What are the barriers? 'Alternative' sustainability initiatives and problems of change-making in a neoliberalized world

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Abstract

Contributing to debates around eco-localist organising's change-making potential at a time of planetary-scale ecological crisis, this research examines two community-scale environmental organisations in rural north-west England: a food hub and a renewable energy company. Although informed by different eco-social imaginaries, both initiatives attempted to develop ecologically sensitive alternatives to fossil fuel-based production practices by building projects aimed at the alleviation of social problems generated by post-2008 austerity policies. Both initiatives, however, faced significant barriers in this regard. Combining insights from eco-Marxist and (neo-)Gramscian approaches, I examine these barriers and the contrasting ways the participants understood and sought to overcome them.

Using ethnographic case studies, and by reading developments in the field of eco-localism through a Marxian critique of neoliberalism, I examine the rise of community localism as a 'grassroots' response to neoliberal globalization and explore how the co-evolution of neoliberalism and civil society environmentalism has shaped localist organising in Britain. Drawing on the case studies, I argue that in advanced neoliberal contexts, eco-localist initiatives can, by channelling the energies of 'civil society' environmentalists in sub-hegemonic directions, reinforce existing social arrangements. Yet I show, too, how activities on this terrain can also transform embedded structures and create spaces where counter-hegemonic activities can flourish.

Building on this, I offer a way to break the impasse that has been reached in current debates between champions of 'top-down', left eco-modernist approaches and proponents of 'bottom-up', degrowth-focused, eco-localist perspectives. I show how the rapid roll-out of large-scale production that the former call for, and the urgent expansion of community-based activities that the latter demand, are not opposing goals, as is often assumed, but in fact constitute the condition of possibility for each other. I conclude by arguing that to bring about emancipatory change, activities in each of these spheres must be re-politicised.

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Declaration

This thesis is the result of my own work and has not been submitted in support of an application for another degree at this or any other university. I also confirm that formal approval to exceed the permitted maximum word length has been granted.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval for this research has been granted by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Management School Research Ethics Committee (FASS-LUMS REC) (see Appendix 1).

Chapter 1: Introduction

Ours is, without doubt, an age of catastrophe. Climate breakdown, mass extinction, social murder, inchoate fascism, authoritarian crackdowns, zoonotic spillovers, live-streamed genocide, the looming threat of global war: a terrifying complex of mutually reinforcing crises whose recent intensification marks the beginning of a new and even darker phase of human history.

Over the past few decades, this proliferation of crises – along with the increasingly evident inability of political elites and capital to contain them – has driven subaltern actors around the world to search for emancipatory, environmentally sensitive alternatives to the institutions and practices of globalized capitalism. As many commentators have pointed out, from the early 2000s onwards in advanced neoliberal contexts like Britain, localization emerged as a key organising principle animating such efforts. Among activist groups, across academia, and within policy circles, interest in localism has surged since that time, and localist logic has exerted a steadily growing influence on activities in, and analyses of, a range of critical sectors, such as energy, economy, food and transport, to name just a few (Albo, 2007; Hopkins, 2008, 2013; McKibben, 2007, 2011; Phillips, 2015, 2019; Schoppek, 2020; Saito, 2024; Sharzer, 2016).

For reasons I will explore in coming chapters, over recent decades the notion that localized activity is *inherently* 'better' than that occurring over greater distances has been translated into 'common sense' in 'progressive' social circles (Albo, 2007; Goodman, et al., 2012; Sharzer, 2012; Srnicek and Williams, 2016). As a result, for many subaltern actors today, localist solutions are unquestionably seen as *the* way to tackle society's most pressing problems – from rising carbon emissions and increasing alienation from nature, to declining community cohesion and escalating levels of mental distress (see, for example, Hopkins, 2008, 2013; Katz and Nowak, 2018; McKibben, 2007; Simms, 2012; Stables, 2019).

I claim, however, that if one takes a critical look at localism's rise from the vantage point of today's *too*-late capitalist conjuncture (Kornbluh, 2024), it can be noted that as subaltern interest in localization has grown, so too have the problems that 'progressive' eco-localists have been working to resolve. It is important to acknowledge here, of course, that this expansion of localist activity has generated, and continues to generate, real benefits for particular communities rooted in particular locales. Yet, it must be stressed, too, that the localist initiatives and movements that emerged have not managed to congeal into a social force capable of universalising these gains. While innumerable 'nowtopian' projects have found fertile ground in capitalist society's cracks and gaps, they have nevertheless failed to molecularly displace that society in the way that

many localists assumed they would. Nor is there any indication that such an outcome is likely any time soon.

For me, localism's failure in this regard raises serious questions about the strategic efficacy of the forms of eco-localist activity that have emerged during the decades of neoliberalism's advance. Given the seriousness of our ecological predicament, the continuing prevalence of eco-localist ideas among environmentalists today, and the limited time left to act if there is to be any chance of avoiding irreversible eco-social breakdown, I claim that a renewed interrogation of contemporary eco-localist practice is urgently required. This study is intended to contribute to that objective.

My research is built around in-depth case studies of two eco-localist initiatives operating out of northwest England: *Greenstar*, a (pro-capitalist) community energy company, and *Freshfair*, a (covertly anti-capitalist) food hub. Both projects were established in the immediate post-2008 conjuncture and both sought to develop local-scale responses to the problems of rapidly intensifying environmental crisis and the rise in social hardship associated with the UK government's implementation of post-crash austerity policies. This study will assess these projects' efforts in these areas and consider what their contrasting developmental pathways can tell us about: 1) the value of their initial localist approaches; 2) 'grassroots' environmental organising in advanced neoliberal contexts more broadly; and 3) how subaltern localist activity might be adapted to make it more effective going forward. It seeks answers to the following research questions:

1) *At a time when new, ecologically-sound ways of living are so desperately required, what barriers impede the expansion of 'alternative', local, low-carbon food and energy production initiatives operating in a fossil fuel-centric neoliberal society?*

2) *What intersections can be made productively between the macro-level analyses critical of a continuing capitalist imaginary and fine-scaled analyses of 'alternative' organisations operating in a predominantly capitalist framework?*

How this study is structured

My thesis is organised in the following way. Chapter 2 'lays the table', so to speak, by introducing key Marxian and (neo-)Gramscian concepts such as value, metabolic rift, the integral state, hegemony, sub-hegemony, and counter-hegemony. I draw on these concepts in later chapters to examine the activities of *Freshfair* and *Greenstar*.

Chapter 3 offers an overview of the localist literature, with a particular focus on the sectors of food, energy, and local economies most relevant to my study. This work not only informs the

analysis of the case studies in chapters 6, 7 and 8, but also, by setting out the main contours of key debates in the localist literature, grounds my intervention into these debates (see chapter 9).

Chapter 4 considers neoliberal development in Britain. Here I look at how neoliberalization processes have shaped environmentalist thought and action over recent decades; on this basis, I examine the post-2008 rise of responsible eco-capitalist ideas that would so deeply influence *Greenstar Energy*'s approach.

In chapter 5, I explore key methodological issues relating to this study. In this discussion, I set out and seek to justify the methods I chose to employ. I also explain how my relationship to the research questions changed over time, and comment on the ethics review process. Lastly, I outline my stance on issues such as reflexivity, positionality and sampling.

Chapters 6 and 7 contain the *Freshfair* and *Greenstar* case studies. Within, I introduce the initiatives, describe their organizational set-ups, discuss the motivations of their key participants, set out their core aims, assess their performances, and examine how their overall strategic approaches changed (or didn't change) over time.

Building on that work, chapter 8 analyses the development of these projects in more detail. By closely examining the relationship between objective structures and the participants' subjective experiences, here I aim to show: 1) how long-term neoliberalizing trends shaped the activities at each initiative; 2) how these developments influenced the participants' attempts at social construction; 3) how the nature of consent at each project shifted over time. Drawing on that discussion, I then outline the key barriers that faced *Freshfair* and *Greenstar* as they tried to develop alternative, ecologically-sound ways of living (see research question 1 above).

The concluding chapter 9 has two main aims. It seeks to: 1) contribute to the development of contemporary eco-localist strategy by arguing that the organizational changes introduced at *Freshfair* could, if taken up among subaltern localist activists more broadly, help to create the conditions needed for a wider emancipatory eco-social transition; 2) contribute to the literature by staging two separate interventions into contemporary eco-localist debates. The first of these interventions builds on the examination of *Freshfair* in chapter 6 to help expose the limits of the Marxian critique I used to conduct that analysis. The second offers a way to break the impasse that has been reached in recent debates in the localist literature between proponents of 'bottom-up', degrowth-focused, eco-localist perspectives and those of a more statist, left eco-modernist persuasion (Heron, 2024b; Huber, 2022; Huber and Phillips, 2024; Schmeltzer, et al., 2022). I show that these supposedly irreconcilable positions are not opposed, as is so often assumed, but internally related. I bring the thesis to a close by outlining how the perspectival shift my analysis provokes can inform contemporary eco-localist practice and aid subaltern efforts to create an emancipatory, ecologically-sound, non-capitalist social order.

What this study does *not* cover

Having set out the areas this thesis covers, I will now say a few words about some key themes I do not discuss in the coming pages.

Although *Freshfair* and *Greenstar* were established in an advanced neoliberal British context, and therefore in a 'core' capitalist nation whose wealth in large part derives from the (historic and continuing) exploitation of 'peripheral' Southern regions, I do not *explicitly* consider this issue in the chapters that follow. Consequently, my thesis does not discuss crucial topics such as, unequal ecological exchange (Ajl, 2023; Khadri, 2023), South-North value flows (Ajl, 2012; Brand and Wissen, 2021; Hickel, et al., 2022), the enforced de-development of Southern regions (Amin, 1974; Rodney, 2018; Suwandi, 2019; Williams, 2022), or Britain's colonial past and its legacies (Gilroy, 2005; Hicks, 2020; Karam, 2022; Lashmar, 2025), despite the unquestionable importance of these issues and their enduring relevance for social research. Likewise, although *Freshfair* and *Greenstar* operated in an advanced neoliberal action setting where capitalist-heterosexist-patriarchal relations were deeply embedded (Arruzza, et al., 2019; Fraser, 2020; Olufemi, 2020), I do not specifically explore how these relations shaped the projects' activities, though shape them they did.

It is important to acknowledge here, then, that this study would have been stronger if I had included these issues in my analysis. Such an approach would have enabled me to examine, say, the role that 'cheap' food from the global South played in the reproduction of global North populations following the 2008 crisis, and therefore how these dynamics shaped the terrain on which the *Freshfair* actors operated (see Brand and Wissen, 2021; Moore and Patel, 2020). Or, to offer another example, it would have allowed me to explore why the case study initiatives were overwhelmingly staffed and controlled by white cisgender males – an issue that, despite its clear significance, I touch on only briefly in chapters 6 and 7. However, it is also important to note here that a single study can only cover so much ground, and that considerations of space and focus meant that while writing this thesis, lines had to be drawn and decisions made regarding what to include and what to leave out. I do not try to claim that this selection process was neutral and objective, but instead accept that it was (necessarily) subjective and indelibly stained by my own experiences, interests, blind spots and biases (both conscious and unconscious). Because these factors played an important role in influencing the overall shape of my thesis, I discuss them at length in chapter 5.

Having set out these brief introductory remarks, I can now move on to consider the key Marxian and (neo-)Gramscian concepts that will, in later chapters, underpin my analysis of the case study projects, my explanation of why we find ourselves living in an age of catastrophe, and my argument that (re-)politicised eco-localist movements can help us to get out of it.

Chapter 2: Theoretical preliminaries – (eco-)Marxian and (neo-) Gramscian approaches

Introduction

This chapter introduces the key concepts I later draw on to examine the ecological, economic, spatial and social dimensions of the case study projects. It has five main sections.

In section 2.1 I offer some preparatory comments regarding Marxian understandings of capitalist social formations. In section 2.2 I discuss Marxian value theory, and then move on to consider the ecological impacts of capitalistic social activity in section 2.3. There I discuss the Marxian 'metabolic rift' approach, which will inform my understanding of human-nature relations in the rest of the thesis.

Section 2.4 introduces Gramsci by examining his work on hegemony. In section 2.5 I consider his views on the relationship between coercion and consent in political governance; I also introduce the related, neo-Gramscian concepts of sub-hegemony and counter-hegemony (2.6). These will be important for the arguments I put forward in chapters 8 and 9. The final section (2.7) outlines Gramsci's conception of the 'integral state' and briefly considers his ideas around 'wars of position' to highlight the strategic significance of activities that occur on the 'civil society' terrain. In each section I point out how the concepts considered will feed into the discussion in later chapters.

2.1 Marx, capitalism, production

Marx opens *Capital* volume 1 with the observation that the capitalist mode of production is one in which wealth appears as an 'immense accumulation of commodities' (Marx, 1976). He takes the commodity form of the product of labour as the basic unit of his analysis of the capitalist mode of production: for him, it constitutes the 'economic cell-form' of bourgeois society[1] (Marx, 1976: 90). Marx also demonstrates how commodities (and other forms of the capital relation) are riven by the core contradiction between their use-value and exchange-value aspects (Marx, 1976; Sum and Jessop, 2013: 237). This point is important, and I will return to it often in the chapters that follow.

In capitalist social formations, where practical human activity is distinctly and disproportionately geared toward the production of commodities, the commodity form is *generalised* (Marx, 1976; Longo et al., 2015: 32). Crucially, it is extended to labour-power,

[1] Sum and Jessop suggest that had Marx lived to see the revolution in genetics, the stem cell form might have been a more appropriate analogy (Sum and Jessop, 2013: 239).

which is treated *as if* it is a commodity[2] (like land, money, and knowledge, it is a fictitious commodity) (Sum and Jessop, 2013: 263). This extension of property rights, contracts, and markets to include the sale of labour power constitutes a fundamental way in which capitalism differs from pre-capitalist societies (ibid.).

In contrast to, say, slave-based and feudal societies, in capitalist formations, members of the lower classes are not *directly* compelled to produce by economic elites. Instead, they offer their labour-power for sale to capitalists through formally free and equal transactions in the labour market. As Huber has pointed out, this arrangement – based as it supposedly is on *voluntary* acts of exchange between the buyers and sellers of labour power – has formed the ideological core of capitalism from its classical liberal through to its neoliberal stages (Huber, 2022: 54; see also Callinicos, 1983). Seen from this perspective, workers are free to work for whoever they choose, and it is this notion of 'freedom' that capitalism's champions often point to when they are looking to highlight its supposed superiority as a social system (Friedman, 1990, 2020; Harvey, 2005, chapter 1).

Marx, however, challenged this basic idea. He claimed that the bourgeois focus on 'equality' and 'freedom' *in the sphere of exchange* helped to conceal the real source of value in capitalist economies and the gross inequalities that underpin this system of production. In *Capital* volume 1, he argued that, to understand the operations of a capitalist society, it was necessary to leave the sphere of circulation/commodity exchange – where 'everything takes place on the surface and in full view of everyone' – and to venture into capitalism's 'hidden abode of production', on 'whose threshold there hangs the notice 'No admittance except on business''[3] (Marx, 1976: 279–280; for how this relates to the politics of climate change, see Huber, 2022). According to Marx, it is only on entering this realm that the vast power imbalance between capital and labour finally becomes clear. For it is here, Marx notes, that:

> …he who was previously the money owner… strides out in front as a capitalist; the possessor of labour-power follows as his worker. The one smirks self-importantly and is intent on business; the other is timid and holds back, like someone who has brought his own hide to market and now has nothing else to expect but – a tanning (Marx, 1976: 280).

Marx pointed out that for this formally 'free' transaction between capital and labour to occur, a particular set of social arrangements already had to be in place: the capitalist class must own

[2] I do not assume that labour power is a commodity like any other (the value of which is determined by the value of the commodities needed to 'reproduce' it), but that the dynamic of capital accumulation derives from the treatment of labour-power *as if* it were a commodity (Sum and Jessop, 2013: 263).
[3] As Nancy Fraser has pointed out, it is also necessary to look *behind* Marx's hidden abode to take account of issues such as social reproduction and ecological degradation (Fraser, 2014).

and control access to the means of production; the labouring classes, by contrast, must own nothing but their capacity to labour, and must have no way to access the facilities or resources required to meet their daily subsistence needs outside of the wage relation (Marx, 1976; also Burkett, 1996: 338; Huber, 2017). On this basis, Marx argued that workers under capitalism are free in a 'double sense': free to dispose of labour-power as their own commodity – yet free, too, of everything necessary for the realisation of their labour-power (Marx, 1976: 272).

The issue of land (which can be viewed as the primary means of production) is centrally important here. For when Marx states that the operation of the capitalist labour market presumes the social separation of producers from the material conditions of life, this includes land/nature (Burkett, 1996: 338; Foster, 2000: 74; Saito, 2017). And as Marx and many contemporary eco-Marxists have pointed out, capitalism's separation of people from the land generates deleterious ecological (and social) effects (Marx, 1976; 1991; Foster, 2000; Burkett, 2014; Longo et al., 2015; Malm, 2018). I will return to this in section 2.3 below.

In the following chapters, I will draw on these ideas to help me examine the activities of the case study projects. For example, I use Marx's analysis of the commodity and his critique of market exchange to peer beneath the surface of the 'ethical' consumption practices that were popular in subaltern environmentalist circles in the action context studied here, and that would so heavily influence *Freshfair*'s approach. I will also use the ideas discussed above to think through the difficulties that both projects faced in acquiring the land they needed for their productive activities. This work will enable me, in chapter 7, to draw a distinction between subaltern strategies that are oriented towards *community*-owned production (a common environmental approach in today's advanced neoliberal context – see chapter 3) and those that aim towards *common* ownership of the means of production at a societal level (it will also underpin my later discussion of how the former can be transformed into the latter).

2.2 Value

Marx argued that commodities, like all use values, are products of labour and nature (Marx, 1976: 134; Burkett, 2014; Foster and Clark, 2020, chapter 9). Yet, while capital appropriates and transforms nature and draws on its capacities in the production of commodities, nature does not itself *create* value. According to Marx, it is the socially necessary labour power employed in the production of commodities that constitutes the sole source of value[4] (Marx, 1976; Sum and Jessop, 2013: 240; Burkett, 2014). By socially necessary labour time, Marx was referring to:

[4] Marx argues that, although capital appropriates and transforms nature's 'free gifts' and draws on its productive powers, a commodity's value depends on the amount of social labour expended on it. This has led many critics to claim that Marx's economic analysis, and particularly his theory of value, downgrades or excludes nature's contribution to production. According to Marx, however, commodities, like all use-values, are products of both labour *and* nature (Marx, 1976, p. 134; Burkett, 2014). By claiming labour as

> …the labour-time required to produce any use-value under the conditions of production normal for a given society and with the average degree of skill and intensity of labour prevalent in that society (Marx, 1976: 129).

From this, it can be seen that a commodity's value is not simply a relation between an individual producer and a product, but rather a relationship between the labour of individual producers and the total labour of society (Marx, 1976; Heinrich, 2012: 55; Saito, 2017: 107–108). For Marx, value is related to the *average* amount of time it takes to produce a commodity given the prevailing social and economic conditions (Marx, 1976; Callinicos, 1983).

Marx points out, however, that in capitalist societies, the average level of productivity is not fixed but fluctuates constantly due to the pressures arising from inter-capitalist competition. Because producers making the same product must compete with one another in the marketplace, capitalist enterprises[5] are forced to find ways to reduce the socially necessary labour time embodied in commodities in an effort to out-compete their rivals in the struggle for market share.[6] By increasing productivity and reducing the labour time required to produce commodities below the social average, more 'efficient' firms can reduce the mass of labour crystallised in their products and thus lower their value (Marx, 1976: 131). If they can sell these products at the going market rate, they can generate greater profits than their less efficient rivals.

As the innovations pioneered by leading firms become generalised over time, however, competing enterprises must search for new ways to gain an advantage (Marx, 1976; Heinrich, 2012: 16). This constant search for super-profits constitutes a basic source of capitalism's overall dynamic (Sum and Jessop, 2013: 240); enterprises that fail to engage in this race will ultimately be forced out of business. It can be seen from this that there exists a *systemic* compulsion to innovate in ways that make capitalist firms more competitive than their rivals (or at the very least to keep up with the innovations introduced by others). This also leads capitalist enterprises to maximize competitiveness by increasing their exploitation of workers and the natural environment (Marx, 1976; Mau, 2023).

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the source of value, Marx was not seeking to dismiss nature's contribution to commodity production. As Burkett has pointed out, in Marx's view, capitalist production relies on nature *and* human labour as vehicles for surplus value production. Yet capitalism only values commodities according to the amount of abstract labour they contain. This, Burkett states, is 'a contradiction of capitalism, not a shortcoming of Marx's analysis' (Burkett, 2014, pp. xvi–xvii). Consequently, he asserts, the claim that Marx's value theory inadequately recognizes natural conditions 'should be redirected toward capitalism itself' (Burkett, 2014, pp. 79–80).

[5] As well as 'non-capitalist' entities looking to sell commodities on the market, as the case of *Freshfair* will help to demonstrate.

[6] As Sum and Jessop point out, capitalist competition also compels producers to reduce the socially necessary turnover time of capital, and the naturally necessary reproduction time (Sum and Jessop, 2013, p. 240).

Because commodity values change with revolutions in technology and productivity, they are related to the outcome of struggles between capital and labour. They also change in relation to natural conditions. As Harvey has noted, values can be altered by transformations in the environment, as well as by the transfer of production facilities to places with more favourable natural conditions (Harvey, 2010: 22). Consequently, he asserts that values can only be understood 'in the relative space-time of the world market' (Harvey, 2010: 37). This point will be particularly important in my analysis of the case study projects, both of which tried – and failed – to insulate their local economic activities from the pressures that flowed in the wider capitalist economy (see chapters 6 and 7).

Value as a social relation

Because for Marx value is a social relation, it is immaterial. Value is not something that labour puts into commodities at specific sites of production; rather, the substance of value is something that commodities obtain when they are set into relation in exchange (Marx, 1976; Heinrich, 2012: 53; Huber, 2017: 4; Saito, 2017: 107). Unlike use-value, then, value does not possess a form detectable by the senses. Instead, it appears only in a 'phantom-like manner' (Marx, 1976: 128; Saito, 2017: 107). Exchange value is its 'necessary mode of expression, or form of appearance' (Marx, 1976: 128).

However, while value is immaterial, it nevertheless constitutes an objective force (Harvey, 2010, chapter 1). As noted above, in capitalist social formations, value constitutes the 'silent compulsion of economic relations' (Marx, 1976: 899; Mau, 2023). Productive activities in such formations are regulated by the law of value: the tendency of capitalists to direct resources to different areas of production according to their expectations for profit (Sum and Jessop, 2013: 241). This law guides production decisions and constantly drives the sense of a need to produce faster and more efficiently (Sharzer, 2012; Huber, 2017).

In chapter 4, I will use these ideas to examine how the spatial restructuring associated with world market integration during the neoliberal period reshaped the global division of labour, reduced the power of organised labour in advanced capitalist economies, and thereby helped to create conditions in which sub-hegemonic eco-localist imaginaries would flourish. In chapter 6, I draw on the concepts outlined above to help me think through the difficulties that *Freshfair* faced as it sought to develop local 'fair trade' networks in an action context shaped by the global-scale operation of the law of value. There I will use the hub's activities to show how the dynamics of global capitalism work to subordinate eco-localist activities to the logic of capitalism as a whole and its anti-ecological drive to accumulate (Albo, 2007: 346; Burkett, 2014; Foster and Clark, 2020, chapter 9).

2.3 Capitalism and the environment

This thesis is based on an understanding of nature-society relations that is rooted in metabolic rift (MR) theory. MR theory was distilled out of Marx's work by John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett, who ushered in a new phase of eco-Marxist research with the publication of their landmark texts, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (Foster, 2000) and *Marx and Nature: A Red and Green Perspective*[7] (Burkett, 2014 [1999]). Originally formulated by Marx on the basis of work by agronomists and agricultural chemists such as Justus von Liebig, the concept of 'metabolic rift' refers to the way that capitalist development disturbs the 'metabolic interaction between man and the earth'[8] (Marx, 1976, p. 637; Foster, 2000; Foster et al., 2010).

According to Foster's pioneering exegesis, Marx in his critique of political economy offered a three-fold ecological conception of 1) the universal metabolism of nature (consisting of biophysical processes and cycles); 2) the social metabolism (the specific relationship between human society and nature occurring through labour and production processes); and 3) metabolic rift (the ecological destruction that results when the social metabolism comes into conflict with the universal metabolism of nature) (Foster, 2000, 2022; see also Malm, 2017, 2018; Saito, 2017).

Drawing on the latest developments in the contemporary natural sciences, Marx argued that human bodies (and therefore human societies) engage in metabolic interchanges with non-human nature to survive. While this process need not be particularly damaging to either humans or nature, over the course of history, the relations through which humans organised these interchanges became fractured and rearranged in ways that harmed human societies and disturbed natural cycles and processes (Malm, 2018). Over the course of the capitalist epoch, the disharmonies generated have intensified markedly – to the point that the disruption of natural cycles is now bringing to a close the relatively stable biospheric and atmospheric conditions that have underpinned the development of human civilization over the past 12,000 years (Foster et al., 2010; Angus, 2016; Steffen et al., 2015; Richardson et al., 2023).

Capitalism as an ecological regime

Marx argued that capitalism, as a social metabolic order, organised material exchanges with ecological systems in ways that subordinated labour and nature to its impulse to accumulate. This, he claimed, had provoked an 'irreparable rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism, a metabolism prescribed by the natural laws of life itself' (Marx, 1991: 949; Longo et al., 2015: 32–33). Foster's rediscovery and extension of Marx's ecological thought around the

[7] For a useful discussion of 'first-stage', 'second-stage', and 'third stage' eco-Marxism, see (Foster, 2014: vii–xiii).
[8] To use the heavily gendered language of Marx's time.

turn of the millennium sparked a new wave of interest in eco-socialist ideas (Burkett, 2014: xv–xxvii). Since the publication of *Marx's Ecology*, scholars have increasingly turned to Marx's work in their efforts to develop an ecological critique of capitalism fit for the 21st century. As a result, growing numbers of researchers have adopted MR theory as a framework for analysing the complex interrelationship between society and nature (see, for example, Clark and Foster, 2009; Longo et al., 2015; Ergas and Clement, 2016; McGee and Alvarez, 2016). As noted above, it provides the foundation for the analysis conducted in this thesis. To help justify my adoption of this approach, here I want to briefly outline and respond to a major line of critique that has been launched against MR theory in recent years: the view that this approach is inherently and irredeemably dualistic.

Jason W. Moore, one of the most prominent advocates of this position, has criticised MR theorists for remaining trapped within the 'prison house of the cartesian binary' (Moore, 2015: 5). Moore argues that the approach taken by metabolism thinkers is problematic because, while they philosophically and discursively embrace a relational ontology, they nevertheless subscribe to a practical-analytical acceptance of the Nature/Society dualism (humanity *and* nature) (Moore, 2015: 75). Consequently:

> Rather than ford the Cartesian divide, metabolism approaches have reinforced it. Marx's 'interdependent process of social metabolism' became the 'metabolism of nature and society'… Metabolism as 'rift' became a metaphor of separation, premised on material flows between Nature and Society (Moore, 2015: 76).

Moore claims that metabolism thinkers draw hard lines between the social and the natural. This, he argues, involves 'a series of violent abstractions implicated in the creation and reproduction of two separate epistemic domains: 'Nature' and 'Society'' (Moore, 2015: 76). The result, he claims, is that Foster's 'ambivalent dualism [has] blunted the possibilities for a dialectical synthesis' (Moore, 2015: 81). In an effort to transcend this (supposed) binary view, Moore offers his dialectical 'world-ecology' approach – one where 'the apparent solidity of town and country, bourgeois and proletarian, and above all Society and Nature, begins to melt' (Moore, 2015: 84).

By employing a 'new' conceptual language that aims to overcome the dualistic thinking of MR theory, Moore argues that his approach focuses not on 'the separation of humanity and nature' as that metabolism thinkers do, but on 'the historical forms of humanity-in-nature, and therefore nature-in-humanity' (a mesh of relations he calls a 'double-internality') (Moore, 2015: 82). He argues on this basis that, instead of talking about a metabolic *rift* (understood as a cumulative separation), what is required is an approach that thinks in terms of a metabolic *shift* (one that focuses on provisional and specific unifications) (Moore, 2015: 83).

This world ecology perspective, however, has been attacked from a Marxian standpoint. Malm, for example, argues that Moore's approach is nothing but a Latourian hybridist framework dressed 'in Marxist garb' (Malm, 2018: 181). For him, this hybridist approach is problematic because it ultimately collapses 'the natural' and 'the social' into each other in a manner that dissolves distinctions and flattens ontological hierarchies (Malm, 2018). Against Moore, then, Malm points out that viewing nature and society as *analytically* discreet entities 'is different to suggesting that they can be separated out and analysed without reference to one another' (Malm, 2018: 180).

Foster echoes this point. He complains that Moore erroneously criticises as dualist 'all attempts to distinguish between nature and society, even by way of abstraction' (Foster, 2016). He goes on to emphasise the superiority of MR theory's dialectical understanding of nature-society relations, and points out that the analytical separation of parts within wholes is central to dialectical approaches:

> …dialectics is all about the mediation of totality, the process that both *separates and unites* individuals and society, humanity and nature, parts and wholes. The social metabolism in Marx's theory stands for the human role as a self-mediating being of nature through production (Foster, 2016; emphasis added).

Defending MR theory's preoccupation with the gap that has opened up between society and nature in a world dominated by capital, Foster stresses that this approach focuses on:

> …the separation of humanity and nature, on the degradation of natural processes and life, *because that is the concrete reality of society, life and nature under the current alienated system of production, capitalism*. This is the whole point of the Marxian ecological critique.

Thus, against the charge of dualism, Foster argues that:

> There is no contradiction in seeing society as both separate from and irreducible to the Earth system as a whole, *and simultaneously as a fundamental part of it*. To call that approach 'dualist' is comparable to denying that your heart is both an integral part of your body and a distinct organ with unique features and functions (Foster, 2016b, emphasis added).

Hornborg has similarly emphasised the superiority of dialectical thinking over hybridist approaches. He argues that:

> Only by keeping Society and Nature analytically apart can we hope to progress in the demystification of that hybrid web in which we are all suspended, and which more than

> anything else obstructs our pursuit of relatedness… The Laws of Thermodynamics and the political economy of oil prices require completely different analytical tools. To deny that Nature and Society need to be distinguished in this way … would be indefensible (Hornborg, 2014: 127).

For eco-Marxists operating in the MR tradition, then, labour power is understood as a 'natural force' that mediates between extra-human nature and society – the latter being understood as that which emerges when nature is worked upon by human labour (Burkett, 2014: 39). From this perspective, the difference between nature and society is a difference *internal to nature itself*. Human labour is therefore understood as nature *acting upon itself* – 'denaturalizing itself' in the realization of society (Johnston, 2019; Heron, 2021: 506–507).

In my view, the rebuttals of the dualist critique offered here are sufficient to exonerate MR theory on this score. On this basis, I claim that MR theory's materialist-dialectical perspective offers a powerful framework for analysing nature-society relations and the ways that these are disturbed under the current alienated system of production: capitalism. From the MR viewpoint, it is argued that this mode of production 'radically reorganis[es] the universal metabolism of nature from the perspective of capital's valorization' (Saito, 2017: 250; emphasis added). Thus, while the relationship between humans and nature may have always generated rifts of one kind or another, capitalism organises this interaction in a particularly distinctive way (Saito, 2017). With the metabolic relationship between humans and nature mediated by value, the expenditure of *abstract labour* becomes the primary factor in the metabolic process, with other elements – such as concrete labour and nature – playing a secondary role (Saito, 2017: 109, 162).

From the above, it can be noted that MR theory identifies an *internal* contradiction at the heart of capitalism, and in this way brings to light its *inherently* environmentally destructive nature. This eco-Marxian approach exposes the '…immanent tendency of capital to exploit both labour power and natural forces as quickly as possible, with no thought about future consequences' and shows how '[c]apital ignores the limits of the natural world, only to undermine the material conditions for sustainable production' (Saito, 2017: 201).

In chapter 7, I use these ideas to critique the localist eco-capitalist imaginary that guided the activities of *Greenstar Energy*, as well as to call into question the strategic value of 'progressive' *sub*-hegemonic environmental approaches considered more broadly. This will feed into the discussion in chapter 9, where, drawing on Foster's argument that humanity's metabolic relationship with nature needs to be *radically* transformed if eco-social catastrophe is to be averted, I consider the role that community scale environmental organisations like *Freshfair* and *Greenstar* can play in bringing such a transition about.

2.4 Hegemony

I now want to talk about the elements of (neo-)Gramscian theory that will inform the analysis in coming chapters. I begin with the concept of hegemony. Because space precludes a thoroughgoing examination of this topic, I will limit my comments here solely to those considered necessary for unfolding my argument in later chapters (particularly chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9. For more expansive treatments of this topic, see, Anderson, 2017; Martin, 2022).

For Gramsci, hegemony relates to the capacity of dominant groups to win and maintain moral, political and intellectual leadership in social life (Gramsci, 2009: 320; Eagleton, 2007: 116; Sum and Jessop, 2013: 201). It is from this position of leadership that the hegemonic force seeks to guide the development of a given social formation in line with its own particular interests (which it seeks to embed as the interests of society as a whole – see Gilbert and Williams, 2022: 34). As has often been noted, hegemony depends to a certain extent on building and maintaining alliances with subordinate groups. It is never won once and for all – rather it is a process that has to be continually reproduced, defended and modified (Williams, 1977: 112; Eagleton, 2007: 115; Gilbert and Williams, 2022: 84, 136).

To maintain hegemony, dominant groups need to disseminate a system of values, beliefs, and attitudes that support existing power relations throughout the social formation. It is necessary to note, however, that hegemony is about more than just ideas, and that it also has an important material dimension. Hegemony must be seen as a broader category than ideology: it *includes* ideology, but is not *reducible* to it (Eagleton, 2007: 112). A ruling group *may* secure the consent of subordinate groups by ideological means – but it may also do so by making *material* concessions to those whose support it needs (by changing housing policy or altering the tax system in their favour, for example) (Eagleton, 2007: 112; Sum and Jessop, 2013: 201). This point is important, and I will return to it in my discussion of the *Freshfair* food hub and its struggles for land, and in my discussion of *Greenstar Energy* and the government's feed-in tariff subsidy scheme, in chapters 6, 7 and 8.

From the above, it can be noted that through a combination of discursive and non-discursive means, dominant social actors seek to suture the identities, interests, emotions and values of key sectors of subordinate classes and other subaltern groups into a hegemonic vision, which it aims to embed in institutions and policies (Sum and Jessop, 2013: 201). Over time, the ideas, customs, and 'spontaneous' habits that are shaped in this way become sedimented, invisibilized, and translated into 'common sense' (Gramsci, 1971; Sum and Jessop, 2013: 208; Schwarzmantel, 2015; Martin, 2022).

2.5 Coercion and consent

While Gramsci acknowledged that hegemony is always underpinned by coercion (or the threat of coercion), he was keen to emphasise the importance of the role that consent played in securing the rule of dominant groups (Gramsci, 1971: 263). Eagleton, picking up on this point, has noted that all political systems typically require some degree of consent from their subjects. In capitalist formations, however, he stresses that it is consent, rather than coercion, that tends to play the more active role. He points out that in capitalist contexts, the state maintains the capacity to discipline and punish, and that it will resort to violence when this is deemed necessary. Yet, he notes, too, that the bourgeois state runs the risk of losing ideological credibility if it decides to utilise this coercive power. It is much better for dominant groups to rule by consent rather than by force, he suggests, because 'once power nakedly reveals its hand', it can then 'become an object of political contestation' (Eagleton, 2007: 116).

So, while centralised political society enforces state power through coercion, it is complemented in this effort by the institutions of 'civil society' [i.e., the 'ensemble of organisms commonly called 'private'') (Gramsci, 1971: 12) (see also section 2.7 below). For Gramsci, such institutions include schools, churches, political parties, families, trade unions, the mass media, and so on (see Rehmann, 2014: 136. I shall suggest later that they also include community-scale eco-social organisations operating in advanced neoliberal contexts). This complex system of hegemonic apparatuses is located throughout the social formation. These institutions are not usually controlled by government, but are used by dominant classes to generate consent (Gramsci, 1971: 10–14, 155, 210, 243, 261, 267).

Building on Gramsci's work, Gilbert and Williams have stressed that consent need not take the form of enthusiastic endorsement of a particular dominant group; rather, it may be 'passive in nature, a matter of compliance and casual participation rather than explicit support'. Based on this observation, they warn that hegemonic leadership is 'always complex in nature, including domination and consent, *and the great grey expanse in between*' (Gilbert and Williams, 2022: 36; emphasis added). These thinkers claim, correctly in my view, that this notion of 'passive' consent is particularly useful for thinking about the operation of hegemony in neoliberal post-democracies like the British context studied here (Gilbert and Williams, 2022: 78, 135). These ideas will underpin my discussion of the activities of *Greenstar* and *Freshfair* in chapter 8, where I will use this distinction between active and passive forms of consent to track the strategic trajectories of the case study initiatives and to examine how these were shaped by neoliberalization processes taking place in wider society.

2.6 Sub-hegemony and counter-hegemony

Having outlined my understanding of the concept of hegemony, I can now briefly consider two related concepts that will also be crucial in coming chapters. The first is sub-hegemony.

Drawing on the work of Sum and Jessop, in this thesis I will typically characterise as sub-hegemonic the activities undertaken by 'progressive' subaltern actors looking to make a 'positive' difference in the world – *and that satisfy those actors' desire to take such action* – but that pose no fundamental threat to mainstream paradigms (Sum and Jessop, 2013: 400).

I want to note here that it is in the interests of dominant groups to permit such activities (rather than ban them outright) because they can help to protect existing social arrangements by acting as a kind of 'pressure release valve' for social discontent: they offer disaffected citizens a way to *do something* about the problems that concern them, but in a way that poses no danger to embedded institutions or established modes of living. In the chapters that follow, I will primarily deploy this term to refer to activities that aim towards 'progressive' environmental and social outcomes, yet that seek to do so through particularistic, gradualist, reformist approaches that leave the core elements of capitalist society (the commodity form, the wage form, the private ownership and control of production, the market-based allocation of goods and services, and so on) intact. The notion of sub-hegemony will be particularly important in my discussion of *Greenstar Energy* in chapter 7.

This can be contrasted to the second concept I want to consider here: counter-hegemony. I want to note that Gramsci himself did not use this term; rather, it is one that has been employed by more recent theorists who have updated Gramsci's work to help them think about subaltern resistance strategies in a context shaped by neoliberal globalization (Gill, 1993; Morton, 2007; Martin, 2022: 93). Gramsci, who was writing in very different social conditions to those existing today, wasn't looking to *counter* capitalism, but rather to *replace* it by building a new hegemonic order (Martin, 2022: 93). In the contemporary capitalist conjuncture, however – one where no alternative 'historic bloc' exists, and in which the notion of replacing capitalism through a 'war of movement' (see below) is often understood, even on the left, as farfetched – subaltern actors have increasingly focused their attention on trying to hold back the capitalist tide through localised struggles against transnational corporations and neoliberal governance (Cox, 1993; Morton, 2007, chapter 5; Martin, 2022).

Given the prevailing balance of social forces and considering the uphill task facing radical actors looking to build emancipatory futures amid the ruins of late neoliberal capitalism, I suggest that the notion of counter-hegemony is a useful one. In this thesis, I will primarily use this term to refer to activities that *consciously* seek to resist and replace established *capitalist* practices (at any level), and that have as their *ultimate horizon* the overturning of the capitalist social order (even when achieving this aim seems a flight of fancy). This categorization will be particularly important in my discussion of the *Freshfair* food hub in chapters 6 and 8. In my analysis chapters, I hope to show how together, the notions of hegemony, sub-hegemony, and

counter-hegemony offer a useful conceptual framework for thinking about the activities of the case study projects.

2.7 Civil society and the (integral) state

In the chapters that follow, I will talk frequently about 'civil society'. I want to acknowledge here that there exists no broad agreement on the meaning of this term, which has long been a contested concept. The notion of civil society has served as a foundational idea in political thinking since the enlightenment, and it is one that has been approached from a wide range of philosophical, theoretical, and political angles (Gramsci, 1971; Habermas, 1989, 1992; Hegel, 1991; Marx, 2000; Foucault, 2008; Jessop, 2022: 137). Over the course of the neoliberal period, the term 'civil society' became increasingly associated with the growing role of 'third sector' organizations, public-private partnerships and community-based actors in public service delivery in response to problems caused by market and state failure (Jessop, 2022: 219). Because this topic is important for my examination of the case studies in chapters 6, 7 and 8, I will expand on it in chapter 4.

In this thesis, I draw on Jessop's work to help me think about activities that take place on the 'civil society' terrain (Jessop, 2022). For him, 'civil society' does not denote 'a specific site with its own structured coherence' but rather comprises a 'heterogeneous set of institutional orders and pluralistic set of agents', many of which 'are operationally autonomous and resistant to control from outside – whether through market forces, top-down command or horizontal networking'. He also notes that 'civil society' is a '*contested* space' – a 'rich and confused site of multiple and contestable identities that can be mobilized for both *pro- and anti-systemic purposes*' (Jessop, 2022: 1–4; emphasis added). In my view, this stress on contestation and struggle in 'civil society' fits well with the distinction, made above, between sub-hegemonic activities, on the one hand, and counter-hegemonic activities on the other. Given capitalism's *inherent* contradictions and crisis tendencies, I suggest that this distinction is important. Indeed, in coming chapters, I will often assess the potential emancipatory value of activities taking place on the 'civil society' terrain by working to determine whether they are sub-hegemonic or counter-hegemonic in nature and intent.

Gramsci's ideas concerning civil society and the state will also play an important role in the chapters to come. Building on the discussion of coercion and consent above, here I want to point out that for Gramsci, the state was not simply understood as a co-ordinating centre and *coercive* apparatus of class power, but rather as:

> the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, *but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules* (Gramsci, 1971: 244; emphasis added).

This idea was central to Gramsci's conception of the 'integral state' – an expansive definition of the state that considered 'political society' and 'civil society' not as separate entities (as they are often understood), but as *fundamentally interrelated spheres* (Gramsci, 1971: 206–276; Buttigieg, 2005: 38; Rehmann, 2014: 136). When seen from this angle, it can be noted, as Jessop has pointed out, that: ''Civil society', a domain of ostensibly 'private' associations', constitutes 'an integral part of the state and, a fortiori, of politics and policy' (Jessop, 2016: 47–48). For Gramsci, the state was not to be viewed simply as a 'dictatorship' of the bourgeoisie that used its material might to *impose* its rule on society, but rather as a terrain of social contestation where political groups and classes engage in struggles for supremacy through attempts to build coalitions and embed a unifying culture (Gramsci, 1971: 239; Martin, 2022: 22–23).

To understand these struggles, Gramsci famously compared the structures of civil society in developed capitalist countries to 'the trench systems of modern warfare' (Gramsci, 1971: 235). Writing in the wake of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, he contrasted the situation in Russia (where 'the State was everything and civil society was primordial and gelatinous') with that prevailing in the West, where, he claimed, there existed a 'proper relation between State and civil society'. Gramsci argued that in advanced capitalist contexts, a complex association of civil society organisations worked to reinforce state rule. According to him, the state was 'only an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks' that shielded the state from public hostility and helped ensure the reproduction of existing social arrangements. Consequently, when as a result of political struggles 'the state trembled', 'a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed' (Gramsci, 1971: 237, 248; also Schwarzmantel, 2015; Martin, 2022: 20).

I claim that his conceptual pairing of 'war of manoeuvre' and 'war of position' is particularly significant here – not only because these concepts help to illustrate what was distinctive about Gramsci's political approach at the time, but also because, as I hope to show in chapter 9, they provide useful theoretical tools for thinking about eco-localist strategy in the contemporary crisis conjuncture. Given the importance I place on his distinction between 'wars of manoeuvre' and 'wars of position' in that chapter, I will say a little about each of these here.

When Gramsci employed the term 'war of manoeuvre', he was referring to political strategies oriented towards direct frontal assaults on the state. Prominent examples here include Luxemburg's notion of the mass strike and Trotsky's strategy of 'permanent revolution' (Gramsci, 1971: 179–80, 220–1, 238, 241, 243; Trotsky, 1931; Luxemburg, 1986: 153-218; see also Martin, 2022). Gramsci argued that in advanced capitalist nations, such approaches were highly problematic because they tended to seriously underestimate the strength and deep-rooted

nature of civil society superstructures, which, as I noted above, made advanced capitalist states less susceptible to frontal attack. In such contexts, Gramsci argued that instead of launching direct assaults against the state's coercive apparatus as part of a war of manoeuvre, subordinate social groups needed to focus their efforts on conducting a wider 'war of position' on the civil society terrain. In this way, such groups could work to create the conditions needed for a wider emancipatory social transformation by operating within the institutions of civil society and gradually taking key 'enemy' positions (Martin, 2022: 23). Gramsci acknowledged that this struggle would be 'concentrated' and 'difficult', and that it would require 'exceptional qualities of patience and inventiveness' (Gramsci, 1971: 239). Nevertheless, he argued that only in this way could subaltern actors work to build civil hegemony and develop the capacities needed to ultimately challenge for state power (Gramsci, 1971: 57; Schwarzmantel, 2015: 209).

Based on this discussion, I claim that, despite the many differences that exist between the social conditions prevailing in Gramsci's time and those of today, his work on civil society and the state contains useful insights for my study (particularly when considered alongside more recent thinkers who have also dealt with the issue of emancipatory eco-social transitions such as Erik Olin Wright (2010; 2019)).[9]

Having outlined the key ideas that will underpin the arguments advanced in later chapters, I can now move on to discuss the study-relevant literature on eco-localism and subaltern transition strategies.

[9] Although a lack of space here precludes a discussion of the complementarities and contrasts between the works of Gramsci and Wright, I will alight on this issue here and there throughout the coming chapters

Chapter 3: Literature Review

Introduction

This review of the literature is split into two main parts. In the first, I discuss the increasing influence of localist thinking in the field of subaltern environmentalism over recent decades and consider some of the most relevant arguments *for* localisation. This part has five main sections, each of which will feed into my examination of the case studies in later chapters. Section 3.1 considers localism as a general approach to subaltern eco-social activity; sections 3.2 and 3.3 look at local energy; section 3.4 discusses local food; section 3.5 focuses on local economies.

Part two takes a critical look at the main pro-localist arguments outlined in part one to highlight and challenge some of the key assumptions that underpin eco-localism in both theory and practice. Sections 3.6 and 3.7 discuss 'folk politics' and the 'local trap', respectively; section 3.8 interrogates the notion of 'community' that undergirds much 'mainstream' localist thinking; and section 3.9 critically assesses (what are so often considered to be) the merits of small-scale production. This leads into a discussion of contemporary degrowth vs left ecomodernist debates in section 3.10.

In section 3.11, I examine the idea, commonly held among 'mainstream' localist actors, that community-scale projects can, by coalescing into 'alternative' networks, displace existing capitalist institutions and practices. Then, drawing on the work of Marxian critics of eco-localist approaches, in section 3.12 I critique the notion that 'alternative', community-scale eco-social initiatives can withdraw into non-capitalist spaces to develop new, 'alternative' modes of living. The chapter closes by briefly discussing the connections between the rise of subaltern eco-localism, neoliberalism's decades-long offensive against organized labour, and the hollowing out of representative democracy in core capitalist nations during the neoliberal period – themes I will expand upon in chapter 4.

Part 1: Arguments for community localism

3.1 Eco-localism in late neoliberal Britain

During the 1960s and 1970s in advanced capitalist economies, localist ideas increasingly came to be seen by subaltern environmental actors as a sound basis on which to develop new responses to the ongoing expansion of large scale, industrialized production systems and the various ecological and social problems these were throwing up (for a landmark work in this field, see Schumacher, [1973] 1993). Over the course of the neoliberal period in Britain (1979–present), and particularly during what I will later refer to as neoliberalism's consolidation phase (1992–2008 – see chapter 4), ideas around localization proliferated throughout social space and became firmly embedded in mainstream political discourse, where they were seen to offer

potential solutions to problems emerging from earlier rounds of neoliberal development (growing social complexity, governance failure, community breakdown, and so on – again, see chapter 4). This general, increasingly pro-localist political atmosphere generated perfect conditions for the further consolidation and expansion of localization within the environmental sphere. As thinkers such as Sharzer, Srnicek and Williams, and Phillips have pointed out, this pro-localist viewpoint became deeply entrenched in subaltern thinking during the first decade of the new millennium – so much so that, by the time my case study projects were coming into being (around 2011), localism had become established as a core element of environmentalist 'common sense' and a key principle informing 'progressive' responses to environmental and social breakdown (Sharzer, 2012; Phillips, 2015; Srnicek and Williams, 2016; see part 2 below).

Eco-localism's steadily growing influence from the early 2000s on can be seen by the way its principles became increasingly incorporated into leftist repertoires of social action since that time. Approaches informed by this logic have been promoted by local food network activists (Prentice, 2006; McKibben, 2007; Hopkins, 2008), community energy groups (Seyfang et al., 2013), local currency advocates (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; Bendell and Doyle, 2017), and supporters of 'small is beautiful' production practices more generally (McKibben, 2007; McKibben, 2011; Sale, 2017); they have also been championed by think tanks such as the New Economics Foundation, the E. F. Schumacher Society, and the Institute for Local Self Reliance (North, 2010).

The principle of localism was foundational for the Transition Towns (TT) movement (which is of particular interest for this research project because the participants at both case study initiatives were heavily influenced by its approach – see chapters 6 and 7). TT was launched in Totnes in 2005 and expanded rapidly throughout the remainder of that decade, both in Britain and beyond (Transition Network, 2024). It aimed to help society reduce oil dependency, cut carbon emissions, and build resilient, environmentally sustainable communities. According to Rob Hopkins, the network's founder and influential public figurehead, to achieve these goals, society needed to 'tak[e] control of our basic needs *at the local level*' (Hopkins, 2013, p. 27, emphasis added). Hopkins argued that localizing social activity would help turn people into more active participants in the fight against climate change; he also claimed that localization would help to repair the social ties that had been broken during the era of 'globalization' (Hopkins, 2008). His passionate belief in the transformative potential of localist activity was reflected in the title of his 2013 book, *The Power of Just Doing Stuff: How Local Action Can Change the World*. In its pages, he went so far as to describe localization as the 'new big idea for our times' (Hopkins, 2013).

This strong belief in localist solutions to pressing eco-social problems was shared by Bill McKibben, one of the most prominent and influential environmental activists on earth[10] during the period covered by this study (2010–2017). Writing in 2011, McKibben stressed that the ecological crisis had become so threatening by that point in time that, for anyone hoping to play a role in resolving it, 'being green' was no longer enough – in his view, it was now also necessary *to be local* (McKibben, 2011). To halt the ongoing destruction of humanity and the biosphere, he argued that society urgently needed to scale down, reduce its dependence on large-scale industrial systems, and to focus only on 'essentials'. Like Hopkins, he claimed that localization would enable society to reduce fossil fuel consumption, cut carbon emissions, catalyse local economies, tackle inequality, build stronger communities, and develop environmentally sensitive food and energy systems (McKibben, 2007, 2011). According to McKibben:

> Scale matters, and at the moment ours is out of whack with our needs… Our key projects are local now; that needs to be our focus (McKibben, 2011: 146).

There existed a significant overlap between the localist imaginary animating the approaches of 'alternative' environmental thinkers like Hopkins and McKibben and the ideas informing the degrowth movements that were growing increasingly influential in Britain and Europe around this time (Demaria et al., 2013). As Romano has pointed out, in degrowth discourse, it is 'the local' that typically constitutes 'the main 'institutional' container and the preferable scale of application of the degrowth alternative' (Romano, 2012: 583). Mocca has similarly noted that among the thinkers and activists associated with this movement, it is generally accepted that it is at the local – and even the sub-local – level that the transition to a degrowth society should begin (Mocca, 2020: 79). This focus on localist activity in degrowth thinking is clear in the work of Serge Latouche, one of degrowth's most prominent exponents. Writing in 2009, he argued, in a manner similar to McKibben and Hopkins, that localist solutions were urgently needed to rebuild communities, inspire conviviality, cultivate sharing networks, boost resilience, reconstitute social values, increase free time, and reduce society's dependence on fossil fuels

[10] Bill McKibben is an American environmentalist, author and journalist. He is the founder and senior advisor of 350.org, the first global grassroots climate campaign. His 1989 book *The End of Nature* – considered to be the first book for a general audience about climate change – has appeared in 24 languages. He has written many subsequent books and is a frequent contributor to publications such as *The Guardian*, the *New Yorker*, and *Rolling Stone*. He is the Schumann Distinguished Scholar in Environmental Studies at Middlebury College, and serves as a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He has honorary degrees from 19 colleges and universities. Foreign Policy named him as one of the 100 most important global thinkers in 2009. In that same year, MSN named him one of the dozen most influential men (McKibben, n.d.).

(Latouche, 2009: 44. I will say more about the relationship between degrowth and localism in section 3.10 below).

This smattering of examples is intended to give a flavour of just how prominent localist thinking was in subaltern environmentalist circles during the period 2010–2017. Around that time, localist activity was commonly understood, and frequently championed, as an effective way for grassroots actors to counter the environmentally and socially problematic effects of (neoliberal) 'globalization' (see part 2, below). For all their focus for localization, however, it is important to note here that the key localist figures discussed above were *not* looking to localize *all* production. Hopkins, for example, clearly stated that he had no interest in 'complete localisation' – that is, in efforts to build a 'nothing in, nothing out' economy. Rather, he centred his approach on what he called the 'proximity principle', which aimed to 'close economic loops *where possible* and to produce locally *what we can*' (Hopkins, 2008: 69; emphasis added). Similarly, Latouche stated that local communities should not attempt to form 'closed microcosm[s]' or cut themselves off from societal structures at other levels. Like Hopkins, he also argued that communities should *strive for* autonomy in energy, self-sufficiency in food, and the localization of economic activity, by working to ensure that *everything that can reasonably be produced locally should be* (Latouche, 2007, 2009: 47–48).

Clearly, then, these prominent champions of 'alternative' eco-localist approaches were not demanding that *all* social activity should be localized (as some critics have come close to suggesting – see, for example, Phillips, 2015). However, while these pre-eminent eco-localist advocates took a position that was nuanced enough to help them avoid the trap of viewing localization as a blanket principle to be applied to *all* spheres of social production, they nevertheless stepped directly into another – that of assuming that small-scale, localist activities are *inherently* more environmentally sustainable and socially just than those occurring over greater scales/distances (and consequently that instances of the former are in all cases preferable to instantiations of the latter).

Below and in the following chapter, I will look more closely at why this 'proximity principle' became so deeply entrenched in subaltern environmental thought in the context under study and the role that neoliberalization processes played in bringing this about. Before I can do that, however, I first need to look at localization trends in three areas of particular interest to this study: energy, food, and the economy. This task will preoccupy me for the remainder of part 1.

3.2 Energy, localisation, decentralisation

In recent decades, energy[11] has featured centrally in localist transition discourses. In the pro-localist energy literature, attention has often focussed on the possibilities associated with small-scale renewable energy production[12] and the role that decentralised energy systems can play in reducing carbon emissions, empowering local communities, and facilitating wider 'progressive' social change (McKibben, 2007; Hopkins, 2008; Schoor et al., 2016; Dawson, 2020). The relationship between social power structures and energy systems organisation has been central in these discussions, and across the literature there has emerged a general acceptance of a broad correspondence between centralised energy systems and centralised political systems on the one hand, and distributed energy systems and more participatory forms of political governance on the other (Bouffard and Kirschen, 2008; Bellamy and Thomas, 2015; Burke and Stephens, 2018).

Currently, across the globe, large-scale, centralised energy systems predominate (Pirani, 2018).[13] These centralised grid systems often derive high proportions of their energy from fossil fuel sources (see, for example, National Grid, 2024), and as has been frequently shown, their operation has had (and continues to have) clear deleterious environmental impacts (Klein, 2014; Malm, 2016; Angus, 2016; Buck, 2019, 2021; Christophers, 2024; Malm and Carton, 2024). Despite their polluting effects, however, centralised grid systems have nevertheless proved to be a resilient feature of energy's infrastructural landscape – and that despite the increasing viability of energy systems powered by renewable energy sources (principally from wind, water and sun) (Jacobson, 2023; Christophers, 2024). One key reason offered for the enduring presence of these large grid-based energy delivery systems concerns the significant advantages they confer on dominant social groups. As figures such as Altvater (2007), Angus (2016), Dawson (2020), Christophers (2024), and Malm and Carton (2024) have pointed out, large fossil-based grid systems are well suited to the demands of economic activity geared towards capital accumulation. Such systems are also relatively easy for large corporate actors to monopolise and control (Warlenius, 2015). Hoffman notes that this has created clear path dependencies: the

[11] Following Huber, I suggest that energy should be understood not simply as a 'thing' or 'resource', but as a 'social relation' enmeshed in 'dense networks of power and socioecological change' (Huber, 2009). Energy, from this viewpoint, is seen as a dynamic site of social struggle – one that intersects with other struggles to develop accepted socio-spatial configurations and associated spatial strategies (Harvey, 2000: 190). These struggles take place on a terrain that is pre-structured in favour of those social groups that have traditionally dominated it.

[12] To limit the scope of this discussion, I focus mainly on energy *generation* as this is most pertinent to my discussion in later chapters (therefore I ignore issues such collective purchasing, community energy efficiency, etc).

[13] In the UK – the site of this study – the energy system is dominated by a small number of large companies. In 2019, the six largest energy firms (the 'Big Six': Centrica, EDF, E.ON, Npower, ScottishPower and SSE) accounted for around 70 per cent of the retail energy market (Ofgem, 2019: 13–14; Centre for Alternative Technology, 2017: 51–52).

existing market domination of a small number of large energy companies tends to reinforce the centralised models they control; consequently 'preference [tends to be] given to central, grid-based approaches that [help them] retain their market power' (Hoffman, 2016: 35).

Renewable energy systems, by contrast, are commonly seen to offer more opportunities for decentralisation and democratic control (Kallis, 2017: 6; Dawson, 2020). Such systems tend to be organised around geographically dispersed power generation units and microgrid infrastructures, and often operate on the principle that, where possible, power generation should take place close to the point of end use (Burke and Stephens, 2018).

Unlike centralised grid systems, decentralised energy infrastructures often blur the distinction between energy generation and consumption by enabling individuals to produce energy for their own use (and, whenever a surplus is generated, the use of others) (Schoor et al., 2016). On this basis, Burke and Stephens argue that, by enabling users to connect to the energy system as producers, consumers, or 'prosumers', decentralised renewable power generation infrastructures open up established centralised grid systems to political contestation in ways not seen since the grid's early development (Burke and Stephens, 2018: 83).

It is for this reason that many see the expansion of decentralised renewable energy systems as central to forging new economic and ecological relationships (Warlenius, 2015; Burke and Stephens, 2018: 83). In Szulecki's view, for example, decentralised energy systems harbour 'the potential not only [of] completely changing the way the energy sector has been organized, but also of creating the foundations for a democratic power system' (Szulecki, 2018: 32). For Warlenius, however, it is precisely because of this emancipatory potential that, '[f]rom the standpoint of the rulers… energy decentralization is a threat, not a promise, simply because there is power in power' (Warlenius, 2015: 91). Thus, he finds it:

> …hard to imagine industrial capitalism, based on competition, commodification and monopolization, willingly adopting an energy system based on a decentralized network of rather cheap and low-tech devices generating electricity from wind, water and sun... Probably the concentrated ownership of capital will fetter the development of such a decentralized energy system, whose full potential could only be developed *under different circumstances* (Warlenius, 2015: 97, emphasis added).

From this perspective, then, decentralised renewable energy systems are seen to potentially pose a threat not just to centralised energy grids, but perhaps even to capitalist structures more generally. This assertion fits with the view of Kallis, who argues that while decentralised renewable energy systems might not be suitable for powering a growing capitalist (or even a growing socialist) economy, they would nevertheless provide an appropriate energy source for a social order based on the principles of degrowth (Kallis, 2017: 6).

The comments above raise an important issue for my overall analysis. If, as has been suggested, decentralised energy systems potentially pose such a threat to existing social arrangements that capitalist elites will not willingly adopt them, why did the 2010–2015 UK Coalition government passionately embrace community energy as a central element of its flagship Big Society (BS) agenda (a policy platform that, as I will show in chapter 7, fundamentally shaped the approach of *Greenstar Energy*)? I will pick up this point in chapter 4. To help create a foundation for that discussion, here I need to take a closer look at community energy in particular (the sector within which *Greenstar* operated).

3.3 Community energy

An ambiguous concept, 'community energy' (CE) is open to multiple readings (Walker et al., 2007; Devine-Wright, 2019: 894). Here, I will draw on the influential definition offered by Walker and Devine-Wright, for whom the term community energy refers to projects where communities (of place or interest) display a high degree of ownership and control, and where these communities benefit collectively from the project's outcomes (Walker and Devine-Wright, 2008). This definition will be sufficient for present purposes (in later chapters, however, I will show how the categories this definition rests upon – 'community', 'ownership', and 'control' – have been shaped by neoliberalization processes over recent decades, and the impacts this has had on eco-localist strategy. See chapters 4, 7 and 8).

Community-scale energy generation has been experimented with by activists and championed by environmentalists since at least the 1970s (Smith, 2005). In the UK, however, the notion that local communities could play a greater role in their own energy production only really entered mainstream energy discourse in the mid-2000s (Seyfang et al., 2013; Catney et al., 2014: 719). Interest in CE would continue to grow over the course of that decade, during which the issue of small-scale renewable energy generation became increasingly prominent in energy policy circles (Seyfang et al., 2013). Finance and support to help local energy projects get off the ground began to be made available through schemes such as the Community Renewables Initiative (Walker et al., 2007; Walker and Devine-Wright, 2008: 497). By the decade's end, CE was frequently being presented by policy makers as a way to empower communities, develop local social ties, and drive forward the transition to a low-carbon energy future (Cameron, 2007; Seyfang et al., 2013). As noted above, the 2010-2015 Coalition government championed CE as an important element of its BS agenda. The Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) even went so far as to claim that CE represented the 'perfect expression of the transformative power of the Big Society' (Barker, 2010).

During this period, interest in CE among subaltern environmental actors continued to grow. When seen from a grassroots eco-localist perspective, CE systems are generally understood to offer numerous benefits. Based on decentralised forms of energy production, it is argued that

such systems can help to improve grid reliability, and by minimising the distance between sites of energy generation and consumption, reduce transmission losses (Burke and Stephens, 2018: 84–85). As also noted above, decentralisation can lead to greater public participation in energy production, which potentially opens up new political possibilities around issues relating to common ownership and democratic control. Compared to *commercial* renewable energy projects, small-scale, 'ethical' *community* energy schemes are considered more likely to meet with public approval, as projects that involve known trustworthy community members are less likely to encounter local opposition (Maruyama et al., 2007; Walker et al., 2010; Eyre, 2013; Walker et al., 2014; Bauwens, 2016). Facing less pressure to maximise profits at all costs, they also tend to be financially viable at lower rates of return. This means that CE schemes can be developed at sites that appear unattractive to corporate actors. By utilising sites that private developers overlook, CE projects are viewed as a way to increase overall renewable energy generation capacity.

For those schemes financed through the sale of shares to community members (with returns on investment paid for by the sale of energy to the grid – a common financing model in the community energy sector during the period covered by this study), CE projects are seen to provide 'green', 'ethical', locally-focussed investment opportunities (Bauwens, 2016: 279; as I will show in chapter 7, this was a key motivating factor for the *Greenstar* participants). Because of this, CE projects have often been championed as a way to divert local financial resources away from 'black' (i.e., fossil-based) areas of the economy towards 'green' sectors (on 'green' and 'black' capital, see Holgersen and Warlenius, 2016: 520–521). They are also understood to play a key role in keeping money flowing locally (another key motivating factor for the *Greenstar* actors – see chapter 7). Additionally, because they can be used to generate revenues for local community projects, CE schemes have been seen by some as a way to pay for local services that have been cut in the UK following the 2008 crisis (on austerity and its impacts on public services, see Seymour, 2014; Cooper and Whyte, 2017; Forkert, 2019). In chapter 7, I will show how *Greenstar* energy pursued just such an approach, and how, by so doing, it developed what I will call an 'entrepreneurial' response to austerity.

Being by nature 'place specific' (Warlenius, 2015), community-led energy schemes are seen to be adaptable in ways that can suit local needs (Department for Energy and Climate change, 2014: 7). Small in scale and rooted in particular locales, it has also been claimed that they can help to create a sense of belonging and place attachment (McKibben, 2007: 148; Bauwens, 2016; van Veelen and Haggett, 2017; Devine-Wright, 2019) and thus help to generate community spirit and social cohesion (Department for Energy and Climate Change, 2014: 7; Wirth, 2014; Haggett and Aitken, 2015; for a critique, see section 3.8 below).

CE projects are also considered important in terms of 'capacity building' and community empowerment. Indeed, it has been argued that they can help to create more resilient communities (Department for Energy and Climate Change, 2014: 7; Haggett and Aitken, 2015; Burke and Stephens, 2018), and, by boosting capacities for self-reliance, help 'people and communities [develop] greater autonomy from currently dominant institutions' (Burke and Stephens, 2018: 85). It has also been suggested that CE projects provide valuable opportunities for people to develop new skills, build confidence, and gain work experience (Department for Energy and Climate Change, 2014: 18–19).

In part two of this chapter, I will respond to the points outlined above by considering the arguments of community energy critics who call these much-advertised advantages into question. This will feed into my examination of *Greenstar Energy* in chapters 7, 8 and 9.

3.4 Local food

Just as with energy production, issues relating to food production also feature prominently in discussions concerning progressive eco-social transition pathways. And, just like with energy, here too there exists a strong tendency to view localised production as more environmentally sustainable and socially just than larger-scale alternatives (Purcell, 2006; Goodman et al., 2012).

The deleterious eco-social effects of corporate food systems – 'Big Ag' – are, of course, well known. Much has been written on this topic, discussing, for instance, biodiversity loss (Magdoff, 2015; Magdoff and Williams, 2017), carbon emissions (Angus, 2016), animal welfare (Blanchette, 2020), agrochemicals use (Foster et al., 2010), exploitation of labour (Magdoff and Williams, 2017; Barca, 2024), damage to the hydrological cycle (Gonzalez and Yanes, 2015; Menga, 2025), food system financialization (Russi, 2013; Holt-Giménez, 2017), and the impacts of structural adjustment programs on the food systems of the Global South (Holt Giménez and Shattuck, 2011; Holt-Giménez, 2017).

In recent decades, as the industrialisation of agriculture has intensified and as its negative effects have become more widely known, the idea that localised food production represents something like the opposite of 'Big Ag' has become ever more firmly embedded in the subaltern environmental imagination. As Purcell has pointed out, those who demand the localization of food production tend to '*assume* that there is something about the globality of the dominant food system… that is problematic' (Purcell, 2006: 1924, emphasis added). Because local food systems are clearly *not* global, they are therefore assumed to be inherently 'good' and as a result, desirable. Consequently, he points out, 'the local' tends to be 'conflated with just, organic, sustainable, secure, fresh, or healthy food' (Purcell, 2006: 1924).

Goodman et al., have similarly noted that localist critics of large-scale, corporate food production practices typically draw strong connections between the localization of food

systems, environmental sustainability, and positive social justice outcomes (Goodman et al., 2012). This tendency is evident across the vast literature discussing small scale, community-focussed alternative food networks (AFNs). For example, much has been written on the environmental and social benefits of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) schemes (Schnell, 2013), permaculture projects (Ferguson and Lovell, 2014), 'guerrilla gardening' initiatives (Thompson, 2015), small farm futures (Smaje, 2020), farmers' markets (McKibben, 2007), the 'slow food' movement (Petrini, 2007), artisanal craft food and beverage networks, and 'locavorist' approaches (Prentice, 2006; McKibben, 2007; Kingsolver, 2008 – more on which below). Be it through providing access to healthier food or reducing food miles, by strengthening community bonds or boosting local economies – the activities of such community-scale, alternative food initiatives are frequently seen as a way for 'progressive' grassroots actors to counter the environmentally destructive and homogenising effects of 'placeless', large-scale industrial food production (McKibben, 2007; Hopkins, 2008; Goodman et al., 2012).

Locavorism

In the field of food systems thought, 'locavorism' arguably represents the purest distillation of pro-localist sentiment. Locavorism, as its name suggests, is primarily concerned with minimising the geographical distance 'from farm to fork' in food systems.[14] Interest in locavorism has grown substantially over the last two decades. The term was coined by Jessica Prentice in her book *Full Moon Feast* (Prentice, 2006); since its publication, the benefits of local, seasonal eating have been popularized through works such as Alisa Smith and James MacKinnon's *The 100-mile diet* (Smith and Mackinnon, 2007), Bill McKibben's *Deep Economy* (McKibben, 2007, see esp. chapter 2), Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* (Kingsolver, 2008), and Lefa Meridith's *The Locavore's Handbook* (Meredith, 2010), to offer just a few examples. By 2011 – the year the *Freshfair* case study project began its operations – locavorism was firmly established as a powerful strand of 'progressive' grassroots food activism and one that would exert a huge gravitational pull on actors operating within environmental movements (Hopkins and Pinkerton, 2009). As I will show in chapter 6, locavorist ideas would heavily influence the *Freshfair* participants' ecological thought and overall strategic approach.

Locavores tend to see locally produced food as intrinsically superior (in terms of taste and quality) to that produced in non-local food systems. The small-scale activities associated with locavorist approaches are typically considered more authentic, less exploitative, and less polluting than large-scale alternatives (McKibben, 2007; Srnicek and Williams, 2016; Reich et al., 2018: 851). On this basis, it has been argued that localized food systems offer an effective

[14] Often locavores aim to source their food from within a 100-mile radius.

way to re-build the community ties that have been eroded over recent decades. McKibben, for instance, sees locavorist activities as playing a central role in breaking the 'dynamic of dissatisfaction' that has emerged in today's hyper-individualized, globalized economy (McKibben, 2007: 106). The reason for this, he states, is that local producers tend to be more embedded in their local communities, and that they are thus less likely to engage in the ecologically destructive or socially exploitative practices commonly found at large-scale enterprises (an assumption I will challenge in section 3.12 below) (see McKibben, 2007).[15]

Viewed from this angle, locavorism is seen to provide a practical way for grassroots actors to counter what tend to be seen as the negative impacts of (neoliberal) 'globalization'. This point has been stressed by Allen, who argues that one reason for the growing popularity of local food initiatives over recent decades is that they offer subaltern groups a *realistic* way to respond to neoliberalism's 'destructive, disempowering and alienating effects' (Allen, 2010: 296). She argues that people have:

> … lost more and more control over the source and quality of their food, and have become increasingly distanced from food practices and knowledges. Neoliberal regimes and commitments have compromised the ability of governments to meet people's needs, and people have responded by organizing at a local scale … Against the forces of neoliberalization … people have taken action in particular places to re-invent the food system through localization (Allen, 2010: 296).

She adds that:

> Given the exclusion of those active in agri-food movements from large-scale political systems, and the failure of national and international institutions to fix food system problems, acting at the local level has come to be understood as a way to regain a degree of control in a world shaped by neoliberal globalisation (Allen, 2010: 296).

In neoliberalizing contexts, then, where opportunities for subaltern resistance have become severely constrained, Allen argues that activity at the local level has increasingly come to be seen as the most effective way for 'progressives' to engage in eco-social action. I will say more about this in part two below and in chapter 4.

3.5 Localization, community economies, and ethical business

Across the localist literature, economic localization is considered central to 'progressive' eco-social change[16] (see, for example, McKibben, 2007; Hopkins, 2008, 2013; Simms, 2012;

[15] This notion is also central to the 'shared value' approach of Porter and Kramer. See Chapter 4.
[16] Local food and energy systems (discussed above) are often seen as integral elements of local economies.

Gibson-Graham et al., 2013). For many eco-localists, community economies (organised around co-ops, small businesses, sharing economies, local currencies, time banks, and so on) have come to be seen as central to the development of sustainable, non-exploitative, non-capitalistic societies (Kallis et al., 2012; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; Wright, 2010).

Arguing from a degrowth perspective, Latouche has claimed that economic localization can help to reduce unemployment, foster community relations, cultivate ties of solidarity, and improve the health of citizens 'by encouraging sobriety and reducing stress' (Latouche, 2009: 50). McKibben similarly argues that local economies are important because they require fewer resources, cause less environmental damage, and 'allow us to find a better balance between the individual and the community, and hence find extra satisfaction' (McKibben, 2007: 105–106). Like many in the localist literature, McKibben claims that by localizing economic activity, society can start to move towards a 'physically plausible economy for the future' – i.e., one that is ecologically sustainable and able to provide people with more time and greater security (McKibben, 2007: 210; for a similar arguments, see Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; Hickel, 2020; Schmeltzer, et al., 2022). Because community economies operate through what he (following E.F. Schumacher) calls an 'economics of neighborliness', McKibben claims that their development will reduce economic exploitation, encourage 'fair trade', and provide opportunities for local producers to escape the pressures of the capitalist economy. In this manner, community economies will create conditions in which it is possible, for example, to:

> …raise[…] wheat and lettuce in a way that honors both farmer and soil, [and grow] timber in a way that allows loggers to work at a reasonable pace and in a living forest (McKibben, 2007: 175).

