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Understanding skill, food and field

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ABSTRACT
Building on an epistemological reading of anthropology as a field-based social science, I argue in favour of ethnography, namely a reflexive field-based practice and a defining methodology for anthropology. I introduce the methodology of 'comparing by context' as a way of rigorously translating the experience of apprenticeship in the field into forms of social learning and of understanding. I argue that practising anthropology as an ethnographer is a matter of negotiating the pendulum between participant observation – a form of apprenticeship in the field – and anthropological understanding.

Resonating with Ingold's piece *From science to art and back again: The pendulum of an anthropologist* is a complex task. While I agree with his critique of 'the surrender of science to the forces of neoliberalism' (6) as many anthropologists do from diverse viewpoints (e.g. Herzfeld 2007, 2018; Carrier 2016), I disagree with his demotion of ethnography (Ingold 2008), and will argue how 'coming full circle' means in fact coming back to ethnography, namely to a reflexive field-based practice as defining methodology for anthropology. My own *Bildungsroman* is that of a calling from philosophy to anthropology, beginning with an anthropological interpretation of Wittgenstein's 'forms of life' (1953), continuing with the analysis of visual apprenticeship, while more recently problematizing 'citizenship' through an ethnographic comparison of economic practice. It is the 'moral education' of the field as Ingold calls it (2) and a rigorous reflection on that experience, I find, that allows one to translate field-based apprenticeship into forms of 'understanding'.[1] While Ingold critiques ethnographic understanding as 'putting things in context' and a way of 'laying them to rest, to silence them or neutralize their power' (7), I take 'anthropological reason' (Fabietti 1992, 78) as a practical-theoretical engagement with the world that is different both from the deductive-nomological and inductive-probabilistic styles of scientific explanation.[2] In other words, I take understanding

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[1]On fieldwork as 'training' to rule-following in a 'form of life', and Wittgenstein's forms of life as social ontology, see Fabietti (1992, 76–77; 73).

[2]For a philosophical introduction to the epistemological traditions of explanation and understanding, see von Wright (1971).

to be a matter of practical and historical reason rather than of logic (c.f. Hacking 1982; Hacking 2012, 599). In line with recent responses to Ingold, which recommend keeping ethnography and fieldwork in tension (Astuti 2017), I would hazard that practising anthropology *as an ethnographer* is a matter of negotiating the pendulum between participant observation – a form of apprenticeship in the field – and anthropological understanding. Ethnographic apprenticeship, though, is not any apprenticeship. It is precisely what Ingold *does not* find in ethnography, namely a way of learning while reflecting on the very process: 'a way of working, akin to a craft, which opens up the world to our perception, to what is going on there, so that we in turn can answer to it' (7).

I was taught that 'ethnography' takes different meanings in the multiple styles developed in the different regional histories of anthropology, namely fieldwork, (ethnographic) monograph, or area-study corpus of knowledge (Fabietti 1999, 16–20). Within the complex and recursive process towards anthropological knowledge, a key passage is that from ethnographic experience (fieldwork by way of participant observation) and ethnographic 'writing'. Among the manifold ways in which anthropologists record, elaborate and communicate what they believe they have understood about their own or other people's societies and cultures are in fact: descriptive note-taking, filming, comparison, modelling, translation, and the list is not exhaustive. Ethnography has come to indicate both the gathering of observations in the field and the final 'writing' practice – which is not exhausted by writing books and articles but includes visual ethnography and multiple digital and sensorial modalities. Ethnography can thus indicate both a genre of social-scientific representation (often a style of writing) and a method of field research that are intrinsically, recursively connected. By ethnography here I mean this ongoing engagement with the field that results in a form of representation and analysis of it.

Understanding is the result of (sometimes life-long) engagement with this craft. It is precisely 'to observe', 'listen', 'attend to', 'pay attention' and 'notice', in one word 'learning' or 'entering relations of correspondence' (5) which, as other anthropologists have also experienced, involve long-term engagement and may result in *mimesis*, namely linguistic and bodily mimicry and the in-depth apprenticeship of ways of being, skills, and modes of attention – yes, a labour of love (Herzfeld 2009; Lave 2011). In short, I consider 'understanding' precisely as the business of putting things in context, though I do not equate ethnography to mere description nor with classification, and I specifically consider comparison by context as an anthropological methodology based on ethnography. I will argue that comparison by way of ethnography activates the jolting ostensive power that unveils truth through juxtaposition (as others have noted that montage is a technique of anthropological significance, used in ethnographic writing as well as in other genres: Marcus 1990; Suhr and Willerslev 2013). I refuse to consider methodology per se as a 'shell' or 'armour' (Ingold 6–7) for mere data-crunching. Methods can be experiments too. I will elaborate on this in the remainder of this piece.

