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Rural politics in undemocratic times: Exploring the emancipatory potential of small rural initiatives in authoritarian Hungary

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ABSTRACT

Constructing environmentally sustainable and democratic political regimes constitutes the most important political project of our times – an era characterised by the proliferation of authoritarianism and the growing effects of climate change. Through the case of Hungary, an example of a modern authoritarian regime, this article discusses how agricultural initiatives such as Community Supported Agriculture, permaculture, and small-scale and regenerative farming can help situate questions of sustainable rural politics into a broader agenda of democratic governance. Building on qualitative interviews conducted in Hungary and the literature on socio-environmental transformations, authoritarian populism, authoritarian neoliberalism, and emancipatory politics, our aim is to envision emancipatory rural politics grounded in democratic societal projects and sustainable ways of producing and living with the land. After laying out what we identify as the three rural pillars of the Hungarian authoritarian regime – unequal land relations, agricultural subsidies and agricultural commodity sales –, we argue for attention to what could become the rural pillars of sustainable democracy: emancipatory alliances, counter-knowledge claims, and emancipatory subjectivities. Efforts at building the latter aspects can help Hungarians (and others) reimagine democracy from the countryside, establish new collective relations, and embrace the unavoidable ambiguities of emancipatory rural politics.

1. Introduction

Throughout the world, new configurations of authoritarian rule are getting mainstreamed, enacted by regimes that merge capitalism, racist and patriarchal nationalism, clientelism, environmental destruction, and neoliberalism. The elements of this list constitute the antithesis of both democracy and environmental preservation. In effect, under capitalism, a small minority (often white, male) that owns most corporate shares decides how to utilize the labor and resources of the nation as well as what to do with the generated surplus. In such a system, instead of being geared towards meeting humans' and nature's needs, production (including agricultural production and other economic activities based on the use of natural resources) is organized around maximizing the profits and power of a minority that controls the economic system. In return, this minority influences formal politics (e.g., manipulation of national elections, monopoly on national media) while increasing proportions of the majority face exclusion, marginalization, and poverty; and natural resources are depleted. Given this, the most important political project of our current times is to support the construction of environmentally sustainable democracies (Arsel et al., 2021) and eventually demolish capitalism from the inside (Nicholson, 2011; Wright, 2019). Yet, exposing the 'true' face of authoritarian politics and waiting for its leaders to lose future elections alone cannot be expected to dismantle them:

> the deepening of socio-economic inequalities, demonization of ethnic and religious minorities, and systematic destruction of critical ecosystems require deeper structural changes that go beyond who holds electoral offices or how they govern (Arsel et al., 2021, 5).

How can such changes emerge and how should we engage theoretically and empirically with the possibilities for emancipation from the entanglement of authoritarianism and capitalism? This is the political project we want to contribute to by discussing the emancipatory potential of small rural and agricultural initiatives in times of authoritarianism in Hungary.

Rural areas are often a key arena of authoritarian neoliberal power struggles: yet, this is an area of research in need of further development, which we contribute to in our paper. Our focus is on rural initiatives for

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several interrelated reasons. The first is that democracy and the sustainability of rural territories are intricately linked: improvement to one facilitates the betterment of the other (Westall, 2015; Smith and Stirling, 2018); and second, because Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán (1998–2002; 2010–present) has used agricultural land to consolidate his regime both politically and economically by providing easy access to agribusiness and formerly state-owned land to a politically backed oligarchy (Gonda, 2019). Third, agriculture constitutes an important economic and social sector in Hungary (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2018) – a potential used by Orbán to strengthen his grip on power. Fourth, rural areas are key for struggles over food sovereignty, understood as the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agricultural systems. Here, priority is given to the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food, rather than the interests of markets, corporations or a political regime (Via Campesina, 2007).

In summary, this article looks at a case that is becoming paradigmatic in studies of illiberalism and democratic backslide. Examining how land ownership, agricultural subsidies, and agricultural commodity sales are at the basis of an illiberal regime in Hungary and discussing how alternative farming practices may become emancipatory, we seek to identify some glimmers of hope in a difficult economic and political environment. Viewing alternative farming as not merely an economic nor environmental activity, we explore novel organization of small-scale farming in Hungary as a democratic practice in an increasingly undemocratic state.

Recent literature on authoritarianism's relation to agriculture, the environment, and the countryside looks at the effects of authoritarian populism on smallholder farming (e.g., Hajdu and Mamonova, 2020), far-right ecologism (Lubarda, 2020b), the intersections between the COVID-19 crisis and xenophobia in the countryside (Petrescu-Mag et al., 2021), the "love triangle" between authoritarianism, populism and the COVID-19 pandemic (Gonda et al., 2022), land-grabbing by and for political elites (Ivanou, 2019), and struggles against extractive projects (Adaman et al., 2019; Graybill, 2019), as well as at the meanings of sustainability and environmentalism under authoritarian and populist politics (Lubarda, 2020a). How rural populations and agriculture contribute to maintaining undemocratic regimes have also been analysed, for example, in Mamonova's study on rural Russian dwellers who continually vote for President Putin (2019).

What remains less discussed is how the countryside, rural politics, and food production initiatives can contribute to cracking open authoritarian rule and help us envision democratic rural politics. The lens of authoritarian populism as discussed in the frame of the forum on emancipatory rural politics (ERPI) (Bernstein, 2020; Scoones et al., 2017), as well as the lens of authoritarian neoliberalism as explored by Bruff, Tansel and Jessop (Bruff, 2012, 2014, Tansel, 2017; Bruff and Tansel, 2019; Jessop, 2019), also applied by Geva (2021) and others (e.g., Gonzales, 2020, Borén et al., 2021; Deutsch, 2021) are helpful to engage with unequal land relations, agricultural oligarchies, concentrated land ownership, and corruption — as well as with drawing up potential ways out.

The lens of authoritarian populism draws attention to how politics mobilise "active popular consent" (Hall, 1979, 15) to produce a binary of 'us' and 'them' (Rancière, 2013). Who are 'the people' and the 'enemies' of Hungarian agriculture as per the political regime? How is the process of subject-making contributing to shaping a particular type of countryside and how is this process being contested? In turn, authoritarian neoliberalism refers to a political economy which gives rise to hyper-capitalist exploitation carried out through authoritarian governance (Bruff, 2014). In Orbán's case, hegemonic rule is fortified through advanced neoliberalisation (Geva, 2021): i.e. via specific neoliberal practices that serve to "protect spaces and circuits of capitalist accumulation" (Bruff and Tansel, 2019, 239).

This article combines the lenses of authoritarian populism and authoritarian neoliberalism to scrutinise agricultural initiatives in Hungary and to make the claim that questions of sustainable agricultural and rural politics are a crucial part of the broader agenda of democratic governance. Combining both lenses helps us maintain in creative tension the discursive practices through which 'rural people' are constructed by the regime's narrative *and* the practices through which capitalist accumulation is ensured by and for the regime's supporters.

Our article draws mainly on 20 interviews conducted in 2020 and 2021 with participants actively engaged in alternative farming practices, such as permaculture, community supported agriculture (CSA), regenerative agriculture, and organic farming, practiced at a small-scale or in alliance with other smallholders. We are ultimately interested in envisioning emancipatory rural politics grounded in democratic societal projects and sustainable ways of producing and living with the land. Our argumentation for linking emancipatory rural politics to democracy is this: sustainable farming practices tend to promote healthier environments (both in the natural and human sense of the word). Healthier natural and human environments are conducive to facilitate cooperation and dialogue, which are crucial components of a truly democratic system. Food sovereignty is key for emancipatory rural politics not only because of food production but also because it is aimed at building new social relations "free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social and economic classes and generations" (Via Campesina, 2007). Many of the examples we came across put strong emphasis on non-farming aspects of farming: cooperation, community building, affective relations with other humans and non-humans. As such, we assume that farming practices that aim to revolutionize the food system to make it more compatible with our changing climate, do contribute to strengthening democratic structures.

