop is officially a cooperative, non-capitalist enterprise while Collectmet is a non-profit, an alternative capitalist form. In terms of labor, both projects rely mainly on non-capitalist volunteer work (co-operators for Beescoop and volunteers for Collectmet) but they both use capitalist wage labor (employees) to support the development and management of their activities (labor is discussed further in the next section). Beescoop appears to be an alternative 'niche' market for middle class consumers. They are co-operators, but it aims to be an alternative supermarket and not an alternative *to* supermarkets. Beescoop tries to navigate between the constraints of the global market and the rules of the capitalist game, for instance the pressure by wholesalers to buy more products to reduce prices. One of its main wholesalers, Biofresh, supplies 24% of its stock. Biofresh sells vegetables that come mainly from large producers who are less environmentally friendly and have little concern for the working conditions of their workforce, the same as those who supply the supermarkets (Tchack 2022). To respond to this, Beescoop has started visits and meetings with farmers to develop greater attention to their modes of cultivation, based on their respective needs.

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<sup>6</sup> Woocoop in Waterloo, Coquelicoop in Jurbise, bab'l Market in Woluwé-Saint-Pierre. Several others have opened.

<i>Enterprise</i>	<i>Labor</i>	<i>Property</i>	<i>Transactions</i>	<i>Finance</i>	<i>Product</i>
<b>Capitalist</b>	<b>Wage</b> Beescoop and Collectmet: limited use of wage employment	<b>Private</b> Beescoop: owns the premises	<b>Market</b> Beescoop Collectmet: schools pay for cooking activities	<b>Mainstream Market</b> Beescoop: private banks	<b>Mainstream Market</b>
<b>Alternative Capitalist</b> Collectmet: non-profit organisation	<b>Alternative Paid</b> Beescoop: co-operators / reciprocal labor	<b>Alternative Private</b> Collectmet: user of the site (15% of the site is owned by the company Abattoir, 85% by the Anderlecht municipality)	<b>Alternative Market</b> Beescoop: fair trade Collectmet: pay as you want	<b>Alternative Market</b> Beescoop: cooperative and ethical banks, subsidies, crowdfunding Collectmet: subsidies, crowdfunding	<b>Alternative Market</b> Beescoop: organic food, short supply chains; bulk
<b>Non-Capitalist</b> Beescoop: consumers cooperative	<b>Unpaid</b> Collectmet: volunteers	<b>Open Access</b>	<b>Non-market</b> Collectmet: gift giving	<b>Non-Market</b>	<b>Non-Market</b> Collectmet: surplus food

Table 1: Material autonomy, using a 'diverse economy' perspective. Adapted from Gibson-Graham (2014, 150)

As explained above, Cultureghem and its initiative Collectmet occupy the Abattoir site. Cultureghem relies on a mix of market (paid activities such as Kookmet, cooking workshops for primary schools – see Figure 3), alternative (pay as you go meals) as well as non-market transactions (gleaning, gift giving and redistribution). The Collectmet food collection and distribution initiative is fully based on reciprocity and the gift economy in term of transactions.

Finally, while both initiatives center around food, Beescoop relies on food from the market system and Collectmet on food that is, on the contrary, ready to be thrown away and with little or no value (it actually has a minimal value as vendors have to pay a tax to get rid of it on the spot). At Beescoop, food is treated as a commodity for its consumers, who shop as in any supermarket. The aim of Beescoop is to be like any other store by proposing a wide range of products – food, but also garbage bags, make-up, knives, socks and even books. Nevertheless, working in the store makes consumers more forgiving of wait times or out of stock products, as they appreciate the perspectives of both consumers and workers. For example, when I go to check-out to pay for my purchases, I may help the cashier who will not know how to encode a certain discount or a product without a barcode. In that sense, the purchase of food is embedded in broader social relationships. Beescoop products come from organic, local, bulk and/or fair-trade suppliers (where possible) while at Collectmet food is not treated as a commodity but as a common resource. Its approach de-commodifies food by redistributing food waste. Put differently, Beescoop operates alternative consumption model but Collectmet is more aligned with an ethic of non-consumption in line with the freeganism movement, bringing gleaning practices to the city (Monsaingeon 2017, 162). Built around the gift economy, the collective prepares and sells



vegetarian meals for a voluntary donation, for all the Abattoir site users and from the surrounding area (workers from companies based in the neighborhood, such as Nestlé, regularly have lunch there).