In chapter 6, I will show how this commonly held localist idea came to predominate at the *Freshfair* food hub, and, by drawing on the discussion of Marxian value theory set out in chapter 2, show how its participants' belief in this principle would eventually be undermined by their experience of trying to put it into practice.

In line with much 'mainstream' pro-localist thought, McKibben sees successful local businesses as a necessary ingredient of thriving community economies (see also Schuman, 2000; Etelson, 2016; Federation of Small Businesses, 2019). He argues (naively, in my view – see section 3.12 below) that local firms, unlike large corporate businesses, are more likely to stay 'rooted in the community' – and that as a result, they will be prepared to 'sacrifice some growth for other goals' (McKibben, 2007: 210). He also argues that, from a customer perspective, shopping locally will 'produce[…] an enormous change in your social life', because '[y]ou go from being a mere consumer to being a *participant*, talking about what you like and dislike, expanding your sense of who's in your community and how it fits together' (McKibben, 2007: 106). Because of

the emancipatory possibilities that such activities bring, he claims that community economies based around thriving local businesses can deliver a 'more hopeful version of the future' (McKibben, 2007: 105–106; for similar, see Gibson-Graham, et al., 2013).

Simms is another who emphasises the role that local firms can play in the coming social transition. He also sees the small business as a foundation stone of community economies – providing 'not just the goods they sell', but also 'the social glue that holds communities together'. In his eyes, local businesses are needed because they help to generate the 'financial resources from which vibrant, diverse, and therefore more resilient communities can grow' (Simms, 2012; see also Federation of Small Businesses, 2019). Taking a similar line, Hopkins sees small firms and community economies as important because these institutions and infrastructures *keep money flowing locally*. Too often in a globalized world, he argues, local economies act like 'leaky buckets, into which pour wages, salaries, pensions and so on', and from which 'most… pours back out again, through chain stores, supermarkets [etc.]' (Hopkins, 2011). As far as he is concerned, the money that 'escapes' out of the local economy in this way is a 'missed opportunity': resources are lost that could be used to build new businesses, generate new investment opportunities, strengthen the existing economy, and fund new creative ventures (Hopkins, 2013: 30). Like Simms, he argues that by plugging these leaks, community economies hold 'huge potential for economic regeneration' (Hopkins, 2011).

This view is shared by the authors of the influential *Zero Carbon Britain: Making it Happen* report. They have argued that the wealth extracted from local communities by large businesses significantly weakens local economies. Community economies, by contrast, can help to ensure that money keeps flowing among *local* businesses (which they assume to be more ethical and environmentally sustainable than larger enterprises) (Centre for Alternative Technology, 2017: 232). By focusing on local businesses, the report suggests that money can be 'recycle[d] around the community, having a multiplier effect'. For this reason: '[l]ocal economies tend to be stronger and more vibrant economies, [with the added bonus that] 'local' is often more sustainable in environmental terms' (Centre for Alternative Technology, 2017: 232). A similar pro-localist economic logic underpins the much talked about 'Preston model' (on which, see Brown and Jones, 2021). In chapter 7, I will show how this kind of community economy thinking shaped the activities of *Greenstar Energy*.

Often among 'progressive' subaltern actors, local currencies are considered key to the development of strong community economies (Centre for Alternative Technology, 2017: 232; Seyfang, 2001; McKibben, 2007; Hopkins, 2011; Bendell and Doyle, 2017). By issuing alternative currencies for use between individuals and businesses, it is possible, advocates of this approach suggest, to maximise transactions in a particular area, and, in the words of

McKibben, 'make a local economy soar' (McKibben, 2007: 162; see also Hopkins, 2008; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; Bendell and Greco, 2017). Gibson-Graham, et al., argue that local currencies make it possible to connect people 'more directly with each other than in the mainstream market with its anonymous pricing system'. They claim that by using local currencies, economic actors negotiate 'in a transparent and reciprocal way how best to meet their needs and the needs of others' (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013: 120–121). I shall argue against this point below.

In the sections above, I have tried to emphasise how, in the years leading up to, and during, the period considered by this thesis, in the areas of energy, food, and the economy, there emerged a strong tendency among subaltern eco-social actors to view small scale activities at the local level as inherently 'better' than those that take place at greater scales/distances: less environmentally damaging, less exploitative, more ethical, more transparent and more authentic. As will become clear in chapters 6 and 7, these ideas would have a significant impact on the development of the case study projects.

In part two of this chapter, however, I will show, by drawing on critical thinkers in the literature and on the discussion in chapter 2, that many of the core elements of established localist thinking outlined above rest on deeply problematic assumptions. By working through these assumptions, I aim to challenge the generally accepted notion that the marked increase in localist activity in core capitalist nations over recent decades represents a significant step towards the goal of bringing about a more authentic, egalitarian, and environmentally sustainable non-capitalist society. Moreover, I build a case for claiming that many of the forms of localism that have emerged during that period have severely impeded efforts oriented towards this aim. Rather than see this relatively recent upsurge in localist activity as an *answer* to the environmental and social problems that 'globalization' has brought, I see it as a *symptom* that needs to be explained. This will be my focus in part 2 of this chapter.

Part 2: Against 'mainstream' community localist approaches

3.6 Against 'folk' politics

According to Srnicek and Williams, the localist approaches that have emerged in recent decades have been steeped in what they call 'folk' political thinking. They argue that the deep penetration of this folk political imaginary among members of 'progressive' social movements has impeded the development of a social force capable of bringing about any kind of fundamental societal transformation (Srnicek and Williams, 2016). They deploy the term 'folk' in a dual manner. They use it: 1) to evoke a critique of folk psychology to help highlight the ways that our intuitive conceptions are historically constituted and often mistaken or outmoded,

and 2) to refer to approaches that focus on the small-scale, the 'authentic', and the 'traditional' (such as those discussed in part one) (Srnicek and Williams, 2016: 10).[17]

In their view, folk political approaches typically emphasise temporal, spatial, and conceptual immediacy in response to the abstraction and inhumanity of contemporary capitalism. Folk political standpoints privilege 'the local' as the site/scale of authenticity, and adherents tend to choose the small over the large in order to bring politics down to the 'human scale'. They argue that folk political views now operate intuitively, uncritically and unconsciously across the contemporary left. Indeed, they claim that these ideas are currently so pervasive among 'progressive' grassroots actors that they have become translated into 'common-sense ways of organising, acting, and thinking politics' (Srnicek and Williams, 2016: 10–11). I claim that the discussion in part one above lends support to this view. I pointed out there that there exists a tendency among eco-localists to view community-scale organising as a primary means to counter the deleterious effects of (neoliberal) 'globalization'. But for Srnicek and Williams, this folk political standpoint is deeply problematic. They argue that such approaches fetishize immediate results and the concrete appearance of action, prefer the simple and the everyday, and reject any form of abstraction, conceptual mediation, or even modest amounts of complexity. While such pro-localist activities are often presented as a means to 'make global capitalism small enough to be thinkable', Srnicek and Williams stress that folk political approaches ignore longer-term strategic considerations. The result, they claim, is an empty pragmatism that is fundamentally incapable of altering structural conditions (Srnicek and Williams, 2016: 15).

In their eyes, by 'attempting to reduce large-scale systemic problems to the more manageable sphere of local community, folk politics effectively denies the systemically interconnected nature of today's world' (Srnicek and Williams, 2016: 40). And by focusing on the *community* scale, they argue that efforts aimed at universal emancipation and global-scale transformation are pushed aside. Further, they stress that, from a folk political standpoint, not only are local-scale activities *assumed* to be the most democratic and open, but projects that aim towards a universal politics are suspected as potentially totalitarian. Consequently, such approaches are often rejected at the outset (Srnicek and Williams, 2016: 11).

It is important to note here, however, that while Srnicek and Williams are highly critical of 'mainstream' localist approaches, they *do not deny the importance of activity at the local scale*. Indeed, they emphasise that 'all politics begins from the local'. The problem as they see it,

[17] 'Folk politics' refers to a wide range of organisations and movements. It has been used to describe groups like Occupy and Spain's 15M, most forms of horizontalism, anarchist-tinged politics, political localism, the slow food movement, and ethical consumerism, among others (Srnicek and Williams, 2016).

however, is that folk political thinking is 'content to remain at (and even privileges) that level' (Srnicek and Williams, 2016: 12). All attempts to build counter-hegemony are rejected, they suggest; emphasis instead tends to fall on ideas of withdrawal or exit (a point I return to in section 3.12 below). Their (not unwarranted) concern is that folk political approaches rest on a 'set of strategic assumptions that threatens to debilitate the left, rendering it unable to scale up, create lasting change or expand beyond particular interests' (Srnicek and Williams, 2016: 10). Consequently, they claim that 'leftist' movements informed by a folk political imaginary are 'in fact incapable of transforming capitalism' (Srnicek and Williams, 2016: 10) – something that, in the previous chapter, I argued will be necessary if today's worsening environmental and social crises are going to be resolved. As I will show below, similar critiques of localism have been made by other Marxian thinkers, such as Sharzer (2012), Phillips (2015), and Huber (2021). I will draw on the work of these (and other) figures in my examination of the case study projects in chapters 6 and 7. In chapter 9, however, as part of my efforts to enrich debates concerning eco-localist strategy in the current crisis conjuncture, I will use evidence from the *Freshfair* case study to conduct a sympathetic critique of the anti-localist position that these thinkers adhere to.

3.7 The 'local trap'

Above I noted that grassroots pro-localist approaches tend to rest on the assumption that the local scale is best suited to the achievement of 'progressive' environmental and social goals. To think in this way is to fall into what Purcell has called the 'local trap' (Purcell, 2006). According to Purcell, '[t]he local trap equates the local with 'the good' [and] it is preferred presumptively over non-local scales' (Purcell, 2006: 1924). He acknowledges that what is defined as 'good' can vary widely, but the point he is trying to make is that there exists a tendency – particularly among 'progressive' actors, both in activism and academia – to take the view that if one's aim is to make the world a more egalitarian and environmentally sustainable place, then local scale activity is best suited to that task. Indeed, Purcell suggests, in a comment that aligns with the work of Srnicek and Williams, that 'it appears to be almost habit among many traditions to prefer *a priori* the local scale' (Purcell, 2006: 1921). On this issue, Catney et al., have also pointed out that it is generally accepted that 'simply because a project/process/movement is local or decentralised, it is somehow clearly 'good', 'more just', 'more democratic' and 'more sustainable'' (Catney et al., 2014: 726). As will become clear in the case study chapters, this pro-localist logic was in evidence at both *Freshfair* and *Greenstar* (although the participants at the former would eventually come to reject this notion – see discussion in chapters 6 and 8).

Purcell (rightly) warns against making assumptions about any given scale. He argues that scales are 'socially constructed strategies to achieve particular ends' and points out that they tend to be shaped by the 'agenda of those empowered by a given scalar strategy (Purcell, 2006: 1921). I agree with Purcell on this matter, and I will return to this general point in coming chapters.

However, while Purcell's critique of localist spatial fetishism is useful, in my view his account nevertheless fails to adequately grasp *why*, among progressive subaltern actors, the local scale emerged as the spatial imaginary of choice with the force that it did during neoliberalism's consolidation phase. Below and in coming chapters, I claim that Marxian theory offers a way to address this gap, and I will draw on the insights it provides to examine the case study projects.

3.8 Community

Linked to this idea that 'the local' is inherently 'good' is the notion that localized activities create strong communities – which, in much of the localist literature, are also assumed to be 'good'[18] (see, for example, McKibben, 2007, 2011; Latouche, 2009; Hopkins, 2011, 2013; Porter and Kramer, 2019). Like 'localism', 'community' is also a protean term, one that has been used for various rhetorical and ideological ends (Delanty, 2018). As Gritzas and Kavoulakos have shown, ideas around 'community' and 'localism' often flow into one another: the term 'community' typically implies 'localism', and in eco-localist discourse these terms frequently appear together (Gritzas and Kavoulakos, 2016: 923). And as Mocca points out, the idea of 'community' is often based upon a normative conception of an idyllic shared space where individuals with some kind of common bond engage in altruistic, solidaristic, ecologically sensitive activities (Mocca, 2020: 89). As such, they are often used to signify a general sense of inclusivity and togetherness in a particular locale. As can be seen from the discussion in part one above, it is this conception of 'community' that often underpins 'mainstream' subaltern pro-localist approaches.

However, not everybody agrees that 'communities' possess the favourable qualities so frequently attributed to them in the localist literature. As numerous authors have argued, there is nothing *inherently* 'progressive' in the notion of 'community'. Gritzas and Kavoulakos note that 'positive' conceptions of 'community' tend to overlook the asymmetric power relations embedded within them (Gritzas and Kavoulakos, 2016: 923). Ajl, too, sees this term as problematic because it tends to obscure a key feature of human community: namely, that 'communities are not homogenous social units, magmas of common interests, but contain *people from different classes*' (Ajl, 2021: 40, emphasis added). This point will be particularly important in my discussion of *Greenstar Energy* in chapter 7.

While community life *may* help to foster co-operation and social harmony, it can also breed isolation, marginalization, segregation, and discrimination (Harvey, 1996). As Mocca points out, the idyllic vision of community localism that inspires many degrowth thinkers tends to overlook

[18] According to Williams 'community' – unlike other terms referring to modes of social organisation, such as state, nation, society, etc. – 'seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term' (Williams, 1983, p. 76).

the possibility that *repressive communities* may emerge – i.e., groups motivated more by the defence of territory or the exclusion of non-conforming actors than by notions of openness and inclusivity (Mocca, 2020: 89; on a community's need of an 'other' to define itself against, see McGowan, 2024). Arguing along similar lines, Phillips points out that the localist emphasis on community can be easily combined with an anti-modernist political stress on a return to traditional customs built on exclusion (Phillips, 2015: 175; see below). And as the anarchist thinker Murray Bookchin has stressed, the localist desire for increased local economic autonomy can quickly lead to cultural withdrawal. He points out that when a community is deprived of the cross-cultural fertilization that accompanies economic interchange, it can 'shrink into itself and disappear into its own civic privatism' (Bookchin, 1995: 237). Even though some of the most prominent localist thinkers of recent times have explicitly sought to distance themselves from autarkic approaches (see section 3.1 above), it is nevertheless clear that there remains an 'in-built risk of closure, authoritarianism, and xenophobia in any locality that pretends to be self-reliant and not dependent on the rest' (Kallis and March, 2015: 364).

Taken to its extremes, this isolationist and exclusionary localist logic can feed into far-right political agendas. Philips highlights what he sees as a significant degree of overlap between contemporary, anti-modernist back-to-the-land ideologies and the *völkisch* agrarian mystique of Hitler's Reich (Phillips, 2015: 175; see also Tooze, 2007; Biehl and Staudenmaier, 2011). And as the Zetkin Collective has shown, climate change has already given rise to novel forms of xenophobic eco-politics – an upwards trend that looks set to continue as temperatures rise and the environmental conditions on which modern societies depend break down (Malm, 2016b; Zetkin Collective, 2021; Salvage Collective, 2021).

As I see it, these remarks present a challenge to those localist thinkers who assume that, going forward, community groups will work together, pool resources and share best practice. After all, it cannot be assumed that community-scale, 'non-capitalist' groups (or even the individuals *within* such groups) will necessarily work together – even when they share common goals. Indeed, in advanced neoliberal contexts – impacted by successive rounds of austerity, marked by high levels of inequality, and shaped by neoliberal competitiveness discourses – it is quite possible that 'reactionary' rather than 'progressive' localisms will emerge. As ecological, social, economic, and political crises intensify, the former become increasingly likely (Zetkin collective, 2021; Moore and Roberts, 2022; Seymour, 2024).

3.9 Is small beautiful?

Mocca contends, rightly in my view, that the argument for localization and small-scale production is often normatively assumed, rather than based on compelling evidence (Mocca, 2020: 84–85). This assertion fits with the view of Albritton, who points out that small-scale initiatives are not by nature of their size likely to be any more democratic or inclusive than

larger-scale projects (Albritton, 2019: 75; see also Phillips, 2015; on the limited nature of participation in the Transition movement, see Bailey et al., 2010; in relation to degrowth, see Romano, 2012). Regarding community economies in particular, and contrary to the views of thinkers such as McKibben, Hopkins, and the authors of the *Zero Carbon Britain* report discussed above, Westra stresses that local economies 'do not have any inbuilt propensity toward environmental benignity' (Westra, 2014: 101). It has also been noted that localized production does not – despite frequent claims to the contrary – guarantee less exploitative labour practices (Samers, 2005; Sharzer, 2012; Gray, 2013; below and in chapter 6, I will discuss this in relation to Marxian value theory).

Indeed, far from being beneficial in environmental sustainability and social justice terms, many have argued that localist approaches have inhibited the development of 'progressive' eco-social movements. Žižek, for example, claims that in this era of spiralling global catastrophes, localist approaches are, simply put, a dead end. In order to resolve large scale problems like the energy crisis and looming shortages in food and water, he argues that it will instead be necessary 'to invent new forms of large-scale collective action' because 'neither the standard forms of state intervention nor the much-praised forms of local self-organization will be up to the job'. Failure to do this, he states, will most likely herald a 'new era of apartheid in which secluded parts of the world enjoying an abundance of food, water and energy are separated from a chaotic 'outside' characterized by widespread chaos, starvation and permanent war' (Žižek, 2018: 83).

Sharzer points out that the decentralized approaches that localists call for are often highly inefficient, because they end up re-creating production systems at multiple sites to serve individual local communities. This involves unnecessary duplication, he argues, and makes it 'impossible to meet the needs of a technologically advanced society' (Sharzer, 2012: 40). Regarding agricultural production in particular, Harvey emphasises the dangers associated with cutting off a particular locale from wider supply networks. In Harvey's view, while localist projects often:

> …place their anti-capitalist faith on the prospects for local food sovereignty, local self-sufficiency and decoupling from the global economy… [the] increasing complexity and geographical proliferation of ties within a global division of labour provide far stronger insurance against local calamities (Harvey, 2014: 124–125).

He points out that in the world market, supplies can be drawn from distant areas to compensate for any local failures – events that will become more frequent as ecological crises intensify (on environmental breakdown and food system fragility, see Longo, et al., 2015; Monbiot, 2022). Consequently, Harvey warns that 'decoupling from the world market in the name of anti-globalisation is a potentially suicidal alternative' (Harvey, 2014: 124–125).

Phillips also argues that local food systems are problematic because not every plot of land is equally suited to all types of animals or plants. Consequently, he suggests that only specialization and a division of labour between regions can help to ensure that land is used efficiently (i.e., that more calories are produced per hectare). He also points out that small-scale food production tends to be expansive: because local food production processes are typically less technology intensive (compared to larger scale alternatives), they require more land to produce the same amount of food (Phillips, 2015: 88; see also discussion in Magdoff and Williams, 2017).

Phillips' comments on technology raise the important issue of agricultural labour and its role in the contemporary eco-localist imagination. Many advocates of local food systems view practical involvement in community-scale food production in a highly positive light. Such labour is often seen as a way to help alienated subjects re-connect with (non-human) nature, re-build social ties, and gain greater control over the processes that put food on their tables (McKibben, 2007; Hopkins, 2011; Pinkerton and Hopkins, 2009; Saito, 2024). It is also generally assumed that those who get involved in such local agricultural labour practices will become more attuned to local socio-ecological processes, and consequently more socially and environmentally responsible in their actions (McKibben, 2007: 124–125; Pinkerton and Hopkins, 2009).

However, while common among eco-localist actors, such views have been criticised as 'anti-modern' or 'anti-progressive' by some (particularly those associated with the eco-modernist left – see discussion below). Phillips, for example, has argued that approaches based on decentralized, labour intensive, low-tech, low-consumption economies cannot form the basis of an emancipatory eco-social order. Rather, such 'romantic', 'back-to-the-land' approaches offer only 'a lamentably vast increase of drudgery' that, thanks to technological advance, need no longer be endured (Phillips, 2015: 96).

Similarly, Huber has argued that those who pin their hopes for a sustainable transition on the mass roll out of small-scale agricultural production fail to understand the labour requirements of such regimes. He points out that small urban gardens may be 'attractive as a hobby or community-builder' – but what happens when such activities 'must provision society as a whole'? And what kind of politics could 'enlist the millions of people required to do the agrarian labor'? (Huber, 2021). On these questions, he states that eco-localists have little to say. Like Phillips, Huber also warns against localist attempts to romanticize 'pre-modern' agrarian life and frugal-egalitarian small-scale societies. He notes that not only was much of pre-modern life dangerous and difficult, but stresses, too, that it was 'based on violent control over labor – most notably slavery – as a basic necessity of social reproduction' (Huber, 2021). I will return to

this point, and how it relates to ongoing debates between green new deal (GND) proponents and degrowth thinkers below.

Just as with food, Huber has argued against the localization of energy systems from a Marxist perspective. He takes aim at those who call for energy system decentralization to escape our current climate predicament (see section 3.2 above) and provocatively claims that the centralized energy systems so often criticised by left-leaning environmental actors are *necessary* for tackling climate change. He also calls into question the idea that the green energy transition will occur through a 'democratic' process of local and community control over distributed renewable energy networks: advocates of such approaches, he argues, fail to 'explain how we can decarbonise at the necessary speed and scale, one community at a time' (Huber, 2022: 48).[19] As he sees it, 'such a voluntarist and localist vision' is entirely 'at odds with the challenges we face' (ibid., 225). Putting it bluntly, he argues that: 'climate change means localism will not work' and that, going forward, 'global production must be socially coordinated' (ibid., 287).

Huber also points out that the localist path to social change so often advocated by contemporary green thinkers is 'deeply at odds with a traditional Marxist vision of transforming social production'. He emphasises that for Marx, capitalism 'produces the material basis for emancipation through *the development of large-scale and ever more centralized industry*' (ibid., 250; emphasis added). On this basis, he claims that, while 'we love to hate big, bulky centralized electric utilities', these are 'actually precisely what Marx… meant by socialized production' (ibid., 251). Building on this, Huber argues that it is not necessary to create 'an entirely new geography of electricity' as energy localists propose. Rather than reject centralised power systems, he claims that environmental progressives need to *bring them under social control*. To do this, he advocates for strengthening union power 'within the existing centralized utility system' – a move that would put labour in a position to demand 'a massive public sector-led restructuring of the grid toward both clean centralized generation…on the one hand, and distributed renewable energy on the other' (ibid., 47).

This principle he applies not just to the field energy, but to production more broadly. His position here aligns with that of Schwartzman, who also claims that locally focussed, 'small-is-beautiful' approaches cannot resolve the issues that face society today. Contrary to those localist thinkers who rail against 'giganticism', he argues that 'not all big projects should be opposed' simply on account of their size. Looking to the future, he stresses that decaying infrastructures will need to be repaired and replaced, and that the pollution generated by military and industrial

[19] Riffing off Jodi Dean's oft-quoted, anti-localist remark 'Goldman Sachs doesn't care if you raise chickens', Huber seeks to underline the ineffectiveness of such marginal activities by stating that 'Duke Energy does not care if you set up a locally owned micro-grid' (Huber, 2022, p. 250).

activities will need to be cleaned up. Such big problems, he suggests, require large-scale solutions (Schwartzman, 2012: 121–122).

3.10 Productivist vs degrowth perspectives

In recent years, these issues around scale and industrialization have sat at the heart of degrowth vs left-eco-modernist debates. As I noted in chapter 1, this thesis, on the basis of my examination of the literature and my analysis of the case study projects, hopes to contribute to these debates by offering a way to potentially break the impasse that seems to have been reached in these discussions today (see Heron, 2024b). Because space precludes an extensive examination of this topic here (which has, in any case, been well documented elsewhere – see, for example, Aronoff, et al., 2019; Hickel, 2020; Ajl, 2021; Huber, 2022; Schmeltzer, et al., 2022; Huber and Phillips, 2024), I will restrict myself to briefly outlining its broad contours in a manner sufficient for my purposes in later chapters.

In the literature, degrowth and left-ecomodernist perspectives are often seen to be completely irreconcilable. Briefly put, degrowth approaches – associated with thinkers such as Giorgos Kallis, Jason Hickel, and Stefania Barca, to name just three of its most prominent advocates – seek to put an end to the fetishization of growth in contemporary society, reduce overall levels of material throughput (in a way that would involve a reduction in resource and energy consumption in the Global North), and reconstitute society so that it operates within biophysical limits (Kallis; 2017; Hickel, 2020; Heron, 2022; Schmeltzer, et al. 2022; Saito, 2024).

Against the champions of degrowth, however, advocates of left eco-modernist perspectives (Matt Huber and Leigh Phillips are generally considered to be the leading proponents of this position today) typically consider any talk of limits as a form of neo-Malthusianism. Rather than *curb* growth, they demand *more* of it (Phillips, 2015; Huber and Phillips, 2024). Phillips, for example, has argued that: ‘there is no point in history where we can say: ‘okay, we’ve had enough now. Let’s stop’. So far as he is concerned, ‘the progressive argument must be to say yes, we do want more stuff, and to argue against those calling for less stuff’ (Phillips, 2015; Phillips, 2019).

Left eco-modernists criticise degrowthers for limiting their critique of capitalism to a vague critique of ‘growth’ (an abstract category that, they note, obscures social relations and thus performs an important ideological function in capitalist society. On growth and ideology, see Dale, 2012; for a thoroughgoing discussion of this issue from a degrowth perspective, see Schmelzer, et al., 2022). They also call out degrowth thinkers for their reliance on what they see as the problematic concept of ‘material throughput’, which, as Tsuda has pointed out, offers no way to distinguish between ‘a mercury-infused coal ash pile and an equal mass of food scraps in a compost bin’ (Tsuda, 2021).

Particularly interesting for my overall discussion is left ecomodernism's critique of degrowth's focus on the local and the particular. Those of a more Promethean socialist bent assert that localist approaches cannot resolve the environmental and social crises currently bearing down on society. Instead, they insist that it is necessary to unleash the productive forces that have been fettered by capitalist social relations in order to create conditions for socialist abundance (Huber, 2022; Huber and Phillips, 2024).

Such thinkers are keen to emphasise the strategic advantages of this productivist approach: only by producing more, they argue, can conditions be created in which the working-class majority can secure 'access to the basics of survival' (Huber, 2019). By pursuing a strategy that aims to make things materially better for working class communities, they claim that their approach has the potential to build a political force that can drive a wider emancipatory transition. This they contrast to the approach of degrowthers, whose (supposed) moralistic focus on reducing consumption in the capitalist core they consider anti-worker and all-too-closely aligned with neoliberal austerity policies. For these reasons, left-eco-modernists claim that degrowth approaches create 'insurmountable barriers to socialist emancipation' (see Heron, 2022. In short, they see degrowth as a political dead end.

The left-eco-modernist position, of course, has been critiqued by degrowthers in turn. Such productivist approaches have been characterised as: 1) reactionary, because they often fail to account for value transfers and uneven ecological exchanges between core and periphery (Ajl, 2021); 2) as western-centric, because of their resource intensiveness as well as their failure to engage with third world Marxisms (Heron, 2024b; Schmeltzer et al., 2022); 3) as anti-ecological, because of what is viewed as their utter disregard for any kind of limit (Heron, 2024b; Saito, 2024). Later, I will add an another point of critique to this list by suggesting that productivist opponents of pro-localist approaches also tend to erroneously view sub-hegemonic eco-localist initiatives as *homogenous entities incapable of transforming themselves or of playing any kind of positive role in driving emancipatory social transition* (a view I will challenge using evidence from the *Freshfair* case study in chapters 6, 8 and 9).

Because of these theoretical and political commitments, Heron has argued that left-eco-modernist approaches support a 'narrowly nationalist, ecologically illiterate, vision of socialist transition which intentionally or not finds common ground with ascendent 'national conservative' thought in the US and elsewhere'. Based on this assessment, he claims that eco-modernism must be rejected (Heron, 2024b).

I claim, however, that while these arguments against left eco-modernism do largely hit the mark, instead of rejecting this position outright, subaltern eco-social actors today need to seriously engage with the issues its proponents raise. Central here, I suggest, is the issue of the left's

relationship to industrialization. While degrowthers are certainly correct to voice concerns over the environmental and social impacts of the large-scale forms of industrial production that left eco-modernists call for, I think the socialist eco-modernists are also correct to maintain that the left today must not reject industrial modernity, but seek to *advance it, democratically control it, and operate it an ecologically rational way* (Huber, 2021).

Industrialization and free time

Drawing on the work of Marx, and in line with many degrowth advocates, Huber views the reduction of the working day as the basic pre-requisite of a free society (Marx [1894] 1981: 958; Huber, 2021). Unlike many degrowth thinkers, however, he adds, crucially, that 'a society based on free time *would need industrial technology to drastically reduce the time required in the realm of necessity*' (Huber, 2021; emphasis added). What Huber is claiming, then, is that the kind of society that degrowth advocates call for – one where people can volunteer in community gardens, engage in convivial living practices, enjoy nature, and so on – *ultimately requires industrial modernization to generate the free time needed to engage in such practices.* He stresses that eco-modernization:

> …does not mean we need to eliminate fulfilling labor-intensive activity like gardening or artisanal craft production. Rather, it means making sure societal reproduction *does not hinge on such labor*. The whole point of the 'realm of freedom' is to include any fulfilling activity one or many wishes to do (Huber, 2022b: 556; emphasis added).

This is an important point for my overall argument and I will return to it in my discussion of localism and strategy in chapter 9. Before closing this section though, let me note here that the eco-modernist demand for urgent, large-scale eco-social interventions raises another tricky issue for eco-localists: the problem of state power. After all, how do degrowthers and other pro-localist actors that emphasise the small scale and the particular intend to respond to those problems that require large-scale co-ordination efforts: global heating, rapid ecological breakdown, climate-induced mass migrations, and the like? This point has been stressed by Malm, who argues that it is difficult to envisage solutions to problems like climate change that do not in some way involve large-scale interventions backed by state power (Malm, 2020: 151–152[20]; see also Parenti, 2015; Žižek, 2018: 84).

[20] Malm argues that the capitalist state is constitutionally incapable of taking the steps necessary to address ecological and social crises. However, he also acknowledges that, as so little time remains to resolve pressing ecological issues, there is 'no other form of state on offer. No workers' state based on soviets will be miraculously born in the night. Waiting for it would be both delusional and criminal, and so all we have to work with is the dreary bourgeois state, tethered to the circuits of capital as always' (Malm, 2020, pp. 151–152). Malm suggests that it is therefore necessary to bring popular pressure to bear on 'the state' in order to shift the balance of forces condensed within it. Localist projects, I will later argue, can play an important part in this process (see chapter 9).

However, as noted above, for many localists – operating as they do in contexts where 'common sense' has been shaped by decades of neoliberal development (see chapter 4) – there exists 'an inordinate fear of centralisation and of monopolisation' (Harvey, 2014: 145) and a tendency to view state apparatuses as distant, undemocratic, bureaucratic, and even totalitarian – in short, central to the problem localists aim to solve[21] (Srnicek and Williams, 2016). This line of argumentation clearly presents a very serious challenge to the views of localism's advocates. Many have responded to it by emphasising the possibilities that are generated when small groups aggregate into larger networks (Mocca, 2020: 85). It is to this issue that I now turn.

3.11 Networks and scaling up

For many eco-localists, it is often assumed that a multiplicity of uncoordinated, small-scale activities – occurring outside traditional institutional and organised channels – can over time develop into some kind of satisfactory macro social alternative (Posey, 2011: 299–300; Harvey, 2014). From this viewpoint, it is understood that small-scale projects operating around the margins of capitalist societies can, by working alongside one another and forming into wider networks, develop alternative, emancipatory, environmentally sensitive modes of living that will ultimately become powerful enough to displace existing social practices and structures (or at least provide ready-made alternatives should those structures collapse) (Seyfang and Smith, 2007; Wright, 2010; Hopkins, 2011, 2013; Schmelzer, at al., 2022).

Within the Transition movement, for example, eco-localist community projects have been viewed as 'scalable microcosms of hope'. On this basis it has been argued that wider social change 'can be achieved through the combined weight of innumerable community-scale actions' (Bailey et al., 2010: 602). This idea of a molecular, agglomerative approach to social transformation is also operative among degrowth thinkers (Schmelzer, et al.; Mocca, 2020). Posey has even gone so far as to suggest that by developing networks of community-scale economic initiatives, it is ultimately possible 'to challenge neoliberal hegemony' (Posey, 2011: 299–300).

However, although a commonly held notion among pro-localist thinkers, the idea that loose networks of small-scale, particularistic projects can ultimately coalesce into some kind of force capable of displacing existing social arrangements has been called into question by some. For example, Schneider, et al., stress that most small- to medium-sized eco-social projects operate *at the margins* of the market economy; consequently, while such initiatives may help to demonstrate the *possibility* of 'alternative' modes of living, given the embeddedness of capitalist

[21] Here there comes into view a convergence between localists and neoliberal anti-statists.

relations of property and production, such activities are destined to remain peripheral. Thus, they pose no threat whatsoever to the dominant system (Schneider et al., 2010).

Mocca, too, argues that it is debatable whether these 'alternative' localist networks could ever achieve the size and strength required to oppose the capitalist system and its neoliberal elites (Mocca, 2020: 87–88). Focusing on degrowth perspectives, she argues that adherents of this approach ultimately 'fail to construct a persuasive argument about the scalability of such experiences that is capable of going beyond the communitarian utopia'. This problem, she suggests, is an outgrowth of degrowth's 'thin theorization of a political system for a degrowth society and how to build it' (Mocca, 2020). This point of critique has been echoed by other opponents of degrowth such as Phillips and Huber (with the latter comparing degrowth's focus on building 'nowtopias' and a 'movement of movements' to the 'model experiments' derided by Engels) (Huber, 2022c).

Schoppek is another who remains unconvinced that networks of community-scale initiatives can ultimately coalesce into something capable of transforming society more generally. She argues that, when one considers historical path dependencies and the prevailing balance of social forces, it is highly unlikely that such scale effects will ever be reached. Indeed, in her view, it is much more likely that local-scale activities will become incorporated into the dominant neoliberal order (Schoppek, 2020; see also Srnicek and Williams, 2016: 70). In my discussion of the case studies in chapters 6 and 7, I will show just how this process of incorporation can occur – and, by focusing on the activities of *Freshfair* in particular, how it can be resisted (chapter 9).

Raising a related issue, Albo asks how localist initiatives would seek to protect any advances made if their gains were to be threatened by capitalist counter-attacks (which, if they became problematic for capital, one expects they would be). He points out that localists often sidestep the question of how powerful local (and, for that matter, non-local) interests hostile to such developments would be suppressed. This he views as one of the 'most important conceptual and political issues' in discussions around eco-social transition. Yet on this topic, he notes, most localists have nothing to say (Albo, 2007: 351).

I would like to emphasise here that by highlighting the shortcomings of molecular, eco-localist, sub-hegemonic approaches in this way, I am not seeking to dismiss the strategic importance of localist activity outright (a point I will return to in chapter 9). Nevertheless, the discussion above does lend support to Albo's assertion that 'local socio-ecological struggles cannot be delinked from … universal projects of transcending capitalism on a world scale' (Albo, 2007: 359; for similar arguments, see Sharzer, 2012; and Foster, 2015). This brings me to the issue of 'withdrawal'.

3.12 Withdrawal

The idea that it is possible, in capitalist social formations, to withdraw into 'non-capitalist' spaces is central to localist strategy. It has often been suggested that it is in such spaces that alternative modes of living can be developed, and from them that such practices can spread. For example, it has been argued that, in these gaps and cracks, co-operative enterprises can flourish (Wright, 2010; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013), community economies based on 'fair trade' can emerge (McKibben, 2007), and local firms seeking niches free from the pressures of corporate competition can operate (Hopkins, 2011, 2013; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013). Indeed, it has even been suggested that, for communities trying to escape from capitalist culture, withdrawal into such spaces can permit a 'concerted rejection of its value form'. Withdrawal, on this view, makes it possible for local communities to 'reclaim and reinvent work against the logic of capital' (Carlsson and Manning, 2010: 925; Kallis et al., 2012). These spaces are also often seen by localists as areas of authentic democracy – spaces where 'progressive', participatory alternatives to established systems of mediated democratic representation can flourish (Wright, 2010).

Some, however, have questioned the idea that localist 'alternative' projects can withdraw into liberated spaces and insulate themselves from the pressures that flow from the capitalist economy and its associated forms of governance. Staging an important intervention that resonates with the discussion of Marxian value theory set out in the preceding chapter, Albo, for example, has argued that the 'alternative' approaches so often championed by localists (local currencies, artisanal community economies, ethical small business activities, and so on), while these may add important new dimensions to eco-localist practice, nevertheless remain marginal in terms of total economic activity, and *subordinate to the valorization processes of the 'formal economy'* (Albo, 2007: 349).

To help situate Albo's comments in terms of the historical development of capitalism, let me point out here that the spatial restructuring associated with world market integration during the neoliberal period has worked to commensurate local conditions, exposing them to the dominant logic of profit-oriented, market-mediated accumulation (Sum and Jessop, 2013: 418; see also chapter 4). Albo argues that this process has tended to undermine eco-localist practice, because each location becomes 'necessarily subordinate to the logic of capitalism as a whole' and its anti-ecological drive to accumulate (Albo, 2007: 346). He emphasises that unlike subaltern actors, the capitalist class can 'shift capital, play one locality off against another, or undermine local strategies by the exercise of political power at national or global scales of governance'. Consequently, he insists, 'liberated' ecological and political spaces 'can only be defended to the extent that the scale and scope of capitalist market activities are reduced and the scale and scope of democracy is extended' (Albo, 2007: 352). On this basis, he stresses that attempts to:

> reduce the scale of production and ecological processes along community development and bioregional lines… and the scale of democracy in support of mutualism… completely misrepresent capitalist power structures and the necessary challenges of democratization (Albo, 2007: 352).

Thus, he argues that localists err when they assume that:

> … the building of socio-ecological alternatives can be insulated from the non-local events and processes that constitute their context (Albo, 2007: 351).

In his view, then, there is:

> … quite literally, no way to withdraw (even if it was judged desirable to do so) from these relations and remain in a capitalist market economy (Albo, 2007: 351–352).

Sharzer takes a similar line. He rejects the commonplace localist notion that community-scale economies provide 'ethical' spaces where small businesses 'won't have to play by the rules of big capital' (Sharzer, 2012: 53–54). He also rubbishes the idea that large-scale, capitalist, high-tech firms can be displaced by co-operative initiatives that engage in 'non-capitalist' trade. Such arguments, he claims, are problematic because they 'miss the power of capital to dominate the market' and overlook the fact that '[c]apital's inherent drive to profit exposes local alternatives to ruthless market discipline' (ibid.).

Also making a point that resonates with the discussion in chapter 2, Sharzer argues that any localist project that aims to extract itself from the capitalist economy will ultimately be 'stymied by the law of value' (Sharzer, 2012). He adds that localist attempts to 'create fair trade around the margins of the market' imagine 'a society without a law of value' (Sharzer, 2016). I will return to this point in my discussion *Freshfair* in chapter 6.

Gibson-Graham, however, have rejected such Marxian critiques of localist practice, which, in their view, place a restrictive emphasis on the 'economy-wide imperative of capital accumulation' (Gibson–Graham, 1996; see also Gibson-Graham, 2006). Seeing this focus as part of the problem, they have argued that progressives must work to deconstruct the capitalocentric discourse that has 'colonized the entire economic landscape'. In this way, they argue that activists can begin to 'un-think' economic determinism and create spaces for non-capitalist economic alternatives (Gibson-Graham, 2006: xxx, 2, 55). Instead of focusing on capital accumulation, then, they argue that it is necessary to acknowledge the diverse nature of existing economic forms – and to bear it in mind that, while some businesses might *choose* to focus on growth, not all enterprises are necessarily growth-oriented (this stance resonates with the view of McKibben, who, as I showed in section 3.5 above, argued that small enterprises embedded in local communities are likely to de-prioritise growth and instead focus on other

goals, such as improving community wellbeing or protecting the local environment; it also aligns with the pro-capitalist, 'ethical' business approach advanced by Porter and Kramer – see chapter 4). According to Gibson-Graham:

> We may no more assume that a capitalist firm is interested in maximizing profits or exploitation than we may assume that an individual woman wants to bear and raise children, or that an American is interested in making money (Gibson-Graham, 1996: 16).

Marxian thinkers, of course, have hit back at this idea. Böhm et al., for example, have argued that Gibson-Graham and colleagues are guilty of trying to build social socio-economic alternatives to capitalism through the sheer performative power of their knowledge alone. They argue that this approach is based on an 'anti-essentialist', pragmatist understanding of politics that focuses on 'the contingency of social outcomes rather than the unfolding of structural logics'[65], and claim that it ultimately boils down to little more than wishful thinking. They instead emphasise that it is the dynamics of accumulation that continually drives capital to 'incorporate or neutralize' the most promising elements of alternative social practice (Böhm, et al., 2016). Sharzer agrees: pointing to capitalism's *structural* imperative to grow, he argues that accumulation is not something that an enterprise in a capitalist society can simply decide to opt in or out of (Sharzer, 2012). The members of the Salvage Collective take a similar view: 'accumulation is, for capital, an imperative, not an option', they state (Salvage Collective, 2021: 9). As Seymour, one of its members has elsewhere pointed out, in this 'system of competitive accumulation, companies which don't grow, die' (Seymour, 2021). This is a pressure, Sharzer asserts, that falls on cut-throat and 'ethical' firms alike, regardless of their size.

Against those who seek to underscore the social and environmental benefits that small businesses can provide, Sharzer argues that even local enterprises are forced to find ways to introduce machines and efficiency savings to reduce the value that each commodity contains in an attempt to lower costs (Sharzer, 2012: 53–54). However, because local firms don't tend to have the resources required to do this, he points out that small business owners are often forced to 'substitut[e] their own bodies and time for capital'. This, he stresses, is 'not an escape from the global law of value or a vision for a friendlier, more humane community' (Sharzer, 2012: 29). Consequently, he argues that small business activity is not 'a check on capitalist development: it's another form of it' (Sharzer, 2012: 53–54). I will return to these themes – the law of value, 'ethical' business, and self-exploitation – in my discussion of *Freshfair* in chapter 6.

3.13 Defeat

For many pro-localist thinkers, the massive upsurge in interest in community localism that has occurred since the mid-noughties has been viewed as a sign of growing grassroots social power and a significant step forward in the struggle to build a greener, fairer world (McKibben, 2007, 2011; Hopkins, 2011, 2013; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; Schmeltzer, et al., 2022; Saito, 2024). Several Marxian critics, however, have suggested that this shift towards the local and the particular should be seen as an effect of the *declining* power of the organised left over the neoliberal period. According to thinkers such as Harvey (2005), Albo (2007), Sharzer (2012, 2016), Foster (2015), Phillips (2015), Srnicek and Williams (2016), and Huber (2022a), for example, this loss of power is the product of sustained elite attacks on subaltern forces during that time. Seen from this perspective, neoliberalism's spatial, economic, political and cultural restructuring is considered to have significantly narrowed the horizons of subaltern resistance.[22] Because the prospect of achieving significant social change through 'mainstream' political channels has diminished over the past four decades (a period during which environmental and social conditions have worsened markedly), subaltern actors have had to turn to the local scale, given that it offers the only remaining level at which resistance can occur (Sharzer, 2012, 2016; Foster, 2015; Srnicek and Williams, 2016). According to Mocca, it was precisely because of the:

> … impracticability of a forceful subversion of the capital system… [that the] strategy of 'dissidence' through bottom-up local activities [came to be established as] the only viable option (Mocca, 2020: 79).

Sharzer similarly roots the growing popularity of localist approaches in the broader political defeat of the left during recent decades. He emphasises that this uptick in localist activity has occurred in a neoliberalizing context – one where, across the left, it became increasingly accepted that large-scale, collective social change was no longer possible (Sharzer, 2012: 3). He argues that:

> Localism isn't dominant today because of its social power. Instead, the decline of working class movements has created an ideological space for localism (Sharzer, 2012: 3).

Phillips, who takes a similar line, claims that it is because of these developments that localists typically occupy 'a remarkably pessimistic position' – one that is at odds with 'the long-

[22] This period saw, for example, the elimination of organized labour as a significant social force in the UK (and beyond), the unravelling of the 'national projects' of social democracy, the increasing neoliberalization of social democratic parties (and the decay of representative political regimes), the elimination of 'actually existing socialism' as a pole of attraction for anti-capitalist forces, and the demise of revolutionary movements across the global South.

cherished, optimistic goal of socialists of global economic democracy' (Phillips, 2015: 84). Srnicek and Williams, too, argue that localism is what happens when 'defending small bunkers of autonomy against the onslaught of capitalism is the best that can be hoped for' – hence the localist emphasis on 'withdrawal' and 'escape' (Srnicek and Williams, 2016: 48). They suggest that, at a time when:

> … most of the political strategies and tactics developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries appear blunted and ineffectual, localism has a seductive logic to it (Srnicek and Williams, 2016: 40).

Building on the discussion above, I claim that the emergence and consolidation of eco-localist thought and action over recent years cannot be understood without taking into account the effects that neoliberalization has had in the domains of economics, culture, politics, and individual subjectivity, or of how changes in these spheres have shaped ongoing struggles between capital and labour – a key issue that the champions of localism discussed in part 1 above tend to overlook. In the next chapter, I will consider how the sedimentation of pro-localist views and their embedding in environmental 'common sense' have worked to constrain the subaltern political imagination, and what this has meant for grassroots organising in advanced neoliberal settings.

Chapter 4: Neoliberalization and the consolidation of eco-localist thought in post-2008 Britain

Introduction

In this chapter, I will examine neoliberalism's emergence and evolution in its Anglo-Saxon 'heartlands' and consider how neoliberalization processes have shaped the development of environmental thought and action over the past four decades or so. This discussion will inform my examination of the case study projects in chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9, where I consider how the co-evolution of neoliberalism and 'mainstream' environmentalism during that period came to influence the participants' thought patterns and behaviours.

The chapter will proceed as follows. I offer a baseline definition of neoliberalism in section 4.1 and discuss the social conditions in which neoliberal thinking emerged and became consolidated in section 4.2. I then consider neoliberal views regarding the role of 'the market' as a technology of eco-social co-ordination (section 4.3).

In section 4.4, I examine neoliberal development in contexts where neoliberal 'regime shifts' have taken place and periodize neoliberalism in the British context. Then, in sections 4.5 and 4.6, I discuss neoliberalism's wider spatial restructuring of production and consider how this relates to the rise of sub-hegemonic eco-localist activism. Section 4.7 looks at the growing importance of 'progressive' social activity on the 'civil society' terrain and situates this in terms of neoliberalism's wider development. Building on this, in section 4.8, I show how neoliberalism's consolidation worked to constrain subaltern thinking and narrow the horizons of political possibility.

In section 4.9 I turn to the issue of neoliberal environmentalism. Here I consider the rise of sustainable development and green economy discourses and on this basis point to the emergence of what I call 'green capitalist realism' – a condition that became embedded in environmental 'common sense' in advanced neoliberal Britain. This idea will be important for my analysis of *Greenstar Energy* in chapter 7. Then, in section 4.10, I explore the rise of 'responsible capitalist' discourses in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis; this will feed into the discussion in chapters 6 and 7, where I examine the contrasting ways that the case study projects positioned themselves in relation to this idea. The chapter closes with some brief remarks concerning the Big Society (BS) agenda, which played an important role in shaping the wider action context in which the case study participants found themselves.

4.1 Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is a complex and polyvalent term. There are many distinct (and frequently divergent) conceptualisations of neoliberalism; indeed, the term is used so widely that some

believe it is no longer useful and should be abandoned altogether (Venugopal, 2015; Dunn, 2017). I understand neoliberalization as a variegated series of processes with distinctive environmental, spatial, economic, social, and political dimensions. Although evolving in relation to different spatio-temporal contexts, inherited institutional landscapes and the shifting balance of social forces (Brenner et al., 2010a, 2010b: 185–185; Jessop, 2002, 2002b, 2018), at its core, I see neoliberalization as a process rooted in a set of policies within which 'the market' constitutes the principal means of governance (Peck, 2010; Mann, 2013; Davies, 2014; Brown, 2017; Jessop, 2018). I will expand on this below.

4.2 Neoliberalization

Considered in economic and political terms, neoliberalism coalesces around a core set of policies emphasising liberalization, deregulation, market-friendly reregulation, privatization, the deployment of market proxies in the public sector, and cuts in direct taxation (Harvey, 2005; Castree, 2010; Davies, 2014; Meek, 2014; Jessop, 2016a, 2018; Christophers, 2018). Marxist thinkers have often discussed the implementation of these measures by referencing their importance for elite attempts to restore capital accumulation following the crisis of Fordism. Harvey, for example, has emphasised the class dimension of these neoliberalizing processes and their effects on the relationship between capital and labour (Harvey, 2005). He argues that, when the economic conditions underpinning the Fordist compromise broke down in the 1970s, elite social groups moved to protect themselves from economic and political annihilation by stepping up attacks on organised labour (Harvey, 2005: 31; see also discussion in Gallas, 2017). This was necessary because, as Panitch and Gindin have noted, from capital's perspective, by this point in time the democratic gains that had been won by the working classes had become a barrier to accumulation. To resolve this problem, dominant social groups responded by eroding these rights and destroying union power (Gindin and Panitch, 2012: 15; Gallas, 2017). Davidson stresses this point when he states that:

> The extent to which neoliberalism has been successfully imposed in any country has depended on the prior extent to which the power of organized labour has been reduced. Where it has not, or insufficiently so, the project tended to stall (Davidson, 2023: 75).

He points out that by the late 1980s, the all-out attacks on labour that characterised the early neoliberal period had largely ceased (Davidson, 2023; also Harvey, 2005; Jessop, 2015; Gilbert and Williams, 2022). Davidson claims that one major reason for this decline in open class-based struggle in Britain towards the end of that decade was the fact that members of key ruling class groups had by that point become much more cautious about what they thought it was possible to achieve through a generalised social offensive (Davidson, 2023: 90; see also Gilbert and Williams, 2022). Another reason – one that is particularly relevant to the argument I develop in this thesis – is that by this stage in neoliberalism's development, *capital's efforts to destroy the*

power of organized labour had largely succeeded (Davidson, 2023: 90; see also Fisher, 2009; Gilbert and Williams, 2022). Srnicek and Williams argue that this defeat of labour in the core capitalist countries had major political and economic ramifications; indeed, they see this act of social re-structuring as 'neoliberalism's most important achievement' because it 'significantly chang[ed] the balance of power between labour and capital' (Srnicek and Williams, 2016: 20). Davidson has similarly argued that the defeat of organised labour during this period should be seen as 'perhaps the greatest service neoliberalism has achieved for capital' (Davidson, 2023: 90). I note neoliberalism's hostility to organised labour here as, while this issue is often ignored in discussions concerning contemporary eco-localist activity (see chapter 3), in my view this successful offensive against worker power played a key role in creating the conditions in which localist 'civil society' organizing would become embedded as a 'common sense' subaltern response to eco-social problems. I will say more about this in coming chapters.

Central to neoliberal efforts to restore accumulation and discipline labour was the removal of barriers to competition in all markets – including, significantly, the labour market. According to Dardot and Laval, this emphasis on competition constitutes *the* key feature of neoliberalism. They see neoliberalism as a 'set of discourses, practices and apparatuses that determine a new mode of government of human beings *in accordance with the universal of competition*' (Dardot and Laval, 2017: 4; emphasis added). They argue that, over the course of the neoliberal period, competition and the entrepreneurial model has emerged as a general mode of government. Far exceeding the 'economic sphere' in the habitual sense of the term, they suggest that market logic has, over time, come to radically transform the values and co-ordinates that govern liberal societies (Dardot and Laval, 2017: 4; see also Mirowski, 2014). Significantly, they note that this rationality tends to 'structure and organize not only the action of the rulers, *but also the conduct of the ruled*' (Dardot and Laval, 2017: 4; emphasis added). This point is important, and I will return to it in my discussion of *Greenstar Energy* in chapter 7.

4.3 Market rationality

In chapter 2, I noted the centrality of market exchange to the operations of capitalist social formations. Under neoliberalism, 'the market' takes on additional significance as market rationality comes to circulate across wider society to colonize all spheres of social life (Foucault, 2008; Fisher, 2009; Mirowski, 2014; Brown, 2017, 2019). This expansion of market logic rests on the neoliberal view that markets (and market-like governance systems) provide the most efficient way to organise society (Hayek, 2001). With the capacity to concentrate knowledge diffused throughout society into the metric of price, markets – particularly if these can be liberated from all forms of state interference[23] – tend to be promoted by neoliberals as the

[23] It is important to note here that, while neoliberalism might aspire to create a 'utopia' based on free markets and small states, 'actually existing' neoliberal regimes have in practice 'entailed a dramatic

most effective way to co-ordinate the distribution of goods across society[24] (Hayek, 1945; Phillips and Rozworski, 2019; Vettese and Pendergrass, 2022). This understanding informs neoliberal arguments that claim that as many state functions as possible should be organised through market (or market-like) exchanges. This principle underpins neoliberal demands for the privatization and marketization of state-delivered services (Cahill, 2014: 3).

Brown argues that the expansion of market logic over time has not only led to 'the neoliberalization of markets, institutions and everyday life, but of democracy and the democratic citizen' (Brown, 2017: 47; see MacLean, 2017). She argues that the ubiquity of neoliberal rationality in 'statecraft and the workplace, in jurisprudence, education, culture, and a vast range of quotidian activity' has, over time, converted the 'distinctly political character, meaning, and operation of democracy's constituent elements into economic ones' (Brown, 2017: 17). Making a similar point, Fine and Saad-Filho claim that this neoliberal restructuring of the relationship between the economy, state, and society has neutered inherited structures and institutions of political representation (Fine and Saad-Filho, 2017: 697). Davies, too, suggests that what he calls neoliberalism's 'disenchantment of politics by economics' (Davies, 2014: 5–6) has generated a crisis of representative democracy in advanced neoliberal states (see also Gilbert, 2013; Mair, 2013; MacLean, 2017). I claim that this 'democratic deficit' has created problems for which political localism and community-scale organising have often been seen as potential solutions. It is worth noting here that this belief in the power of markets has heavily shaped neoliberal approaches to environmental protection. As has often been pointed out, neoliberals tend to view the market as the most effective mechanism for sustainably organising nature (Brand and Wissen, 2021; Buller, 2022; Foster, 2024, chapter 4; see section 4.9 below). Consequently, as neoliberal principles have become more socially embedded, such pro-market views have increasingly come to shape the terrain on which environmental struggles take place. This will be important in my discussion of the *Greenstar Energy* project in chapter 7.

4.4 Periodization

Drawing on the work of Jessop and Davidson (Jessop, 2019; Davidson, 2017), this section sets out a periodization of neoliberalism that will underpin the discussion in later chapters. By proceeding in this way, I aim to establish a conceptual framework that will:

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intensification of coercive, disciplinary forms of state intervention in order to impose market rule' (Brenner and Theodore, 2002). Saad-Filho and Yalman capture this idea in their definition of neoliberalism, which they see as: 'an accumulation strategy, a mode of social and economic reproduction and a mode of exploitation and social domination based on the *systematic use of state power to impose, under the ideological veil of non-intervention*, a hegemonic project of recomposition of the rule of capital in all areas of social life' (Saad-Filho and Yalman, 2010).

[24] From the neoliberal viewpoint, much more effective than central planning, for example.

1) Help me to explain why localism became so deeply embedded as a key principle of social organization among sub-hegemonic environmentalists in Britain in the post-2008 period (and, by extension, why this issue became so important to the *Freshfair* and *Greenstar* actors – see chapters 6 and 7).
2) Enable me to explain why the participants at each of the case study projects, in that shared post-2008 action context, subscribed to *contrasting* eco-social imaginaries (pro-localist, pro-capitalist at *Greenstar*, and pro-localist, anti-capitalist at *Freshfair* – see chapters 6, 7, and 8).

Jessop usefully sets out an analytical distinction between four main forms of neoliberal transition: 1) neoliberal system transformation, 2) principled neoliberal regime shifts, 3) the neoliberal economic re-structuring of (semi-)'peripheral' economies, and 4) the implementation of pragmatic neoliberal policy adjustments.[25] Britain, which forms the backdrop of my study, was the site of what he calls a principled neoliberal regime shift. Consequently, it is on this type of transition that I will focus here (on the others, see Jessop, 2019). This shift is primarily associated with the Thatcher administrations, which drove forward an aggressive neoliberalizing agenda after coming to power in 1979 (Harvey, 2005a; Jessop, 2015, 2019; Gallas, 2017).[26] During the Major and New Labour years that followed, neoliberalism in Britain became consolidated and further advanced; it would take on new, more extreme forms in the post-2008 period (Davidson, 2017; Jessop, 2015, 2019). These developments would play an important role in shaping the action context in which the case study projects operated.

To develop a better understanding of how neoliberalization processes in Britain generated social conditions that allowed (sub-hegemonic) eco-localist principles to be translated into subaltern environmental 'common sense' (see chapter 3), I need to look at neoliberal regimes shifts in more detail. Guided by the work of Jessop, and supplementing his account with the work of others (such as Brenner, 2004; Castree, 2010; Fine and Saad-Filho, 2017), I want to show that, where such shifts have taken place, policies have tended to focus on:

1. *Liberalization*: to promote greater market competition.[27]

[25] He notes that these may exist as hybrids and can change over time in a given political/economic space.
[26] Jessop has pointed out that during the period 1975-1978, Labour made a series of *pragmatic* neoliberal policy adjustments in response to pressing economic concerns. The Thatcher regime would pursue such policies more *systematically* and on principled grounds (Jessop, 2015; see also Srnicek and Williams, 2016: 20; Harvey, 2005a: 12).

[27] Sum and Jessop's understanding of competition is insightful. They see it as: 'the external expression of the internal drive of capital as capital to expand, to produce surplus value, and realize it in the form of profit. Competition realizes the contingent necessities of the differential accumulation of particular enterprises, clusters or sectors and the differential growth of particular economic spaces. Competition takes many forms and plays out in many ways. It is not confined to any particular type of economic

2. *Deregulation*: involved the 'rolling back' of existing institutions. Often justified by the need to boost competitiveness, this process reduced state capacities to respond to the social and ecological impacts of capitalist production (McCarthy, 2004: 276).
3. *Financialization*: emphasised the accumulation of interest-bearing capital. Worked to detach the creation and circulation of financial assets from productive capital circuits (although never completely) (Fine and Saad-Filho, 2017: 687).
4. *Market-friendly re-regulation*: 'rolling forward' neoliberal institutions through enhanced forms of state intervention and new forms of governance (e.g., the World Bank, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the International Monetary Fund, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, etc.) (Brenner, 2004; Gindin and Panitch, 2012; Jessop, 2019).
5. *Privatization*: of state-owned enterprises, state-provided services, and public land (Jessop, 2002; Harvey, 2005; Christophers, 2018; Meek, 2014).
6. *Use of market proxies in the public sector*: this became commonplace and naturalised over time. Made those functions and services still delivered by the state more market-like (Castree, 2010: 10–11; Davies, 2014, p. xiv).
7. *Internationalization*: facilitated by the disembedding of capital from local constraints. This process 'intensifie[d] the influence of the logic of capital on a global scale' (Jessop, 2019: 351).[28]
8. *Cuts in direct taxation*: for big corporations, wealthy households, etc.
9. *The creation of 'free', self-governing, entrepreneurial individuals and communities*: required the cultivation of an ethic that emphasised self-reliance and reduced dependence on public services and the state (Castree, 2010: 10–11; Mirowski, 2014) (on how this relates to the BS agenda, see section 4.11 below).
10. *Development of 'flanking mechanisms' in 'civil society'*: to compensate for the inadequacies of the market mechanism (Jessop, 2002b) (see section 4.7 below).

By looking at how these policies were implemented *over time*, one can see how neoliberalism's evolution has been shaped by efforts to deal with problems that have been thrown up by earlier rounds of neoliberal development. Here, once again, I draw on the work of Jessop, who

activities although, in today's neoliberal, financialized world, financial innovation and competition are especially significant' (Sum and Jessop, 2013, p. 264).

[28] This process of internationalization was predicated on the mass production/consumption of fossil fuel energy (see Huber, 2013; Malm, 2016).

identifies seven[29] main stages of neoliberalization in contexts where neoliberal regime shifts have occurred (Jessop, 2019):

1. Pre-history as an intellectual, ideological, and political movement up to the point where momentum was such that a neoliberal party was likely to enter office: a 'point of no return'.
2. Consolidation of a government committed to a neoliberal agenda; efforts to gain control of the legislature and executive despite opposition from other political forces.
3. 'Roll-back' of institutions of the post-war Fordist compromise.
4. 'Roll out' of neoliberal institutions; pursuit of efforts to embed neoliberal principles nationally, regionally, and globally.
5. Resistance to the accumulating effects of neoliberalization (such as increases in inequality and the intensification of uneven development); emergence of 'Third Way' politics to help address problems generated by the marketization of society and to maintain neoliberal momentum (Jessop, 2019: 347; see section 4.7).
6. Irruption of the 2007-09 economic and financial crisis; failure of 'Third Way' efforts to maintain neoliberal momentum; socialisation of toxic assets and losses based on the 'exceptional powers' invoked by neoliberal regimes.
7. Attempts by the power bloc (in which the forces of finance capital are significant) to constitutionalize and make permanent the 'exceptional' austerity policies and politics that were being used to protect an economic-political order threatened by the crisis (Jessop, 2019: 346–348).

In terms of this thesis' aims, Jessop's conceptualization is useful because it helps to highlight how the emergence of 'Third Way' approaches during the '90s – with their emphasis on 'third sector' and neocommunitarian solutions to environmental and social problems – helped to stabilize neoliberalism and create the conditions necessary for further rounds of neoliberal accumulation. This point is important, I suggest, because it helps to destabilise accepted 'mainstream' conceptions regarding the role that 'third sector' and neocommunitarian organisations play in advanced neoliberal contexts (the activities of which are often understood to take place on a neutral social terrain situated outside the sphere of politics – see section 4.7 below). In chapter 7, I will draw on these ideas to highlight the deeply *political* nature of *Greenstar*'s supposedly apolitical activities.

[29] This captures the major phases in neoliberalism's development up to the time he was writing. Heron's notion of 'capitalist catastrophism' potentially offers a way to add another, more recent, stage to this periodization (Heron, 2024). I will return to this point in chapter 9.

Having outlined Jessop's periodization of neoliberalism, I now want to map onto this an alternative periodization offered by Davidson (2017). Painting with broader strokes than Jessop, he breaks neoliberal development in Britain down into three major stages:

1. *Vanguard regimes of reorientation (1979–1992)*: this constitutes the first, most aggressive phase of neoliberalization in Britain and in political terms was dominated by the Thatcher administrations. As Davidson has pointed out, this period was marked by waves of privatization, de-regulation, financialization, and (often violent) assaults on working class power. While acknowledging that there are no hard and fast boundaries to be drawn here, let me note that this phase broadly corresponds to stages 2, 3, and 4 in Jessop's seven-stage list above.
2. *Social regimes of consolidation (1992–2007)*: refers to the development of Third Way approaches and was dominated by New Labour. As Davidson has noted, these neoliberal consolidation regimes were 'formally characterized by social or liberal democratic rhetoric'. He adds, however, that while they managed to 'incorporate the rhetoric of social solidarity', they simultaneously managed to 'maintain[…] and even extend[…] the essential components of neoliberalism' (Davidson, 2023: 93). This phase broadly maps onto stage 5 in the list above.
3. *Crisis regimes of permanent exception (2007–)*: this refers to the regimes that emerged in the period following the 2007–2009 economic and financial crisis. This is important in terms of my discussion because it was during this period that the case study projects emerged and operated. This phase corresponds to stages 6 and 7 in the list above.

I claim that Davidson's periodization complements Jessop's work in ways that are useful for my examination of the case study projects in later chapters. To help prepare the ground for that analysis, in table 4.1 below I bring the main insights from each of their perspectives together. (In section 4.9, I will add an ecological dimension to this periodization to further prepare for that discussion).

Phase of neoliberalism	Key characteristics
Vanguard Neoliberalism (1979-1992)	• Liberalization • Roll-back of existing institutions • Market-friendly re-regulation • Privatization • Consolidation of neoliberal government
Consolidation Neoliberalism (1992-2007)	• Emergence of Third Way approaches • Growing emphasis on entrepreneurialism, community, localism, and resilience • Development of 'flanking mechanisms' in 'civil society'
Crisis Neoliberalism (2007–)	• Failure of Third Way efforts to maintain neoliberal momentum • Exceptional powers invoked by neoliberal regimes • 'Permanent austerity'

Table 4.1: Phases of neoliberal development in Britain

4.5 Neoliberalism and space

During the Fordist-Keynesian period, the role of the national territorial state as a geographical container of capital accumulation, political and economic organisation, and social development intensified and solidified (Brenner, 1998: 474; Sum and Jessop, 2013, p. 257). However, the economic and political reorganisation that accompanied the crisis of the Atlantic Fordist growth regimes led to the decomposition of past scalar and spatial fixes. This led to a 'hollowing out' of the national state apparatus and a proliferation of discursively constituted and materially instituted scales. Occurring through a variety of trial-and-error, often *ad hoc*, political initiatives, what has emerged is an increasingly tangled hierarchy of shifting, overlapping scalar arrangements associated with multilevel interventions – a context in which no particular scale (supra-national, national, regional, local) dominates as the primary anchor point of capital accumulation (Jessop, 2016b: 112, 116, 180, 195, 235; Jones, 2021: 23–24).

Neoliberalization reshaped inherited institutional landscapes and reconstituted the interconnections between them. These restructuring processes facilitated marketization and commodification and intensified the uneven development of regulatory forms across places, territories and scales (Brenner et al., 2010b: 184–185). This process of 'de-nationalisation' led

to the intensification at sub-state levels of 'interspatial competition' (Brenner, 1998: 475). According to Brenner and Theodore, it was in this context – in the absence of any sustainable regulatory fix at the global, supranational or national levels – that localities emerged as a key scale at which a negotiated form of capitalist regulation could be forged (Brenner and Theodore, 2002: 342). In this context, opportunities emerged for elements within the political elite to empower local entrepreneurial cultures and unleash what they saw as the innovative capacities of local economies (Brenner and Theodore, 2002: 342). Cities and regions increasingly began to compete with one another for state subsidies and capital investment (Brenner, 1998: 475), and a network of global cities emerged that extended beyond any particular state-regulated territorial space (Jessop, 2002b: 180).

Jessop has argued that the emergence and solidification of new scales generated by these processes, along with the proliferation of social measures developed to connect them, generated social complexity (Jessop, 2016b: 166). According to Brenner and Theodore, the need to address the complexity generated by world market integration helps to explain the contemporary political appeal of the local scale. They claim that localist approaches in large part rest on arguments that foreground the 'uncontrollability' of supralocal transformations (Brenner and Theodore, 2002: 341). Eagle et al., have likewise argued that in the decentred and disaggregated neoliberal context, there has emerged a growing sense that 'control' over social processes has somehow been lost. These authors note that this sense has been felt among political elites as well as among those they seek to govern. Like Brenner and Theodore, they too suggest that this sense of uncontrollability has driven interest in political localism over recent decades (Eagle et al., 2017; also Stoker, 2004: 117). Reinforcing this point, Hickson has argued that, for contemporary actors who increasingly 'feel lost in the world of markets and centralised states… the only way of reattaching meaning to their lives is to localise power so that they can have a stronger sense of identity' (Hickson, 2013: 419).

According to Stoker, it was this growing sense of ungovernability and a generalised loss of control that drove the rise of New Localism in the mid-1990s. He suggests that the turn towards 'the local' around this time should be seen as a 'practical response to a significant practical challenge' – namely, a way to deal with the increasing complexity of what the modern state was attempting to achieve (Stoker, 2004: 117). He points out that this shift rested on the assumption that the challenges facing the modern state could best be met at the local level. The New Localists called for the devolution of power and resources away from centralised state control and towards front-line managers and local democratic structures (Stoker, 2004: 117). The underlying idea here was that, while not all political decision making should be concentrated locally, going forwards, 'more of it should be' (Stoker, 2004: 118). (One can detect here a

resonance between the principles of New Localism and the pro-localist arguments made by thinkers such as Hopkins, McKibben and Latouche, discussed in chapter 3).

From this perspective, localism was increasingly being seen as a way to empower communities. Among critical scholars, however, a contrasting view emerged. For such thinkers, this turn towards localism and 'the community' was seen as part of a wider political reorientation that was occurring in response to the social and environmental consequences of neoliberalism's 'roll back' phase (Peck and Tickell, 2002; Davidson, 2017). Those who took this position argued that the notion of community was being selectively invoked as a strategic component of neoliberal strategies designed to deal with market failures and maintain capital accumulation (Peck and Tickell, 2002; Catney et al., 2014; Jessop, 2019: 355). Viewed from this angle, the growing emphasis on 'the local' around that time should be understood not as an attempt to empower communities, but rather as part of what Peck has called neoliberalism's 'roll out' phase – a stage in neoliberalism's development where community organizations and NGOs increasingly came to be used as (flexible, low-cost, non-state) service providers in an effort to fill key gaps that had opened up in state provision (Peck, 2010: 38–39). I will say more on this below.

Making a related point, Davoudi and Madanipour have argued that this growing emphasis on 'localism' and 'community' should be seen as a spatial aspect of the 'post-social' technologies of neoliberal governmentality (Davoudi and Madanipour, 2015; see also Foucault, 2008; Dean, 2009; Rose and Miller, 2013). They understand the fragmentation of 'the social' into multiple communities as a counterpart to the fragmentation of 'the national' into multiple localities (see above). From this perspective, the growth of localism is viewed as an attempt to bring about the self-regulation of individuals and communities through the development of programmes, techniques, and rituals that support market governance and increased competition (Lawrence, 2005: 9). This insight fits with the view of Goodman et al., who argue that, while political localism might devolve some decision-making powers to local actors, overall co-ordination is still exercised though multi-layered, top-down institutional structures (Goodman et al., 2012: 22). These thinkers argue that the increasing political stress that has been placed on the local scale since the mid-1990s should be understood as an attempt to 'further a neoliberal form of global logic' – one that plays on 'left ideals of political participation and right ideals of non-interference in markets' (Goodman et al., 2012: 22). On this basis, they argue that 'the presumption that localization intrinsically stands as a force against globalization seems, at best, naïve'. Indeed, in these thinkers' eyes, the growing focus on re-localisation that has occurred over recent decades should not be seen as a form of 'resistance to neoliberal globalization', but rather as an 'intrinsic part of it' (Goodman et al., 2012: 22). This view shall inform my assessment of the activities of *Greenstar Energy* in chapter 7.

4.6 Neoliberalization's spatial restructuring of economic processes

World market integration created opportunities for moving up, down, and across scales, for commodifying and securitizing the future, and for rearticulating time horizons (Sum and Jessop, 2013: 418). With neoliberalization as its driving force, these processes unfolded in ways that privileged value in motion. In this sense, world market integration and the increasing economic importance of hyper-mobile financial capital were central to neoliberalism's evolution. Disembedded from the frictions of national power containers – and aided by technological advances and cheap hydrocarbon energy sources (Altvater, 2007; Huber, 2013; Malm, 2016) – neoliberalization compressed the density of market transactions (a process Harvey has called 'time-space compression' (Harvey, 2005: 4, 1990). This increased emphasis on speed, acceleration, and turnover time in economic activity advanced the logic of capital at the global scale, and increasingly subjected activities in geographically disparate locales to the audit of the global operation of the law of value (Sum and Jessop, 2013: 418). This will be important in my discussion of *Freshfair*'s activities in chapter 6.

Neoliberalism's restructuring of space boosted capital's capacity to defer/displace its internal contradictions by increasing the global scope of its operations and by enhancing its abilities to offload its problems on to other economic actors and interests, other systems, and the natural environment (Sum and Jessop, 2013: 418). This reinforced its capacities to dis-embed its activities from local material constraints and to deepen the spatial and scalar divisions of labour in its search for global opportunities for superprofits (ibid.).

This process of spatial restructuring (often captured under the 'catch-all' term 'globalization'[30]) was facilitated by the financialization of the global economy, the development of new communication technologies, and the so-called 'logistics revolution'. Together, these elements significantly improved capital's ability to scour the globe for new production sites where labour power was cheap and environmental regulations lax. As Mau has noted, these developments enabled capital to seize local, regional, and national economies 'by their roots' and subject them to a process of fracture and reassembly. In this way, capital broke existing production processes up into pieces, 'spreading their fragments all over the globe in order to reunite them through planetary supply chains' (Mau, 2023: 288). This process of spatial restructuring is important for this discussion because, as Mau stresses, it 'generally enhanced the power of capital at the expense of the power of anti-capitalist forces' (Mau, 2023: 290). For this reason, Mau considers

[30] This term, as Sum and Jessop note, has important ideological effects. In their view, it describes a new form of imperialism rooted less in territorial conquest and more in the capacity to dominate the division of labour, commodity chains and financial flows (Sum and Jessop, 2013, p. 264). Competition among transnational companies is central here, with firms competing on the world scale for profit maximization – a process that pressures market actors to boost competitiveness across territorial scales (Sum and Jessop, 2013, p. 269).