For this, we bring together recent literature on authoritarian populism and authoritarian neoliberalism, socio-environmental transformations, and emancipatory politics (Section 2) to identify the three rural pillars of authoritarianism in Hungary: land ownership, agricultural subsidies, and agricultural commodity sales (Section 4) right after having explained our research methods (Section 3). In Section 5, we provide elements to rethink sustainability beyond authoritarianism and argue that relying on emancipatory alliances, counter-knowledge claims as well as supporting the emergence of emancipatory subjectivities can help bring forward a democratic project for Hungarian rural areas. Yet, we warn about the contradictions underlying alternative agricultural initiatives and how these contradictions could become catalysers or – to the contrary – obstacles for questioning the exercise of authority and marginalisation under authoritarianism. We conclude by highlighting the two main challenges faced by a Hungarian food democracy project that combines the objectives of food sovereignty, environmental sustainability and democracy.

Our endeavour is first and foremost intellectual and speculative. Yet we believe that it has emancipatory potential, as imagination and hope are already something radical (Freire, 1996; hooks, 2003), and that we owe this exercise to ourselves and our fellow Hungarians.

2. Conceptual framework: authoritarian populism, authoritarian neoliberalism and the rural prospects of emancipation

2.1. Emancipation and alternative farming practices

We get inspiration from feminist political ecologists' understanding of emancipation as a process of building commons, well-being, affective and caring relations with humans and non-humans as well as equity and justice (Mehta and Harcourt, 2021). Only by caring for the human and more-than-human and building equitable, solidary, democratic and just relations with each other, will we be able to engage in emancipatory processes. Thus, care, as a political and ethical concept is at the heart of our vision of emancipation. And while we see emancipation as fundamental alterations to political, economic and socionatural relations,

practices, values and meaning-making (Nightingale et al., 2021), we also believe that there is no clear blueprint for it. As Mehta and Harcourt explain, we need to be able to imagine "possible futures beyond the theories, policies, and practices of capitalist and socialist/state-capitalist growth" (2021, 21).

In this paper, by alternative farming practices we mean those potentially emancipatory farming initiatives that can help change our ways of thinking, desires, habits and modes of being with other humans and non-humans. We start from the hypothesis that alternative farming practices (Community Supported Agriculture, permaculture, and small-scale and regenerative farming) can become prefigurative (Jeffrey and Dyson, 2021) as they re-think sustainability practices in the countryside. While they may not be able to crack the shell of the old world (Naegler, 2018), they remain "political practices that consciously attempt to create a desired future world in the present – the 'new society in the shell of the old' (Breines, 1989, 52) – instead of postponing revolutionary transformation to a diffuse moment in the future" (Naegler, 2018, 507). These alternative farming practices not only have the potential to help rethink sustainability but also democracy (understood as per its original meaning in which deliberation and direct participation are central): proximity and care towards the land, and towards others such as producers and consumers entails building and maintaining affective relations — as opposed to the exploitative ones (towards both nature and people) on which today's dominant food industry relies.

All these concepts are filled with and generate tensions, contradictions and ambiguities. For example, we are conscious of the fact that 'Western democracies' are not the model to strive for, among other reasons because they are based on exploitation in other geographies. Throughout our discussion, we attempt to not lose sight of these tensions, contradictions and ambiguities.

2.2. Authoritarian populism and authoritarian neoliberalism

Authoritarian populism refers to a historically and geographically specific moment that resulted from and responded to the 'great move to the Right' in many parts of Europe and the US in the 1970s (Hall et al., 1978, Hall, 1979, 1980, 1985). Hall's discussion of authoritarian populism underscored a double political movement characterised by efforts to ideologically dismantle the welfare State *in parallel to* strengthening state dirigisme (1985, 117). This dual move is also what describes authoritarian populism in the 21st century under Erdogan's Turkey, Bolsonaro's Brazil, or Modi's India. In Orbán's Hungary, the state is a central actor, not as the overseer of a welfare state, but rather through its efforts towards increased marketisation, which helps concentrate power in the hands of increasingly few people (Geva, 2021). Orbán, posing as a market saviour, "has recalibrated the state to emphasise consumption as the basis of citizenship" (Geva, 2021, 4), and especially consumption of national goods (DeSoucey, 2010, Lubarda, 2019).

A crucial element for the authoritarian state's constitution, as seen in Orbán's Hungary, is the ability "to construct around itself an active popular consent" (Hall, 1979, 15) through the strategic production of the binary 'us' and 'them' (Rancière, 2013). Yet such a reliance on the discursive creation of 'the people' versus their 'enemies' is what constitutes the very fragility of such politics (Geva, 2021). Indeed, if the social reproduction of the Hungarian working class and peasants is not guaranteed, Orbán's "capitalist social Darwinism" (Scheiring and Szombati, 2019) runs the risk of collapsing (Geva, 2021). The 'us' includes primarily white, male, new middle-class elites, a nationalist bourgeoisie and the regime's 'loyal' oligarchs: the main beneficiaries of the 2015 land privatisation and thus the motive for re-writing the Hungarian agricultural scene[1]. Paradoxically, the 'us' also includes the very peasants who are a victim of Orbán's alienating rural policies (Rogers, 2020, Bori and Gonda, 2022, Antal, 2019).

Authoritarian politics also rely on narratives of transformation, which *prima facie* sound emancipatory and aligned with building consent around noble objectives (Aslanidis, 2016) while in reality serving the purpose of putting forward business-as-usual solutions and alienating, subjugating and oppressing in the name of these concepts (Blythe et al., 2018; Feola, 2015). Keeping in mind the slippery slope that separates emancipatory and pseudo-emancipatory initiatives or sustainability and pseudo-sustainability allows us to illustrate how these transformative concepts so easily morph into their opposites. Under authoritarian rule, the lack of precision about what constitutes democracy, emancipation or sustainability, how they may mutate over time and across spaces and the inclusions and exclusions that their different understandings and practices will create actually supports the status quo (Blythe et al., 2018, Nightingale, 2019). Understanding how emancipatory concepts and practices are co-opted becomes key in our endeavour.

Authoritarian neoliberalism, as a conceptual lens, adds two important aspects helpful to understanding the Hungarian case. On the one hand, it draws attention to the importance of *material* relations that underpin the maintenance of authoritarian rule but also to how the transformation of such material relations (to agricultural production and to the land) can help with moving away from authoritarianism. Second, it prompts us to focus not only on practices and discourses that seek to build consent (for example around nationalist narratives of managing land and natural resources) but also on the ones that marginalize and paradoxically exclude particular people and socionatures from this apparent unity (Bruff and Tansel, 2019, 234).

Neoliberal politicians have been particularly skilled to perpetuate the ambiguities of the narrative of emancipation. By giving the illusion that individual emancipation and freedom are possible (in particular through consumption), their policies and narratives have created a vacuum that authoritarian politics are increasingly (and gladly) filling via calling for a strong and centralised nation-state (Swyngedouw, 2021) as embodied by Orbán's 'illiberal democracy' (sic) (Orbán, 2014). What is needed, then, is envisioning emancipatory rural politics to confront authoritarian politics, (Scoones et al., 2017), "re-scripting emancipation" as a collective process that is aimed at the collective's enjoyment and freedom, rather than targeted towards individuals' satisfaction and liberties (Swyngedouw, 2021). Similarly, for scholars working on authoritarian neoliberalism, the purpose of analysing struggles that take place within politics and governance, as well as their messiness and even contradictions is to find ways "for things to be different in the future" (Bruff and Tansel, 2019, 238).