In what follows, first I contextualize Ingold's positioning of anthropology vis-à-vis laboratory science. Then I use my own research on skilled visions and my current project on citizenship and collective food procurement[3] to position myself vis-à-vis the

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[3]The project *Food citizens? Collective food procurement in European cities: solidarity and diversity, skills and scale* (2017–2022) examines the different types, premises and consequences of collective forms of food production, distribution and consumption in three European cities.

epistemological connections that Ingold has mapped between the sciences and art. As a result, I propose a definition of anthropology as a science of socio-cultural relations that bridges the ecology of culture and economic practice.

Field and 'data'

I share Ingold's fears that the latest obsession with 'data' has (re)introduced a crude positivism by which 'ideally [the scientist] should leave it all to his recording equipment and exit the scene, only to return to register the outcomes once the job is done' (5). The insistence and increasingly binding regulations by funding bodies and academic institutions on data storage, data management, and open data, may force scholars to eschew from making truth claims altogether, or align with a 'data-gathering' imaginary of scientific practice, as if this amounted to picking apples: the apple is out there; I pick it and it is the property of the university or research funder that has employed me to pick it. Since (part of) this is paid with public money, it is only fair that it should be placed in repositories so that the apple can be crunched by more than one processor, instead of picking it all over again. My argument is that this crude realism, steeped in neoliberal management, is real and powerful, but that it would be defeatist – and equally crude in epistemological terms – to abdicate from science altogether.

To read *From Science to Art and Back Again* I juxtapose it with Simon Schaffer's *From Physics to Anthropology and back again*, on laboratory science at the time of Boas. To this pamphlet I turn in order to negotiate Ingold's statement that 'to collect data, in science, is not to receive what is given but to extract what is not' (5). At least two among the founding figures of anthropology, Franz Boas and W.H.R. Rivers, were trained in laboratory science (1994, 7). Alfred Haddon, coming from zoology to anthropometrics, learnt interdisciplinary collaboration with folklorists and museum collectors in his first field expeditions in Cambridgeshire, precursors to the 1898 expedition to the Torres Straits. As a biologist, he would describe himself as interested in the '*evolution in arts*' (6). Schaffer concludes that 'some of the most eminent enquirers who began empirically to study indigenous peoples in the name of ethnographic science did not arrive in the field from their armchairs, nor from their verandahs, but from their laboratory benches' (8).

He explains the significance of 'laboratory life as culture' for fieldwork at the time (9), looking at the 'local techniques of culture of the workplace' (10). Schaffer's historical contextualization of the genealogy of fieldwork allows us to subvert the dominant impression, outside anthropology, that fieldwork is a soft copy of a lab experiment: anecdotal, introspective and based on personal observation rather than generalizable – basically a form of 'art', rather than of 'science' in commonsensical terms. But commonsense has a history, and Schaffer mesmerizes the reader with the twists and turns of that genealogy. He reminds us that 'laboratory regimes' were 'painstakingly constructed' – in Germany earlier than in Britain (1994, 15) but 'laboratory training was a new ritual which could never completely specify the way its performers behave' (17). He points at psychology and physiology, specifically at Hermann Helmholtz, as 'the dominant figure in the group of natural scientists who set out to make the failure of the 1848 revolution into a triumph for laboratory technique, exact measurement and politico-economic power' in Bismarck's Germany (16). Boas' own scientific training in the study of sensory perception

was steeped in this emerging tradition and its political compromises, but he did not acquiesce in it. In Schaffer's words:

> Workers such as Boas and Rivers could not and did not take their own laboratory life for granted. They were themselves involved in making the conventions of laboratory science at least as actively as they were helping develop the practices of field work. And this means we cannot and should not explain the methods of fieldworkers by appeal to a self-evident model of the way laboratory sciences proceed. (18)

Fieldwork as a model of scientific practice preceded that of the laboratory and has its own history, from the positivist team-efforts of the Torres Straits to our current manifold experimentations with multiple modalities (Collins, Durington, and Gill 2017; Westmoreland 2017) and sometimes team work again. Cultures of collecting, with their networks of correspondence and cabinets of curiosity, underlie the history of field sciences such as botany, geology, archaeology and palaeontology. What physiological psychology was adding, Schaffer shows, was precisely 'introspection' and 'trained observation', expert observers being experimental participants themselves, as in the case of W.H.R. Rivers and William Head in Cambridge (20). Far from impersonal objectivity, their ideal was a self-reflective coincidence of subject and observer.