Figure 3: Kookmet, cooking workshops for schools every Monday and Friday (credit: Abattoir)

In term of material autonomy, Beescoop appears as an alternative to the capitalist-market economy, its objective being "to show that there is an economic alternative to mass retailing and to have a space for discussion: to host other projects, to use the kitchen, to make people discuss and mix them" (2019). Collectmet is more autonomous from market-based value systems. Its aim is not simply to fight against food waste as one interviewee mentions: "we want to share what we do; we always say, we don't give we don't redistribute but we really are there in a sharing mode ... we want to share with everyone, and to share as well our knowledge, our expertise" (2019). This echoes Holmes' findings that "the food acts as a conduit to provisioning much more than just itself, but also enables the circulating and sharing of less tangible and more emotional types of support (2018, 142).

#### *Social autonomy*

Firstly, an autonomous project "involves a daily practice of forming and reforming new social relations and identities" (Wilson 2013,10). Both projects distance themselves from the status imposed by capitalist and market society. In Collectmet, there is a blurred demarcation between volunteers, participants, visitors and beneficiaries. Volunteers who collect the surplus on Sundays have often first started as beneficiaries of the food distribution on Mondays. Customers from the Kookmet (temporary kitchen) might join other activities throughout the week and become volunteers. Kitchen activities are open-access workshops, where everyone can show up with no registration and at any time, to learn and share food know-how. This form of functioning

nurtures a dignified approach where everybody is respected and considered, charged with responsibilities and agency: "there is this idea of social cohesion, creating social ties, and also giving an important position to people" (2019). In Beescoop, as a member I am a co-operator (owner), a user (customer), and a worker. As a co-operator I am expected to attend the General Assembly and read paperwork in advance, even though only a small minority attend them. As a worker, I am in charge of filling the fridges, doing the cash register, checking deliveries and putting them on the shelves, cleaning or welcoming new visitors (Figure 4). Doing shifts in the store is a time for social exchange and making links. When we arrive for the shift, we make introductions, the coordinator explains priority tasks, and asks who wants to do what. I noticed that elderly volunteers favour working on the checkout. It is also possible to join committees and be involved in less day-to-day activities such as organising the GA, dealing with co-operators' work or developing governance tools; and to turn this volunteer work into work shifts. There is also a certain coercive dimension (Ouahab, 2020), since the work shifts have to be staffed, so penalties apply for non-participation (compensation shifts).



Figure 4: Working at the Beescoop supermarket (credit: Fabrice Pichat)

Secondly, conviviality (Illich 1973; Lambert 2020) is an essential ingredient of this social autonomy. It is at the centre of the organisation of Collectmet collect and Kookmet kitchen activities. Sustained efforts are being made to encourage and settle this sense of conviviality. The collective changed their redistribution system for citizens (to a random draw) and organizations (by time slots) to avoid battles to get the food. They also try to create new spaces for conviviality. As one employee explains:

...the people who come to the fridge at noon to get their fruits and vegetables we try that they come to sit with the children at the table, and eat for free also what the children have cooked (...) it was very complicated because the people are very reticent (...) at the beginning we brought the soup to the fridge and now every Monday there are 10 or 15 people who sit at table. (2020)

Beescoop has a conviviality committee to organise side activities. For example, during one GA, there was dancing organised during a break. Another time the street was closed off for an annual neighbourhood dinner to celebrate Eid, the important day for Muslims. These moments of conviviality, cooking and craft workshops, as well as meetings and debates, place values and the political project centrally even though there are economic necessities. Working conditions and user-friendliness are surveyed, and to avoid too much pressure, that is to preserve conviviality, Beescoop wants to keep the current membership system despite many members not being actively involved in social activities or shared governance.