In this article, we rethink emancipation by taking seriously these calls in the literature: we want to unmask the contradictions and ambiguities of authoritarian populist and neoliberal politics, rethink concepts such as emancipation, democracy, and sustainability beyond their instrumental uses, and focus on collective, rather than individual processes of change. We go beyond the conceptual emptiness of the neoliberal and capitalist understandings of emancipation by exploring the potential of those rural initiatives that challenge authoritarian politics' "things to be resisted"(Scoones et al., 2017). By conceptual emptiness we refer to the fact that neoliberal and capitalist politics are interested in reproducing an existing system of privileges, and the responsibility is put on the individual's shoulders; radical transformations and the strengthening of a caring and conscious collective are not envisaged. Our understanding of emancipation is inspired by feminist political ecologist engagements with transformations that contest the

[1] We recognise that such 'us-them' dichotomies are not restricted to authoritarian right-wing political rhetoric, as exemplified by works on left-wing populisms by for instance Mouffe (2018).

underlying social, political, and economic processes of marginalization and inequality (Eriksen et al., 2015). We are particularly interested in contestation, dissent, and alternative or counter initiatives, because we view them as potential cracks through which emancipation can emerge. Our engagement with questions of power, knowledge, and norms opens up alternative futures that move beyond current understandings of what is possible in terms of transformation (Patterson et al., 2017, Ojha et al., 2022). We look for emancipatory initiatives that enable the inclusion of marginalized groups, capacity-building, empowerment, and agency, understanding transformations as generated by a plurality of small changes taken on by individuals and communities themselves (Scoones et al., 2020). We are aware that such initiatives may not be grand and can allow for unexpected outcomes, but we argue that the outcomes will always be valid if they represent the values and visions of democratic and emancipatory processes.

3. Methods: Mapping the three rural pillars of authoritarianism and studying the emancipatory potential of rural initiatives in Hungary

Our article draws on 20 interviews (with 18 men and two women) conducted in 2020 and 2021 (see Table 1 in Appendix). We chose participants who are actively engaged in alternative farming practices, such as permaculture, CSA, regenerative agriculture, and organic farming, practiced on a small-scale or in alliance with other smallholders. We also broadened our scope to include the perspectives of actors within the conventional agricultural sector, such as integrators, large landowners, downstream distributors, and government officials: these interviews greatly contributed to our understanding of the Orbán regime's three rural pillars. Our conversations were structured around four main themes. The first theme revolved around respondents' personal stories, including their motivations, strategies, and difficulties in becoming farmers and/or actors within the agricultural sector. The second asked respondents about the different types of farmers in their area (i.e., large landowners, smallholders, foreign landowners, etc.) to understand power relations and potential conflicts. The third theme addressed the local institutional environment behind agriculture, and respondents' relationships to these institutions. The final theme addressed respondents' reflections on the future of alternative, ecological farming in Hungary, as well as on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the agricultural sector. All the interviews were transcribed and their content subsequently categorised based on emerging analytical categories underpinning emancipatory initiatives. In addition, this paper relies on secondary sources, such as websites of relevant agricultural and governmental organisations, policy documents, and webinar attendance on related topics.

Some of our respondents expressed concerns about the threat of being targeted by the regime and might not have felt comfortable disclosing their stories and opinions in full detail. This was compounded by a general fear of talking about politics in Hungary, which most respondents mentioned. Accordingly, we anonymised the identities of all our interviewees. Furthermore, most of our interviewees were male, which we explain, in part, by the internalised patriarchal assumption that the head of the farm is always male. All these constraints represent limitations to how emancipatory initiatives are represented in our paper.

4. The three rural pillars of the authoritarian regime in Hungary

4.1. Unequal land relations: From post-socialist agricultural land politics to land grabbing under the Orbán regime

Significant changes have marked the Hungarian agricultural land tenure system since the 1990s, impacting the possibilities for establishing emancipatory rural initiatives. Following the cessation of the Soviet Union in 1989, the agricultural sector – until then primarily dominated by state-owned co-operatives – was restructured through a redistribution process, resulting in over 1.8 million new, mostly small landowners. These lands were acquired through direct land restitution, compensation bonds, and distribution to previous employees of co-operatives (Burger 2022). While most new landowners lacked the skills, assets, and financial and technical support to successfully cultivate such small parcels of land, early speculators – both Hungarian and foreign – amassed land through buying cheap bonds, pocket contracts,[2] and assigning ownership to close family members (Fidrich, 2013). These speculative trends increased significantly with the prospect of European Union membership at the turn of the century, despite the installation of a moratorium on foreign land ownership (Fidrich, 2013). From 2010 onwards, under Orbán's leadership, a number of rural policy implementations, behind-closed-doors land auctions, and public procurement deals have reshaped the Hungarian countryside and, in particular, concentrated agricultural land ownership in the hands of politically connected Hungarian oligarchs, who were mostly interested in price speculation (Gonda, 2019). Between 2010 and 2020, the number of registered farms was reduced by one third, while the per capita farm size increased significantly (Gadóc, 2021, Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2020). Such land concentration was further compounded by the fact that many large farms were legally divided into smaller sub-units, to circumvent maximum ownership limits. As one respondent noted: "it doesn't matter that we have 380,000 registered farmers in this country; in reality, this is 50,000 actual farms" (interview with Barnabás[3], September 2020).

Ironically, some of our respondents who practice alternative farming in Hungary and with strong positions regarding the kind of agriculture required for environmental sustainability and democratic rule obtained access to land through such speculation on land prices by their family members. Thus, to develop their alternative initiatives, they have possibly forced other farmers to leave their land. This is the case for Anna, who explained that in the early 2000s her father purchased the last 2.5 ha of land in their village, which is situated in a peri-urban and attractive region of Hungary. Due to increasing urbanisation, at the time of the interview the land was for sale for an exorbitant 300 million Hungarian forints.[4] However, for some years it had allowed Anna to experiment with agro-ecological production practices with a collective of four women. With the help of her family, Anna eventually found another plot in 2020 where she could develop her agricultural activities and invest in agro-ecology long term (interview February 2021).

Anna's story is not unique. Benjámin's father's speculation on compensation bonds after the fall of socialism is what helped his family develop their own farm. At the time of the interview, their land comprised 170 ha and was growing at a rate of 10–20 ha per year, due to their increasing ability to buy out poorer neighbours. When Benjámin joined the farm around 2010, the family changed their strategy to amass more land for a new alternative type of farming (interview February 2021). Such land concentration under the banner of alternative farming is another ambiguous emancipatory practice – one which found resonance in other respondents' stories as well. Some expressed that they had to buy out other smallholders to ensure that their neighbours' non-ecological activities would not impact their own:

[2] Pocket contracts refers to a strategy used by foreign investors to acquire land while a moratorium on foreign ownership was in place, as well by Hungarian investors who wanted to surpass the maximum land-ownership limits imposed by the 1994 Land Act. Investors would use Hungarian strawmen to buy land without putting a purchasing date on the contracts, keeping it 'in their pockets' until the moratorium is lifted (Roszik 2021).

[3] Respondents' names have been changed.

[4] Approximately 850 000 euros. Compared to 4460 euros, the average price for a hectare of agricultural land (source: https://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xftp/stattukor/mgfoldarak/2019/index.html).

> That land that we unfortunately don't buy could end up in precisely the kind of agricultural practice that we don't want, where they use pesticides, etc. We can't really have an effect on smallholders, so we'd rather buy them out (interview with Benjámin, February 2021).