With the industrial development of experimental devices for carrying out sensory tests (chronoscopes, kymographs, tachistoscopes), international 'communities of experts were defined by their mastery of such devices and their willingness to participate in experiments using them'. These were mostly devices for seeing, and for allowing sensorial reactions to be seen. Making them work across nationally and internationally networked communities of observers meant standardizing not only the instruments but also the manner in which they were used: it is at this point that 'observatories became subjects to factory regimes' (23). Perhaps unsurprisingly, students of psychology become the most used experimental subjects: in Schaffer's words: 'they were *subjects* in every sense: topics of disciplined enquiry, subordinates of regimes of power, and bearers of consciousness' (28). Adding comparison to standardization, sheets of questions would calibrate responses from global networks of correspondents, as famously practised by Charles Darwin with his *Questions on the Breeding of Animals* (1839), followed by the British Association for the Advancement of Science and resulting in the series *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*. Boas, working on such research protocols in 1887 would according to Stocking mark 'the beginning of the collection of data by academically trained natural scientists defining themselves as anthropologists' (31). Schaffer's revisiting of anthropological foundations reminds us that anthropology shares the origins of field science, that the expectation of standardized field observation is imbricated with emerging laboratory practices, but also that it has been *about observation* since its origins.

Far from being a 'data-processing exercise' (Ingold 5), ethnographic practice resists the gift-erasing data management that is dominant in the natural sciences, and eagerly appropriated in the social sciences. Both because the 'data' produced in ethnography are 'co-produced' with research participants (Pels et al. 2018), and because anthropologists infuse intellectual labour in their ethnography, ethnographic 'data' are precisely *not* 'bits broken off from the currents of life, from their ebbs and flows, and from their mutual entailments' to then be 'transferred to a databank or storage facility for safe-keeping' (5). We should not even call them 'data'. Ingold describes anthropology as 'positively

squishy' and evocative of mycology, another 'soft science'. Consider ethnographic 'data' and gourmet mushrooms. Tsing (2013) explains how, to turn the highly personal value of collected mushroom into commodities, the 'gift' must be taken out first. Subsequent phases of sorting mushrooms remove them from their collectors and the social relations that connects them. This not only alienates mushrooms but allows capitalism to cash the added value of those original relations of skill and gift: 'capitalism always requires a non-capitalist social relation to accomplish its goal' (2013, 37). Paralleling ethnographic 'data' and Matsutake mushrooms, relentless data packaging takes the anthropologist out while seizing the gift of ethnography – in principle, to pass it on to the next data 'sorter'. Fortunately, other people's fieldnotes are useless precisely because they are 'raw', 'unprocessed'. But we should see the intent for what it is: a theft of (intellectual) surplus, a (permanent) suspension of the traditional rights of scholars, namely intellectual property, and a concurrent transformation of ongoing ethnographic conversations into a collecting practice. Personal engagement, fuzzy semantics, reciprocal gratitude and curiosity, and the sometimes lifelong relations that ensue, is ethnographic surplus, both in the sense that is appropriated and 'packaged away' *and* in the sense of its redundancy. Left shriveling on the market floor is our passion: the craft of being affected and persuaded, the gift of *learning*.

Ingold's preferred metaphor for the anthropological endeavour is one of resonance and correspondence – mine is that of apprenticeship. I would describe ethnography as a form of cultural apprenticeship, conducive to anthropology as an art of understanding. One must *do* ethnography in order to learn this art. For ethnography, the same can be said as what Marcel Mauss famously defined as technique: it is 'an action which is effective and traditional. There is no technique and no transmission in the absence of tradition' (1934). It a craft that is taught *traditionally* namely by apprenticeship to a master – with the relevant fuzziness, ambivalence and power dialectic that we find in master-apprentice relationships in an artisan's workshop (Herzfeld 2007). I therefore disagree with Ingold when he says that ethnography is a simple description of the world, 'wrapping it up' (7). As the expert practice of investigating and critiquing social, political and economic relations, anthropology builds upon ethnography as a trained apprenticeship of cultures.