Thirdly, autonomous food spaces are self-governed. Self-governance is another name for autonomy according to Baschet (2016, 72). "The desire for autonomy is underpinned by a reinvention and reinvigoration of political process, decision-making and communication through experimentation with particular organizational principles such as direct democracy, decentralization and consensus" (Pickerill & Chatterton 2006, 739). Beescoop is an autonomous project insofar as it builds a project of emancipation and a different form of collective life (Baschet 2016, 70). Shared governance and participation are key to its functioning, differentiating it from other food cooperatives. In the words of one employee, Beescoop offers a different economic model "to re-appropriate the act of consumption and decide in a more horizontal way" (2019). Indeed, while Beescoop was largely inspired by the Park Slope Coop model (cooperative and closed, with some labor by members), it decided to put in place a different model of governance that gives much more power to its co-operators. Park Slope Coop and its recent equivalent in France, La Louve, have a representative vision of democracy, away from more autonomous models of self-governance (Ouahab, 2020). During my four years as a co-operator, I witnessed efforts to improve and deal with issues of participation, trust, communication and governance. To ensure that more than the most involved co-operators sit on committees, there are random draws for certain committees (notably the one responsible for organizing GA), and committee work can be done instead of store work. At one stage the project went through a democratic crisis, and a solid process was put in place to rethink its governance. Collectmet has much less focus on self-governance methods, but still relies on the implementation of self-governance as a form of "shared dignity" (Baschet 2016, 72).

From the consumption of food to the governance of a supermarket, we see "...an overall strategy of mutual aid" (Wilson 2013, 15). Mutual aid (Swann 2022) was central during the COVID crisis when both projects tried to support their users in need. As an employee of Abattoir explained "During COVID there was an emergency, we had no more products, so we started to buy products to deliver to the people who were really in need, so the colleagues of Cultureghem drew up lists, they checked who was really in emergency and we delivered to these people with products which were bought by (Cultureghem)" (2020). Beescoop organized home deliveries and adapted its opening hours to support vulnerable co-operators. It has organized food collects for distribution by the ADES organization, a self-organized and self-managed social network based nearby.

This analysis brings to light how both projects are based on social autonomy. They include a strong sense of the collective, by sharing work, activities, responsibilities, and helping people in a convivial atmosphere. They seek to foster mutual aid, solidarity and collective experience and challenge the normative identities of workers, beneficiaries and consumers.

### *Autonomous imaginaries*

Autonomous spaces emerge from an imaginary of autonomy. They "employ different tactics and political imaginaries about how the future might be organized" (Chatterton & Pickerill 2010, 484). Autonomous imaginaries are about imagining disengagement with market and capitalist logics. They first emerge from a concrete market and capitalist situation and the way the actors picture it. According to Gibson-Graham "the way we represent capitalism (as all-encompassing and pervasive, or as uneven, fragile, and less extensive than imagined) has an important impact on the way we imagine, act, and claim new spaces of interventions" (2006, 74). Collectmet emerged from "a waste management emergency" (2020). An employee in charge of the site's waste management explains that "there were a lot of products arriving here every weekend, some of which were already in poor condition when they arrived and the cost was so low that if they didn't sell, they were simply thrown away" (*ibid*). In the meantime, gleaners operated in the market in an unethical, survival-of-the-fittest manner, and when the waste was finally centralized in large containers, they no longer had access to the food



surplus. It is from this situation that Abattoir and Cultureghem decided to develop the Collectmet initiative to salvage edible food from waste and organize its redistribution. With regards to Beescoop, it was founded by a group of friends. When they moved to Brussels after finishing their studies, they were puzzled by the compartmentalization of the city and their neighborhood. Schaerbeek is similar to other districts of Brussels: part of the municipality, its oldest urbanized area, is more densely populated and has retained traces of its industrial past. It is also home to many foreign nationals. Another area, on the other hand, is airier, more residential, with more green spaces and a more affluent population. As one of the founders explains: "I was a little angry to see the symbolic borders you see between the upper and lower Schaerbeek, just within two blocks" (2018). It came from "an individual need" as they were the first victims of this economic partitioning because as "post-students but a bit broke" (*ibid*) they could not afford to have access to good food. Beescoop emerged from a combination of political will and collective needs, leading them to seeking to develop a political project around food issues to "show that another economic model can be possible and can stand up on its own" (*ibid*). Then, a meeting with the founder of Park Slope food coop from Brooklyn and the emergence of a similar project in Paris (la Louve) quickly convinced them to import and implement this cooperative supermarket model.

