Food systems, transformation, and politics: Examining nexus relations to advance a new research agenda

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Abstract

This paper argues agri-food scholars need to engage more critically with conceptualisations of food systems and politics of transformation, given current debates about food system sustainability, climate change, planetary boundaries, resilience and well-being, alongside new politics, social movements and forms of protest that disrupt established ways of deliberating, agreeing and enacting social change. As food systems exceed established 'thresholds', transformative change is needed. However, de- and re-politicisation, oscillating from post-political to new modes of hyper-politics, challenge not only food system knowledge production, but also the socio-material actions needed to enact food system transformation pathways at scale. Against this context, the paper summarises the contribution the Special Section makes to food system transformation politics, highlighting a 'politics of knowledge', 'politics of transformation' and 'politics of feeling' nexus of relations. We conclude by calling for further research on food-politics relations given their role in determining whether we achieve or not the food system changes necessary for the health of people and the planet.

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Introduction

Calls to radically transform food systems are not new, but over the last decade or so, agreement has solidified into at least a 'fractured consensus' (Maye & Kirwan, 2013)—that we need to change how we produce, process, consume, and govern food systems, even if exactly how to do this is still debated (FAO, 2025; HLPE, 2025; Rockström et al., 2025). One key driver informing this need for change is the impact of several increasingly intersecting crises (Holloway et al., 2025; Sage, 2022), from notable 'acute' system shocks (e.g., the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine wars, new tariff wars) to more persistent systemic 'chronic' stresses (e.g., climate change, the obesity crisis, biodiversity loss).

Crisis in food systems is also not new (Ericksen et al., 2009), but the intensification and intersection of issues is (Brunori et al., 2020). A growing body of scientific evidence is amassing to crystallise and validate the urgency for change, while also recognising likely contestations. The EAT-Lancet Commission (Rockström et al., 2025), for instance, has published the latest comprehensive analysis of global food system transformation, presenting clear and comprehensive evidence that food is the single largest cause of planetary boundary transgressions and strongly reasserting that we need to transform what we eat (less meat and more plant-based diets). Crucially, it recognises a need to enact necessary food system changes through a just transition framework, with a particular focus on food governance and policy to address distributional impacts. Recommendations include, for example, the strategic sequencing of policies for healthy diets, sustainable production, and social justice; the redesign of finance mechanisms and incentives; and greater participatory governance for decision-making. This matters because it recognises that food system transformation based on science and consumer choice strategies will not be sufficient, given underlying power relations and equity issues.

Transformative changes to our food systems therefore necessitate engagement with 'the political', given underlying political economy, power, and accountability dynamics (Arnold et al., 2022; Béné et al., 2019), as well as the need to capture social attitudes and values around different transformation pathways (Chinaglia & Duncan, 2025, this issue). However, relations between food systems, as the object of change (transformation), and the political, are highly contested, sparking debate about what food systems are for (food and nutrition security notwithstanding) and how best to transform (or even decelerate) them to protect planetary boundaries, support nature recovery, improve diets, and maintain farmer and rural livelihoods. The presence of multiple crises, when added to this mix, also questions how resilient food systems should be shaped. This can amplify difference and disagreement. Crises thus become drivers and mechanisms that enhance conflict and fracture agreement on transformation pathways.

We can already observe how these different demands on food systems are creating conflicts and challenging established political ideologies. The farmer protests in India in 2020–21, for example, were successful in reversing a market-friendly (neoliberal) policy. We have also seen farmer protests over proposed nitrogen emission cuts in several European countries (see Crivits et al., 2025, this issue), which have increased tensions between farmer groups and environmentalists over food production and rewilding. We have also witnessed rural-urban and increasingly intra-rural conflicts regarding land use and energy changes for net-zero ambitions (Wang et al., 2023). Mangnus and Candel's (2025) analysis of the European Farm to Fork strategy also usefully reveals the political (un)making of food policy, with food framed as a security issue to support agricultural output over more systemic changes that would support sustainable food futures.