Skill and the ecology of culture

When we translated Tim Ingold's work into Italian, Francesco Ronzon and I chose five essays, some of which were about to be published in his *The Perception of the Landscape. Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. We proposed the Italian equivalent of 'Acting and Dwelling. Practices, Environments and Anthropologies' as a title. The publisher preferred *Ecology of Culture*. At first it seemed to betray Ingold's reflection. However, it anticipated what I ultimately take from it, namely a definition of anthropology as a science of socio-cultural relations that bridge environment and human practice.[4] An ecology of culture is a complex environment within which we learn to participate and belong, not only culturally and socially but also sensorially. Specific modes of attention, mediated by both senses and cultural models, are acquired within a material environment that is dotted with significant

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[4] These considerations were presented more extensively in my Inaugural lecture at Leiden University, *Ecology of Vision and Economy of Citizenship* on 30th October 2017.

templates as well as socially performed by peers and mentors. What we recognize as familiar and proper is learned and inculcated through *enskillment* (Ingold 2000, 36–37, 357), namely an apprenticeship of the senses and of human relations. An *ecology* of culture is thus a complex environment within which we have learnt to orient ourselves (Grasseni and Ronzon 2004). For example, in my ethnography with cow breeders in the Alps of northern Italy (Grasseni 2009), I concluded that one such specific mode of attention was dairy farmers' 'skilled vision' (Grasseni 2007). Their 'cow talk' contained important aesthetic and moral judgements, made from the point of view of being both skilled farmers and convinced 'breed improvers', using progeny breeding to make every new generation of heifers produce more milk. The good of their work was visible to them and to their fellow breeders in the 'beauty' of their animals. Breed inspectors, working farmers and cattle-fair judges visualized and idealized the animal body in terms of its 'functional' beauty. 'Traits' that stand for good milking and reproduction potential are standardized and disseminated internationally, but also incorporated in everyday artefacts such as plastic toys and trophies. These items populate everyday conversation and play, public events and domestic interiors, and thus confirm a certain way of viewing certain types of animals as 'good looking'. Further research and conversations with artisans and scientists show, similarly, that specific working practices are visible only to the skilled eye, and are understood as 'beautiful' and 'moral' within a particular group. In other words, skilled practitioners learn to see and appreciate value in the aesthetics of their final product (Hankins 2017).

The *skilled visions* approach (Grasseni 2007) relies on the concept of 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991). Belonging to a community means being granted the right to develop skills. In the case of the farmers' visual competence, this is embodied and tacit,[5] but also shared across the community. Skilled visions are not innocent: they always incorporate assumptions and criteria of preference. It is this presumed body of knowledge that allows the viewer to interpret a range of cues within a process of *recognition*. This body of presumed knowledge may well consist of cultural stereotypes, racism, sexism, or exploitative views on nature and animals. Skilled visions are ways of looking and as such are per se invisible. It takes the skilled looks of peers to understand the significance of what is offered to the eyes. For example, progeny breeders look for and see patterns and traits that they recognize from genealogy, computerized models and photographs of cattle fair winners in professional magazines. Their skilled vision is the result of a complex relationship between attention, habit, representation, and a broad understanding of history and context. Fellow practitioners *also* see the same animal as beautiful because they recognize this relationship and agree with the decisions and actions taken to arrive to this particular cow shape. *Vice versa*, contesting practitioners who do not agree with progeny breeding and the intensification of milk production, may brand the same animal not as 'queen of the fair' but as an 'anorexic pin-up'. The language highlights the conflicting views of intensive agriculture and sustainable farming. Ethics is *seen* – literally – in the beauty of the animal.

Skilled vision is a form of cultural and sensorial apprenticeship that enables the shared understanding and appreciation of (certain types of) 'beauty' and 'propriety' *within a circle of experts*. Through the enforcement of material and social cues, it sustains and reproduces specific acts of looking and understanding, which are at once aesthetic, moral, functional

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[5] On tacit knowledge, see Polanyi (1966) and Collins (1974).

and normative. These are incorporated in working practices and standards, in metrics and evaluations. This ecology of vision is not only a matter of individual *enskillment* but also of social relations and of hegemony: it is moral because it informs the social circle of a community of practice, it builds status and confirms identities. Its aesthetics shapes routines of belonging that are as ambivalent and elusive as they are self-evident to its members. Contesting it means proposing an alternative way of 'good looking' (see Stafford 1996), alternative models and social relations where evidence can be found of 'good work' because the very notion of (animal) beauty is profoundly rooted in context and history. Beauty is a very local form of agreement on how the world should be. In the next step, I apply this realization to broader discussions on methodology, and I propose comparison by context as an anthropological methodology based on ethnography.