This problematic practice is a crystallisation of several issues: that alternative farming in Hungary is mainly accessible for a privileged few, that its implementation may contribute to new exclusions, and that rural politics favour large conventional landowners. Only those few who are able to circumvent formal rules or become somewhat independent from the system can hope to survive as alternative smallholder producers. This has the perverse effect that those who should and could become allies (small and medium-holders practicing alternative and conventional farming) become threats to each other.

How to access land in a context where rich, pro-regime supporters are privileged can be daunting and requires creativity. According to Anna, smallholders with an alternative-farming mindset can often access small areas of land where traditional agricultural rules do not apply, such as old farmsteads, closed properties, or real estate located in the vicinity of settlements (interview, February 2021). Others are less optimistic:

> We can't even find half a hectare of land, despite having some money – not much of course; we're scraping the bottom of the middle class. In theory, the policies are targeting us, but for the government it's better if we don't want anything, especially not to farm our land (comment to webinar, February 2021).

Another layer of this contradictory situation that keeps the regime's 'land pillar' in place is Orbán's narrative on 'Hungarian land to Hungarian people'. While the moratorium on land sales to foreigners expired in 2014, it was replaced by a Hungarian 'Land-law package' (Alvincz, 2013) – a de facto extension of the moratorium – approved by the Hungarian Parliament on June 21, 2013. Orbán's narrative about the threat of a foreign land haul not only helps to discursively hide land grabbing by domestic oligarchs and foreign allies (Bori and Gonda, 2022) but also to grab local knowledge, cultural heritage and identity: to possess land "is to appropriate its values beyond its potential to produce commodity goods; to influence production practice on this land is to alter not only its ecology, but its values". (Brawner, 2021, 404).

To reiterate, historical and modern-day land grabbing has created a land tenure system closely resembling the feudal structure of the 19th century. The highly concentrated nature of agricultural land has enabled the formation of a politically backed oligarchy who speculates on land prices and pursue harmful single crop agricultural practices. Land speculation seeps through to emancipatory practices and points to the ambiguous nature of emancipation discussed later in this paper.

4.2. Agricultural subsidies

Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) payments and subsidies have contributed to the concentration of land ownership and rapid increase in land purchase and rental prices (Lennert and Farkas, 2020) in particular through the Single Area Payment Scheme, the European Union's support scheme for farmers. Farmers can apply based on eligible number of hectares and receive subsidies accordingly (European Commission, 2023). The Hungarian agricultural sector and the country's large landowners are highly dependent on the European Union's agricultural subsidies. Hungary received 12.4 billion euros in the period of 2014–2020; and with subsidies reaching 240 euros per hectare, oligarchs with massive accumulations of land and little to no cultivation gained significant wealth from these payments alone (Krasznai Kovács, 2015).

European subsidies not only appear as a resource that the Orbán regime manipulates to strengthen its oligarchs, they also contribute to the emergence of 'non-local' and mobile farmers (Krasznai Kovács, 2021) who in turn support the regime. "Similar to feudalist periods, the subsidy system has re-introduced the absent farmer" (Krasznai Kovács, 2021, 399) as extensive crop production with modern machinery requires only a few days of local activity a year. These large-holder farmers who often do not live on their land are the ones who in turn sustain the undemocratic regime. In addition, the kind of agricultural production these 'non-locals' implement does not provide significant employment opportunities for locals, and usually the profit does not stay in the locality of production either (Lennert and Farkas, 2020).

Agricultural subsidies do not support the development of non-conventional farming in Hungary. As Lennert and Farkas' study highlights, the CAP's agro-environmental programme[5] was welcomed by Hungarian farmers after EU accession: some 25% of utilised agricultural land used to be included in the agro-environmental programme in 2004. However, by 2017, only 8% of utilised agricultural land was still subject to agro-environmental measures, organic farming being in an even worse state, with only 200,000 ha and 3929 registered organic farmers in Hungary in 2018 (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2023). While in Europe, the proportion of organically cultivated areas increased from 3% of the total agricultural areas in 2002 to 8% in 2018, in Hungary this growth has been much less significant: from 1,5% to 2,5% in 2018 (Lennert and Farkas, 2020 based on EUROSTAT data). Interestingly this number jumped to 5,8% in 2021 (Hungarian Central Statistical Office 2023), which we attribute to the growing financial gains to be made from export-oriented organic farming. As such, we maintain that while it may be beneficial to the environment, it is not socially just if it is implemented by pro-Orbán organigarchs (our term for oligarchs involved with or economically benefiting from organic farming).

It is urgent to question the role of European agricultural policies in both hampering environmental sustainability and contributing to the destruction of democracy within its own borders, despite purportedly aspiring to the contrary. This process becomes all the more ambiguous as an increasing number of 'sympathetic' pro-regime elites who produce organically greenwash and whitewash authoritarianism. They do this through environmentally friendly agricultural production and the protection of land, while contributing to the destruction of democracy and the increase of poverty and marginalization – thereby hijacking emancipation.

The CAP's area-based payments are not only problematic because they benefit mostly large landholders exponentially increasing their holdings. Lennert and Farkas' study highlights that in 2019, there were 150 000 beneficiaries of area-based subsidies (in comparison to 182,000 in 2015): this data signals the role of these subsidies in facilitating land concentration. On the other hand, the impressive amount of money represented by these subsidies does not seem to remain in rural areas: Lennert and Farkas (2020) cite a 2015 study by the State Audit Office of Hungary (Horváth and Báger 2015) revealing that of the approximately 10 billion Euros paid out as direct subsidies between 2007 and 2014, the sources available in the New Hungary Rural Development Programme during the same period only amounted to just over half that amount.

Sometimes the efforts of alternative smallholder farmers to be recognised by institutions – for instance by becoming beneficiaries of subsidies – end up being exhausting and even demotivating. When asked whether she applied for the Grant for Young Farmers in the EU-funded New Hungary Rural Development Programme, Anna replied: "I didn't even consider it. I know three people who got the grant, and all three ended up burning out from countless sleepless nights fretting bankruptcy" (interview, February 2021). As discussed in Section 4.1., these disillusions sometimes prompt farmers to get creative about how to access land, support, and information, which we argue constitutes struggles that underpin the becoming of political subjects but also to rethink democracy and food sovereignty as alternative farmers.

[5] The same for which the EU has allowed temporary derogations in 2022 using the war in Ukraine and related threats to food security as a justification.

4.3. Agricultural commodity sales

An additional feature of the post-socialist epoch's agricultural landscape – and specifically according to Orbán's rural narrative – is the dominance of so-called integrators (Nemes and Varga, 2015). These integrators are owned by some of the country's wealthiest businessmen and operate mainly as trade organisations. For instance, KITE, the country's largest, is owned by Sándor Csányi, Hungary's wealthiest person. Lőrinc Mészáros, the infamous gasfitter-gone billionaire and childhood friend of Orbán also entered the integrator business and owns Agrolink Zrt (Menedzsment Fórum 2015, növekedés.hu 2021).The agricultural sector contains numerous additional integrators, operating on varying scales and in different subsectors. Generally thought of as companies that "help out farmers in need" (növekedés.hu, 2021), integrators supply farmers with inputs (seeds, manure, pesticides, etc.) and subsequently purchase post-harvest produce from them. While this contractual arrangement provides some security for farmers, transactions are frequently done at below-market prices, and the pre-harvest contract often leaves farmers unable to exit such exploitative cycles (interview with Jónás, June 2020).