These food system transformation debates and conflicts are intensely political, in that they generate 'antagonisms' (Wenman, 2013) because of the values and interests at stake. Thus, alongside a fractured consensus on the need to change our food systems, and a growing scientific evidence base explaining why this is essential for the health of people and planet, conflict and counter-politics under polycrisis can filter through to disrupt political action for change and polarise social groups. This reflects and intersects with political disruption in wider society and 'the great recoil' (Gerbaudo, 2021) from neoliberal hegemony to anti-globalist populism. We see, for example, increased national securitisation discourses, competitiveness, and populism, as well as

political tactics to maintain the status quo of incumbent actors. Politics plays out through physical arenas as well as on digital social media, where contrasts and emotions may be amplified (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). For political theory, this means the post-political critique of consensus politics—as the 'scandal of democracy' (Swyngedouw, 2009, p. 615) that depoliticised decision-making and suppressed contestation and antagonism in deliberation (Mouffe, 2005, 2013)—now sits alongside a 'post-truth' order defined by Trumpism, nationalism, and 'hyper-politics' (Jäger, 2024), where everything is politicised but not institutionalised.

Taking stock of these debates, and with the support of the papers in this Special Section, we observe a critical shift from a 'consensus framework'—based on Agenda 2030 and the Paris Agreement on climate change—to a 'post-truth' phase. The consensus phase unfolded through the elaboration of science-policy interfaces, multi-stakeholder participation, and official endorsement in international institutions. Despite overlooking underlying conflicts over power, justice, and distribution, this phase proposed clear transformation targets to the international community. In the 'post-truth' phase, a shared understanding of reality is undermined by alternative narratives strongly supported by media and political parties, even in matters where there is a significant consensus within the scientific world, such as climate change and biodiversity degradation. The current moment can be seen as a reaction to this fractured (now broken) consensus, wherein political polarisation undermines attempts to establish a shared ethical and cognitive mandate as the necessary condition for transformation by democratic means (see also Canfield et al., 2021a).

The political in this context is not only critical to collectively identify and agree upon pathways for change in food systems, but it can also present major obstacles to change. The challenge, then, is how to manage conflict within a democratic frame. Mouffe (2013), for instance, proposes an agonistic democratic frame, resulting in a post-political outcome. Researching what we term here emergent 'food-politics' as nexus relations is another means to address conflictual pluralism and signifies a critical juncture and future priority in studies of food system transformation. These processes will significantly determine whether it will be possible to achieve the changes necessary to maintain a healthy food system and a healthy planet.

We use the remainder of this introductory paper to call for a greater focus in agri-food research on the relationship between food system transformation and the political. This requires critical engagement with research in political studies and related disciplines to examine politicisation, post-politics, and hyper-politicisation, positioned alongside more critical and precise analysis of terms and concepts that have become increasingly popular but 'fuzzy' (Markusen, 1999) in food studies (notably 'food system' and 'transformation'). The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. First, we give a brief general overview of the Special Section and the way it was conceived, organised, and the papers that were selected. Second, we use the papers from the Special Section to develop and introduce three cross-cutting themes that emerge from the analysis presented in the main articles. We term these 'politics of knowledge', 'politics of transformation', and 'politics of feeling', revealing at each step what we regard as critical insights and future priorities for analysis on the intersection between food system transformation and politics. In the final part, we set out suggested themes for a future research agenda.

Food system transformation and politics: Special section overview

This Special Section was conceived as an opportunity to extend agri-food scholarship on the politics of responsibility and accountability (Arnold et al., 2022; Canfield et al., 2021b) by engaging more directly with ideas from depoliticisation (Mouffe, 2013; Swyngedouw, 2009) and repoliticisation (Gerbaudo, 2021; Jäger, 2024). The post-political and hyper-political signify an interesting and active provocation to the agri-food studies community. Take the post-political critique of consensus forms of statecraft, for example, and contrast this with the popularity of multistakeholder-type models in food system governance. In essence, can we use post-political and hyper-political theory to prompt new ideas and ways of engaging with politics in agri-food? This sits alongside the emerging sense of polycrisis and the increasing mobilisation and popularity of

terms and concepts related to food system transformation, which we assert need greater scrutiny to avoid hollowing them out.