Comparing by context

Not only beauty, but policy itself is measured with contingent and locally specific standards. Their own validity and efficacy is implicitly local (Jasanoff 2005, 27). Furthermore, the very notions of citizenship are profoundly rooted in regional and national histories. I will get back to this. For now I wish to spell out how context-based juxtaposition is an epistemic strategy to contrast and compare the analytical observations of specific practices across diverse contexts, which vary for some fundamental aspects while hosting similar processes, and thus shape those very processes accordingly. For example political scientist Patrizia Messina has used an innovative theoretical and empirical approach to the comparative study of policies for local development in two Italian regions, Veneto and Emilia Romagna, both characterized by the diffusion of small and medium enterprises, but each grounded in a long cultural and political history of Catholic and socialist predominance respectively. Messina shows how these different cultural contexts produce incommensurable styles of governance and relevant networks of institutional and associative support and alliance. Each region is in effect a complex system requiring 'an ecological approach to the analysis of local political systems' (2006) and a comparative reading of these two diverse modes of regulating local development (2012, 15). This comparison is precisely *not* a question of measuring commensurable data, but rather 'a way of shedding light on the one hand on the most significant differences emerging from comparison and, on the other, on the processes of persistence and change of two modes of regulation' (2012, 15). While Messina is interested in a systemic approach to modes of political regulation, what she uses is an anthropological style of comparison, avoiding – as Evans-Pritchard (1951) had also recommended – to 'compare only or predominantly by similarity rather than by difference' (2012, 14).

The goal of this comparison is not empirical, but conceptual. Inspired by Gregory Bateson, Messina advocates practising an 'ecology of mind', which she interprets as dialogic reasoning, namely 'the capacity to learn from the relations among concepts, their genesis and development' (2012, 12). While comparison must happen among commensurable objects, here it does not serve the purpose of measuring traits in equal objects placed in different environments, but rather to bring into relief the difference among the contexts that shape such objects. In the specific case: it was not of use to try and measure the different degree of 'social capital' or of 'trust in institutions' that citizens and entrepreneurs possess, in two neighbouring Italian regions. It is precisely the

diverse fashioning of the starting definition (in her case: 'political regulation of local development') in two empirical contexts, investigated through longitudinal observation and documentary analysis, that allows one to recursively revisit the notion we began with, and conclude that there are diverse *modes* of political regulation of local development. This would not have been possible by simply defining indicators and then measuring them in the two sites. In other words: 'you do not "see a difference" – a difference is what makes you see' (Viveiros de Castro 2012, 77).

The anthropological ambition of this particular example from political science, which consciously appropriates the ethnographic notion of 'thick description' as method, is to derive a context-sensitive understanding of what Messina calls 'cultural matrix of modes of development' through a methodology of comparison *by context*, or *by difference.* While her focus lies on practices and 'processes of institutionalization of meaning', resulting in different 'systems of meaning' and value, and corresponding 'systems of concrete action' (2012, 14–15, quoting Crozier and Friedberg 1978), I argue that the same feedback circle (from a starting object of inquiry, to its comparison by context, to a revision of the beginning premises in the light of empirical inquiry) is a real conceptual movement that can be applied to other objects of inquiry, resulting in a more profound understanding – not so much of a well-defined object, but rather of the (history of the) premises that brought us to define that object of inquiry in the first place. In other words, the ambition of anthropology can be recalibrating normative definitions to context-salient histories and distinctive practices. Even though it registers differences and regularities, comparison by context does not evaluate or measure; nor does it propose 'best practices'. Rather, it brings difference into relief, not just to describe it, but to allow a better understanding of how and why the social practices under scrutiny have become and remain relevant, or are by converse being questioned.

Economies and citizenship

Back to my own *Bildungsroman,* from the aesthetics of dairy farming to the politics of cheese denominations and finally to the reinvention of short food chains, I have gained insight in multiple and ambivalent interpretations of apparently self-evident principles among diverse circles of experts, for example that of 'sustainability' (see Krause and Sharma 2012) or of 'solidarity' (Grasseni 2013). Which better place than food chains to find evidence of ecologic and relational balance gone astray: water scarcity on the one hand and floods on the other, reduced soil fertility coupled with increasing desertification due to climate change. There is increasing awareness that food production has been actively overlooked or imagined as fundamentally benign, while more and more documentary dissemination and scientific evidence point to the fact that, for example, the cattle and dairy industry is one of the major culprits of climate change. Shocking evidence from the breeding industry puts the finger on the sore spot of animal welfare, while recent ethnography denounces the multiple layers at which CAFOS (*concentrated animal feeding operations*) are a fair if putrid representation of our so-called globalized economy: not only are the animals mistreated but the workers themselves – exposed to physical and emotional overload, kept in compounds in and outside the working environment, often in conditions of slavery, easily blackmailed for example because of their immigrant status, segregated according to their ethnicity and languages, so that no information easily travels across departments (Blanchette 2015).