'logistics' as 'one of the key weapons *in a decades-long global offensive against labour*' (Mau, 2023: 287).

By drawing together the points set out in this and the preceding sections, it becomes possible to see how the breaking of organised labour during neoliberalism's 'vanguard' stage – a process that required the spatial restructuring of capitalist production – helped to consolidate neoliberalism and create a set of social conditions where, with neoliberal logic deeply embedded and left forces severely weakened, alternatives to capitalism could scarcely be imagined, never mind actualised (Žižek, 1999: 55; Fisher, 2009). Over time, as capitalism increasingly came to be seen as the only *realistic* way to organise society, and as potential non-capitalist alternatives tended to be marginalized, *capitalist social relations became naturalised and invisibilized*.

Consequently, in that neoliberal consolidation period (see table 4.1), where *capitalist social relations* had faded from view, I suggest that the increasingly evident intensification of environmental and social problems that were occurring around that time (climate breakdown, alienation from nature, the loss of community, and so on) – problems that I have argued result from the way that *capitalism* organises society and nature (see chapter 2) – *appeared* as though they were being driven not by *capitalism*'s longer-term development, but rather by *neoliberalism*'s more recent restructuring of *spatial* relations (that is, by 'globalization'). I claim that these conditions gave rise to a neoliberalized form of 'spatial fetishism', where the localization of production increasingly came to be seen as something like the opposite of 'globalization', and consequently as a means to counter the environmental and social problems that were becoming increasingly associated with the latter. In chapters 6 and 7, I will draw on these ideas to examine the localist imaginaries that informed the activities of *Freshfair* and *Greenstar*.

4.7 Neoliberalization, market failure, and the 'Third Way'

During the 1970s, there was a growing perception on the part of national and transnational elites that state intervention was failing and the state itself was in crisis. The neoliberal turn to the market in Britain during the 1980s can be seen as one attempt to resolve these problems, which had been attributed to governmental overload, state failure, and a crisis of governance (Jessop, 2000; see also Dardot and Laval, 2017; see above). Yet the market-based approaches that neoliberals pursued would also prove lacking in key respects. As Davidson points out, while state managers in capitalist social formations 'have both to facilitate the process of capital accumulation *and* ameliorate its effects on the population and environment', neoliberal elites tended to prioritise accumulation while letting the impacts on society and nature mount (Davidson, 2017: 626; emphasis added). According to Jessop, problems in these spheres have occurred because neoliberal regimes – as a result of their privileging of the market, their one-

sided emphasis on the exchange-value aspects of the capital relation, and their one-sided emphasis on the protection of finance capital in crisis management – have over time become less able/willing to directly provide the forms of support required to protect social life and the environment (Jessop et al., 2012; for more on neoliberalism's deleterious effects on people and planet, see Bonneuil and Fressoz, 2017; Brand and Wissen, 2021; Huber, 2022; Vettese and Pendergrass, 2022).

Given neoliberalism's priorities, already by the early- to mid-90s, the limitations of neoliberalism's overenthusiastic, fetishistic market turn were becoming apparent. The course of neoliberal development in Britain had by that time led to sharp increases in inequality and insecurity, cuts to public services, and a significant downturn in the quality of life for many poor and working-class people (Dale, 2012b: 17; Beckett, 2016). As Gilbert and Williams note, by this point, the New Right neoliberal bloc had become fatally weakened by its own contradictions and its narrow social base. Setting this out in terms of the categories suggested in table 4.1, it can be said that 'vanguard neoliberalism' had excluded too many political constituencies, and that the social inequalities and environmental problems it had generated had undermined its political legitimacy (Gilbert and Williams, 2022: 119).

Equally clear was the sense that *some* kind of intervention was needed to maintain neoliberal momentum and preserve social cohesion. However, any efforts to deal with these issues that involved an explicit (re-)turn to the state were, in that neoliberalised context, considered ideologically and politically unacceptable[31] (Jessop, 2000). Consequently, during neoliberalism's consolidation period, attention increasingly turned towards 'civil society'-based solutions to pressing environmental and social problems. Ideas around family and community self-help were promoted with increasing enthusiasm, and interest in co-ordination through self-organizing networks, partnerships, and other forms of reflexive collaboration grew (Jessop, 2016: 164). Community organisations and social movements became more heavily involved in policy development and implementation (ibid., 165), and the 'third sector' was repositioned from a peripheral concern to a key provider of public services (Fyfe, 2005: 539; Fong and Nascheck, 2021). Commenting on this shift, Fong and Naschek have pointed out that, as neoliberal socio-economic restructuring proceeded, non-profit organisations, active community groups, social entrepreneurs and responsibilized individuals all became increasingly called upon to 'pick[…] up the slack… [by] providing goods and services that the market cannot' (Fong and Nascheck, 2021: 95–96). Over time, as neoliberalism became further consolidated, the idea that such agents not only could, but indeed should play a role in the delivery of public services became translated into 'common sense' (Huber, 2022).

[31] As if it had ever gone away. See section 4.3 above.

As noted above, such 'civil society' activities are frequently understood to operate at a distance from 'the state' (narrowly conceived) and are thus often seen as *apolitical* in nature. According to Fong and Naschek, however, this position is mistaken. They argue that the 'explosion of third sector growth during the neoliberal period' helped to create a 'transformed civic universe within which elites [became] effectively insulated from popular pressure from below' (Fong and Nascheck, 2021: 129). On this basis, they claim that the growth of 'third sector' activity over recent decades has generated a mode of 'solving' social and environmental problems that 'ultimately serve[s] the status quo'. While these kinds of activities may *appear* apolitical and socially neutral, Fong and Nascheck argue that they actually work to provide a 'protective' layer' for capitalist society (Fong and Nascheck, 2021: 95–96). This will be important in my discussion of *Greenstar* in chapters 7 and 8.

4.8 'Capitalist realism'

In section 4.4 above, I showed that political, economic, and cultural changes occurring during the 'vanguard' period created conditions that enabled neoliberalism to become socially consolidated. Fisher has pointed out that, during this consolidation phase, capitalism came to fill the 'horizons of the possible' and, over time, became naturalised and invisibilized. This gave rise to a condition he called 'capitalist realism'. Fisher used this term to refer to the general sense that prevailed in advanced neoliberal settings, where capitalism came to be seen as 'the only viable political and economic system'. In such contexts, he argued that it had become easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (Fisher, 2009; also Žižek, 1999: 55). I alight on Fisher's notion of capitalist realism here because I believe this concept provides a useful basis for thinking about the changes that have occurred in environmental consciousness over the course of the neoliberal period (see section 4.9 below).

Fisher argued that capitalist realism resulted from the seeming absence of any viable political-economic alternative to neoliberal globalization in the two decades or so prior to the 2008 crisis (Fisher, 2009; see also Harvey, 2005a; Gindin and Panitch, 2012). He argued that by the time of the financial crash, capitalism had come to 'seamlessly occup[y] the horizons of the thinkable', and that capitalist social logic had penetrated deep into the social unconscious, 'coloniz[ing] the dreaming life of the population' (Fisher, 2009: 8). Others have similarly pointed out that neoliberalism, by distinctively shaping the ecological, economic, political, and social dimensions of capitalist social formations, and by recasting the inner lives of those exposed to its ever-expanding social logic (Rose and Miller, 2013; Mirowski, 2014; Brown, 2019), had severely constrained subaltern ideas regarding what was considered politically possible in that context. According to Fisher, this mode of thinking had become so embedded by that point in time that it continued to shape 'progressive' eco-social thinking in neoliberalism's post-2008 crisis phase, even though the conditions that had initially given rise to it had by that point

started to unravel (Fisher, 2009, 2014; see also Harvey, 2011; Davies, 2014; Davidson, 2017; Stahl, 2019; Heron, 2024). Fisher argued that many of those who consciously opposed capitalism after the crisis continued to unconsciously adopt it as the unalterable backdrop to their anti-capitalist activity (Fisher, 2018; Heron, 2024). He claimed that the deep social penetration of neoliberal ideas had shaped people's political imaginaries to such an extent that this had successfully suppressed the collective desire for something fundamentally different from what capitalism could offer (Fisher, 2012: 134). Fisher's concept of capitalist realism (which I modify below) will be important in my analysis of the *Greenstar* case study in chapter 7. In chapter 9, I will draw on this idea to show how the action context in which the case study projects operated differs to that found today, and what that means for contemporary eco-localist strategy.

4.9 Neoliberal environmentalism

Modern civil society environmentalism emerged with the rise of powerful ecological-social movements in the 1960s, particularly in the US and the UK.[32] This rise was catalysed during the early 1970s by a diverse range of factors (for example, the release of the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* report, the publication of Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful*, the ecological consciousness-raising effects of the famous *Blue Marble* photo, growing resistance to nuclear weapons testing, and so on).

If one considers these developments in terms of the periodization of neoliberalism set out in section 4.4 above, it can be noted that modern environmentalism in advanced capitalist economies such as Britain and the US emerged around the time that Fordism was entering crisis, and that it developed during the neoliberalizing decades that followed. This process of co-evolution played a key role in shaping the development of environmental thought during this period.

'Sustainable development' and the rise of 'NGO-ism' in the environmental domain

During the 1970s, rising levels of ecological consciousness, a growing awareness of environmental limits, and concerns about capitalism's role as a driver of ecological breakdown began to present serious challenges to the prevailing social order. These conditions would give rise to what came to be known as the 'sustainable development' paradigm (Dale et al., 2016). Supporters of this broad agenda argued that the power of capitalism could be used to resolve the environmental and social problems that were becoming the cause of so much concern. Resting on the notion that capitalist growth could be 'greened', its advocates claimed that by working to

[32] I am not trying to suggest that environmental activism only began in the 1960s and '70s, but rather that a new phase of environmentalism emerged at this point. Nor I am trying to suggest that environmental struggle is limited to core nations in the capitalist North. There is, of course, a long global history of environmental struggle (see, for example, Foster, 2021; Montrie, 2011).

reduce growth's ecological impacts, sustainable development approaches could reduce pressure on the environment *and* deliver the high levels of economic growth required to drive social progress (Sachs, 2015). It was, they claimed, a 'win-win' solution.

Emerging in a context that tended to select for capitalistic solutions to environmental and social crises, sustainable development became an increasingly powerful organising principle throughout the 1980s (Dale et al., 2016; Daly, 1993; Kenis and Lievens, 2015). It was popularized – particularly in policy circles – by the publication of the Bruntland Commission's 'path-breaking' report on global environment and development in 1987 (Bruntland Commission, 1987). The publication of this report is significant in terms of my study's aims as it is understood as a key moment in a wider shift in environmentalist thought that occurred during the 1980s and early '90s. Around this time, interest in the relatively 'radical' environmental approaches established during the post-war Fordist or Keynesian era began to wane, and attention increasingly turned towards 'non-confrontational' forms of environmental action that favoured market-based and techno-centric solutions[33] (Koch, 2012; Holgersen and Warlenius, 2016: 564; Huber, 2022). While the former had tended to focus on street protest, class struggle, and state regulation, the latter was more inclined towards environmental taxes, pollution trading, green technologies, and 'smart' policy designs (Holgersen and Warlenius, 2016: 514; Huber, 2022).

This general shift occurred in step with the rise of ecological modernization theory (EMT). Emerging in Europe during the 1980s, EMT (in its initial form) can be seen as the 'social scientific elaboration and formalisation of the underlying philosophy concerning environmental change articulated in the Bruntland report' (Mol and Janicke, 2009: 6). Ecological modernization approaches focused on 'ecologising' the economy and developing techno-centric, market-based solutions to eco-social problems (Mol and Janicke, 2009: 24). By working to reformulate such problems in ways that would 'mesh with the logics of modern markets' (Mol and Janicke, 2009: 7), EM thinkers aimed to reduce the influence of traditional ecological movements and instead place economic actors at the centre of environmental action.

Businesses were considered central to the EM strategy because unlike oppositional groups, they could address ecological problems in a 'structural manner' from 'within the existing constellation of modernity' (Mol and Janicke, 2009: 7). For EM thinkers, capitalist firms were to play an active role – alongside other 'non-political' actors such as charities, NGOs and

[33] This is not to say that struggle disappeared completely. The problem was, according to Srnicek and Williams, that environmental and social struggles increasingly came to assume a more 'folk political' form. Actors involved in this type of organising tended to view large-scale, centralised activities with suspicion and often gravitated towards horizontalist and anarchist-inflected approaches (Srnicek and Williams, 2016; Harvey, 2014, p. 145; see discussion in chapter 3).

community groups – in driving the kinds of 'progressive' change they purportedly wished to see. The publication of the Brundtland report is again important here because it helped to open the way for the involvement of NGOs in environment and development issues (Redclift, 2005). Not just because of Brundtland, but certainly in the years that followed it, charities, social enterprises, green businesses, community-based actors, and voluntary groups all came to play a greater role in environmental governance. This process helped to extend business norms and power into civil society domains (Jones, 2015: 177–178; Fong and Nascheck, 2021). It also helped to consolidate the role of private businesses in the delivery of neoliberal 'flanking mechanisms' as part of the 'social dimension' of globalization (Sum and Jessop, 2013: 347). As I will show in chapter 7, these ideas would heavily influence the environmental thought of the *Greenstar* participants.

'Green' growth/economy: reinforcing the market after 2008

Over the course of the 1990s and early 2000s, the idea that environmental problems could most effectively be tackled through market-based, technocratic, 'green' capitalist approaches became firmly embedded in 'common sense' across the non-profit and policy worlds (Klein, 2014; Wainwright and Mann, 2018; Huber, 2022; Vettese and Pendergrass, 2022). In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis (the period during which *Freshfair* and *Greenstar* operated) this notion would become even more entrenched. As capitalist elites scrambled to develop responses to the environmental and economic crises that were throwing the very continuation of capitalist development into doubt[34], ideas around 'green growth' and 'green economy' moved to the centre of mainstream international policy discourse (Jacobs, 2012; Wanner, 2015; Dale et al., 2016). Disseminated through supranational bodies, large corporations, the media, and other 'civil society' institutions, these ideas exerted a powerful ideological influence (Kenis and Lievens, 2015; Huber, 2022). Percolating through society, they would help to infuse the 'general atmosphere'[35] with the notion that, in the aftermath of the crisis, the transition to a 'responsible' and environmentally sustainable capitalist growth regime was possible. These ideas would mesh with the pro-localist discourses that were also gaining traction around that time (see chapter 3). As I will show in chapter 7, these pro-localist, pro-capitalist ideas would heavily shape the activities at *Greenstar Energy*.

By mapping the developments outlined above onto the periodization set out in section 4.4, here I add an ecological dimension to the picture of neoliberal development sketched out there. Bringing these elements together allows me to point to the emergence of what I will call 'green capitalist realism' – a condition where green capitalist solutions came to 'fill the horizons of the

[34] Others have described this as a 'triple crisis' of finance, energy, and environment (see, for example, Jessop, 2012). I agree with this formulation but decided to simplify matters for clarity here.
[35] I borrow this phrase from Adorno (see Adorno, 2017, p. 125).

possible' and from within which it became difficult to imagine, never mind develop, non-capitalist ways of protecting the environment. Building on the work of Fisher, I claim that this notion offers a useful way to describe the mode of thinking that emerged during neoliberalism's consolidation phase, and that became deeply embedded among subaltern environmental actors in the post-crash conjuncture (even though the conditions that had initially given rise to it had by that time started to unravel).

Phase of neoliberalism	Key characteristics	Environmental logic
Vanguard Neoliberalism (1979-1992)	• Liberalization • Roll-back of existing institutions • Market-friendly re-regulation • Privatization • Consolidation of neoliberal government	**Sustainable development** **Green capitalist realism**
Consolidation Neoliberalism (1992-2007)	• Emergence of Third Way approaches • Growing emphasis on entrepreneurialism, community, localism, and resilience • Development of 'flanking mechanisms' in 'civil society'	
Crisis Neoliberalism (2007-)	• Failure of Third Way efforts to maintain neoliberal momentum • Exceptional powers invoked by neoliberal regimes • 'Permanent austerity'	

Table 4.2: Neoliberalism and the emergence of 'green capitalist realism'

In my examination of the case study projects in chapters 6 and 7, I will draw on the ideas discussed above to show how neoliberal principles became deeply inscribed in the participants' habits, behaviours and patterns of thought (even at *Freshfair*, where the actors consciously set out to resist neoliberalization processes).

4.10 'Responsible' eco-capitalism in the post-2008 conjuncture

During the neoliberal period, as environmental and social problems mounted, businesses were increasingly being made aware of the negative impacts of their activities. Damaging media coverage, NGO-driven 'naming and shaming' campaigns, and an upturn in consumer activism all increased the pressure on firms to find ways to integrate environmental and social concerns into their business practices (Sum and Jessop, 2013: 319). Corporations started to engage in public relations campaigns in an effort to convince 'moderate' environmental groups and the wider public that businesses could take action to reduce their own industries' environmental and social impacts (Jones, 2015: 167). In that context, ideas around corporate social responsibility (CSR) gained traction. As Jones has noted, CSR 'provided an ideology [that] tr[ied] to soften the cold market forces logic of neo-liberalism' (Jones, 2015: 159). This was useful from a business point of view, he suggests, because it provided a 'philosophy' for companies that wanted to show that they were taking environmental and social problems seriously. In line with this 'philosophy', firms could respond to environmental and social critiques by engaging in charitable acts, exerting stakeholder pressure, doling out corporate sponsorship, making 'green' policy nudges, highlighting 'responsible' business practices, and so on (Jones, 2015: 159).

The 2008 crisis gave additional impetus to these attempts to make capitalism appear more environmentally sustainable and socially responsible. As Žižek has noted, the post-crash period witnessed the emergence and consolidation of a new 'ethical', 'responsible' eco-capitalist imaginary. From this perspective, it was claimed that the time had come to ditch older capitalist approaches that 'opposed the market to social responsibility', and to instead reunite these domains 'for mutual benefit' (Žižek, 2018: 34–35). He notes that those who championed this 'new ethos of global responsibility' claimed that it was possible to exit the crisis by putting 'capitalism to work as the most efficient instrument of the common good' (ibid.).

In that post-2008 conjuncture, these crystallising responsible eco-capitalist approaches were presented as a way to take back control of an 'immoral' and 'irresponsible' capitalism that had got out of hand. In the wake of the crash, with issues relating to executive pay, political lobbying, and large-scale fraud damaging the reputation of many firms and the corporate sector more generally, a growing sense emerged that businesses had become 'too cavalier with the public interest' (IPPR, 2012). In response, key business leaders and commentators argued with increasing force that, to stabilize the capitalist system, new responsible business approaches were needed (Porter and Kramer, 2019).

Alongside business leaders, leading politicians also demanded a shift to a new form of responsible capitalism. For example, French president Nicolas Sarkozy pinned the blame for the crisis on the irresponsibility of the financial sector, which, he claimed, had 'perverted the logic of capitalism' and turned it into 'an immoral system' (Deutsche Welle, 2009). In the US, President Obama blamed the crisis on the unethical actions of a few greedy bankers who had decided to exploit gaps in the financial sector's regulatory systems for their own personal gain. Taking a swipe at the form of 'casino capitalism' that had caused the meltdown, he argued that it was no longer 'sustainable to have a 21st-century financial system that is governed by 20th-century rules and regulations' – a situation that had 'allowed the recklessness of a few to threaten the entire economy'. To exit this crisis, and to prevent something similar from happening in the future, he argued that a better regulated, more responsible capitalist system was needed (Washington Post, 2009).

In the post-crisis British context (around the time that the case study participants were setting up their projects) the leaders of the three main political parties were also demanding a more ethical form of capitalism. Labour leader Ed Miliband argued that Britain needed to shift economic activity away from predatory, short-term speculation, and instead work 'towards creating a more responsible capitalism' (Miliband, 2012: 18; 25). Taking a pro-market stance that aligned closely with the 'common sense' views embedded in that advanced neoliberal action context, he claimed that, while '[w]e all know that markets are the best way known to us to structure an economy and to deliver optimal outcomes for businesses, employees and consumers', the financial crisis had nevertheless 'altered our understanding of how markets work best' (Miliband, 2012: 19). Going forward, he suggested that capitalism needed to be restructured in a way that made 'markets work for working people' so they could see that it is possible to 'aspire for social justice while also running a free market economy' (Miliband, 2012: 19).

Making a similar case, Liberal Democrat leader and Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg claimed that the economy's problems were not the fault of capitalism as such; rather they were rooted in the irresponsible form of 'crony' capitalism that had emerged over recent years – a system with '[p]oliticians in the pockets of vested interests, regulators asleep at the wheel, [and] an unrestrained economic elite' busily pursuing their own interests (Clegg, 2012). He stressed that because the crisis had turned capitalism into 'today's political punchbag', it was important to defend capitalism's record as 'one of history's greatest success stories.' He argued that this was no time to call capitalism into question; instead, what was needed was a 'more responsible capitalism. A more liberal capitalism' (Clegg, 2012).

Prime Minister Cameron was also calling for a new 'moral' capitalist order to resolve the pressing problems of the day and to prevent the repeat of any such crises in the future. He

claimed that greed-driven recklessness had pushed the economy to the brink and pinned the blame for the financial crisis squarely on the 'previous government's turbo-capitalism' which, he argued, had 'turned a blind eye to corporate excess'. Cameron stated that by taking a more responsible stance, it would be possible to 'use this crisis of capitalism to improve markets, not undermine them'. Out of the wreckage of the crisis, he wanted to build a 'genuinely popular capitalism', one that would allow 'everyone to share in the success of the market' (Cameron, 2012).

Such calls for responsible capitalism resounded throughout the post-crash landscape. Coursing through mainstream economic and environmental discourse, these ideas would shape the development of the Big Society (BS) localist agenda which heavily influenced the activities at both *Freshfair* and *Greenstar* (see chapters 6 and 7).

4.11 The Big Society

Speaking in 2010, newly installed Prime Minister David Cameron claimed that the relationship between the state and the population in the UK was problematic. He wanted to reduce what he saw as the public's overreliance on the state. In his view, a level of dependence existed that had taken away individual personal responsibility. To rectify this, he wanted to instigate a 'huge cultural change' by building a 'Big Society'. In this way, he aimed to generate a new set of social conditions that would instil in the public a resilient, responsibilized attitude – one 'where people don't always turn to officials, local authorities or central government for answers to the problems they face' (Cameron, 2010).

Importantly for this study, localization was considered central to this process of social engineering. According to Cameron, there existed a 'deep connection between where decisions are made and what works.' Consequently, he argued that in a context where central government held far too much power, local communities needed to be given more opportunities to control their own affairs. He said that localism:

> …isn't some romantic attachment to the past. It is absolutely essential to our economic, social and political future. If our local economies are vibrant and strong we are far less vulnerable to global shocks or the failures of a few dominant industries. If people know that their actions can make a real difference to their local communities, they're far more motivated to get involved – and civic pride is revived… It's for these practical reasons that I am a confirmed localist, committed to turning Britain's pyramid of power on its head (Cameron, 2009).

The Coalition government stated that through its localising agenda, it wanted to create more opportunities for institutions such as co-operatives, social enterprises, charities, and mutual societies to get involved in the delivery public services (Seymour, 2010; Williams et al., 2014:

2799). This programme of decentralisation and public service reform was, like New Localism before it, promoted by its champions to boost resilience and empower local communities in a decentred, globalized world. Critics of BS localism, however, were quick to highlight the contradictory nature of this so-called 'progressive' agenda. Westwood, for example, pointed out that while the Coalition government claimed that it wanted to give control back to local communities by enabling social enterprises, local activist groups, and the like, to deliver local services, it was at the same time overseeing the implementation of a programme of harsh austerity measures that was undermining the capacities of such groups to act in such a manner (Westwood, 2011: 692; 696). Featherstone et al., likewise note that, while the BS agenda was publicly promoted as a way to re-build communities, empower regions, and boost resilience, in actuality it was centred around 'a ferocious agenda of public-sector cuts' that was intended to pose a direct challenge to 'state intervention, regulation and the public sector'. According to them, the BS agenda was not a progressive project, but a programme oriented towards 'a right-wing restructuring of Britain' (Featherstone et al., 2012: 177). Viewed from this critical perspective, the Coalition's government's BS agenda, far from offering a way to empower local communities, instead represented:

> an invidious form of neoliberalism par excellence, fused with a conservative neocommunitarianism that marshals the virtues of volunteerism, entrepreneurialism, and self-reliance to negate the need for collectivism and the public sector (Williams et al., 2014: 2803).

This view was shared by Seymour. He argued that what Cameron offered in the 2010 Conservative election manifesto differed little from the policy programmes of previous campaigns. One difference, however, was that the Cameron project, in an effort to reach beyond the Conservative's traditional class base (i.e., capital and particular sections of the middle class), sought to present 'impeccably neoliberal' policies in language that claimed to be sceptical of neoliberalism (Seymour, 2010: 74). Crucially for my discussion, Niven has highlighted how the issue of environmental care became incorporated into this 'compassionate conservative' makeover. However, far from seeing the Cameron project as a genuine attempt to respond to growing environmental concerns in that conjuncture, he argued that the 'green Toryism' that emerged at that time was nothing other than a cynical attempt to offset the government's 'profoundly unsympathetic' austerity agenda by advancing a form of romantic, nostalgic community localism (Niven, 2011).

From the discussion above, it can be seen that in Britain, at around the time the case study projects were coming into being, ideas around responsible capitalism and green localism were being mobilised by elite neoliberal political actors as part of wider efforts to restructure the

state, cut public services, responsibilize subjects, de-politicize local communities, and shift the balance of social forces further in the direction of capital. This will provide a basis for the discussion in chapters 6 and 7, where I will show how these developments shaped the thought patterns and behaviours of the case study participants and outline what this meant for their eco-localist strategies.

Chapter 5: Methodology

Introduction

In this chapter I discuss key methodological issues relating to this study. In section 5.1, I outline my primary research questions and consider how my relationship to these questions changed over time. In section 5.2, I briefly introduce the methods I employed; this serves as an entry point for discussing how I selected the case study projects (section 5.3). In section 5.4, I focus on the ethics review process and set out my approach to the issues of participant anonymity and personal safety.

This is followed by a discussion of reflexivity in section 5.5. There, I emphasise how important it is for researchers to account for how their presence, their interpretative frameworks, and their personal interests, shape the research process. I argue that because it is impossible to conduct purely objective social research, researchers must be open about their personal motivations. Accordingly, I briefly outline my own political interests, consider how these relate to the aims of the *Freshfair* and *Greenstar* projects, and note some of the ways that the research process changed me.

The remaining sections discuss the methods I employed in more detail. Section 5.7 focuses on semi-structured interviews, section 5.8 on participant observation, and section 5.9 on document analysis. The chapter closes with some remarks on data analysis (section 5.10).

5.1 The research questions

The research questions arose out of my own long-term interest in eco-localist organising in Britain and my growing sense that the popular forms of subaltern localist activity that have emerged over recent decades have done little to push society in a more socially just or environmentally sustainable direction. This general observation led me to formulate the following research questions:

1) *At a time when new, ecologically-sound ways of living are so desperately required, what barriers impede the expansion of non-capitalist, local, low-carbon food and energy production initiatives operating in a fossil fuel-centric neoliberal society?*

2) *What intersections can be made productively between the macro-level analyses critical of a continuing capitalist imaginary and fine-scaled analyses of non-capitalist localist organisations operating in a predominantly capitalist framework?*

I considered these questions focused enough to direct my research activities, yet broad enough, too, to provide the space I needed to pursue relevant and interesting lines of inquiry as these

emerged. Although these questions would remain largely unchanged during the research process, I should point out here that they did come under increasing strain as the study progressed. There were two main reasons for this. First, when I initially formulated the questions, I had erroneously assumed that the prime developmental barriers I would be investigating would be of a practical/material kind (overstretched staff members, lack of financial resources, competition from corporate actors, and so on). However, as the investigation proceeded, I came to see that *ideational* barriers (such as the inability to think *beyond* capitalism, or the belief that localist activity is *inherently* 'better' than that which takes place at greater scales/distances) were affecting the organisations' activities in ways I had not fully anticipated. While this did not lead me to *amend* the initial research questions, it did change how I related to them (see chapters 6 and 7).

The second reason concerns the use of the term 'non-capitalist' in my original research questions (see above), and this did lead to one seemingly minor, but actually quite significant, modification. During the study, I decided to replace the term 'non-capitalist' with the word 'alternative' – a switch I found it necessary to make because as the work progressed, it became increasingly clear to me that the *Greenstar* participants, as part of their efforts to make society greener and fairer, were looking to *reform*, rather than fundamentally *challenge*, capitalist institutions and practices (see chapter 7). At around the same time, my research on capitalism's law of value for chapters 2 and 3 was also highlighting for me just how difficult it is for small-scale, localist initiatives to successfully extricate themselves from the wider capitalist economy that they often seek to define themselves against, and therefore to engage in activities that could be accurately described as *non*-capitalist. I therefore considered the word 'alternative'[36] more suitable.

5.2 Ethnographic methods

In the field of sociological inquiry, ethnographic methods are widely seen as an effective way to gain insights into the living practices of social groups. Ethnographic approaches involve 'the study of people in naturally occurring settings or 'fields' by means of methods which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities' (Brewster, 2000: 10). They typically see 'the researcher participating directly in the setting' and involve 'close contact with the everyday life of the studied society or group over a fairly long period of time' so that 'cultural issues such as shared meanings and symbols' can be examined (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009: 85; also Prasad, 1997: 102). In this study, I have utilised semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. I will say more about these methods in sections 5.6–5.9

[36] In my final research questions, this term appears in inverted commas. This is because while the participants at *Greenstar* believed that they were developing an *alternative* mode of living, my research suggests that their project was reproducing neoliberal capitalist practices. See chapter 7.

below. To help prepare the ground for that discussion, I must first consider the process through which I selected the case studies.

5.3 Selecting the projects

When designing this study, I decided that a close examination of a small number of projects, rather than a less detailed look at a larger number of schemes, would best suit my purposes. It seemed to me that such an 'intensive' (as opposed to an 'extensive') approach (see Swanborn, 2010: 14-15) offered the most effective way to build detailed pictures of the projects in question. I also decided to examine the projects *over a relatively long period of time*[37] (instead of taking a more superficial 'snapshot' over a shorter timespan), as this would enable me to see if/how the participants' thoughts and behaviours shifted as the fortunes of their projects, and/or the wider action context they operated within, changed.

Given these factors, and taking into account Alvesson and Sköldberg's observation that 'the ethnographical method is demanding of time and resources' (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009: 87), I decided that the most practical course of action was to look for case studies in my local region. As I saw it, this kind of localist approach offered several key benefits:

1) *It would help to ensure that my project was achievable*: studying local projects would help me to manage the finance- and time-related impacts of the research. This was important because I needed to balance my research activities with my various caring commitments.[38]
2) *It would allow me to be flexible*: by examining *local* projects, I could carry out the tasks set out in my initial research plan *and* have the freedom to pursue interesting opportunities as these emerged (to attend events/meetings called at short notice, for example, or to swiftly arrange interviews with key participants at moments of organizational crisis).
3) *It would enable me to make use of my own local knowledge*: before I started work on this study, I had, over the course of several years, worked with a number of 'progressive' eco-social initiatives in that area, and therefore had some understanding of the kinds of environmental projects that operated there and the types of services they were looking to deliver.

On the third point, Alvesson and Sköldberg have noted that such local knowledge can be valuable as it gives the researcher an intimate understanding of the culture they are studying.

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[37] The fieldwork was conducted over a two-year period (2017-2019).

[38] When I started this project, my first daughter was five years old and my partner had just given birth to our second daughter. I also have sole caring responsibilities for my elderly dad, who has Alzheimer's disease, lives alone, and has no other forms of support.

They point out that when the 'object of study is not an alien … community but some part of the researcher's own society (a village, an organisation, a subculture) … the researcher will already have considerable knowledge of the general context in which the study is located' – something that can potentially save the researcher a lot of time and effort (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009: 85). However, while useful in some ways, they also warn that a high degree of familiarity with the object of research carries dangers to which the researcher must be attuned. That is because, for the investigator operating on familiar terrain, it can be 'difficult, if not… impossible [to see the] taken-for-granted assumptions and blind spots in their own social culture, research community and language'. To help address this problem, Alvesson and Sköldberg argue that researchers need to 'stimulate critical reflection and awareness' while conducting their activities (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009: 9-10). To do this, while working on my study, I consistently sought to maintain an awareness of my position as a neoliberalized subaltern environmental subject conducting an examination of the effects of neoliberalization on other subaltern environmental subjects, and to critically reflect on how my presence, my experiences, and my own interpretative frameworks were shaping the research process. I will say more about this in section 5.5 below.

It was through my local knowledge and connections that I first came to hear of the *Freshfair* and *Greenstar* projects and first became aware of their potential suitability as research objects. Although I had not been directly involved with either of these initiatives before, I had followed their activities with some interest since they were first set up in 2011. Early observations had suggested an interesting contrast between the eco-social imaginaries that guided their activities, one that could provide a useful basis for a wider examination of subaltern eco-localist practice in advanced neoliberal Britain. I was aware, of course, that the projects operated in different sectors (food at *Freshfair*, energy at *Greenstar*), and that this might be seen by some to undermine the case for a comparative analysis. It was clear to me from the outset, however, that the many common features these projects shared would make such an undertaking not just possible, but worthwhile. As I commented in chapter 1, both organisations were located *in the same geographical area*; both emerged at *around the same time* and were looking to develop local-scale responses *to the same set of problems* (intensifying ecological crises and growing social hardship associated with the implementation of post-2008 austerity policies); both were eco-social projects *with a strong localist focus* and both operated *in a Big Society context* where sub-hegemonic localist ideas were being championed by elite political actors. As will become clear in the chapters that follow, these shared features would offer useful points of comparison for my analysis.

5.4 Ethics/Consent

In accordance with Lancaster University's standard ethical procedures, I completed an ethics review before starting my research. This work was submitted to and approved by the university's relevant ethics committee, and I followed its protocols throughout. In line with this review, I secured informed consent from all participants prior to their involvement with the study. Initial contact with potential participants was made typically via e-mail. At this stage, each was given a participant information sheet (PIS) and a consent form (see appendix 1). These documents contained information about me, my research project, the aims of the study, and details about what their participation would involve. In this initial correspondence, I made it clear that participants were free to contact me should they require any further information, that their involvement in the study was voluntary, and that they could withdraw their consent at any time. I also made it clear at this stage that the information they provided could be withdrawn from the study for up to one month after the interview, that audio recordings would be deleted upon completion of the PhD, and that transcriptions of these recordings would be kept for a minimum of ten years.

Before the interviews, I explained to the participants that they could stop the proceedings at any point (if, for example, they felt uncomfortable, or were concerned that sensitive information might be revealed). Following the interviews, the recording device was kept in a locked storage box until the audio files were transferred. These were stored on (password protected) secure servers and deleted from the device.

Given the nature of my research, I did not expect to engage with vulnerable members of the population (for example children, or adults with additional needs). Nevertheless, when conducting this research, I remained alert to the possibility that vulnerable participants may get involved at any time; this was to ensure that if they did, all appropriate measures could be taken to protect their rights and dignity.

Anonymity

To help protect the identities of the participants, I have assigned fictitious names to the actors and organisations involved in this study. Likewise, I have referred only to the broader region the projects operated within and not to specific places. I have proceeded in this manner because some of the participants provided material that could potentially compromise them in their workplaces, and/or negatively impact their relationships with others.

When I was recruiting participants for this study, I made it clear to them that while every effort would be taken to protect their identities, because the organisations were relatively small, had few staff members, and delivered relatively specialised services, anonymity could not be guaranteed. All interviews were conducted on the basis of this understanding.

Safety

All activities were conducted with the issue personal safety (of myself and the participants) in mind. Given the nature of my research, it was necessary to conduct interviews in a wide range of settings (people's homes, workplaces, farms, public cafés, and so on); my fieldwork also involved numerous site visits and attendance at meetings and events at a range of locations. All research settings were informally risk-assessed upon arrival and only when deemed safe would the planned activity go ahead. The fieldwork entailed a lot of travel across northern England (and sometimes beyond). Where the remoteness of a particular location necessitated the use of a car, high driver safety standards were upheld. Before conducting any visit, I nominated an appropriate back-up contact and gave them an itinerary of my planned activities. Pre-arranged check-in times were established so that safety contacts would be alerted in the event I failed to return after fieldwork; I also put in place a safety word protocol (a code word I could use when calling a safety contact to covertly let them know that I was potentially in danger). Thankfully, all interviews and site visits were conducted safely.

5.5 Reflexivity

My overall approach in this thesis rests on a general understanding that the real world cannot be captured by the research process and reproduced in all its complexity, and that some sort of reduction must therefore be made (Sum and Jessop, 2013: 7). It is also rooted in an acceptance that it is simply not possible to engage in purely objective research. Okely has underscored how important it is for a researcher to accept the *inherently* subjective nature of research: only once this has been recognised, she argues, can an investigator move beyond 'naïve attempts to objectify the research' and accept that 'the specificity and individuality of the observer are ever present and must therefore be acknowledged [and] explored…' (Okely, 2005: 24).

Making a related point, Davies argues that because all researchers are connected to the object of their study to some degree, and because the investigator's presence inevitably impacts on the research process, this makes the issue of reflexivity centrally important (with reflexivity here broadly understood as 'a turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference' – see Davies, 1999: 3-4). She points out that this is particularly important in ethnographic research, where the relationship between researcher and researched tends to be 'intimate, long-term and multi-stranded', and where 'the complexities introduced by the self-consciousness of the objects of research' need also be considered (ibid.).

Reflexivity and interpretation

Crucially, Seale points out that knowledge is 'always mediated by pre-existing ideas and values, *whether this is acknowledged by the researcher or not*' (Seale, 1999: 470, emphasis added). And because it is impossible to conduct research that is free from all forms of interpretation,

Alvesson and Sköldberg argue that *reflexive* research must entail what they call the 'interpretation of interpretation' – that is, 'a critical self-exploration of one's own interpretations of empirical material (including its construction)' (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009: 9). They state that in order to conduct this kind of exploration, researchers need to acknowledge that various forms of pre-understanding inevitably structure any interpretative process, and accept that it is necessary to take the 'perceptual, cognitive, theoretical, linguistic, (inter)textual, political and cultural circumstances that form the backdrop to – as well as impregnate – the interpretations' into account in their research (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009: 9-10).

Building on this argument, and following the path laid out by Downey and Dumit, I want to emphasise here, then, that because a researcher cannot *not* intervene, focus must therefore fall on *how one intervenes and what the effects of this intervention might be* (Downey and Dumit, 1997, emphasis added; Zuiderent-Jerak, 2007). This brings me to the thorny issue of interests.

Interests

Because social science does not take place in a vacuum but in particular political and ethical contexts, social research has societal implications. Remarking on this issue, Alvesson and Sköldberg point out that in research, 'what is explored, and how it is explored, can hardly avoid either *supporting (reproducing) or challenging existing social conditions*' (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009: 11, emphasis added). They go on to note that the questions a researcher asks (or does not ask), and the ways they interpret and reproduce reality, inevitably favours or disfavours certain actors and interests. On this basis, they stress that researchers need to be aware that 'the interpretations and the theoretical assumptions on which these are based *are not neutral but are part of, and help to construct, political and ideological conditions*' (ibid.). So, how does all this relate to my study? Well, because it is impossible for a researcher not to have interests – personal interests, political interests, interests that flow from the demands of academia, and so on (Fortier, 2000: 9), I think that the most appropriate way to deal with this issue *is to be open about them* (at least in so far as one recognises and understands these oneself). Accordingly, I would like to note here that so far as the major themes covered by this study are concerned – capitalism, neoliberalization, environmental crisis, austerity, societal breakdown, and so on – I am far from being a detached and disinterested observer.

I have a strong desire to see carbon emissions rapidly reduced, ecological devastation halted, and an environmentally sustainable and egalitarian social order brought into being (it can be noted here that on these points, my interests align with those of the *Freshfair* and *Greenstar* actors). Like the participants at the case study projects, I too have spent a significant proportion of my life engaged in 'progressive' eco-localist activities. Moreover, during the time I have spent participating in and learning about such activities, I have developed my own ideas about

how subaltern actors might most effectively work to bring about 'progressive' societal change – ideas that aligned with the views of some of the participants some of the time (but, it must be said, not with some of the participants all of the time, all of the participants some of the time, and certainly not all of the participants all of the time). My own position on capitalism is centrally important here: I argued in chapter 2 that capitalism is *inherently* exploitative and environmentally destructive. Based on that assessment, I contend that all attempts to build a responsible, environmentally sustainable capitalist society are necessarily doomed from the start. I want to clarify this here because, as will become clear in the next two chapters, my position on this issue was much closer to the view held at *Freshfair* than it was to the stance of the *Greenstar* participants – a point that should be borne in mind when reading those chapters.

And what about neoliberalism? As a person who lives in an advanced neoliberal society, and whose life has been made much more difficult because of the neoliberalization processes I examine,[39] could I really be expected to take an objective stance on this issue? I think not, and it would be dishonest of me to suggest otherwise here. Better, then, to be open about my stance on this issue and state that in my view, neoliberalization has been immensely damaging for the environment and for society. Moreover, I contend that if there is to be any hope of transitioning to a greener, fairer future, then neoliberalism and the changes it has driven – privatization, financialization, the breaking of organized labour, the intensification of the commodification of nature, the spread of market rationality into all areas of social life, the demonization of the principle of state intervention, and so on – will have to be resisted and reversed.

The research process and me…

Although I discussed neoliberalism at length in the previous chapter, I did not explain there that it was only through writing that chapter that I came to see the extent to which my own life had been shaped by the neoliberalization processes I was examining in relation to others. It will be recalled that in that chapter, I set out a periodization of neoliberalism that broke neoliberal development in Britain down into three major phases: a 'vanguard stage' (1979–1992), a 'consolidation phase' (1992–2008), and a 'crisis phase' (2008–) (see table 4.1). Although I initially developed this periodization to examine changes in the participants' thought patterns and behaviours over time (see chapter 8), as I was conducting that research it dawned on me that *I was also conducting a periodization of my own life*. I was born in 1980, around the

[39] When I think about neoliberalism *as a researcher*, it is difficult to ignore how its impacts shape my day-to-day life (including my ability to conduct research). Take, to give just a few examples, the cuts to social care that leave me struggling to care for my elderly dad every single day; the cuts to health services that mean my wife cannot access the support she needs as she deals with a debilitating long-term illness; the cuts to education that push the teachers at my daughters' schools ever closer to breaking point; the general atmosphere of precarity and uncertainty and the stress this brings daily. This list could all too easily be extended – and of course not just for me, but for so many others living in advanced neoliberal Britain (and beyond).

beginning of neoliberalism's vanguard stage, and although I had never really stopped to think about it before, when I was writing that chapter, I came to see that my childhood (in a former mining town in northwest England) had unfolded in a context marked by aggressive neoliberal advance; that I had entered into adulthood just as neoliberalism became fully consolidated; and that a large proportion of my adult life had played out against a backdrop of consolidation neoliberalism – that is, in a context where capitalism came to fill 'the horizons of the possible' and where alternatives to it had faded from view (Fisher, 2009; see chapter 4). Not only that, but the more I immersed myself in that research, the more convinced I became that for most of my adult life, I had actually been trapped in the very 'capitalist realist' condition that I was now writing critically about – a realisation that would retroactively re-shape the way I thought about my past, and entirely change the way I related to my present.

Although I do not have the space to expand on this here, there is one important personal change that I do need to highlight: engaging in this research *entirely transformed the way that I think subaltern eco-localist actors should work to change society*. Through my work on this study, I became much more aware of the limitations associated with the sub-hegemonic eco-localist approaches that I myself once subscribed to, and this growing realisation pushed me towards a more radical (that is, counter-hegemonic) political position over the course of this project. I mention this here because when one reads the chapters that follow, one might notice that my own political shift here parallels the one made by the *Freshfair* participants – something that can hardly be dismissed as a coincidence. Based on this discussion, then, I must emphasise that, while researchers are often encouraged to reflect on the ways their activities shape the research process (see above), it is also necessary to pay attention to, and to be open about, the ways that *the research process shapes the researcher*. Nobody, it seems, emerges from this process unscathed.

5.6 The research process

For this study, I conducted 28 semi-structured interviews, carried out multiple (short-term) periods of participant observation, and analysed various documents relating to each of the participating projects. I will now say more about these methods and how I deployed them.

5.7 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews served as a key methodological device for generating data. It is important to note before going further that this method has its limitations and drawbacks. One concerns the 'staged' nature of semi-structured interviews, which typically remove participants from other group members and from their operating environment, and thus involve the construction of highly artificial research situations that make the gathering of 'naturalistic' data impossible (Davies, 1999: 4; Olson, 2016). Another concerns the fact that the successful execution of any interview rests on a series of interpretative acts that, while these often go

unacknowledged, nevertheless play a key role in shaping the kinds of knowledge that are produced. Interviews, after all, depend upon a set of shared cultural understandings concerning what an interview is, how they should be conducted, and what kinds of responses are considered appropriate in such settings (Davies 1999: 4). The researcher, *before* an interview can take place, has to ''interpret[…]' what and who can be asked'; *during* the interview, they need to interpret what has 'been said previously, what is being said now, what is interesting … what it is possible to get an answer to … [and] what constitutes a meaningful answer' (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009: 287). The interviewee must also engage in interpretive acts of their own. As Alvesson and Sköldberg point out, what the respondent says when questioned depends to a large extent on the ideas they hold about the interviewer and how they construe the interview situation (at more or less conscious levels) (ibid.).

Despite their limitations, however, this method proved useful for my study. The semi-structured interviews allowed me to put pre-planned research-related questions to the participants directly, whilst they also gave me the flexibility I needed to pursue unexpected and interesting lines of inquiry as these emerged (something that would have been much more difficult, if not impossible, to achieve had I employed a more rigid interview format).

The interviews also helped me to build relationships of trust with key participants at each of the projects. This was especially so in those cases where I interviewed the same individual on several occasions (this tended to happen when preliminary analysis of a completed interview, something that emerged while conducting fieldwork after an interview, or something that I found in the literature, sparked off a new line of inquiry that required further investigation). The personal connections forged in this manner enabled me to talk to the participants about sensitive issues such as their political views, motivations, beliefs, hopes, fears, frustrations, and so on – topics that would often prove significant for my study (see chapters 6 and 7). Such bonds could not have been created had I used, say, focus groups or surveys (although these, too, have their benefits – see DeMarrais and Lapan, 2004; Bernard, 2011). Interviewing participants several times over an extended period also helped me to get a sense of how their ideas and behaviours changed (or didn't change) over time – an issue that will loom large in the coming chapters.

In addition to the information generated by my interview questions, it is worth noting here that the interviews provided valuable insights into the participants' general living practices by enabling me to observe their office spaces and domestic settings.

Finding the interviewees

This study employed a non-probability sampling approach. Unlike with probability sampling (which is more closely associated with quantitative research), the selection that results from this kind of approach is not intended to be statistically representative; rather, 'units are deliberately

selected to reflect particular features of, or groups within, the sampled population' (Ritchie, et al., 2014). Building on section 5.3 above, it can be noted that my study utilised stratified purposive sampling. This kind of approach, as Ritche, et al. point out, aims 'to select groups that display variation on a particular phenomena but each of which is fairly homogeneous, so that subgroups can be compared' (Ritchie, et al., 2014; see also O'Reilly, 2012).

Once I had selected my case studies (see section 5.3), I identified their key participants through desk-based research and by drawing on my own local knowledge and contacts. Because the organisations I worked with were relatively small in size, in a certain sense it can be said that the interviewees selected themselves: I interviewed *all* the main figures at each initiative – consequently, they became involved in my study simply by way of their involvement with the projects that I was examining.

This focus on the central participants proved useful, as the data gathered in this way helped me to build a detailed picture of the organisations in question: their founding ideals, their long-term aims, the personal histories of their core members, and so on (see chapters 6 and 7). However, it must also be noted that this approach was biased, because it overlooked more marginal individuals who may have had important things to say, but who were less easy to identify using desk-based approaches.

To help address this, the study also utilised snowball sampling. Through my interviews with the key individuals, I was able to identify and recruit additional participants who might otherwise have remined 'hidden' (see Mack et al., 2005: 5). Of course, snowball sampling, as has often been pointed out, is also biased: because new sample members are selected by people who are already involved in the study, the sample tends towards homogeneity and, consequently, the diversity of the sample frame is compromised (Ritchie, et al., 2014; O'Reilly, 2012). For this reason, I employed snowball sampling as a supplementary, rather than a central, sampling method.

I conducted 18 interviews at *Freshfair* (with core hub members, volunteers, producers, and customers), and 10 at *Greenstar* (with core personnel, board members, and volunteers). This imbalance was due to the marked way that the approach at the former initiative changed over the period covered by this study (compared to the latter, where the overall strategic approach stayed largely the same – see chapters 6 and 7). More interviews were needed to examine those changes in depth.

Where interviews were recorded, they were transcribed as soon as possible afterwards and saved in electronic format. However, it was not always possible to record the interviews. Sometimes, this was because it was simply not practical to do so (for example, when an interview was unexpectedly conducted 'on the spot' immediately after a meeting or event);

sometimes, it was because a particular participant did not want to be recorded. In those cases where recording was not possible, I took notes and captured important direct quotations using shorthand. I transcribed shorthand notes soon after the interview while the events were still fresh in my memory. These notes, too, were typed up and saved in electronic format (see appendix 2).

5.8 Participant observation

To help offset the 'artificial' and 'staged' nature of the semi-structured interviews, my research also included periods of participant observation. After all, and as Angrosino observes, '[o]nly in the field [can] a scholar truly encounter the dynamics of the lived human experience' (2007: 2).

For reasons I have already outlined (see section 5.3), for this study I deemed it neither practical nor necessary to fully immerse myself in the participants' lifeworlds for an extended period (although for excellent examples of this kind of approach, see Blanchette, 2020; Woodcock, 2017). Instead, I conducted multiple shorter spells of participant observation over an extended period. In contrast to the interviews, this method enabled me to observe the participants in more 'naturalistic' settings and in this way provided valuable insights into the case study projects' operations and organisational dynamics. While conducting the observation, I could, for example, study the participants' body language as they interacted with one another, (over)hear background conversations between them, see how they moved though the space of the observation site, and so on. This information complemented the interview material well.

For my fieldwork at *Freshfair*, I attended internal meetings (regular steering group meetings, wider membership meetings, volunteer co-ordinating meetings, and so on) as well as external events (meetings with existing and prospective buying groups, public-facing outreach events, etc.). I spent time at the hub's depot – this was the place where *Freshfair*'s staff members co-ordinated the hub's day-to-day operations, where producers dropped off food and discussed business matters, and where volunteers prepared orders for delivery; it also served as a social space where people involved with the project could meet, talk, and relax. I worked in the hub's community garden; I also visited some of the producers on their farms. Crucially, I continued to examine the activities of the *Freshfair* participants *after the hub had closed down*. To do this, I attended local political events and demonstrations organised by these participants in the wake of that closure, and I conducted additional semi-structured interviews with them during this period. These activities helped me to build a picture of how their approach to organising changed over time and generated valuable insights into their longer-term strategic development (see chapter 6).

At *Greenstar Energy*, I observed internal staff meetings, shareholder meetings, and annual general meetings (AGMs). I attended public-facing *Greenstar* events, as well as several non-

Greenstar events where the company's participants were speaking (this provided insights into how this project related to others in the region). To help develop a better understanding of the founders' lives outside of the *Greenstar* project, I visited the farm run by one, and the manufacturing firm run by the other. I also attended a recreational staff 'away day' to gain a sense of how its participants related to one another outside of their immediate working environment.

While I found the participant observation useful, it is important to note that, like any method, it also has its drawbacks. Perhaps foremost among these is the problem of 'reactivity', which refers to the way that participants who know they are being studied adapt their behaviours to account for the researcher's presence (Bernard, 2011: 354). Then there are the difficulties that flow from the researchers need to find a balance between a desire to get as close to the action as possible, and their need to maintain a degree of critical distance.

In this study, while during the fieldwork my presence could not fail to have *some* impact on the participants' activities (see Davies, 1999: 4), throughout the research process I consciously sought to minimise this. I think the fact that that I lived in the region where the case studies were based, had some history as a subaltern eco-localist actor in that area, and shared with the participants some common acquaintances in the local environmentalist milieu, helped in this regard, as these factors made it relatively easy for me to 'fit in'. I suspect this might have been more difficult had I have been a complete 'outsider'. I found this 'insider/outsider' position useful as it meant that I was 'known' enough to be accepted, yet detached enough to ensure a degree of critical distance.

Before beginning the fieldwork, I decided that in addition to observing the projects' activities, I would directly participate in these if such a course of action seemed appropriate and useful for my research. I also decided at that stage that I would not actively seek to intervene in these activities in ways that might influence their overall direction – a position I maintained throughout. A brief example here will help to illustrate this approach in action: while I was volunteering at the hub's community garden, I, like everybody else at those sessions, took part in the work of planting, picking, weeding, and so on. However, I did not try to organise or direct these activities in any way; instead, during the sessions, I tried to remain a peripheral figure, working alongside others, observing as I went along.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, I found it relatively easy to minimise the impact of my presence in larger meetings and in public-facing events where there were many in attendance. In such situations, observing and taking notes while trying to pass unnoticed was relatively straightforward. In smaller, internal meetings, however, it proved more difficult to fade into the background in this way. Still, in these settings, too, I consciously sought to keep my

participation to a minimum (pleasantries, general comments, small talk, and so on, but no direct interventions or attempts to steer the proceedings). If, when sitting among participants in such settings, I felt that comprehensive note taking would draw unwanted attention to me, I would refrain from doing so and instead make brief notes that I could expand on later. It is worth pointing out here that even in these more intimate contexts, my presence became less of an issue as time went on and as I became a more familiar feature in those action settings.

It was necessary to maintain a flexible approach during my fieldwork because meetings and events were often organised reactively and at short notice; as a result, I had to make sure that I left enough space in my research schedule to respond to these events as they happened. This approach enabled me to 'explore the rich, untapped sources of data not mapped out in the research design' (Fetterman, 1989: 12). It is also worth stating here that the semi-structured interviews and the periods of participant observation overlapped to a significant degree, and that the development of each of these methodological elements influenced the unfolding of the other in a co-evolving process: the interviews generated information about potential fieldwork opportunities (events, meetings, and so on), and the participant observation that resulted would frequently produce new lines of inquiry that necessitated additional interviews. Combining methods in this way can be seen as an example of what Fetterman has called 'triangulation' – an approach that sees the researcher employ different methods to build a fuller picture of the participants' lives (Fetterman, 1989). While critics claim that this kind of approach can lead to 'homing out' – a loss of focus that generates incoherent findings (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) – others note that it can be advantageous, as it allows 'richer and more varied material to be acquired' (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009: 86). My experiences support this latter view.

5.9 Document analysis

As well as conducting semi-structured interviews and periods of participant observation, I examined numerous documents and texts to gather key information about the organisations. These included financial reports, marketing surveys, minutes, presentation slides, promotional materials, internal emails, website copy, and so on. I found some of these materials using desk-based research; other valuable sources were kindly passed my way by the participants themselves. As will become clear in chapters 6 and 7, these documents contained important information about the projects' performances and their overall strategic approaches. Often, I gained access to these documents thanks to the discussions that took place during the semi-structured interviews and as a result of the relationships established during those encounters.

5.10 Analysis

While the fieldwork was ongoing, I regularly conducted preliminary analyses of the data to identify points of interest as these emerged. Once I had completed the fieldwork, I compiled all my materials and began to code the data. This required a close examination of the materials

gathered and the drawing out of key themes and patterns (Strauss and Corbin, 2003). This was an 'iterative process' – one that involved 'going from material to ideas, back to material and so on' (Crang, 1997: 188). It was as I was conducting this analytical procedure that the significance of each group's view of capitalism, their contrasting understandings of the principle of shared ownership, and their divergent stances on the issue of political struggle (to name just a few of the themes that will arise in coming chapters) all became apparent. Through this process, it also became clear to me that eco-Marxian critiques of capitalism and neo-Gramscian work on hegemony offered much for my examination of the projects' activities. I have considered these theoretical approaches in previous chapters, and in the ones that follow I will draw on these ideas to interrogate the participants' actions. I would also like to note here that it was by going back and forth between the data and the literature (in the manner that Crang suggests) that I first started to notice gaps in the wider literature that I thought my study could address. I will expand on this in chapters 8 and 9.

I would like to close this chapter by pointing out that my examination of the data was, like any data analysis process, subjective, and by emphasising that the case study chapters appear as they do because of choices and selections that I made. When I was processing the data, I had to decide what material to leave in and what to take out (and there was much that did not make it into this final document[40]). This meant giving priority to certain patterns and connections and de-prioritizing others – a process that saw the data trimmed 'on [my] terms' with the 'help of certain categorizations and aggregations', all with the aim of 'getting results' (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009: 214). It must be said, then, that alternative case studies could have been written: if I had decided to include different data, the chapters that follow would have been different, too. I would also like to point out that if a different researcher analysed the same documents, interviewed the same participants, and observed the same meetings, events and activities that I did, they would no doubt come to different conclusions to the ones I arrived at. Maybe I would too if I started this project all over again – such is the nature of ethnographic research. So, let me conclude by emphasising this point: what follows in the next two chapters constitutes my attempt, at this particular stage in my intellectual journey, to capture the reality of the participants' lifeworlds during a period when they were busy conducting journeys of their own. Having set this out, I can now go on to examine the *Freshfair* and *Greenstar* projects in detail.

[40] I will expand on this in the 'Further Study' section in chapter 9.

Chapter 6: The *Freshfair* Food Hub Case Study

6.1 Introducing the food hub

The *Freshfair* food hub was established in 2011 in a relatively small city in rural northwest England. In many ways a 'conventional' community-scale alternative food project,[41] it was set up by a small number of committed activists to provide local communities with a source of affordable, 'ethical', sustainably produced local food.

Its founders wanted to offer local shoppers an alternative to 'mainstream' corporate food outlets (which, in their view, constituted an integral part of an exploitative and environmentally destructive capitalist food regime). To this end, *Freshfair* attempted to link local, small-scale food producers with self-selected local consumers, with the aim of allowing the latter to 'buy directly and enjoy good quality and environmentally sensitive food, at prices fair to all' (Freshfair, 2011a).

The activists behind this initiative were motivated by a shared desire to develop a local-scale response to two major crises marking the conjuncture in which they found themselves: 1) the ecological crisis (with a focus on climate change in particular); 2) the austerity-related social crisis associated with the 2008 financial crash and its aftermath. It can be noted, then, that from the very beginning, this project had both an environmental and a social dimension.[42]

To expand on these points, in terms of its environmental goals, the *Freshfair* participants were looking to develop an alternative food system that could reduce 'food miles' and cut carbon emissions. In line with the locavorist logic that was deeply embedded in the subaltern environmentalist imagination in that conjuncture (see chapter 3), its founders decided from the outset that all food sold through the hub should be produced within 30 miles of its city-centre base. By championing *local* food as a solution to pressing environmental crises, then, the hub was moving with the spirit of the times (see below).

In terms of its social goals, *Freshfair* was set up to help local communities deal with the effects of the Coalition government's neoliberal austerity programme. It sought to do this by making good quality, local food available to everybody – including, crucially, those on low incomes. From the very beginning, the idea of providing *mass access* to local produce was central to its

[41] I use the term 'alternative food projects' to refer to that evolving global network of loosely defined, food-related initiatives that in recent decades has emerged in response to the 'glaring and multifaceted contradictions of the unsustainable industrial food system and the exploitative trading relations embedded in the global supply chains that support its growth and (expanded) reproduction' (Goodman et al., 2012, p. 4).

[42] I am not trying to suggest that 'the social' and 'the environmental' are separate spheres. I am merely making an analytical distinction for this discussion.

aims (see below). The actors behind *Freshfair* did not want their hub to operate like a 'typical' alternative food project, which often only cater for the needs of affluent, 'ethical' consumers who can afford to pay extra for local, artisanal produce (Sharzer, 2012). Rather, *Freshfair* was specifically intended to support working-class communities struggling in that austerity context.

Freshfair was also set up to identify, and develop links between, independent local producers. The hub wanted to create a network of small farmers that could increase the region's food producing capacity, strengthen the local food economy, and boost community resilience in the face of future climate change-related food system shocks.

By connecting local producers and consumers in this way, the hub's founders were looking to demystify the local food system. They wanted to make the operations of the food economy more transparent and more authentic as they believed this would encourage non-exploitative, 'fair trade' activities between growers and buyers. They believed that by forging new relations in this way, the hub could also work to re-build social ties and connections to nature that had been lost in recent decades.

As I showed in chapter 3, such a focus on resilience and community capacity building was widespread among 'grassroots' eco-localist activists during the period examined by this thesis. Thus, by prioritising these areas, the *Freshfair* hub was, in some ways at least, operating firmly in line with core elements of established subaltern environmental 'common sense' in that conjuncture. However, when one looks more closely at the hub's operating model, it soon becomes clear that *Freshfair* differed markedly from the 'conventional' alternative food projects that are so often disregarded by eco-Marxian critics.

6.2 The local scale: production and consumption

Below I will show that, contrary to outward appearances, the *Freshfair* food hub was not a typical 'folk-political' eco-localist project (Srnicek and Williams, 2016; also Sharzer, 2012; Phillips, 2015; see chapter 3). However, in line with folk political approaches, the project did focus on the local level, and its organisers did – at least during its earlier phases – tend to uncritically view activity at this scale as inherently authentic, fair, and environmentally sustainable.

I have already noted that the issue of food miles was of central importance to this group's members. Naylor, one of the project's founders, emphasised that *Freshfair* was set up to tackle problems that were associated with 'importing food in order to sustain people in the way that they were eating'. Taking a stance that aligned with the embedded 'common sense' eco-localist view outlined in chapter 3, he asserted that such activities were 'carbon intensive' and that 'transport was a clear element of that' (Naylor, 2017a). The *Freshfair* participants:

> … were angry about shitty food [coming from] all over the place when in some cases you could get [better quality food] from the farm down the road … We wanted community-based production on some significant scale that would allow us to make a contribution to the local need for food (Naylor, 2017a).

Freshfair was not Naylor's first attempt at running a local food project. Before he became involved with it, he had, along with fellow F*reshfair* founder Upton, set up a vegetable box scheme in a small town eight miles from the city where *Freshfair* would make its base (I mention this here because Naylor's and Upton's experiences at this earlier project would feed directly into the development of the *Freshfair* hub). However, this box scheme folded after around 12 months due to a lack of community participation and low sales. Naylor said that it struggled because:

> … we only had limited amounts of stuff [i.e., a small range of produce] … I guess there were problems with reliability, and I guess we were asking people to rearrange their food acquisition habits which made [buying through the scheme] inconvenient for them. Therefore, the only people who got involved were those who were ideologically committed [to buying local food], you know, those who were prepared to do it (Naylor, 2017a).

This early box scheme had been consciously developed in line with the localist principles of the *Transition Towns* (TT) movement, with which both Naylor and Upton were heavily involved at that time (on TT, see chapter 3). When this scheme was forced to close, the pair were bitterly disappointed. But as committed community activists with a strong interest in environmental sustainability and alternative local food systems, it was not long before they were looking to start a new project that could overcome the deficiencies of the old. Drawing on the lessons they had learnt there, they decided that, for their next venture, they would need to find a way connect to larger numbers of people. Upton said that:

> … working in [the rural town] meant that the population was too small. We needed more people, and we therefore realised that we needed to get into [the city situated nearby, which had a much larger population]. We thought that would give us a better chance [of success] and it felt logically as though this was a step in the right direction (Upton, 2017a).

They believed that this new venture would need to offer a wider range of produce than the old project had, and that it would have to operate in a way that made shopping for local food much more convenient than, say, a standard box scheme or farmers' market approach. They concluded

that such changes were needed to get local people to break with their usual supermarket shopping habits.

They shared their idea for a new food project with two members of a sustainability group that already operated in their target city (this group was also heavily influenced by the eco-localist approach of the TT movement). This community transition group had similarly been toying with the idea of establishing a food hub in the city. Naylor recalls that, when the four individuals first came together to discuss their ideas, a shared sense of impending catastrophe coloured the air. As they talked:

> … the notion of [environmental and societal] collapse was strong... We'd just discovered that we were going to wreck the world for sure and realised that we kind of needed to do something about it. We couldn't see how the market was going to deal with it – other than things would collapse a bit here and a bit there and, you know, the people with money would probably be alright. So, we thought it was important to do something about food security… we could see that [the existing food system] was vulnerable and that something needed to be done (Naylor, 2017a).

Although the finer details still needed to be worked out, these four individuals decided to work together to set up a new food project that could reduce carbon emissions from the local food economy and support members of the local community who were struggling under the weight of post-2008 austerity policies. The project would have other aims too, but before these can be discussed, I need to take a closer look at the motivations, experiences, and worldviews of these four founding members. This information will be vital for helping to understand the way the *Freshfair* project operated; it will also be important for my discussion of eco-localist strategy in chapter 8.

6.3 Freshfair: the steering group

These four individuals would comprise *Freshfair's* steering group – the hub's primary co-ordinating mechanism. This group would be responsible for taking decisions relating to the design, development, and management of the new venture.

All four had what I consider to be a high level of political education, although each identified with a different left political tradition. I need look more closely at these contrasting stances because their interplay would shape not only the hub's initial design, but also its strategic development over the longer term. While their political differences were real, however, these were, at least at this early stage, less important than the commitments they shared.

Although they had all been involved with various sub-hegemonic[43] localist projects over the preceding years, all were highly critical of prevailing eco-social arrangements and all positioned themselves firmly on the 'left' or 'far left' of the political spectrum (although, for reasons discussed below, they tended not to broadcast this fact). Each subscribed to what I will here call a radical, 'all change' ecological imaginary because all saw capitalist social relations as a fundamental driver of environmental and social problems. They each rejected the notion that a 'green' or 'responsible' capitalism was possible, and all believed that making the transition to a sustainable, emancipatory order would require making a *complete break with capitalist production*.[44] Significantly, however, they disagreed about how such a break should be brought about.

To help ground the analysis of *Freshfair*'s strategic trajectory in later sections and chapters (and to show how these actors' own personal political journeys were shaped by neoliberal development in Britain – see chapter 8), here I need to provide some key study-relevant information about each of them.[45]

Rob Naylor[46]

An experienced community campaigner, Naylor was in his early-60s when *Freshfair* was established. He had been an active member of the UK Labour party for over 40 years (and remained a committed member throughout his time at the hub). A self-described 'radical socialist' operating *within* the Labour tradition, he had long been motivated by a desire to tackle social inequality and ecological destruction. He was also a committed eco-localist and had been actively involved with the TT movement since its early days.

Although he thought the prospect unlikely (at least for the foreseeable future), he believed that creating a socially just and ecologically sound society would require making the transition from a capitalist social order to one based on socialist principles. In the British context, he believed that such a shift could only be brought about by working *through* the parliamentary system; activities taking place outside that system (localist projects, demonstrations, direct action, etc.) could in his view produce nothing other than '… a skirmish at the side as opposed to making something significant happen' (Naylor, 2017a). In making this claim, he was not seeking to downplay the significance of small-scale, non-electorally aligned social and political activities.

[43] On hegemony, sub-hegemony and counter-hegemony, see chapter 2.
[44] This shared anti-capitalist stance stood in stark contrast to the 'local responsible green capitalist' imaginary that informed activities at *Greenstar Energy* – see chapter 7
[45] Before going further, let me note here that these four individuals identified as white, able-bodied, British-born males.
[46] I just want to emphasise again here that all participants have been given fictitious names. See my discussion of anonymity in chapter 5.

Rather, he sought only to highlight their limitations. Indeed, when asked if such localized 'skirmishes' had wider political significance, he replied:

> Yes, of course. Because you don't know what's going to happen next. Even just for political education processes there should be a lot of skirmishing going on. Yeah, that is fine. But if they're going to go anywhere these things ultimately have to engage with the existing democratic process. This is the political reality and because of this [whenever I think about the question of strategy] I reach the conclusion that I've always reached: that I'm going to stick to being a member of the Labour Party (Naylor, 2017a).

Naylor, then, believed in the need for a socialist future, but ultimately took a reformist, parliamentary approach to social transition. This position can be contrasted to that of Sabatini, another founding member who, as I will show below, took a more revolutionary stance.

Before looking at the next member of the group, I want to briefly note here how neoliberalization processes shaped this participant's political development. He was born in the early 1950s and became politically active in the mid-1970s. During his youth and young adulthood in social democratic Britain, he became acculturated into a society in which the forces of organised labour were strong, working life was relatively secure, and public expectations regarding the kinds of support that state authorities could and should deliver were relatively high (Naylor, 2017a, 2017b; Harvey, 2005; Gindin and Panitch, 2012; Gallas, 2017; Gilbert and Williams, 2022). As a British citizen, he had benefitted from the various forms of social support that were made available to him during that time (free health care, accessible public higher education, affordable public housing, and so on). Crucially, he had also seen how, during the Thatcher, Major, and New Labour years, many of these vital sources of state support had been removed. Or to put it another way, he had witnessed first-hand how, over the course of the neoliberal period, the privatization of public services (Harvey, 2005; Meek, 2014; Christophers, 2022), the growing marketization of society (Davies, 2014; Mirowski, 2014; Brown, 2017) and the deliberate disorganisation of organised labour (Harvey, 2005; Gindin and Panitch, 2012; Gallas, 2017) had detrimentally affected the lives of working-class people (Naylor, 2017a; 2017b). Although Naylor acknowledged that the social democratic capitalist system he grew up within was far from perfect, he nevertheless stressed that he had largely positive personal experiences of British society *before* the neoliberal turn, and that he had seen a marked deterioration in all aspects of social life in the period since the election of the first Thatcher government.

Anthony Upton

Like Naylor, Upton was also a widely respected community activist. In his mid-70s when *Freshfair* began, he had previously worked as a paediatrician but had given up medicine in the

1970s to concentrate on sustainable agriculture. He had owned and run an organic farm in rural north-west England for over three decades and was a well-known figure in the local farming community. In his role as an unpaid member of the steering group, he brought valuable farming contacts and agricultural expertise to the hub.

Also like Naylor, this individual had been greatly inspired by the TT movement during the late 'noughties', and he channelled much of his energy into grassroots eco-localist activity around that time. Under the Transition banner, he had worked closely with Naylor on several local climate change and food-related initiatives (including, as noted above, the failed box scheme that preceded *Freshfair*). During this period, he found the optimism of the Transition movement 'infectious' and saw the growth in eco-localism that it inspired as a vital source of hope in darkening times: a 'chance at last to change the world after a frustrated lifetime spent fighting for a better one' (Upton, 2018).

This strong interest in localist activity would feed directly into the development of the *Freshfair* project and fundamentally shape its overall approach to tackling eco-social problems. However, and as I will show later, his experiences at the *Freshfair* hub would entirely change his way of thinking and ultimately lead him to reject outright the kind of localist logic that underpinned the Transition approach. Drawing on the terms set out in chapter 2, below I will show how, over the course of *Freshfair*'s lifetime, this participant moved from a sub-hegemonic eco-localist position towards a counter-hegemonic, revolutionary socialist standpoint. He would later claim that this new revolutionary perspective helped him to finally understand his '… history of stumbling from children's doctor to farmer to climate change activist … [and to] make sense of why I'd spent such a long time getting nowhere' (Upton, 2018).

This perspectival shift would greatly influence the way he thought about political strategy. Although the participant I am about to introduce played a large part in precipitating this shift, the conditions necessary for it were generated by Upton's longer-term experiences of neoliberalization in Britain. Like Naylor, Upton had materially benefitted from the social democratic compromise that emerged in the aftermath of World War II, and he too was a passionate supporter of the welfare state and the National Health Service. Like Naylor, he had also been angered by neoliberalism's dismantling of these structures. During the 1980s, he became increasingly opposed to the Thatcher administrations' neoliberalizing reforms (he was one of the many who refused to pay the Poll Tax when it was introduced in England in 1990). His dislike of neoliberal policies would continue to grow throughout the Major and New Labour years as the impacts of their implementation on working class communities became clear.

Mike Sabatini

Sabatini shared Naylor's and Upton's interest in environmental sustainability and social justice issues. However, unlike them, he was never a fan of sub-hegemonic transition-style localist approaches to eco-social change. Also in contrast to the participants discussed above, he was *not* a well-known local activist: he had worked in high-level policy development and project management positions in the third sector and in local government and had only recently started to get involved in local sustainability activities. He was in his mid-40s when *Freshfair* was established and thus considerably younger than Naylor and Upton. He also emerged from a different political tradition: throughout his teenage years and his early 20s, he had been a highly active member of the *Socialist Workers' Party* (SWP) in London. Yet, like Naylor and Upton, he, too, had been profoundly shaped by the politics of the Thatcher period. Angry at the negative social impacts brought forth by the neoliberal turn, he became increasingly opposed to the Thacher regimes during the 1980s and became heavily involved in anti-government direct action around the time of the Poll Tax riots. This was a formative experience for him, and one that pushed him towards the radical revolutionary socialist position that would later influence the way he designed the food hub's model (see below).