Taken together, and set against intersecting emergent crises, we have a context that raises fundamental questions about how we understand food systems, warranting critical reflections, including political economy questions about responsibility, accountability, and equality. The polycrisis raises questions, for example, about which values or principles are most important in identifying pathways for transforming food systems, and the interplay between science and policy in democratic contexts to enact transformative potential. This is likely to require new language, methods, and research tools to deliberate food futures for citizens and the planet. Guided by these insights and underscored by the assertion that we needed to encourage more critical thinking about food system transformation and politics, the authors co-convened a highly successful and well-supported working group at the European Society for Rural Sociology (ESRS) conference in Rennes in July 2023. This provided the foundation for the Special Section. We have included several papers from that original meeting, as well as other key contributions to further extend the scope, geographical diversity, and thematic fit. The final Special Section comprises eight research papers in total. Each engages critically with the question of food system transformation and politics, particularly how we conceptualise and study food systems as an object of knowledge production and transformation and as a political project that influences visioning and social action. The papers draw on recently completed or on-going research projects related to food systems and include case material from Belgium, Brazil, France, Italy, The Netherlands, Switzerland, and the UK, as well as wider links with international systems.

Each paper observes food systems in a state of permacrisis and emergent political resistances to desired transformation goals. Nevertheless, the food system concept and emergent politics of transformation inevitably configure differently in different places. Individual papers show this context specificity, which is important. Here, though, we focus on the cross-cutting insights the papers collectively provide in terms of conceptual and methodological re-assessment of food systems and de- and re-politicisation. Three themes emerge that inform future research, related firstly to what we mean by the food system concept (politics of knowledge), then what transformation of food systems means, and the innovative practices and mechanisms needed to accommodate underlying changes (politics of transformation). This is linked to a final topic regarding the de- and re-politicisation of food systems and the increasing influence of emotion and affective polarisation in politics, including forms of protest (politics of feeling). We elaborate each of these themes below, linking clusters of papers and cases that speak directly to each theme and the relationship between them.

Food-politics I: Food system concept mobilisation and the politics of knowledge

This first theme relates to the food system as an analytical tool, concerning how the scientific community mobilises and theorises the concept and the implications of this for transformation, both in terms of how we research and communicate messages and design interventions for change. In the Special Section, three papers (Frick et al., 2025; Hasnain & Hill, 2025; Maye et al., 2025) speak directly to this first food-politics nexus, signifying what we call 'the politics of knowledge'. This is partly about recognising how food system models and frameworks are products of knowledge and mental constructs, but crucially also that, given increasing attention to the concept in food policy and practice, these relations have direct political implications in how we describe, organise, and communicate food-society changes. To be clear, we do not seek to critique or dispute the underlying value and contribution of the food system concept *per se*. All papers in the Special Section evidence the concept's inherent usefulness and value as an analytical tool. Here we implore instead a transformation in the research community and call on researchers to improve how the term is used in the food system literature and beyond. The critical point is to recognise terminology and the mobilisation of concepts as processes that are inherently political, with political imperatives.

Maye et al.'s (2025) paper, for example, recognises not only the prominence but the resurgence of the food system concept in agri-food studies literature in recent years, tracking uptake from 1987–2024. The paper

takes a deep-dive into two cases—a food system transformation case (process-based) and a food system urban case (place-based)—as well as summarising key features of food system thinking, extracted from key papers that explain what this approach involves and entails. Whilst observing general interest in the concept, connected to growing concern to address interlocking crises, the analysis reveals bipolarisation via two different styles of mobilisation: one which is more heuristic (the concept is essentially an organisational device) and the other which is systemic (applying characteristics associated with systems thinking). For most papers, the heuristic application is by far the most dominant, indicating much less systems thinking than one might expect. This is not necessarily a failure, but more explicit recognition of how the concept is employed is called for (cf. Brock, 2023), recognising critical issues for the future training of food system thinkers.