My current research on 'food citizens' focuses on collective food procurement to understand citizenship through economic practice in Europe. By 'collective food procurement' I mean a wide range of people's participation in the production and distribution of the food they consume, at multiple levels. We can categorize three types of networks: those directly active in urban foraging and food production (for example in community gardens), those engaged in setting up short chains, whereby producer and consumer come directly into contact, and those active in local governance (for example in food policy councils). These multiple forms of collective food procurement have not yet been comparatively analysed in Europe in terms of their broader implications for citizenship. *Collective* food procurement adds the sociocultural dimensions of reflexivity and contestation to the elusively simple act of food provisioning, beyond the minimal goal of food safety and food security. Through food engagements, Europeans use and transform their 'common-sense knowledge of the link between taste, place and quality' (Trubek 2009, 211). Against the 'ontonormal' assumption that 'citizen-consumers' act individually in the market (Mol 2009), collective food procurement can constitute a space of 'transgression' (Goodman and Sage 2014) and of 'counter-epistemologies' (Grasseni 2013). Citizens can re-signify producer-consumer relations, which feed back into innovative social practice. Food procurement networks can be read as 'citizenship laboratories' (Forno, Grasseni, and Signori 2015), where people educate themselves about sustainability, frugality, or global justice, but also learn to exercise their democratic capacities through situated deliberation and practice. In this sense, it can enable forms of 'lifestyle politics' (De Moor 2016) through participation in emerging 'civic food networks' (Renting, Schermer, and Rossi 2012), relying on consumers' practices to foster active citizenship (Dubuisson-Quellier, Lamine, and Le Velly 2011). Livelihoods are necessarily *economic* arrangements, namely ways of organizing life in such a way that it can reproduce itself (Narotzky and Besnier 2014), and food procurement is a form of versatile economic practice that lends itself to social experimentation. Consequently, styles of food procurement embed diverse interpretations and practices of sustainability and of solidarity. We investigate how networks of people engage with sustainability issues in practical terms and through food: which skills do they acquire or lack? How do they operate across and within diverse communities? Do they scale 'up' or 'out', and if so, how?

Collective food procurement networks are embedded in local 'civic epistemologies': different traditions of mutuality, of deference to authority rather than engrained scepticism, or of political reasoning (Jasanoff 2005, 29–32). Cultures of governance and styles of participation are profoundly embedded in social histories and structures at once enabling and constraining economic and political action (Granovetter 1985). Collective food procurement may enhance understandings of citizenship, but also confirm hegemonic fault lines along sociocultural differences. This adds a cultural, *ambivalent* dimension to the civil, political and social dimensions of citizenship (Geschiere 2009 Hurenkamp, Tonkens, and Duyvendak 2012;). This includes the consensual and sometimes hegemonic character of cultural belonging, of political values, of economic and institutional forms of association – forms of community self-organization that require social integration, shared values, and respected practices. I follow those anthropologists who adopt 'an expansive notion of citizenship' (Lazar and Nuijten 2013, 4) beyond formal membership of a nation state, looking at substantive forms of access to, and participation in decision making over resources (De Koning, Jaffe, and Koster 2015).

The challenge is to study if and how collective styles of procurement articulate and are in turn co-produced by styles of participation. This is an important challenge if we consider how transitions to sustainable lifestyles are being imagined as a technology fix, with little notice paid to the diversity of cultures of procurement, and of participation, *even within* Europe. Far from being 'a methodological armoury', or 'a shield to protect the researcher from direct sensory contact with materials' (Ingold 5), here a comparative framework is precisely a way to acknowledge the impossibility of systematically parsing the 'bundles of lines' and of relations that collective food procurement networks weave within and across their societies. Indeed, in this field investigation 'the laboratory is nothing less than the world we live in, and from which there is no escape' (Ingold 5).

The sociocultural dimensions of solidarity, diversity, skill and scale are at the heart of my inquiry into food citizenship, linking both the conceptual and the methodological aspect of the project. Here, comparison is driven by the Ingoldian sense of compassion as discussed above: far from being, in my opinion, 'the very opposite of methodology', comparative ethnography is precisely 'a crucible of mutual involvement' (6), embracing the fact that understanding is not a purely intellectual endeavour but a sensory and dialogic one – one that requires presence. 'Putting in context' does not mean boxing up or classifying, but appreciating connections, genealogies, borrowings, mistranslations, competitive emulation, ambivalent dialectics, and power games. Understanding this is, yes, 'putting things in context', which does not mean 'laying them to rest', but on the contrary activating our cultural understandings of these dimensions in practice: for example what does 'solidarity' mean in diverse contexts and histories such as those of Poland, Italy, and the Netherlands? Instead of giving a *definition* of solidarity, ethnography contrasts and compares cultural understandings of it. By doing so, it mobilizes them as well as situates them.