However, Sabatini became increasingly disillusioned as neoliberalism was consolidated during the New Labour years and his interest in activism faded. Although he never lost his faith in revolutionary socialist ideas, by the time he moved from London to northwest England in the mid-2000s for work, he had dropped out of political activism altogether. This would change in 2008 when the financial crisis shocked him back into action. Re-energised by the crash, Sabatini started to look around for a local revolutionary political group with which to get involved. In that area at that time, however, he could find no such group. In the absence of more suitable political matches, he decided – grudgingly – to join the local branch of the Green Party, and he also got involved with his local transition group. In contrast to the case of Naylor, however, he 'never fully accepted the reformist sort of strategy'. Instead, he based his understanding of how to change society on Marx's *Capital* and was guided by a '… critical acceptance of the Russian revolution as the way to organise a transition of power' (Sabatini, 2018). Frustrated by what he saw as the limitations of the Green Party's electoral approach, he attempted over the next two years to subtly shift the branch's activities in a more radical socialist direction. He was ultimately unsuccessful in this regard.

By the time *Freshfair* came along, he had drifted away from the Greens. When the food hub advertised for a (paid) business development officer to help set the project up, it was he who landed the role. Although he had long been sceptical of localist initiatives (time banks, local

currencies, veg box schemes, and the like), he nevertheless saw in this project the potential to create space for radical political activity *over the longer term*.

Pete Forrester

Forrester was in his mid-30s when he became involved with *Freshfair*. Like Naylor (and Upton), he was at that point a prominent local environmental campaigner. Unlike Naylor, however, he did not subscribe to the parliamentary reformist point of view; nor was he a revolutionary socialist like Sabatini. Instead, he described himself as having 'an anarchist background'.

Born in the early 1980s, he was the youngest member of the steering group. He became politically aware during the 1990s when he started to get involved with the anarchist anti-globalization movements that were influential at that time. During his 20s he became heavily involved with initiatives such as *Climate Camp* and the *Festival of Dissent*.[47] As an anarchist activist, he took part in countless demonstrations (where he was a frequent and enthusiastic member of the notorious 'black bloc'[48]) and had been involved in numerous episodes of direct action over the years. During this period, he spent several years living 'off grid' in a yurt at an isolated forest site.[49]

In the late 2000s, however, he became less involved with anarchist-influenced direct action and increasingly immersed in the grassroots eco-localist movements that were emerging at that time (see chapter 3). Inspired by the TT movement, he set up a local transition group – an initiative that was loosely organised along horizontalist lines (drawing on the discussion in the previous chapter, this can be understood as a classic example of a 'folk-political' project – see Srnicek and Williams, 2016). Although this initiative engaged in sub-hegemonic localist activities, as an individual, Forrester maintained a radical political outlook. In contrast to Naylor, who believed that the path to a sustainable future had to pass through the ballot box, he argued that real change could only come:

> … from the bottom up. It can't be politicians, in my experience … I don't foresee the current system – representative democracy – delivering the kind of change that we need in time to avert catastrophic climate change (Forrester, 2018).

[47] 'Climate Camp' was established in the UK during the mid-2000s to draw attention to the activities of large carbon emitting organisations. Successive camps have served as a rallying point for activists engaged in environmental and anti-capitalist struggles. There is a strong emphasis on anarchism and direct action. The Festival of Dissent has provided a hub for anti-capitalist resistance around G8 summits.
[48] The 'black bloc' is typically associated with anarchist, anti-globalization and anti-fascist protest. Activists in the black bloc at mass demonstrations often wear black clothes and tend to hide their identities from security forces by wearing ski-masks, scarves, sunglasses etc. Black bloc tactics primarily include rioting and vandalism against private property.
[49] With the permission of a sympathetic local farmer.

He saw the UK parliamentary system as undemocratic, short-termist, narrowly focused, and biased in favour of elite interests. Given the scale of the ecological crisis and the nature of the changes needed to avert it, he saw engaging with it as a waste of time. What he wanted was a society based 'without government, without capitalism'. Bringing this about would require:

> System change. Complete revolution … I don't see any way of changing things by degrees (Forrester, 2018).

It was through his role as director of this transition group that he became involved with the *Freshfair* hub. Although he was too young to experience life prior to the neoliberal turn in Britain, his years of involvement with anarchist groups had fostered in him strong anti-capitalist and anti-neoliberal views that meshed well with the political commitments of the group's older members. While he arrived at his radical political viewpoint via a different route to the others, he nevertheless, like them, understood that alternatives to capitalism *were possible*.

Despite their political differences, then, these actors came together to design a new local food project that aimed to:

- Reduce greenhouse gas emissions associated with the local food economy
- Boost food growing capacity and community resilience in the local area by building a network of food producers within a 30-mile radius of the hub's city base
- Operate in a way that was fair to both food producers and consumers
- Strengthen the local food economy
- Help local communities deal with the pressures of austerity by making good quality local produce available to people on low incomes
- Offer local consumers an affordable, convenient alternative to supermarkets
- Open spaces in which alternative, radical political ideas could germinate.

From the very beginning, it was decided that the new project would be run in an open and democratic manner. Co-operation was a central principle: there would be no single leader in charge – all decisions within the steering group were to be reached by consensus.[50] Income generated through food sales would be used to cover the cost of the hub's operations. Any surplus was to be funnelled into other local sustainability projects or re-invested to help the project expand in line with the goals outlined above.

Based on the discussion in chapter 3, it can be seen from the above that this project, with its focus on localized food production, 'ethical' consumption, food security, community resilience

[50] Others who might want to get involved with strategic activities at the hub – producers, volunteers, customers – were invited to participate in some decision-making processes.

and ‘fair trade’ activities occurring around the edges of the capitalist marketplace, was operating in line with many of the key priorities established in ‘mainstream’ sustainability discourse at that time. However, as has been pointed out already, *Freshfair* was not a typical sub-hegemonic, eco-localist, ‘folk political’ project.

6.4 The Model

Working together, the four members of the steering group developed an innovative collective purchasing model that connected local food producers with consumers in workplaces across the local area. It operated in the following way.

Buying groups were established in participating workplaces. Each group appointed a buying advocate, whose job it was to co-ordinate members, deal with minor issues arising within each group, and act as a point of contact between the group and the central food hub. Members of each buying group would individually submit their orders via *Freshfair*’s online ordering system no later than the Friday of each week; the following Tuesday, ordered produce was delivered (by Forrester using a bicycle and trailer) to each group’s workplace, where the advocate would distribute the pre-packaged orders among the members (Freshfair, 2011b).

By focusing attention on *the workplace* as the site of local produce sales (instead of on farmers’ markets or vegetable box schemes, where food activist attention so often falls), the hub *looked like* a fairly ‘conventional’ alternative food project – albeit one with a novel twist. Indeed, from the beginning, this was how the project was publicly presented by its founders: the hub’s distinctive workplace-centric model was promoted primarily as a way to make the purchasing of local food *easy for consumers*. The virtue of this approach, the founders argued, was that by getting their orders delivered direct to their workplaces, *Freshfair* customers could dispense with the need to go shopping *outside of work time.* Thus, the hub was sold as a convenient alternative to local supermarkets, from which it hoped to draw people away. As Forrester explains:

> The idea of an internet-based system was that you could have access to local food without having to go to a local market or go to local shops on your days off. You know, it was like a convenient way to have access to local food … The basic idea was that it was no hassle for them [customers]. You know, they could have local food at a reasonable price delivered to their workplace (Forrester, 2017a).

But there was another reason for this focus on local workplaces. As can be seen from the personal profiles above, there was within the steering group a strong interest in socialist and Marxist ideas. These ideas influenced the hub’s design, which, despite its bucolic gloss, was

consciously intended, from the very beginning, to *build ties of solidarity within and between workplaces across the city and its surrounding areas*. So, while the hub might have *looked like* a fairly standard local food project from the outside, when developing the hub's model, Sabatini notes that he had:

> … a very working class, proletarian conception of what I wanted to achieve, which was to get into where people worked and to make that link between collective purchasing, ecological habits and the workplace. It was consciously based on a very organised working-class, trade union-type model where the workplace should be the cell of societal transformation (Sabatini, 2017a).

For Forrester too, the workplace model was central to the project's wider aims (which I will discuss in more detail presently). According to him, the core idea was to create something:

> … a bit like the trade union model in workplaces. You'd have [buying advocates] promoting it in their own workplaces and talking about the food and promoting it to colleagues (Forrester, 2017a).

The buying advocates, then, were to co-ordinate fellow workers and act as their representatives in relation to the hub. By increasing interactions between workers, *Freshfair*'s steering group was hoping to boost levels of local workplace solidarity that they believed had declined markedly during the neoliberal period. That is to say, they were looking to tap into the rapidly growing public interest in local food (see chapter 3) as a way to instil something akin to a trade union consciousness among groups of local workers.

The principle of *group* buying was central in this regard. *Freshfair* aimed to challenge the individualised purchasing practices found in corporate supermarkets – practices that, in the steering group's view, reflected and reinforced the social atomisation of neoliberal society. By establishing new local food production-consumption circuits, its members aimed to cultivate a city-wide counterculture based around notions of workplace solidarity and environmental sustainability. In this way, they hoped to challenge the hegemony of established capitalist agro-food system practices and create spaces where 'radical' (counter-hegemonic) political ideas could germinate.

Freshfair's members understood full well that the market-based approach to social change they were pursuing – one founded on the sale of 'ethical' commodities in the capitalist marketplace – carried serious risks (of incorporation into neoliberal order, of being outcompeted by large corporate rivals, and so on). However, based on their reading of the conjuncture, they knew, too, that in the short term at least, they needed to work with the grain of established socio-cultural

practices if they were to have any chance of developing in line with their medium- to longer-term aims.

Regarding the latter, the steering group members were ultimately hoping to scale the project up to the point where it could start providing 'food for the masses… cheap food that can be provided to everybody [regardless of income]' (Sabatini, 2017a). But they didn't intend to stop at food. When designing the hub, these core members had:

> … imagined the idea that you could create a kind of Maslov's hierarchy of need, where we could do food first and then move up to getting collective purchasing for things like furniture, then we could go to white goods through getting people to repair things like fridges, TVs, computers, things like that … the idea would be that in a kind of molecular way, people would no longer buy commodities from capitalists (Sabatini, 2017a).

From this, it can be seen that *Freshfair* took a very different approach to the failed, TT-inspired box scheme that preceded it. Sabatini (who had not been involved in that earlier project but was aware of its existence and wanted to improve on it) stated that:

> [The old box scheme] operated with a petit bourgeois view which is where you have small sellers interacting though the market with atomised buyers, [and] where you try to use consumption as a way of educating and changing behaviours. So, the idea there is that if you change people's consumption patterns and behaviours, you somehow generate a beneficial effect on society. Whereas I wanted to generate a sort of beneficial effect on society by using the workplace to change behaviours, so that people could learn collective ways to consume. So those value discussions were in the background [at the time we were developing the project] (Sabatini, 2017a).

Following up on these remarks, I asked Sabatini directly if *Freshfair* had been set up to change class relations within the city itself. He replied: 'Oh, totally. That's what we talked about at the time' (Sabatini, 2017a). However, not all of those who became involved with *Freshfair* would be made aware of these aims. Reading and reacting to the strategic context in which they were working, the steering group's members decided that they needed to conceal the more 'radical' aspects of their wider vision and the politics that underpinned it. As Upton noted:

> … the political motivation of the project – which [for me] is what was going for it – was never shared, never openly ... it was never put on the line [i.e., broadcast publicly], and it would never be put on the line because it wouldn't have been any good for marketing. But this is not surprising given the type of society we are in ... I think very,

very few producers and customers would have shared this political view (Upton, 2017b).

It is necessary to point out here that the steering group members did not believe they were misleading the producers and customers who came into contact with the hub – after all, the hub *really had* been set up to support local producers, to help local shoppers gain access to affordable, good quality local food, and to strengthen the local food economy. The key difference between the motivations of the steering group members on the one hand, and those of *Freshfair*'s producers and consumers on the other, was that for the former, the hub's localist activity was not viewed as an end in itself (as it tended to be seen among the latter – see below), but *rather as a means by which to move towards their radical longer-term goals*. It can be seen, then, that there was *a genuine and significant degree of overlap* between the interests of the steering group members and those of the participating producers and consumers – an overlap that enabled a strategic alliance to be built.

Based on the information above, and drawing on the neo-Gramscian terminology introduced in chapter 2, here I want to point out that the *Freshfair* food hub superficially operated in a *sub-hegemonic* manner. Yet from the very beginning, it was *covertly* intended to transform existing structural selectivities over the medium- to long-term in a manner that would facilitate the development of counter-hegemonic activities. Based on this assessment, I suggest that *Freshfair* should be seen as a *counter-hegemonic project masquerading in sub-hegemonic guise*. This characterisation provides a point of reference that will help to differentiate this project's approach from that of *Greenstar Energy*, discussed in the following chapter.

Through *Freshfair*, then, the hub's founders believed they had found a way to align their radical political interests with the business interests of struggling, small-scale, local producers who were desperately looking for ways to boost their sales, and with the interests of local shoppers, who, in a context marked by a high degree of social alienation and cascading environmental crises, and where opportunities for eco-social action were severely circumscribed (see chapters 3 and 4), were looking for ways to 'ethically' consume. I will now consider the interests of the producers and consumers in more detail.

6.5 Producers

I noted above that *Freshfair* was intentionally set up to create a network of small-scale, *local* producers. But to get the project up and running, it first had to find some producers who were willing to get involved. As Upton recalls, this took 'an enormous amount of work and a hell of a lot of foot stomping around [the region]' (Upton, 2017b). But their efforts did pay off: after a few difficult months of travelling and informal negotiations, Upton and Naylor had identified 28 producers who were prepared to come aboard. Together, these farmers and producers offered a

range of goods that included meat, vegetables, fruit, cheese, yoghurt, conserves, cakes, and beer – a range deemed wide enough to enable trading.

The steering group had needed to find a way to appeal to producers' interests. Upton's experience was vital in this regard: a farmer himself, he knew all-too-well the difficulties that small producers faced when they tried to sell their goods. To generate income, he said, such producers:

> … typically have to rely on farmers' markets, which are quite labour intensive. These small producers have a lot of expertise, but unfortunately, they have to dilute what they are good at as they have to spend time struggling to find outlets for produce … It is an extremely bad use of time and producers' skills are wasted ... Farming is what these people are good at and in a different society they would be valued [for it … As it is, they] might have to stand in a farmers' market from six in the morning until four in the afternoon and not sell very much. Or they might try and struggle to run box schemes or attempt to negotiate impossible contracts with supermarkets – which are very difficult [for small-scale producers] to get into (Upton, 2017b).

Upton's comments here resonated with those of Fowles, a local farmer who sold meat through the *Freshfair* hub. She illustrated the problems she faced:

> I might hear there's a market coming up in Kendal [a town in Westmorland and Furness]. Well, I'm not going to go to Kendal because it is 60 miles away. It just isn't worth it. Then people say: 'there's a market coming up in [your area] in 10 days – why don't you go there?' Well, you've got to be there at eight o'clock in the morning and you don't pack up until four, so you're not back until five. You're away all the daylight hours. How can you do farming at the same time? (Fowles, 2018).

To offer a solution to this problem, *Freshfair* would act as a central co-ordination point for disparate local producers. The hub would take responsibility for tasks such as marketing, sales management, and produce distribution – activities that small-scale producers struggled to find time to do. In this way, *Freshfair* would free farmers up to focus on 'what they were good at': producing food. From the producers' point of view, this approach worked well. Bradley, a local meat and dairy farmer, for example, liked working with the hub because it enabled him to concentrate on his farm:

> … the great thing for me [about *Freshfair*] of course was I didn't have to worry about the marketing and that kind of thing. That was very attractive to me as there was no time to do all that (Bradley, 2018).

For similar reasons, Fowles thought the hub was 'absolutely excellent'. She said:

> Oh, it was brilliant. It was brilliant. Every month, a certain amount of produce was sold. People were buying through *Freshfair* ... it provided us with another outlet for our produce. It was incredibly helpful (Fowles, 2018).

Freshfair helped in other ways, too. By providing a new outlet for sales, the hub gave some would-be producers the confidence they needed to set up in business. Bowe, for example, was a member of the local community who kept a small number of pigs. Before *Freshfair* came along, she used them only to provide meat for personal consumption. But when the hub was looking to add pork suppliers to its network, they asked if she would consider selling commercially. This gave her the push she needed to start up in business:

> I sold meat through the project right from the beginning. It was great and it helped me to get going. It was one of the main things that helped me start up because I knew I could sell through them each week … [*Freshfair*] has been a really big part of my business. There were regulars who bought sausages and I was selling a lot through them (Bowe, 2018).

Porter, who ran a large beef and sheep farm, tells a similar story. When *Freshfair* was starting up, he said that he was:

> … interested in growing [produce] and had wanted to grow fruit and veg for some time. I grew a little bit for myself in the corner of a field. I wanted to do more but it was very difficult to get into because of having to grow [the produce] and then market it when I already had a farm to look after. And I could never see a way into it because the marketing would take up too much time. In April, with lambing and trying to sow all these crops, it could never be done (Porter, 2017).

The hub, which had been struggling to find local vegetable producers, asked if he would consider supplying *Freshfair*. He said:

> We had various conversations. I was thinking about putting up a polytunnel. So, we talked about it. And with the confidence I got from that, I decided to put up a bigger polytunnel than I was going to. So, I put up quite a decent sized commercial polytunnel to supply *Freshfair* … For me, overall, it was fantastic because it put money in the system to pay for the polytunnel and everything and it really got me going on the vegetable side of things … It gave me confidence to have a market. And I had money coming in straight away. Not a huge amount. But *Freshfair* was a massive benefit to me … It totally got me going (Porter, 2017).

These examples help to show that *Freshfair* provided valuable support for participating local producers. By taking responsibility for marketing and for the co-ordination and distribution of

produce, the hub helped to relieve some of the pressures felt by local farmers, which gave them more time to concentrate on their businesses. Also, by providing an easy-to-access outlet for sales, it gave some local producers the confidence to start up in business and/or expand their operations. In these ways, it can be seen that *Freshfair* was helping to strengthen the local food economy – one of its initial key aims (see above).

6.6. *Freshfair* and localism

Freshfair, from the very beginning, was conceived as an avowedly localist project. As has been noted already, the hub's whole approach was built around the principle that *all* of its produce should be sourced from within a 30-mile radius of its city-centre base. I will stress again here that by focusing on the local scale in this way, the hub was operating fully in line with established subaltern environmental 'common sense' (see chapter 3).

At first glance, the hub's emphasis on local production made little sense in practical or business terms. The region was one where agricultural activity was almost entirely focused on meat and dairy production, so finding the range of produce needed to make the hub viable was going to be very difficult. Of course, the steering group members were well aware of this issue when they started the project – indeed, this was a central problem they wanted to address. As I noted above, increasing local 'food security' was one of *Freshfair*'s core aims; for its founders, increasing local vegetable growing capacity was considered central to achieving this goal.

The steering group's keen interest in *local* food production was shared by the producers. Porter, for example, was already a passionate supporter of local food economies before he joined *Freshfair* and was drawn to the project precisely because of this localist focus. He decided to get involved with the hub because he wanted to help it overcome the difficulties that it would face finding local vegetables. He said:

> There is such a limited selection of fresh produce [in this area] … it is all just beef, sheep and dairy within 30 miles of [the *Freshfair* hub]. You drive in your car and you will have to drive a long way before you see a field with vegetables in it … [in this region,] you can drive all day and never come across a field of vegetables or fruit or anything (Porter, 2017).

He had long been frustrated by this lack of local vegetable production,[51] so when *Freshfair* came along, he saw it as an opportunity to stage an intervention. He knew that the hub's 30-mile

[51] This absence of vegetable production made him wary of businesses that claimed to sell 'local' produce – and fuelled a passion within him to make a genuine contribution to local food production. His sense of frustration comes through in the following comments: 'So many things are bullshit in local food. It is so full of shit … You go to any half decent restaurant around here and they've all got 'local' and 'organic' all over it. But if you go in and ask them where they get their vegetables from … you know. Everywhere has 'local produce' on their menu and it is absolute horseshit. Because there isn't any [in this region]. They'll

limit would make things difficult, but it was precisely this challenge that drew him towards the scheme. He was keen to get involved, he said, because the hub took a:

> … very purist approach. That 30-mile radius thing was a really tough ask. If you were looking at a 30-mile radius from Hereford, or from Lincoln, you would have a very different set up ... But a 30-mile limit in [the northwest of England] is very tough. Actually, I don't think we realised quite how difficult an ask it was at the beginning. However, having said that, that was the thing that really attracted me to it. I was really involved in *Freshfair* and I thought it was great … And part of that, definitely, was the purist thing. Because this project was the real deal. You know, 30 miles is really difficult. And that really attracted me and that really kept me with it (Porter, 2017).

Porter's comments regarding the difficulties associated with sourcing vegetables in the hub's locale raises important questions about the hub's view of 'food security': why did its members think that making their local area more food secure required diversifying supply *so close to home*? Why was increasing *local* production so important to them? Drawing on the discussion in chapter 3, it can be noted here that the *Freshfair* actors were at this stage in their eco-political journey operating in line with a core tenet of localist ideology at that time: the 'proximity principle' (that is, the idea that everything that can be produced locally should be – Latouche, 2007; Hopkins, 2008). However, as I also showed in that chapter, critics of localism have challenged this idea by pointing out that some areas just happen to be better suited to certain types of agricultural production than others – consequently, they argue that by focusing all their attention on *local* production, projects like *Freshfair* often end up trying to produce food in one area that could be more efficiently grown elsewhere (Phillips, 2015, p. 88). These critics also point out that such localist approaches can end up unnecessarily duplicating production processes *that would be better coordinated at larger scales* (Sharzer, 2012, p. 40). Seen from this critical standpoint, specialisation (i.e., a division of labour *between* regions) offers a far better way to guarantee food supply than localization ever could. Such approaches, of course, raise difficult questions about co-ordination and control that localists typically fail to address (Albo, 2007; see chapter 3).

My interview with Porter touched on another issue raised by critics of localist approaches. As I also showed in chapter 3, it has been argued that there exists a tendency among 'progressive' eco-localists to *assume* that local production is more environmentally sustainable and socially just (and therefore more desirable) than productive activity taking place at greater

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get eggs and they'll get beef and lamb and maybe even a bit of cheese. But as far as fruit and veg goes there isn't any for them to buy ...' (Porter, 2017).

scales/distances. According to Srnicek and Williams, this pro-localist sentiment has become fully translated into 'common sense' on the environmental left over the neoliberal period (Srnicek and Williams, 2016; also Purcell, 2006; Born and Purcell, 2006; Sharzer, 2012). I suggest that the following comments from Porter support this view. I have noted already that this participant was a passionate champion of local food. But when I asked him *why* he thought local production was so important, he replied:

> That's a really good question. I don't think I ever really think about it … [long pause]. Yeah, that's really difficult. Yeah, it is just one of those things that I think is the right thing, so I never actually think why. I just think … [pause]. I don't know (Porter, 2017).

Nicholson, a *Freshfair* pork supplier, was another strong believer in localization who saw the hub as a concrete way to put this principle into practice:

> The fact that *Freshfair* was local was important to me … if you can buy things on your doorstep, it is better for your local community because you're putting money back into that area … I think starting small and getting people to buy stuff locally really helps the local economy … That is why we want to keep it local (Nicholson, 2018).

But like Porter, he could not explain *why* local economic activity was in any way better than that which occurs at other scales – *he just assumed that it was*. Drawing on the discussion in chapter 3, I suggest that these participants were *fetishizing the local scale*, and that both had fallen into 'the local trap'.

This tendency to fetishize local scale activity was evident not only among the producers who supplied the hub, but also among those who bought from it. Crawford, for example, who served as a buying advocate for one of the larger and more active workplace buying groups, said that the primary reason she bought through *Freshfair* was 'because of its localness'. Yet she, too, could not explain why exactly its 'localness' was important – the fact that the hub provided *local* food was considered justification enough for her involvement (Crawford, 2018). Similar can be said of Cartwright, a member of the same buying group. He purchased through the hub primarily because it 'helps *local* farmers and food producers' (Cartwright, 2018; emphasis added). In his eyes, 'localness' seemed to stand in for a whole host of enchained 'positive' qualities: fairness, environmental sustainability, strong community spirit, and so on. However, while as a customer of the hub he *could* know that the food he bought was local, he *could not* know anything about the labour practices involved in the production of his commodities, the welfare of the animals he consumed, the ownership structures of the farms, etc. Because his food was local, and because he assumed that local production was good, he felt no need to concern himself with such matters.

This same preoccupation with 'localness' was evident among others who bought through *Freshfair*. This claim is supported by the results of a 2014 customer survey (conducted by the hub). Those who responded pointed overwhelmingly to the fact that *Freshfair*'s focus on *local* food production was the prime reason for their engagement (see table 6.1 below).

Respondent	Customer responses to the question: w*hy do you buy through* Freshfair*?*
A	'It's a great way to promote the sale of local produce by local farmers for fresh local produce that's tasty'.
B	'To get fresh local ingredients'.
C	'I like the idea of supporting local businesses'.
D	'To support local producers and suppliers supporting local business - both the growers and *Freshfair'*.
E	'To support local food producers and obtain good fresh food'.
F	'To support local producers'.
G	'To help the local farmers, local economy, to have tastier and healthier food at home... and to turn the head [sic] to greedy supermarkets whose aim is profit at any cost'.
H	'It is a convenient way to make sure you don't run out of staple foods'.
I	'I wanted to support local producers'.
J	'To give local producers the chance to sell their food as [if they were selling] to a large supermarket'.
K	'To promote use of local suppliers'.
L	'I like the quality of the food and the fact that it is locally sourced. Supermarket produce is expensive, poor quality and tastes of very little'.
M	'Local produce – very fresh'.

Table 6.1: Freshfair customer survey (Freshfair, 2014b).

Except for participant H, all respondents to the survey said that they were attracted to the hub for a reason linked to its local focus. The responses also help to highlight the importance that

Freshfair customers placed on the hub's ability to *support local producers and the local economy* in particular (respondents A, C, D, E, F, G, I, J, K). Again, their answers tend to assume that local scale activity is somehow inherently 'good'. Interestingly, except for respondent G, none seem to consider local production in relation to wider environmental or social concerns (there is, for example, no mention of climate change, social inequality, or problems stemming from the profit-oriented nature of industrialized food production systems, despite these being central concerns of the steering group members). Rather, focus here tends to fall almost entirely on the *scale* of production, which overrides all other concerns.

The dangers associated with this concentrated focus on scale can be illustrated through two *Freshfair* producer-related examples: the first concerns Fowles and Bowe, the second, Porter. As producers, Fowles and Bowe both sold food through the hub. Both were situated within the 30-mile limit – therefore, in the eyes of a 'typical' *Freshfair* customer, both were 'good' producers engaged in the righteous activity of supplying local food. However, the customer who focused only on the *scale* of production could have no idea that Fowles was a wealthy farmer from a highly privileged background who owned a large farmhouse in a prime semi-rural location and over 200 acres of land, while Bowe, by contrast, was an agricultural worker with no land of her own and very limited financial resources. Nor could they know that Bowe had, for several years, worked as an employee of Fowles on the latter's farm. When buying through the hub, the *Freshfair* customer could not know, then, that one of these individuals owned the means to engage in production on a significant scale, while the other did not. For the customer interested *only in where the food came from*, this power imbalance remained hidden.

With the case of Porter, issues around the disparities of ownership are again raised – only this time, not *between* producers, but *between producers and non-producers*. Porter saw himself as an 'ethical' farmer, one who wanted to 'do good' by boosting the production of local food (which, as I noted above, he understood as ethical activity *in itself*). He felt compelled to do this, he said, because he owned a lot of land on which food could be grown, while most of the people who lived in his local area owned none. Because of this imbalance, he said that he felt 'an obligation to make that [land] available to them' (Porter, 2017). Interestingly, however, he never intended to meet this obligation by, say, transferring the ownership of that land to the community members he felt compelled to help. Rather, he wanted to 'make it available' to them by *selling them the food commodities that he produced on it*:

> People say they want local organic vegetables, but they haven't got any land. Well, I have got land – so I will grow some stuff and we will see if you want to buy it. And if you want to buy it, great – I'll grow some more. And if you don't want to buy it, no problem ... put your money where your mouth is (Porter, 2017).

Here it can be noted that Porter's approach to developing *local* production rested on the continuation of existing ownership arrangements, and on the continued commodification of food – prevailing forms that the *Freshfair* steering group members ultimately wanted to overturn. From this, it can be seen that Porter's pro-localist viewpoint takes no account of why it is that 'the vast majority of society (i.e., the working class) *depends on commodities for survival*' in the first place – an issue I discussed in chapter 2, and one I will return to later (Huber, 2019; emphasis added).

6.7 *Freshfair*: establishing the project in the Big Society context

In chapter 1, I pointed out that *Freshfair* began its operations in a context that was heavily shaped by Big Society localism. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the political inclinations of the steering group's members, these individuals were, on the whole, somewhat sceptical of the Coalition's government's passionate embrace of communitarian ideas. Yet still, they couldn't fail to notice that there existed certain affinities between the government's ostensible support for local communities and the hub's public facing activities. Thus, from the outset, they started to look for ways to capitalise on the opportunities their overlapping agendas might throw up.

In the hub's early days, just as the steering group members were starting to meet regularly, they spotted a competition hosted by the UK Government's Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS).[52] The department was looking for community projects that were aiming to develop innovative approaches to collective purchasing. Although the hub was little more than a concept at that time, they decided to enter. There was, after all, a cash prize on offer. Sabatini explains:

> … we were starting up during the time of austerity and ideas around what I would call the ideology of community resilience were emerging. It was where communities were encouraged to do things for themselves and things like the Big Society were around … So, I see [*Freshfair*] as a paradoxical response to the Big Society … [Despite our opposition to what the government was doing] we entered this competition, because the government themselves were putting out buying group challenges with awards of £10,000 (Sabatini, 2017a).

Although a national competition with over 100 applicants, *Freshfair* was selected as one of twelve shortlisted projects. The steering group members were surprised – but thrilled. As a reward for making it into the competition's next stage, they were allocated an 'expert' business mentor, appointed by BIS. Over the next few months, they worked alongside this expert advisor to develop what would become the *Freshfair* project. Sabatini explains that:

[52] This department was disbanded in 2016 when it was merged with the Department of Energy and Climate Change to form the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

> We had to work with this capitalist fella to thrash out a business plan and make it [the project] a bit more real. So, every Tuesday morning we were having a Skype call between the [steering group] and this Colin geezer [the business expert]. It was all very bourgeois really as we were setting up this company (Sabatini, 2017a).

Having made it into the final round, the steering group members were requested to present their project before a panel of judges in London. They travelled together from northwest England by train, bringing with them a selection of fresh produce that they intended to exhibit as part of their presentation. Chuckling as he recounted the tale, Sabatini said that:

> I turned up [to the interview panel] in a sharp suit … What [the judges] didn't realise was that I was actually staying on in London as I was going to the *Historical Materialism*[53] conference while the rest [of the team] took the train back. So they didn't realise that the guy in the sharp suit was actually a complete enemy of the system (Sabatini, 2017a).

Although the presentation went well, the project narrowly missed out on first place. However, the competition had been so close to call that the judges decided to award *Freshfair* a £4,000 consolation prize. When they heard the news, its members were overjoyed. Upton said:

> … our business plan persuaded the Government to choose us for a national award. We went to dance with the devil in Westminster and returned in triumph, blinded by glory. The hysteria spread … Was it remarkable that we hadn't yet put the idea into practice? (Upton 2017b).

Having secured this funding, the project was ready to start. The group initiated a three-month pilot scheme to test out the model. They set up buying groups in several local workplaces, where its favourable reception suggested that the project was viable. Based on its initial sales figures, Business Development Manager Sabatini developed a more detailed business plan. His projections showed that monthly sales would continue to grow, and that on current trends, the hub would require a subsidy to help cover operational costs for its first three years, after which it would become self-financing through sales. His political leanings greatly influenced the development of the project's operational strategy. Here he explains how Marxist ideas helped to shape his business plan:

> I worked out the rate of growth against the amount of money we can raise to the point where we wouldn't need a subsidy and the project would be

[53] This is an annual conference of Marxist ideas held in London (as well as other locations around the globe).

> self-funding … but it wasn't about profit – it was about self-financing … The idea was to not need a subsidy. So I used Marx's theory of the rate of profit to guide my understanding of what the pressures were (Sabatini, 2017a).

He went on:

> I understood from Marx and Marxism how crucial profitability is and that you shouldn't keep an eye on the mass of stuff you sell but the ratio of what you sell to what you keep. So, I think I had an acute sense of what profit is or what surplus is in financial terms rather than in use-value terms. Marx helped here because through Marx I understood what to look out for and how to manage. And Lenin helped me to understand how to stay absolutely focused on how to get things done and [the necessity of] being unpopular at times or risking unpopularity (Sabatini, 2017a).

At the end of the pilot scheme, the hub managed, through a successful funding application, to secure an additional grant of almost £23,000. This was awarded to cover the projected shortfall between operational costs and income during the hub's first three years. This income boost meant that *Freshfair* could now employ Forrester (who had volunteered up to that point) as a project manager (contracted at 15 hours per week), and an administrative assistant (also 15 hours per week). This funding also enabled them to rent a city centre depot from which it could co-ordinate its operations. The project was becoming more widely known and more buying groups were joining. The local media started to take an interest in the hub and the local authority began to look for ways to work with *Freshfair* and promote its services. As these developments unfolded, the members of the steering group became increasingly excited. Although they had no prior business experience, they had managed to set up a brand-new enterprise – and it was beginning to take off. Crucially, they were starting to believe that after years of political frustration, they had finally landed on an approach that could successfully operate within, yet subtly subvert, capitalist structures. During the hub's first months at the depot, Upton recalls that:

> It was idyllic at this stage. We had found this place [the depot] ... it was perfectly placed right in the centre of the city. Pete [Forrester] had made it into a wonderful space inside by borrowing sofas and technical equipment. This was a place for people to drop in and meet – above all it was a place with good access for producers to come and drop their stuff off. It was where the packing happened, it had deep-freeze storage. That combination of a workplace and where people could drop in was just incredible. Also, because we'd got some grants, we had enough money to pay workers – some of whom had been out of work or who had a disability and were looking for part-time work or

> looking for a way of getting back into work ... so there was that side of it too. It felt really revolutionary. We had meetings that were revolutionary – the way they were run … [i.e., in a democratic and open manner]. The whole thing was very refreshing after years of parochialism [working with other localist projects]. It was getting bigger, more established. And it all felt as though the project was going in the right direction (Upton, 2017b).

It would not be long, however, before the hub's core members started to realise that all was not well with the *Freshfair* project.

6.8 Performance

Although the hub enjoyed an initial period of success, over the course of its first full year it started to become evident that sales were consistently falling below initial projections. To help illustrate this trend, here I include an outline of actual sales compared to those forecast in the business plan (table 6.2):

Month	Projected sales	Projected retained income	Actual sales	Actual retailed income	Projected vs actual sales
Nov	£2,121	£636	£1,620.52	£413.72	-£501
Dec	£2,227	£668	£2,165.54	£689.32	**+£62**
Jan 13	£2,338	£701	£1,028.58	£293.99	-£1,310
Feb	£2,455	£736	£1,443.22	£407.22	-£1,012
Mar	£2,578	£773	£1,549.19	£455.31	-£1,029
April	£2,707	£821	£2,636.26	£729.95	**+£71**
May	£2,824	£847	£1,654.19	£459.37	-£1,170
June	£2,965	£889	£1,336.09	£371.94	-£1,629
July	£3,113	£935	£1,586.32	£452.67	-£1,527
Aug	£3,268	£980	£1,207.74	£376.59	-£2,061
Sept	£3,431	£1,029	£1,934.25	£573.04	-£1,497
Oct	£3,602	£1,080	£1,233.72	£361.64	-£2,369
Nov	£3,782	£1,134	£1,214.17	£351.37	-£2,568

Table 6.2: *Freshfair*'s projected vs actual income (November 2012 – November 2013) (Bell, 2016).

It was becoming clear to those in the steering group that their initial plan had been based on an overly optimistic growth forecast, and that hub's initial success in recruiting producers, customers, and advocates could not be sustained. Their earlier excitement began to fade and in the monthly steering group meetings, concerns started to grow. Upton notes that:

> … we'd had several of these meetings, but I remember there was this one particular meeting when it started to feel like there might be a problem with the project. We were all looking at Mike's [i.e., Sabatini's] report and we could see that the sales were still tiny (Upton, 2017b).

The members couldn't understand why sales figures weren't corresponding to the high levels of public interest that surrounded the hub. Upton said that:

> … we'd had so much publicity and it felt like in the workplaces we were delivering to there was so much good will. We were really expecting that this would take off. And we had a wonderful range of produce and it looked like there was the potential to increase. I did a lot of travelling [across the region] looking for more vegetables ... and I spent a lot of time with farmers looking at how we might organise this logistically, support them with transport, looking at their existing markets, and feeling fairly confident that we could increase their profitability. So there was a lot of enthusiasm. But in meeting after meeting, we could see that sales were not going up (Upton, 2017b).

Although a surprise to the steering group, the low level of sales was less of a shock to Porter. I noted above that this producer was a keen supporter of the hub and its primary vegetable supplier. But he had had doubts about *Freshfair*'s figures from the very beginning:

> They had projections as to what they were going to shift [i.e., sell], and I remember, because of having experience with the meat game [i.e., selling meat], that I thought this looked a bit iffy … I had to put stuff in the ground, and they were my only outlet at the time, so I had to be quite careful. And to be honest I was slightly sceptical as to the starting point they were talking about for the level of their sales. I was a bit short of space that was prepared [for growing vegetables], and I was pretty sceptical … so I never hit the [vegetable growing] targets that they had set. Which was ideal really because they couldn't sell that amount (Porter, 2017).

By this point in time, *Freshfair* had managed to establish a core group of 'ideologically committed'[54] customers (i.e., individuals who were already convinced of the benefits of local food and who were willing to buy regularly). However, as noted above, the project was specifically set up to reach *beyond* such individuals to members of the wider public. I have already noted that one of the hub's core aims was to make local food available to 'the masses', and that its longer-term political ambitions rested on achieving this goal. To attract buyers, the founders had designed the project to be convenient for customers to use – yet despite their best efforts, the hub was finding it difficult to get people to break with their regular shopping habits.

[54] This is Naylor's phrase. See section 6.2 above.

Forrester and Upton had toured local workplaces for months on end, delivering presentation after presentation about the virtues of their project, in an effort to get new customers to come on board. But during these sessions, Forrester noted that they consistently encountered:

> … resistance to change… we were finding that many people weren't convinced of the need [for a project like *Freshfair*]. People are kind of stuck in the habit of going to supermarkets and, you know, it was quite a hard sell (Forrester, 2017b).

Upton had come to a similar conclusion. He found that for:

> … people with two jobs and a family, people very short of time for the buying and preparation of food, one of the things that they like to be able to do is get everything at once. So, if you couldn't get absolutely everything from our website, people would still be tempted to go to the supermarket. We found that shopping habits … are very difficult to change (Upton, 2017b).

Alongside a lack of convenience, another major problem related to *price*. The significance of the affordability of *Freshfair*'s produce becomes clear when one situates its stuttering development in its political-economic moment. As I noted in chapter 1, the project was set up in a post-2008 economic landscape where the UK government's austerity agenda was hitting local government budgets, welfare services and benefits programmes, and creating severe financial hardship for many (Garthwaite, Collins and Bambra, 2015). In that context, rising living costs and stagnant wages were impacting domestic food budgets, with many people forced to either cut back on particular foods or 'trade down' with regards to quality (Dibb and Fitzpatrick, 2014; Centre for Alternative Technology, 2017: 43-44).

I have noted that *Freshfair* hoped to respond to these problems by ensuring that the food it sold was affordable for those on low incomes. To do this, the hub decided from the outset to peg its prices to those found in supermarkets. Upton stressed that:

> … we really tried hard on price. We watched supermarket prices, and we tried to keep very close to supermarket prices (Upton, 2017b).

However, this objective soon hit up against another of the hub's core aims – that of making local food available 'at prices *fair to all*' (Freshfair, 2011a; emphasis added). As has already been shown, *Freshfair* did not just want to make food affordable for consumers – it also wanted to make sure that local producers *were paid fairly for their goods* (on this point, see McKibben, 2007: 175; also chapter 3 above). Upton, during his travels among producers, had often discussed the problems they faced as they struggled to generate income through their activities. Consistently he had seen:

> … the pinch on them in terms of market realities and the narrow opportunities they had to make a living. It was clear that the conflict around that was constant for them (Upton, 2017b).

But by getting caught up in a price war with local supermarkets, the steering group members nevertheless found that, in order to compete, *Freshfair* was having to look 'all the time … to underpay producers. And that was utterly counter principles' (Upton, 2017a). The group was starting to realise that they simply could not compete with supermarkets on price. As Forrester points out:

> One of the main aims of the project was to make local food affordable for everybody, to match supermarket prices … On some produce, in season, at certain times, we matched high-end supermarket prices. But we never got anywhere near budget supermarket prices – on anything (Forrester, 2017b).

This problem became apparent to Porter, too:

> We were trying to compete with the supermarkets on price. Pete (Forrester) was always keen on that. And I was to a degree. But as time went on, I knew I couldn't supply some of this stuff. Some things we could get close to supermarket prices. But some things we couldn't. You know, you want it local, you want it organic, and you want it cheaper than the supermarket – and there were so many criteria to fill you just couldn't fill them all (Porter, 2017).

The hub's struggle on this front underlines the importance of two interconnected issues I highlighted in chapter 3: first, localist notions of withdrawal, and second, the operation of capitalism's law of value. Regarding the first, *Freshfair*'s founders had initially believed that they could create a non-capitalist network of local food producers that operated independently of the mainstream food economy. However, as I have shown, the *Freshfair* network was trying to separate itself off from the activities of the large supermarkets by selling (local-ethical) commodities *in the marketplace*. Thus, they had no option but to compete with these larger corporate entities. By taking a market-based approach, the steering group members were finding that no matter how hard they tried to maintain their distance from the corporate food economy, they could not escape the economic pressures that flowed from it. This outcome fits with the views of Marxian critics such as Albo and Sharzer, who as I showed in chapter 3, argue that while localist projects often *appear* as though they are offering an alternative to established capitalist practices, their activities nevertheless tend to remain *subordinate to the valorization processes of the 'formal economy'* (Albo, 2007: 349; see also Gunderson, 2014).

Upton admitted that at times, and although he understood the financial difficulties that many local people in that post-2008 austerity context were experiencing, he found himself getting frustrated by customers' obsession with the price of *Freshfair*'s food. In his experience, he consistently found that the hub:

> … only had to be a penny or two out [from supermarket prices] and we discovered that people will do anything to get a penny off [produce] … they [customers] have been brainwashed by the supermarkets into thinking that it is all about cost. It's not about quality, and it's not about health, and it is not about supporting your local producers and it's not about saving the planet. It's all about price (Upton, 2017b).

Forrester, too, concluded that:

> People want cheap food. And most people aren't willing to pay much of a premium for sustainably produced local food (Forrester, 2017b).

This latter participant was disappointed to find that many of those who did purchase food through the hub were quick to:

> … go back to their ordinary habits … if they're feeling a bit skint that month they just go back to the supermarket (Forrester, 2017b).

Given this struggle with the supermarkets, the steering group decided to make a strategic concession: to protect the interests of the *Freshfair* producers, the hub would give up on its goal of making local food available to low-income groups (one of the project's initial core aims – see above). In an effort to shore up the project's finances, they instead decided that they would spend more time targeting affluent consumers (an option these left-leaning food activists, from the outset, had been determined to avoid). Forrester found this shift away from the project's initial objectives incredibly disheartening. Working to chase higher-end markets, he said, was:

> … just not me and not what I wanted to be doing really. We were just having to compromise in order to survive (Forrester, 2018).

Battered unrelentingly by market forces, Forrester found himself getting increasingly 'sucked in to making things more business-like' – something that, for him, was 'really off-putting' (Forrester, 2018). In a desperate effort to boost the hub's connections to local firms, he started attending business networking events. He recalls one meeting where discussions around profit-making became particularly repulsive to him. In it, a successful local cheese-producing entrepreneur gave him some advice on how to boost the hub's prospects. Forrester recounts that:

> [The entrepreneur] said, 'you need to go where the money is. There's no money in this region'. So, he was saying that we should sell our [produce]

> to people in York, sell it people in Edinburgh, go to where the money is and promote produce [from this area]. But then he started talking about selling our local beef to customers in Singapore, and I was like – 'are you in the right meeting? We're talking about local food.' I mean, he was kind of right in a way. He was a businessman, he'd done alright for himself and he'd bought this cheese business. So, he was saying: sell where the money is in order to fund your good work – do your community gardens, do your community allotments and your small sustainability projects, but fund it through a much harder-nosed business model (Forrester, 2018).

After receiving this advice, Forrester recalled that:

> I had a sinking feeling in my stomach. I mean, it's not me. I could see that that is maybe the way you would have to go if you did want to have a successful business … I did try approaching affluent communities, but it was just not what the project was about (Forrester, 2018).

The members of the *Freshfair* steering group were starting to feel that their lack of business experience – something that had seemed beneficial in the early days thanks to the fresh perspectives this provided – was now seriously jeopardizing the project. As their financial position worsened, things became increasingly desperate. To buy themselves some breathing space, the steering group decided to bring forward funding earmarked for year three to help cover losses in year two. They knew this was a risky move, as it would leave the project without an external funding source from early 2015 onwards. However, given that the future of the project was in doubt, the group's members decided it was a risk worth taking. By this point in time, the hub was also having to draw on the financial resources of its parent organisation (the local transition group established by Forrester). This started to put considerable strain on the wider sustainability network of which *Freshfair* was a part.

To give an idea of the scale of the hub's problems, it can be noted that by April 2014, *Freshfair* was operating with a monthly deficit of -£1,311.59 (see table 6.3 below). Its not insignificant outgoings were causing problems. The hub needed income to cover payments to producers, wages for staff, and rent for its depot – all of which were necessary given the aims of the project and the relatively complex and resource intensive nature of its operations.

Delivery	Category	1/4/14	8/4/14	15/4/14	22/4/14	Totals
Sales	Income	£649.14	£436.14	£452.88	£487.63	£2,025.79
Payment to producers	Cost	£466.92	£317.25	£324.01	£355.20	£1,463.38
Retained income	Cost	£182.22	£118.89	£128.87	£132.43	£562.41
Admin staff	Cost	£156	£156	£156	£156	£624
Operational staff	Cost	£98	£98	£98	£98	£392
Management	Cost	£100	£100	£100	£100	£400
Communications	Cost	£48	£48	£48	£48	£192
Depot	**Cost**					£266
Balance: total income less total costs						**-£1,311.59**

Table 6.3: Snapshot of *Freshfair*'s financial performance, April 2014 (Freshfair, 2014b).

In an attempt to relieve some financial pressure, the hub asked the city authority (which owned its depot) for a reduction in rent. The request was denied. Council staff explained to the group that the local authority, under pressure in that austerity context to maximise income from its estate (see below), was unable to offer a rent discount.

The participants decided that they needed to find another source of income to help cover the hub's costs until they found a way to boost sales. They considered opening a *Freshfair* shop but dismissed that idea when it became clear that rent for retail space would be too costly. They thought about selling to food-related businesses in addition to workplace groups, and for a short time did supply a small local café. However, it soon became clear that they could not compete on price with local wholesalers. Collaboration with the café came to an end and this idea, too, was shelved.

More successful was their attempt to set up a café of their own. This they did in a market town situated around 20 miles away from the *Freshfair* hub, after a community project approached them to ask if the hub would like to utilise its underused catering facilities. This new venture was well received locally, and it began to establish a regular clientele. However, staffing issues and the distance between the café and the depot made it difficult to manage. This further stretched the hub's already limited resources, and after around five months the café was closed. By this point, however, another opportunity to boost the hub's income had arisen much closer to home.

6.9 Freshmeals Direct

Under pressure to make austerity-related savings, the local council announced in 2013 that it was planning to end its involvement with the delivery of its 'meals on wheels' service. With the local authority looking to offload it, the members of the steering group thought that they could

deliver this service. They approached the council with a proposal to supply meals to vulnerable local people using produce sourced through the *Freshfair* network. The council accepted. It offered *Freshfair* the use of catering facilities at a local homeless hostel, where meals could be cooked and packaged ready for delivery (Forrester, 2018; Sabatini, 2018; Upton, 2018; Anderton, 2019).

In many ways, this was a positive development for the struggling project. Through its new *Freshmeals Direct* service, the hub was working to alleviate the impact of austerity-related cuts, and it was also helping to support local producers – two of its initial aims. And crucially, this new service started to provide *Freshfair* with a much-needed source of income. According to Upton, *Freshmeals* was:

> … a wonderful thing when it first started. We used the same volunteers and the drivers who had delivered before [the hub took over the service]. I did a bit of delivering, a bit of cooking and supported in the kitchen. And it was fantastic because all our cooking rubbed off onto people living in the hostel. There was a hell of a lot of good stuff there (Upton, 2018).

But a deeper tension was evident here. I noted above that the founders of the hub were critical of the Coalition government's austerity agenda and its drive to slash local authority budgets. I emphasised too that they disagreed in principle with the outsourcing of public sector services, and that they believed strongly that councils should receive *more* funding to enable them to deliver high-quality services to local communities. Yet here they were taking over a council service that the local authority had decided to cut. Although it did not fit with the hub's deeper political motivations, the *Freshmeals* service did help to temporarily relieve *Freshfair*'s financial struggles. However, it did nothing to resolve the structural problems associated with its buying group model.

6.10 Land

This discussion of austerity brings the conversation to the issue of land – the acquisition of which was central to *Freshfair*'s longer-term plans. Because the hub's struggle over land would play a key role in shaping these actors' political development, and because this will be important for my discussion of eco-localist strategy more broadly in chapters 8 and 9, I will consider this issue in some detail here.

Land, as Christophers has noted, is socially significant for a host of reasons, providing as it does a basis for almost all economic processes, state functions, and social activities. Land quite simply is, he points out, 'the literal foundation' of people's lives (Christophers, 2018: 4). However, as I noted in chapter 2, in capitalist social formations, the majority of people are separated from the land, which is largely privately owned and controlled (as opposed to being

held and controlled in common) (Marx, 1976; Linebaugh, 2014; Angus, 2023).[55] For this discussion, it is important to note that this separation creates the conditions for what Christophers has called the 'negative operationalization of landed power' (Christophers, 2018: 29-30) – that is, the 'prevent[ion of] land uses *that may actually provide public benefits*' (Christophers, 2018: 51 emphasis added). In his 2018 study, T*he New Enclosure*, he charts the rapid acceleration of the privatization of public land in Britain during the neoliberal period and shows how this process 'actively closed down and constrained practices and possibilities of social, economic and political development' (Christophers, 2018: 29). He also shows how this process of privatization accelerated in the post-2008 austerity conjuncture – a period in which central government heaped pressure on local authorities to sell 'surplus' public land (and buildings), ostensibly in an effort to help 'balance the books' following the financial crash. It was in this context that the *Freshfair* food hub started its search for land. As I will show below, the pressure on local authorities to offload assets and cut operating costs placed serious barriers in its way.

The financial difficulties the hub had been facing had pushed the issue of landownership up the steering group's agenda. As I have shown already, the hub's ultra-localist focus and the supply issues this generated was causing *Freshfair* major problems. Given these issues, the steering group decided that the project needed some land of its own – and soon:

> We began to see that the way forward was growing this stuff [vegetables] ourselves… Because it was so difficult to get enough produce from other farmers… [and] because they needed to take every opportunity they could to sell it and they needed to maximise their prices. So, a natural solution was to look for land (Upton, 2017a).

This, Upton noted, was a 'big turning point' for the project (Upton, 2017a). The group realised that if they had land, they could increase the hub's range of produce and smooth out its supply issues, thus helping them to resolve some of its short- and medium-term problems. Land would also enable the project to expand in line with its longer-term aims: catalysing the development of a city-wide counterculture around food, work and ecology, and providing 'food for the masses' in a way that would advance their efforts to de-commodify the local food economy (Sabatini, 2017a).

[55] Building on the discussion in chapter 2, I want to point out here that land, like labour, money and knowledge, is a *fictitious* commodity (Jessop, 2002; Polanyi, 2001). Virgin lands (and their natural endowments) are not produced as commodities (i.e., are not created in a profit-oriented labour process subject to the competitive pressures of market forces) but tend to be appropriated as 'free gifts of nature' and incorporated into processes of capital accumulation (Jessop, 2002, pp. 11–14).

However, like so many community-scale projects (see Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012: 390; Smith and Seyfang, 2013), *Freshfair* had limited financial resources. After some initial searches, it soon became clear that *Freshfair* was not going to be able to buy the land it needed on the market:

> We … suffered all of the problems associated with people who've got no money and no resources, no assets, trying to do something on a commercial scale. And it became clear that that would not be easy … We set about trying to get grants… and we opened dialogues with farmers about 'would you flog us five acres of land?' And they would say: 'Yeah, you can have five acres – for twenty grand' or something enormous [which was, of course, completely out of the question] (Naylor, 2017a).

Taking a position that closely aligned with the viewpoint of Christophers (noted above), this participant argued that private landownership constituted a major barrier blocking the development of 'progressive' community projects in general, and the development of *Freshfair* in particular:

> So, this is the land thing … private ownership stops things happening and puts [power] in the hands of the owners. And I think that this works on food and it works on housing and that it works on, you know – it's that private ownership of land thing that screws it up really (Naylor, 2017a).

With no chance of buying land on the open market, the team decided that the best way forward was to request an area of surplus land from the local authority. When they began this process, the steering group members were relatively confident that this request would be successful. They knew the local city and regional authorities owned a lot of surplus land, and they had been building good relationships with senior officers in the city authority over recent months. Not only that, but they felt that by embarking on their search for land at that particular time, they were moving in line with the prevailing political *Zeitgeist*. I have noted already that the hub came into being shortly after the formation of the 2010–2015 Coalition government, which made much of its neocommunitarian, 'Red Tory' focus on building local economies and resilient communities, and of its goal of transferring power and resources from local government to communities, voluntary groups, charities and individuals (Blond, 2010; Cameron, 2010; see discussion in chapter 4). Regarding the issue of public land specifically, in February 2011, just as *Freshfair* was getting going, Conservative housing minister Grant Shapps launched the government's Community Right to Reclaim Land Scheme – an initiative, he stated, that would 'give members of the public the right to reclaim and develop hundreds of acres of unused public sector land and buildings … currently trapped in a bureaucratic quagmire' (UK government,

2011). Stressing the importance of the community benefit aspect of the Right to Reclaim Land approach, he stated that:

> I am determined that this system [for reclaiming land] works … and if necessary I will use legislation to make sure it is *local communities who reap the rewards of opportunities to develop local land and buildings that currently lie unused* (UK Government, 2011; emphasis added).

Of course, given their political orientation, the *Freshfair* participants were highly sceptical of the government's plans, which looked to them like an underhanded attempt to open the way for a mass sell-off of council assets. Nevertheless, they also saw in the government's proposals a chance to get hold of the land they needed. Emboldened by the coalition's rhetoric, and notwithstanding the fact that they were already by this stage overworked and overstretched, they decided to make this search for council land one of their central priorities. They would put a lot of their activist time and energy into this quest. The group entered talks with both the regional and city authorities, and they found that senior officers at both were, from the outset, very supportive of their plans. Upton recounted that, at the regional council:

> … the initial reception was extraordinarily positive and extraordinarily encouraging. [The officers there] said 'let's get the maps out. I'm sure we can find you somewhere. And look, what about this? And what is it exactly that you want to do? How interesting. Goodness me, that ticks a lot of boxes' [i.e., aligns with the council's own goals], and stuff like that (Upton, 2017b).

The project was similarly well received by senior officers at the city council. Talks with both authorities continued over the following months, and as the discussions became increasingly positive, the *Freshfair* participants started to warm to this particular aspect of the BS agenda (Upton, 2018; Naylor, 2017b). As time went on, however, and despite all the positive energy in the talks, the steering group members grew increasingly concerned about the lack of concrete offers. Indeed, the *Freshfair* participants were starting to fear that, in that wider austerity context – and despite the encouraging signals coming from central government *and* senior executives at their local councils – the priorities of the city and regional authorities perhaps lay elsewhere.

Around that time, of course, both the local and the regional councils were coming under increasing pressure to reduce the size of their estates and to find fresh sources of income. The city authority's deputy leader pointed out that, in 2010 (that is, just as the *Freshfair* members were thinking about starting a new food project), the council was preparing what was set to be the 'largest asset disposal programme ever undertaken' by the authority (Anderton, 2019). In September the following year, as part of its continued efforts to reduce its base budget in line with central government demands, this authority set out to 'identify all property which the

council owns or uses' so that it could make 'efficiency savings, and … effectively respond to the changing property requirements [coming from central government]' (City Council, 2011). Simply put, this authority was being forced to sell off its 'surplus' assets, and it was aiming to do so *just as the hub was starting to look for land*.

Because the best areas of its surplus land were being sold off to private developers in an effort to maximise income, it transpired that there was little left over for the hub to choose from. Consequently, and after many months of negotiations, when some concrete offers did finally start to come through, these were:

> … absolutely shit sites – too small, flooding, access [problems] – you know, you name it. They've been turned down by developers who wouldn't want them for nothing. There was one [site] that was offered to developers for one pound and they didn't want it. Maybe they thought that the community would be suckers enough to take it (Forrester, 2017b).

Recalling his discussions with the hub around that time, Anderton, the City Council's Deputy Leader (and keen *Freshfair* supporter), said that it was:

> … quite challenging to [find] any other land assets *which we were not planning to sell* that that they could possibly look at – none of them proved sufficiently interesting (Anderton, 2019; emphasis added).

After around two years of fruitless searching, Upton became aware of a promising patch of public land situated at the edge of the city, not too far from the *Freshfair* depot. Although it was difficult at first to ascertain which authority (regional or city) it belonged to, the City Council Deputy Leader, like Upton, believed that it had a lot of potential. It was, he said:

> … a good site, because it was quite close in to some big urban areas and it was not that far from the city centre … It was easy to see how we could transport food across the city area without much effort (Anderton, 2019).

Keen to support the hub, Anderton agreed to help progress its request for this tract of land and started working to that end. After further investigations, however, it soon transpired that:

> … this land was owned by the regional authority [not the city authority of which he was a member] … Nonetheless, we still thought this might be a useful venue for scaling up [the food project] … and also for some trial, exploratory work around how we could cut food miles [and determine] what supply we could take from that particular land. [Through *Freshfair*,] we aimed to transform urban land use at [the site] by creating an

> edge-of-city hub for learning, training and commercial food production (Anderton, 2019).

The hub's members were getting increasingly excited. At last, they had identified a perfectly suited area of surplus land, and they had strong backing in their claim for it from the City Council's Deputy Leader and other executives. They were daring to believe that their long struggle for land was finally drawing to a successful close. Anderton was hopeful, too. He recalled that:

> We had … conversations with [regional] officers who … were warm to the idea (Anderton, 2019).

However, while negotiations started well, as the months went on, they began to falter. Anderton said that:

> … as time progressed and we moved from talking to policy officers within the [Regional] council to the property officers, well, then things cooled ... What we couldn't understand at the time was that there wasn't a direct call or evident use for this land that would prohibit this sort of project taking place (Anderton, 2019).

But the regional authority was also coming under pressure to maximise income and reduce the costs associated with its estate to 'as close to zero as possible'. In that austerity context, the authority pointed out that 'maintaining the status quo is not an option' (Regional Council, 2012). Perhaps unsurprisingly given these wider conditions, the regional authority decided that it was unable to transfer its land for free to the *Freshfair* hub as had been requested. Reflecting on the discussions taking place at that time, the City Council Deputy Leader said that:

> They [the Regional Council] were under much more pressure from austerity [than the City Council was]. Because of their responsibilities for social care – children's services and adult social care … I think at the heart of it that it felt like the [Regional Council] was saying, you know, why don't you use your land for this? And they were probably thinking: 'we need to get some financial value out of this land, because we're all strapped for cash, you know'... And I remember the conversations that chimed with me [at the time] around 'well, this land might have real value for an urban extension at some point' (Anderton, 2019).

The ultimate refusal of their request was a crushing blow for the *Freshfair* participants, one that put paid to their hopes of obtaining land. After several exhausting years of searches and countless hours of tough negotiations, the steering group members had finally run out of steam. Anderton could recall the moment that the group gave up:

> *Freshfair*'s engagement [with the Regional Council] went on for quite some time. But the property people at the time were very difficult to pin down and, in the end, I think it was [Upton] who just said, 'I've had enough' (Anderton, 2019).

The food hub's failure to get hold of the land it needed extinguished its long-term expansion plans and drastically reduced its chances of survival. Upton recalled that the search for land had been 'long and heart-breaking', and that its final outcome had left the *Freshfair* team depleted and utterly demoralised (Upton, 2017b). This result he found all the more frustrating because the *Freshfair* team had worked alongside senior figures at both councils who were keen to see the hub succeed, but whose hands in that austerity context had been tied. He said that:

> There are a hell of a lot of good officers [in the City and Regional Councils] who are trying to support these projects [i.e., 'progressive' community initiatives like *Freshfair*] – people who are superbly quite radical but who were so restrained by what they could do. Which comes back more and more to austerity cuts in 2010 and the absolute prerogative of having to hold on to land – their most important asset – until they could sell it for the absolute maximum market value (Upton, 2017b).

It can be noted here that *Freshfair*'s situation corresponds closely with the picture painted by Christophers, who pointed out that when it came to getting hold of public land in that post-crash austerity action context, '… voluntary organisations, charities and the like simply could not expect in general to be able to compete on price with private-sector buyers with much deeper pockets'. Consequently, he added, such groups tended to be 'squeezed out' (Christophers, 2018: 226). And in a comment that accurately captures the tensions facing the *Freshfair* hub and the council officials who supported it, he noted that it is:

> hard not to sympathize with public-sector executives who – when compelled to dispose of land and faced with the choice between, on the one hand, maximizing disposal receipts and, on the other, selling the land to community organizations or other public bodies for less than best consideration – opt for the former (Christophers, 2018, p. 343).

He added that:

> … the stark, even shameful, reality is that the government's 'buy our surplus land' overtures to local authorities – and especially to community groups, charities and voluntary organizations – are little more than a sick joke. The Community Right to Reclaim Land? Deep cynicism seems like the only reasonable response (Christophers, 2018, p. 237).

This was indeed the response of *Freshfair*'s steering group members. Their failure to obtain land extinguished any residual interest they had in trying to find progressive opportunities in the government's BS agenda. Upton said that:

> They [the government] had persuaded people to get enthusiastic about some of these [Big Society] ideas ... What stood out for me is the hope given to communities in terms of actual legislation for rights to have first refusal, or to actually acquire public land, on which a lot of [our] enthusiasm was based, [and the fact that this] was actually contradicted by other legislation [i.e., selling public land at market value, austerity policies, etc.] (Upton, 2018).

It was not long after this that the struggling hub was forced to close for good. In the wake of its closure, the *Freshfair* actors started to realise that, in an effort to keep the hub going, they had been concentrating all their energies on trying to turn the hub *into a successful business* – a focus that had diverted their attention away from the *political* goals that had initially motivated them (more on which below). Further, Sabatini said that the steering group members had now come to the conclusion that 'the Big Society was all about getting communities to do things instead of the state' (Sabatini, 2018). Their struggles over land had been a catalyst in this regard and had highlighted for them the contradictions of the BS localist approach. Upton said that:

> The Big Society really nailed it for me. [There came a point where] I suddenly realised what was going on really, which was this shift to expecting voluntary activity to fill the gap left by the retreat of the state ... So, I now see that we turn up as volunteers in [the City Council Deputy Leader's] office, and he knows he is moving with the political current [i.e., getting volunteer groups to make up for services cut due to funding shortfalls]. But fundamentally the retreat of the state is a catastrophe (Upton, 2018).

He went on:

> I admit that I was starting to get a little seduced by the Big Society idea. Of course, I was sceptical of the government – but I did think that the idea of opening things up to local communities sounded interesting … It was only years later [that is, after they had failed to get land and after the hub had closed down] that we would realise that, at the end of the day, it [the government's promise of support for local community groups] was nothing but empty-handed exhortation, pure and simple. We realised that there wasn't any support to do anything (Upton, 2018).

Through their experiences, the steering group members concluded that, although the Coalition had publicly broadcast its intention to empower local communities, in reality its promises of the material support needed to do this were empty. Below, I will show how this realization played a

key role in repoliticizing these actors. In chapter 8, I will outline what lessons can be drawn from their experiences for eco-localist strategy more broadly. Before I can do that, however, I need to rewind a bit to consider some other key areas where the hub was forced to compromise on its founding ideals.

6.11 The turn away from collective purchasing and localized production

Relatively early in the hub's existence, *Freshfair* started to encounter a problem that the steering group had not seen coming. This concerned the issue of workplace solidarity – or more precisely, the lack of it.

As noted above, the hub was intended to cultivate relationships between workers within workplaces and between workplaces. By stimulating such connections, the project was looking to restore the social ties that neoliberalism had eroded and build a foundation on which a radical local political movement could grow. However, they consistently found that the project was undermined by the very lack of solidarity its activities were meant to address.

Despite the high hopes the *Freshfair* founders originally had for the workplace buying group model, in the end, Upton said that it 'proved to be very disappointing'. He noted that:

> The workers in the workplaces [that signed up to *Freshfair*] had very little solidarity and very little recognition of shared aspirations [with their colleagues]. Although people worked in same workplace, they lived in very different communities [outside of work]. The few [buying] advocates that we got going actually found it very difficult. What they were doing was countercultural in the workplace – counter the individualistic culture. I used to get quite frustrated by this (Upton, 2017a).

They consistently found that in workplaces:

> There was no relationship of solidarity with other colleagues … people were often too busy and too distant socially from their mates … And I can see why that is … since the 1980s, there has been a real change from the atmosphere of co-operation to the atmosphere of competition in neighbourhoods, between people. This [realisation about the lack of solidarity in local workplaces] was a real downer. We kind of knew we were up against it then. It was such a weakness of that model (Upton, 2017a).

Forrester took a similar view:

> You'd often only get a few people signing up at the initial session and it would dwindle to one or two committed people in each workplace. So the buying group model never really had legs (Forrester, 2017a).

Sabatini similarly claimed that a key reason for the hub's poorer-than-expected performance rested on the fact that 'social solidarity isn't there in the workplaces' (Sabatini, 2017b). Based on his experiences at *Freshfair*, he ultimately concluded that getting such a model to operate successfully is '… in a neoliberal society … virtually impossible'. He went on to say that:

> I now see that [such a model] assumes levels of social solidarity and collective activity that we haven't got in civil society at the moment, [a civil society] that has been structured by the way in which commodity production and consumption takes place in the wider economy … We couldn't replace at any deep level structures of consumption that are based around individuals in cars going to supermarkets. All we were doing was adding a layer on top. We didn't have the heft to completely change the models, which is what [bringing about the wider changes we wished to see] would require (Sabatini, 2017b).

With the hub still desperate to boost sales, the steering group decided to make another strategic compromise: they made produce available to *individual* consumers and not just to members of buying groups. Just as with the hub's earlier turn towards more affluent customers, this shift, too, represented another significant departure from its founding aims. Although a necessary move, Upton stated that:

> We were then dealing with individuals instead of groups, and the whole thing … lost its co-operative ethos (Upton, 2017b).

Yet even this concession failed to reverse the trend of declining sales that was so critically undermining the hub. Another compromise soon followed. Overstretched, Forrester was struggling to manage *Freshfair*'s day-to-day operations. He was finding it harder to co-ordinate the activities of producers and growing gaps in supply were starting to emerge. To help fulfil its orders, the hub turned to a local greengrocer – a move that broke with the principle of supporting local farmers. Also around this time, the steering group members decided that sourcing food from within 30 miles of the hub was proving just too difficult. They expanded *Freshfair'*s catchment area for suppliers to cover the whole of northern England and southern Scotland – a move that obliterated its localist focus (which was, as I noted above, a key reason for customers' involvement).

The project was limping on thanks to the enduring custom of a small number 'ideologically committed' buyers plus the trickle of income from the *Freshmeals* project, but this was insufficient to maintain staff levels at the hub. Now struggling badly, the steering group was again forced to choose between its principles and survival. They could no longer afford to pay its project administrator. Sabatini explained that they couldn't keep him on because they didn't want to exploit him:

> We originally paid him minimum wage. He had a fixed hours contract … but he was self-employed. We did have discussions about whether we were unfairly exploiting him, so we decided to up his wages to the national living wage at the time. But without getting further funding we were never going to be able to continue to employ him. So we had to lay him off (Sabatini, 2017b).

On this point, Upton adds that:

> … we were getting very short of money, and we had to lay off a worker who was just tremendously good. And from having had a very difficult path, this guy was working really well on a relatively small wage ... and it began to feel as if we'd lost the way really. We were having to compromise on our values. Mike [Sabatini] was getting more and more defensive. Rob [Naylor] was getting more aggressive about the fact that things weren't working. And then Mike of course realised it himself – realised that all the promises that he'd made to everybody, about how it was going to be okay ... they were all starting to look empty (Upton, 2018).

As its struggles continued, the project's focus on internal democracy and consensus-based decision making stared to fade. Upton said that:

> It did feel very democratic at the beginning. And then I think those principles got compromised as it began to go under. As things became difficult one person [Sabatini] tried to take charge a lot more (Upton, 2018).

Struggling financially, the hub next had to terminate Sabatini's Business Development Manager post. These layoffs only increased the burden on Forrester, who, already overstretched, was now responsible for all of the hub's strategic, management, and administrative duties (Bell, 2016: 7). With this increased workload, he found that he could no longer follow up on opportunities that may have increased the hub's sales (Bell, 2016; Naylor, 2017b; Forrester, 2018).

Those who were left at the project increasingly found themselves having to engage in (what they later saw as) exploitative practices. While there had always been a degree of overworking at the hub, and while unremunerated labour time provided by members of paid staff (on top of that of volunteers) had from the very beginning been necessary for the project's survival, this

now became unsustainable. On this point, Forrester believed that his anarchist-inspired worldview had worked in the hub's favour as, throughout its operational existence, he had often been 'happy to work for nothing' (Forrester, 2017a). Following the layoffs, however, he was working 'vastly more' than his contracted 15 hours per week and the amount of unpaid labour time required of him became just too much (Forrester, 2017a).

Sabatini pointed out that the hub had always relied on such practices to keep it operational. As a small-scale, 'alternative' project, paid staff time was consistently kept to an absolute minimum and volunteers were utilised wherever possible. Looking back, he said that the hub:

> … had a very minimal staffing model … [and] I think we were exploiting people. We were exploiting unpaid labour. Pete [Forrester] was self-exploiting. I was the only one that wasn't exploited as I wouldn't do it … [The project] relied on volunteers and exploitation (Sabatini, 2018).

Porter, one of hub's vegetable suppliers, had noticed the strain that this increased workload was placing on Forrester. Speaking after the hub had closed, he said that:

> I've always felt that Pete (Forrester) was let down … He was working over his hours. He never got paid enough. People would get involved in this exciting new thing but after a few months they were just like 'we've had enough of that' and they would just give it all to Pete to do … He got a lot of stuff dumped on him and a lot of hassle and not much money or credit that he should have got. I used to think that people were taking the mick a bit with that set up. I could see a point where he got a bit fed up which is completely understandable (Porter, 2017).

Forrester became increasingly exhausted. He said that:

> It all got a bit depressing in the end. It was just so much work and it dragged you down a bit to see the amount that people were buying getting [sic] less and less and not really understanding why (Forrester, 2018).

In the project's final phase, turnover became so low that: '… there was no money to pay anybody, so it became 100 per cent voluntary' (Forrester, 2018). By this point, the low volume of sales was making it difficult for producers to justify the time they spent delivering their goods to the hub (Bell, 2016, Upton, 2017a, Forrester, 2017a). Porter, for example, said that:

> I had to drive my stuff to [the depot] once a week, which was a bit of a pain. I think it is 18 miles. It wasn't too bad. It didn't take that long but it became an issue especially towards the end when there wasn't enough stuff to justify the time. I always said that I

> needed to be selling 50 quid of stuff a week and then everything was fine but there was quite a long time when I wasn't getting 50 quid (Porter, 2017).

By late 2016, the remaining members of the steering group stopped meeting. Sabatini had left the project, and Upton had relocated to Scotland (although he maintained contact with the hub). As a result, Forrester ran *Freshfair* with little support. External funding had almost been exhausted by this point and the project continued in a minimal state until it finally closed its doors in early 2017.

6.12 Reflecting on the hub

Before starting *Freshfair*, its founders had each spent significant portions of their adult lives engaged in various projects that they had hoped would make the world happier, fairer, and more environmentally sustainable. But despite their best efforts, all had ended up frustrated by the lack of progress they had made.