Hasnain and Hill (2025) build on these points, making a case for greater clarity of terminology, particularly for core concepts central to food system application, namely: 'drivers', 'outcomes', and 'feedbacks'. The field, they note, is relatively under-theorised, and the consequence of not having greater clarity is an inconsistent, ambiguous application of the food system approach. This is problematic because food system frameworks are not neutral representations of reality; they are inherently political, inherently subjective, and relatively simplistic, which means interpretations should be approached with caution, or at least with an awareness of limitations and the possibility for bias, requiring supplementation through additional forms of knowledge and perspective. Applying the concept requires, then, a reflexive approach and a rejection of a realist ontology. For Hasnain and Hill, clarifying how food concept terms are understood and applied is a critical step in this knowledge politics, alongside interdisciplinary collaboration, to advance how we design food systems and organise and implement transformational actions.

Frick et al. (2025) supplement this argument through an analysis of transformation pathways in agri-food. In a novel application, they show how the tacit knowledge of 11 researchers in an EU project shapes their understandings of socio-ecological transformation. The research subjects have expertise spanning 101 European transformation initiatives, covering different scales, approaches, and objectives. Using a repertory grid methodology, they assess respondents personal meanings of different pathways and observe convergences and divergences in the dataset. Researchers agree and converge, for example, on the need for stakeholder inclusion, autonomy, the scope of ambitions, and the link with farming practices when describing transformation potential. However, stakeholder personal constructs were in divergence regarding issues like market orientation and what makes initiatives transformative. This underscores a need to reflect on how stakeholder inputs to design agri-food transformation processes take place.

Food-politics II: Food system change and the politics of transformation

Visions for a sustainable food future, then, are political, subjective, and require careful management. This speaks to our second food-politics nexus, which we term 'the politics of transformation'. In general terms, this recognises transformation as necessary for food system sustainability and, crucially, that politics are necessary for transformation. Given the overarching focus of the Special Section, all eight papers address transformation in food systems to some extent. We have clustered three papers that speak particularly well to this nexus relation, advancing in different ways transformation and political agency (Arnold & Soppe, 2025; Chinaglia & Duncan, 2025; Lamine et al., 2025), but first some general points to contextualise how transformation is theorised in all eight papers. We observe a consensus that food systems need to change, with an active framing of food systems as sites of political action and resistance. Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) are prominent niche innovations and a means to do this (cf. Maye & Duncan, 2017). Transformation signifies an act of replacement and a re-making of the food system in a new image. The other form of transformation is of the dominant corporate capitalist regime, which contributors also identify.

This description of transformation is different from the Multi-Level Perspective in Transition Studies (cf. Geels & Schot, 2007), in that food systems analysis is framed as full system change in, for example, practices, policies, technologies, and knowledge, rather than just rules-based changes to socio-technical regimes. It also includes

a change to the image and objectives of the food system, so the outcomes are not just food but also health. This conceptualisation of transformation is implicit or explicit in many food system papers reviewed by Maye et al. (2025). The three papers we highlight here advance these ideas in different ways. Chinaglia and Duncan (2025), for instance, make the case for experimentalist governance as key to transformation. Using a case study of Campi Aperti, an AFN comprising a formal farmers' market association in Bologna that has been active for over twenty years, they examine the role of the political in the internal governance of the network. Applying an adapted version of experimental governance, the paper responds to critiques of AFN structures for their depoliticising tendencies (e.g., managerial processes that erase conflict) to show how internal structures facilitate engagement with the political, navigating power dynamics and strategic uncertainties and revealing the political potential of such arrangements. However, these innovations are more effective internally, with less influence outside the network. Their analysis shows that experimental governance can be a space of political agency and transformation.

The other two papers spotlighted in this section examine the politics of transformation as a market device and a territorial assemblage, respectively. First, Arnold and Soppe (2025) provide a rich longitudinal case study of the Swiss fair trade flower market, from 1990 to 2025. As a transformative politics, they argue that social movements signify key agents for politicising food systems, and a key strategy is to moralise markets. Employing Callon et al.'s (2007) idea of 'market devices', they reveal 'the sequencing of market devices' as a political process and moral enactment. Market arrangements thus work to 'heat up' and 'cool down' markets through specifying accountabilities and obligations. In the case study these finally became concentrated on one device—the certification standard for flower plantations as a 'mainstreaming' of fair trade. Movement-induced markets not only have unintended consequences through their political work, they also generate, through devising and 'the politics of scalability', intra-movement conflict.