Integrators contribute to farmers' alienation and to the disintegration of the relations of solidarity, proximity and care towards other humans and non-humans that characterise traditional peasant societies. In our interviews with people working for integrators, these integrators were praised as key associations, providing farmers with security for commercialisation, pertinent advice for production, and even as a means to contribute to the survival of uncompetitive smallholders. Yet such organisations only sound like emancipatory alliances; in reality, such alliances are controlled by wealthy oligarchs and are underpinned by neoliberal and capitalist models. For instance, Félix, a board member of one integrator, whose understanding of competitiveness is embedded in productivism, justified biological crop protection as a growing imperative of European policies and buyers, rather than as a necessity to rethink environmental sustainability. Rather than questioning the conventional agricultural model, for him, the only way to sustainability is through innovation of production technologies (interview, April 2021). As such, most integrators have become vehicles for the further neoliberalisation of the Hungarian countryside and with it, the marginalization of small- and medium holders. Instead of protecting farmers from the pressures of the European and global free market, they tend to prioritize cheap supply and high profit margins that benefit their wealthy owners only.

An additional layer to commodity sales as a pillar for the authoritarian regime is the dominance of multinational supermarkets and wholesale chains. The trend was initiated in the early 2000s under prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsány's rule[6], when international supermarket chains such as Metro, Auchan, Tesco, Spar and Cora entered the country and quickly gained a large, 16% share of the national food market (Vízvári and Bacsi, 2003). This trend was further expanded upon during Orbán's post-2010 governing (napi.hu, 2013), despite some more recent attempts by the regime to expel some of these foreign chains (Savage, 2022). These chains have diminished the role of local markets and have driven small- and medium holders further to the margins of the market economy, often preferring cheaper foreign or large-scale national suppliers. As highlighted by one of our respondents, large-scale companies make a double profit: once by selling the produce at an inflated price, and once by paying the producer after the income from the produce has gained significant interest. One farmer highlighted this issue in detail, while explaining his relationship with LIDL, the German international discount supermarket chain with over 186 stores in the country. He explained that the contracts signed between the supplier and the stores allowed the latter to make payments for the produce up to 60 days after receiving it. With highly perishable products that are sold within a timeframe of two weeks, the profits made by the supermarket are first invested and allowed to gain interest.

Unequal land relations, agricultural subsidies and agricultural commodity sales form the basis of the rural manifestations of authoritarianism in Hungary. In combination, they contribute to an increasingly widening rural–urban divide, and more importantly, a divide between small- and medium (local) farmers and large (non-local) oligarchs and landlords. It is a challenging environment for rural emancipation – yet, as the next section highlights, glimmers of hope remain.

5. Alternative farming as prospects for emancipation?

The manoeuvring space for non-traditional, alternative farming for smallholders and their associations in the agro-political context previously described is difficult and severely limits the prevalence of such farms. In 2021, only 34 permaculture initiatives were registered in the database of the Hungarian Permaculture Association (2021). In 2016, there were 10 CSA projects (Nagy, 2016), and this number was only 16 by the end of 2020 (interview with Ádám, February 2021). Our interviews, observations and the review of existing literature show many constraints for smallholder farmers to engage in alternative farming, yet they highlight three interrelated aspects that can potentially help rethink sustainability and democracy from the countryside. In what follows we explore these, keeping in mind their underlying tensions and contradictions.

5.1. Strategic alliances for emancipation

Concepts such as alliances and co-operation have a negative connotation in many post-socialist countries, due to a history of forced co-operatives based on regulated and institutionalised ways of collaborating. However, bottom-up alliances based on participation in decision-making can be key for the democratic governance of emancipatory processes (Stirling, 2014). The COVID-19 pandemic has strengthened this conviction as we have witnessed how a worldwide public health crisis has contributed to increasing democratic backlash rather than triggering major systemic changes: in Hungary, the pandemic provided justification to strengthen Orbán's authoritarian grip on power, further exclusionary politics, and a consolidation of the economic power of the regime's oligarchy (Drinóczi and Bień-Kacała, 2020; Molnár et al., 2020, Gonda et al., 2022).

Historically, major social changes such as women's emancipation, the end of slavery, or the struggle for plural sexualities have not been pushed forward via central control but by bottom-up, grassroots movements. For Stirling (2014), democracy needs to be a constant struggle for the less powerful to gain increased agency and the capacity to challenge power. Yet at the same time, authoritarian governments have systematically used pseudo-emancipatory motives to destroy the community as a public sphere. By giving rise to "immunological dispositives" based on surveillance and control, they have ultimately suspended participation in the rights and obligations of the community (Swyngedouw, 2021). Hence, reconstituting the community based on values different from the quest of individual enjoyment and the possibility of isolation from 'intruders' becomes a pathway for thinking about non-authoritarian, non-populist and liberal processes of emancipation. From our perspective, it is important to understand whether and how alliances that emerge from bottom-up initiatives in the Hungarian countryside apprehend questions of participation in emancipatory processes, and if and how they build relations over commons (for example caring relations) that may eventually challenge authoritarian populist politics' understanding of alliances for (pseudo-)sustainability.

[6] Socialist Prime Minister of Hungary between 2004 and 2009, partly responsible for the wave of destructive and exploitative privatization sweeping through the country in the early 2000s. Orbán's political rhetoric is highly dependent on mobilizing resentment against Gyurcsány, systematically discrediting any opposition leader or movement, by rhetorically associating them with him and his politics (regardless of whether it is true or not).

While access to information was mentioned as the key motivation for respondents to engage in alternative alliances and networks, it appears that such access was available only to a privileged few. For instance, one young respondent working on a 170-hectare farm in southeast Hungary is engaged in an impressive number of alliances, all targeted at improving the technical and managerial aspects of his business. Most of these alliances are paid services and involve institutions such as the Forest Research Institute,[7] the Hungarian Permaculture Association,[8] the Életfa Environmental Association,[9] biologists at the Eötvös Lóránd University, the Sweden-based Savory Institute, and other training organisations in Australia, the US and the UK. "Our concept was to include experts, and then make sure they keep returning," Benjámin explained (interview, February 2021). But Benjámin's widespread access to knowledge alliances were clearly facilitated by his family's economic situation, his language skills, and his education abroad. The size of his farm was significant enough to be noticed by professional associations, researchers, and other larger and wealthier farmers. Nevertheless, by enacting a positive example to some of his neighbours, he is contributing to expanding the knowledge alliances he established: "(…) witnessing our success and recognition, we get more and more requests from farmers. And pretty good offers too. They want to co-operate with us" (interview, February 2021). Similarly, Ádám, who runs a CSA initiative in northeast Hungary growing a variety of seasonal vegetable and fruit products, reported that he and his co-workers had contributed to the creation of another CSA in the area, thereby facilitating what he described as a much-needed multiplication effect of knowledge (interview, February 2021).

Eight of the ten interviewees who practice alternative farming methods were young people (under 40) and had obtained higher education. While some did this in an agricultural capacity, many had studied and worked in entirely different sectors, such as informatics, business, or medicine. Yet, all had acquired the skills and experience necessary to finding information and to learning by themselves:

> there's a growing number of these university graduates wearing rubber boots, who are somehow tied to the area, but are not multigenerational farmers. Rather, it is the intelligentsia who will return or switch to this kind of producer livelihoods (interview with Anna, February 2021).

For interviewees not from a privileged background, family support and local networks were key to improving technical aspects of farming, as well as for navigating the institutional labyrinths behind Hungary's nonconventional farming. For instance, Alexander, who returned to the family dairy farm in the peripheries of Budapest after his father faced health issues, gained most of his farming knowledge from his parents and neighbours (interview, February 2021). Hugó, who runs a cattle farm and studied at the Hungarian Agricultural University, explained that he helps families who have more difficulties than he does, because he is convinced that sustainable agriculture can only be achieved by supporting young, small-scale, diversified farmers: "Everyone here should be working on supporting those few young people who are motivated to start on this path, regardless of whether it's organic or non-organic" (interview, February 2021). Anna explained that she works with associations that help disadvantaged communities in Hungary's poorest regions to develop their own collective vegetable-producing initiatives. These pathways out of poverty create a learning and support network, a culture of co-operation, and contribute to producing healthy and sustainable food locally (interview, February 2021). However, these networks tend to mostly attract younger generation farmers. As already mentioned, older generations have more acute memories of forced co-operation, which young farmers do not. Also, young people have better skills to access information, internet communities, and engage with collectives in languages other than Hungarian. All this explains why age is so central in engaging in emancipatory processes.