Through a shared desire to tackle problems associated with climate change and social inequality in the post-2008 conjuncture, they had come together to establish *Freshfair*. In this project, each saw an opportunity to build on their previous experiences and to advance on what they saw as their failed environmental and social justice activities up to that point.

As I have shown, Naylor and Upton saw *Freshfair* as a way to overcome what they had started to see as the limitations of their earlier transition-style localist activities. For the anarchist-inspired Forrester, it provided a way to give his disparate activities a degree of co-ordination and institutional coherence. For Sabatini, the hub offered a fresh opportunity to spark up a local eco-socialist movement following his disillusioning experience with the Green Party (see section 6.3). The latter, having consistently found himself constrained by what he understood as the structural limitations of its parliamentary political approach, said that he saw in *Freshfair* a *non-electoral* way to intervene in climate and social justice struggles. In its early days, he saw *Freshfair* as:

> … a *progression* on that electoral approach … in the sense that it gave up any illusion in the state as it is as a vehicle for achieving those kinds of changes (Sabatini, 2018; emphasis added).

However, by the time the project was winding down, he had come to see *Freshfair* as:

> … a *regression* [on the electoral approach] because it gave up the on idea of a *political* struggle for power. Through the hub, we were looking for a non-political way of changing society – as if we could burrow around capitalism. And now I see that was really a half-term measure to reconceptualise things while I was coming to terms with

> what had been a move away from electoral base reformist politics (Sabatini, 2018; emphasis added).

When they had first come together to set up *Freshfair*, Upton, Naylor, Forrester and Sabatini had been looking for a way to advance their radical political goals *in a manner that worked with the grain of existing capitalist practices and institutions*. They were alert to the dangers of incorporation that such an approach contained; nevertheless, they believed that their deep-rooted anti-capitalist principles would prevent their activities from becoming subsumed. For instance, on the issue of the government funding they secured in *Freshfair*'s early stages (see above), Naylor said that at the time, the steering group saw this kind of support as:

> … a token effort to be able to show that they [the government] are doing this kind of thing [i.e., taking action to help communities resolve pressing environmental and social problems]. But really all they're trying to do is keep quiet the people at the frontier who are pushing for something to happen [i.e., bring about radical change]. This type of effort [the government's push for Big Society localism and its limited support for community-scale initiatives] does not lead to the transformation of anything (Naylor, 2017a).

The *Freshfair* participants had intended to use these resources *for subversive ends*. However, only with the benefit of hindsight would they realise that their activities had started to mirror the practices and structures they had initially set out to challenge. For example, it was only after the project closed that Sabatini finally realised that the steering group members had become so focused on trying to turn the hub into a *successful business* that they lost sight of their original environmental and political goals. Although they could not see it at the time, Sabatini would later conclude that the competitive market environment in which they operated had caused the group to become fixated with price – and that as a result they had 'become quite neoliberal' in the way they ran the project (Sabatini, 2017b). Noting this drift away from *political* activity, Sabatini said that:

> … from my perspective, I can now see that I was getting completely finance dominated (i.e., overly focused on sales). And also, by expecting individuals to be able to commit more and more, we ended up focusing on the individual rather than the collective in the end. And because you get some individuals who buy more [than others], you try and work out where your best sales are and then dump the rest [i.e., those who don't buy as much]. So you end up being very instrumental and operational in your attitude to people around you. And the financial element completely takes over the project. As a result, the whole thing, although it appeared to be based on a principle of co-operation, was predicated on this kind of neoliberal style of entrepreneurialism (Sabatini, 2017b).

As I have noted, this focus on *financial* performance meant that the participants ended up neglecting the wider sustainability network of which the project was a part. Reflecting on this, Sabatini said:

> I now think that *Freshfair* was turning the local *Transition* network into a neoliberal project because all the effort was on that [the food hub]. There was no campaigning, there was no sort of politics or activism anymore, it was all sort of a business (Sabatini, 2017b).

These participants had initially hoped to use an outward facing ethical-localist business approach to conceal their project's radical agenda. But over time, and under pressure to compete against local supermarkets, the hub lost its critical edge and was transformed, against its founders' original intentions, *into one of the very sub-hegemonic 'mainstream-alternative' food projects they had originally wanted to set themselves against*. Crucially, they would only become aware of this *after the project closed down*. When they did, however, this realization would provoke a significant strategic re-orientation.

When first developing the *Freshfair* idea, Sabatini believed the project had a lot of socially transformative potential. However, following its closure, and based on his experiences at the hub, he shifted position entirely. On reflection, he concluded that local food projects like *Freshfair* can:

> … only operate in a neoliberal society at a loss, or by exploiting workers and volunteers. At best it can become a tiny little niche. You might get a few farmers and 30 or 40 people who buy a few bits and bobs and they feel good about themselves, but really it's about a load of people giving time for free and a load of people being willing to buy stuff for twice the price they could get it in Aldi or Lidl. And it might be better [quality food]. Certainly, it is safer eating that way … But is it ethical consumption? It is not ethical in my view because it is based on underpayment and exploitation (Sabatini, 2018).

During its early stages, Sabatini had been genuinely excited by the project that he and his colleagues had worked so hard to build. Following its demise, however, he stated that:

> I now think this is an impossible model. I think [this type of localist project] only works with subsidy – with somebody willing to fund it so that it can offer food at such a low price that people will take it up … I think the idea of a petit bourgeois commodity capitalist model whereby local farmers, who themselves are barely managing, supply a central depot, which then takes food out to workplaces where it is sold among their

> mates … I think in a neoliberal society it is virtually impossible … It would have to compete on price. It would have to compete on quality. It would have to compete on availability at different times of the year, which runs against the ecological principle of seasonal only. So you've got structures in the way (Sabatini, 2017b).

He went on:

> It is not that I think *Freshfair* is impossible. I think it is possible – but only under the right political conditions. I think it still offers the germ for how one would run a socialist or a communist society. And eventually you might start to see the dismantling and abolition of state structures if this became the dominant form of behaviour. But only in a society that is not ruled by commodities can consumption rule production. As long as there is commodity production and commodity ownership, and the ownership of wealth is being driven by investors rather than consumers, the idea that any form of consumer-led activity can change society is upside-down. In a socialist society consumption will drive production because we will be in charge of what gets produced. So it would become a political decision, not an economic one, as to where you place your priorities (Sabatini, 2017b).

Upton made a similar assessment:

> *Freshfair* is a classic example of a good idea that can't get anywhere in a capitalist system. [Such projects] are always going to struggle. They're always going to be vulnerable. They are always going to depend on the commitment of small numbers of people to work for nothing because they believe in it … They are tragic because some of the best people get exhausted and frustrated. And there is so much that could be beneficial about these projects in terms of climate change (Upton, 2017b).

Having had time to reflect on *Freshfair*'s performance following its closure, he also concluded that:

> … a fundamental reason for failing was capitalist social relations and the politics which supports it. Because of that you end up with a very, very narrow margin to pay any workers or [to pay] any expenses if your workers are volunteers. We were working so close to the line all the time … [At small, localist projects] you find that you have the same people flogging themselves into the ground. *If those people could only see what they are doing in the wider context of a capitalist economy, their contribution would be so much better* (Upton, 2017b; emphasis added).

Just as Sabatini drew on Marxian perspectives when he first developed the project's business model, so too did this political outlook shape his interpretation of its 'failure'. Projects like *Freshfair* can't succeed, he argued, because:

> … the level of class struggle [in contemporary society] isn't strong enough to switch cultural and consumption behaviours… [At *Freshfair*,] we were imagining higher levels of class consciousness and class solidarity than actually exist. We've been putting the cart before the horse. Projects like *Freshfair* cannot work. They are idealistic, not materialist, because you start with a great idea and imagine that if you have a good idea, people's behaviour will change – that you can convince them because of the quality of the idea. Whereas in reality, people's behaviours change first, and then various forms of new practice open up. But at no point did we change the balance of power. I really thought we could. But I now see that the only people really with any political power were those driving this whole agenda – the Tory government and the Lib Dems who were championing localist projects to try and sugar the pill of austerity (Sabatini, 2018).

When they first came up with their (outwardly reformist, inwardly radical) workplace buying group model, these participants genuinely believed they had found an institutional form that would allow them to operate within capitalist structures while subtly subverting them. In the end, however, they found that they could not separate the hub's activities from the wider capitalist economy they were hoping to challenge; they also found that they could not access the resources they needed to expand their operations in line with their radical aims. Indeed, in that advanced neoliberal context, they had not even been able to keep their 'alternative' food project alive.

6.13 Freshfair and 'failure'

Despite all the hub's problems, however, the *Freshfair*'s participants did not conclude that their project was a failure. Rather, and with the benefit of hindsight, they came to see the hub's somewhat underwhelming business performance as confirmation of the inherent limitations of attempts to build radical projects that operate through the market and in line with the principles of 'fair' trade and 'ethical' consumption. Based on their experiences, these figures would come to entirely reject such approaches. Indeed, as I will show in more detail in chapter 8, it was the hub's 'failure' that finally pushed the participants *from a position rooted in passive consent to one based on outright resistance*. In the wake of the hub's closure, these actors were now convinced that activities associated with this latter position had much greater socially transformative potential than the 'mainstream eco-localist'-adjacent path they had been treading. Accordingly, while *Freshfair* might have failed in business terms, its participants were keen to point out that its activities had generated a wealth of valuable learning outcomes. Forrester, for example, reflected positively on the whole experience:

> I wouldn't be depressed about any of it. You've got to try these things. It was a lot of effort at various points, but it was a lot of fun at the same time. And we learnt a lot from it that might lead into other things … We made some really good contacts with local producers that we're still in touch with (Forrester, 2018).

It was a viewpoint shared by Sabatini:

> It [*Freshfair*] was thoroughly worthwhile – as long as we draw the right lessons. I think it taught me a heck of a lot about what can't be done. And I think in the end it helped to convince me of a more revolutionary Marxist understanding of how to change society (Sabatini, 2018).

Although the project eventually collapsed, Sabatini nevertheless concluded that it did in the end achieve one of its initial key aims: *the opening up of spaces in which alternative political ideas could germinate* (see section 6.3 above). He later came to realise that, through its activities, the hub had had a significant influence on the members of the wider activist network of which *Freshfair* was a part. Sabatini said that:

> [*Freshfair*] helped to create among a certain network of people a kind of solidarity that has enabled them to then spiral that out into other political activities. It has to be said that the people who were involved [as project organisers and volunteers, not customers or producers] are the people who are now involved in things like hospital protests [against NHS cuts]; they were also involved in migrant solidarity work … I think it has been a step in the evolution of a network of activists whose role will continue to develop. I don't think it has been caused by *Freshfair*, but I think *Freshfair* gave them an opportunity to really cut their teeth on some serious organisational activity. I think the experience that came out of that has been valuable ... I think it has given both traction and a certain degree of credibility to a number of people, which means their views are being heard and reflected by the wider activist community. And I think it has also [generated an understanding of] how to operate with divergent interests and divergent pressures. So that's one of the reasons why in this area we now have an unusually mature, developed activist community for a city of our kind and one that is relatively free from the usual sources of being co-opted by either trade union bureaucracies or by the Labour Party, or by local authorities, or [by being] sucked into big charities (Sabatini, 2018).

Upton expressed a similar view. He stated that:

> Community projects [like *Freshfair*] are not useless. You've got to start somewhere in the real world. And in many ways, this is the best project I've ever been involved with. That fact that it has failed has made me take a completely different approach to how society can be changed. It has completely changed my thinking (Upton, 2018).

For this participant, his experiences at the hub extinguished any last traces of the sub-hegemonic, eco-localist, 'folk political' worldview that had so heavily shaped his environmentalist activities in the pre-2008 period, and which had continued to exert a residual influence on this thinking during his *Freshfair* years. He had put a lot of himself into the project and was hit extremely hard by its closure. However, he said that, in the months that followed:

> … the wounds of disrespect for myself and the others began to heal, and I started to emerge from the cocoon of localism. I realised that its limits had not only been geographical [i.e., related to the difficulties associated with sourcing and selling produce locally], but it had blinded me to the historical process … In my view, an alternative to the deeply flawed society we find ourselves living in is possible. But creating this fairer society is going to require a stepwise change – and class [i.e., class analysis, not just localist thinking] has to be central to this (Upton, 2018).

As *Freshfair*'s problems mounted over the months and years, Upton, like Sabatini, became increasingly drawn towards revolutionary socialist ideas. Out of his experiences with *Freshfair*, he concluded that:

> [Localist] projects must realise their limited ability to make fundamental change and [those involved with them need to] look at the limitations of reformist activities. Often, we look to do things [i.e., set up new projects] where no one else is already doing it [that is, focus attention on trying to find a niche]. But instead, we should be looking to contribute where there is already a significant number of people moving in the same direction… [and then try to draw them towards a more class-based, anti-capitalist position]. It might be to do with food, or health, or housing, or zero-hours contracts. Community projects should be looking at how to contribute to mass movements in the right place, at the right time, depending on political and economic circumstances (Upton, 2018).

Sabatini also forced home this point. He concluded that initiatives like *Freshfair* – community-scale sustainability projects operating *within the market* – can only ever *detract* from wider social struggles. And it is only through such struggles, he argued, that radical social transformation can be made to happen. He said:

> What I've noticed is there is a huge diversion of class struggle and a huge diversion of activist time spent on trying to keep these things [i.e., 'conventional' eco-localist projects] going when actually time could be better spent fighting the powers that be on health and education, and learning through that process how to gain forms of power that might one day be used to good effect (Sabatini, 2018).

Based on the discussion above, I claim that the actors' experiences at *Freshfair* should be seen as one important stage in a longer journey of political development – a partially-reformist step on the way to a much more radical political destination. Above I noted that the *Freshfair* participants had from the very beginning wanted their project to create spaces where radical political ideas could germinate; I pointed out, too, that even though it failed as a business, among local activist networks, it did indeed manage to achieve this aim. But this opening up of spaces for new political ideas was not just evident in the wider activist milieu, as important as that was. Crucially, *it also occurred within the participants themselves* – an outcome that can be seen by the way the project's 'failure' completely changed the way they thought about political strategy after the hub closed down.

After *Freshfair*, three of its four founding members decided to make a complete break with the 'non-conflictual' forms of eco-localist activism that had so heavily influenced their previous activities. Sabatini and Upton both joined – and became highly active within – a UK-wide revolutionary socialist organisation. Forrester returned to his anarchist roots and became heavily involved in environmental direct action (he would go on to become a key organiser in *Extinction Rebellion* and took part in various actions around the country). Drawing on their experiences at *Freshfair*, these participants now saw these more radical forms of political activity as a huge advance on the hub's ethical-localist, market-based approach. The position of the hub's final member, Rob Naylor, changed the least. After *Freshfair*, he continued to work within a number of local 'folk-political' initiatives, despite his lingering doubts about the potential for such activities to make any kind of lasting impact in terms of addressing wider environmental and social problems.

From the discussion above, then, it can be seen that for the majority of the steering group members, their experiences at *Freshfair* led them to entirely transform their approach to eco-social strategy. This outcome can be contrasted to the situation at *Greenstar*, where the participants would continue to adhere to the sub-hegemonic localist logic that had initially informed their activities, despite the various problems this generated for their project. It is to this subject that I now turn.

Chapter 7: The *Greenstar Energy* case study

Introduction

Having discussed the *Freshfair* food hub in the previous chapter, I will now examine the activities of *Greenstar Energy*. This chapter proceeds as follows. Sections 7.1 to 7.3 set out key information regarding *Greenstar*'s objectives and organisational set-up; they also provide some study-relevant biographical details about the key figures behind it. Section 7.4 examines the *Greenstar* participants' views on the issue of green capitalism. This work will not only enable me to contrast their approach to that taken at *Freshfair*, but also to show how the Coalition government's Big Society (BS) agenda came to influence *Greenstar*'s activities in strategically significant ways (section 7.5).

In sections 7.6 to 7.8, I show how, in this project, the issue of green capitalism intersected with ideas around localization and responsibilization – dominant themes in that BS action context – and consider how, together, these came to shape the thought patterns and behaviours of the *Greenstar* actors. Then follows a discussion of the project's performance (section 7.9). This grounds an examination of the major barriers that *Greenstar* faced (as highlighted by the participants themselves). In Section 7.10, I draw on my earlier discussions of 'folk politics' (see chapter 3) and 'green capitalist realism' (see chapter 4) to examine the gap that emerged between the actors' own view of their project's performance and its original aims. The chapter closes by considering how my examination of *Greenstar Energy* helps to illuminate issues around neoliberalism, production, and emancipatory strategy in a way that enriches ongoing debates in the wider literature (section 7.11).

7.1 Background

As I noted in chapter 1, *Greenstar Energy* was, like the *Freshfair* food hub, established in 2011 in rural northwest England by a small group of subaltern actors who were looking to develop a local-scale response to climate breakdown and post-2008 austerity policies. While *Freshfair*'s activities revolved around the production, distribution, and consumption of food, this project focused specifically on energy. *Greenstar* aimed to facilitate the development of community-owned renewable energy schemes in its local area. By focusing on this sphere of activity, its participants were looking to boost renewable energy production and generate income that could be used to offset the impacts of government cuts to local services (see section 7.8 below). They were also seeking to transform people's relationship to energy production in a way that empowered local communities and generated strong social bonds. Built around an 'ethical shareholder' model, this project aimed to:

- provide financial investment opportunities in the sphere of renewable energy in its region of operation.
- support aspiring communities to develop renewable energy projects to help reduce societal dependency on fossil fuels.
- localise energy production in a way that boosted community resilience and encouraged the development of local economic activity.
- establish a stronger renewable energy skills base across its local region (Greenstar Energy, 2017b).

Greenstar Energy was registered as an Industrial and Provident Society for the Benefit of the Community (IPS Bencom). The enterprise employed no paid staff but operated solely through the work of volunteers. These volunteers brought a wealth of experience from the worlds of local businesses, green finance, local government, and the environmental sector. As I will show in coming sections and in the next chapter, the nature of their experiences would come to shape the environmental imaginary that informed the project's development.

7.2 The model

In contrast to *Freshfair*, which developed a unique operating model that sought to bring ideas from the world of union organising into the field of community food production, *Greenstar* employed a well-established (although niche) community energy finance model. And while the former project focused its attention primarily on 'local-ethical' *consumption*, here emphasis fell on the practice of 'local-ethical' *investing*.

Greenstar aimed to raise the capital it needed by facilitating share issues among local people who were keen to invest in 'ethical' projects (Greenstar, 2017a). From the outset, it looked to attract large numbers of small community investors, rather than large private or institutional backers. To this end, *Greenstar* set a minimum investment level at £250, and a maximum of £50,000 (Greenstar, 2017a). The capital raised through the sale of shares was to be used to build community-scale renewable energy projects. These would generate income (via the Feed-in Tariff (FiT), see section 7.9 below) by selling electricity to the national grid. This income was to be divided between:

- repaying capital investment to shareholders
- paying annual dividends to shareholders (with investors receiving a financial return in proportion to the amount invested)
- payments for local community projects
- running and maintenance costs (Greenstar, 2017a).

The project's founders set it up as a democratically controlled initiative. In principle, each energy scheme was to be owned by its members (that is, shareholders) and controlled on a 'one member, one vote' basis. However, as I will show later, while members were granted some voting rights, certain individuals within the project held much more sway over decision making processes than others.

By setting the project up in this way, its founders believed that they were developing a genuinely *alternative* eco-social initiative – one that, by expanding its operations and serving as an exemplar project capable of inspiring other local communities, could help to push society in a more environmentally sustainable and socially progressive direction. However, as I will show in coming sections, this project was less 'alternative' than its participants liked to believe. Indeed, I will argue that *Greenstar*'s activities unproblematically reflected and reproduced neoliberal norms and practices that had become socially embedded in that advanced neoliberal action context, and that as a result it helped reinforce neoliberal eco-social logic among the local environmental actors who encountered it.

7.3 Key members: worldviews and experiences

Greenstar was set up by two key individuals: David Stevens and Ben Merchant[56]. Although it would later rely on a network of volunteers with a range of skills and experiences (see section 7.9), these two actors played an outsized role in project's conception, design, and initial development. It was they who directed its passage from a formative idea to an operational entity: drawing up its objectives, putting in place its institutional architecture, prospecting for potential renewable energy sites, ascertaining project viability, and bringing in others with the expertise needed to make the initiative a success. To prepare the ground for the discussion in coming sections and in chapter 8, here I need to briefly set out some study-relevant biographical information regarding these two nodal actors.

David Stevens

Once the project was up and running, Stevens assumed the role of Company Director. He was responsible for taking major operational decisions. He oversaw strategy, managed the renewable energy projects (from design and construction stages through to power generation and maintenance), liaised with local stakeholders (environmental NGOs, local authorities, installers, community groups, etc.), co-ordinated its volunteer staff, and so on. He was a key driving force behind the project from the very beginning; indeed, his energy can be seen as the 'glue' that held the whole enterprise together (see section 7.9 below). Dedicated and industrious, he continually worked 'behind the scenes' to ensure the project's smooth functioning; he had a hand in every aspect of *Greenstar*'s operations and understood its systems and procedures better

[56] Both identified as white, British males and were aged between 40 and 50 at the time of the interviews.

than anyone else. In addition, he was the 'public face' of *Greenstar Energy*: he conducted media interviews, championed its work, gave public presentations, and encouraged new communities to come forward and consider setting up renewable energy schemes of their own.

Alongside his volunteer role as *Greenstar*'s director, he worked in a full-time senior management position for a well-established local environmental charity. He had previously worked as a lead environmental officer at a local authority and had held several other senior positions in the environmental third sector over the previous two decades. Over this period, he developed a high level of expertise in the areas of ecology and climate change science.

Ben Merchant

This participant's journey to the community energy sector differed from that of his co-founder Stevens. In the mid-2000s, Merchant began working as a London-based financier at a merchant bank specialising in fundraising and investment management in the energy, environment and efficiency sectors. He continued to serve as a senior consultant for this group while at *Greenstar Energy*. By that time, he was also the Chair of a large and successful manufacturing business that operated out of northwest England and had divisions across Europe, China and the US. Alongside these roles, he also served as the Managing Director of a growing renewable energy company that specialised in the construction of hydro-electric projects. Widely seen as a local business leader with strong green credentials, he, like Stevens, was already a well-known and highly respected figure within 'mainstream' local sustainability circles by the time that *Greenstar Energy* was coming into being.

These two individuals would be assisted by a wider group of volunteers. This pool of trustees and advisors boasted a broad range of skills on which *Greenstar* could draw. Their areas of expertise included: project management, organizational administration, environmental sustainability, renewable energy, financial management, business planning, marketing, local government, and community development (Greenstar, 2017c, 2017d; Roberts, 2017). Although I will consider this in more detail later, I just want to note here that these core volunteers all shared a belief in the progressive power of 'sustainable business'. As I showed in chapter 4, this notion was well established in 'mainstream' environmental discourse in that advanced neoliberal action context. Ideas associated with it would heavily influence these participants' thought patterns and behaviours.

7.4 'Green capitalism' as a key organising principle

The nodal actors at this project coalesced around what I will call a 'local eco-responsible capitalist' imaginary. As I will show below, the participants here did not believe that it was necessary to break with capitalism to resolve the rapidly intensifying environmental and social crises that so concerned them. To the contrary, capitalism – insofar as it was seen *at all* – tended

to be viewed as the most effective way to mobilise the resources needed to resolve these crises (if its innovative power could be harnessed for the social good, that is – see below).

To help me develop this point, it is useful to compare the approaches of the two case study projects. As has already been noted, these initiatives were set up at around the same time and in the same geographical area, and both were intended as local-scale responses to the same set of issues (climate breakdown and austerity-related social problems). Given these commonalities, what interests me is the *contrasting* ways that the actors at each project came to construe the drivers of these crises, and the divergent strategies they pursued as a result. Key here, I have suggested, is the way the participants at these initiatives situated themselves in relation to capitalism. Having considered the *Freshfair* actors' position on this matter in the previous chapter, it is now time to discuss the *Greenstar* participants' views on capitalism and its relationship to environmental and social breakdown.

Greenstar Energy *and green capitalism*

In chapter 6, I showed that the *Freshfair* participants, whose activities were informed by a *critical* eco-social imaginary, took the view that the eco-social crises they were responding to were products of *capitalist* development. They saw capitalism as an *inherently* contradictory social formation, and they believed that resolving these crises would ultimately require making the transition to some kind of some kind of non-capitalist[57] mode of social organisation. They rooted the marked intensification of environmental and social problems over recent decades in the rise and consolidation of *neoliberalism*, which they understood as a particularly aggressive form of capitalist development (one that had significantly shifted the balance of power between labour and capital in the direction of latter, and that had, through the financialization and the globalization of production, massively accelerated the exploitation of society and nature).

The actors at *Greenstar*, however, took a very different view. For reasons that will become clearer in chapter 8, for these individuals, capitalism was seen as a mode of social organisation that, while it *could* generate sub-optimal environmental and social outcomes, was not *inherently* environmentally and socially destructive. They argued that, while capitalist development had hitherto clearly played a significant role in generating problems such as climate change, biodiversity loss, social exploitation, and community breakdown, capitalism nevertheless could, if nudged in a more ethical, responsible direction, be made to operate in an environmentally sustainable and socially just manner. Moreover, as far as they were concerned, transitioning to a responsible eco-capitalist regime was the *only* way avoid eco-social catastrophe.

[57] As I showed in the previous chapter, three of the four strategy team members argued for a transition to some kind of socialist future; the remaining member believed that anarchism offered the best way forward.

Stevens, whose views on this issue were shared across the project, argued that making such a shift would require the massive expansion of social activity in two key areas going forward: the 'social sector'[58] and 'responsible business' (Stevens, 2017a; also Merchant, 2017; Taylor, 2017a; Rose, 2018; Warburton, 2018). Unlike the *Freshfair* actors, then – who identified a *systemic* link between profit-oriented production, ecological destruction, and social domination and exploitation – Stevens blamed eco-social problems *not* on:

> the generation of profits per se, [but their] distribution. It is a matter of where those profits go and how they are spent. If they are used for social benefit, and for environmental benefit, and if in the process of making those profits there is nothing detrimental happening to communities or to the environment, then … I can live with that. [However,] I can't live with profit if profit means exploiting the environment and the degradation of that environment and exploiting people to the detriment of their opportunities (Stevens, 2017a).

By drawing on the discussion in chapter 4, it can be seen here that Stevens' position on this matter aligned closely with the 'ethical' capitalist view that circulated widely in 'mainstream' environmental discourse in that post-2008 action context. Fellow co-founder Merchant took a similar view. He, too, saw no need to make any kind of fundamental break with capitalistic social arrangements in order to achieve environmental sustainability and social harmony. As far as he was concerned:

> …the globalized capitalist economic system… is here to stay and it can work extraordinarily well. Clearly, it has impacts – but in fact it can also be used for good… finance and technology can be used very, very positively (Merchant, 2017).

Like Stevens, he believed that in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, and with the prospect of irreversible climate breakdown getting ever closer, the shift to a new form of responsible eco-capitalism was desperately needed. And like Stevens, he saw the activities of 'progressive' 'civil society' projects like *Greenstar Energy* as central to bringing this about. Through this community-scale project, he stated that he wanted to:

> …kind of do something positive that uses all the great advantages of capitalism and being able to finance things, raise money and, you know, be able to buy solar panels from anywhere in the world… to make use of this technology and everything else, but actually have the benefits accruing locally (Merchant, 2017).

[58] Here he was talking about 'non-capitalist' enterprises operating on the 'civil society' terrain: community groups, charities, NGOs, and so on.

I'll say more about this emphasis on localism in a moment. Before doing so, however, I want to emphasise that for these two principal actors, *capitalism* was not to blame for the environmental and social crises that were clearly spiralling out of control, but rather the *immoral, reckless form of capitalism that had emerged over recent decades*. They saw capitalism as a *neutral* way to organise society – a system that could be inflected in 'good' or 'bad' directions, depending on the kinds of social groups that happened to be in power at any given time. And as they saw it, 'bad' people had been in charge for far too long.

For Stevens and Merchant, then, these growing crises were not systemic, but emerged through the moral failings of particular individuals and social groups (unscrupulous business figures, greedy bankers, overly materialistic consumers, and so on) whose accumulated actions had pushed capitalism in a dangerous and unstainable direction. Because they saw capitalism as neutral, they believed that their championing of a responsible variant of it was simply a common-sense, practical, progressive, non-ideological position. Žižek has pointed out, of course, that this kind of 'non-ideological' standpoint is 'patently false' because 'the very notion of capitalism as a neutral social mechanism *is ideology … at its purest*' (Žižek, 2018: 25; emphasis added). I will say more about this in section 7.7 below, and about why the participants subscribed to this view in chapter 8.

For the moment, let me just summarize by saying that, in the eyes of Stevens and Merchant, capitalism had lost its way in recent decades, and it was now high time to pull it back on track. Both believed, in that crisis conjuncture, that the shift to a responsible eco-capitalist regime was not just possible, but necessary. And both believed that community projects such as theirs could play a key role in bringing this transition about. Here it can be noted that these two individuals were not looking to *erode* capitalism as part of a longer term strategy to overturn it (as the actors at the food hub wanted to do); rather, they were looking to *tame* it – that is, alter capitalist activities in a manner that eradicated their deleterious environmental and societal effects (on eroding and taming capitalism, see Wright, 2019). Resolving eco-social problems for them, then, was not a matter of *replacing* capitalism, but of *reforming* it. This position was shared among all the project's participants, and it was one that fundamentally shaped *Greenstar*'s strategic approach from its earliest days. Having highlighted these actors' shared belief in the need to reform capitalism going forward, I want to show how they saw localization as key to bringing this about. Before I can do that, however, I need to say a few words about the Coalition government's Big Society (BS) agenda, which played an important role in shaping subaltern environmentalist discourse in that post-2008 action context.

7.5 The Big Society and *Greenstar Energy*

As noted in chapters 3 and 4, the conjuncture in which both case study projects emerged was one where localist ideas were freshly 'back on the UK political agenda' (Featherstone et al.,

2012). Localism had become a defining keyword in the political narrative of the newly formed Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government and a central organising principle of their flagship BS agenda. As I showed in those earlier discussions, advocates of this policy repertoire tended (publicly, at least) to champion the emancipatory possibilities generated by this agenda's focus on decentralisation, community empowerment and public service reform, and through its emphasis on co-operatives, charities, and social enterprises in the delivery of social services (Williams et al., 2014: 2799).

It is worth noting here that the ideas that underpinned this agenda featured particularly prominently in the lives of the *Greenstar* participants. That is because, early in the Coalition's reign, their local region had been selected by the new government as one of only four national Big Society 'vanguard areas'. This area thus became, in the words of Prime Minister Cameron, one of only four 'great training grounds' in the UK where this agenda would be piloted – 'the first territory on which real and ultra-local power [will become] a reality… and [where] the Big Society is built' (Cameron, 2010).[59]

Their locale, then, was being widely championed as a national centre for community localist activity at precisely the time when the *Greenstar* project was coming into being. As part of his wider BS vision, Cameron had stated that he wanted his government to empower local communities, to help them take back control of their lives from the state and to improve their own local services (see chapter 4). In line with this ambition, he asked the communities in *Greenstar*'s local area:

> What is it that we're doing that's stopping you from doing what you want to do? How can we stop stopping you? And how do we stop stopping others? (Cameron, 2010).

Cameron portrayed this area as a forerunner, one that would blaze a trail for the Big Society to come. He claimed that the community groups in that region were laying the foundations for a localist revolution. He wanted their deeds to inspire 'other forward-thinking, entrepreneurial, community-minded people and neighbourhoods in our country to come forward and ask for the same freedoms, the same support too' (Cameron, 2010). *Greenstar*'s local Conservative MP, a passionate supporter of the BS agenda, vigorously championed the localist ideas that emanated from central government across his region. This high-profile politician would welcome officials from the Department of Communities and Local Government, the Department of Environment, Food and Rural affairs, and the Department of Business Industry and Skills to his constituency to see first-hand the kinds of community activities that were taking place there. He proudly

[59] It is necessary to note here that, although *Greenstar* and *Freshfair* were situated geographically close to one another, they were located in different political constituencies. Each was therefore represented by a different MP, and their areas covered by (mostly) different media ecologies.

pointed out that these officials took the lessons they had learned during their time in the region back to central government, and that many of the ideas trialled in his constituency found their way into the Coalition government's Localism Bill. Thus, he could claim that his local area 'had become a model for [a piece of] national legislation' that 'recognise[ed] local communities who know more, care more and can do more than central government' (Greenstar Local MP, 2017).[60]

The *Greenstar* participants tended to be highly supportive of this local MP and his BS-focused, pro-localist views. In contrast to those at *Freshfair*, then, who saw the BS agenda as an elite attempt to create ideological cover for neoliberal austerity and a right-wing restructuring of the state (see chapter 6), the participants here tended to treat as sincere the motives of the hegemonic actors who promoted this agenda as a way to democratise local services and empower communities. As will become clear in coming sections, the BS agenda's foregrounding of localization, social entrepreneurialism, civil society activism, and the community-based delivery of public services would heavily influence the way these participants thought about and conducted their 'progressive' eco-social activities.

7.6 Localization

At *Greenstar Energy*, just like at *Freshfair*, localization constituted a core organizational principle from the project's earliest days. The *Greenstar* participants fully accepted the notion, socially embedded in that wider action context, that local, small-scale production was somehow *inherently* 'better' (in environmental and social terms) than large-scale production taking place over greater distances (an assumption I challenged back in chapter 3). Unlike the *Freshfair* actors, however, who eventually came to break with this position, the *Greenstar* participants maintained this line of thinking even after its limitations became clear to them (see chapter 8). The strong emphasis these actors placed on 'the local' can be seen in the following comments from Taylor, *Greenstar*'s Financial Director:

> We always had a strong view that it [*Greenstar Energy*] should be locally developed and that we should try and keep it as local as possible … When we were first developing the idea, we thought that there were a lot of people in the area who would be interested in providing capital and who would like to see a local scheme … It was all about energy being local, about local investment, [about] returns back to local people (Taylor, 2017a).

I noted in section 7.4 above that the participants here had come to see the immoral, irresponsible form of capitalism that had emerged over recent decades as a primary driver of contemporary social and environmental crises. Here it is necessary to outline the spatial dimension of this

[60] In the interests of participant anonymity (and in line with my ethics review), I have redacted the name of this MP.

aspect of their thinking: these actors believed that capitalist society had *become* irresponsible and immoral *because* it had become hyper-globalized and thus dis-embedded from local communities. Stevens and Merchant were particularly strident on this point. As I will show in coming sections, they believed that globalization processes over recent decades had severed the link between communities and (large) capitalist enterprises. For them, this had created a situation where those who controlled and benefited from corporate activities were geographically separated (and thus shielded) from the *negative* environmental and social consequences of their actions. Furthermore, they argued that this degree of separation left capitalist actors blind to the *positive* societal impacts that 'ethical' business activity could bring (Stevens, 2017b; Merchant, 2017).

They believed that these problems could be resolved by building local economies, as this would help to make economic activity authentic, ethical, and community-focused once again. By taking this position, it can be noted that these actors were operating in line with a key strand of eco-social thought that was deeply embedded in that wider action context. As I showed in chapter 3, this idea informed the activities of a broad range of 'progressive' actors, from Transition Town groups and degrowth activists, to advocates of the Coalition government's BS agenda (Hopkins, 2008; 2013; Blond, 2010; Seymour, 2010; Niven, 2011; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; Schmelzer et al., 2022). The *Greenstar* participants would uncritically accept this localist economic logic and build their project's approach around it.

Greenstar and the local economy

Stevens became interested in local economies because, during his years spent working within the sustainability community, he found that the fruits of economic activity kept flowing out of the region. He said that:

> It just struck me that there was continued development in renewable energy around here and that local communities were not benefitting in the manner that they should have been (Stevens, 2017a).

It was this realization that motivated him to set up *Greenstar Energy*. A focus on local money flows and community benefit thus became central to the project. When the time came to raise the capital needed for *Greenstar*'s first renewable energy schemes, Stevens emphasised this point in his pitch to potential investors:

> To date, we know that many of the benefits of local renewable energy projects 'leak out' of the area. Sometimes it's the profits that disappear out of the county, sometimes it's simply the lost opportunity of employing local companies to install and maintain the equipment. This needs to change. We are convinced that through the renewable energy

> projects that we [i.e., *Greenstar Energy*] invest in, we can ensure that benefits are kept locally (Greenstar, 2017e).

He criticised commercial developers for taking from the region and for failing to support local communities. Such companies, he stated:

> … operate here, but we're talking about commercial investments from companies based outside of the region and sometimes outside of the UK. Procurement goes to outside companies to install equipment, profits go back into those commercial companies and back into stock markets, and then there is pretty much nothing left for the local community in terms of a fair and proportionate community dividend (Stevens, 2017a).

But *Greenstar* was set up with different priorities in mind. Taylor, the company's Financial Director stressed that:

> We do not want to just come across like a [commercial] developer – that is what we're trying to avoid. We do not want to be anonymous. We want to be in the local community, and we want to know that the money [generated through the sale of energy] goes back to local people, and not to France or the US, or wherever (Taylor, 2017a).

In contrast to commercial operators, then, *Greenstar* wanted to 'ensure that a far greater proportion, if not all, of the expenditure and income from our renewable energy projects is kept revolving in the local area' (Greenstar, 2017a). When talking about how *Greenstar* built its energy projects, Stevens was proud to point out that:

> The hydro engineers, the diggers, the civil engineers – they come from five miles down the road. This isn't going to China, it is not going to Japan. It is going to people who live and work locally. That is just so important to the whole point of community energy. It's about value for money and it is about keeping money in the local economy (Stevens, 2017a).

All the participants at this project stressed the importance of *Greenstar*'s localist focus – and the importance of local economic activity more generally – because they saw such activity as *inherently* environmentally sustainable and socially just. As I will show in coming sections, however, by focusing on the *scale* of their activities, these actors were overlooking other key factors that needed to be considered if they were going to operate in line with their founding aims.

7.7 'Ethical' local businesses and 'civil society' groups

From the very beginning, the *Greenstar* participants were, in that wider austerity landscape, looking to deliver local services in a way that did not rely on 'the state'. Regarding the issue of

precisely which groups in society should bear responsibility for supporting local communities, Merchant said that:

> I don't believe that giving 100 per cent and going back to nationalising everything is [the way forward] … (Merchant, 2017).

Instead, and in a manner that again aligned closely with the core aims and priorities of the BS agenda (see chapter 4), the participants here believed that some combination of 'ethical' local businesses and local 'civil society' groups could and should step in to deliver local services. At this project, there existed a general sense that this kind of activity, if expanded, could lay the foundation of a local responsible capitalist regime going forward – one that could resolve the environmental and social crises bearing down on society. Merchant stated that:

> I think that communities can play a huge role here … But it doesn't necessarily have to be all about local communities. [What is needed is] more local ownership, more local businesses… I just think that the way to address [pressing social and environmental problems] *is through local capitalism, where you bring back the ownership [of production] much closer to home* … (Merchant, 2017; emphasis added).

The *Greenstar* participants were arguing for such a local capitalist approach because in their eyes it was the *globalization* of capitalism, not capitalism itself, that was destroying the wider environment and the ripping up the fabric of social life. On this point, Merchant said:

> Look, I mean look at globalization … it just speeds everything up … this development is incredibly quick, then of course you get … the whole thing just speeds up, it's runaway. The problem is, actually, it's a global problem, you know, we're globalized now (Merchant, 2017).

Unlike the actors at *Freshfair*, then, the *Greenstar* participants accepted the existence of core elements of capitalist society: markets, commodification, wage labour, private ownership of land and production infrastructure, and so on. For them, it was primarily the *scale* at which social activity took place that was problematic. Consequently, these participants were not looking for an alternative *to capitalism*, but an alternative *to a globalized capitalism* that had allowed large, 'anonymous' corporations to act with complete disregard for people and planet as they scoured the globe in search of super-profits. Both Stevens and Merchant criticised large, 'placeless' multinational capitalist corporations like Apple and Amazon, which, they argued, completely ignored the needs of local people. Merchant, for example, complained that such companies:

> … have the power to legally set themselves up so they don't even pay any tax – I mean, they are doing nothing for communities. *Nothing*. This is a massive problem' (Merchant, 2017).

The participants here argued that capitalist enterprises needed to be embedded into local communities so that they would operate in ways that took the environmental and social impacts of their activities into account. By referring back to the discussion in chapter 4, one can detect here a strong resemblance between their position on this issue and the responsible capitalist ideas that were being discursively embedded in that post-2008 action context (particularly the notion of 'shared value' advanced the by business-friendly academics Porter and Kramer (2019; see also Žižek, 2018).

Inspired by such ideas, the *Greenstar* participants envisioned an ideal future where responsible-local capitalist businesses – enterprises that employed and trained local people and sourced their materials locally insofar as they could – generated profits and invested those profits back into their businesses, into their local areas, and into local civil society groups who could then use these resources to deliver services for local community members. They *assumed* that if this kind of 'ethical' pro-capitalist civil society activity could be increased in their local area, then this would lead to the development of a resilient 'community economy' – one that could counter the damaging effects of globalization by reducing carbon emissions, restoring community ties, and delivering vital services for local people in a way that did not rely on state support. They saw ethical-local investment practices as central to this goal – hence the project's focus on fostering *community* shareholder activity. So, just as the *Greenstar* participants wanted to eradicate the *spatial* separation that globalization had introduced between capitalist businesses and local communities (see above), so, too, did they want to eliminate the geographical gap that had emerged between investors and their investments. Merchant lamented that, in the globalized economy of today:

> … If [people] happen to have savings and investments, these will often be through their pensions. But they are totally disconnected from their investments – these are miles away and they have no idea where [their money is or what it is invested in] … This is a massive problem (Merchant, 2017).

Greenstar's focus on *localizing* investment was intended to overcome this major split that, in the eyes of its participants, only alienated people from productive activity, from each other, and from nature. By encouraging *local* investor activity, Stevens was aiming to find a way to:

> … take us back to the days before the 'Futures Market' or 'selling short,' [to] days when the profits of local enterprise and of farming would be reinvested in building local homes or in the growth of other local businesses and services. Such [local] investors

> could walk to where their money was being used. They could touch the stonework, talk to the new employees, or even taste the new crop. In modern times, it's just bewildering to understand where and how our investments, pensions or savings are being used (Greenstar, 2017e).

It can be seen here that Stevens was being guided in his efforts to develop a fair, sustainable economy in the present by a vision of an idyllic, agrarian, local capitalist past – a time before globalization, before financialization, a time when businesses were embedded in particular places and worked for the benefit of their local communities. As the following comments from Merchant on the issue of civic infrastructure also make clear, he was similarly inspired by some vague idea of a wholesome local capitalist society of old – one marked by a strong sense of civic responsibility, and where philanthropic local merchants worked in the interest of their local communities:

> Look at buildings today, for example … if you go to towns and cities up and down this nation and you look at what has been built in the historical past, it is a damn sight better than what is being built now – and one of the reasons is the tradesmen [i.e., business leaders] of the town, they owned the businesses, they lived in the town, they were very often, you know, the community leaders as well and they had every incentive [to improve their surroundings]. Of course, they wanted to have a good environment for them[selves] and their families and employees and everybody else to live in. Whereas now, that's not how it is any more … (Merchant, 2017).

This desire to return to some kind of egalitarian local capitalist society of the past – one that, in contrast to the globalized economy of today, was transparent, authentic, harmonious, and fair – permeated this organisation. In chapter 4, I showed how BS elites mobilised this idea to try to embed responsible eco-localist capitalist principles in subaltern 'common sense' in that post-2008 conjuncture. It can be noted, then, that *Greenstar*'s approach aligned closely with this view. Based on the discussion in chapter 2, however, it can also be pointed out that this line of thinking was deeply problematic because the wholesome, egalitarian capitalist society of old that they wanted to return to *had never actually existed in the first place* (Williams, 2016; on the psychic dimension of this yearning for a return to a harmonious society that never was, see McGowan, 2024; Žižek, 2023). Despite this inconvenient fact, this phantasmatic projection nevertheless came to shape how the *Greenstar* actors thought about, and conducted themselves within, their post-2008 present.

There were several other problems with *Greenstar*'s approach that I need to briefly mention before I can move on to discuss the initiative's relationship to neoliberalism in section 7.8. The first concerns their views on 'globalization'. In my discussions with these participants, it

became clear that this issue was a central preoccupation of theirs (Stevens, 2017a; Merchant, 2017; Taylor, 2017a; Warburton, 2017; Rose, 2017). As I noted above, Stevens and Merchant were keen to stress the importance of this issue, and they returned to it again and again. However, during my conversations with these two individuals, it became evident that when they employed this term, they were primarily using it to refer to the *spatial* aspect of neoliberalism's restructuring of capitalist production over the past four decades or so. Notably, other important elements of this process – for example the increasing de-politicisation of the social field, or the general decline in labour's representation and political power, which I discussed in chapter 4 – were entirely missing from the picture (this can be contrasted to the situation at *Freshfair*, where these issues were placed front and centre).

To help explain the *Greenstar* founders' prioritization of spatial factors, as well as the intense focus on localization at this project more generally, I will briefly return here to the discussion of 'spatial fetishism' conducted in chapter 4. There I sought to account for the emergence of this 'spatial fetishist' viewpoint by outlining how the increasing prevalence of spatialised thinking related to the longer-term trajectory of neoliberal development. I argued there that, because capitalist social relations had become naturalised and largely invisibilized in the 'green capitalist realist' conditions of neoliberalism's consolidation phase, issues such as environmental despoliation, alienation, and social exploitation – problems that I have argued are rooted in the ways that *capitalism* arranges eco-social relations (see chapter 2) – could *appear* in the subaltern eco-social imagination as though they were being driven by *neoliberalism*'s re-structuring of *spatial relations* over recent decades. I claim that the *Greenstar* participants, as 'progressive' sub-hegemonic actors operating *uncritically* on this terrain, had internalised these ideas, which came to shape the way they thought about, and thus responded to, eco-social problems. I will develop this point in chapter 8, where I claim that because capitalism had come to fill these actors' horizons of political possibility, the only future they could imagine was a *capitalist* one. And because they tended to prioritise *spatial* factors, *local* capitalism became the aim.

The second point concerns the extent to which the *Greenstar* actors believed that it was possible to insulate local economic activities from the wider capitalist economy. Just like those at *Freshfair* (at least during that project's earlier phases – see chapter 6), the participants here believed that it was entirely possible to build well-sealed community economies based on localised 'fair trade' activities and 'ethical' investment practices. The *Greenstar* actors saw such activities as key developmental steps on the way to an eco-local capitalist future – one where local businesses, geographically situated in specific places, acted in line with the interests of local communities.

However, as I showed in chapter 3, while popular in 'mainstream' eco-localist discourse in the context under study, this viewpoint, as Marxian critics have pointed out, tends to overlook the fact that 'ethical' local capitalist (and 'ethical' market-based non-capitalist) enterprises cannot escape the pressures that emerge from the global scale operation of capitalism's law of value (Marx, 1976; Albo, 2007; Heinrich, 2012; Sharzer, 2012; Phillips, 2015; see chapter 3). Consequently, while it may be true, as Stevens, Merchant and others at this project claimed, that local firms tend to be more aware of the needs of local workers and the impacts of their business activities on the local environment (Stevens, 2017a; Merchant, 2017; Taylor, 2017a; Kennedy, 2017), it is equally true that 'responsibly minded' local enterprises remain forced to compete in contexts that are invisibly shaped by value flows in the wider capitalist economy (no matter how much community economy ideology works to elide this fact). As I noted in chapter 2, under capitalism there exists a *systemic* imperative for firms to constantly find ways to lower costs and maximise profits. As Sharzer (2012) and Phillips (2015) have pointed out, even 'ethical' local enterprises cannot escape this reality.

Before moving on, it is necessary to add here that, while they cannot break free from the pressures that flow from the wider capitalist economy, community-scale economic initiatives can operate in ways that make it *appear* as though they have made good this escape. By generating an *impression* of immediacy, transparency, and authenticity, they often work, as Gunderson points out, to mask 'the harms of capitalism by convincing society that the harms of capitalism can be rehabilitated within the commodity form itself' (Gunderson, 2014). By *appearing* to offer an alternative way forward, such market-based, local (non-)capitalist enterprises can, by channelling subaltern energies in sub-hegemonic directions, end up reinforcing the very social arrangements that drive the problems these initiatives hope to solve. Gunderson adds that the only way to end capitalism's harmful effects is to transcend capitalism altogether – a point that fits well with the views of the *Freshfair* actors, yet one that seemed to exist far beyond the imaginative horizon of the *Greenstar* participants. Based on the above, I claim that these actors were not incorrect to argue that in today's globalized capitalist world, the mass of people living in core capitalist nations do tend to be alienated from production processes, from each other, and from non-human nature. They were wrong, however, to assume that *the localization of capitalist activity* would be sufficient to resolve these problems. I will return to this in chapter 8.

The final point I want to make here concerns the participants' understanding of the term 'community'. As can be seen from the discussion above, these actors were motivated by a strong desire to build a project that could keep money flowing within the local community. However, I claim that their stance on this issue was problematic because of their *spatialised* understanding of what a 'community' is. Among those at *Greenstar*, a 'community' was

primarily understood as a group of people that lived alongside one another *in a particular geographical space*. In my view, however, this foregrounding of spatial factors led them to overlook the ways that individuals *within* a geographically defined community space *relate to one another*. Consequently, while they hoped their project could serve as a nodal point in a vibrant community economy that worked to keep money flowing in the local area, they failed to adequately consider the uneven way in which power and resources were distributed among different groups *within that local space* (and the role that their initiative played in helping to reinforce these dynamics). I will say more about this in section 7.11 below.

7.8 *Greenstar Energy*: a neoliberalized eco-social 'alternative' project

In chapter 1, I noted that the *Greenstar* participants initially set out to build an *alternative* eco-social project – one that could provide a local-scale response to the intensifying environmental and social crises bearing down on society. In the previous section, I pointed out that they saw *Greenstar*'s activities as part of a wider responsible eco-capitalist approach that they believed offered the most realistic and effective way to deal with these issues. However, given the discussion in chapter 2 – where I underscored the unviability of responsible eco-capitalist pathways – I claim that because they subscribed to this position, this project was beset by a fundamental contradiction. In this section, I want to focus on one particular facet of this contradiction: namely, the way that *Greenstar* looked to resolve problems that had been accelerated by the advancement of neoliberal capitalism *by taking an approach that was thoroughly neoliberalized*.

Because *Greenstar*'s activities were congruent with, and conducive to the extension of, neoliberal capitalist eco-social relations, I contend that this initiative was not as 'alternative' as those involved with it liked to believe. I will say more about *why* this was the case, and the strategic implications that flowed from this, in chapter 8. To help prepare the ground for that discussion, here I will look at three key areas where *Greenstar*'s activities can be said to have been neoliberalized.

1) Greenstar's individualized, shareholder-focused approach to social change

As I showed in section 7.2 above, this project pursued a market-focused, profit-oriented, individualistic approach in its response to pressing eco-social problems. Through its 'ethical' shareholder model, *Greenstar* aimed to attract capital from local investors, which it intended to use to develop 'community-owned' renewable energy projects. Although I will say more about this in point 2 below, the project's core participants were, by organising their project in this way, *consciously* looking to emulate the shareholder investment practices that had become standard practice in the corporate world (and whose logic had increasingly overflowed the boundaries of

'the economic' to spill out into all other spheres of social life during the neoliberal period (Fisher, 2009; Mirowski, 2014; Gilbert and Williams, 2022).

By choosing this approach, the *Greenstar* actors were not looking to challenge embedded neoliberal capitalist practices; rather, they were looking for a way to use these practices and direct them in a way that served the greater 'social good'. Unlike large capitalist corporations – who as the actors here pointed out tended to use a shareholder approach to enrich 'anonymous' investors – *Greenstar* wanted to utilise the power of returns-seeking capital in a way that helped local communities (Stevens, 2017a; Merchant, 2017). They did not consider this kind of individualised, shareholder approach in any way problematic. It just seemed *simply obvious* to them that they should organise their 'progressive' eco-social activities in this way; for them, this 'local-ethical' shareholder model offered a way to responsibilize capitalism and act on climate change in a manner that empowered and enriched local communities (Stevens, 2017a; Taylor, 2017a; Merchant, 2017). As Taylor put it, by setting up *Greenstar* in the way that they did, they were looking to give members of the local community an opportunity to:

> invest in something local … something that benefits you financially, supports our communities, and generates renewable energy, taking us away from fossil fuels (Taylor, 2017a).

Stevens said that by taking this approach, *Greenstar* was offering local people a way to feel:

> ... a sense of relief that [they] are *doing something* about all this [i.e., climate and community breakdown] (Greenstar, 2017e; emphasis added).

However, while this initiative might have made local investors feel better by providing them with a way to *do something* about the intensifying environmental and social crises, in my view its approach was problematic because this 'something' *in no way challenged the neoliberal capitalist mode of eco-social organisation that was driving the problems it was hoping to ameliorate*. Indeed, by taking the approach that it did, I suggest that *Greenstar*'s activities helped to reinforce neoliberal logic on the wider 'civil society' terrain.

The participants did not see it this way, of course. They believed that with their 'ethical' shareholder model, they had found a way to use the power of capitalism to advance progressive societal change in a manner that avoided any need to engage in social struggle. As I noted in chapter 4, this kind of 'post-political' thinking had become deeply entrenched during neoliberalism's consolidation phase (on this post-political turn, see Swyngedouw, 2011; Mair, 2013; Žižek, 2018; Crouch, 2020). I will say more about this project's 'non-political' approach in point 3 (below). Again, it can be noted that the actors' belief in the socially transformative

power of capitalist-adjacent community investment practices aligned fully with the BS agenda's governing logic (see chapter 4).

2) *Greenstar's 'entrepreneurial' approach to resolving eco-social problems: social support 'beyond the state'*

Another way that this project's activities can be seen to have been neoliberalized relates to the way it foregrounded *entrepreneurial* solutions to environmental and social problems.

'Green entrepreneurialism'

During my discussions with the *Greenstar* participants, it became abundantly clear that the figure of 'the entrepreneur' loomed large in their strategic imagination and that entrepreneurial logic represented a core guiding principle for their activities (Rose, 2017; Jackson, 2017; Kennedy, 2017; Taylor, 2017a). This logic was powerfully at work in the minds of its founders, Stevens and Merchant. For them, 'the entrepreneur' was understood as *the* central source of societal innovation, the motor force of progress in the contemporary world. It was their faith in the innovative power of the entrepreneurial class that ultimately underpinned their belief that capitalism could be 'greened' (see above). Based on the work in chapter 4, it can be noted that by taking this position, they were thinking with the grain of established green capitalist reason in that post-2008 neoliberal context (Fisher, 2009; Mirowski, 2014; Buller, 2022; Gilbert and Williams, 2022).

Here I suggest that, once again, it is productive to contrast the approaches taken by *Greenstar* and *Freshfair*. As I pointed out in the previous chapter, the central participants at the latter initiative held up revolutionary political figures such as Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, and Pyotr Kropotkin as key sources of inspiration and reservoirs of strategic insight. At the former, however, it was the renowned entrepreneur, rock climber, and environmentalist Yvon Chouinard who served as the organisation's intellectual lodestar. Chouinard has become widely known for his role as founder of the 'ethical' outdoor clothing company Patagonia – for Stevens and Merchant, an ethical capitalist enterprise *par excellence*. Both participants placed socially progressive entrepreneurs like Chouinard at the centre of their social transformation strategy (Stevens, 2017a; Merchant, 2017). Indeed, so important did they see such figures that both recommended Chouinard's best-selling 'business memoir', *Let My People Go Surfing*, as a vital resource that anyone who wanted to change society should read. If more capitalist firms could be encouraged to act like Patagonia, they argued, then problems like climate change and mass social hardship would be well on their way to being resolved.

So, in contrast to the anti-capitalist, 'bottom-up' approach taken by *Freshfair* (see chapter 6), the *Greenstar* participants inclined more towards a pro-capitalist, 'top-down' position. I have shown

already that they saw the *local* capitalist firm as a key driver of social transition at the community level. But these actors acknowledged, too, that larger 'ethical' capitalist firms also had an important part to play in driving social change more broadly. For example, Stevens argued that:

> There will be some leading companies … that have to set the agenda. And, you know, companies like Patagonia, companies which are hugely respected, need to take the lead. Consider that the top six billionaires have the same wealth as the bottom 3.5 billion people. What happens if you change those six individuals? You know, they are the gatekeepers … and big companies are the gatekeepers, too. What happens if mining companies were to decide that with exploration, you know, that for every acre of forest that they took out, they put two acres back? You know – it is possible … so I think we need to believe that [responsible eco-capitalism] is possible (Stevens, 2017b).

For Stevens, this green entrepreneurial perspective was so deeply embedded that, in his view, it was 'absolutely critical' that subaltern actors looking to change society today had a sound understanding of business. In contrast to the participants at *Freshfair*, when Stevens talked about the future green transition, he did not mention organised labour, he did not consider the role of social movements, and he rarely considered the importance of political factors (see below). Rather, for him, 'ethical' entrepreneurial activity – at the local and non-local levels – was key.

In terms of his own project's role in this transition process, he saw *Greenstar* as a localized instantiation of this urgently needed wider ethical-entrepreneurial shift. He stated that from the project's earliest days, he and his fellow participants *knew* that they were going to have to run their community energy project in a professional, business-like manner if they were going to make is a success. On this, he said:

> We knew first and foremost that the business had to work. If the business can't work, then you can't distribute benefit … A lot of work has to go in just to make the business work. That is the key. If you have got a healthy business, then you have got the opportunity to make profits and direct the profits of that business into social good (Stevens, 2017a).

He added that the *Greenstar* participants fully understood that they needed:

> … to have a good business case. We knew we had to look professional if people were going to hand over their money to us. That is where other [local community] groups go wrong. They don't look competent. Having gone through the process of developing community energy and understanding more about business investment, I think that

> communities need to be more commercially savvy. We wanted to build a slick business that could look after people's money and give them a solid return on their investments (Stevens, 2017a).

And, he went on:

> … the key to attracting investment is confidence, okay? Now we know that people gain confidence if things are well organised and well regulated, if there are people on the board who have business skills and experience. And that is the reality… if you are trying to raise a significant amount of money, it just gives [potential investors] more confidence if they know that [the enterprise] is being run in a business-like manner.

From the outset, *Greenstar* set about recruiting trustees who could help to instil this sense of confidence. Stevens proudly pointed out that those who ultimately got involved with the project:

> … had project management experience, they had finance experience … some people had hydro development experience, some had governance experience … because of this, [potential investors looking at *Greenstar*] got the sense that the people who were at the helm of this project were trustworthy and had got the necessary experience [to make it work] (Stevens, 2017a).

The situation at *Greenstar* can once again be contrasted to that at *Freshfair*, which, being staffed by more politically inclined but less commercially savvy participants, had no such skills on which to draw. In chapter 8, I will say more about how these contrasting skills bases and collective experiences influenced the development of strategy at each project and why this mattered. For now, I just want to point out that the entrepreneurial, business-focused imaginary that shaped *Greenstar*'s response to environmental breakdown mirrored the responsible green-capitalist logic that had been translated into 'common sense' during neoliberalism's consolidation phase, and that had come to underpin BS-related attempts to re-legitimate capitalism in the wake of the 2008-crisis (see chapter 4). Crucially, this entrepreneurial approach would not only shape the way these participants approached the issue of environmental crisis – it would colour the way they responded to austerity-related social crises, too.

Entrepreneurialism as austerity response

At the beginning of this chapter, I noted that *Greenstar* energy, like the *Freshfair* food hub, was initially set up to help local communities deal with the effects of government austerity policies. However, the participants at the former project took a very different position on the issue of austerity compared to those at the latter. As I showed in chapter 6, the *Freshfair* actors did not consider the Coalition government's decision to implement its programme of cuts to public

services as *necessary*. Rather, they saw austerity as a *choice* – one that had been taken to protect the interests of political and financial elites whilst pushing the costs of the 2008 financial crisis onto society's poorest and most vulnerable members.

I also noted there that by designing their project in the way that they did, the *Freshfair* participants were not simply looking to *respond* to neoliberal austerity by helping people to cope with its immediate effects (although by trying to make good quality food affordable for local people, this was certainly part of what they were trying to achieve). No, they were also looking to contribute to the building of a wider counter-hegemonic movement that they hoped would ultimately *develop the capacity to challenge the power of the political class that was implementing the programme of austerity measures*.

The participants at *Greenstar*, by contrast, accepted the view – one advanced by governing politicians and sympathetic media outlets in that post-2008 conjuncture – that the British state *needed* to drastically cut public spending in order to 're-balance the books' following the crisis (Seymour, 2014; Berry, 2016; Cooper and Whyte, 2017; Basu, 2018). Because they accepted that austerity was *inevitable*, and because they had already internalised the pro-business, capitalist realist logic that had been translated into 'common sense' during neoliberalism's consolidation phase (see above), the participants here set out to develop an *entrepreneurial response to austerity*.

So, instead of trying to find ways to *contest* the dominant social groups that were implementing the cuts, the participants here believed that the best way to respond to government austerity was to get socially minded businesses, entrepreneurial individuals, and motivated local 'civil society' actors to *generate the income needed to pay for the services that were being lost.* And they wanted *Greenstar* to perform this role in their local area. As Merchant put it:

> Look …if we have surplus profit, then we can put it back into the community. You know, because as part of creating a great community [in this area] … we need to spend money on street furniture, on planting trees, pavement surfaces – more money than has ever been spent there. We know that [in this austerity context] the council isn't going to give us that money – *so we've got to make it* (Merchant, 2017; emphasis added).

This viewpoint was shared by Stevens. He stressed that:

> [With our project,] the excess profits ... go back into the community. Those communities will decide how that money is spent … So, they might decide to put it into subsidising their bus services which are being cut here in [this area], or they might decide to develop their new playground, or it might help pay for meals on wheels (Stevens, 2017a).

In their eyes, this entrepreneurial response to austerity offered a way to empower local communities and reduce the reliance of local people on 'the state'. Their project's alignment with the government's stance on this issue can be seen in the following quote from Prime Minister Cameron, who was keen to stress that:

> The Big Society is about a huge culture change where people, in their everyday lives, in their homes, in their neighbourhoods, in their workplace, don't always turn to officials, local authorities or central government for answers to the problems they face, but instead feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities … if we want real change for the long-term, we need people to come together and work together – because we're all in this together … We need to create communities with oomph – neighbourhoods who are in charge of their own destiny, who feel if they club together and get involved they can shape the world around them … we want other forward-thinking, entrepreneurial, community-minded people and neighbourhoods in our country to come forward (Cameron, 2010).

By referring to the discussion in chapter 4, it can be noted, then, that what the *Greenstar* participants were viewing as a means of community self-emancipation corresponded closely with government efforts to streamline 'the state' in ways that would undermine local communities. As I pointed out there, in that post-2008 conjuncture, BS elites were seeking to discursively embed the idea that social enterprises and local community groups should start delivering services that had hitherto been provided by the state. By accepting that the cuts were *necessary*, and by actively looking for entrepreneurial ways to pay for the services lost to them, I suggest that the *Greenstar* actors were fully buying in to this logic.

3) Greenstar*: an 'apolitical' project*

The third thing I want to mention in this discussion of *Greenstar Energy* and neoliberalization concerns the participants' view that theirs was a *non-political* project. During the interviews, it became clear that this supposed political neutrality was central to their personal identities as 'professional'[61] environmental actors, and central, too, to the organisation's identity as a whole. Unlike at *Freshfair*, then, where the participants *intentionally* set out to develop a project that *looked* like an apolitical community food hub from the outside, but which covertly sought to engage in political struggles against the neoliberal capitalist order, the actors at *Greenstar* considered their project *an apolitical and non-ideological enterprise through and through*. As far as these participants were concerned, *Greenstar* was quite straightforwardly a commercially

[61] Here I'm not using the term 'professional' to refer to someone who is paid for their activities in a particular field, but more in the sense of someone who tries to avoid letting personal feelings influence their activities.

savvy community project working on the 'civil society' terrain in an effort to bring local business, finance, and renewable energy experts together with 'ethical' local investors to develop entrepreneurial solutions to pressing environmental and social problems *outside the sphere of politics*.

However, drawing on the work set out in chapters 3 and 4, I claim that, contrary to the participants' view of their own activities, in that advanced neoliberal, BS setting, *Greenstar* did perform a political function. Furthermore, I claim that the naturalization of neoliberal thought and practice in that wider action context, and their internalization of that logic, blinded them to this fact.

- *Demarcating 'the political'*

As I see it, one key reason for this group's assertion that they operated outside of the political sphere relates to their highly restrictive definition of 'politics'. These participants tended to use this term exclusively to refer to activities that related in one way or another to the operations of established 'mainstream' UK political parties as they occupied or vied for political office (governing, standing in elections, political campaigning, lobbying, donating to political parties, and so on). In other words, these participants tended to associate the term 'politics' with activities that related to struggles over who controls 'the state' (at the national, regional, and local levels). As members of *Greenstar Energy*, they proudly claimed that they did not engage in any such activities (Taylor, 2017a; Warburton, 2017; Kennedy, 2017; Merchant, 2017; Rose, 2017; Jackson, 2017).

To give a flavour of the relative lack of political awareness among those at this project, here I want to offer an anecdote concerning Stevens. In one of my interviews with this participant, I asked him to outline his political stance. At first, he seemed genuinely shocked that I would ask such a question (I had, I had realised, broken the golden rule, laid out in the old saying, that in polite conversation one must avoid all talk of politics). His sense of shock soon gave way to mild confusion, which arose, it transpired, because he was unable to see how my interest in his political views might in any way relate to my examination of his project's activities. After a brief pause, however, he replied:

> Well, I'm interested in the environment … and I'm interested in people – but I'm not really interested in politics. I don't actually know enough to be able to put myself in one [camp] or the other … I mean, I do have liberal values, I suppose. I believe in fairness, I believe in opportunity … I believe in values and those values tend to be green, they tend to be about ethics, they tend to be about a fair distribution, they tend to be about reducing the mass of inequality, the massive gap between the wealthiest and the poorest.

> Yeah, so, maybe you could call me a liberal … but, well, I don't know really … (Stevens, 2017b).

This kind of general fuzziness regarding all things political was evident right across this project (this can be contrasted to the situation at *Freshfair*, where the core actors were all knowledgeable about, held strong opinions on, and were always keen to discuss, political matters – see chapter 6). Some participants did acknowledge that they held political opinions as *private* citizens who were more or less sympathetic to one or another of the 'mainstream' UK political parties (for those willing to say, in every case it was the Liberal Democrats or the Green Party) (Rose, 2017; Jackson, 2017; Warburton, 2017). But even in these cases, the participants in question were keen to stress that their *private* opinions did not in any way influence the energy company's activities. For them, politics was a *private* matter, and *Greenstar* was simply an ethical, business-focused initiative that operated on a neutral 'civil society' terrain situated outside the sphere of politics.[62]

Building on the discussion in chapter 2, however, I want to point out here that it is not possible to separate out the 'civil society' terrain from the sphere of politics in the way these participants believed. In that chapter, I drew on Gramsci's conception of the 'integral state' to show that the activities that take place on this terrain – through private institutions, organisations, social movements, and other 'non-state' actors – can and do play an important role in reinforcing (or, as I emphasise in chapter 9, challenging) state power. As Gramsci argued, and as Jessop has emphasised, ''[c]ivil society', a domain of ostensibly 'private' associations', *should be seen as 'an integral part of the state and, a fortiori, of politics and policy*' (Jessop, 2016: 48; emphasis added).

So how does this contribute to my efforts to critically examine *Greenstar*'s activities? Well, in chapter 4, I noted that the growth of 'third sector' activity in the areas of environmental and social protection during the mid- to late-1990s and early 2000s *was central to the development and consolidation of neoliberal capitalism in Britain*. I pointed out there that in that neoliberalizing context, where state capacities in key areas of social provision were steadily being eroded, private businesses and 'civil society' organisations were increasingly being called upon to deliver environmental and social services that the neoliberalizing state either could not or would not (Fong and Nascheck, 2021; also Jessop, 2000). Consequently, the terrain that *Greenstar* was operating upon was *not* politically neutral. Yet, it could *appear* so to its participants because in that 'post-political' action context, neoliberal capitalist eco-social relations had been naturalised and invisibilized (see Mouffe, 2005; Rancière, 2006; Žižek, 2008;

[62] The participants' desire to transition to an eco-localist *capitalist* regime would seem, at first glance, to contradict their cherished idea that *Greenstar* was an apolitical project. However, for these individuals, this was not a seen as political demand because capitalism, in their eyes, was socially neutral.

Fisher, 2009; Swyngedouw, 2010; Gilbert and Williams, 2022; also see discussion in chapter 4). Moreover, the fact that this terrain appeared to them as *the* place to stage their social intervention must also be seen as a product of neoliberal development. I will return to this point in chapter 9.

7.9 *Greenstar*'s performance (1)

Having looked at who was behind *Greenstar Energy* and its operating model, I now want to examine the project's performance. This section has three main subsections. The first looks at how *Greenstar* approached the task of raising the capital needed for its renewable energy schemes. The second focuses on the energy generation and community benefit aspects of the project. The third takes stock of some of the main barriers that impeded its development as it sought to operate and expand in that advanced neoliberal context (this is in line with my primary research question – see chapter 1). This section closes with some brief comments regarding the way that the participants themselves perceived their project's performance. This will feed into my discussion of localist strategy in chapters 8 and 9.

To begin, let me quickly recap *Greenstar*'s initial core aims. As I pointed out in section 7.1 above, the project aimed to:

a) Raise capital to build local renewable energy schemes
b) Produce renewable energy
c) Generate profits and pay dividends to participating shareholders
d) Raise money to help vulnerable members of the local community
e) Expand its operations to the point where it could start generating the levels of income needed to deliver local public services that were being lost to austerity
f) Serve as an 'exemplar project' – one that could inspire other local groups to develop similar 'entrepreneurial' local green energy schemes
g) Play a local role in tackling (planetary scale) environmental and social crises.

1) Raising capital for renewable energy schemes

To build its two inaugural renewable energy schemes – a hydro project at a local reservoir and a solar photovoltaic (PV) system on the roof of a local authority building – *Greenstar* needed to raise £310,000 (£260,000 for the former, £50,000 for the latter). As I noted in section 7.2 above, the participants set out to do this by employing a community shareholder model – a relatively conventional approach in the sphere of community energy (see chapter 3). *Greenstar* offered shares that local investors could purchase. Investors became members of the project. As members they gained the right to vote in decisions put to them at annual general and other

special meetings.[63] Members were also permitted to nominate local projects for *Greenstar*'s community fund – an annually awarded payout for 'good causes' (see section 7.9 below).

Thanks to the well-networked nature of the energy company participants, *Greenstar*'s two initial share issues were well publicised among members of the local sustainability community (Stevens, 2017a). Assisted by this publicity, the share offers were conducted successfully, with the target amounts achieved within a matter of days (the schemes proved so popular that they became *over*subscribed; many would-be investors had to be turned away once the totals had been reached). The relatively high dividend rates forecast by the project also played a part in driving this demand. *Greenstar* was offering investors an average of 5 per cent interest over a 20-year period – a figure far higher than the rates available on standard savings accounts at that time (Stevens, 2017a; Greenstar, 2017e).

I also want to suggest that the neoliberalized nature of its activities (see above) was another reason for its favourable reception. *Greenstar* provided local people with a way to take action on climate change that corresponded closely with established (neoliberal) norms and practices. In that advanced neoliberal action context – one where declining levels of labour representation and political power, the generalised defeat of radical left forces, and the growing acceptance of green capitalist approaches among grassroots environmental actors had severely limited the possibilities for subaltern resistance (see chapter 4) – this ethical investment opportunity enabled local people to *do something* about climate breakdown in a way that posed no threat to their lives, livelihoods, or embedded ways of thinking. Because this was a neoliberalized project, *Greenstar* met with relatively little resistance – economically, socially, culturally, or politically. These factors helped to ensure that it easily raised the money it needed.

Once the necessary capital was in place, *Greenstar* could make the transition from its planning and development to its construction phase. Both of its initial energy installations were built on time and to budget. I will now look more closely at each of these schemes.

The hydro scheme

The hydro project, finally completed in January 2017, was initially forecast to generate over 150,000 kWh of electricity annually and estimated to save around 1.6m kg of CO_2 over its 20-year lifetime. The scheme was projected to generate £30k in revenue its first year. With maintenance, management and insurance costs coming in a £9k, in its first full year of operation, *Greenstar* was looking to spread the remining £21k between capital repayments, interest payments, and community benefit payouts.

[63] *Greenstar*'s 'one member, one vote' approach was intended to stop larger investors from having an outsized say in company decisions. I will expand on this in section 7.11 below.

In its first year, the scheme did not quite match expectations, however. Hampered by some technical issues and lower-than-expected rainfall levels, the hydro scheme ended up 16 per cent down on initial projections. Consequently, that year *Greenstar* paid out only 2.5 per cent interest to investors (half that originally forecast). In its second year, while not quite as bad as the first, the hydro scheme was still down 11 per cent on projections; again, the project capped dividends at 2.5 per cent. At the end of that year, *Greenstar* stated that it would aim to pay higher investor dividends in following years to make up for these unexpected early losses (Greenstar, 2018).