Lamine et al. (2025) meanwhile take the territorial scale as their entry point, proposing a combined framework of pragmatist sociology and political ecology to assess how food system transformations can be enacted in a more re-politicised way. They provide rich accounts of three cases in France and Brazil. Critical in their piece is the way food system transformations can become depoliticised, even though we might observe institutional politicisation, and how these two perspectives combined can help to better identify how people in territories define and identify agri-food system problems and work together to identify solutions, whilst at the same time working to reconfigure power relations and push for a diversity of visions of food system transformation. They note, for instance, the role of collective knowledge production and how politicisation processes emerge through encounters between different types of knowledge (dialogue of knowledge). In the two French cases, we also see how depoliticisation can be both strategic (as some actors impose their vision of transition) and systemic (as mechanisms converge). Crucially, they argue that participation, if not studied carefully, can become homogenised and too narrow for capturing and discussing alternative views.

Food-politics III: Food system politicisation and the politics of feeling

In this final theme, we elaborate relations between de- and re-politicisation and their potentially disruptive implications for progressive food system transformation. Building on the arguments introduced earlier from political theory, we label this section 'the politics of feeling', taking inspiration from cultural political geographers Anderson and Secor's (2025) argument that politics in times of crisis (enacted as regimes of neoliberalism, progressivism, populism) have become increasingly a matter of emotion and feeling. For the papers in this Special Section, this idea speaks particularly well to the earlier remarks regarding new populist discourses as they infiltrate debate, including protests about the future of farming and rural landscapes, which often spill out as forms of demonstration and protest in towns and cities. It considers also how the dynamics of depoliticisation and repoliticisation work together, with depoliticisation, in certain contexts, not necessarily bad for decision-making if the alternative is inclined to ignore science and/or polarise debate.

Two papers in the Special Section speak well to this third nexus, starting with Brunori et al.'s (2025) analysis of

the depoliticisation and polarisation of CAP reform processes in the EU, particularly the recent Farm to Fork strategy. Their analysis makes several useful points, particularly their argument that analysis of (de)politicisation alone will not suffice, calling also for the inclusion of polarisation. As they explain, this signifies a tendency for the polity to divide into opposite fractions, often with little overlap in terms of values or interests, and is not present just for a single issue. It can be ideological, and affective polarisation can form a type of denial or rejection of politicisation. The consequence is that solution diversity can be reduced and a strengthening of binary approaches manifests. Farmer protests in Europe initiated a new phase of 'high politicisation and high polarisation', as affective polarisation, and crucially, polarisation in fact concealed nuances in the protests, highlighting certain aspects, such as the anti-European debate, whilst failing to reflect the politicisation of issues such as power distribution in the food system and supply chains. Interestingly, they point to the Strategic Dialogue initiative in 2025 as a de-polarisation strategy because of the explicit attempt to reduce levels of polarisation while maintaining high politicisation. Their analysis also revisits debates regarding deliberative arenas, critiqued by some because they depoliticise conflicts, suggesting these spaces, including for agri-food systems, could provide new tools for politicisation if employed as transformative tools for local consensus.

These points about revisiting how we consider consensus and compromise building as components for transformative change in democratic environments are welcome. The article by Crivits et al. (2025) is complementary in this regard, taking the case of nitrogen policy in Flanders as the entry point, and framed through politicisation, re-politicisation, and post-politics. The case examines how 'the post-political condition' gets expressed in the policy arrangements for nitrogen. What was initially a technocratic process became politicised after 2021 when a nature conservation group successfully filed litigation, in turn rupturing the 'neo-corporatist arrangement'. The analysis after this point shows increasing examples of dissensus and diverging interests and political expressions, alongside authoritarian efforts to contain the debate. The policy appraisal thus shows the top-down nature of the implementation process that eventually led to polarisation. One can productively re-politicise an issue, they argue, by embracing divergent and antagonistic discourses, identifying in turn a critical role a critical role for social scientists as 'democratic mediators'. This echoes Mouffe's (2005) political ontology that foregrounds dimensions of antagonism over consensus in democracy.