Other networks such as Magház (2021) or Védegylet (2021) – which are responsible for promoting agrobiodiversity, environmental responsibility, seedbanks and seed swaps, training, and advocating for legislative changes – were also mentioned by respondents as important communities to be part of. Furthermore, social media is increasingly used for connecting with like-minded farmers. Kristóf, who runs a 70-hectare chicken farm under principles of regenerative agriculture, explained: "I like these people [I connect with on social media], because they are like us. And we can talk openly about where they sell, what they sell, their price-setting, their expenses, their profits, everything" (interview, March 2021).

Alliances with consumers were also mentioned as key aspects of sustainability and of a political paradigm change. Respondents like Ádám and Kristóf, who practice CSA, developed and rely on the tight relations between consumers and the farm, which are facilitated by inviting 'members' for open days, virtual animal adoptions, and workshops. Alexander, whose family has been selling dairy products for local customers for the past 40 years, is also dependent on and supported by a tight-knit consumer community. These and other initiatives, like basket communities,[10] were reported as crucial for relations between producers and consumers.

Established alliances and networks between a particular privileged group of farmers (and consumers) certainly have the potential to influence politics. Orbán's authoritarian regime seeks a central vantage point of control over every economic sphere (Geva, 2021), because centrally managed sectors are easier to influence and corrupt. A fragmented and decentralized agricultural sector that builds on grassroot alliances can circumvent *and* question central power. Yet to become emancipatory, uneven power relationships, "classed, gendered and racialised inequalities and spatial divides", need to be questioned (Calvário et al., 2020, 876). As such, the road to emancipation seems rocky and necessitates investigating the possibilities for democratic governance processes to stem from these alliances.

Not every alliance that sounds emancipatory constitutes dissent from authoritarian, populist and illiberal politics; on the contrary, pseudo-emancipatory initiatives can, in fact, help both greenwash and whitewash such politics. Martin's case illustrates well what we mean by a pseudo-emancipatory initiative. Martin is a Hungarian oligarch with ties to the Orbán family, and a firm believer in organic production which he implements in practice on 1500 ha in central Hungary. There he produces large amounts of wheat, corn, sunflower, rapeseed, as well as walnut. He is subsidised and recognised as an organic producer. Martin also intends to organise an organic village in the area and helps some neighbouring organic farmers by storing and selling their products to large supermarket chains. He also gives these farmers advice – something he defines as 'co-operation' (interview, April 2021). Martin used multiple arguments to justify this comment: environmental benefits, chauvinism (he mentioned that he wanted to please his wife who loves organic products), and, more importantly, that selling organic products makes a lot of money. For him incorporating and integrating other organic farmers was aimed at earning more money by capitalizing on the high prices of organic produce.

In addition to what may become, in the long run, disempowering and exclusionary alliances promoted by pro-regime oligarchs and agricultural integrators, alternative smallholder farmers often face other impediments to building emancipatory alliances. As Alfréd, a small horticultural producer in Central Hungary, explained:

[7] *in Hungarian:* NAIK – ERTI Erdészeti Tudományos Intézet.
[8] *in Hungarian:* Magyar Permakultúra Szövetség.
[9] *in Hungarian*: Életfa Környezetvédelmi Szövetség.
[10] Basket communities (in Hungarian *kosárközösség*) are increasingly appearing in the Hungarian countryside. They are primarily shops and stores selling the produce of local farmers and often work based on membership, similar to Community Supported Agriculture models.

> In Hungary there is a strong culture of *'if I can't have it, neither can you'*. I'm talking about the worst kinds of acts. From discrediting to reporting us to the tax office, home searches, raids. They tried to investigate me as if I was responsible for stealing all the country's gold. Whereas my only crime was that I found a market gap where I could establish myself (interview, March 2021).

Although trauma of forced socialist co-operativism can partly explain such behaviour, denouncing neighbours who do things differently fits well with the regime's 'us against them' narrative. While for safety reasons we do not display interviewees' political affiliations, it was evident that political differences play into the conflicts that hamper local alliance building. Also, most Orbán voters are situated in the countryside, while Budapest and other large cities remain strongholds of opposition.

To sum up, strategic alliances – though not immune to contradiction and appropriation – are key in facilitating emancipation from authoritarianism's three rural pillars. A strong organization between alternative small- and medium holders can to some extent resist the ever-growing encroachment of non-local landlords pursuing economically lucrative, but environmentally and socially detrimental farming practices. For instance, the open source sharing of market(ing) strategies and complementing each other's CSA Basket Communities when short on certain types of produce, all contribute to these initiatives remaining economically viable – and thereby resist the need to exit farming, sell land and contribute to unequal land relations. Similarly, the sharing of experience, knowledge and know-how on grant applications, subsidies and even fighting unfair decision-making practices undermine the Orbán regime's reliance on agricultural subsidies as a means to control farmers. Finally, by overcoming the traumas of forced co-operation and joining forces, alternative farmers have been able to carve out a financially viable market share – without being drawn into the mostly exploitative and pseudo-emancipatory top-down integration schemes.

5.2. Counter-knowledge claims and emancipation

For Scoones et al. (2020), communities interested in pushing transformation towards sustainability need to take multiple knowledges seriously – not only for reasons of respect but also to reach the best options through negotiation, fostering co-production of knowledge and new understandings and framings of problems. Co-production of knowledge is directly related to democracy's participatory and deliberative underpinnings.

Central to our discussion of the possibilities for emancipation under authoritarian populism is the hierarchisation of knowledges and the process through which certain knowledges become unique, dominant and hegemonic. Often, under authoritarian and populist rule, "the voices of those who disagree are deemed inarticulate, wrong, nonsensical, and/or ideological" (Swyngedouw, 2021, 14). As Swyngedouw explains, this split between 'noise' and 'voice' cannot be solved through deliberation for a better comprehension of each other's point of view. Rather, it must be engaged with as a constitutive part of authoritarianism and populism's politics of othering, which not only renders particular people worthy and others unworthy but also constructs certain knowledge as valuable while dismissing other knowledge (Rancière, 2013). Democratic arenas, traditionally envisioned as places for knowledge dialogue and confrontation are devoid of their original mission under authoritarian populism: by rendering these arenas apolitical and post-democratic, they become, instead, places where certain types of knowledge are enforced while others are made hegemonic (Swyngedouw, 2021).

Thus, engaging with knowledge pluralism and counter-knowledges and by supporting small, local democratic arenas where deliberation can be practiced can become emancipatory acts under authoritarianism, as authoritarian regimes rely on over-centralized decision-making processes, manipulation of data, and the silencing of unauthorized voices, not only in Hungary (e.g., Arsel et al., 2021, Cupples and Glynn, 2017). Of particular interest in our endeavour is to understand how counter-knowledge claims challenge what counts as 'sustainable' and 'competitive' agriculture for the regime and the struggles for subaltern forms of knowledge as well as for opening up deliberative spaces that could make relevant contributions to a revitalized countryside.

Our interviews showed that knowledge struggles (in particular over the meaning of sustainability) often happen outside of the mainstream knowledge-production spaces of universities, ministries, and national research institutes through independent, online learning spaces, workshops, and local knowledge-sharing. Several respondents are involved in attaining, producing, and disseminating such practical knowledge, through publications, books, social media, workshops, and more.