The solar scheme

The solar project also opened in early 2017. This scheme was forecast to generate around 20,000kWh annually and to make CO_2 savings of approximately 10,000 kgs per year. In its first year of operations, this scheme *exceeded* its 20,000kWh target and generated £4.5k in income (£3.5k after maintenance, management and insurance costs were deducted). Just as with the hydro scheme, its surplus was divided between investors and the community benefit fund (the latter of which I will consider in more detail below). It performed similarly in its second year. Given this better-than-expected performance, the solar project represented around 15 per cent of *Greenstar*'s total income over these two years (Greenstar, 2019).

Based on the information provided above, and by referring back to the list of key aims set out at the beginning of this section, I want to point out here that in relation to points (a), (b), and (c) in that list (raising capital needed to build local renewable energy schemes, producing renewable energy, and generating dividends for individual shareholders, respectively), *Greenstar* did make some concrete gains. Consequently, if one was to base an assessment of its performance on these indicators alone, then the *Greenstar* project could arguably be judged a success. So how does this picture change when one brings into focus its community benefit aspect?

2) Greenstar and community benefit

At the outset, *Greenstar* forecast that over its 20-year lifetime, it would dedicate £40,000 of the planned income generated by its two inaugural energy schemes to the funding of local community projects. This was estimated at 20 per cent of the total expected annual interest payments paid to investors over that time. In line with its localist focus (see section 7.6 above), the *Greenstar* project, when looking for worthy beneficiaries for its community fund, prioritised *local* 'progressive' causes – particularly those located within 20 miles of its renewable energy sites.

From the start, however, tensions emerged because of the incompatible nature of two of *Greenstar*'s core aims: delivering returns on investment at rates sufficient to attract shareholders and providing adequate levels of funding for local community projects. Noting the disparity

between the (relatively small) sums that were forecast to be paid to local communities and the (much higher) amounts that the shareholders were due to receive, *Greenstar*'s financial director lamented that:

> ... it is quite depressing how small [the level of community payback] is … It's hardly going to change the planet. There is a trade off because anything that goes to the local community is then not going to the private shareholders. I mean, we have projected around 5 per cent [return on investment to shareholders] and we can't really turn around and say to investors 'well, now we only want to give you 2 per cent because we want to give the community 4 per cent instead of one'. They might be a bit cheesed off and sue us or something (Taylor, 2017b).

Taylor added:

> We knew when we set the project up that when we set investor payments at 5 per cent, that the communities were not going to get a great deal. We decided to set the limit for community payback at around 1 per cent – but that isn't very much money, really (Taylor, 2017b).

Kennedy, a *Greenstar* board member recruited for his HR and management experience, similarly acknowledged that the initiative's projected levels of community payback were relatively trifling.

> [*Greenstar*] was set up to generate low carbon energy, and to generate energy locally for the benefit of the local community … admittedly, the proportion of payback is quite small – it was never going to be a big payback. That's why we need to think about how we can distribute this [surplus] in a fair way (Kennedy, 2017).

In each of its first two operating years, *Greenstar* awarded £2,500 to selected local community initiatives. Some of this money was used to fund public-facing energy efficiency awareness raising events; some was donated to a local homeless charity; the remainder was given to a community group that was looking to raise funds for a feasibility study for another local energy scheme. Despite these concrete outcomes, however, the social support that *Greenstar* provided to local communities was significantly less than the ambitious Stevens had really been hoping for. He stated that the energy project was initially:

> … looking to pay somewhere around £3,000 [each year] to the local community. But really that means we're not paying them enough. I mean, really, we want to add another zero to that – at least. I mean, we really need to scale this up if we're going to make a difference (Stevens, 2017a).

As I noted at the beginning of this section, project expansion was another of *Greenstar*'s initial core aims (see point (e) in the list above). That is because the participants knew that only by scaling *Greenstar* up could it start to generate the levels of income needed to offset austerity's impacts on local communities and make a significant contribution to carbon reduction efforts (also core aims – see points (e) and (g) in the list above). However, for reasons I will now discuss, this planned expansion failed to materialize.

3) *Greenstar*: barriers to expansion

In accordance with my primary research objectives (see chapter 1), here I want to look at the major barriers that impeded *Greenstar* as it sought operate and expand in line with its initial aims. Or more specifically, here I want to look at what the *actors themselves* highlighted as key barriers to their project's operations. While I consider this topic worthwhile in itself, I want to note here that this discussion will feed into my analysis in chapters 8 and 9, where I point to another, more fundamental barrier to this project's activities – one that the participants at this project were themselves unable to see, yet one, I claim, that my eco-Marxian and neo-Gramscian approach helps bring to light. In this section I will consider three major barriers in particular:

- A lack of resources
- Corporate competition (and struggles over land)
- The removal of government support via the Feed-in Tariff (FiT).

I will deal with each of these in turn.

- *Lack of resources*

Like many small non-corporate projects, and just as with the case of *Freshfair* discussed in the previous chapter, *Greenstar* struggled due to a lack of resources. In one respect, this project was luckier than most, as in its early days it was granted access to a £15,000 interest-free loan by its parent organisation, a well-established local sustainability charity. This money enabled *Greenstar* to constitute itself and to get project development underway. In these early stages, the energy company also managed to secure a small amount of grant funding to pay for the time that Stevens spent setting the project up. This short-term funding soon ran out, however, and from that point on *Greenstar* was run wholly on a volunteer basis.

This reliance on volunteer labour created significant barriers in terms of the amount of time the participants could spend working for the project. Just like at *Freshfair*, the *Greenstar* actors found that they did not have time to follow up on opportunities for project development as these arose (see chapter 6; for discussions of this issue in the wider literature, see Seyfang and Smith, 2007; Horrell et al., 2009). Stevens acknowledged that *Greenstar* had:

> … a resource issue ... absolutely. I mean, look, if a big investor came to me and … said, right, go and set up another project and we will pay you to go and do it, and pay for the time you would otherwise have spent managing your other projects, then I would go and do it. But I'm already … absolutely stretched. I'm already the chair of two community energy companies and I work for an environmental organisation and I'm absolutely stretched. My time to set up other things is really limited (Stevens, 2017a).

This point was reinforced by Taylor:

> We don't have much time, people are stretched and tired, and there isn't much time to look for opportunities. But the thing is, to get the money we need to do that [i.e., build a solid resource base], we'd have to be looking for something like a 10 or 15 per cent return on the energy projects, which given the lack of resources, there is no way we can get. So it's a bit of a catch-22 situation (Taylor, 2017a)

She added:

> Having no resources is definitely a problem and it does get in the way. I feel frustration all the time. Communication within [the organisation] is a problem. Everything is done last minute – but that has just become normal. It all goes back to a lack of resources … and that leads to a lack of planning … everything takes so much time to sort out, it's just like, ugh. It's such a faff. You think that something will take an hour and it doesn't. You think that something else will take half an hour and it takes three ... (Taylor, 2017a).

Stretched in this way, the *Greenstar* participants, again like those at *Freshfair*, found that they were compelled to engage in forms of self-exploitation. Just to keep the project going, they consistently found that they had to work beyond the time they had initially set aside for their *Greenstar* activities. All the *Greenstar* participants experienced this to one degree or another, but this practice was most extreme in the case of Stevens. I noted above that he was one of *Greenstar*'s two founding members. Early on, he became the main driving force behind the project, to which he committed a great deal of his spare time. Stevens' dedication and well-intentioned self-sacrifice became fundamental to *Greenstar*'s operations. However, the dependence this generated created serious problems. He gave so much of himself to the project from its earliest days that he became central to all aspects of its activity. Over time, he became the only person who really knew how the whole enterprise held together and how its systems operated. As Kennedy pointed out, this over-reliance on one key individual left the whole organisation highly exposed:

> The problem is, when you have a driven and enthusiastic person who is pushing things forward, like David [Stevens], then things continue. But if you are in a situation where you lose that drive and enthusiasm – the person moves on to something else, for example, gets fed up, bangs their head against the wall too many times and decides to not push any more – then the whole thing can lose momentum. It is a considerable vulnerability to the organisation (Kennedy, 2017).

He added:

> Because we are a relatively small number of people there is a lot of pressure and reliance put on key people. For example, if I'm to name names, let's say David [Stevens] decided to do the lottery and won it and then decided to bugger off, the whole project would crumble. It might not fail entirely, but bloody hell it would be hard work picking up all the balls and plates that he has got juggling and spinning. A lot of the information is in his head. So that's a huge risk. It is having single points of failure through too much knowledge, and a lack of structured documentation, which all comes down to a lack of time and resources (Kennedy, 2017).

Because Stevens was himself so stretched, he found it difficult to manage those who wanted to volunteer for the project and to utilise their time effectively. This created further pressures for the project. As Taylor pointed out:

> [*Greenstar*] is completely dependent on volunteers to power it … and it gets really hard when everyone is volunteering their time. Everyone is waiting for direction from somebody because they are used to it [in their professional lives in the corporate sector or in their 'day jobs' at environmental NGOs]. I actually think people would give more of their time if they were directed [i.e., managed] properly … but we don't have the resources for that. Really there is one person [Stevens] who has always done everything because nobody else can really get to grips with it all … and because [this person is always over-stretched], it can be hard for volunteers to know what they can do to help (Taylor, 2017a).

Kennedy, too, underscored the threat that this reliance on volunteers posed to the project:

> A key risk is volunteer labour. It is all a juggling act. If you have got volunteers ... You don't know how long people are going to stay. You know, one of our trustees just left because there was something they didn't agree with. It is different in the corporate sector. If you have a contract at a senior level with an organisation then you have probably got three months' notice to work and unless you've done something really bad, it is unlikely that you're going to be kicked out immediately. You get notice so you can

> hand over to someone else. You don't get that with volunteer staff. You work on a very fluid basis (Kennedy, 2017).

The *Greenstar* actors saw these interrelated issues – a lack of available time and resources, its dependence on volunteer labour, and its over-reliance on one particular individual – as major problems that hindered its expansion chances. Another concerned the highly competitive nature of the sector they operated within.

- *Competition and access to land*

Perhaps unsurprisingly, *Greenstar* found it difficult to compete against commercial renewable energy operators. Such enterprises, the participants pointed out, tended to be much better resourced (in terms of available staff time and access to capital) compared to community energy groups like *Greenstar*, and consequently they tended to be much better placed to identify and seize profitable opportunities as these arose.

They highlighted the issue of obtaining land as particularly problematic in this regard. *Greenstar* needed land on which to build its renewable energy projects. However, the participants pointed out that community energy schemes like theirs often struggle because (better resourced) private energy firms tend to secure access to the most promising renewable energy sites (that is, those with the greatest renewable energy-generating potential). And because private developers tend to get the best sites, they find themselves much better placed to offer investors higher rates of return (often somewhere in the region of 10-15 per cent, compared to the 5 per cent on offer at *Greenstar*) (Stevens, 2017a; Merchant, 2017; Taylor, 2017a). On this issue, and in a way that underscored his admiration for commercially savvy actors (as well as his frustration with non-business-minded localist groups), Merchant explained that:

> Private enterprises are usually the pioneers and the first to market. They take up the best sites ... It is only later on that social enterprise kind of recognises that there is a possibility of changing how things are done … but by the time these local groups come on board, the best sites have gone. And so their returns are least (Merchant, 2017).

I think that Merchant's comments on this issue raise some interesting points for my study. The first concerns *Greenstar*'s contradictory stance on capitalist competition. As I pointed out in section 7.4 above, the participants at this project tended to view competition, thanks to the innovations and efficiencies it generated, as one of capitalism's most attractive features. Yet on the issue of land, they were lamenting the fact that this same competitive dynamic made it difficult for projects like theirs to operate and expand. So, on the one hand, these community actors eulogised hyper-competitive capitalist firms for their progressive social power, and

sought not just to work alongside such enterprises, but also to emulate their operating practices and propagate these on the 'civil society' terrain. Yet on the other, they complained that capitalist competition made it difficult for community projects like theirs *to compete*. These participants, then, wanted to enjoy (what they saw as) the benefits of capitalist competition, but without its negative consequences. In chapter 4, I showed that this kind of wishful thinking is frequently found among those who advocate 'responsible capitalist' approaches. From this position, it is often argued that it is possible to keep the 'good' aspects of capitalism (its dynamism, its inventiveness, its ability to rapidly respond to new demands, etc.) but get rid of 'the bad' (environmental destruction, social exploitation, and so on). In that chapter and in chapter 2, however, I argued, by drawing on eco-Marxian theory, that it is simply not possible to separate the 'good' and the 'bad' in this way when talking about capitalist development, because capitalism is *inherently* exploitative and ecologically destructive (Foster, 2000; Foster et al., 2010; Burkett, 2014).

The second point relates to Merchant's views on land *ownership* specifically. As I noted above, the difficulties *Greenstar* faced in accessing land severely hindered its ability to act in line with its original aims. Yet the problems this struggle generated did not lead him (nor anyone else at the project, for that matter) to *call into question* existing landownership arrangements. This can again be contrasted to the situation at *Freshfair*. As I showed in the previous chapter, the participants at that project, whose expansion plans were also thwarted by land access problems, fundamentally disagreed with, and wanted over the longer term to challenge, capitalist landownership arrangements (and capitalist property relations more generally). At *Greenstar*, however, these embedded arrangements were considered natural and immutable. The following comments from Merchant help to illustrate this point. When discussing the issue of which particular social groups should have the right to use local land, he claimed that:

> … community groups often make the *false assumption* that because something is in their locality, they have a right to do it [i.e., use local land and resources for the good of the community] – whereas of course *everything belongs to someone* and if you haven't actually got a legal agreement that allows you to do it, then you haven't even started (Merchant, 2017; emphasis added).

Of course, Merchant was not wrong to point out that, on the issue of landownership in contemporary Britain, almost everything *does* 'belong[…] to someone' (on this, see Christophers, 2018; Shrubsole, 2019). However, I suggest that he and his fellow *Greenstar* actors erred when they assumed that the progressive social changes they wished to see could be achieved whilst leaving existing landownership arrangements intact. At *Freshfair*, the participants believed that land should be de-commodified and brought into community or

common ownership so that it could be used for the greater social good (see chapter 6). The *Greenstar* actors, by contrast, believed that community groups like theirs, in order to improve their chances of getting hold of the land they required, needed to better accommodate themselves to existing arrangements by acting more like corporate firms. In chapter 8, I will say more about how the *Greenstar* participants' views on this matter came to constrain the emancipatory possibilities associated with their project.

- *The Feed-in Tariff*

By far the biggest practical barrier to *Greenstar*'s development was the cut to the government policy that underpinned its entire model: the Feed-in Tariff (FiT). The FiT, introduced in 2010, provided payments to licensed electricity suppliers for the generation of renewable energy. It was intended to give a financial incentive to help kick start the development of renewable energy production as part of the UK's environmental strategy, which aimed to reduce carbon emissions and increase energy security.

The FiT scheme fitted well with the Coalition government's pro-localist BS agenda (see chapter 4). As far back as 2007, in line with his 'compassionate conservative' makeover of the Conservative party, David Cameron had highlighted Britain's problematic reliance on centralised, fossil fuel-based energy systems and the need for a 'decentralised energy revolution' as part of a wider response to climate change. He argued that Britain needed to '… move from a top-down, old-world, centralised [energy] system to a bottom-up, new-world, decentralised system …' (Cameron, 2007). He emphasised that this focus on small-scale electricity generation was about more than just energy, stressing that 'decentralised energy is a key part of our political vision' and a 'vivid illustration of our [i.e., the Conservative Party's] political approach' (Cameron, 2007). By enabling community groups to generate electrical power, Cameron claimed that he wanted to give people in Britain 'more power over their own lives. This really is', he stated, 'power to the people' (Cameron, 2007).

Cameron took this focus on local energy production into government when his Conservative Party was elected in 2010 (alongside the Liberal Democrats, their Coalition partners). As I noted in chapter 3, local energy became a core element of the Coalition's broader localist agenda – so much so that it was held up as the 'perfect expression of the transformative power of the Big Society' (Department for Energy and Climate Change, 2010). It was this kind of talk that had initially inspired the *Greenstar* actors to set their project up, and it was in this charged pro-localist atmosphere that they started to develop their entrepreneurial, community-based approach to tackling environmental and social problems. The FiT provided the financial foundation upon which their energy project would stand. As Merchant pointed out: 'when the Feed-in Tariff came in, it was a huge catalyst to more [community energy] schemes being built'.

This policy gave the *Greenstar* actors the confidence they needed to set their plans in motion, and it would become central to their project's operations and their longer-term expansion goals (Merchant, 2017). However, while the FiT scheme offered them a way to potentially realise their community empowerment vision, it also left the project vulnerable to changes in government policy.

Reducing the tariff

In late 2015, the government stated that it was going to make significant changes to the way the FiT scheme operated. In January 2016, 'deployment caps' were announced, which limited the number of installations that qualified for FiT payments. The FiT rates were also reduced (NBS, 2016; RECC, 2016; Ofgem, 2019b). The tariff for solar PV systems fell from 12.47p/kwh to 4.39p/kwh, and the rate for wind turbines and hydroelectricity dropped to 8.54p/kwh. Moreover, it was announced that the FiT rates would be reduced further by a set quarterly amount, and then by an additional 10 per cent if the 'deployment cap' for that quarter was reached. These changes introduced a high degree of uncertainty into the small-scale renewable energy sector because in this new funding environment, installers could not know in advance what tariff rate they would receive.

For many who had pinned their green transition hopes on the growth of this sector, the announcements were nothing short of catastrophic. Community Energy England noted in the wake of this announcement that these changes 'have seriously de-motivated the sector to the point at which many are considering whether further active participation in the 'Big Society' is a waste of their time' (Community Energy England, 2015). As I will show below, the *Greenstar* actors – who prior to this point had been passionate advocates of the government's BS approach – would, as a result of these changes, gravitate towards just such a sceptical position.

For the moment, however, I want to stick with the issue of FiT policy to show how the justification the government gave for this shift helps to illuminate another problematic feature of *Greenstar*'s approach, one that brings up the issue of capitalism and innovation once again. The government stated that it felt it could reduce FiT rates because the installation costs for solar PV had fallen dramatically since the scheme was introduced. In 'mainstream' environmental discourse, this reduction in the cost of solar has been seen as an example of capitalism working at its dynamic best (Alami et al., 2024; Christophers, 2024). Seen from this perspective, capitalism had taken solar energy – an expensive, marginal technology – and, by introducing efficiencies, streamlining production, etc., had made it economically viable as a mass energy source. Capitalist 'progress', then, had made it possible to remove government support. In line with this pro-capitalist logic, the UK government, when it cut the tariff, stated that its initial support for the community energy sector had only ever been intended to 'help technologies

stand on their own two feet, not encourage reliance on subsidies'. Consequently, having set the community energy sector in motion, the government was now looking to engineer a shift from 'a demand-led to a competition-led allocation of support' to generate new 'efficiencies' and deliver 'better value for money for consumers' (Department for Energy and Climate Change, 2015: 9). Based on the work set out in chapter 4, it can be noted here that this rationalisation for the FiT rate cut corresponds with the responsible green capitalist outlook that had become firmly entrenched in that advanced neoliberal action context. As I will show below, because the *Greenstar* actors had internalised this logic, they could accept this explanation for the policy shift (even though they remained unhappy about the cut itself).

I claim that this discussion helps to expose a core contradiction in *Greenstar*'s approach. I noted in section 7.8 above that the *Greenstar* participants, in line with the prevailing *Zeitgeist*, had been looking to develop an *entrepreneurial* community response to environmental and social problems that, in accordance with embedded neoliberal 'common sense' and the core organisational principles of the BS agenda, did not turn to 'the state' for help, but instead looked for innovative ways, in that wider austerity landscape, to generate the income needed to pay for key local services. I have also pointed out that by designing *Greenstar* in the way that they did, these actors believed they had indeed found an entrepreneurial way to empower local communities and reduce their dependence on 'the state'. It seemed to escape the participants' attention, however, that their 'entrepreneurial' community project *had only been viable in the first place because of the state support it received*. *Greenstar* relied on the FiT subsidy scheme – this can be seen by the fact that once it was taken away, the initiative failed to set up any new energy projects.[64] The cut, then, delivered a devastating blow to the project's prospects. Merchant pointed out that:

> For the community renewables [sector], it was tough … when the Feed-in Tariff was reduced we had to stop all development … it put the brakes on in a massive way … (Merchant, 2017).

Merchant, along with the other *Greenstar* participants, felt incredibly let down by this change in government policy. The following comments from Stevens, made shortly after the change in policy was announced, makes this clear:

> **…** we have a number of hydro schemes in [the region] which we know just won't go ahead now. I mean it is so disappointing. I mean we've been encouraged by the government to go to green energy, we been encouraged by these themes of localism and the Big Society, we've embraced it, we've put loads of voluntary hours into it, and now

[64] While *Greenstar* couldn't expand, the first two projects remained operational as these had been locked into 20-year contracts before the FiT rate was reduced.

> it will come to nothing. The opportunities for the communities to earn their own income are going to disappear. I'm absolutely gutted (Stevens, 2015b).

He added:

> The difficulty with the government changing from encouragement to then taking away those subsidies is that all of those volunteer hours and those volunteers, it ends up in a cycle of cynicism where, if those subsidies come back people will go, well, yeah, we'll work for years and then people will just pull the rug out from under our feet. Look, if we look at [business] investment, it is all about long-term security. It is no different for communities. They just want that security for the future and taking away that subsidy overnight – *overnight* – will just make them feel hopeless I think (Stevens, 2015b).

This sentiment was shared across *Greenstar* (Merchant, 2017; Taylor, 2018; Waberthwaite, 2018). Based on the information above, I suggest that the government's decision to remove its support for community-scale renewable energy projects *directly undermined these participants' active consent* for the Coalition's entire localist agenda (I will expand on this in the following chapter). Despite their disappointment, however, their deeply rooted belief in the power of the entrepreneurial solutions remained undimmed, as the final sentence in the following quote from Merchant helps to show:

> Feed-in Tariffs were deemed to be, politically, too expensive, they were … blah blah blah … Which I think was rubbish, actually, when you look at the true costs of the subsidy. But you can't assume that they are going to come back. *So you've got to innovate* (Merchant, 2017; emphasis added).

In my view, it is telling that Merchant did not countenance any kind of *political* response to the policy shift that had fatally undermined his project. In that de-politicised context (Swyngedouw, 2010, 2011; Žižek, 2018), he viewed the government's decision not as something that could be resisted, but only accepted. And once it had been accepted, the only way he could think to respond to it was by making his project more business-like, more entrepreneurial, more innovative. Yet *Greenstar* would never manage to innovate its way out of this predicament. Supported by the FiT, the project had successfully set up two renewable energy schemes; without it, it could expand no further. This might not quite have fitted with the entrepreneurial imaginary that guided the project's activities, but as the consequences of the FiT cut showed, that was the reality on the ground.

7.10 *Greenstar*'s performance (2)

Having considered the barriers that the participants highlighted, I now want to look at how they thought their project performed overall. The first thing to say here is, despite all the problems

outlined above (or perhaps even because of them), the *Greenstar* actors were delighted with its performance and saw this initiative as a 'total success' (Stevens, 2017a). Let me consider this judgement more closely.

In section 7.9 above, I showed that *Greenstar* was relatively successful in certain key areas – namely, generating renewable energy and delivering returns to investors. In others, however, I pointed out that the results were a little more mixed. Here I'm referring to 1) *Greenstar*'s aim of generating revenues for local communities, and, by extension 2) its intention to develop to the point where it could start paying for key local services that were being lost to austerity. On the first of these points, I have already shown that *Greenstar*'s community fund was far less than the participants at the project had initially hoped it would be, and that, while it was able to pay for *some* forms of local community support, the scope and duration of this activity was extremely limited. This leads me to the second point: because the project was unable to expand its operations in the way that it had originally intended, and because it therefore failed to generate anything like the levels of community payback that were initially expected of it (see above), *Greenstar*'s activities made a barely perceptible difference to social service provision in that harsh austerity landscape. Yet despite these clear shortcomings, a general sense of triumph prevailed at this organisation: as I noted a moment ago, its participants were thrilled with what the project had achieved.

Referencing the serious problems their project had encountered and the ways these had severely undermined its wider strategic vision, I asked Stevens if, in light of his experiences, he thought that the project's original aims had changed. He replied:

> No, they haven't changed. Not in the slightest. They are absolutely anchored (Stevens, 2017a).

But how could he maintain this position, given the problems *Greenstar* had encountered – particularly the FiT rate cut, which had completely destroyed its financial model? The answer: because he assumed that capitalist 'progress' – through its technological advances and its driving down of costs – would soon make *Greenstar* economically viable again, even without FiT support (Stevens, 2017a).[65] Consequently, he believed that the project *didn't need to adapt its overall approach*. Just like Stevens, Taylor also remained committed to *Greenstar*'s original 'entrepreneurial' community shareholder model. When I asked her if, given the issues that had halted the project's expansion plans, she thought *Greenstar* should change its approach, she replied:

[65] From the discussion in section 7.9 above, it can be seen that his thinking here corresponded with the government's justification for the FiT rate cut.

> No. There haven't really been any [problems]. We have worked to time and to budget. We have had a few teething problems with the hydro which will affect our profit but they should be sorted soon. I think it is all going well (Taylor, 2017b).

What I noticed when talking to these participants was their inclination to foreground *Greenstar*'s *particular* successes (the two energy schemes they had managed to put in place before the FiT rate was cut) and ignore problems relating to the *universalising* aspect of their project. I suggest that these actors' position on this issue resembles the 'folk political' outlook critiqued by Srnicek and Williams, which I discussed in chapter 3. As I showed there, these thinkers took 'folk political' approaches to task for prioritising small-scale, 'immediate' activities oriented towards readily comprehensible, short-term goals and for ignoring less palpable, longer term, strategic considerations (Srnicek and Williams, 2016). I suggest that viewing *Greenstar* as a 'folk political' project offers one way to account for the disconnect that emerged between the participants' rosy view of their project's performance and its actual results 'on the ground' (measured in terms of what they themselves initially set out to achieve).

Another way to potentially account for this disjuncture relates to the fact that, while *Greenstar* did fall far short of accomplishing all that it had planned to, it nevertheless was consistently *just successful enough* to enable its participants to justify to themselves the continuation of the project's activities. This brings me back to the issue of sub-hegemony first discussed in chapter 2. As I have already noted, *Greenstar* mirrored neoliberal practices and did nothing to challenge the wider neoliberal capitalist order that was driving the eco-social crises it was responding to. It is important to add here, however, that its activities were *nevertheless sufficient to satisfy those involved with it that they were taking meaningful steps to tackle these problems*. On this basis, I claim that *Greenstar* can be seen as a sub-hegemonic eco-localist project *par excellence*, and that its activities can as a result be understood as *sub-hegemonic 'pseudo-activities'*. I will say more on this in chapters 8 and 9.

Finally, I suggest that these actors' selective evaluation of their project's activities played a key role in helping them to maintain their existing eco-social worldview. By viewing the *Greenstar* project as an outright success despite its evident shortcomings, these actors were validating the pro-localist, responsible green capitalist imaginary that had informed their activities from the very beginning and to which they could imagine no real alternative. I will pick up this point in the following chapter, where I claim that this deeply embedded organisational imaginary formed an *ideational barrier* that would severely limit this project's emancipatory potential.

7.11 Neoliberalism and production

In chapters 3 and 4, I drew on the works of Marxian thinkers such as Huber, Phillips, Sharzer, and Srnicek and Williams to point out that in core capitalist countries over the course of the

neoliberal period, there occurred a generalised shift in subaltern environmental focus away from the sphere of production towards the sphere of individualised consumption (evidenced by the increasing emphasis within environmentalist repertoires on ethical consumerist approaches, the growing interest in individual carbon footprint accounting, and so on – see Sharzer, 2012; Phillips, 2015; Srnicek and Williams, 2016; Huber, 2022).

Huber in particular has linked the growth of such activities – something he refers to as 'lifestyle environmentalism' – over recent decades to the rise of neoliberalism and the way its associated processes have spatially restructured global production, destroyed union power, evacuated class from almost all social and cultural discourses, and professionalised and depoliticised environmentalist activity (Huber, 2019; see also discussion in chapter 4). More specifically, he argues that because neoliberalized actors in core capitalist nations have become increasingly *separated* from (offshored) production processes, and because this situation has been normalised, subaltern environmental groups today tend to miss the importance of struggles in and over the sphere of production and instead focus their attention on trying to achieve their desired eco-social outcomes through their capacity as *consumers*. In Huber's eyes, this shift in focus has led environmentalists in advanced neoliberal contexts to overlook the importance of the sphere of production, and crucially, the significance of *who exactly owns and controls* the production processes upon which social life depends (Huber, 2022).

In chapters 3 and 4, I used Huber's work to help me explain the growing social importance of (subaltern) eco-localist activity during the neoliberal period. Here, however, I suggest that *Greenstar*'s activities present a potential challenge to his work. That is because, while I believe Huber is correct to underscore the urgent need to democratise the ownership and control of production at this time of intensifying crisis (see chapter 2), and correct, too, to argue that an increasing subaltern focus on the sphere of consumption has hindered the development of wider emancipatory movements, I claim that he is wrong to suggest that 'mainstream' environmental actors in advanced neoliberal contexts fail to consider issues related to production and its ownership and control (Huber, 2022). Contrary to Huber's assertion, then, I claim that the very existence of the community energy sector in the UK[66] generally, and the activities of the *Greenstar* project in particular, help to show that neoliberalized subaltern environmental actors *can and often do take issues around production and non-capitalist forms of ownership and control seriously*. Furthermore, I contend that radical thinkers such as Huber, who wish to catalyse the development of *counter*-hegemonic eco-social movements going forward, need to take account of this fact. Why? Because in my view, only by doing so does it become possible

[66] And, of course, further afield.

to *expose the mechanisms through which these very real subaltern demands for shared ownership and control become neoliberalized*.

To help me unpack this, I will draw a distinction here between activities oriented towards *community* ownership of production, and those that aim towards *common* ownership of the means of production (at the societal level). Considered in these terms, I claim that Huber, who on my reading is ultimately concerned with activities geared towards the latter, tends to overlook the importance of those associated with the former, and that consequently he squanders the opportunity to develop an understanding of how subaltern demands for shared ownership and control get channelled in sub-hegemonic directions. I think the *Greenstar* case study is illustrative here because it helps to show how such demands can become incorporated into existing governing technologies, siloed off from other areas of social life, and in this way contained.

Greenstar*: pseudo-community, pseudo-ownership, pseudo-control*

At *Greenstar*, I suggest that the actors' desire for community ownership and control was 'pre-corporated' into existing social arrangements because, having been acculturated into their neoliberalized action setting, they subscribed to weak conceptions of 'community', 'ownership', and 'control'. Let me briefly consider each of these areas in turn:

- **Community:** at *Greenstar*, the project's members (i.e., shareholders) were understood 1) *as a community* (of place and interest), and simultaneously 2) as *part of the wider local community*. On point 1), however, I suggest that these members could only be understood as a 'community' in the weakest possible sense: while it is true that most investors lived in the local area, it was true, too, that these individuals tended not to come into any kind of contact with one another, and that there thus existed no genuine social connections between them.[67] Perhaps in that post-2008 setting – where community ties had been severely weakened by decades of neoliberal advance – this minimal sense of community felt in some sense meaningful. In my view, however, this loose collection of environmentally inclined, profit-seeking *individuals* could barely be seen as a community at all.

  Building on this, I claim that the participants' inclination to view the *Greenstar* members *as a community* (point 1), and to consider this group as *part of the wider local community* (point 2) performed an ideological function. I suggest that this focus on 'community' helped to obscure the inconvenient truth that the *Greenstar* project

[67] A small number of members did encounter one another at AGMs and other special meetings, but this contact was minimal.

operated in a manner that tended to separate the local people who came into contact with it into two broad groups: first, those who had the means to invest and who would as shareholders receive regular returns on their investments; second, those who did not have the means to invest, yet who may potentially benefit in some minor way from the small proportion of the surplus that *Greenstar* diverted to its 'community fund'. This, then, was a highly divided and inequitable scenario that was at odds with these participants' ideal notion of 'a community'. Stretching this further, here I will also (tentatively) suggest that parallels can be drawn, on the one hand, between the group of *Greenstar* investors and the wealthy investor class in neoliberal capitalist society more broadly, and, on the other, between the local beneficiaries of *Greenstar*'s community fund and the working-class majority in advanced capitalist economies. Based on this, I suggest that *Greenstar*'s 'community' project mirrored social arrangements found in capitalist society more broadly and, under the guise of bringing people together, helped to reproduce capitalism's fundamental social antagonism (see chapter 2) at the local scale. The *Greenstar* project, then, by generating an *illusion* of community where there was in fact none, helped to efface class distinctions existing in the local population.

- **Ownership:** I claim that *Greenstar*'s conception of community *ownership* also rang hollow. Here I want to highlight two particular issues. First, building on the previous point, I want to emphasise that *Greenstar*'s energy projects were not owned by the local community considered in any meaningful sense, but rather by a relatively privileged group of individuals who lived locally. Thus, their claim that *Greenstar*'s energy projects were *community owned* was highly questionable. The second concerns the restricted social applicability of their concept of community ownership. As I noted in section 7.1, the *Greenstar* participants wanted the community energy sector to play a much greater part in Britain's energy mix because they believed that this would transform people's relationship to energy production in a way that empowered local communities and generated strong social bonds. However, they were unable to expand this logic of shared ownership *beyond the sphere of community energy itself*. Both as a point of principle and in practical terms, they focused all their attention solely on this sector. Thus, their progressive social energies were siloed off and contained within parameters set out by the government's community energy incentives (and they would remain so even after these incentives were taken away – see chapter 8).

- **Control:** if the *Greenstar* participants' ideas around 'community' and 'ownership' were weak, then I claim that their conception of popular 'control' was even weaker still. While *Greenstar formally* operated using a democratic 'one member, one vote' system

(see section 7.2), in reality its members and participants had very little say over how the project was run. As I noted in section 7.9 above, *Greenstar*'s activities were for the most part guided by one central figure: the Company Director, Stevens. He was responsible for taking most of *Greenstar*'s operational decisions, and it was he who played an outsized role in determining which aspects of the project's operations were to be put to board members and/or the wider membership for their consideration. Therefore, while the *Greenstar* initiative *promoted itself* as a democratically controlled community energy project, it was democratic in a minimal sense only. Nevertheless, this *appearance* of member control seemed sufficient to satisfy those involved with it that this was indeed a democratic project.

To bring this chapter to a close, and to help ease the transition to the one that follows, let me briefly recapitulate the main points from the discussion above. In this chapter, I have shown that the *Greenstar* participants:

1) Tended to fetishize the local scale
2) Believed that transitioning to a (local) green capitalist regime was not only possible, but *desirable*. This was because in their view, such an approach offered the only *realistic* way to resolve environmental and social crises going forward
3) Considered their activities, as well as those that take place on the 'civil society' terrain in advanced neoliberal contexts more broadly, as non-ideological, socially neutral, and taking place *outside of the sphere of politics*
4) Were looking to develop a non-political/market-based approach to societal change that avoided the need for any kind of social struggle
5) Subscribed to weak conceptions of 'community', 'ownership' and 'control' of production, which drastically limited this project's emancipatory potential.

Based on these points, I claim that while the participants saw *Greenstar* as an *alternative* social project that offered a local-scale response to the wider environmental and social crises that neoliberalization had intensified, in realty its activities were congruent with, and conducive to the extension of, neoliberal capitalist social relations. By focusing on 'ethical' investment, eco-localism, and 'green' entrepreneurialism, *Greenstar*'s activities helped to channel local environmental actors' desire to respond to environmental and social problems in a market-mediated, profit-oriented direction. Because it operated fully in line with established neoliberal thought and practice, its activities met with little in the way of resistance – economically, culturally, politically, or psychologically. As a result, *Greenstar* managed to achieve a level of 'success' that was sufficient to convince those involved with it that their continued participation in the project was worthwhile (despite the fact that it failed to make any genuine headway in

terms of the more socially transformative aspects of its initial agenda). For these reasons, and in contradistinction to the case of the *Freshfair* food hub, I characterise *Greenstar* as a *sub-hegemonic subaltern eco-localist project operating unreflexively in the shadow of fossil neoliberalism*. In the next chapter, I will examine why *Greenstar Energy* developed in this way, why the participants at *Freshfair* took a radically different approach, and how all this relates to the development of neoliberal capitalism in Britain.

Chapter 8: Analysing the case studies

Introduction

Chapter 4 provided a contextual backdrop for my study by examining neoliberal development in advanced economies (with a particular focus on the British case). There I discussed neoliberalization's deleterious environmental and social effects and made some preliminary comments regarding the ways that neoliberalization processes over recent decades have shaped subaltern responses to these impacts.

In chapters 6 and 7, I shifted perspective to examine the case study projects. There I sketched out the central participants' study-relevant biographical details, discussed their motivations and eco-social imaginaries, outlined their key aims, considered their initial strategic visions, and assessed the performance of their ventures.

In this chapter I aim, by drawing on the Marxian and Gramscian ideas discussed in chapter 2, to bring these earlier discussions of context and conduct together. Taking account of the dialectical interplay of these spheres, in what follows I will examine: 1) the relationship between objective structures and the participants' subjective experiences to show how the longer-term evolution of neoliberalism in Britain shaped environmentalist 'common sense' in the post-2008 period; 2) how this 'common sense' influenced the participants' attempts at social construction in ways that helped to reinforce the social arrangements that were driving the problems their projects were set up to mitigate.

The chapter has two parts. Part one revisits and refines the material set out in chapters 6 and 7 to bring more clearly into view the contrasting organisational imaginaries that informed the activities at each project. On this basis I identify important similarities and differences between their approaches (section 8.1). This feeds into an examination of how the evolution of the participants' worldviews relates to wider environmental, economic, cultural, and political factors (section 8.2).

In part two, I look at the issues of subaltern resistance and neoliberal co-optation through a Marxian and (neo-)Gramscian lens (section 8.3 and 8.4). Employing the categories of hegemony, sub-hegemony, and counter-hegemony first discussed in chapter 2, I consider once more the developmental trajectories of the case study projects first outlined in chapters 6 and 7. There I showed that it was not just the *pro-capitalist* energy company (which from the very beginning operated unreflexively in line with neoliberal social logic) that operated in a way that helped to reinforce, neoliberal eco-social relations, but that the *anti-capitalist* food hub (whose actors had consciously sought to challenge this logic) ended up doing so too.

In line with my primary research aims, the work in this chapter will help to develop my understanding of the barriers that face eco-localist projects as they operate in fossil fuel-based advanced neoliberal contexts (section 8.5). The insights generated here will feed into the final chapter, which draws together the work of this and the previous chapters to enrich ongoing discussions about eco-localist strategy at this time of rapidly intensifying environmental and social crisis.

Part 1: Grounding the analysis

8.1 Same context, different imaginaries

During the discussion in chapters 6 and 7, I outlined some key commonalities between the case study projects. To recap briefly: *Freshfair* and *Greenstar* were situated geographically close to one another; both were established at around the same time (in 2011, in the wake of the 2008 crisis); both emerged in an action context that was heavily shaped by the Coalition government's Big Society (BS) agenda. The initiatives also shared similar objectives. Both *Freshfair* and *Greenstar* sought to: 1) reduce carbon emissions in its sector (food at the former, energy at the latter); 2) rebuild community ties and restore the relationship between people and nature; 3) provide sources of social support for local people who were struggling to deal with the impacts of government austerity policies.

There were some important differences between the projects, too. In my view, the most significant among these was the contrast between the eco-social imaginaries that informed the activities at each. As I have shown, the strategy team members at the food hub coalesced around a *pro-localist, anti-capitalist* position (at least initially); the principal actors at the energy company subscribed to a *pro-localist, pro-capitalist* standpoint. I claim that the contrast between these organisational imaginaries – one that I believe is significant *precisely because* these projects emerged at around the same time, in roughly the same place, and in response to a shared set of problems – provides a valuable entry point for examining how neoliberalization processes over the past four decades have shaped 'progressive' localist responses to environmental and social breakdown, and what this means for emancipatory social strategy today. By examining the root causes of this divergence, I aim to expose the limitations associated with each project's initial approach, and in this way to highlight some core limitations of popular forms of eco-localist organising more generally. I will develop this argument in the sections that follow. To do that, I first need to draw out some key points about each project from the case study chapters.

Freshfair *and* Greenstar*: eco-localist organising and the 2008 crisis*

In chapter 6, I showed that the members of the *Freshfair* strategy team had long-held, deeply entrenched anti-capitalist views. I also showed there that even though they subscribed to radical

ideas, from around the mid-2000s until the time they decided to set *Freshfair* up in 2011, these individuals nevertheless felt that they needed to channel all of their activist time and energy into sub-hegemonic, eco-localist 'mainstream-alternative' community-scale projects.

I accounted for the disjuncture between their *radical* political views and the *reformist* nature of their social activities by showing that, for most of that time, they were operating in a context of 'green capitalist realism'. As I argued in chapter 4, this was a period when capitalistic principles of eco-social organisation had become so deeply ingrained in environmental 'common sense' that, in the popular ecological imagination, capitalism had come to 'seamlessly occupy the horizons of the thinkable' (Fisher, 2009: 8). I also pointed out there that this was an action setting in which activities that aligned with neoliberal norms and values tended to be selected for, while those that did not tended to be marginalized (see Gilbert and Williams, 2022). For these reasons, they found it difficult to operate in line with their anti-capitalist principles.

Consequently, in that pre-2008 advanced neoliberal action setting, the *Freshfair* participants became resigned to the fact that any attempt to organise *against* capitalism was a waste of time. In their eyes, it was just too deeply entrenched to challenge. Adjusting their expectations in line with what they thought was possible in that context, these participants had concluded that securing some modest 'progressive' gains through localist activity was the best that could be hoped for. Because they could see no realistic alternative to the neoliberally inflected eco-localist forms of activism that were so prevalent in that context (see chapter 3), they decided to operate in this vein. To do so, they had had to repress their radical beliefs and intentions (see chapter 6).

That would all change with the 2008 crisis. I showed in chapter 4 how this crisis terminated neoliberal capitalism's period of hegemony – but not, of course, its period of dominance (Žižek, 2018; Gilbert and Williams, 2022). For the *Freshfair* participants, the irruption of this crisis shattered capitalism's façade of invincibility and created space for them to think once again about anti-capitalist social transition pathways. In the wake of the crash, the 'radical' political ideas they had repressed during the previous years suddenly came back to the surface. The crisis had expanded their horizons of political possibility and transformed their ideas about the kinds of social change they thought progressive eco-localist approaches could deliver. As I explained in chapter 6, it was in this post-crash period that these participants first joined together to form *Freshfair*. The anti-capitalist ideas that were re-emerging for them at this time would strongly influence the way they constructed this project.

This situation can be contrasted to the one that unfolded at *Greenstar*. As I showed in chapter 7, in the years leading up to the 2008 crisis, the central participants here became environmentally aware and active through their involvement with various local businesses, 'green' finance

initiatives, and 'third sector' organisations. I suggested there that this developmental history played an important role in shaping how they interpreted the causes of the ongoing economic and environmental crises as well as what they thought needed to happen to resolve them.

I also showed there that these participants had concluded that capitalism was not to blame for the intensifying environmental and economic crises that were currently engulfing the globe, but only the irresponsible, financialized, globalized form of capitalism that had emerged in recent decades. From the discussion in chapter 4, it can be seen that by taking this position, the core *Greenstar* actors were aligning themselves with the arguments put forward by dominant political and business groups in that immediate post-crash conjuncture.

So how does all this link to the issue of localization? Well, the *Freshfair* actors wanted to transition away from capitalism and towards a society based around cooperation, democracy, production for use-value, etc. During the project's early phases, they believed *that localization offered the primary way to achieve this societal shift*. At that time, they thought that by changing the *spatial* relations of their activity (making things more localized), they would be able to bring about a change in *social* relations (increasing the power of working-class communities vis-à-vis capital). However, based on their experiences, they would later shift to a position where *class* relations gained primacy, and the *scale* of their activities became of secondary importance. It can be seen, then, that over the course of the period examined by this study, the primary and secondary aspects of their initial approach became inverted (see tables 8.1 and 8.2 below).

At *Greenstar*, the key actors had from the outset believed – in line with established mainstream 'progressive' subaltern environmental thought at that time – in the need for localized solutions to pressing eco-social problems. Unlike at *Freshfair*, however, the participants here subscribed to the view that local *capitalism* offered the most appropriate – indeed, the only viable – way to avoid irreversible environmental breakdown and/or a repeat of the 2008 crisis (Stephens, 2017a; Merchant, 2017). Also in contrast to the *Freshfair* case, the participants here did not later break with their original localist stance – even when the limitations of this approach became apparent (see chapter 7). I have tried to capture the way the participants at these initiatives positioned themselves in relation to capitalism and localization, and how this changed (or didn't change) over time, in tables 8.1 and 8.2 below.

2011		
	Primary aspect	**Secondary aspect**
Freshfair	Scalar relations (localism)	Social relations (class)
Greenstar	Scalar relations (localism)	N/A

Table 8.1 (above): *Freshfair* and *Greenstar* positions on localism – 2011

2017		
	Primary aspect	**Secondary aspect**
Freshfair	Social relations (class)	Scalar relations (localism)
Greenstar	Scalar relations (localism)	N/A

Table 8.2 (above): *Freshfair* and *Greenstar* positions on localism – 2017

I have shown that the two case study projects pursued contrasting eco-social transition strategies, and that these approaches were informed by different eco-social imaginaries. Which raises a question: given the numerous commonalities between these initiatives (same start date, same geographical location, same broad aims, etc.), what can explain the stark contrast between their approaches? To help answer this question, I claim that it is necessary to consider how the evolution of each project's approach relates to the longer-term development of neoliberalism in Britain.

8.2 Neoliberalization and the case study participants

Both *Freshfair* and *Greenstar* came into being and began their operations in 2011. By referring to the periodization of neoliberalism set out in chapter 4, it can thus be noted that both projects emerged during neoliberalism's post-2008 crisis phase. Situating the emergence of these schemes in their particular social-political-economic context in this way is useful, I suggest,

because it helps to bring into clearer focus the problems the participants were grappling with (austerity-related social hardship, public sector cuts, rapidly rising carbon emissions, and so on).

However, although useful, I also claim that such a synchronic approach can only take the analysis so far. In order to develop this in a way that can help to generate strategically useful answers to the question posed above, it is necessary to look beyond the action context in which the projects were established and to consider how the emergence of these initiatives in that post-2008 conjuncture relates to shifts in the areas of economy, society, culture, and politics *over time*. If one maps the biographical information about the participants at each project (see chapters 6 and 7) onto the periodization set out in chapter 4, it can be seen that while *Freshfair* and *Greenstar* may have emerged *in the same post-2008 neoliberal crisis context*, the principal actors at each first became involved in environmental activity *during different phases of neoliberal development*.

It can be seen that the majority of *Freshfair*'s principal actors came of age politically during neoliberalism's vanguard stage – a time when neoliberalism had yet to be fully consolidated, an action context within which political alternatives to capitalism either actually existed out in the world (for example, the 'actually existing socialism' of the Soviet states), or were at least strong in cultural memory (see chapter 4). Consequently, these participants had all been extremely active in what might be described as not-fully-neoliberalized contexts where levels of social solidarity and political resistance were relatively high. Not only that, but all had experienced first-hand how neoliberalization processes had generated negative social and environmental impacts. Further, each member of *Freshfair*'s strategy team understood that alternatives to neoliberalism (and to capitalism more generally) *were possible and could potentially be brought into being*. As I noted above, although these ideas would fade during neoliberalism's consolidation phase, they would re-emerge with the 2008 crash and greatly influence how they organised in its wake.

From the discussion in chapter 7, it can be noted that the principal actors at *Greenstar* became politically aware and environmentally active *during neoliberalism's consolidation phase*. This phase can be seen as neoliberalism's high point – a context where neoliberal social logic had become firmly embedded in subaltern 'common sense' and where the condition known as 'capitalist realism' prevailed (Fisher, 2009; on how this compares to the situation today, see chapter 9 below).

Not only that, but by this stage in neoliberalism's development, the social power of organised labour in Britain had been largely extinguished (Harvey, 2005; Gallas, 2017), cultural memories of class struggle and workplace solidarity had faded, and individualistic norms and entrepreneurial ideas had become deeply embedded in popular culture (Harvey, 2005; Fisher,

2009; Mirowski, 2014; Dardot and Laval, 2017; Gilbert and Williams, 2022). The cultural-political context in which they emerged was one where 'grand narratives' tended to be viewed with suspicion, and where projects oriented towards any kind of universal politics were often seen as totalitarian (Žižek, 2002; Eagleton, 2004; Srnicek and Williams, 2016; Gilbert and Williams, 2022). By this point, state-based approaches to command and control had been largely discredited by neoliberal elites keen to portray such forms of organization as overly bureaucratic, anti-democratic, and inefficient (Harvey, 2005; Srnicek and Williams, 2016; Christophers, 2018, 2022; Gilbert and Williams, 2022), while conversely, the idea that the market offered *the* most effective tool of eco-social co-ordination had become deeply ingrained in the social imagination (Fisher, 2009; Davies, 2014; Mirowski, 2014). With working class-based forms of social resistance defeated, and representative democratic institutions largely hollowed out (Mair, 2013), the 'third sector' (in which many of the *Greenstar* participants worked) had by that point become established as a primary terrain on which to conduct activities oriented towards 'progressive' environmental and social goals (Fyfe, 2005; Jones, 2015; Fong and Nascheck, 2021). Also important here – particularly given my focus on *eco*-localist organising – is the fact that ideas around sustainable development, ecological modernization, and 'green economy' had, by the time these participants were getting active, become firmly established in environmental discourse (Mol et al., 2009; Kenis and Lievens, 2015; Dale et al., 2016; Huber, 2022; Buller, 2022; see also chapter 4).

I suggest that these contextual factors played a critical role in shaping the way the *Greenstar* founders thought about, designed, constructed, and operated their project. Unlike at *Freshfair*, whose participants had experienced non-neoliberalized modes of living and out of these experiences developed a *critical* view of neoliberal-capitalist eco-social relations more broadly, the participants at *Greenstar* had been culturally conditioned in a context where neoliberalism had *already* been consolidated and naturalised, and where possible alternatives to capitalism appeared beyond the realm of the possible, if they appeared at all. I will pick up this point in part two of this chapter.

I am suggesting, then, that the stark contrast between the projects' organisational approaches can be at least *partly* explained by the fact that the core participants at each initiative became engaged in environmental politics during different phases in neoliberalism's developmental history. However, I want to stress that I am *not* trying to claim that *every* difference between their approaches can be accounted for simply by pointing to the specific phase of neoliberalism within which the participants became environmentally aware and active. Clearly, their actions were 'overdetermined', with innumerable economic, cultural, political, personal, psychological etc., factors all playing a role. What I am suggesting, however, is that if the aim here is to develop a thoroughgoing understanding of these projects' (divergent) eco-localist approaches,

then the role that neoliberal development played in shaping the actors' conceptions of the world must not be overlooked. This very important component, relevant to my argument, is often ignored in discussions of eco-social practice in the pro-eco-localist literature (see chapter 3; see also chapter 9).

Part 2: Hegemony, incorporation, resistance

I now want to look at how these eco-social imaginaries influenced the projects' strategic development in that post-2008 advanced neoliberal action context.

Drawing on the material above and on the work set out in previous chapters, in the following sections I will employ a (neo-)Gramscian framework to: 1) look at how the nature of consent at each project changed over time; 2) examine why these shifts occurred; 3) consider the consequences of these changes for each project's strategic outlook.

I will begin by looking at the way the *Freshfair* actors moved from a position where they *passively consented* to the government's eco-localist agenda to one that was based on *outright resistance*. I will then look at how the participants at *Greenstar* shifted from a position where they *actively consented* to the Big Society (BS) localist viewpoint to one that was based on a form of *passive consent*. For this latter project, I will also examine why its participants failed to break with the neoliberalized eco-localist stance that had informed their project's activities from the very beginning, even when the limitations of this approach started to become clear. This work will feed into my discussion of neoliberalization, resistance, and contemporary eco-localist strategy in chapter 9.

8.3 The food hub: from passive consent to incorporation

In chapter 6, I showed how *Freshfair* continually struggled to conduct its operations in the neoliberalized post-2008 BS action context, and, by drawing on the elements of eco-Marxian theory considered in chapters 2 and 3, why it struggled. Building on that conversation, here I want to look at how these struggles shaped the participants' views on strategy. I suggest that discussions around Gramscian conceptions of hegemony are particularly useful here.

Having set out my understanding of hegemony back in chapter 2, I now want to draw on that work to help me examine *Freshfair*'s activities. I will focus on how neoliberalization processes – as well as the way the hub's participants responded to these processes once they became aware of their effects – changed their praxis. The insights generated by this line of inquiry will underpin the discussion in chapter 9.

Passive consent

In chapter 2, I showed that for Gramsci, hegemony is based on a combination of coercion (or the threat of coercion) *and* consent (Gramsci, 1971; also Schwarzmantel, 2015; Martin, 2022).

Here, I want to consider this issue in more detail by drawing on the work of Gilbert and Williams (2022). These thinkers emphasise that for Gramsci, consent can be either *active or passive in nature*. They argue that, in Gramsci's work, and in the work of many who follow him, focus often falls on the *active* aspect of consent. Yet they seek to draw attention to consent's *passive* dimension, as this, they claim, is valuable for thinking about hegemony in advanced neoliberal social contexts (Gilbert and Williams, 2022: 78). I find their foregrounding of the distinction between passive and active consent useful, and I will use their approach to structure my argument in what follows.

Stressing the different forms that consent can take, Gilbert and Williams note that, for subaltern groups, consent can range from *active, explicit endorsements* of elite projects and ideologies (take, for example, the actions of Donald Trump's more fervent nationalist supporters during the period of his presidencies), through to a form they describe as *reluctant acquiescence* or *passive consent* (such as that conceded by 'disaffected' citizens in neoliberal post-democracies) (Gilbert and Williams, 2022: 135).

The latter, they argue, is a form of consent through which individuals find themselves obliged to defer to an ideology or system of government 'that they do not consciously endorse but see no benefit in trying to resist'. In situations where consent is passive, they go on to say, individuals end up becoming subjected to governmental systems that 'order their behaviour *whether or not they concur with the abstract principles or objectives informing them*' (Gilbert and Williams, 2022: 80; emphasis added). When thinking about consent, they stress it is vital to remember that:

> … it is perfectly possible for large numbers of people to find themselves in clear disagreement with a hegemonic common sense, whilst simultaneously being forced to defer to it and comply with its norms, *behaving to all intents and purposes as if they did believe in it* (Gilbert and Williams, 2022: 62; emphasis added).

They seek to emphasise the difference between:

> … accepting an ideology as simply an ahistorical norm – a true 'common sense', no alternative to which can be imagined – and recognizing it as undesirable and contingent, yet too powerful to escape or overthrow. Indeed, *individuals and groups may often find themselves in situations in which they are forced to comply with a set of norms that they fundamentally and consciously disagree with* (Gilbert and Williams, 2022: 62; emphasis added).

The conception of passive consent that Gilbert and Williams outline here accurately describes the sub-hegemonic eco-localist position that the *Freshfair* actors took *in the years leading up to*

the 2008 crisis (see section 8.1 above). During that period, its participants worked within 'mainstream' reformist (i.e., sub-hegemonic) community localist initiatives, not because they believed that such activities would bring about the kinds of emancipatory social change they wished to see, but rather because, given their reading of the conjuncture and their understanding of the balance of social forces prevailing at that time, they felt compelled to act in line with neoliberal norms and practices *despite the fact that they were opposed to neoliberalization and the embedded forms of eco-localist practice that dominated in that setting*.

Something similar can be said about the position they subscribed to during the period of *Freshfair*'s operations (2011-2017). Things were a little different by this point because in the post-2008 crisis period, it was not simply that the participants disliked neoliberal capitalism but felt compelled to act in line with it because they thought it too strong to overcome. Rather, in the aftermath of the crash, they believed that capitalism was now *vulnerable* to 'progressive' left assaults. Nevertheless, they still did not feel that it was possible in that post-2008 action context to *openly* organise against capitalist institutions and practices: they recognised that neoliberalism, although badly shaken by the crisis, remained *dominant*. And because of that dominance, they felt compelled to conceal the radical aspects of their project and to act in line with the neoliberal capitalist norms and practices they secretly opposed.

8.4 Interpreting *Freshfair*'s strategic development: from incorporation and 'failure' to outright resistance

In chapter 6, I showed that *Freshfair*'s 'multi-dimensional' approach worked relatively well at first. However, the hub could not maintain its positive start and it soon began to struggle. Although the *Freshfair* participants had initially believed that their radical political principles would prevent their activities from becoming incorporated, growing financial pressures meant that they became more deeply entangled in the web of exploitative practices they had initially hoped to challenge. Although they were not fully aware of this at the time, *Freshfair* was losing its critical edge and starting to operate just like a 'regular' 'mainstream-alternative' (i.e., sub-hegemonic) food project.

The project's eventual closure would change that, however. This event initiated a process of strategic learning that would entirely change the way these actors thought about and responded to eco-social problems. The unintended consequences of *Freshfair's* activities were reflected upon and fed back into new rounds of strategic development in a knowledge producing process out of which would emerge a new, more openly radical political approach – one that the *Freshfair* actors believed was an advance on the old food hub model. The participants had rejected the 'spatial fetishism' that had coloured *Freshfair*'s early activities and developed a new approach that *prioritised class relations over spatial relations*.

8.5 Bringing it back to hegemony

I now want to return to the issue of hegemony. In chapter 4, I noted that the 2008 crisis undermined capitalist hegemony in advanced neoliberal Britain. I also pointed out there that the Coalition government championed neoliberally aligned 'ethical'-eco-localist activities as part of its efforts to re-legitimate capitalism in the wake of that crisis (for useful discussions of this post-crisis turn towards ethical eco-localism, see Seymour, 2010; Niven, 2011; Žižek, 2018). Building on that discussion, and by drawing on the work in chapter 6, I now want to draw attention to what I see as a core contradiction in the coalition government's attempt to re-establish capitalism's hegemony in that conjuncture. This point is important not just for my analysis of the food hub, but also for my examination of the energy company in section 8.6 below (as well as for my discussion of contemporary eco-localist strategy more generally – see chapter 9).

I am referring here to the fact that, in the post-crisis context in which *Freshfair* operated, the Coalition government was looking to re-build capitalist hegemony *without offering any significant material concessions to the subaltern groups it was seeking to co-opt* (on the importance of such concessions, see chapter 2; also Gramsci, 1971: 161). Instead, and as I showed in chapter 4, the Coalition administration was putting forward a localist 'compassionate conservative' agenda that foregrounded issues around community empowerment, personal freedom, and resilience in a way that made it *look* like it was providing much-needed material support to local communities *whilst in actuality it was implementing an austerity programme that was taking such forms of support away* (Seymour, 2010; Niven, 2011; Featherstone et al., 2012; Seymour, 2014; Cooper and Whyte, 2017).

That this was the case can be seen from the discussion in chapter 6 concerning *Freshfair*'s attempts to get hold of surplus public land. In that BS context, the Coalition government was vociferously championing the idea that community groups like *Freshfair* should be able to take over surplus local authority assets so that communities could develop their own institutions and deliver their own public services (see chapter 4). But as I showed in that discussion, while sympathetic council executives had wanted to support *Freshfair*'s search for land, in that austerity context – where central government was forcing councils to maximise their income though the sale of 'surplus' assets – the local authority had been compelled to sell to a private developer the land that some of its most senior officers had wanted to transfer to *Freshfair* for free.

I pointed out that this was a radicalising experiencing for the *Freshfair* actors – one that would play a central role in pushing Upton, Sabatini, and Forrester to reject the eco-localist principles that had inspired *Freshfair*'s original approach and to take a much more militant line. But as can be seen from chapter 7, it was not just at the food hub that the growing realization of the

emptiness of the government's offers of support was significant. There I showed that at the energy company, too, the Coalition's failure to deliver its promised support for community-scale environmental initiatives seriously impacted on the way that its participants thought about eco-localist activism. At that project, however, the strategic implications that flowed from this realisation were entirely different.

8.6 The energy company: from active to passive consent

Above, I noted that the *Freshfair* actors became increasingly neoliberalized over the course of their time at the project – and this despite their deeply embedded anti-capitalist principles, long-standing awareness of the dangers of incorporation, and their single-minded determination to avoid this fate. I have also pointed out that, when they finally realised this, they stopped *passively* consenting to the Coalition's localist agenda and instead shifted to a position based on outright resistance.

This can be contrasted to the situation at *Greenstar*. As noted in chapter 7, the central actors here, from the project's earliest days, *enthusiastically* subscribed to the sub-hegemonic localist logic that underpinned the government's localist agenda. Above, I sought to (partially) account for their positioning on this issue by situating the central actors' trajectories of eco-political development against the backdrop of neoliberal development in Britain. Building on that discussion, and again drawing on the (neo-)Gramscian terminology set out above, it can be said that these participants, when they were setting up their project, *actively* consented to a sub-hegemonic, eco-local capitalist approach – a position they would adhere to throughout the early years of *Greenstar*'s existence. During this period of *active* consent, it must be stressed that these participants *genuinely* believed in the progressive potential of the BS agenda, which for them represented a sincere attempt by government to empower communities and develop progressive localist responses to the rapidly intensifying ecological and social crises of the day.

However, as I also showed there, *these participants' active consent would ultimately give way to a form of passive consent*. I have tried to capture these dynamics (and the way the shift at the energy company relates to the strategic transformation at the food hub) in figure 8.1 below.

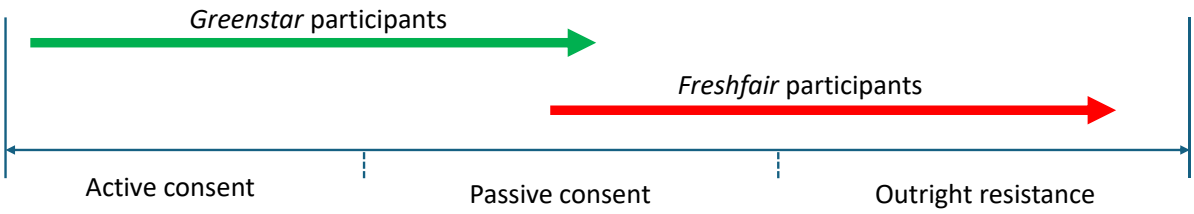

Figure 8.1: Movement along the 'continuum of consent' over time (2011-2017)

I suggest that the trajectory of *Greenstar Energy* as shown in this diagram raises three important issues that require further elaboration and clarification:

> 1) Why exactly did the participants – who had for so long been passionate advocates of the government's eco-localist BS agenda – shift from a position of active to passive consent?
>
> 2) Why, once they had stopped actively consenting to the government's localist approach, did they continue to (passively) subscribe to their original pro-capitalist, eco-localist viewpoint instead of moving towards a position of outright resistance (as the *Freshfair* actors did)?
>
> 3) What, if anything, does their failure to break with this approach tell us about community-scale environmentalist activism, incorporation, and resistance in advanced neoliberal contexts more broadly?

I will answer each of these in turn.

- *Question 1: Why did the participants at the energy company shift from a position of active to passive consent?*

In chapter 7, I showed that just like at *Freshfair*, the *Greenstar* participants' active consent was undermined by the Coalition's failure to provide continued adequate material support for the localist cause it so vocally championed. Here the issue was not land, but the financial support the government provided via the Feed-in Tariff (FiT) and upon which the *Greenstar* model depended.

In that chapter, I showed that the *Greenstar* participants were devastated by this policy shift when it was announced, and that the removal of the FiTs led them to completely revise their earlier favourable assessment of the government's entire localist agenda (Merchant, 2017; Stevens, 2015b; Taylor, 2018; Waberthwaite, 2018). In my view, this change in the participants' stance serves to negatively reinforce Gramsci's assertion that to achieve/maintain hegemony,

governing elites need to make meaningful material concessions to (selected) subaltern groups (Gramsci, 1971: 161; see discussion in chapter 2). I believe that the case of *Greenstar* offers a concrete example of how the *absence or withdrawal* of this kind of support can work to undermine an elite group's leadership role in the eyes of subaltern actors. Gilbert and Williams point out in their discussion of Gramsci that even the most minimal, passive, and disaffected modes of consent require that at least *some* of the interests of subaltern groups are at least *partially* realised (Gilbert and Williams, 2022: 136). However, in the austerity environment in which the case study projects were operating, the Coalition government seemed either unwilling or unable to provide even these minimal levels of support.

Back in chapter 4, I argued that the Cameron government had tried to entrench a pro-capitalist, neoliberally aligned form of eco-localist 'common sense' in an effort to neutralise growing subaltern resistance in that post-2008 conjuncture. To do this, it attempted to suture the identities, values, emotions, and interests of core sections of environmental movements to a 'responsible' 'green' local capitalist hegemonic vision through the development of BS institutions and policies. However, as the cases of *Freshfair* and *Greenstar* suggest, this administration failed to back up its localist rhetoric with the kinds of material support that such community initiatives need. In my view, this lends support to the arguments of those in the literature who claim that the government's localist agenda was never really about empowering local communities, but rather about finding a way to provide ideological cover for the Coalition's programme of local government cuts (Niven, 2011; Seymour, 2014; Cooper and Whyte, 2017; see chapter 4).

For the participants at both case study projects, the government's failure to provide this kind of support became increasingly apparent as time went on. Consequently, over the course of its time in power, the actors at both initiatives – despite their different starting positions on the continuum of consent shown above (diagram 8.1) – became increasingly disenchanted by its eco-localist approach and increasingly drawn towards the continuum's right-hand pole. Yet there was a significant difference in the way that the members of these two projects responded to the dawning realization that the government's promises of community support were hollow.

While the *Freshfair* actors would develop a new counter-hegemonic approach that was intended to transcend the limitations of *Freshfair*'s semi-reformist, 'mainstream' eco-localist-adjacent strategy, the *Greenstar* participants continued to adhere to the sub-hegemonic, eco-localist, 'responsible' green capitalist logic that had informed their activities from the very beginning (despite its increasingly evident limitations). This brings me to the second question raised above.

- *Question 2: Why did the* Greenstar *participants retain their sub-hegemonic, eco-localist position, and why did this not give way to a counter-hegemonic perspective?*

Because the core *Greenstar* actors came of age politically, and first became environmentally active, during neoliberalism's consolidation phase, they had, by the time they were looking to set their project up, fully internalised neoliberal social logic, which by that point had become *deeply inscribed in their everyday thought patterns and behaviours to the point of invisibility* (chapter 7).

Thus, when they were looking to start a new project in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, it seemed *simply obvious* to them that it should be based around localist, 'green' capitalist, techno-centric, and 'third sector' principles (see chapter 4). Having been fully acculturated into green capitalist realism, these actors had been unable to envisage any alternative to the sub-hegemonic eco-localist approach they initially developed. Consequently, they had no option but to stick to this approach even when it ran into difficulty.

It is also necessary to note here that over many years, these participants' lives had become intimately bound up with eco-localist activities. I noted in chapter 7 that during neoliberalism's consolidation years, several of these individuals became heavily involved in environmental work *on a professional basis* (through their engagement with local NGOs, local authorities, 'responsible' businesses, 'green' finance institutions, and so on). Consequently, their lives and livelihoods became increasingly entangled with market-centric, eco-localist, responsible capitalist activities and thus increasingly dependent on their continuation. As a result, I suggest that the *Greenstar* participants became increasingly invested – economically, ideologically, socially, and psychologically – in neoliberally inflected, eco-localist ways of knowing and acting in the world. This also made it difficult for them to turn their backs on 'mainstream', sub-hegemonic eco-localist approaches.

Then there was the issue of their project's 'success'. As I noted in chapter 7, their acculturation into green capitalist realist conditions fostered within them a deeply neoliberalized conception of what 'alternative' ways of thinking and acting might look like, which in turn led them to develop a neoliberalized notion of 'success'. This would heavily influence their ideas about how *Greenstar* should operate and their expectations regarding the kinds of outcomes it could potentially achieve. Here it is worth recalling that although this project did not manage to achieve the goals its participants had initially aimed for, it nevertheless achieved a level of success that allowed them to convince themselves that their project's activities were worthwhile. In short, *Greenstar*'s activities provided them with a way to *feel like they were doing something meaningful* to respond to the worsening environmental and social crises, *even though it did nothing to challenge the underlying drivers of these crises*. I will say more about this below.

- *Question 3: What, if anything, can all this tell us about community-scale environmentalism, sub-hegemony, and incorporation?*

Before I tackle this question directly, I must return to an argument I initially put forward in chapter 2, for only by doing so does the significance of the non-emergence of a counter-hegemonic perspective among the *Greenstar* participants become clear. In that chapter I argued, by drawing on eco-Marxian perspectives, that capitalist social formations are *inherently* exploitative and environmentally destructive. On that basis, I claimed that the intensifying environmental and social crises that both case study projects were responding to were fundamentally being driven by *capitalist* eco-social relations. Based on that assessment, I argued that it is impossible to resolve these crises through attempts to green and responsibilize capitalism (as the *Greenstar* actors believed), but that to do so, *capitalism would have to be transcended* (for supporting arguments, see Foster, 2000; Burkett, 2014; Angus, 2016; Malm, 2016; Saito, 2017).

Bringing this back to my discussion of *Greenstar*, I noted in chapter 7 that its participants believed that they had established a genuinely *alternative* eco-social project – one that could play a (local) role in helping to resolve the wider environmental and social crises of the day (Merchant, 2017; Stevens, 2017a). However, I have also argued that *Greenstar was an impeccably neoliberal initiative* – one whose operations helped to entrench among its members (as well as across the local environmentalist movement more broadly) the neoliberally inflected, pro-capitalist, eco-localist perspective that the Coalition government was seeking to embed in environmentalist discourse at that time.

By operating entirely within neoliberal parameters, and by making concrete advances (only) in those areas that were conducive to the consolidation and expansion of neoliberal eco-social relations, I have argued that while *Greenstar* might have *looked like* an alternative project, its activities in no way challenged the existing neoliberal capitalist order that was driving the crises the project was set up to respond to. Also, because *Greenstar* operated in this neoliberally-aligned manner, I have pointed out that its activities met with little resistance. And because the project met with little resistance, it was able to achieve a level of 'success' that was sufficient for those involved with it to convince themselves that their initial strategy was sound (despite its evident shortcomings – see chapter 7 and above). Satisfied with *Greenstar*'s achievements, these participants felt no need to question the 'rules' of the neoliberal 'game'.

Based on the above, and by drawing on the discussion in chapter 2, I suggest again that *Greenstar Energy* should be seen as a sub-hegemonic project *par excellence*. Contrary to the view of its participants, who saw this project as a 'total success', I claim that *Greenstar*'s activities helped to provide ideological cover for a neoliberal capitalist order that would

ultimately need to be overturned if the crises its founders wanted to tackle were ever to be resolved. I also suggest that, seen from this perspective, every sign of its success (gauged using the neoliberalized criteria of its members) *could more accurately be seen as a sign of failure*.

When looking at the food hub, I claim that this formulation can be reversed – at least if one extends the span of the analysis beyond the point where *Freshfair* closed its doors. I noted in chapter 6 that when these participants first set up their project, they decided to bring its activities into a kind of superficial, short-term alignment with established neoliberal norms and practices in an effort to build the resources they needed to realise their radical longer-term aims. But I showed too that in that neoliberalized foodscape, the hub from the outset struggled to compete against corporate supermarkets and never quite managed to achieve the level of sales it needed to stay afloat. Thus, when viewed purely from a business perspective (such as that used by *Greenstar*'s members to evaluate their project's performance), the *Freshfair* hub could quite accurately be described as a *failure*. It certainly felt that way to its members at the time: no matter how hard they worked, and no matter how much they gave way on their founding ideals, they could not halt their project's decline.

But when the participants reflected on the hub's performance *after it had closed*, they arrived at a different viewpoint. With the benefit of hindsight, they concluded that every one of its failures, although painful at the time, had actually brought closer their decision to reject outright the market-centric, sub-hegemonic-adjacent, 'ethical' eco-localist approach they had initially subscribed to, and that they now thought was incapable of delivering the kind of social transformation they wished to see. The hub's poor performance *as a business*, then, had pushed them to take up a more radical *political* position – one that in their view, as well as in mine, had much more socially transformative potential. I will develop this argument in the following chapter.

8.7 Barriers

Based on the work in previous chapters and on the discussion above, I now want to summarize the key barriers, as identified by this study, that impede the development of alternative, non-capitalist, eco-localist initiatives as they seek to operate and expand in advanced neoliberal contexts (the subject of my primary research question – see chapter 1). So, what are the barriers?

1) *The embeddedness of 'ethical' eco-localist imaginaries among subaltern environmental actors*

In chapters 3 and 4, I argued that Marxian critiques of eco-localism and Marxian accounts of neoliberal development provide insights that help to explain why a localist strategic worldview

became embedded in subaltern environmental 'common sense' in the advanced neoliberal British context generally, and among the actors at the case study projects in particular.