These autonomous experimentations are "driven by prefigurative imaginaries of what alternative 'governing political formations' could look like" (Cooper 2016 cited in Monticelli 2021, 114). From each specific context, a common imaginary has emerged and been reinforced. After meeting with the founder of Park Slope, Beescoop organized in 2014 a tour to visit similar initiatives in the US and Canada. One of the founders of Beescoop gave his impression of Park Slope after their visit: "it was selling dreams, it was great, it was a crazy thing, they work... we are still very very small compared to them... it's really a big big machine" (2018). The much-repeated Park Slope story reinforces the creation of the common imaginary of the food coop. Park Slope opened in 1973 when consumer food co-operatives experienced a strong surge in popularity, in parallel with the counterculture and civil rights movements. Yet, many eventually failed in the 1980s as competition with supermarkets increased and internal challenges mounted. Park Slope is frequently presented as an initiative that survived the collapse of the food coop movement (for example during mandatory information meetings for future Beescoop co-operators) and this also appears in a thematic booklet (*Beescoop across the Atlantic*), in guides (*How to start a food coop*) and in web documentaries. The founder of Park Slope made a movie in 2016 which also built the imaginary of the coop model, with its labor by members and management by employees. Beescoop and several other food coops in France and Belgium are directly inspired by this project.

While their values and operations are those of Park Slope, Beescoop has placed self-governance and participation at its core. It has now become a source of inspiration for other cooperative supermarkets springing up all over Belgium. The basis of this inspiration is a shared imaginary of a challenge to mass retailing. Yet, an imaginary of autonomy infuses all recent initiatives taken to respond to the issues of governance and trust encountered by the cooperative. Collectmet's initiative has also laid the foundations of a common imaginary around the notion of sharing. With one thing leading to another, distribution was only one entrance to the many activities around food (cooking, talking, connecting to others) creating a sharing and cooperation dynamic. As one of the employees of Collectmet explains: "the dream of one of my colleagues is to say that we give food to all of Brussels, to say to people who don't work, come and cook with us, we cook a lot more and you leave with what you need and we deliver food to all the schools to all the children in the neighborhood who at lunchtime have access to a meal that is fresh, cheap and cooked with love" (2019).

As utopian experiments, these initiatives "imagine alternative ways of life that would be ecologically and socially sustainable and enable wider and deeper human happiness than is now possible" (Levitas 2017, 9). Their vision – their 'imaginary reconstruction of society' (Levitas 2013) – takes the form of a solidarity movement breaking down social and spatial divisions. The imagined future is multicultural and socially mixed, and restates some utopian ideals by challenging imaginaries of ownership, competition and wage labor for Beescoop, and imaginaries of food waste and food aid for Collectmet.

## 5. Discussion: The limits to autonomy

"The tendency for autonomy is always contested and fractured, contradictory and overlapping" (Pickerill & Chatterton 2006, 737). Some scholars have warned that even in the 'alternative economies' movement,



neoliberal rationalities such as the growth of responsibility, state alienation and naturalization of inequity might be embedded in collectively held imaginaries (Argüelles *et al.* 2017, 32). As Monticelli emphasizes "concrete utopias are always under the threat of being 'translated', i.e. circumscribed, co-opted, appropriated, subsumed" (2021, 108). The limitations and barriers that these practices face are shown above, risking reinforcing the same practices that they attempt to resist. Indeed, "a politics of autonomous geographies does not concern linear progression towards some desired place-bound utopia or equilibrium, but an obligation to recognize co-existence, negotiations and conflict" (Pickerill & Chatterton 2006, 736), and "there is a constant *negotiation* between competing tendencies towards autonomy and non-autonomy" (p. 737). As Cadieux and Slocum put it, it is necessary to analyze "how transformative food work *gets stuck* and what might enable it to move towards socially just food systems" (2015, 13). Towards this effort, political ecology is useful for identifying the risks of exclusion (Slocum & Gowan 2015), risks to farmers' livelihoods (Blumberg *et al.* 2020), competing interests within initiatives (Siniscalchi 2013) or their embedding in neoliberal processes (Agyeman & McEntee 2014). In the remainder of this section, I draw on these studies to highlight the tensions and contradictions faced by the two projects.