The idea behind multi-level comparison in post-industrial cities, considering the sociocultural dimensions of solidarity, diversity, skill and scale of action, is to challenge glossy imaginaries of the European urbanite, to scout a kaleidoscopic and diverse array of ways to procure, share and consume food together, on the ground so to speak. Sustainability, in particular, takes on different meanings and leads to specific practices tied to local concerns: for example those of ageing, postindustrial poverty, gentrification, immigration and out-migration. Various, discordant forms of 'new' and 'sharing' economy are transforming both economic contestation *and* business models, grassroots initiatives *and* policy. Collective food procurement networks do the discursive and practical work of imagining change, producing value, and articulate models of participation – with, but not only, important aspects of digitalization. Old and new ecologies of belonging interact and coexist with political and economic infrastructures and may well (re)produce forms of exclusion and hegemony. For instance, survey data about Italy's Solidarity Purchase Groups (more than 7000 families in Lombardy alone) tell us that they are networks of mostly highly educated white middle-age women (Forno, Grasseni, and Signori 2015). Collective food procurement may thus enable new forms of citizenship, but in the same breath confirm degrees of segregation between classes, faiths, ages or ethnic groups. While largely associated with relations of 'care' (Kneafsey et al. 2008), place-based foods may underscore gender-conservative agendas, political localism, or be oblivious to social inclusion. Exclusive solidarity (Holmes 2000) feeds on self-reliance and can and does support neoliberal styles of governance (Muehlebach 2012): in this respect, food procurement and citizenship share important cultural ambivalences.

How then does an ecological approach to skill and culture help us understand collective food procurement *comparatively* as a practice of citizenship? The appreciation of what is proper and adequate cannot be transferred from one context to another because objects and processes are evaluated by different criteria and affected by the resources available, local histories and discourse. However, within each community of practice, practitioners do draw moral and economic conclusions about their own practice (and of others). Comparing *by context*, we can juxtapose narratives across locations and levels of action (for example: foraging, short food chains, and food governance). Using digital media adds the capacity to navigate multiple types of materials (texts, photographs, maps, audio, footage). Specific and immersive field trajectories can be shared and contrasted. How do people interpret and articulate 'solidarity' or 'diversity'? How are multiple and even contradictory narratives about 'reskilling' or 'scaling up' appropriated across contexts? Which discourses and practices of citizenship do these processes deliver, underscore, and shape? It is important to analyse who is enrolled and affected by these processes: who is included and who is excluded, how power relations and stereotypes are transformed, co-opted, or reinstated through diverse styles of collective food procurement. As I argue in the conclusion, navigating multiple narratives enriches our conceptual understanding of citizenship as a situated and diverse process.

Conclusion: navigating ethnography

Comparing by context through ethnography, namely comparing by thick descriptions of similar processes in different contexts, is like navigating multiple narratives of as many forms of life. Holding up to oneselves the *possibility* of multiple viewpoints reminds us that life can be – and *is,* elsewhere or for others – otherwise. Arriving at this anthropological understanding by way of ethnography is precisely the opposite than contemplating this possibility by mere conjecture. Contrary to what some popularizers accuse us of, anthropology is not locked up in an ivory tower. Anthropology is not about thought experiments. That is thanks to the fact that ethnography is about, and ultimately *is*, life. What anthropology holds up to neoliberal scientism, though, is a cracked mirror. Multiple and conflicting narratives confound. They are not welcome in policy briefs. To say that ultimately, every ethnography is different and that if an anthropologist rather than another writes it makes a different story detracts from simplistic truth-claims (unless we take ethnography to be the mere 'description' of reality that Ingold accuses it of being).

Anthropologists rarely speak commonsense. They question it. Not because they have spent too much time in an ivory tower, but because they have left it. The ivory tower is not academia. It is the common sense of gathering 'data' and processing them as if they were apples. Anthropologists operate as ethnographers starting from the premise that social life is a situated practice and a process of cultural production. Fieldwork as a form of apprenticeship bring about transformation of oneselves first, of one's society as a result of communicating anthropological knowledge and bringing it to bear against the banality of common sense.