Conclusion: towards a future research agenda

This Special Section is a timely intervention for food system transformation studies for two reasons. Firstly, it pushes for the application of the food system concept to be more precise and explicit because of increased actor mobilisation. This call for greater clarity is reflexive in a methodological sense, because the research questions and methods applied are imprecise and to some extent under-theorised, so need more precision or at least specificity to enact meaningful change, as well as better interdisciplinary collaboration. The call is also political, recognising that work on food system transformation requires navigating questions of power, knowledge, and resources.

Secondly, this urgency around better defining the object we seek to transform (the food system) intersects in the articles here with an emerging contested politics of transformation, neoliberal reordering, breakdown, resistance, and hyper-political populist feeling. The papers reveal a critical shift from the Agenda 2030 consensus framework to post-truth politics. This identifies an urgent need, we argue, for both research and policy agendas to adapt to this new political reality. Several research questions emerge in this regard. For example, how will science-policy relations change in this new political context? What should the role of scientists be? Should the critique of neoliberalism be revised, or is this phase a new form of neoliberalism? What does 'transformation' mean in a context where power relations are no longer concealed by governmentality? How can local networks adapt to the new phase and develop forms of resistance and resilience? Where should empirical work be concentrated? Finally, to what extent can 'food system transformation' function as a genuine and democratic space for change; or is it inevitably also at risk of turning into yet another consensus narrative, following in the footsteps of Agenda 2030?

These are some of the critical research questions this Special Section raises and highlights here as essential for future research. The eight Special Section articles also demonstrate, in different ways, how political science and related fields already provide critical insights to help food system scholars assess the new politics of food system change. Theories of de- and re-politicisation help to open more radical conceptualisations of food system arrangements, as we see from the papers using ideas such as deliberative democracy, agonistic pluralism, affective polarisation, and experimental governance. For agri-food scholars in sociology, geography, and beyond working on these questions, greater alignment with political science will be key. We can see too how these ideas can be usefully combined with more established theory in agri-food rural sociology, such as pragmatist philosophy, political ecology, market sociology, and responsibility. In this new food politics, it is likely that political alliances will emerge in unexpected forms. The political and social contestations surrounding food system transformation—including debates, conflicts, and protests—are constitutive of the change itself. Consequently, these dynamics will redefine both the trajectory of transformation and our future scholarly interpretations of it, framing concepts such as localisation, food sovereignty, and food justice as forms of resistance (Maye, 2025). Insights from rural sociology, such as rural development counter-movements (Marsden et al., 2020; Wright, 2010), and Gramscian 'counter-hegemony' (de-commodification), can help here, as can new work in human geography on the politics of feeling, metabolic politics, spatial justice, and multi-species planetary geographies. In the articles, we see repeated recognition and emphasis on the fact that the food system is a sub-system. From a transformation perspective, this points to understanding multi-system interactions, a now growing theme in transition studies (Andersen & Geels, 2023). Future work should thus link the politics of change not only to food systems but beyond them as well.

The main contribution of the articles in this Special Section is the nexus relationship among the politics of knowledge, transformation, and feeling. We argue, and the articles show, that these are not separate dimensions of food system change but are instead overlapping and mutually influential. To advance our understanding of food system change, we must be prepared to pay attention to the overlaps of feelings and knowledge and how they work together to transform the people and systems needed to produce and consume food sustainably. Building on this contribution, emerging themes that can further advance the food system transformation politics presented herein include: building on the idea of the politics of knowledge, further critical perspectives are welcome on the food system concept, including new epistemologies, methodologies, and training of researchers and policymakers to map food system intersections with politics and justice; conceptual work on politics in food system transformation, including novel perspectives from post-political theory, hyper-politics, and other related studies of de- and re-politicisation. Understanding the role of knowledge production, use, and communication when mobilising the food system concept to enact change in times of crisis, and its relation with the policy process; and re-evaluating wider transformational and governance questions about the state, sovereignty, justice, rights, responsibility, legitimacy, and accountability. These latter points develop and extend work related to both the 'politics of transformation' and the 'politics of feeling' nexus relations identified here. Interestingly, this includes further supporting rather than reducing the role of participation and deliberative arenas to support democracy, and better discussion and training of researchers as 'democratic mediators'. In an era of uncertainty, elaborating these themes, research questions, and their connections is essential for supporting the future shaping of food system transformation pathways.

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