Procedural knowledge – that is, the skills and know-how required to get through or around official procedures and legislation in order to access agricultural subsidies, project funds, tax relief, or even land – is another important aspect of emancipatory struggles (Holland, 2017). In a context where official pro-smallholder policies are contrasted by clientelism, corruption, and pressure by pro-regime supporters to determine who gets subsidies, knowing key people and ways to express disagreement with biased decisions can sometimes help reverse unfair processes. For example, the plot of land awarded to Hugó – a smallholder cattle farmer – through public auction, was subsequently taken back and redistributed to a politically connected person. Hugó reflected on the fact that other people with less procedural knowledge and understanding of how the system (dis-)functions may be even more disadvantaged than he is. After several unsuccessful appeals to administrative decisions regarding subsidies, land distribution, and project funds, and a small number of successful ones, he noted that:

> What's incredibly difficult about this is that, after all, I entered these battles as someone who has multiple diplomas, speaks multiple languages, and has experience in government. And that's how I won a few of them (interview, February 2021).

Another counter-knowledge practice mentioned by Olivér – an owner of a number of old forests in which he practices agroforestry – was the paying of fines for supposed non-compliance with 'top-down institutional measures'. The National Forestry Agency ordered him to replace the existing walnut forest with acacia, based on what he described as obsolete knowledge that did not take into account non-adapted soils and poor growing conditions for acacia. Instead of complying, Olivér continues to pay the yearly fines. Furthermore, his repeated conflicts with the agency prompted him to enrol in forestry studies. By becoming an expert himself, he wants to circumvent the obligation of having to receive (often outdated) 'expert advice'. Over-compliance with rules emerged in multiple interviews as conscious strategies to minimise harassment by institutions. As Alfréd explained:

> I always try to think one step ahead. For me, it's most important that I do everything officially and legally. […] And I can say that every night I go to bed in total peace, because I know that I do everything according to the rules (interview, March 2021).

Nevertheless, access to information and training; the capacity to build alliances where emancipatory knowledge practices are shared; speaking foreign languages; and having contacts and experiences abroad are all things that help put into perspective the regime's narratives, policies, and institutional practices. Knowledge struggles aimed at circumventing and/or over-complying with unjust rules and regulations are key strategies for achieving successful emancipatory trends. Furthermore, in the face of the regime's strong exclusionary narratives and its quasi- monopoly over Hungarian media (Polyák 2019), it is more important than ever that those who can access counter-knowledge also share it.

Above we have illustrated how alternative knowledge is attained by young, forward-thinking farmers who are often not originally from the countryside, and how such knowledge should not be confounded with

what is regarded as 'sustainable' and 'competitive' by supporters of the Orbán regime. Organic production and biological crop protection are not sustainable practices if one's understanding of sustainability does not encompass the building of democratic relations and the challenging of inequalities. Therefore, a closer look into struggles for practicing subaltern forms of knowledge can help us to identify those cracks in authoritarian politics that can contribute to challenging the regime's hegemonic, pseudo-emancipatory understanding of sustainability.

Again, these counter-knowledge claims present a clear analytical and empirical challenge to the three rural pillars of Hungarian authoritarian populism. Unequal land relations have been contested through challenging unfair decisions on land distribution; exploitative and exclusionary agricultural subsidy programs are approached with caution and care, or avoided altogether; and top-down integration is replaced by meaningful cooperation between actors with equal stakes and shared values.

5.3. *Emancipatory subjectivities*

We understand subjectivities as the ways in which people are brought into relations of power through particular subject positions (Nightingale, 2011), such as urban and rural, worthy and unworthy, practicing sustainable ways of living or the contrary. By discursively placing authority in the people, populism subjectivates the subject in a particularly ambiguous manner (Mamonova and Franquesa, 2019): it disempowers people *in the name of* empowerment. The conceptual focus on subjectivities helps elucidate the possibilities for resistance to emerge as subjectivities are constantly shifting (Butler, 1997, Sundberg, 2004): emancipatory subjectivities re-signify subjugated subject positions and the meaning of equality and justice. As formulated by Swyngedouw, when the subject rejects the position they are prescribed by authoritarian populist politics, what emerges is

> a moment of disidentification with the consensually established order and the part one plays in its enactment, thereby rupturing the unequal configuration of the given and open up a space and time for transgression and egalitarian transformation (2021, 17).

Following from this, we define emancipatory subjectivities as those which emerge through processes and moments wherein persons and groups rethink their positions as citizen-subjects and start relating differently to themselves and others, including to the narratives of the state and institutions, their rules and regulations. Whether emancipatory subjectivities will ultimately lead to social-political-natural transformations towards sustainability largely depends on how one builds upon these subjectivities, for example through strategic alliances or, on the contrary, how they are constrained. The cases and life stories of the persons we interviewed offer insight into those citizen subjectivities that are in the process of transforming and being reclaimed in ways that signify potential cracks in authoritarian and populist rural politics: emancipatory subjectivities constitute the becoming of political subjects (Swyngedouw 2021).

Picturing our interviewees only through the image of "university graduates wearing rubber boots" (interview with Anna, February 2021) obscures the multiple subjectivities they perform. In many cases, it is these multiple subjectivities that underpin their becoming political subjects. For example, Hugó is a farmer who is also active in local politics; Anna is a farmer involved in research; Dániel is a farmer involved in both local politics and religious activities. While the state recognises them only through one of their subject positions – as taxable individuals ('farmer', 'smallholder', 'agro-tourism provider', etc.), it is precisely through their multiple subjectivities that they engage in networks and have the capacities to strengthen alliances and promote counter-knowledge claims.

Importantly, in the process of becoming political subjects, a space of vulnerability to repression can also be opened up: in Alexander's case, harassment compelled his family to move, and Hugó faced more controls from agricultural authorities and potential fines. At the time of the interview, Hugó was active in an oppositional political party. He told us:

> When I entered the party, I got four controls within three months – I cannot rule that as a mere coincidence. I'm in a sensitive position, politically vulnerable, I lease state-owned land. I'm subjected to the authorities and political intentions (interview, February 2021).

However, vulnerability should not necessarily be seen as something negative that only debilitates the subject. When understood through a relational ontology (Butler, 1997), it can help in constructing relations – a sort of political collective that instead of erasing differences, builds on these differences to challenge the very vulnerabilising processes that affect its members. This shared vulnerability is already facilitating the emergence of such collectives, for example, through the exchange of tips on how to go around unjust regulations. It is for this reason that we argue that emancipation needs to be understood as a process rather than an endpoint. The authoritarian populist and nationalist narrative about 'progress' is very much in line with the type of 'competitive' agricultural model that is promoted by integrators. We claim that we need to understand 'progress' very differently: progress is when (emancipatory, caring, compassionate) relations between humans and non-humans are created via the emancipatory process. Such an understanding requires us to focus on the values (e.g., solidarity, equity, democracy) that should underpin emancipation rather than (often problematic) endpoints (e.g., increase in agricultural productivity, economic growth).

The world is in crisis, and people need to rethink their ways of producing and living with the land; this was a common claim by respondents who practice alternative farming. Alexander expressed that he wanted to reach independence in all spheres of his farm by producing locally everything he needed to feed his family (interview, February 2021). Dániel, who also strived for self-sufficiency, was one of the few respondents to link his agricultural practices to his desire to become independent from 'the system' and political pressure. Stating ironically that "usually this part is cut out from interviews", he said:

> The dekulakisation[11] of the 1950s can happen tomorrow. So they could bring in a law tomorrow, that this lifestyle is finished, because it is too alternative. I don't really depend on whether Gyurcsány or Orbán is prime minister, because regardless, our cow will yield 20 L of milk, and I will have butter. I'm not dependant like those living in the city […] (interview, February 2021).