Modelling ethnographic encounters as intersecting serendipitous paths means building on the recognition that 'methods are practices, and practices are always located' (Mol 2013). Methodology is consequently a space of reflection, research questions taking shape around actual encounters and their succession, acknowledging that imagination shapes

social formations, which is why we look at 'the formative impact of a shared aesthetics through which subjects are shaped by tuning their senses, inducing experiences, moulding their bodies, and making sense' (Meyer 2009, 7). Indeed social structure is a texture of social relations, as Ingold underlines in his reading of Radcliffe-Brown (Ingold 2008). Imagine then *following* each thread, for at least part of its winding path, criss-crossing the encounters with other actors. The novel contribution of what I have called digital visual engagements (Grasseni and Walter 2014) is to co-produce immersive participatory spaces in which we appreciate the actors' positionality within possible (but not infinite) trajectories. The material, cultural and political dimensions of an anthropological object – for example in my case collective food procurement networks – are revealed as co-constituted by the very encounters and nodes that we can map and locate with hindsight, thanks to ethnography and to its comparative elaboration in teamwork. When both actors and observers invoke co-production, the very meaning of 'participant observation' – anthropologists' flagship method – is placed in generative tension, between fieldwork and ethnography.

The goal of anthropology is not classifying or describing what is similar but explaining and understanding difference. Citizens don't need to live in blind resonance with their own implicit images and narratives of value. They *can* appreciate the multiplicity of such images and narratives, react to them, be affected, and learn to change them. The main goal of comparing by context is to appreciate the difference of other people's practices and values, and to recognize the fact that life can be *otherwise* than our own. In order to do so, complex sociocultural systems must be taken into consideration as economic, historical, material, perceptual, and political wholes. With the skilled visions approach, I proposed to appreciate that what we see is literally in-formed, apprenticed and disciplined (Grasseni 2018). Similarly, an 'ecology of culture' approach consists in studying how our being active participants in forms of life is informed by styles of conduct that are considered proper, cultural preferences and shared perceptions that make the substance of the institutionalization of meaning. I made the example of collective food procurement in European cities, my current object of investigation. Comparing them by context, we unpack the diverse economic subjectivities, moral reasoning, and social premises that underlie them, bringing to the fore how differently they work *within* and *across* Europe. By investigating their transformative skills, and by mapping the porous borders of their networks at different scales of action, we get to the core of *how* practices and discourses of solidarity and citizenship are diversely produced, and *how* they at once constrain and enable political imagination. In this case, comparison helps locating diverse subjectivities and political imaginaries in new economic practices. At multiple levels and in different locations, economic practice forges (certain models of) citizenship, beyond the simplistic assumptions of consumers' 'smart' or healthy 'choices', and regardless of the one-size-fits-all log(isti)cs of 'food systems'.

Anthropology can contribute ethnographic research and comparison by context to understand and intervene in complex and ambivalent debates on sustainability, diversity and citizenship. Unpacking the 'complementarity between economic and social anthropology' (Ingold 10) means precisely making a truth-claim – one that is enabled by engaging with the world and those who inhabit it by means of prolonged and reflexive observation, and realized by cultivating a 'dialogic reasoning' (Fabietti 1992). To quote the collective definition of anthropology that we gave at the Leiden Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology in May 2017, 'the strength of an

anthropological approach consists in this capacity to connect different scales of the social, namely to keep an eye for the detail while connecting it to the big picture' (Grasseni, Maeckelbergh, and Pels 2017, 3). The Leiden school does emphasize ethnography *as methodology*, namely a continuous and dynamic reflection on methods, and on fieldwork in particular, combining ethnographic and longitudinal observation with other methods (whether quantitative, archival or digital).

> Fieldwork allows the researcher to investigate a sociocultural, political, or ecological process over time and in exceptional detail. This allows researchers to identify not only how institutions and societies are supposed to function, but also how and why they often diverge from their ideal course. (Grasseni, Maeckelbergh, and Pels 2017, 3; see Pels 2015)

This is particularly relevant when anthropologists address practices of *social resilience* vis-à-vis the *global vulnerabilities* that their research participants (and themselves) are faced with in their everyday life: precarious working conditions, the hegemony of technological fixes as a dominant discourse to 'manage' sustainability or diversity, *and* an engrained intolerance of critical thinking. These vulnerabilities articulate the topical connection between ecology, economy and politics.

In sum, I agree with Ingold that 'we anthropologists are predisposed, therefore, to what could be called a relational rather than a populational way of thinking, to a view of the world more topological than statistical' (4). But far from being in the business of 'wrapping things up', of 'silencing and neutralising', and of 'closure' (7) ethnography is and remains the vault key of anthropological understanding. Anthropological knowledge devoid of ethnography is precisely one that elides the conditions of its production, risking resulting in knowledge 'produced by modellers who had never observed or handled anything that lived or grew upon this earth' (4).

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Notes on contributor

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