Drawing on the work of Marxian thinkers, I examined why activities at the local level are so often understood to be *inherently* more ethical, authentic, and environmentally sustainable than those occurring at larger scales/distances. This Marxian approach also enabled me to highlight the connection – one frequently overlooked in the wider localist literature – between the strong subaltern focus on localization in the post-2008 conjuncture and neoliberalism's disorganization of organised labour during its vanguard and consolidation phases. Using the work of thinkers such as Albo (2007), Sharzer (2016), Srnicek and Williams (2016), and Huber (2022), I argued that this process of disempowerment played a key role in generating the economic, political, and cultural conditions in which green capitalist realist logic would later become embedded.

In chapter 4, I showed how capitalist *social* relations became naturalised and invisibilized during neoliberalism's consolidation phase. Building on this, I suggested that the increasingly evident environmental and social problems occurring around that time (climate breakdown, biodiversity loss, community fragmentation, growing alienation from nature, etc.) – problems that I have argued are rooted in the way that *capitalism* organises eco-social relations (see chapter 2) – tended to appear in the subaltern environmental imagination as problems that emerged from the (neoliberal) restructuring of *spatial relations* over recent decades. Under those conditions, I suggested that environmental and social crises tended to be seen as problems that were being driven by the *globalization* of capitalist production, rather than problems rooted in the contradictory and crisis-prone nature of capitalist production itself.[68] As a result, localization increasingly came to be seen as something like the opposite of globalization, and thus as an antidote to the environmental and social problems commonly attributed to its rise (chapter 4). This helps to explain why so many 'alternative' environmentalist actors operating in advanced neoliberal contexts foreground issues relating to the *scale* of production, but to insufficiently consider (and often overlook entirely) issues relating to the *ownership and control of production*[69] – factors that I argue must sit at the heart of any emancipatory social transformation strategy going forward (see chapter 2; I will expand on this in chapter 9).

In chapters 6 and 7, I considered how this 'spatial-fetishist', pro-localist viewpoint came to shape the activities at both *Greenstar* and *Freshfair*. At the latter, I showed how the participants' early obsession with localization distracted their attention from the issues of capital and class that had initially motivated them to set up their project (and how this led to the incorporation of

[68] It is worth noting that the offshoring of production played a key role in creating the conditions that made green capitalist realism in the neoliberal heartlands possible (chapter 4).

[69] I have argued that, if these issues were considered at all, they tended to be understood in a neoliberalized manner (see chapter 7).

their activities). I also noted that the participants here only came to realise how this localist focus constrained their activities *after the hub had closed down*. This point is important, and I will return to it in chapter 9.

2) *The widespread acceptance of the notion among subaltern actors that it is possible to transition to an ethical eco-capitalist regime*

In chapter 3, I argued that for many 'progressive' subaltern actors operating in advanced neoliberal contexts (as well as for many of those who write about them in the eco-localist literature), existing (neoliberal capitalist) eco-social arrangements are all-too-often taken as the *starting point* of analysis. I have argued that this is because the prevailing social conditions in which contemporary eco-localist activities take place are often seen by 'progressive' subaltern environmental actors as natural, necessary and neutral (rather than historically specific, contingent, and pre-structured in favour of the social forces that have traditionally dominated this terrain). I have pointed out that those who take such a view typically overlook how the co-evolution of neoliberalism and modern environmentalism over recent decades has generated a set of economic-political-cultural conditions that tends to select for social activities that leave capitalist social arrangements (profit-oriented production, wage labour, the market-based allocation of goods and resources, etc.) intact (see chapters 3 and 4).

In chapter 7 and above, I argued that the *Greenstar* actors had fully internalised this logic, and I demonstrated how it came shape to their approach to eco-localist strategy in the post-2008 conjuncture. I showed that for them, the idea that capitalism could be made ethical and environmentally sustainable was simply *self-evident*. I also pointed out that because these actors had absorbed the eco-localist ideas that dominated in that (Big Society) context, they believed that these goals could be attained by *localizing capitalist social relations* (see also point 1 above) – a position I challenged in chapter 2. There I argued that because capitalism is *inherently* ecologically and socially destructive (Angus, 2016; Malm, 2016; Foster and Clark, 2020 Foster, 2024; Heron, 2024), progressive eco-social actors need to find ways to *fundamentally challenge capitalist institutions and practices* if they want to create spaces for emancipatory alternatives. This, of course, was the position held at *Freshfair*.

3) *The widespread acceptance of the view that eco-localist activities taking place on the 'civil society' terrain are apolitical*

In chapter 4, I argued that in advanced neoliberal action contexts, it is common for subaltern actors to view the 'civil society' terrain on which localist activities take place as a *neutral* social space where individuals and groups can engage in 'progressive' eco-social activities *in an apolitical manner*. However, I have shown that the growth of 'progressive' environmental and social activity on the 'civil society' terrain over recent decades (through the work of NGOs,

charities, community projects, etc.) *must itself be understood as a core feature of neoliberal development* (Jessop, 2000; Fyfe, 2005; Seymour, 2010; Jones, 2015; Fong and Nascheck, 2021). It must also be noted here that as a product of neoliberal development, this terrain tends to select for subaltern activities that closely align with established neoliberal capitalist norms and practices. On this basis, I argued that activities in this domain play an important role in stabilising existing eco-social arrangements (Fisher, 2009; Seymour, 2014; Gilbert and Williams, 2022). This assertion grounds my claim that sub-hegemonic eco-localist actors who unquestioningly accept this field of activity as a depoliticised, socially neutral terrain (as the *Greenstar* actors did) fail to see how their 'progressive' activities can help to: 1) generate ideological cover needed for further neoliberal development; 2) reinforce neoliberal regimes by 'picking up the slack' caused by industrial decline and by providing socially necessary goods and services that the market cannot deliver (Fong and Nascheck, 2021, p. 95; see also Niven, 2011; Sharzer, 2012; Phillips, 2015; Srnicek and Williams, 2016).

In chapter 7, I showed how this (invisibilized) pro-capitalist logic informed the development of *Greenstar*'s organisational imaginary. I claimed that their neoliberalized perspective made it difficult for them to: 1) see how their activities, which they believed offered a genuine social alternative, mirrored established neoliberal practices; 2) understand that in order to resolve the intensifying environmental and social crises that so concerned them, *non*-capitalist solutions might be required. Drawing on the work of thinkers such as Malm and Carton, I claim – against the view of the *Greenstar* actors – that resolving these crises will *necessarily entail social conflict* (see Malm, 2020; Malm, 2021; Malm and carton, 2024). In the following chapter, I show that activities taking place on the 'civil society' terrain will be centrally important to this struggle.

4) *The widespread acceptance of the view among subaltern actors that it is possible to create and withdraw into non-capitalist economic spaces at the edges of the mainstream economy where 'alternative', 'fair trade' activities can flourish*

As noted in chapter 3, this commonplace assumption provided a degree of strategic coherence to much 'mainstream' eco-localist activity in the advanced neoliberal action context studied here. Thoroughly embedded in eco-localist 'common sense' in that conjuncture, I have shown that this approach rests on the assumption that subaltern actors can open up liberatory, 'non-capitalist' spaces around the edges of the capitalist economy and work within these spaces to develop *alternative* economic practices. The general idea here is that such 'alternative' activities, once they become established in particular 'niches', can be expanded in ways that will eventually displace dominant (environmentally and socially damaging) practices (Hargreaves et al., 2013; Seyfang et al., 2014; Vickers and Lyon, 2014; Wright, 2019).

In that chapter, I also suggested that subaltern actors who take this position often subscribe to the view that a *quantitative* increase in such 'alternative' activities (through the expansion of individual projects, the replication of their practices by other groups, and by bringing such groups together into 'alternative' networks) will ultimately lead to a *qualitative* (progressive) societal shift. In chapters 6 and 7, I showed that this guiding principle underpinned the activities at both *Freshfair* and *Greenstar*.[70]

However, building on the discussion in chapters 2 and 3, I have stressed that when thinking about this kind of 'withdrawal-develop-displace-transform' approach, it is important to recognise that subaltern eco-localist activities taking place on the 'civil society' terrain *can be inflected in either sub-hegemonic or counter-hegemonic directions*. In my view, the distinction between these two modes of activity is one that eco-localist actors in advanced neoliberal contexts (and those who study them) frequently fail to make (see chapter 3). I claim that this has been problematic so far as developing emancipatory eco-social movements is concerned because, as I noted in chapters 2, 3, and 4, sub-hegemonic activities, while they may help disaffected subaltern actors *feel like* they are doing something to resolve environmental and social crises, pose no fundamental threat to dominant institutions and practices.

Making this distinction enabled me to characterise *Greenstar* as an *unreflexively sub-hegemonic eco-localist initiative* (chapter 7), and *Freshfair* as a *counter-hegemonic project operating in sub-hegemonic guise* (chapter 6). It also helped me to show how, under pressure in the capitalist marketplace, *Freshfair*'s activities became neoliberalized over time, and how this ultimately turned the hub into something that resembled a 'regular' sub-hegemonic food project (despite its actors' counter-hegemonic intentions).

Another important factor here is capitalism's law of value, which I first discussed back in chapter 2. There and in chapter 3 I argued, by drawing on the work of Marx and Marxian thinkers such as Sharzer, Albo, Huber, and Gunderson, among others, that while 'progressive' localist economic projects often *look like* they are opening up and operating within non-capitalist spaces, such 'alternative' activities nevertheless remain fundamentally shaped by the economic pressures that flow from the wider capitalist economy (Marx, 1976; Albo, 2007; Heinrich, 2012; Sharzer, 2012; Gunderson, 2014; Huber, 2022).

I have suggested that this appearance of alterity can be highly problematic so far as efforts to develop emancipatory social transition strategies are concerned. I noted in the last chapter that local economy projects can perform an ideological function because they can help to 'mask[…]

[70] Although, as I also pointed out in chapter 6, the participants at the former would eventually break with this view.

the harms of capitalism by convincing society that the harms of capitalism can be rehabilitated within the commodity form itself' (Gunderson, 2014). Building on the work in chapters 6 and 7, I claim that the activities of both *Greenstar* and (the incorporated) *Freshfair* were ideological in precisely this sense. Importantly, however, at the latter project, the participants came to realise this and they ultimately turned against the idea that subaltern actors can use market-based approaches to push society in a progressive direction. I will expand on this in chapter 9.

5) Difficulties accessing the resources needed to engage in production

In chapters 6 and 7, I showed that the state's failure to provide (or maintain) the levels of material support that the case study projects required (and that the participants at each had been led to believe would be forthcoming[71]) seriously undermined their ability to expand in line with their longer-term aims. I claim that the difficulties these initiatives faced in this regard helps to highlight the role that state institutions can play in creating the conditions in which alternative eco-social projects can flourish (on this, see Wright, 2010, chapter 6; Wright, 2019, chapter 5; I will say more about how this relates to 'civil society' struggles in chapter 9).

The case studies also highlight how important land is for emancipatory eco-social production projects and how difficulties obtaining land in advanced neoliberal contexts can severely disrupt subaltern efforts to develop alternative modes of living (Christophers, 2018). It is worth pointing out here, too, that the work in chapters 6 and 7 also helps to highlight the limitations of subaltern approaches that focus their attention solely on (neoliberalized notions of) community ownership (of land and other key resources). Instead, and building on the discussion in the previous chapter, I argue that subaltern localist actors need to think *beyond* the community scale and to find ways to connect local attempts to advance demands for *community* ownership to wider struggles that aim towards the goal of establishing *common* ownership of the means of production at the societal level (see chapter 9).

Based on the discussion above, I claim that if subaltern eco-localist actors are to play a meaningful role in the development of an emancipatory and environmentally sustainable social order (as I believe they can), then they must find ways to overcome the barriers I have outlined. Moreover, I claim that my analysis of the *Freshfair* food hub contains valuable lessons for how subaltern eco-localist actors in advanced neoliberal settings might adapt their activities to help them achieve this aim. I will expand on this point, and explore what it means for localist strategy today, in the following and final chapter.

[71] This related to the issue of land at *Freshfair*, and to the issue of financial support via the Feed-In Tariff at *Greenstar*.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I identified, by drawing on my reading of the literature in chapters 3 and 4, and on my examination of the *Freshfair* and *Greenstar* projects in chapters 6 and 7, several key barriers that impede the development of 'alternative' subaltern eco-localist initiatives as they seek to operate and expand in an advanced neoliberal British context.

Building on that work, this chapter aims to: 1) contribute to the localist literature by addressing gaps that my investigation has highlighted, and 2) contribute to the development of eco-localist strategy by showing how the lessons learned by the *Freshfair* actors could, if taken up more broadly, help 'progressive' subaltern projects and movements overcome the barriers my study has identified.

The chapter proceeds as follows. Section 9.1 outlines how my examination of *Freshfair* exposes a key limitation of the Marxian critique of 'mainstream' eco-localist activity that has been so central to my argument up to this point. Section 9.2 considers how the eco-social conditions in the immediate post-2008 action setting in which the case studies operated compare to those prevailing today. This grounds the discussion in section 9.3, which draws out the key learning points from the *Freshfair* actors' experiences and considers how the lessons they learned can inform contemporary subaltern eco-localist practice.

In section 9.4, I build on chapter 8's examination of active and passive consent to consider how acts of 'radical passivity' can shape subaltern thought and practice in strategically significant ways. This underpins the discussion in section 9.5, where I argue that (counter-hegemonic) community-scale projects can play a key role in creating the conditions needed for a fundamental emancipatory eco-social transition. In section 9.6, I offer a way to break the impasse that seems to have been reached in ongoing debates between advocates of degrowth localist approaches and those of a more left eco-modernist persuasion, and in this way to enrich the literature on this topic. I bring the chapter to a close by suggesting some potentially fruitful areas for further study (section 9.7).

9.1 *Freshfair*: highlighting the limits of Marxian critiques of 'mainstream' eco-localist organising

In this thesis I have drawn on Marxian critiques of 'mainstream' eco-localist approaches to examine the case study projects (see chapters 6, 7, and 8) and to highlight problematic assumptions in the eco-localist literature and in eco-localist practice (see chapter 3). However, while the arguments put forward by Marxian critics of eco-localist activity (such as Huber, Sharzer, Albo, Phillips, and Srnicek and Williams, among others) have been central to my

analysis so far, here I want to suggest that my examination of the case study projects – an examination that their theories have enabled – also brings to light a problem with their line of critique. Before I develop this point, let me stress that my intention here is not to *dismiss* these theorists' contributions to ongoing strategic debates, which in my view have been centrally important. Rather, I want to use evidence from the *Freshfair* and *Greenstar* case studies to *develop* their ideas in ways that can enrich ongoing conversations in the literature and inform discussions around subaltern eco-localist strategy today.

The Freshfair *food hub: appearances can be deceptive*

In chapter 3, I pointed out that Marxian critics of 'mainstream' sub-hegemonic eco-localist initiatives often dismiss the strategic importance of such projects because they consider them insufficiently 'radical' (i.e., particularistic and focused on making minor reforms around the edges of capitalist society, rather than aiming for deeper social changes).

In my view, this kind of broad-brushed dismissal of eco-localist activity tends to erroneously assume that such initiatives are *one-dimensional, strategically unified entities* – that is, homogenous, 'non-radical', 'mainstream-alternative' projects operated by participants who are wholly incapable of engaging in critically informed, anti-systemic activities of any kind.

I have shown that this dismissive view of 'mainstream' eco-localist activity is often to be found among those who take up left eco-modernist positions (see chapter 3). However, as my analysis of the *Freshfair* food hub indicates, when looking to assess the strategic potential of 'mainstream' eco-localist groups, it is necessary to bear in mind that appearances can be deceptive. I showed in chapter 6 that the *Freshfair* actors were motivated by anti-capitalist intentions. However, I showed too that these participants had decided, in that advanced neoliberal action context, to *conceal* their counter-hegemonic ideas from public view. Consequently, this initiative's radical essence *was not apparent to outside observers*. Indeed, and as I noted in chapter 6, only by peering beneath the surface of *Freshfair*'s 'reformist' activities could it be seen that this project's actual goals were *closely aligned with the 'radical' strategic aims of Marxian critics of mainstream eco-localist approaches such as Huber and Phillips*. From the outside, it *looked like* just another 'conventional' reformist local food project of the kind that Marxian critics condemn. Only from within could it be seen that *Freshfair* was *a counter-hegemonic project masquerading in sub-hegemonic guise*.

Based on my examination of *Freshfair* and on my reading of the literature, then, I claim that radical critics who dismiss the strategic potential of reformist, sub-hegemonic, community-based, eco-localist initiatives:

1) Overlook the fact that these institutions are *not* rigid, strategically uniform entities but *dynamic sites of social struggle*
2) Ignore the possibility that such initiatives may contain actors who either already subscribe to counter-hegemonic ideas (but do not feel able to show this openly) or who may become amenable to such ideas
3) Don't seem to take seriously the idea that such initiatives *can potentially be intervened in and changed over time*.

On this basis, I suggest that in the contemporary crisis conjuncture, radical critics who dismiss outright the activities of sub-hegemonic eco-localist groups may be overlooking key sources of support that are going to be needed if the deep-rooted social changes they demand are ever going to be realised (see section 9.6 below).

Of course, I am not trying to suggest here that *all* sub-hegemonic eco-localist projects should necessarily be understood as counter-hegemonic projects in disguise. Far from it: it is undoubtedly the case that many 'mainstream-alternative' eco-localist projects – for reasons related to path-dependency, intellectual inflexibility, ideological acculturation, strategic stasis, and so on – are, and are quite possibly destined to remain, *initiatives that are sub-hegemonic through and through*. As the case of *Greenstar* shows, it is possible for appearances to accurately reflect a project's essence in this regard: from the 'outside', this initiative *looked like* a homogenous, one-dimensional, sub-hegemonic 'mainstream alternative' eco-localist project of the kind that Marxist critics attack *precisely because it was one* (see chapter 7). Nevertheless, I maintain that these radical critics err when they overlook the strategic potential of 'mainstream' reformist eco-localist groups.

For while it may be true that such initiatives *can* channel the energies of disaffected groups in sub-hegemonic directions (and thus play a role in reinforcing the neoliberal capitalist eco-social arrangements that drive environmental and social crises – see chapters 2, 4, 7, and 8), it is also true that in the contemporary crisis conjuncture – one where decades of neoliberal development have severely undermined subaltern capacities for resistance (see chapter 4) – the terrain on which these eco-localist groups operate continues to serve as a primary site of environmental contestation, and one, I contend, that anyone looking to develop effective emancipatory strategies today cannot afford to ignore. Consequently, and regardless of whether environmental activists who situate themselves at the radical end of the political spectrum like it or not, in advanced neoliberal Britain, the terrain of reformist, 'non-radical', eco-localist activity is (and for the foreseeable future will remain) a key battleground in the fight for a sustainable, socially just future, and thus one that radical political actors are going to have to struggle over.

So, I claim that while Marxian critics of eco-localist approaches such as Huber and Phillips are *correct* to insist that resolving the environmental and social crises that are currently spiralling out of control will require that capitalism is transcended (see chapters 2 and 3), I insist that they are *wrong* to disregard the role that sub-hegemonic 'mainstream-alternative' eco-localist initiatives can play in creating the conditions required to bring such a transition about. This is an important point, I argue, because developing it potentially offers a way to break the impasse that has been reached in contemporary debates between degrowth advocates and champions of left eco-modernist approaches discussed back in chapter 3. I will return to this point in section 9.6 below.

9.2 Localism and strategy

Building on the discussion in chapter 8, I now want to think again about the key strategic learning points from the case study projects and to consider how these might inform current eco-localist practice. Before doing so, I must say a few words about how the action context that the case study projects operated within relates to the action context today.

In chapter 1, I pointed out that both *Freshfair* and *Greenstar* launched their operations in 2011 in a context that was heavily shaped by political class responses to the 2008 crash and to the ecological crises that were rapidly accelerating at that time. As I noted in chapter 4, neoliberalism's hegemony had by that point started to break down and the conditions that had given rise to the 'capitalist realist' imaginary were beginning to unravel (Fisher, 2009, 2018; Heron, 2024). As many have pointed out, this process of disintegration has only accelerated since then (Žižek, 2018b, 2023; Jessop, 2019; Davies, 2020). This has generated a new set of conditions within which progressive environmental actors must work. But how to grasp these changes?

From 'capitalist realism' to 'capitalist catastrophism'

Heron provides a way to conceptualize this shift in a manner that is useful for my discussion (Heron, 2024). Heron argues that the capitalist realist conditions that existed before 2008 (conditions that continued shape economic, political, and social activity in the post-2008 period examined by this study) have now given way to a new configuration of eco-social conditions that he calls *capitalist catastrophism*.

He argues that it is necessary to highlight this shift from capitalist realism to capitalist catastrophism because doing so provides a way to better understand the devastating environmental and social events that are unfolding today. He claims that this process of unravelling should be seen as a part of a 'dramatic and asymmetrically catastrophic reconfiguration of… labour, and non-human nature' that is taking place due to the 'unevenly distributed unmaking of neoliberalism' (Heron, 2024).

In chapter 4, I noted that one of the defining features of the capitalist realist condition was the pervasiveness of the general sense that it was 'easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism' (Žižek, 1999, p. 55; Fisher, 2009). According to Heron, in the contemporary capitalist catastrophist conjuncture, this notion no longer holds. Why? Because today, he states, the end of the world *is all too real*: 'we watch it in real time, we read about it on our social media feeds, and we take to the streets to protest it'. What Heron is trying to emphasise here is that, for so many people in the world today (and particularly for those who reside in what is frequently referred to as the Global South), *the end of the world is already here* (Heron, 2024; see also Ware, 2024).

What Heron is attempting to do, then, is to update Fisher's notion of 'capitalist realism' – an idea I drew on in my discussion of neoliberal subaltern environmental consciousness in chapter 4 – for these new catastrophic times. To help highlight the difference between these two positions, Heron homes in on Fisher's idea of the 'cancellation of the future' (see Fisher, 2014). Heron points out that for Fisher, this idea was primarily concerned with the field of culture (in the sense that an exhausted Western culture was no longer able to produce anything fundamentally new). In Heron's hands, however, this concept becomes more expansive and concrete: in the emerging capitalist catastrophist conditions of today, the idea of 'the cancellation of the future' is no longer limited to the cultural sphere – the intensification of devastating weather events, famines, pandemics, and the like, means that for many people across the world today, *the future has, in a much more literal sense, been cancelled.*

So, how does all this relate to my examination of the case study projects and to my discussion of eco-localist strategy more generally? Well, in chapter 4, I showed that under the conditions of (green) capitalist realism (whose legacy strongly shaped ecological consciousness during the context under study), it had become difficult for subaltern eco-localist actors to *imagine* (never mind construct in reality) alternatives to capitalism. Heron is keen to point out, however, that today's new capitalist catastrophist conditions have emphatically brought this period of imaginative stagnation to an end. To back up this claim, he points to the abundance of post-capitalist imaginaries that have emerged over recent years: transitional and anti-imperialist green new deals (Aronoff et al., 2019; Ajl, 2021), degrowth societies (Schmelzer et al., 2022), eco-modernist utopias (Phillips, 2015; Huber, 2021), half-earth socialisms (Vettese and Pendergrass, 2022), small farm futures (Smaje, 2020), fully automated luxury communist societies (Bastani, 2019), and so on (Heron, 2024). He contends that the proliferation of these ideas in subaltern circles shows that, now that the period of capitalist realism is over, many on the left are 'once again learning to flex their utopian imaginations'. Building on this, he argues that the flourishing of these ideas is an important development in terms of left-leaning efforts to actualize an emancipatory future. However, he also identifies a significant problem in this

regard: in today's capitalist catastrophist context, because left social-political forces are historically weak (see chapters 3 and 4), progressive social actors find themselves in a situation where 'the gap between what can be conjured in our mind's eye and our concrete conditions of struggle appears formidable, even insurmountable' (Heron, 2024). What Heron is saying, then, is that, while in these new conditions progressive subaltern actors may be (re-)gaining the capacity to *envision* non-capitalist futures, *they nevertheless remain incapable of building the emancipatory society they are increasingly able to imagine*.[72]

It is here that I believe that my comparative analysis of the case study projects has something to offer. Why? Because the condition that Heron describes – this capacity to *imagine* non-capitalist social alternatives combined with an inability to *realise* them – is *precisely that which prevailed among the* Freshfair *participants during their time at the hub.* More useful still, I showed that this was a condition that these actors *managed to overcome* (see chapter 6). For these reasons, I claim that the process of strategic learning that the *Freshfair* actors underwent during that period when capitalist realist conditions were starting to break down contains valuable insights for progressive eco-localist actors operating in today's capitalist catastrophist conjuncture.

9.3 *Freshfair* and strategy

In chapter 6, I noted that *Freshfair*'s activities were informed by 'radical' (that is, counter-hegemonic) ideas. I noted, too, that in that neoliberalized action context, whenever the hub's participants tried to act in line with these radical principles, they found that they consistently hit up against embedded structural constraints. In chapters 6 and 8, I showed how these difficulties forced its participants to embark on a process of strategic learning that would continue long after the project closed its doors. To draw out the key learning points from that journey, I want to focus here on three main areas where the participants' experiences at the hub shaped their ideas in strategically significant ways.

1) *The* Freshfair *actors came to reject the 'spatial fetishism' that informed their original approach*

As I observed in chapter 6, the principle of localism was central to *Freshfair*'s operations for most of its operational lifetime: from the very beginning this logic permeated all aspects of the initiative and became a foundational element of *Freshfair*'s identity as an 'alternative' food project. However, as I also showed in that chapter, this almost exclusive focus on localism

[72] I think Heron is correct to note the effects that this shift from capitalist realism to capitalist catastrophism has had on the left eco-social imagination, but I suggest that he perhaps overestimates its impacts. By focusing on the ideational changes that this shift has brought about (real as these are among certain critical sections of the environmental left), I claim that he overlooks the fact that across much of the subaltern 'progressive' left today, *capitalist realist logic still holds* (even though the conditions that gave rise to it have broken down). This, indeed, was the case at *Greenstar*.

generated major problems for the hub – problems that forced the participants to engage in practices that they had initially opposed, and that would lead them, in a desperate attempt to keep the project going, to abandon its original localist focus.

I also noted that after *Freshfair* closed, there began to emerge among the participants a sense that their intense focus on localism had been a mistake. In retrospect, they concluded that the hub's initial localist approach (which, as I have noted, aligned closely with key elements of subaltern environmentalist 'common sense' in that context) had severely constrained their thinking by drawing their attention away from the issues of class struggle and anti-capitalist resistance that had initially inspired them to set up their project.

After *Freshfair*, however, and as a direct result of their experiences there, these participants decided that they would focus less on the *scale* of their activities and instead put more emphasis on the issue of class struggle (see chapter 6). Putting this in the terms laid out in chapter 3, it can be said that in that post-*Freshfair* period, the participants moved away from the degrowth-adjacent, small-is-beautiful, eco-localist position they had initially subscribed to, and towards one that was more closely aligned with the eco-socialist views of thinkers like Huber and Phillips. However, these actors did not dismiss the role of reformist, sub-hegemonic forms of local-scale organising in the way that champions of left-productivist approaches so often do (again, see chapter 3). That was because these participants recognised that, while *their own* views on localization had changed, eco-localist ideas nevertheless remained deeply embedded in subaltern environmental 'common sense'. What was different now, though, was that, while *for practical strategic reasons* they knew they still had to act at the local scale, *they no longer fetishised it*.

2) *The* Freshfair *actors broke with the idea that it is possible to create non-capitalist spaces using 'alternative' market-based approaches*

In chapter 6, I noted that, based on their experiences at the hub, the *Freshfair* actors came to reject the idea that it is possible for subaltern groups to carve out and withdraw into liberatory, non-capitalist, 'fair trade' spaces at the edges of the market where 'ethical' commodities can be exchanged free from the pressures of the wider capitalist economy.

I pointed out in chapter 3 that this idea was, like the principle of localism, deeply ingrained in 'progressive' eco-social thought in the action context studied here. In chapter 6, I showed that this notion had shaped *Freshfair*'s initial design and early development. Its participants had initially believed that *Freshfair* could facilitate 'ethical' commodity production in a way that could *erode capitalism from within*. However, they found that when they tried to put this idea into practice, they could not insulate their 'ethical' economic activities from the competitive pressures that flowed from the wider corporate food economy.

The participants were not fully aware of this at the time; just as with the problems that stemmed from its focus on localism noted above, they only realised that they had been adjusting their behaviours to meet the demands of the marketplace *after the hub had closed*. When they did, however, they decided to transform their entire approach. From that point on, rather than expending all their energies on trying to sell 'ethical' commodities at the edges of the capitalist marketplace, they instead focused their efforts on raising class consciousness and on cultivating radical activities *outside the sphere of the market*. Based on their experiences at the now defunct hub, they believed that this new approach offered a better chance to realise the radical goals they had initially hoped to achieve through the *Freshfair* project.

3) *The actors at* Freshfair *concluded that they needed to re-politicise the social terrain, rather than operate in a manner that required them to conceal their 'radical' political intentions*

Unlike the participants at *Greenstar*, the *Freshfair* actors did not view the 'civil society' terrain on which they operated as a neutral field of social activity (see chapters 6 and 7). Rather, and from the very beginning, the core food hub members understood that the social space they operated within was pre-structured in favour of neoliberalized social forces, and that it tended to select for activities that aligned with neoliberal principles. To help them deal with this, I showed in chapter 6 that they tried to conceal the radical aspects of their agenda by making the hub *look like* a 'conventional' sub-hegemonic food project. This approach did not work, however, because by trying to operate *like* a conventional food project, *Freshfair* inadvertently turned into one. When the strategy team members finally realised this, they decided to abandon that approach.

Following *Freshfair*'s closure, and when they were trying to work out what to do next, the hub's participants decided that instead of starting another radical project that superficially operated in line with established neoliberal norms and practices, they would instead attempt to cultivate anti-systemic ideas inside other existing sub-hegemonic localist projects and work to openly highlight the limitations of reformist localist approaches as they now understood them.

No longer in the business of trying to sell 'ethical' commodities, the former *Freshfair* participants felt more able to act in line with their radical political commitments. Freed from the constraints imposed on them by the competitive pressures of the capitalist marketplace, they could forget about profit margins and monthly sales targets, and instead focus their attention on building class consciousness and spreading counter-hegemonic ideas *within* other local subaltern groups. The participants believed that this new, post-*Freshfair* approach offered a more effective way to re-politicise the wider social field and transform embedded structural selectivities in subversive ways (chapter 6).

I claim that these three lessons carry a wider significance for progressive eco-localist actors operating in advanced neoliberal Britain today. Based on my examination of *Freshfair* in chapters 6 and 8, and drawing on arguments developed in chapters 2, 3 and 4, I suggest that if, like the *Freshfair* participants, more sub-hegemonic eco-localist actors: 1) decided to break with the 'spatial fetishist' viewpoint that remains so deeply embedded in subaltern eco-social 'common sense'; 2) understood the inherent limitations of 'alternative' market-based solutions to urgent eco-social problems; 3) recognized that 'progressive', 'apolitical' eco-social activities on the 'civil society' terrain frequently operate in ways that help to reinforce the neoliberal capitalist arrangements that drive environmental and social crises, then progressive social forces operating today would be much better placed to deliver the kinds of deep-rooted social change that the current crisis situation demands (see section 9.5 below).

9.4 Critical distance, strategic transformation and 'pseudo activity'

I have already pointed out that the *Freshfair* actors, when they were immersed in the hub's day-to-day operations, had been too close to their own activity to notice that their project had started to deviate from its initial aims (chapter 8; also above). I have stressed, too, that they only became fully aware of this issue, and thus the limitations of their overall approach, *after the hub had closed*. As the participants themselves pointed out, it was only 'after the event' that they managed to find the time and space they needed to critically assess their activities (chapter 6). Up to that point, their constant over-busyness – a condition forced upon them in the hyper-competitive context of the capitalist marketplace – had prevented them from looking at their own activities through the radical political lens through which they viewed the rest of their social reality. It was only *after* their project had failed as a business that they started to yield the core strategic insights that their experiences contained.

This can be contrasted to the situation at *Greenstar*. I noted in chapter 7 that because this project worked with the grain of embedded neoliberal social logic, it became relatively easy for this initiative to reach a level of performance that was sufficient to enable those behind it to convince themselves that they were making *enough of a difference* to justify the continuation of their activities (chapter 7). Unlike at *Freshfair*, then, which never quite managed to reach the level of sales it needed to make itself financially sustainable, *Greenstar* was *consistently just successful enough* to ensure that its participants were never forced into a position where they had to *critically assess* their activities (and as I have shown, even if they had been, they would have struggled to do so in any case because their thoroughgoing internalization of neoliberal reason had rendered them incapable of thinking outside the co-ordinates of green capitalist logic). So, what insights can be gleaned from all this for my discussion of contemporary eco-localist strategy?

Stepping back

Based on my discussion of eco-localism in the post-2008 British context (where *sub*-hegemonic eco-social activities tended to dominate the field of subaltern environmental action – see chapter 3), and on my examination of the case study projects (see chapters 6 and 7), here I want to suggest that there are times when *stepping back* from practical activity can be more conducive to the advancement of efforts aimed at social emancipation than continued uncritical engagement in 'progressive' activities that align with established environmental 'common sense'.

Here I want to return to the issue of 'pseudo-activity' discussed in chapters 2, 4 and 7. I pointed out there that in advanced neoliberal action contexts – where opportunities for resistance are limited and where it has become almost impossible for even well-meaning and environmentally-aware citizens to extricate themselves from the circuits of fossil capitalism (chapter 4; Brand and Wissen, 2021; Seymour, 2022: 159–166) – it can be tempting for 'progressive' subaltern actors to engage in 'ever more frantic forms of activity' as a way to *do something* to help them deal with the feelings of guilt and helplessness that often overwhelm them (Huber, 2022; Seymour, 2022: 159–166; Delay, 2024: 28; Saito, 2024: 14).

However, as Saito has pointed out, such forms of pseudo-activity can end up doing 'more harm than good' because (putting it in the terms used in this thesis) they often help to channel the energies of disaffected subaltern actors in *sub*-hegemonic directions. Such activity, he argues, tends to 'prevent us from taking part in larger actions truly needed to combat climate change [and environmental and social breakdown more generally]' (Saito, 2024: xiii). Consequently, while reformist, sub-hegemonic approaches may *appear* to provide alternative ways of organising social activity, it is highly likely that such actions will work to reinforce existing eco-social arrangements (often against the stated intentions of those who engage in them). As Žižek (2006: 27) has pointed out, and as the case of *Freshfair* seems to suggest, if transforming society *really is* the aim (as so many eco-localists insist), then rather than frantically engaging in (sub-hegemonic forms of) eco-localist activity in a desperate effort to *do something* to respond to worsening environmental and social crises[73], it would perhaps be better if subaltern actors *stepped back* from the scene of the action to create space for *critical* reflection.

- *From passive consent to (radical) passivity?*

Žižek points out that political elites are always on the lookout for ways to keep disaffected citizens occupied. He claims that what ruling elites fear most is the emergence of situations where large numbers of discontented people find themselves with time to think about the

[73] As was the case at *Greenstar* – see chapter 7.

problems they face. Consequently, he argues that to maintain the social regimes on which their privileges rely, elite actors constantly need to find ways to engage the masses in 'pseudo-activities' to 'make sure that our ominous passivity is broken' (Žižek, 2006: 27).

It is worth pointing out here that Žižek's remarks on 'pseudo-activity' overlap with my own comments on sub-hegemony in chapter 2. I noted there that elite groups looking to maintain consent need to allow subaltern actors to conduct *limited* forms of oppositional activity (rather than shut down all forms of such activity outright). Drawing on Gramsci, I suggested that these *restricted* forms of activity can help to protect existing social arrangements by acting as a kind of 'pressure release valve' for social discontent: they offer disaffected citizens the opportunity to *do something* about the problems that concern them, but in a way that poses no real threat to embedded institutions or established modes of living (this line of argumentation underpinned the discussion in chapter 4, where I suggested that the Coalition government's BS localist agenda – which heavily shaped the activities at both case study projects – should be seen as just such an elite attempt to channel the energies of subaltern actors in a sub-hegemonic direction).

But as I argued in chapter 2, subaltern actors cannot hope to resolve the intensifying ecological and social crises bearing down on society by pursuing strategies that *remain* sub-hegemonic. Rather, I claim that 'mainstream' subaltern actors need to shift their attention from *sub*-hegemonic 'pseudo-activities' to *counter*-hegemonic interventions that aim to undermine existing capitalist arrangements (or that can at least play a role in creating conditions that are conducive to such a process of undermining – see section 9.5 below).

In my view, Žižek's emphasis on the act of 'stepping back' is crucial here. Instead of blindly becoming immersed in 'pseudo-activity' (where we are 'active all the time to make sure that nothing will really change'), he argues that for disaffected citizens looking to transform society, 'the first truly critical step is to *withdraw into passivity and to refuse to participate*'. As he sees it, in an age marked by immediacy and 'actionism', such a counterintuitive move is necessary because only in this way can subaltern actors 'clear[…] the ground for a *true activity*, for an act that will effectively change the co-ordinates of the scene' (Žižek, 2006: 26–27; see also Adorno, 2001: 190–203). I believe that the findings from the *Freshfair* case study support Žižek on this point. As I have stressed, the hub's participants only managed to find the space they needed to *critically* assess their activities *after they had stopped engaging in them*. In chapter 6, I showed that this process of *radicalizing disengagement* enabled them to see how their earlier thought patterns and behaviours had become neoliberalized, despite their original subversive intentions. The critical distance they gained by stepping back in this way enabled them to identify problems with the old *Freshfair* model and devise a new approach capable of overcoming its limitations.

To clarify, I am *not* suggesting here that sub-hegemonic eco-localist actors need to disband their projects (as the *Freshfair* participants were forced to do) in order to gain this kind of critical insight. What I *am* suggesting, though, is that if sub-hegemonic actors want to overcome the barriers I have outlined above and to build more effective eco-localist movements going forward, then, like the participants at *Freshfair*, they need to: 1) find ways to *critically* reflect on their activities; 2) accept the possibility that they may have to transform their activities in ways that appear counterintuitive and/or politically unrealistic when seen from an embedded 'common sense' perspective.

I want to emphasise here that in my view, it is not enough for subaltern actors to simply step back, review their activities, and then return, refreshed, to the scene of the action. Rather, the kind of distancing I call for must be one that enables sub-hegemonic eco-localist actors to *critically* assess their existing ideas and practices. And as should hopefully be clear from the discussion in previous chapters, I believe that (eco-)Marxian approaches offer a valuable storehouse of conceptual tools ideally suited to this task. Why? Because, as I argued in chapters 2, 3 and 4, (eco-)Marxian theoretical perspectives 1) by focusing on value flows, help to make clearly visible the immanent limits of reformist, profit-oriented, market-mediated, 'localist essentialist' approaches to emancipatory eco-social transformation, and 2) by foregrounding capital's *systemic* need for continued accumulation and by showing how it structures eco-social relations in order to achieve this, help to deepen our understanding of the drivers of environmental and social crises in ways that can better inform subaltern efforts to resolve them.

Consequently, I suggest that going forward, eco-Marxian ideas need to be increasingly incorporated into subaltern environmental thought and action to the point where they can become sedimented into a new form of 'common sense'. I suggest that this would enable sub-hegemonic eco-social actors to transform their 'pseudo-activities' into counter-hegemonic activities capable of 'effectively chang[ing] the co-ordinates of the scene' (Žižek, 2006: 27). Of course, in today's advanced neoliberal context, generalising (eco-)Marxian ideas and finding ways to embed these in eco-localist thought and practice is going to be no easy task. Based on the discussion in chapter 2, I suggest that any attempt to bring such a shift about will necessarily involve subaltern struggles on the 'civil society' terrain. It is to this issue that I now turn.

9.5 Sub-hegemonic eco-localist activities and emancipatory social transition today

In section 9.1 above, I claimed that Marxian thinkers associated with left eco-modernist and accelerationist perspectives (Phillips, 2015; Srnicek and Williams, 2016; Huber, 2022) often dismiss the idea that sub-hegemonic forms of eco-localist activity have any kind of strategic potential. I claimed, too, that they are wrong to do so. I now want to develop this point in a direction that I think can help to break the impasse that has been reached in contemporary debates between degrowthers and left eco-modernists (see chapter 3).

Following Böhm et al., I first want to stress that when looking to assess the strategic capabilities of sub-hegemonic eco-localist initiatives, it is entirely possible to acknowledge that the activities of such groups can be *useful* (in that they provide a way for people living in capitalist societies to engage in non-competitive, more solidaristic ways of living) *and to simultaneously accept that they lack the potential to fundamentally transform society in the ways that radical actors demand* (Böhm et al., 2016). On this point, Böhm et al. argue, correctly in my view, that the strategic potential of such localist groups should not be dismissed simply because, when seen from the perspective of their anti-capitalist detractors, their activities are considered insufficiently radical. Instead, they argue that ways must be found to '*value* these practices and, at the same time … *criticise their intrinsic limits*' (Böhm et al., 2016: 268–269; emphasis added). I have argued that (eco-)Marxian ideas offer a useful way to *criticise* the intrinsic limits of sub-hegemonic eco-localist practices in the way that Böhm et al., demand (see chapters 2, 3 and 4). But how should progressive eco-social actors approach the issue of assessing their value? In my view, Gramsci's conception of the 'war of position' provides the basis of an answer to this very important question.

Gramsci showed how activities on the 'civil society' terrain can work to reinforce embedded state structures when these are challenged. As I noted in chapter 2, when discussing the relationship between state and civil society, he famously claimed that in advanced capitalist contexts (where there exists a 'proper relation between state and civil society'), when 'the state trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed'.[74] For Gramsci, '[t]he State was only an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks' (Gramsci, 1971: 237). Gramsci compared the structures of civil society in developed capitalist contexts to 'the trench systems of modern warfare' (Gramsci, 1971: 235; see also discussion in Martin, 2022: 20). These 'trenches', he stated, were composed of a wide range of 'private' organisations that, while formally independent of public authority, nevertheless played an important role in preserving state power. Examples of such organisations include newspapers, clubs, churches, and other civil associations (Gramsci, 1971: 235; Jessop, 2018b; Martin, 2022: 20). Based on the work in this and previous chapters, I suggest that sub-hegemonic eco-localist groups operating in advanced neoliberal contexts – because these often work to shield the modern state from direct public hostility and in this way reinforce the rule of dominant groups (Gramsci, 1971: 248; also Schwarzmantel, 2015; Martin, 2022) – can also perform this function.

Yet it is important to note here that the activities of eco-localist groups *can also help to create the conditions required for wider progressive social shifts*. This point links back to my

[74] He contrasted this to the situation in Russia (where 'the State was everything and civil society was primordial and gelatinous') (Gramsci, 1971, p. 237).

discussion of Gramsci's conception of 'war of position' in chapter 2. I think that Buttigieg's comments on this issue are worth noting. Drawing on Gramsci, he argues that in liberal democracies, where civil society reinforces political society, progressive subaltern actors looking to develop effective social transformation strategies must 'refrain from facile rhetoric about direct attacks against the state' and instead accept that any attempt to create the conditions for a future emancipatory social transition will involve 'the difficult and immensely complicated tasks that a 'war of position' within civil society entails' (Buttigieg, 2005: 41; Gramsci, 1971; Jessop, 2020: 132–135; this overlaps with Wright's notion of eroding capitalism – see Wright, 2019: 59–64; also chapter 2 above). Quoting from Gramsci, Buttigieg also points out that, if oppositional forces are to effectively engage in this struggle, they must first conduct 'a reconnaissance of the terrain and an identification of the trench and fortresses represented by the components of civil society' (Buttigieg, 2005: 41; quoting Gramsci, 1971: 238). This task is necessary, he suggests, because subaltern groups need to **'**arrive at a thorough knowledge of the intricate, wide-ranging, and capillary operations of the prevailing hegemony *before devising strategies for supplanting it*' (Buttigieg, 2005: 41; Jessop, 2020: 135).

In my view, this Gramscian perspective offers a useful way to think about the activities of the *Freshfair* food hub. With the benefit of hindsight, I suggest that the hub's journey from conception to closure and beyond can be understood as a kind of subaltern 'reconnaissance mission' – one that the members of this initiative unwittingly embarked upon when they first set up their project, yet one that nevertheless generated valuable information about the barriers that impede eco-localist projects as they seek to operate and expand in advanced neoliberal contexts (the subject of my primary research question – see chapter 1). Moreover, I suggest that my discussion of these actors' strategic development journey has, by foregrounding the ways they adapted their activities to deal with the difficulties they faced, generated important insights that can help other subaltern actors overcome the barriers to advancement that I outlined in the previous chapter. My discussion of *Freshfair*'s activities in this thesis can, then, be seen as an attempt to draw out and distil the key strategic learning points from these participants' experiences in the hope that progressive localist actors in today's crisis-ridden context can make use of them.

What the evidence from the *Freshfair* case study suggests is that, just because today's advanced neoliberal action context offers far from ideal conditions for the development of counter-hegemonic projects and movements, all is not lost. That is because, in this late neoliberal crisis conjuncture, radical eco-localist actors *can still engage in struggles on the civil society terrain as part of wider efforts to transform embedded selectivities and open spaces where future counter-hegemonic activities can potentially take root*. Indeed, it is my contention that creating

the pre-conditions for the kinds of radical social transformation that the current crisis situation demands will require subaltern actors to engage in just this kind of activity.

9.6 De-growth eco-localism or eco-socialist productivism? Yes, please!

To pick up a thread I left hanging in chapter 3, here I want to suggest that re-centring the strategic importance of subaltern 'civil society' eco-localist activity in this way potentially offers a way to break the impasse that has been reached in current environmental debates between proponents of 'bottom-up', degrowth-focused, eco-localist perspectives and those who advocate for 'top-down', left eco-modernist approaches.

That is because, in my view, when one takes seriously the role that subaltern 'civil society' eco-localist activities can play in creating the conditions needed for a wider social transformation, then it becomes possible to see that *the rapid growth of large-scale industrial production that the socialist eco-modernists call for, and the rapid expansion of small-scale, community-based activities that degrowth thinkers demand, constitute the condition of possibility for each other.*

I have already considered the first part of this formulation in chapter 3. Focusing on the eco-modernist position, I suggested there that Huber is correct to point out that *more* large-scale industrial production (so long as this is democratically planned, operated along use-value lines, and conducted in a manner that is conscious of environmental limits) is going to be needed if the majority of the world's population is ever going to have the free time and levels of material security they need to allow them to engage in the kinds of community-scale activities that degrowth thinkers champion (community gardening, participatory planning, 'convivial living', and so on) (Huber, 2021; see also Srnicek and Williams, 2016).

However, while correct up to a point, I claim that advocates of left eco-modernist approaches *tend to overlook this formulation's equally important second part*. Drawing on (neo-)Gramscian perspectives, I suggest that, if state institutions and the sphere of production are going to be changed in ways that the industrialised eco-socialist pathway requires, then oppositional forces will have to engage in – *and win* – a 'war of position' on the 'civil society' terrain as part of wider efforts to remould subaltern 'common sense' and transform embedded selectivities (both inside and outside of 'the state'). I contend that struggles *within existing sub-hegemonic eco-localist groups* will play a key role in this process. Why? Because in today's advanced neoliberal landscape – where left social forces have been drastically weakened and where opportunities for subaltern resistance remain severely limited (chapter 4) – *these initiatives represent a key site of 'progressive' eco-social activity*.

Furthermore, I claim that my discussion of the *Freshfair* food hub shows that it is *possible* for eco-localist projects to modify their activities in ways that can move them along the continuum of consent towards the pole of outright resistance (see chapter 8). Given the rapidly worsening

conditions of today's capitalist catastrophist conjuncture, I argue that many more localist groups are going to have shift in this direction if the social conditions needed for a future emancipatory social transformation are going to be created.

I believe that, as the planetary conditions needed for human and non-human flourishing unravel, and as the limitations of 'progressive' sub-hegemonic eco-localist approaches become ever more apparent, new opportunities for counter-hegemonic forms of eco-localist struggle are going to emerge. Perhaps if 'mainstream' eco-localist actors can be convinced to transform their approaches in the ways that the *Freshfair* participants did, enough of these opportunities will be taken.

9.7 Potential areas for further Study

Here I would like to briefly mention some potential areas for further study that I did not have space to expand on in the thesis:

Landownership, food sovereignty, and 'public common partnerships'

In the preceding chapters, I have argued that 'progressive' eco-localist activists, if they are to contribute to the development of genuinely emancipatory social alternatives, need to find ways to link their particularistic, small-scale projects to wider struggles oriented towards establishing common ownership of the means of the production *at the societal level*.

I would like to point out here that recent work by Heron, Russell, and Milburn (2023; 2024; 2025) offers a potentially useful way to take this idea forward. Specifically, I think their work on 'public common partnerships' (PCPs) is particularly useful in this regard, as this model could provide a concrete organizational form through which local authorities, communities, farmworkers, and activists could be brought together (in the way that the *Freshfair* actors always hoped – but never quite managed – to achieve). Although I didn't have space to explore this in the thesis, I believe that productive intersections could be made between my work on localist strategy and theirs, and that this could be a fruitful area for further research.

'Authentic' production and 'immediacy'

In this thesis, I have shown that in the advanced neoliberal British context, progressive subaltern actors have often tried to overcome the alienation generated by capitalist (eco-)social relations through efforts to develop 'authentic', less-mediated (localised) commodity production-consumption circuits. Had more space been available, I would like to have said more about how the *Freshfair* actors attempted to achieve such 'authenticity' by providing their customers with information about *where* their food was produced and *who* was behind its production (a not uncommon approach at alternative food projects – see, for example, Guthman, 2007). I would like to have shown, too, how Marx's distinction between concrete and abstract labour (Marx, 1976) could be used to fruitfully examine such subaltern attempts to develop authentic production practices. In the case of *Freshfair*, for example, such an approach would have allowed me to show how many of the key difficulties this project faced emerged because its members tried to construct a project that foregrounded *concrete* labour in a capitalist context organised around *abstract labour time*. I think this area is ripe for further study and that such work would complement that of others who have examined the issue of 'authenticity' from a Marxian perspective (see, for example, Brownhill, et al., 2012; Sharzer, 2012; Gunderson, 2014). And although I did not have space to explore this in my thesis, I also think there is scope to put the literature examining the neoliberal-era growth of subaltern interest in localism and 'authenticity' into conversation with Korbluh's recent work on the turn towards 'immediacy' in

the field of (too-late capitalist) culture (Kornbluh, 2024), as well as with the Hegelian critique of ‘immediacy’ more broadly (Hegel, 1977). By illuminating subaltern struggles for immediacy from a distinctive new angle, I think such an approach could offer fresh insights into contemporary eco-localist practice at a time when new way of thinking and acting are desperately required.

Word count: 99,899

Appendix 1: Ethics Review Documentation

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Management School Research Ethics Committee (FASS-LUMS REC)

Lancaster University

Application for Ethical Approval for Research – General Guidance

Instructions Please refer to NOTES in this form for guidance. The application form starts on page 3.

A. How to apply to the committee:

The FASS-LUMS REC forms should be used for **all projects by staff and research students, whether funded or not, which have not been reviewed by any external research ethics committee.** If your project is or has been reviewed by another committee (e.g. from another University), please contact the FASS-LUMS research ethics officer for further guidance.

In addition to the completed form, you need to submit **research materials of direct relevance to your application** such as (but not limited to):

i. Advertising materials (posters, e-mails)
ii. Letters/emails of invitation to participate
iii. Participant information sheets[1]
iv. Consent forms[2]
v. Questionnaires, surveys, demographic sheets
vi. Interview schedules, interview question guides, focus group scripts
vii. Debriefing sheets, resource lists

For all sections of the form, be specific but concise in the information you provide. The reviewers are academics from the different departments in FASS and LUMS. They will not necessarily be from your subject area or discipline, so make sure to avoid subject-specific terminology and be as clear as you can.

NOTE

[1]We recommend that you use the sample information sheet on the FASS-LUMS Research Ethics Committee website as the basis of your information sheet.

If your participants include people with a learning disability, your information sheet and consent form should include pictorial representations of the information you are trying to communicate (Makaton). For more information go to http://www.makaton.org/

[2]We recommend that you use the sample consent form on the FASS-LUMS Research Ethics Committee website as the basis of your consent form.

For all applications you need to:

Submit the FASS-LUMS REC application form and any relevant materials listed under A by email to fass.lumsethics@lancaster.ac.uk **as** a **SINGLE attachment preferably in Word format**. *If this is not possible submit the documents in a* ***single*** *PDF.* ***Before converting to PDF ensure all comments are hidden by going into 'Review' in the menu above then choosing show markup>balloons>show all revisions in line.***

You can submit applications at any time.

Projects involving existing documents/data only or the evaluation of an existing project with no direct contact with human participants will be dealt with via chair's action.

All projects involving human participants will be reviewed by at least two reviewers. A lead reviewer will be appointed from the FASS-LUMS REC who will be responsible for providing comments and feedback to applicants. The lead reviewer may contact you for any clarification of your application if needed.

Depending on the project and the ethical issues it raises, your application may be discussed by the full FASS-LUMS REC at their monthly meetings and as applicant you may be asked to attend this meeting. We will contact you if your application will be discussed at the committee meeting. Please ensure you are available to attend the committee meeting on the day that your application is considered, if required to do so.

Committee meeting dates are listed on the FASS-LUMS REC website.

Projects involving social media and participants recruited or identified through the internet require full consideration by the FASS-LUMS REC. This is in particular the case if the understanding of privacy in these settings is contentious or where sensitive issues are discussed and where quotes and visual images the researcher intends to use may be identifiable. For example, as part of your study you may be using data from an online context that is publicly available. But this does not mean that the participants/members of this context also perceive it to be public[3]. Any study involving online interviews, online ethnography or any other use of data from private or semi-private internet sources is considered to involve contact with human participants and therefore needs a full ethics review.

NOTE

[3]For more advice on the ethics of internet research, see Association of Internet Researchers, Ethical decision making and internet research, http://aoir.org/ethics/

B. What level of review is required for my project?

In order to help the committee decide what level of review your project requires, please consider question 1 below, points a-i.

1. Does your research project involve any of the following?

a. Human participants (including all types of interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, records relating to humans, use of internet or other secondary data, observation etc.)
b. Animals - the term animals shall be taken to include any non-human vertebrates, cephalopods or decapod crustaceans.
c. Risk to members of the research team e.g. lone working, travel to areas where researchers may be at risk, risk of emotional distress
d. Human cells or tissues other than those established in laboratory cultures
e. Risk to the environment
f. Conflict of interest
g. Research or a funding source that could be considered controversial
h. Social media and/or data from internet sources that could be considered private
i. Any other ethical considerations

If the answer to question 1 above is:

☑ **Yes** - complete Section **1,3 and 4**
☐ **No** - proceed to Section **1, 2 and 4**

FASS-LUMS RESEARCH ETHICS APPLICATION FORM

SECTION ONE [Must be completed by all applicants]

Title of Project[4]: Exploring barriers to local food and energy production

Name of applicant/researcher: Stephen Graham

ACP ID number (if applicable)*:

Funding source (if applicable) ESRC

Grant code:

NOTE

[4]Make your title short and descriptive so that people can easily identify the main topic of the research. The title of your project does not need to be the same as the title you propose to use for your publication (e.g. your thesis).

Type of study

☐ Involves existing documents/data only, or the evaluation of an existing project with no direct contact with human participants. **Complete sections one, *two* and four of this form**

✓ Includes *direct* involvement by human subjects (including but not limited to interviews, completing questionnaires, social media and other internet based research). **Complete sections one, *three* and four of this form**

1.Appointment/position held by applicant and Department within FASS PhD Research Student (Sociology)

2. Contact information for applicant:

E-mail: s.graham3@lancaster.ac.uk **Telephone**: REDACTED

University Address: Department of Sociology, Bowland North, Lancaster University LA1 4YN

3. **Names and appointments/position of all members of the research team**

N/A

3. If this is a research student project, please indicate what type of project by marking the relevant box:

Masters by research ☐ PhD ✓

4. Project supervisor(s): Distinguished Professor Bob Jessop (Sociology); Dr Claire Waterton (Sociology)

SECTION TWO

Complete this section if your project involves existing data only, or the evaluation of an existing project with no direct contact with human participants

1. Anticipated project dates (month and year)[5]
Start date: End date:

NOTE
[5]These dates should indicate when recruitment will begin (taking into account the timescale of the ethical approval process) and when funding ends or your thesis will be submitted.

2. Please state the aims and objectives of the project (no more than 150 words, in lay-person's language)[6]:

NOTE

[6]This summary should concisely but clearly tell the reviewer (in simple terms and in a way which would be understandable to a general audience) what you are broadly planning to do in your study.

3. Please describe briefly the data or records to be studied, or the evaluation to be undertaken.

4. How will any data or records be obtained?

5. Confidentiality and Anonymity

a. If your study involves re-analysis and potential publication of existing data but which was gathered as part of a previous project, conducted by another individual or collective, involving direct contact with human beings, how will you ensure that your re-analysis of this data maintains confidentiality and anonymity as guaranteed in the original study?

6. What plan is in place for the storage of data (electronic, digital, paper, etc)?[7] Please ensure that your plans comply with the Data Protection Act 1998.

NOTE

[7]State clearly where and what format your data will be stored.

Timescales: The standard guidance we provide to people about length of time for retaining data is for a minimum of 10 years. This is not a requirement but a general recommendation. Your study may have a rationale for retaining data longer, but if so, please explain. Where electronic data is to be stored for longer than the recommended period, it should only be kept on Lancaster University servers, and not on portable or home devices.

Data security: Data stored on all portable devices (eg laptops) should be encrypted as well as password protected; data stored on the University server does not, however, need to be encrypted. If you are based and work predominantly away from the University, give consideration to how you will store the data securely as you undertake your research, and how it will be securely transferred to the LU campus for longer term storage.

7. What are the plans for dissemination of findings from the research?[8]

NOTE

[8]Dissemination covers a wide range of activities including (but not limited to) reports, academic submissions (such as theses and journal articles), newspaper articles, etc.

8a. Is the secondary data you will be using in the public domain?

8b. If NO, please indicate the original purpose for which the data was collected, and comment on whether consent was gathered for additional later use of the data.

9.What other ethical considerations (if any), not previously noted on this application, do you think there are in the proposed study? How will these issues be addressed?

10a. Will you be gathering data from discussion forums, on-line 'chat-rooms' and similar online spaces where privacy and anonymity are contention?

10b. If yes, your project requires full ethics review. Please complete Sections 1, 3 and 4.

SECTION THREE

Complete this section if your project includes *direct* involvement by human subjects

NOTE: In addition to completing this form you must submit all supporting materials (see general guidance on page 1 of this form).

1. Summary of research in lay terms, including aims (maximum length 150 words)[9]:

This research aims to examine the factors that impede the expansion of small-scale, low-carbon food and energy production initiatives in contemporary fossil fuel-based neoliberal societies. It will be based on insights gained from ethnographic studies of two such initiatives based in northwest England. One project is a food hub that works to link up local producers and consumers to help reduce food miles and boost the local economy; the other is a community energy group, which facilitates share issues to raise finance for community-owned renewable energy schemes across the county. The results of the research project will be fed into future policy discussions at both organisations. This is intended to help them (and other similar organisations) build effective survival/development strategies at a time when the low-carbon services they provide are so desperately required – but when the resources needed to expand their operations are increasingly difficult to find.

NOTE

[9]The summary should concisely but clearly tell the reviewers what you are planning to do. It is very important that you describe your study in such a way that it is understandable to a general audience. Your study will be reviewed by colleagues from different disciplines who will not be familiar with your specific field of research. Avoid jargon and use simple terms. Your study may also be reviewed by the lay members of the FASS-LUMS REC.

2. Anticipated project dates (month and year only)[10]

Start date: **May 2017** End date: **October 2022**

NOTE

[10]These dates should indicate when recruitment will begin, (taking into account the timescale of the ethical approval process) and when funding ends or your thesis will be submitted.

3. Please describe briefly the intended human participants (including number, age, gender, and any other relevant characteristics):

Intended participants are individuals associated with the organisations outlined in Section 3.1 (above): staff members, trustees, board members, and volunteers. In the

case of the food hub, it will also include local food producers and service users/customers; at the renewable energy initiative, participants will also be drawn from communities where renewable energy schemes have been constructed, as well as where such schemes have been planned planned but ultimately failed to get off the ground. All participants are based in or located close to [northwest region]. In the context of this study, participants are not considered vulnerable – however, a constant awareness will be maintained throughout the research process to ensure that, should potentially vulnerable participants be recruited as the project develops, appropriate measures will be taken to protect their rights and dignity.

4. Are members of the public involved in a research capacity, for example as data collector (e.g. participatory research) and if so, do you anticipate any ethical issues resulting from this?[11]

No.

NOTE

[11]This does not refer to members of the public being interviewed, but to forms of participatory research, where you invite members of the public to collect data.

5. How will participants be recruited and from where?[12]

Participants will be recruited by approaching 'gatekeeping' individuals at each of the two organisations that feature in this study (I already have strong relationships with such figures at each project – the result of a decade of involvement with a wide range of social and environmental projects in the region). The purpose of the research will be explained to the gatekeepers. I will ask directly 1) if it is possible to conduct ethnographic research – primarily semi-structured interviews – focussed on activities at each organisation; 2) if it possible to contact the potential participants I have already identified through desk-based research; and 3) if they can identify/suggest other participants who might be willing to take part. Letters/e-mails of invitation and Personal Information Sheets will be sent to all potential participants (who will be given the opportunity to request any further additional information they may need). Those wishing to take part will be provided with consent forms, which must be completed and returned. Other participants (e.g. those met at annual general meetings or community/public forums) will be informed and consent sought as appropriate.

The semi-structured interviews constitute the first stage of this research project. Depending on the results of the interviews, participant observation methods may also be utilised in a second stage to gather additional data. At this point it is impossible to determine what ethical/safety issues might arise from such additional data collection activities. Therefore, should other data gathering methods be required, an amendment to this Ethics Review application and its supporting materials (e.g. participant information sheet, consent form, letter/email of invitation etc.) will be submitted to the ethics committee.

NOTE

[12]Please include here (if applicable) information about the following: How will participants be able to find out about the study? Will all volunteering participants be included or may you have to turn some away? If you will use different recruitment procedures for different participant groups, clearly indicate this and outline each set of procedures.

6. Briefly describe your data collection methods, drawing particular attention to any potential ethical issues.

Once potential participants have been identified and contacted, an initial round of semi-structured interviews will be conducted with those who have provided consent. These will typically be one-on-one interviews, and will take place in a range of locations – at times in public places (e.g. cafés), sometimes in non-public settings (e.g., offices, the homes of participants). For interviews held in public places, potential breaches of confidentiality (due to the possibility of participants being seen talking to a researcher) will be considered and discussed with the participant before the interview takes place. Should a concern arise, a non-public setting will be found. A lone working policy (also included in this application) has been developed to reduce risks associated with interviews conducted in non-public locations. Interviews conducted will, where consent is granted, be audio recorded. It will be made clear consistently that participants can withdraw from the interview process at any time prior to the interview, and can have their information deleted up to four weeks following it (as set out in the Participant Information Sheet).

7. Consent

7a. Will you take all necessary steps to obtain the voluntary and informed consent of the prospective participant(s) or, in the case of individual(s) not capable of giving informed consent, the permission of a legally authorised representative in accordance with applicable law? **Yes.** If yes, please go to question 7b. If no, please go to question 7c.

7b. Please explain the procedure you will use for obtaining consent?[13] Please include sample participant information sheets (PIS) and consent forms in your application. If applicable, please explain the procedures you intend to use to gain permission on behalf of participants who are unable to give informed consent. Please include copies of any relevant documentation.

Each potential participant will be provided with a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) and consent form (both included in this application). The PIS will explain the aims of this study and provide the individual concerned with the information they require in order to make an informed decision as to whether they wish to take part, and also the researcher's contact details should they require further information.

Participant information forms will be sent via email where possible, or by post if the potential participant does not have access to/is not comfortable with electronic

forms of communication. It will be made clear to potential participants that I will be available to discuss any potential issues/concerns they might have. For those willing to take part, a consent form will be sent using their preferred communication method; in the consent form, it will be clearly explained that the document must be completed and returned before the interview can take place. It will also explain that I intend to make audio recordings of interviews where consent for this is granted.

NOTE

[13]If non-handwritten forms of consent will be used in the study, explain why and what they will be.

If your research includes anonymous surveys for data collection, no consent form will be used because that would compromise anonymity. However, a cover sheet or opening page/section or some type of introduction should clearly inform participants that by completing the survey they are providing consent for the use of the data for research. The cover sheet or introduction may also remind participants of other aspects of what they are agreeing to (but without requiring them to sign or type identifying information such as a name at the end of the information).

If you are using computer-based forms of data collection, describe carefully how consent processes will be addressed.

7c.If it will be necessary for participants to take part in the study without their knowledge and consent at the time, please explain why (for example covert observations may be necessary in some settings; some experiments require use of deception or partial deception – not telling participants everything about the experiment). **N/A**

8. What discomfort (physical and psychological eg distressing, sensitive or embarrassing topics), inconvenience or danger could be caused by participation in the project beyond the risks encountered in normal life? Please indicate plans to address these potential risks.[14] State the timescales within which participants may withdraw from the study, noting your reasons.[15]

I do not expect distress or discomfort for the participants taking part in this study. It will be made clear in the Participant Information Sheet that those involved in the study can withdraw their consent at any time prior to the interview, and that the information they provide can be destroyed up to four weeks after it.

NOTE

[14]Be as thorough as possible in anticipating potential sources of discomfort.

Provide a plan for addressing the discomfort that may arise during the conduct of the research and discomfort that may develop following the conduct of the research, potentially as a consequence of participation in the research. We suggest you include possible sources of support in the Participant Information Sheet. You may also consider providing a debriefing sheet.

[15]Time limits for withdrawing from the study: please avoid the phrase “participants may withdraw at any time” because withdrawal for most studies is time limited. For example, once you have published your data, withdrawal is clearly not possible in the true sense. You may want to consider a reasonable time period for withdrawal following data collection, depending on the type of study you are doing, for example:

i. If you are collecting interview data and will be conducting simultaneous data collection and analysis, it may be reasonable to give participants a 2 week period following the interview to withdraw their data. [For other studies, longer periods of time may be appropriate.] An example of wording that may be used is “Participants are welcome to withdraw from the study at any time before or during the interview and up to 2 weeks following their interview (or survey completion).”

ii. If you are collecting your data via focus groups or group interviews, it is impractical to allow participants to withdraw their contribution once the group has started and recording begun. An example of wording that may be used is “Participants are welcome to withdraw from the study at any time before the focus group begins, but will not be able to withdraw their contribution to the discussion once recording has started.” You should be explicit in this section about your intention to brief participants about this at the start of the focus group (for example during the setting of ground rules).

iii. If you use anonymous surveys, you need to clearly indicate to participants that they will NOT be able to withdraw their data/contribution once they have submitted it because it will not be possible to identify it as theirs.

9. How will you protect participants’ confidentiality and/or anonymity in data collection (e.g. interviews), data storage, data analysis, presentation of findings and publications?[16]

Anonymity will be the default position in this study. Pseudonyms will be employed for all participants. Fictitious names will be given to the organisations that feature in this research project.

The organisations that feature in this study are relatively small, have few staff members and in certain cases deliver specialised services – therefore it may not be possible to guarantee anonymity in this study. That this is the case will be made clear to potential participants from the outset (see Participant Information Sheet and consent form).

I will continue to be aware of any concerns that may arise regarding anonymity of participants as the study progresses and act accordingly.

NOTE

[16]In the context of research confidentiality means that you will only disclose information that participants share with you in the forms agreed by them in the consent form. In most case, this includes offering anonymity, i.e. using pseudonyms and ensuring that individual participants cannot be identified in your dissertation/publications/presentations.

In some studies, it is possible that in the course of the research information arises that gives the researcher cause for concern and that may require her/him to breech confidentiality. For example if in an interview a participants discloses information that indicates that they or others may be at risk of harm, the researcher may need to share this information with others. In your PIS, when eliciting consent, explain the limits to confidentiality. This is in particular important when working with vulnerable individuals or groups.

10. Do you anticipate any ethical constraints relating to power imbalances or dependent relationships, either with participants or with or within the research team? If yes, please explain how you intend to address these?[17]

The organisations that feature in this study are small and are made up of relatively small numbers of staff members and volunteers. Although each initiative seeks to operate as far as possible in an egalitarian and not-particularly-hierarchical way, power imbalances do inevitably exist. It is not felt that this project will create any specific power imbalances other than those already present.

NOTE

[17]For example, if you are a teacher/former teacher conducting research in the school/language school you used to or are still working in, what are the implications for research participants? Explain clearly that their participation or decision not to take part does not affect their studies or any assessments.

11. What potential risks may exist for the researcher and/or research team? Please indicate plans to address such risks (for example, noting the support available to you/the researcher; counselling considerations arising from the sensitive or distressing nature of the research/topic; details of the lone worker plan you or any researchers will follow, in particular when working abroad[18].

Lone working will be required, but in low-risk situations. A lone-working policy is included in this application. Through this policy, arrangements will be put in place to ensure the safety of the researcher (i.e. contact with a pre-appointed individual at previously agreed times).

NOTE

[18]The University's guidance on Lone Working can help you with this, see here: http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/depts/safety/files/loneworking.pdf

12. Whilst there may not be any significant direct benefits to participants as a result of this research, please state here any that may result from participation in the study.

The results of the research project will be fed into future policy discussions at both organisations. Hopefully, this will help them to build effective strategies at a time when the low-carbon services they provide are so desperately required – but when the resources needed to expand their operations are increasingly difficult to find.

13. Please explain the rationale for any incentives/payments (including out-of-pocket expenses) made to participants[19]:

N/A

NOTE

[19]If you are intending to use incentives/payments, keep in mind that they should be modest so as not to suggest coercion of the participants. If you are reimbursing for travel, please indicate the financial limit of the reimbursement.

14. What are your plans for the storage of data (electronic, digital, paper, etc.)? Please ensure that your plans comply with the Data Protection Act 1998[20].

All data will be stored on an encrypted laptop and using encrypted external memory devices. Where necessary, material will also be stored on Box. Audio recorders will be kept in a locked storage box until recordings have been transferred to a secure storage medium. All audio recordings will be moved from the recording device on the day of the interview, stored on encrypted portable devices, backed-up on university servers and deleted from the recorder (see also 16b, below). Signed consent forms will be kept in a locked document box. Documents containing sensitive data, when sent to supervisors, will be password protected.

NOTE

[20]Data storage: non-audio and non-video data. State clearly where and what format your data will be stored.

Timescales: The standard guidance we provide to people about length of time for retaining data is 10 years (minimum). This is not a requirement but a general recommendation. Your study may have a rationale for retaining data longer and for various intended purposes, but if so, please explain. For example, some data may be specifically collected with intent to be added to a formal databank (quantitative or qualitative), or there may be plans for secondary data analysis that is anticipated from early in the design of the project. Where electronic data is to be stored for longer than the recommended period, it should only be kept on Lancaster University servers, and not on portable or home devices.

Data Stewardship: Please state who will have guardianship of the stored data (and if you are a student, who will be responsible for storing/deleting your data once you have completed your course). Please also include information on who will see the data (e.g. supervisors; research team members; transcribers)

Location: If your data is stored centrally or will be accessible to others, you should note in your application who will have access to the data.

Data security: Data stored on all portable devices (eg laptops) should be encrypted as well as pass word protected; data stored on the University server does not, however, need to be encrypted.

If you are based and work predominantly away from the University, give consideration to how you will store the data securely as you undertake your research, and how it will be securely transferred to the LU campus for long term storage.

15. Please answer the following question *only* if you have not completed a Data Management Plan for an external funder.

15a Do you intend to deposit your (anonymised) data in a data archive? [21]

No.

NOTE

[21] Most funders require researchers to preserve and share their data via a data archive. Lancaster University's Research Data Management Policy also suggests that all researchers, PhD students included, should store and archive their data in ways appropriate to the specific study and type of data. Please note that if you store data in a data archive where other researchers, upon request, can have access to this data, this needs to be explained on participant information sheets & consent forms.

There are different ways of storing and sharing data, but you are likely to follow one of these two options:

Example 1: Data will be deposited in Lancaster University's institutional data repository and made freely available

with an appropriate data license. Lancaster University uses Pure as the data repository which will hold, manage,

preserve and provide access to datasets produced by Lancaster University research.

Example 2: Data will be offered to the UK Data Archive (as per the standard ESRC procedures) or another similar data archive.

For further guidance on data archiving, please see here: http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/library/rdm/deposit-your-data/.

15b. If you have responded 'no' to question 15a, please explain briefly why you cannot share your data via a data archive or repository[22]

Due to the small scale of the organisations involved I cannot in all cases guarantee participants' anonymity.