This vision of independence can be problematic as it does not impede the thriving of the authoritarian regime and its supporters, integrators, and oligarchs. As Kristóf expressed, wanting to be independent through self-sufficiency can be seen as a selfish behaviour; instead, alternative knowledges and practices need to expand (interview, March 2021). To this, we add: strategic alliances between new political subjects need to push forward the emancipatory and food sovereign democratic agenda and practice (Kondoh, 2015; Nicholson, 2011).

Just like alliances and counter-knowledge claims, the emergence of emancipatory subject-positions is crucial in reshaping those three rural pillars propagated by Orbán's illiberal governance. The young, educated persons we interviewed and who practice alternative farming can forge pathways towards emancipation precisely because of their multiple and contested subjectivities: subjectivities which are underpinned by an idea of care – for one's health, for nature and for others. Taking advantage of their multiple subjectivities has allowed our respondents to challenge unequal land distribution programs, draw on shared experiences of subsidy schemes, mobilize activist circles, promote climate preparedness and even establish themselves in a market niche that renders them independent of the traditional commodity system.

The importance of alliances, counter-knowledge claims and the

[11] The demonization and persecution of private landholders during communist rule.

emergence of emancipatory subject-positions are not new in the literature that discusses food sovereignty and sustainability interconnected with democracy (see for example Hassanein, 2003, Holt Giménez and Shattuck, 2011, Renting et al., 2012, Sumner and Wever, 2015, Kennedy et al., 2018): yet they have a particularly contradictory character which our case study has helped to highlight. In the final section of our paper we reiterate and reflect on a key question: how do emancipatory alternatives affect democratic governance? We close by proposing food democracy as a useful conceptual framework to situate the findings of our paper.

6. Rethinking sustainability beyond authoritarian populism: food democracy for whom and for what?

Our empirical evidence illustrates how strategic alliances, counter-knowledge claims, and emancipatory subjectivities can help put questions of sustainable rural politics back into a broader agenda of democratic governance. Moreover, it prompts us to rethink emancipation from authoritarian rule as an ambiguous, rather than a straightforward, process. The interviews show that emancipatory initiatives that question the meanings and practices of sustainability and democratic relations are often simultaneously emancipatory *and* exclusionary. Therefore, the question of emancipation becomes emancipation *for whom* and *at what price*, as well as *how to anticipate* and work with the exclusions that the processes of emancipation will inevitably create (Nightingale, 2019).

The political ambiguities expressed by some of our respondents highlighted the fact that the connections between alternative farming practices and democratic and inclusionary political convictions are not straightforward either. One respondent had clearly far-right convictions and had even been part of the far-right political party Jobbik. Another talked in denigrating ways about Roma populations. While these people contribute to rethinking sustainability through their alternative practices, the performance of their political subjectivities is at times embedded in exclusionary and even racist convictions. This observation reinforces our claim that alternative farming initiatives need to be re-politicised with a stronger focus on the tenets of democratic governance. This is extremely important under Orbán's racist and exclusionary politics.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which many of us expected to become a major crisis that would push forward radical socio-environmental changes, has also highlighted the ambiguities of emancipatory processes (Gonda et al. 2022). While some respondents reported that the pandemic had positive impacts – such as increased buyer-consciousness, improved community engagement between farms, but also between farms, buyers, and local communities – they also mourned the hijacking of emancipation through the authoritarian populist propaganda of 'promoting local,' which in the case of Orbán's regime intersected with nationalist and racist claims.

Given that emancipation is such an ambiguous process, we argue that conflicts and dissent need to be embraced rather than avoided (Gonda et al. 2023, Mouffe, 2013), while alliance-building processes should not be idealised. Indeed, conflicts will probably arise in the attempt to move away from neoliberalism, capitalism and authoritarianism. Sustainability science tends to emphasise consensus and thus fails to address larger issues of conflict or opposition (Swyngedouw, 2022). Yet contentious debates about the meaning of democracy, food sovereignty, emancipation, and sustainability (for whom, how, and at what cost?) are inevitable: they should be at the heart of democratic arenas from the local to the global level.

We find the concept of food democracy useful for scholar-activists to engage with ecological stewardship entangled with the opportunity of collectively building the relations of food production, distribution, and consumption. As Johnston et al. claim, "food system sustainability needs to be seen as much more than a set of ecological standards easily met by discerning consumers: it is a fundamentally political project with obligatory cultural, social, and ideological dimensions" (2009, 527). But this ecological-political project of food democracy in Hungary faces two challenges that need to be discussed and revealed to the public purview rather than hidden, in order to find allies.

The first challenge is what at first glance looks like a co-optation of alternative farming as we have illustrated with the case of the Hungarian 'organigarch' in Section 5.1. but that also happens at the corporate level. These types of cases are not just 'about how "genuine" alternative practices are annulled by corporate appropriation' (Kennedy et al., 2018; Johnston et al., 2009, 527). Rather, the fact that they are praised as emancipatory reveals the lack of politicization of consumer choice (i.e. the insufficient efforts and capacities to rethink the industrial food system beyond its neoliberal – and in this case authoritarian– reliance). For this reason, we advocate for a radicalization of our position concerning food sovereignty and democracy. Indeed, food sovereignty comes with "the right to control policies and public goods, and to define what we eat from a social perspective, not just an individual one" (Nicholson, 2011). Within a framework of neoliberal politics and Orbán's authoritarianism, food sovereignty cannot happen. Put simply, we need not only to question what we eat but also who produces it and whom the production process benefits.

The second main challenge that the Hungarian case highlights in terms of food democracy is the need to question and repoliticise the meanings of locality, refusing nationalist and xenophobic interpretations. Eating local produce, supporting local growers and organizing production on a manageable scale can be just as much at the heart of food democracy initiatives as in commodified, and elitist pro-authoritarian regime programs. What is crucial is to collectively re-think the industrial food system and educate consumers so that they become a political community rather than an individual one (mindful consumers). While the local scale may be the adequate one in some cases (e.g., progressive community projects), in other cases governance and ownership issues may be more effectively organized at the regional level, through strategic international alliances, and even lead to crucial relations of solidarity across places and nations. No matter at which scale, networks such as basket communities, online discussion platforms, and international educational initiatives have the responsibility of supporting this politicisation.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Noémi Gonda: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. **Péter József Bori:** Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Writing - review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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Appendix I. – List of Interviewees

Nr	Anonymised Name	Region	Gender	Industry
1	Hugó	Pest County	M	Farming, Local Politics
2	Anna	Pest County	F	Farming, Research
3	Olivér	Pest County	M	Farming, Medical professional
4	Benjámin	Zala County	M	Farming
5	Dániel	Pest County	M	Farming
6	Ádám	Nógrád County	M	Farming
7	Alexander	Pest County	M	Farming
8	Alfréd	Pest County	M	Farming
9	Kristóf	Heves County	M	Farming
10	Patrik	Capital Region	M	Food Retail, Hospitality
11	Martin	Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok County	M	Business, Farming, Hotels
12	Oszkár	Hajdú-Bihar County	M	Integrator
13	Félix	Csongrád-Csanád County	M	Integrator
14	Barnabás	Pest County	M	Farming
15	Jónás	Capital Region	M	Chamber of Agriculture
16	Márton	Csongrád-Csanád County	M	Farming
17	Miklós	Capital Region	M	Research Institute of Agricultural Economics
18	Ilona	Capital Region	F	Smallholder Interest Group
19	Róbert	Pest County	M	Agricultural Consultant – CAP
20	András	Capital Region	M	Chamber of Agriculture

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