First, global food market dynamics may affect autonomous food spaces. Like other food surplus redistribution initiatives, Collectmet raises "some questions as to its long-term sustainability due to its reliance on the discards of the very system it is trying to evade." (Wilson 2013, 15) Indeed, its model relies on over-production of food and unsustainable agro-production (Gascón 2018) – fruits and vegetables traveling long distances and with chemicals added to aid growth and prolong shelf life. As Holmes (2018, 145) demonstrates for redistribution projects, inequalities can be reproduced at the micro-level too. She outlines two main points: limited choice, and low food quality (see also Saxena & Tornaghi 2018). The quality of food is indeed low overall (for example the food I collected went rotten very quickly, I had to throw most of the avocados, while the blackberries were tasteless). Some vendors already get food sold at low prices because of lower quality, as one employee from Abattoir explains: "shopkeepers who only bought pallets of end-of-series fruit and vegetables, sometimes it was a pallet that they paid 50 euros, they brought it back here and sold half of it for 300/400 euros, the other half they threw away, they didn't care at all, they put it in the garbage and the week after they started again" (2020). Holmes (2018) also points to the perverse impacts of these practices that fill the gap left by the absence of the state in agro-business waste management, offering a cheap or free disposal alternative. These kind of initiatives "not only rely on capitalist practices for surplus food, but also fill voids created by them" (Ulug & Maarija-Trell 2020, 129). Following Monsaingeon (2017), Collectmet is in a "deal with it" position, part of a reconciliation effort, between opposition and acceptance of food waste (p. 161). Some argue that "spaces that prioritize the process of food over food as a product tend to result in so-called 'stronger' models" (Wilson 2013, 14). This means that recovering food and sharing it freely or preparing it collectively, and sharing it freely among a diverse community, is more important than the quality of food itself and its provenance.

Second, urban redevelopment dynamics affect autonomous food spaces. In particular, one risk that emerges for Collectmet is the development projects of Abattoir and its surroundings. These could re-structure the whole neighborhood and increase inequalities, with the audience and beneficiaries at risk of being displaced. The district of Cureghem has been the center of significant urban transformations since the 2000s, as new activities have slowly moved in (Orban, Sanchez & Vanin 2021). Abattoirs is an economic attractor and new circular economy businesses have located there, such as the BiGH aquaponic urban farm. In parallel, regional authorities have also been supporting circular projects, and there are now a number of them close by. BiGH may be the precursor to new actors arriving. The future development of Abattoirs includes a large urban warehouse for medium-sized companies doing food processing and production, and this could create synergies in terms of energy or waste in a CE approach. A public swimming pool will be built on the rooftop. This Manufacture-Abattoir project has regional and European funding. Brussels activists have already shown that "the concentration of significant public funding in this area is leading to or accompanying increasingly marked gentrification processes" (Schoier & Sénéchal 2016, see also Anguelovski 2015). This illustrates the risks that discourses of sustainability, diversity and social cohesion, used as a frame for neighborhood redevelopment (Kebrowski *et al.* 2020), pose for autonomous food spaces.

Finally, there are internal contradictions that are particularly visible at Beescoop. According to Pastier (2020) who carried out an analysis for Beescoop of its governance processes, there are two main risks, identified in other cooperative supermarkets, particularly in France: depoliticization and mimicry (p. 19). Although Beescoop's initial motivation was the social and political scope of their initiative, Pasquier points to the fact that the capacity needed to run a supermarket and the constraints and pressure to run it well have seemingly taken over from meeting political objectives. Beescoop's case also suggests that power relations are unequal as in some other cooperatives: the co-operators are mostly white, highly educated and wealthy, and live locally. Despite its focus on social cohesion, ties with the rest of the neighbourhood's inhabitants are weaker. In that sense, Beescoop is offering "closed autonomy" (Baschet 2016, 76). There have been some on-going discussions between founders, board members and co-operators about the evolution of the supermarkets, its main values and objectives, and this is a complex issue within the cooperative. Beescoop wants to sell at affordable prices but it is very difficult, impossible even, despite their reduced and controlled profit margins. Organic and fair-trade food is simply expensive. The recent price increases in Europe since the pandemic, and economic crises caused by the Ukraine war and trade battles means local people have less disposable income, further limiting the achievement of Beescoop's vision.

The initial project was to create an accessible food coop based on the Park Slope Coop model which would include both conventional and organic products. But the current focus on self-governance giving power to the co-operators tends to favorize a closed approach. There has been an intense debate about the direction the supermarket should take: a placement of classic agribusiness products on the shelves to allow customers to have a cheaper basket of goods and bringing in lower income members (a vision defended by the initiators of the project and a small part of the co-operators) or a focus on the healthiest and fairest products to assure the highest quality (a vision supported by most co-operators participating in the GA and their activities). This debate is still on-going and while the risk of closure is real, its efforts to increase participation and improve self-governance are another window of hope towards openness. Beescoop combines a paradoxical mix of utopia and pragmatism (El Karmouni 2017, 265). There is a voluntary approach to autonomy in relation to the market system by means of self-governance or volunteer work, but at the same time the project reproduces capitalist dynamics and inequality (Cadieux & Slocum 2015). As Wilson puts it, "it is a continual process of negotiation and creation to insulate and distance food from the values and ethics of the conventional food system" (2013, 13).

## 6. Conclusion

Alternative food practices are a heterogeneous mix of organizations and networks and the literature tends to either applaud their capacity to resist capitalist economy or alternatively pays "an excessive attention to (their) limits" (Calvario & Kallis 2017, 18). By analyzing two urban food initiatives, I have explored how circular food economies can foster territorial, material, social and imaginative autonomy while also grappling with contradictions and tensions. These contradictions reveal the ongoing struggles of such initiatives to resist capitalist dynamics while seeking to create cooperative, solidarity-based and convivial food systems.

The article has made three key contributions. Firstly, studying these initiatives as potential autonomous food spaces reveals their embeddedness in particular places and their intertwining within broader alternative networks, their struggle against capitalism with everyday practices such as shopping or cooking, their constant search for conviviality and their willingness to emancipate and self-govern. Using an autonomous food space lens is "one way to explore the diversity of experimentation and imagination that shapes our relationship with what we eat" (Wilson 2013, 11). In opposition to the constraints of market society, such as an obsession with productivity and profit, work and consumption, autonomous food spaces prefigure a place for conviviality, solidarity, cooperation and common decisions. Both initiatives challenge working and social relationships that can be commonly found in for-profit as well as in not-for-profit activities such working in a company, being a customer in a supermarket or a beneficiary in a food bank. With this blurred demarcation between different roles and responsibilities, autonomous practices and imaginaries emerge to work, share, interact as well as to own and govern. These challenge the capitalist discourse on food and demonstrate that there are other viable food models.

Secondly, the desire for autonomy highlights how these in-the-making autonomous spaces are always facing tensions and contradictions, and at risk of reproducing the very capitalist dynamics they are fighting. Here, political ecology has much to contribute (Blumberg *et al.* 2020; Galt 2013; Moragues-Faus & Marsden 2017). Particular attention must be paid to global and urban capitalist dynamics that may render projects ineffective or at best vulnerable in terms of autonomy. But it is also internal organizational dynamics that can prove to be the most harmful, compromising the objective of autonomy by reproducing power relationships.

This relates to the third key contribution. Focusing on autonomous practices and imaginaries allows for the recognition of prefigurative practices. Pickerill and Chatterton summarize perfectly this dimension of autonomy when they write: "...despite these problems, however, the very commitment to the process, as a utopian vision and a materialization of a desire for something better, working through and evolving the use of direct democracy and horizontality, offers the hope of creating the future in the present" (2006, 741). The contestation of the current food system, the dominance of corporate players and the non-sensical production of food waste, nourish the imaginaries of autonomous food spaces presented here. To reinforce sharing, and to diffuse their respective models, autonomous food spaces rely on particular imaginaries – food cooperative or a sharing mindset – to fulfil their own goals geared towards autonomy. Yet, despite their differences, autonomous food spaces appear "as an inspiration to disrupt the hegemony to the current food system" (Casabella & Denoo 2019, 100).

Through these contributions, the article has informed our understanding of diverse food economies and advanced a critical research agenda that integrates political ecology with circular economy studies, emphasizing the social and political dimensions of circular food economies.

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