NOTE

[22] You may have reasons for not making your data widely available. For example, due to the small sample size, even after full anonymization, there may be a small risk that participants can be identified. It may also be the case that due to the (commercially, politically, ethically) sensitive nature of the research, no participants consented to their data being shared. You can find more information about ethical constraints on sharing data on this site:

http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/library/rdm/what-is-rdm/preserve-and-share/data-access-statements/

16. Will audio or video recording take place? Audio – **yes**; video – **no**

16a. Will portable devices (laptop, USB drive, audio- and video- recorders, etc) be encrypted (in particular where they are used for identifiable data)? **Yes (excluding audio recorders. See 16b).**

16b If it is not possible to encrypt your portable devices, please comment on the steps you will take to protect the data.[23]

Recording devices will be kept in a locked storage box until recordings have been transferred to a secure storage medium. All audio recordings will be moved from the recording device on the day of the interview, stored on encrypted portable devices, backed-up on university servers and deleted from the recorder. Although not my intention, if a transcriber is used, information will be shared with them via secure means (e.g. Box). The transcriber will sign a confidentially agreement.

NOTE

[23]**Transporting audio/video data:** you should state that if you store any identifiable data (audio recordings, participant contact details etc) on portable devices such as a memory stick or laptop you will use encryption. Password protection alone is not sufficient for identifiable data. Information on encryption is available from ISS http://www.lancs.ac.uk/iss/security/encryptionoptions/ and their service desk is also able to assist.

If your portable device cannot be encrypted, you must confirm that any identifiable data (including recordings of participants' voices) will be deleted from the recorder as quickly as possible (eg when they have been transferred to a secure medium, such as a password protected & encrypted PC) and state that the device will be stored securely in the meantime.

16c. What arrangements have been made for audio/video data storage? At what point in the research will tapes/digital recordings/files be destroyed?[24]

The audio recordings will be stored on encrypted portable storage devices and university servers but deleted upon completion of the PhD. Transcriptions of these recordings will be kept for a minimum of ten years.

NOTE

[24]**Storage**. Audio and video data is considered more sensitive than most written data because of its capacity to threaten confidentiality more directly. There are, however, no fixed deadlines, and recordings such as oral histories may be kept in perpetuity. With audio data that does not need to be kept for the long term, it is common to erase/destroy the recording once it has been transcribed and checked. However, we suggest that you retain the recordings until your work has been examined and/or published, in case you need to check the original recordings for any reason. For video, it may depend on the types of analyses proposed for the study. There may be good reason to keep the data longer, but the key in completing this section of the application form is to be explicit about timescales for storage, and the reasons for your timescale should be clearly indicated and explained.

16c. If your study includes video recordings, what are the implications for participants' anonymity? Can anonymity be guaranteed and if so, how? If participants are identifiable on the recordings, how will you explain to them what you will do with the recordings? How will you seek consent from them?

N/A

17. What are the plans for dissemination of findings from the research? If you are a student, include here your thesis[25]. Please also include any impact activities and potential ethical issues these may raise.

Findings will be disseminated via the thesis and may be submitted for publication in an academic/professional journal. As fictitious names are used for the organisations involved and participants are anonymised, no ethical issues are anticipated regarding dissemination of findings at this early stage. However, I will continue to be aware of any ethical concerns that may arise as the study progresses and act accordingly.

NOTE

[25]Dissemination covers a wide range of activities including (but not limited to) reports, academic submissions (such as theses and journal articles), study summaries, and publications:

-If you are a student, be sure to include your academic paper (such as dissertation or thesis) as a form of dissemination.

-Phrasing regarding publication should reflect that you may pursue submission for publication, but you cannot guarantee that the dissemination will include publication. For example, you may write "Results of the research may be submitted for publication in an academic/professional journal."

18. What particular ethical considerations, not previously noted on this application, do you think there are in the proposed study?[26] Are there any matters about which you wish to seek guidance from the FASS-LUMS REC?

N/A

NOTE

[26]It is rare that studies have no ethical considerations at all. Try to be thorough and thoughtful when considering this question. You should not try to invent issues, and at the same time, do not assume that by noting a problem you are hurting your application. This section provides an opportunity for you to demonstrate to the committee that you have a substantial and clear understanding of the potential ethical issues, and that you have given thought to how to address them (even if they may not be able to be addressed perfectly).

SECTION FOUR: Statement and Signatures

By submitting and signing this form, I confirm that

- I understand that as Principal Investigator/researcher/PhD candidate I have overall responsibility for the ethical management of the project and confirm the following:
- I have read the Code of Practice, Research Ethics at Lancaster: a code of practice and I am willing to abide by it in relation to the current proposal.
- I will manage the project in an ethically appropriate manner according to: (a) the subject matter involved and (b) the Code of Practice and Procedures of the university.
- On behalf of the institution I accept responsibility for the project in relation to promoting good research practice and the prevention of misconduct (including plagiarism and fabrication or misrepresentation of results).
- On behalf of the institution I accept responsibility for the project in relation to the observance of the rules for the exploitation of intellectual property.
- If applicable, I will give all staff and students involved in the project guidance on the good practice and ethical standards expected in the project in accordance with the university Code of Practice. (Online Research Integrity training is available for staff and students here.)
- If applicable, I will take steps to ensure that no students or staff involved in the project will be exposed to inappropriate situations.

Please note: If you are not able to confirm the statements above please contact the FASS-LUMS research ethics committee and provide an explanation.

Applicant [27]electronic signature: Stephen Graham
Date 30/3/17

NOTE
[27]If you are a student, make sure that you have discussed the project **and the application** with your supervisor. Build in enough time in your preparation schedule for your supervisor to properly review your application and give your comments before submitting it for ethical review.

Student applicants:

Please tick to confirm that you have discussed this application with your supervisor, and that they agree to the application being submitted for ethical review ☒

Project Supervisor name: Distinguished Professor Bob Jessop **Date application discussed** 28/3/17

Students must submit this application from their Lancaster University email address, and copy their supervisor in to the email with this application attached

All applicants (Staff and Students) must complete this declaration:

I confirm that I have sent a copy of this application to my Head of Department (or their delegated representative). **Tick here to confirm** ☒
Professor Corinne May-Chahal (Head of Sociology)

Invitation e-mail/letter to potential participants

[Participant Name]

[Participant Address]

[Date]

Dear **[participant name]**,

I am a mature PhD student at Lancaster University with a background in local social and environmental projects in northwest England. I would like to invite you to take part in a study looking at small-scale carbon reduction projects in the county, such as local energy production and local food production and distribution. My research aims to examine how such local initiatives can contribute to wider efforts to move to a more sustainable future – and the challenges and barriers that they encounter in their activities.

I am particularly interested in hearing about your experiences of being involved with **[organisation name]** and I would greatly appreciate it if you would consider participating in this project. Consequently, I am writing to request approximately one hour of your time for a face-to-face interview (at a time and location convenient for yourself).

Your insights will contribute to a better understanding of the factors that impede the development of small-scale carbon reduction projects, and will be used to help find ways to enable such projects to operate more effectively.

This research will be undertaken on a confidential basis – therefore those taking part will not be named without consent. All quotations used will be unattributed unless you give permission to reproduce them in your name. This project has been designed to ensure that it meets the ethical standards required by Lancaster University.

Should you wish to find out more about this study, please see the **[attached/enclosed]** Participant Information Sheet. If you require any further information, please feel free to contact me:

E-mail: s.graham3@lancaster.ac.uk

Mobile: REDACTED

I hope you will be able to support this research project. I shall follow this **[e-mail/letter]** with a telephone call within the next week to find out if you would like to participate.

Kind regards,

Stephen Graham.

Lancaster University

Participant information sheet

My name is Stephen Graham. I am a mature PhD student at Lancaster University with a background in local social and environmental projects in northwest England. I invite you to take part in a study on small-scale carbon reduction projects in the region. This research examines how local initiatives can contribute to a more sustainable future and the barriers that they face in achieving this.

Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether to participate in the research.

What is the study about?

This study aims to examine factors that might hinder the operation and development of small-scale, low-carbon projects in the fields of food and energy production. It will undertake a small number of case studies of local projects based in northwest England.

Why have I been invited?

I have approached you because I would like to hear the views of individuals who have been or are currently involved with carbon reduction projects in the region. I would be very grateful if you would agree to take part in this study.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?

If you decide to participate, you will be interviewed at a time and place convenient for yourself. During the interview, I would ask about your thoughts on the difficulties faced by small-scale environmental organisations as they seek to deliver low carbon goods and services.

What are the possible benefits from taking part?

Taking part in this study will allow you to share your experiences as part of a local, low-carbon food/energy project. Your insights will contribute to a better understanding of the factors that impede the development of such projects. The findings of this study will be shared with the organisations involved and may be used in future policy and strategy

discussions. The information will also be made available to other small-scale environmental projects to help them to operate more effectively.

Do I have to take part?

No. Your participation is entirely voluntary.

What if I change my mind?

If you change your mind, you are free to withdraw from the project. If you withdraw, the information that you provided will be extracted and destroyed. However, please note that it is difficult and often impossible to remove data from one participant when it has already been pooled with data from other people. So you can only withdraw up to 4 weeks after taking part in the study.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

You will need to give up to one hour for the interview.

Will my data be identifiable?

Fictitious names will be given to the organisations in this study and pseudonyms will be employed for all participants. However, as you are involved with a relatively small organisation delivering (in certain cases) specialised services, it may not be possible to ensure anonymity in this study.

How will the researcher use the information I have shared and what will happen to the results of the research study?

The information you share with me will be included in my PhD thesis and may be submitted for publication in an academic journal. I may also present the results of my study at academic conferences. When writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. Where requested I will only use anonymised quotes from the interview. So, although I may use your exact words, it will not be possible to identify you in my work.

How my data will be stored
Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that is no-one other than me, the researcher, will be able to access them) and on password-protected computers. I will store hard copies of any data securely in a locked document box. In accordance with Lancaster University guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.

What if I have a question or concern? Who has reviewed the project?

If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please e-mail me at: **s.graham3@lancaster.ac.uk**. Alternatively, call me on: REDACTED. You can also contact my supervisors:

Distinguished Professor Bob Jessop: REDACTED

Dr Claire Waterton: REDACTED

For any concerns or complaints you may wish to discuss with someone not directly involved in the research, contact the Sociology Head of Department:

Professor Corinne May-Chahal: REDACTED;

Postal Address: Sociology Department, Bowland North, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YN.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you for considering your participation in this project.

CONSENT FORM

Project Title: Exploring barriers to local food and energy production
Name of Researcher: Stephen Graham
Email: s.graham3@lancaster.ac.uk

NOTE: This form must be completed by the participant and returned to the researcher before the interview can take place.

Please tick each box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily	☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during my participation in this study and within 4 weeks after I took part in the study, without giving any reason. If I withdraw within 4 weeks of taking part in the study my data will be removed. I understand that, if I take part in an interview alongside other participants, that my data is part of the ongoing conversation and cannot be destroyed. I understand that the researcher will try to disregard my views when analysing such data, but I am aware that this will not always be possible.	☐
3. If I take part in an interview alongside other participants, I understand that any information disclosed within the interview remains confidential to those present, and I will not discuss the interview with or in front of anyone who was not involved unless I have the relevant person's express permission.	☐
4. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications or presentations by the researcher/s, but my personal information will not be included.	☐
5. I understand that my name/my organisation's name will not appear in any reports, articles or presentations without my consent. I also understand that, although all efforts will be made to ensure anonymity, due to the nature of the study and the relatively small size of organisations involved, there remains a small risk that participants may be identified.	☐
6. I understand that any interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed and that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure.	☐
7. I understand that data will be kept according to University guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study.	☐
8. I agree to take part in the above study.	☐

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Date	Signature

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Signature of Researcher/person taking the consent_____ Date _____

One copy of this form will be given to the participant and the original kept in the files of the researcher at Lancaster University

Lone working policy

For PhD research project: Exploring barriers to local food and energy production

Student: *Stephen Graham*

Lone working considerations may be relevant to this project in cases where the student is required to interview participants in their homes, or at other venues where no-one else is present (e.g. office premises).

In these cases, potential risks exist for the student (although the level of risk is considered extremely low). These include:

- Being subjected to aggressive, abusive or violent behaviour on the part of the participant or a member of their household or a visitor;
- Being attacked by a household pet;
- Suffering injury or harm on the way to the interview venue (e.g. being involved in a traffic accident).

To address these risks to the student the following procedures will be put in place:

Prior to a lone interview situation

- The student will inform his supervisors (Distinguished Professor Bob Jessop and Dr Claire Waterton) that a visit is arranged for a particular date and time at a specific address. The student will state the expected duration of the visit and the intended means of transportation. One of the supervisors will elect to be the nominated contact person for each day. If neither supervisor is available (due to lectures, attendance at conferences etc.) another suitable staff member at Lancaster University will act as the nominated person.
- Ample time will be allowed to enable the student get to the interview location in as safe a manner as is possible and to assess any possible dangers regarding the venue/situation prior to commencement of the interview.

At the interview venue

- The student will inform the interviewee of the lone working policy.
- The student will keep his mobile phone within easy reach.
- The student's phone will be fully charged prior to the interview.

If the student needs to report an emergency without alerting the participant he will call the nominated person and state: “I’m running late and will struggle to make it to our meeting later. I will have to arrange it for another day.” The nominated person will then call the police and provide details of the interview location.

Following a lone interview

1. Upon his return to the university or to his home the student will inform the nominated person that he is safely back. If the student expects to face delays that are likely to last for more than 2 hours past his expected time of return, then he will contact his supervisor to let them know of the situation.
2. If, on the day of a lone interview, the student has not made contact with the nominated supervisor more than 2 hours after his expected time of return, then the supervisor will seek to establish contact with the student. If no contact is made with the student within 6 hours after the expected time of return, the supervisor will inform the police.

The student will share copies of this policy with his supervisors. The contact details of the supervisors can be found below:

Contact details of student’s supervisors

Name: Distinguished Professor Bob Jessop

Address: B102, Bowland North, Lancaster University.

Phone number (mobile): REDACTED

Alternative phone number: REDACTED

Email: REDACTED

Name: Dr Claire Waterton

Address: B147, Bowland North, Lancaster University.

Phone number (mobile): REDACTED

Alternative phone number: REDACTED

Email: REDACTED

Interview Schedule

Note: Participants will primarily be drawn from three organisations: the participating food hub (*Freshfair*); the participating community renewables scheme (*Greenstar Energy*); and the latter's parent organisation (*Sustainable Northwest*). Interview dates are provisional only and shown to the nearest week. Inclusion of named individuals in the study is contingent on their consenting to take part.

Those potential participants not yet identified (highlighted in red in the table) will be found through interviews with the *named* individuals below. They too will be provided with Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms when invited to take part.

Participant	Interview date	Location
Name redacted *Founding member of Freshfair*	W/C 24/4/17	Glasgow (Participant's home)
Name redacted *Development officer Freshfair*	W/C 24/4/17	North Cumbria region (Participant's home)
Name redacted *Freshfair Project Manager*	W/C 1/5/17	North Cumbria region (Private office)
Name redacted *Co-founding member of Freshfair*	W/C 1/5/17	North Cumbria region (Participant's home)
Name redacted *Sustainable Northwest Chief Exec.*	W/C 1/5/17	Eden area (Sustainable Cumbria office)
Name redacted *Greenstar Director*	W/C 8/5/17	Eden area (Sustainable Cumbria office)
Name redacted *Greenstar Director*	W/C 8/5/17	TBC
Name redacted *City Council (Partnership Manager)*	W/C 8/5/17	Cumbria region (Local Authority office)
Name redacted *Local food producer involved with Freshfair*	W/C 15/5/17	TBC
Local food producer involved with Freshfair #2	W/C 15/5/17	TBC
Local food producer involved with Freshfair #3	W/C 15/5/17	TBC
Freshfair customer #1	W/C 22/5/17	TBC
Freshfair customer #2	W/C 22/5/17	TBC
Freshfair customer #3	W/C 22/5/17	TBC
Greenstar core participant #1	W/C 29/5/17	TBC
Greenstar core participant #2	W/C 29/5/17	TBC
Greenstar shareholder #1	W/C 29/5/17	TBC
Greenstar shareholder #2	W/C 29/5/17	TBC
Member(s) of precursor community energy scheme #1	W/C 3/6/17	TBC

Interview template

Participants will take part in semi-structured interviews based around the following:

- *Interviewee:*
- *Date:*

1. Preliminaries

1.1. How have you been involved with [organisation name]?

1.2. How long/in what capacity?

1.3. What were your initial motivations/aspirations?

2. Strategy

2.1. What do you consider to be the project's aims?

Which do you think are the most important aims and why?

Have the aims changed over the course of the project, and if so how/why?

2.2. How was the strategy developed, and who was involved?

How has the strategy changed over time?

2.3. Who have been the key strategic partners (i.e. other local groups, local authorities, corporate sponsors etc.)?

How have they contributed to the project?

What is the relationship between your organisation and these partners?

Are there any potential strategic partners whose participation you think could benefit this project?

Are there any potential strategic partners who might benefit from this project?

3. Expansion and barriers

3.1. Do you think this project provides a model that could be adopted in other places or in other sectors of local production and consumption?

3.2 Do you think this project provides a model that could be scaled up, i.e., applied beyond a local or regional level?

3.3. What, if anything, do you think stands in the way of its expansion?

3.4. Are there any particular challenges or threats facing this organisation?

3.5. What do you think impedes others who wish to establish similar organisations?

3.6. What actions do you feel must be taken if carbon reduction projects such as yours are to reach their potential?

4. Staff/management

4.1. Who are the key decision makers within the project and what is the structure/process for decision making?

4.2. To what extent does the project rely on contributions of volunteers?

What are the main volunteer roles within the project?

How are volunteers recruited and managed?

4.3. Do you feel that staff members have sufficient capacity to identify/follow up on development opportunities?

4.4. What challenges or frustrations do you encounter?

5. Climate change

5.1. What do you think are the major drivers of rising carbon emissions?

5.2. What do you think needs to happen if carbon emissions are to be significantly reduced in coming decades?

Who should drive this process (e.g. politicians, business leaders, social movements)?

5.3. Do you think that it is possible to avert irreversible climate change?

5.4. What role do you think your organisation plays in tackling climate change?

5.5. How could this role best be enhanced?

6. Outcomes and impacts

6.1 What do you think motivates people to engage with this project [as producers/customers/shareholders/community group members/volunteers]?

6.2 What do you think have been the main benefits [for local producers/community groups/the climate etc.]?

6.3 Can you think of any other project beneficiaries?

6.4 What outcomes do you think have emerged from this project?

Which areas have been most successful and why?

Which areas have been least successful and why?

6.5 What do you think have been the main learning points from the project so far?

6.6 How do you think the project could be improved?

6.7 Where would you *like* this project to be in five/ten years' time?

6.8 Where do you think this project *will actually be* in five/ten years' time? Why?

7. Other

7.1. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

7.2. Can you think of anyone else who may have information to add to this study and who might be willing to get involved?

Appendix 2: Transcriptions

Transcriptions of interviews with primary participants, ordered alphabetically (based on surnames).

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David Anderton Interview

Date: 8 May 2019

Attendees: David Anderton; Stephen Graham

SG: Could you explain your role at the Council?

The effects of transformation have caused us to restructure and rearrange our services so during those ten years I have taken pretty much direct responsibility for almost all of the things that the council does, particularly the front facing services: from planning to property to collecting the waste to cleaning the streets to looking after the parks, managing relations with external partners for leisure, museums, all of those things. I'm the deputy chief executive. The city council has been around for a long, long time and it is not a 1974 construct. So people's relationship with the city council can also go back a long way. We still hold land and assets that go back in some cases hundreds of years, actually and so it is benefit to the council – both financially and physically in some ways – and in particular to local people. So, yeah, it puts us in a slightly different position … some authorities, particularly those that came about as district council authorities after 1974, may not have enjoyed the same assets as we have. So, it has helped us to make the transformation from an austerity and financial perspective. So, we get about one third of our operating income from our own estate, and in some cases district councils probably achieve one-fifth or less, so it affects the balance of resources.

SG: Why did Freshfair's attempt to obtain an area of public land not work out?

I met Anthony [Upton] and got to know him. At first he was quite direct but I soon realised that this was his frustration at trying to get stuff done ... They [the people at Freshfair] had a good span of engaged people at the project – both in terms of the initial work supplying veg boxes, in terms of practical know-how and honest labour. Anthony was more strategic ... and also Joe (Sabatini). I met them on quite a few occasions and not long after we set up the food cities steering group this idea around [getting hold of public land] came about. [The land we identified] was owned by the regional authority [not the city authority] … Nonetheless, we still thought this might be a useful venue for scaling up [the food project] … and also for some trial, exploratory work around how we could cut food miles [and determine] what supply we could take from that particular land. [Through *Freshfair*,] we aimed to transform urban land use at [the site] by creating an edge-of-city hub for learning, training and commercial food production.

SG: Did the relationship between city council and county council get in the way?

I think there were two things really ... the county council have often struggled with ideas that the city have either backed or generated, that in some way appear that we're trying to take a call

on their land, property assets, whatever. This is a small 'p' politics thing really. And we had a few conversations with [regional] officers were warm to the idea, but then as time progressed and we moved from talking to policy officers within the [Regional] council to the property officers, well, then things cooled ... What we couldn't understand at the time was that there wasn't a direct call or evident use for this land that would prohibit this sort of project taking place. This wasn't designated at the time for housing or for other usage. It was farmland. It was rented out, some of it, it had a property on it – and this property had some connection to [the owner of a local commercial developer], but to [this individual's] family rather than a business. They didn't have any sort of call on the land or any sort of right.

SG: So, no 'hope value'?

No, I don't think so. But Anthony got more frustrated as it all started to fall away in terms of momentum. It seemed to stall at that point. I think it was probably in some ways, I mean it wasn't advanced in its thinking or ahead of its time, but even that length of time ago certainly the climate change and carbon reduction agenda in this [region] was not really talked about, not at a council level, not in the city council and I don't think in the county either. So, I think it was relatively easy to say 'well this sounds like a city council project, why don't you put it on a piece of your land?' I think that was at the heart of it really. And although we said this is a good site, because it was quite close in to some big urban areas and it was not that far from the city centre … It was easy to see how we could transport food across the city area without much effort … it lost track and it didn't really ever have strong political support in the city council or in the county.

SG: You mean using it for food production?

I don't think it got the traction that it needed. They [the Regional Council] were under much more pressure from austerity [than the City Council was]. Because of their responsibilities for social care – children's services and adult social care … Yeah, at first we were unsure who owned the land. They (Freshfair) identified the land as it looked like a good location and it didn't look like it had any meaningful use really. I think Anthony thought we [the city council] owned it. We established it wasn't city land. *Freshfair*'s engagement [with the Regional Council] went on for quite some time. But the property people at the time were very difficult to pin down and, in the end, I think it was [Anthony Upton] who just said, 'I've had enough'.

SG: So, the county council were having to be careful what assets they disposed of due to austerity?

I think at the heart of it that it felt like the [Regional Council] was saying, you know, why don't you use your land for this? And they were probably thinking: 'we need to get some financial

value out of this land, because we're all strapped for cash, you know'... And I remember the conversations that chimed with me [at the time] around 'well, this land might have real value for an urban extension at some point'.

SG: So, do you think that the regional council decided not to give Freshfair that land because it was better for them to sell it?

I think they would probably look to sell to a developer.

SG: And I suppose in a cash-strapped situation, that would make sense?

Absolutely, yeah, yeah. We did think about … the project goals came before this site came forward (i.e., was identified). We looked at various other city sites for smaller similar related projects so ... we looked at potential use of a park site, we looked for a hydroponics project idea as well at … one of our depots that wasn't being used any more ... but effectively from our portfolio holder / council perspective they were quite happy with that, but they never progressed really. I think Freshfair just ran into too many other difficulties...

SG: Would anybody at the county council know what happened to that piece of land?

The property team at the county council have gone [i.e., been cut], I think.

SG: Has the relationship between the voluntary sector and the council changed in the last ten years? Do 'third sector' organisations now deliver more services that the council used to deliver 'in house'?

In many ways … definitely, but I'm not sure around this topic ... (i.e. local food production] … I think Freshfair was slightly unusual really in that there was a strong community-oriented belief system around 'we want to do this' and 'we want to make a difference in this way' and I'm sure other places do the same, but it wasn't something we were doing already ... In things like health walks and 'friends of' groups and parks in other places. I think we do rely on them (charities and volunteer groups) more than we did – or perhaps it's easier to say that if such groups hadn't decided that they would take on such responsibility, they [i.e., these activities] probably would have had to stop. They would have just ended. So there has been a definite impact...

SG: Looking beyond food to all council activities, do the 'third sector' and volunteer groups have more of a role now?

Not massively. We haven't really outsourced to the third sector for those kinds of things. There are more volunteers involved in some of the things we do now that we perhaps would have had in the past. The health walks is the best example. We probably would have just paid walk leaders and we don't – it is pretty much a voluntary led programme. As a council we haven't stopped doing an awful lot because of austerity ourselves. We've been fortunate enough to be

able to rely on our own income through selling assets. We had an asset disposal programme and we've had an investment programme in our own estate as well to try and generate more ...

SG: Is there a register of these assets anywhere?

Yeah, there is an annual update report on that which we could dig out. It is online … In there is a search function and you will be able to search for the annual asset disposal programme. And if you struggle with that let us know. About seven years ago we had a company called Montague Evans who ... we had a property portfolio options report – I use it quite a bit actually [he grabs the report from a shelf] – oh, it was in 2010, nearly 10 years ago ... so what they did was they looked at what our future asset management arrangement should be and they looked at categorizing our assets at the time – at the time it was a total value of £138 million, which is quite a lot for a district ... they categorised these into COGS or something, operational, strategic and investment. So this building (council office) is an operational asset – we're not selling it. We can do things to make it more efficient as a property, but it wouldn't be of much use to anyone else. The strategic assets were things like [a local] industrial estate where the council gets a good chunk of money from ASDA for example, and the investment assets where places like … we've just had a report go through the executive for a piece of land which is right next to the motorway junction which will be developed for out of town retail stuff. The things you can't put in the city centre as there is not enough space ... From that there was a disposal programme which ... It was the 'largest asset disposal programme ever undertaken' … as I say, since 2010 we've been producing an update report and initially it was a four-year disposal programme, erm ... and we went through that. So it was kind of low hanging fruit to more difficult to shift things. So some of them were land assets so, there were a couple of parcels of land at [a local wood] … where we just sold them off for housing development because they fit the local plan – because they fit the local plan and they were good value for us in terms of holding it on to it until such times as we could develop it. Again, up at the motorway junction ... [A prominent local developer] has recently built an estate up there – well that was council land as well. So that was about trying to sell and get money back and of course we could reinvest that and improve our income stream. And we looked at the time ... Anthony was quite challenging to test out if we had any other land assets, but it was quite challenging to [find] any other land assets which we were not planning to sell that that they could possibly look at – none of them proved sufficiently interesting.

SG: How does all of this relate to the localism act 2011 and the community right to reclaim land?

Yeah, that right to take on services or be the first port of call for property to be disposed of or never to be used again, those key strands were managed by policy in the offices next door … It

is a funny thing. It is a smart concept in many ways but publicly it never seemed to get enough interest or momentum really. It always seemed to be focused around the village pub is going to shut ... which is understandable, but it is not kind of used in this sort of semi-urban food agenda.

SG: What are your experiences of the Big Society agenda?

I don't think in this district there was ever enough public will to test the local authorities – city and county – on this. Whereas in places … I think there were a better collection of really well organised voluntary institutions working on this sort of front. Here [such] … focused groups don't appear to have been as prevalent and they were [in the past]. There wasn't a kind of ... it never really felt like there was a positive pressure from below. I mean [the local transition group] at the time, the first time I became aware of them was a local event and I thought 'there is a number of people here, this is quite an interesting group'. And Freshfair seemed to be an offshoot of that. Pete [Forrester] and some others. But they were helpfully quite a polite, interactive group – it wasn't really demanding, it wasn't saying 'don't you think this agenda should ...?'. I mean at times it could feel a bit like that but Anthony kind of thought that this is not going to play very well with local politicians and others so let's not get too aggressive. So it seemed well organised ... The Big Society was never really a big thing at the council. I mean, we liked the idea, but it just wasn't in our gift to make it happen.

SG: Do you find much tension between what local councillors might have wanted and what Freshfair wanted? Or was it just a lack of interest?

I think it was really just about ... the councillors didn't seem to be excited by ... well I'll grab hold of this agenda. But they were never unhelpful. They were quite passive about it really. And whether that would be the same now, I don't know ... they were never resistant, they just didn't really see a sense of urgency really. I think that might be different now.

SG: Freshmeals Direct: what inspired the council to offload this service?

It was a county council service that they, during that early period of austerity, I think they must have taken what might have felt like a bit of a cold-hearted decision that we just can't make this work. You know, we can't ... the subsidy level is too high... when Freshfair took it on, one of the overheads which they were going to struggle with which we did help with was premises. The property which was still very new then … was this women and family homeless accommodation which had a big kitchen. The manager of the site was instrumental because he said 'yeah, you can use our kitchen and storage area, and all we ask is that if there are residents in the units could they get involved in some way?' So this gave an opportunity of unpaid work but they learned cooking skills. It seemed to work quite well for a while ...

Eleanor Bowe Interview

Date: 11 February 2018

Attendees: Eleanor Bowe; Stephen Graham

SG: Can you tell me how you started in pig farming?

I was doing a Soil Association junior apprenticeship. The person who owned the farm I was working at suggested that I set up my own enterprise to help make some money. They didn't have any pork, so I got myself a couple of weaners and just built up from there … It was growing okay but things are kind of stationary at the moment. I've had to dial it back – in part because I've now got a baby but mostly because I lost one of my major customers, Freshfair.

SG: How did you get involved in Freshfair?

I knew the people involved and was in there from the beginning. I knew Pete [Forrester]. We were in the same circles. When Freshfair started they said they were looking for someone with pork and I said I would do it. I sold meat through the project right from the beginning. It was great and it helped me to get going. It was one of the main things that helped me start up because I knew I could sell through them each week – I knew I could sell a certain amount to them. Because trying to shift a whole pig – well, it is quite a lot of meat to sell. They came along just as I was starting out and that really helped. Freshfair has been a really big part of my business. There were regulars who bought sausages and I was selling a lot through them.

SG: Who else do you sell to?

A pub for sausages. And a selection of private customers. There's also a lady from London and six of her friends – they do mail order. Also, my family and friends and various other people I've met. The Freshfair thing has been quite a loss. I haven't been able to pursue other opportunities because of this little fella [baby]. Hopefully I can pick things up again at some point in the future.

SG: Were there any other major benefits of selling through Freshfair?

They had a hub near the swimming pool. I used to drop it off once a month at the depot. It was good because on the online ordering system I could see what was selling and what wasn't and I got quite good at looking at that. I had access to it so I could see what was selling and what was needed over the next couple of weeks, what the trend was, so I could pre-empt that. It all worked pretty well.

SG: Could they have done anything better?

I think it worked really well. It was all quite informal, but it seemed to work well. We were just small producers. I never saw the delivery side of things so I'm not sure about that, really.

SG: What do you think about reducing food miles, etc.?

Yes, I think it is really important that people buy food locally. It is much better for the local community. The fact that Freshfair was local was important. You know, I had someone contact me from China – they must have found me online – looking for pork, and I would never do that.

SG: Have you ever tried selling to supermarkets?

There are lots of hoops to jump through when you want to sell to supermarkets. They are so rigid and strict and there is no way small producers can meet such demands. There's much more flexibility when selling through local channels. Little local shops are okay as they have the wiggle room.

SG: Did you get paid through the hub okay?

It was hard to start with because I needed the money coming in but once things got going and things were selling regularly, money came through.

SG: What do you think drives climate change?

I think it related to the way that we live our modern lives. We need a more resilient farming system and we need to be able to bounce back from bad weather. I think starting small and getting people to buy stuff locally – not shipping stuff from the other side of the world – really helps. A lot of people feed pigs pelleted food which is made from soya and comes from the other side of the world. We don't use pelleted food. We use home-grown barley. Not only do we sell it locally, but we try to get feed locally too. It is like a completely closed system. Of course, sometimes we have to buy stuff too. Yes, the less you have to import in, the better. That is why we want to keep it local – also it is extremely expensive [buying in bagged food]. It is ridiculously expensive. You just couldn't make it pay. You have to keep the business part of it in your mind because it has actually got to make money.

SG: if a project like Freshfair started again, would you get involved?

Yes, I would love to because it was good. It would be great if it had kept going. I wish it would pick up again. It was a good experience and we learnt together because we were with them from fairly early on.

Pete Forrester Interview 1

Date: 18 May 2017

Attendees: Pete Forrester; Stephen Graham

SG: How did the project start?

It came out of a box scheme in [a local town] – well, it was more a kind of a food hub scheme where you went and picked up fruit and veg and produce at the community centre in a shipping container where you weighed out your own stuff. And they'd sort of hit a plateau with the number of people being involved in that – about 15 people – and they couldn't get any more so they wanted to expand into [the city] to make the project … I think the idea for the funding they'd got was to make the project self-sustaining, so to do that they needed a bigger market. So they wanted to do it partnership with [the transition group I am a part of], so that's how Freshfair was born.

SG: What was your involvement at this stage?

We were just a steering group – me, Anthony [Upton], Rob [Naylor] and Mike [Sabatini].

SG: And what were the motivations behind this project?

It was environmental and social. I mean, my motivation was environmental. To reduce the CO_2 associated with the food that we eat and to promote local food for the benefit of more sustainable farming practices, benefits for the local economy and health benefits as well, I guess. And to provide an alternative to supermarket food. The city had just got another supermarket when we started – I think it has something like 14 now which is quite a lot for the size of the population. And there isn't really any alternative – it is quite difficult to get an alternative to supermarket food if you work full-time. The idea of an internet-based system was that you could have access to local food without having to go to a local market or go to local shops on your days off. You know, it was like a convenient way to have access to local food.

SG: Did these motivations change over time?

They probably stayed the same. Yeah, I think there became less focus on convenience. But the overall aim of the project – to allow people to get local food and for the environmental benefit – was the same throughout the project.

SG: And how did the strategy develop?

The model initially was that you got scale by having buying groups in large workplaces in the city. So we target large workplaces and went into those places like the [local newspaper] or the [the local council] or [local museum]. Those sorts of places – big employers. We went in and we

gave a talk to employees and got various people signed up to the scheme. So they had a code to sign up. And then we'd deliver the produce at the same time every week, near the end of the working day so that it was fresh and they'd take it home. The basic idea was that it was no hassle for them [customers]. You know, they could have local food at a reasonable price delivered to their workplace. The benefits of scale was that you could scale up quite quickly … a bit like the trade union model in workplaces. You'd have [buying advocates] promoting it in their own workplaces and talking about the food and promoting it to colleagues. But it never really happened like that. You'd often only get a few people signing up at the initial session and it would dwindle to one or two committed people in each workplace. So the buying group model never really had legs.

SG: And why was that?

People get stuck in their ways … Doing those talks was quite interesting because people would taste the tomatoes or taste the lettuce or look at the meat and you could tell them a story about it. The providence of the food and how the salad was grown and picked the morning … if you compare that to supermarkets, it's like seven days [old when it hits the shelf] and it's been sprayed with chlorine and it's not a good process … Then often people would go to the supermarket and pick up a bag of salad that was on offer or something and they'd have it in their bag so they'd often get stuff at the supermarket and then cancel a bit of their order. We had a system on the website where you could have repeat orders which we thought would make it easier but it was quite a clunky website. I think that Marks & Spencer's spend several thousand pounds a day on the photos on their website – and that's what we're competing against. Our website cost 12 grand in total, at various different stages, and we're limited to what we can achieve with that. I mean it was a good website. It was an e-commerce system; bespoke – I mean the software was written for Freshfair. I think the developers learned a lot doing that as well as us.

SG: Who came up with the buying group model?

I would say Anthony Upton. We were trying to think of ways that we could get to scale quickly and kind of create this idea of solidarity around the food within the workplace. So the steering group was me, Anthony, Mike and Rob, and we must have met every week for a few months – for maybe four or five months before the launch. We had a launch in the [local authority central office] as that was where the first council buying group was.

SG: So where are things up to now?

It has ceased to exist. It has finished … Just because it had dwindled to such an extent. I mean there were still maybe 20 people buying every week but for the amount of work and effort, and

volunteer effort, and effort on the part of the producers to bring the food into the depot, for such a small amount of food I think we were … I think to a degree they were really patient with us, you know, giving us more and more of their time for less and less return for them.

Pete Forrester Interview 2

Date: 20 October 2017

Attendees: Pete Forrester; Stephen Graham

SG: So now that Freshfair has closed down, why do you think it failed in the end?

I don't know. I'm not really sure why it failed. Kind of a combination of reasons. People want cheap food. And most people aren't willing to pay much of a premium for sustainably produced local food. They are willing to pay a little bit of one … Resistance to change … we were finding that many people weren't convinced of the need [for a project like Freshfair]. People are kind of stuck in the habit of going to supermarkets and, you know, it was quite a hard sell. The hassle. People's lives are so busy. We did a little bit of market research … trying to contact people that had stopped ordering and trying to find out why they'd stopped. There must have been about 30 or 40 people, and about 30 or 40 reasons why they stopped. Sometimes it could be that they got some carrots that weren't in good condition. And we were like 'if you'd just told us we'd have given you more carrots'. But people don't like to complain. So yeah, people just go … go back to their ordinary habits … if they're feeling a bit skint that month they just go back to the supermarket. But I think in terms of the project moving on, the local food agenda in the city council and maybe in the wider sustainability network, I think there were benefits in doing the project. We learnt an awful lot.

SG: And do you think anything will come out of this?

Yeah, it was exhausting but we're still keen within [the transition group] to do some kind of food project. I mean, the other thing to come out of this was the Freshmeals project. So about half way through the four or five years of Freshfair we took on a meals on wheels project and the idea was that that used local food and it still does to a certain extent and that's a really successful project.

SG: Has that been sold off?

Yeah, the cook who is running it at the moment is taking it on a social enterprise. Probably a CIC – like a charity but less onerous in terms of reporting. So she's forming a CIC and we're handing it over to her on kind of a lease basis.

SG: So will she pay the transition group?

Yes, she will. And it will help its sustainability. And it will free people up to do other projects. It still takes up a lot of time, Freshmeals. We're well rid of it. Although it is a really good project. It is 60 meals a day. Which is good. There is a massive need for it. There were 300 meals at one time in the early 90s in this area and we have a more elderly population now than we did then. And there is a lot of isolation in the community and people not getting a good meal, good food.

SG: Would Fair Food Carlisle take it back over again?

No. We did it. We launched it. We made the project. We're really pleased with that. We learnt a lot doing it so we're happy just to let it go now.

SG: Any thoughts on what the next food project might be?

We have talked about different ideas. There is Food Assembly. It's a fairly new thing and it involves the producers coming to a place like a town hall, community centre type place all at once and everybody comes with their bags and stuff and buys it. It would be less work and administration. The thing is that lots of producers just want to be producing. They don't want to be selling as well. Some do. Some are really keen to meet the people who are buying their food but others just want to be farming or growing or making and they don't want that interaction with the pubic.

SG: When Freshfair was operating, who were the main strategic partners?

The transition group, in terms of the steering group, were supportive. But Freshfair had its own steering group. The local authority had a sustainable food group which is part of the Sustainable Food Cities network. They were supportive. That group started roughly at the same time as Freshfair, by coincidence. It is quite a broad ranging group of people, quite influential people. You know, there is the Deputy Chief Executive of the council– he comes to those meetings. So he was very handy to have on board. But not any practical help as such. We did get a grant of £5,000 at one point and the idea of that was to start Freshfair in some of the community centres, but we didn't really do it properly. They were happy that we completed the outcomes of the grant but it didn't really happen. And this was something I was always a bit unsure about throughout the Freshfair project. It tended to be more affluent people that were involved. Not completely – there were less affluent people buying, but on the whole it was more affluent people. And one of the main aims of the project was to make local food affordable for everybody, to match supermarket prices … On some produce, in season, at certain times, we matched high-end supermarket prices. But we never got anywhere near budget supermarket prices – on anything. That's difficult to do for anyone. I think the cost of food is something we

don't really realise, or value. And I think what the supermarkets do is kind of incredible – how they make it so cheap and their business model.

SG: So what do they do that your organisation couldn't?

I'm not sure. You hear things like supermarkets employing psychologists who set the supermarket out … and you see kids buying magazines, like princess sticker books or something from a bit of the shop which was nothing to do with the toy aisle and which was at their height, so I'm sure they do use sneaky tricks. And loss leaders – things that they're not making any money on at all. But we were picking up food from Marks & Spencer's in Kingstown, the bread, for the food bank and the entire bread aisle goes in the bin every day – the fresh bread. And it's all to do with the smell. So they're losing quite a bit of money every day and there is this massive amount of waste. And it is just to do with putting it in people's minds that everything in the shop is fresh, because you smell fresh bread and you think 'fresh produce'. So you walk around the shop smelling that and thinking that the carrots are fresh – and they're not.

SG: Could the council have done more to have supported the project?

We were renting a unit at a local business centre. It was £400 a month rent and they wanted to put the price up at one point. We managed to get that decision overturned and … we actually asked for a reduction. And the centre is only 50 per cent occupied – half the building is empty. So we felt the council could have given us a bit of a reduction on that. But the council said that this was a reduction anyway … So they could have done more if they'd wanted to – although they've got to answer to the public, I guess.

SG: And what about getting hold of land?

Yep. So we talked generally to the regional authority and the local authority about land … They've offered us some sites and all of them have been unsuitable. They've been … absolutely shit sites – too small, flooding, access [problems] – you know, you name it. They've been turned down by developers who wouldn't want them for nothing. There was one [site] that was offered to developers for one pound and they didn't want it. Maybe they thought that the community would be suckers enough to take it.

SG: What would having a substantial amount of land allow you to do?

Well, we could do [i.e., build] that project … Things like that might help because I think one of things about Freshfair, if you look at businesses, they all make a profit. I've not got any business background, but chatting to people recently about the mark-up they put on things, you're often talking … well, I was talking to a guy who sells fires and he was talking about getting 100–150

per cent mark up on everything he sells. He'll always try and buy the cheapest possible and sell at vastly inflated prices. And my not being a businessman – I guess the nature of Freshfair was that it was a fair price – the point is that the producer is doing that already and we were just putting 15–20 per cent on the price to cover our costs. Whereas I think if we grew the stuff and then sold it for a reasonable price, you're getting the profit instead of the producer having the profit. But the idea of the project was to support local producers. So I don't know. I think one of the good things about Freshfair was linking up what could be grown locally, what is grown locally, and what is missing from that local food supply chain. To be able to say that no one is growing any herbs north of Preston, why is no-one fulfilling that need? And then to get gifted some land by the local authority and get a social enterprise mental health project going where you're growing herbs on a relatively small scale but you're getting 100 per cent of the profits to cover the project, then something like that could potentially work.

SG: Are there any strategic partners that you would have liked to have been involved?

Regional authority. Maybe housing associations. They could have been more involved.

SG: And why were they not?

There's a degree to which people want their own projects. Mind, Mencap, Age UK, all those sorts of people chase the funding. They get funding grants to do their own similar-sounding projects and they're very resistant to working together, in my experience. I don't know whether that's just the case here or everywhere.

SG: Is that down to the nature of funding?

Yes. People are competing when they should be working together.

Pete Forrester Interview 3

Date: 21 January 2018

Attendees: Pete Forrester; Stephen Graham

SG: Although Freshfair no longer operates, do think its model could be employed in other areas, or here at different times?

Yes. I was chatting to someone who bought a cheese business in Appleby. [This entrepreneur] said, 'you need to go where the money is. There's no money in this region'. So, he was saying that we should sell our [produce] to people in York, sell it people in Edinburgh, go to where the money is and promote produce [from this area]. But then he started talking about selling our

local beef to customers in Singapore, and I was like – 'are you in the right meeting? We're talking about local food.' I mean, he was kind of right in a way. He was a businessman, he'd done alright for himself and he'd bought this cheese business. So, he was saying: sell where the money is in order to fund your good work – do your community gardens, do your community allotments and your small sustainability projects, but fund it through a much harder-nosed business model

SG: And what did you think of that idea?

I had a sinking feeling in my stomach. I mean, it's not me. I could see that that is maybe the way you would have to go if you did want to have a successful business … I did try approaching affluent communities, but it was just not what the project was about. It's just not me and not what I wanted to be doing really. We were just having to compromise in order to survive. We were just having to compromise in order to survive – which is how it is in any social enterprise. The nearer you get to your ideal sort of ethics, the less profitable it is. And therefore it fails. It's a problem of the capitalist system. I mean the reason we need a locally-produced food in the first place is because the capitalist system has dissociated us from the land. We don't know how to grow and the vast majority of us don't own any land to grow anything on anyway. And we're told you've got to buy your food from supermarkets – shit food full of sugar and fat. And we're marketed at constantly to do that. So yeah, it's the problems of capitalism that created the need for a local food system. But to have a food system that works it has got to be vaguely capitalist in its approach. Unless it's not. I like the idea of free food. We looked in to starting a pay-as you feel café … I like that kind of concept. So yeah, squatting some land and just growing. We did try some guerrilla gardening, in flower beds near the train station, and the week after and there was a guy in a white suit spraying [a chemical] everywhere which was a bit disheartening.

SG: To what extent did the project rely on the good will of volunteers?

Massively. We did have paid staff at various points during the lifetime of the project. But in the latter stages of the project it was 100 per cent volunteers. The project didn't make any money. So we had a grant to begin with that we spent over three years – a decreasing amount of money – and the idea was that the revenue of the project would pay for staff time as that revenue decreased. Instead what happened was sales went up to a certain point and then plateaued for two years and then suddenly declined. So there was no money to pay anybody so it became 100 per cent voluntary.

SG: So who organised volunteers?

Me. I was getting paid to do some of that work, but I was always working vastly more than 15 hours I was paid for. If you're doing talks in workplaces – and I was trying to do one a week for

a while – it can take five or six hours just to do one of those. And then the administration of the projects – getting new producers online, talking to producers, co-ordinating food coming into the depot, co-ordinating the website and payments and things like that. It mounts up.

SG: How do you feel about the project, looking back?

I wouldn't be depressed about any of it. You've got to try these things. It was a lot of effort at various points, but it was a lot of fun at the same time. And we learnt a lot from it that might lead into other things … We made some really good contacts with local producers that we're still in touch with.

SG: Have you found that you missed development opportunities due to a lack of resources?

Yes. That's why it is really important to have a strong steering group which is looking at the strategic issues. When we were doing well we had a good steering group – we were meeting every month, or more than every month. People were taking things on and doing them themselves in between meetings. When the group was struggling, that was much harder and we were definitely missing opportunities.

SG: What about expertise?

Business, marketing and IT knowledge are important. We met people who had marketing skills … yeah, marketing was the big one, to be honest. Like social media, advertising – which big supermarkets can throw money at and they are doing that constantly and we have to compete with that.

SG: What do you think are the main drivers of climate change?

It's the way we live under a capitalist society. Everything is based on the extraction of natural resources and the burning of fossil fuels in order to fund a way in which we live where we are disassociated and disconnected from the land and from each other. That's what drives climate change. Through the burning of fossil fuels. And food is one of the biggest contributors to that – so I guess that's why we chose food.

SG: What needs to happen if we are to stop irreversible climate change?

System change. Complete revolution. Because big business and the oil industry has such tight control over the government. Corporations are so interwoven that I don't see any way of changing things by degrees. There will always be resistance and they will always find a way to wriggle out of that change. I think climate change is so pressing and urgent that we need to radically change the way we live and interact with each other.

SG: Can projects like Freshfair play a part in this process?

I think it could – and I think it did to a degree. I mean you stand in a room of people and talk about local food and about why local food is better, that gets you on to sustainable practices, climate change, the amount of oil in our food and the transportation involved in getting the food to the marketplace, and the waste generated by that system. But in terms of more radical system change I don't think it did really. It just kind of tinkered with the system. And it wasn't really radically enough for me. And the fact that you get sucked in to making things more business-like was off-putting for me.

SG: Where would the changes required come from?

It's got to come from the bottom up. It can't be politicians, in my experience. They only react to what they're pressured to do by ordinary people. I don't foresee the current system – representative democracy – delivering the kind of change that we need in time to avert catastrophic climate change.

SG: And do you think that climate change is still irreversible?

I don't know, to be honest. I read something which says that we're past various tipping points and there's very little hope, to days when I'm buoyed up by the goodness in everyone and there are possibilities. You have days where you think 'it's all sweet and everything will be fine' – and then other days where it's dreadful … Some of the projects we're involved in could potentially provide models for different ways of working out of the current capitalist system. And linking them together and having a dialogue about the overall aim would definitely be a bigger aim.

SG: What motivated people to get involved in this project?

It switches for different people. So there was one lass who, for her, was in it for the wider health benefits of having local food compared to supermarket food. She wasn't turned on at all about climate change or the systemic questions.

SG: What positive and negatives things came out of the project?

The relationship with producers was a positive. Learning about how food is produced and where it came from. And the Freshmeals project. Negatives. We should probably have stopped a bit sooner. We should have stopped six months ago – it all got a bit depressing in the end. It was just so much work and it dragged you down a bit to see the amount that people were buying getting less and less and not really understanding why … One other positive is the committed people who kept on buying. It was really good to see people who were just totally committed to the project – and that includes the producers as well. I met so many people through this project.

SG: How would you describe your political background?

I have an anarchist background. That's where my politics comes from. I was involved in climate camp, the G8 Summits, the Festival of Dissent, that kind of thing. So I think society could be based without government, without capitalism.

SG: Did this influence the way you ran Freshfair?

Maybe it made me happy to work for nothing! Decision making – the transition group runs on consensus decision-making. Freshfair did to a degree, although it wasn't explicitly stated. We had a fairly consensual approach.

Susan Fowles Interview

Date: 5 February, 2018

Attendees: Susan Fowles; Stephen Graham.

SG: *How did you get into farming?*

It just happened. We bought this place with 19 acres in the late 80s – my husband bought it. We got some cattle and went from there. Now it is no longer a smallholding - I'm managing 200 acres. My daughter persuaded my to buy 50 acres at [a local village] so she could have the house of her dreams. So I decided to give the land here to [a local wildlife group] to prevent it from being built on. I gave them 36 acres. When I die, the children will have no say over who buys the land. They are building left right and centre here and it is very, very vulnerable.

SG: *So, what was your involvement with Freshfair?*

I was involved since the beginning. Pete told us what they were planning to do. They were going to only have organic food. Anthony [Upton] was very concerned that it should be organic and local food that people had access to. They were hoping that it would be for the poorer people but in fact it didn't go in that direction.

SG: Why do you think the scheme struggled to connect to people on low incomes?

By and large the poorest people don't know how to cook. That is one of the biggest problems. And a lot of education needs to be done ...

SG: What are the outlets for your food?

We do three farmers' markets a month. We also sell meat from the door here at the farm. Although that is difficult to do because it is not possible to pay someone to be around all the time to take customers.

SG: So what did it mean to have Freshfair as a central hub selling produce?

Oh, it was brilliant. It was brilliant. Every month, a certain amount of produce was sold. People were buying through *Freshfair* … It provided us with another outlet for our produce. It was incredibly helpful.

SG: And was it more efficient to sell through the hub?

Yes, it provided us with another outlet. It was probably up to five per cent of our sales went through the hub.

SG: Who else do you sell through? and why not through supermarkets?

Well you have to cut out the middle man if you are a small producer like we are. We are trying to build up our own customer base who buy directly from us.

SG: What were the benefits of selling through Freshfair?

Well, we shifted some more of our produce. We had to deliver stuff to [the hub in the city] but for me that wasn't too bad. But for others like Diane and Eric who sold cheese through the hub, they have to come 20 miles each way.

SG: Were there any drawbacks? Anything they could have done better?

I don't know if Pete was taking too much on but he wasn't giving the time to it. And at one point there was another Pete working there [the admin assistant]. The fact that people were stretched was definitely a limiting factor for the project. I am absolutely certain of it.

SG: Freshfair tried to reduce food miles and carbon emissions. Was that important to you?

Yes, very important to me. That's one reason why I don't want to travel too far to go to farmers' markets. But on top of that, there is the expense. I mean, I might hear there's a market coming up in Kendal [a town in Westmorland and Furness]. Well, I'm not going to go to Kendal because it is 60 miles away. It just isn't worth it. Then people say: 'there's a market coming up in [your area] in 10 days – why don't you go there?' Well, you've got to be there at eight o'clock in the morning and you don't pack up until four, so you're not back until five. You're away all the daylight hours. How can you do farming at the same time?

SG: How do you feel now that Freshfair has been forced to close?

Well, upset, actually, because we were given no notice at all. I rang up Pete to say something about how much food we had in the fridge and he said well we don't want any more. I said what? Absolutely no notice at all. He said that he's sent round an email. I said no, Pete, I've had nothing. And Eleanor [Bowe], who supplies the pork said exactly the same. I supplied the beef and lamb and Eleanor supplied the pork. I had to get it all specially priced for them because they added 20 per cent on. We could not cut our prices for Freshfair, so we had to sell to them at our usual price. So they had to add 20 per cent and that meant it was expensive. If people wanted the convenience of it being delivered to their office and then they were prepared to pay for that.

SG: Were you sad to see it go?

Yes, I was very sad to see it go. I was absolutely furious that I was given no notice. That was really bad. I don't know what went wrong with Pete. I guess he just had too much on. But he should look after people like Eleanor and myself. Eleanor had a huge amount of bacon and sausages [left over]. And I wasn't going to buy it all as we have enough beef and lamb that we need to eat ourselves.

SG: Although the Freshfair model had its problems, do you think it was a good idea?

I think it was absolutely excellent. I really do. I think it is very good to be altruistic and Pete has progressed a long way and he's got all these wonderful ideas … but actually you've got to have a sound business sense and that wasn't there really.

SG: Are there any particular threats to you as a producer?

Brexit. [A local organic vegetable producer who I know] – they are having difficulties. They say they are not getting as many new customers. We're shifting the very valuable meat and we can also shift mince.

SG: What do you think is driving climate change?

Greed in the west. People are not prepared to go out wearing two thick jerseys. I'm always challenging people to do more, you know, take the little car, don't take the Land Rover. You know, the Land Rover uses more fuel. People want huge cars. It is the way they live their lives. It is the amount of machines they have. They throw things out. It is the throwaway society.

SG: And what can be done about that?

Education.

SG: So, who should drive change?

Everybody. This acquisitive, materialistic society is the problem. Every single purchase we make is an ethical decision. Not everyone may be able to do that because of the poverty they are in. But they don't know how to re-use before they recycle.

SG: What role can local food play in environmental protection?

We have to eat locally. People at the farmers' markets strongly feel that the food should be local. It is not so much that it is organic. The furthest any of our animals go is Lockerbie. Local is very, very important.

SG: Would you get involved in something similar if it happened again?

Yes, but the organisation would need to be better. Pete has got the ideas, but the world doesn't run [that way]. You can't just waffle your way through in an anarchist way. And now that they have got children, they realise that you can't just drift in a hippie tent [i.e., live in a yurt]. The ideal is very nice.

David Kennedy Interview

Date: 23 September, 2017

Attendees: David Kennedy; Stephen Graham

SG: How did you get involved with Greenstar Energy?

I looked for a way to use the skills and experience that I had, and I came across Greenstar. I was interested in the embryonic idea of a community energy project in the area. I became involved because it felt right to have some senior, trustee level involvement in the establishment of the team to manage the project. I had no background in energy production and no wish to save vast amounts of carbon emissions due to local generation of hydro. My initial drive was to ... go along with it, to at least be there to have a finger in the pie in decision making and to be reassured that I knew what was going on. I joined in order to keep an eye on it to protect the project. I could see that it was an interesting project – but there are lots of things around reputational risk. And if you're a charity that is taking a financial risk and you are not seen to be in there making sure that it works then you could be seen as neglecting your duties as a charity trustee. So that was the main driver for me.

The project just happened to come up at the right time. I had no real interest in saving the planet. I do wonder what kind of a world we are going to leave our grandkids and their kids and I see that the current generation, the current population of the world, is quite happy to rape and pillage anything they can get out of the ground, use up what they want and then fill the whole in with all sorts of other crap that they have created – plastic, nuclear waste, or whatever and my driver is much greater than just carbon and climate change. I feel that my role is to leave the world in a better state than it was when I got it, so there is a future for the kids, for future generations. The journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. If you don't do anything, you can't complain. If you're doing something, then at least you can say, well, you know, I haven't done a lot, but I've done a bit.

SG: So, did you develop an environmental consciousness whilst at this project?

I've always been a country person at heart. I think the country people accept the power of nature and we see the impact – people come along and build a road somewhere and put a concrete barrier across the middle to stop the cars coming over - but it stops the animals getting across. I wouldn't say I had vast ambitions of what I wanted to do or how I wanted to do it, it's just that I wanted to leave things as good as we could … We're probably going to do a pretty good job of wiping ourselves out as a race through the use of misuse of all we are going through at the moment.

SG: Can you tell me about Greenstar's aims?

I want to see locally generated energy for the benefit of local people, funded by local people. It is a bencom. It is funded by local people. This gives local people the opportunity to do something – in their own way – to do something for the local environment. So they can put their money into this. You know, if we can create 30kw of electricity – that is 30kw we don't have to burn coal for, or oil or gas, we don't create nuclear waste. You know, this is all about little steps. So, we involve the community, we are about community ownership. The owners get a benefit out of it, and the community gets some benefit out of it. Hopefully we could in future overcome the monopoly of the power companies that say you can't generate that because you are not in our gang. Go away. You don't play here. You generate your energy under the conditions that we say you generate under; you sell it to us at the price that you say you are going to sell it for; and if we want to change the rules, we will change the rules. So, we need to generate energy very locally and then get it to the local substation and get it directly back to the people in the area where it is generated. So we have the back-up of the national grid, but the people next door to the generator are getting first shout at the cheap energy. So these are the types of things I would like to see. Greenstar was set up to generate low carbon energy, and to generate energy locally for the benefit of the local community – be it for the individual investors or for the community as a payback. admittedly, the proportion of payback is quite small – it was never going to be a big payback. That's why we need to think about how we can distribute this [surplus] in a fair way.

SG: What would local energy generation mean for local communities?

There is a degree of pride in your own community. The people involved in it get a lot of personal satisfaction. It can also help keep the money of that community in the local community. Also, if you have got many more small energy producing units instead of big centralised ones, then you have a lot more resilience. If a great big generator goes bang, you lose a lot of power. But the likelihood of losing ten thousand community projects is much more remote. So you have a lot more resilience in your supply.

SG: Who developed strategy at the project?

I think there was a bit of a push from Ben [Merchant] to David [Stevens] to see if there was an interest and a will to establish a community energy project. There was a particular project came up but the returns were low – so there are some sites it seems that community energy can't touch because they are not profitable enough … so it would take longer to get the money raised. But one option came up and this seemed much more feasible and plausible timescales were tight but were more realistic. The costs were less than the other project. A lot of work had already been done [by the renewable energy company]. David [Stevens] did amazing work establishing the bencom and getting financial approval to do it. We had to go through lots of hoops to establish

that. But that is another benefit – we have now established a community company that can offer that service to [other community groups]. We used Greenstar's financial vehicle to sell the shares and to manage the money. If we hadn't have been in place and had the FCA approval to do that, they would have had to have jumped through those hoops and that would have taken longer. So there would have to be a good argument not to help other community groups. If it was a feasible project, there would be no reason not to ... It is potentially another income source.

SG: Does Greenstar make money to pay people?

I don't know all the detail of the budget from the top of my head. I know there is management element of the expenditure comes from the income. So we have a contract with [Greenstar's parent organization] for certain activities, so that comes out of it. Money for insurance comes out of it. Legal expenses. So, some of the income has to go on running the company. But because we're all volunteers and we do things pretty much free of charge, that is kept to a minimum. But from our income we need to be careful about our repayments because we have to repay the capital that we have had of the investors over 20 years. And because we haven't paid anything first year and probably the second year, then if we're paying back over 20 years we've got to pay it back over 5 per cent a year over twenty years. But if we haven't paid anything over the first couple of years then we need to raise that a bit to cover it. The argument is that the bit that we put for community benefit is, in my mind, something like – if we're talking two or three thousand pounds from a particular local project, how much benefit are we going to give to the local community. So how big do you define the community you're going to support and what do you support them with?

SG: What risks are associated with this project?

The biggest threat is personnel. Unless you've got a big organisation that has lots of Indians [sic] turning the handle of the sausage machine, your senior people don't produce anything. They are the change agents. They are the people who view the future, see what is coming up, read the strategy, manage the politics, bring it into the company and say, look if we're not careful we're going to get left behind so we need to change this. But the guys at the coal face are turning the sausage machine and sausages are coming out. Sausages are coming out and money is coming in. So take away all the management and above, the company will still make money. It may not make lots of money and it may not make money indefinitely, but it will make whatever it was making on the day you took the (senior) people away. So if we as Greenstar were to lose our people, we would be very vulnerable and I see it is one of the big issues that I feel that we have is single point of failure. Because we are a relatively small number of people there is a lot of pressure and reliance put on key people. Now to put my finger on the person, if David [Stevens] decided to do the lottery and won it and then decided to bugger off, the whole project would

crumble. It might not fail entirely, but bloody hell it would be hard work picking up all the balls and plates that he has got juggling and spinning. A lot of the information is in his head. So that's a huge risk. It is having single points of failure through too much knowledge, and a lack of structured documentation, which all comes down to a lack of time and resources (Kennedy, 2017). We've got a small organisation so who needs to have policies, who needs to have procedures? We don't need to write it down because we know what is going on. Hang on David has won the lottery and he's buggered off to Barbados for the next five years. Well, David? Oh, he's not answering his phone today … But you can defend against it and manage it. But that is to share things out. But you have to have sufficient numbers of people involved. It's a nightmare. It is another balancing act because you don't want to have too many people involved because then you don't know who is doing what, but you do need to have some shadowing going on. A key risk is volunteer labour. It is all a juggling act. If you have got volunteers ... You don't know how long people are going to stay. You know, one of our trustees just left because there was something they didn't agree with. It is different in the corporate sector. If you have a contract at a senior level with an organisation then you have probably got three months' notice to work and unless you've done something really bad, it is unlikely that you're going to be kicked out immediately. You get notice so you can hand over to someone else. You don't get that with volunteer staff. You work on a very fluid basis.

SG: To what extent does Greenstar rely on the work of volunteers?

Total. The only two contracts that we have are one with [the parent organisation] and one with [the renewable installers]. [The latter] do the technical and maintenance aspects and [the former] do the admin. Those are the only services we pay for on an ongoing basis, I think. We've got a small amount of outgoing to those with contractual arrangements to deliver a service. The rest is voluntary. And the chair could just turn round and say, sorry, I don't want to do this any more. It is always a problem with volunteers. The problem is, when you have a driven and enthusiastic person who is pushing things forward, like David [Stevens], then things continue. But if you are in a situation where you lose that drive and enthusiasm – the person moves on to something else, for example, gets fed up, bangs their head against the wall too many times and decides to not push any more – then the whole thing can lose momentum. It is a considerable vulnerability to the organisation.

SG: Are there risks related to government cuts, etc?

This is where we need a PESTEL analysis [a strategic business management technique] You should check out Business Balls website. It is great for this kind of thing. Political economic social technological environmental and legal. So what is the driver from the political side? Are they going to change the Feed-in Tariff? What is the political mood regarding the generation of

energy? Economic – how much are we earning from this? Is it feasible? What will it cost us in the future. Social: does it affect people – does a wind turbine get in people's way? Equally, could it help them to generate some income so that they could do something that they wanted to do? Technological – can we put a highly efficient generator in. Can we connect to the grid? Legal, you know. This is a good analysis tool to trigger the brain. These kinds of things are very useful.

SG: What are the major drivers of climate change?

I think we have an issue with climate change. I don't know how we solve it. I don't think there is the will in the world to solve things. I don't think it is in human nature to think long term. You talk to politicians and what is their problem? Will I get elected next time? I'm only 52 and I need at least another session in parliament. So they are thinking five years into the future. Who is thinking 25, 100, 1000? We're not thinking the long term. it's just all about short termism.

SG: What about root causes? is there a particular driver of climate change?

It is society and technological development. If you look at Western society, we have developed our technologies and sciences to an extent that we're not necessarily ... our industry is not the heavy industry that it used to be. Even America and Russia has a bit of it, but all the bigger western countries tend not to be the big, heavy engineering places that they used to be. We used to have coal mines, iron ore, steelmaking. This all used lots of energy. Energy was created by burning coal. Because our requirements have probably reduced and our technologies have advanced so that you can create more cleaner energy we are now leaning back on less developed countries who are using the old methods to provide the power to do the old work that we no longer do. And they are saying that we're not going to back off. You've had 100 years of burning coal, we're going to do it too. So until we can develop worldwide systems that provide economic clean energy, then we have a bit of a problem. It is difficult then to do too much about it. The other thing is that we seem to have blinkers ... The subsidies they are putting into Hinkley Point are immense. If they put those subsidies into green energy we would be self-sufficient, would have less nuclear waste and would be a lot better off. So it’s back to the politics of it.

SG: Does it all come down to technology?

I don't think there is any one silver bullet. We need technology, but then there is population ... Things are changing and the status quo is being challenged. So, I think there is an opportunity to get a greener view taken on board.

SG: Who should drive this change?

I think we need political champions. These champions must be driven, transformed, and created by a popular groundswell. Until we have a sufficient groundswell ... I mean we have that system where people can sign petitions if they get enough signatures they can then get things debated in Parliament. I think that sort of a movement ... we almost need some sort of a champion to lobby. We need green businesses to drive things. We need lots of entrepreneurs to get on board if we're going to make things happen. We have good people out there, pushing things forward. We need lobbyists, influencers who can get into the right people and get the message that there is another way – one that might not have the same negative impacts. Once that starts to percolate, and if you get a groundswell of enthusiasm about it, then more people will listen to you, and the more people that listen, then you get more people, and it is just a mushroom.

SG: What have been the most and least successful parts of the project?

Most successful part of the project is that we achieved an [energy] output, we actually generated energy, and we generated energy in sufficient quantity to sustain the organisation. We had half year results, and even with all the problems we've had …we've still made a few thousand pounds profit. It is a nice feeling. And if you think that is in six months. So over a year, we should make enough money to run. It is looking good to be self sustaining. If we can get one off the ground that is self-sustaining, we have got a model in place that we can move on to others. We've just got to be careful we don't overstretch.

SG: And the least successful?

It has all gone reasonably well all the way. I suppose if I had to say... the most disappointing thing is the lack of turnout for the AGM. I know people don't tend to go to AGMs unless you make it attractive. So people think, well, you know, I'm not turning out for that. I'd much rather have a glass of wine and watch Tipping Point or something ... so I think the actual involvement of people is probably the most disappointing thing. I mean it is good that we have got the investors, but you have to ask the question of the age profile and the involvement profile of the people that are involved with it, why have they done it? Is it because they can make a difference to the planet or to the future in some way, or is it the fact that they can get a lump of money back from the tax man and they can get a reasonable return on investment that you can't currently get anywhere else ... it's money we're not too bothered about, you know, it would be nice to have it back – but if push comes to shove, well, it wouldn't really matter so much. Because we have a lack of engagement, we don't know what we're losing ... We've got X numbers of investors. We might have some amazing technologists, some amazing company chairmen, treasurers, financial people in there – and because we don't know what their skill sets or what their interests are, we don't know if we're missing out on something. We don't know what we're missing. We might have the answers to the problems that we have in our midst, but

we just don't know. And that comes from a lack of engagement. Also, this links back to data protection – we can't contact people to find out what they can do.

SG: Where would you like this to be in five or ten years' time?

I would like to see the current projects running and paying their way, and some new projects coming on board. I would like to see Greenstar growing into a sufficiently large entity to help communities across the region in a better way. If we could have ten of these and we could have £3,000 from each of them into the community, £30,000 for the community could make a much greater difference. And better still if we have one hundred, then we've got £300,000 – that is a lot. You could then be almost self-sufficient because you'd have enough income.

Ben Merchant Interview

Date: 20 November, 2017

Attendees: Ben Merchant; Stephen Graham

SG: How did you get involved in the energy sector?

I started a career in the energy and environment sector in 2001 when I began working for a big industrial company. I was focusing on doing market research for fuel cells, you know, fuel cells are effectively like a clean battery rather than recharge it – you just have to refill it with hydrogen so that, you know, as long as you replace the hydrogen – it's clean, oh, and you can use natural gas as well. It effectively was then quite an obscure end of the renewable energy industry and that set me off on … I worked there for a few years and just through people I met I was offered a job in renewable energy finance connected with fuel cells because the people I met were raising finance for fuel cell companies and so I went into renewable energy finance … I was basically preparing early-stage companies for raising money and I would go out and raise the money and try to find investors to put money in … so that would involve, you know, helping to write their business plans, everything else. Very often, actually, with early stage technology with all the risks associated with that and … then I came across hydro-power. A friend of mine up here said "why don't you come to a hydro-power meeting" and I thought, well, this is so much better than anything else because it's not in its early stage – it's been around for a hundred years; it lasts for a hundred years. I also was living in London but was wanting to spend more time up here [in northwest England]. It is a wet, hilly part of the world where there is hydro potential so I just got obsessed by it. Absolutely obsessed by hydro-power and where the potential was and … I was able to dedicate some of my time when I was working in that job to look at this and then set up my own company. At one point it was nothing but a website with a couple of pictures on a business card, you know, it was nothing more than that. Then, this was about 2008, I persuaded [a local engineering company] to invest and then we started. We did our first major hydro scheme around 2009-10.

SG: How did you manage to find a gap in the hydro market in an area that has a lot of hills and water?

Because it [building hydro schemes] is unbelievably hard. I had to fight, you know, there are multiple consenting authorities for hydro, you know, you're building in a natural, wild environment and you've got to demonstrate that you can do that in a way where you minimise the environmental impact. People are scared of doing something new – especially planning officers.

SG: So do you see the bureaucracy associated with local government as a barrier?

It was. It took a good five years if not longer [to show] that we were responsible – we were vilified in some cases. It took a while to build the trust. So we built that first scheme and there were a couple of other small ones we did. In the early days it was just for ourselves.

SG: This wasn't a community renewable scheme?

No, this wasn't a community renewable scheme at all. If you do it for yourself, then if you make a mistake then it doesn't matter. Then from 2011, I thought I need more people on this. The I thought well, if we have more people then I need to pay for them. So I thought we have to sell our services. I can't remember what year the Feed In-Tariff came in … but when the Feed-in Tariff came in, it was a huge catalyst to more [community energy] schemes being built.

SG: Are you finding a niche by being able to do this in environmentally sensitive areas, places that are beautiful? Is this your thing?

Well, I think most of the potential is in sensitive places. That's where the water is. It tends to be in natural and quite pristine environments. So in 2011 I took on one engineer, who was my cousin actually. And we went on from there. I mean, were still a very small team. We've got two engineers, one construction manager and two office staff.

SG: How did the cut in Feed-In Tariff affect things?

For the community renewables [sector], it was tough … when the Feed-in Tariff was reduced we had to stop all development … it put the brakes on in a massive way… We could see the Feed-In Tariff and knew it would be cut a bit … we thought community renewables might work because then people aren't just investing for a return they're investing for all the other benefits that they bring to other places, people … so they might accept a four to five per cent return where a more commercial scheme would, well, if you're going to borrow money for a scheme as we have then you need to be able to pay the interest and you need to be able to pay the capital back, so you've got to have a scheme that has ten per cent return as a minimum.

SG: And how much capital do you need to start a scheme?

Hydro is difficult because it is like an 18 months to two year run-in to get the permits, whereas frankly for a solar scheme you don't even have to have permission to put solar panels on lots of places … but even community renewables now is tough because … there was almost a perfect storm of problems back in 2015 when they were cutting the Feed-In Tariffs massively, they cut all the tax incentives, but also there were tax reliefs available for investments in community companies. They said that they would not cancel that and that something would take its place, and then they went back on their word and they cancelled that as well. So you might get a four per cent return, but if you can get some tax relief, like get some of your income tax back, then it

makes it higher. And it is an incentive for making an investment with a positive impact. But that was all cancelled, all within weeks of each other. But we managed to get a hydro scheme and a solar scheme set up before everything was cut. So that is fixed for 20 years.

SG: So do you think, then, that these types of projects are replicable?

I guess that the type of people that are interested in promoting community renewables, you know, they're not jealously guarding their intellectual property, you know, they want more of it to happen so, you know, Greenstar doesn't need to have global domination, so if we can help other people to get it off the ground then great – or inspire other people, and so on. A commercial venture would definitely not take the same view. Why would you want to help your competition?

SG: And have you about commercial developers buying up potential renewable sites and then sitting on them?

Well, basically, energy development is a subset of property development. It is very normal in property development for developers to have a land bank. So I wouldn't say necessarily that I've seen any evidence of a developer not developing a site, but another example of that … a key restriction of distributed renewables as opposed to very large scale is the capacity and the distribution grid and that can be bought up. So that is all paid for, even if a scheme does not go ahead, then … it can frustrate others.

SG: So, you did a lot of the legwork to make Greenstar's community renewables schemes viable. Without someone doing that work, would Greenstar be possible?

We took all the risk out. I mean I tried to do a hydro project [a few years earlier] and – this is one of the very first ones that I wanted to do – there was a landowner up there and I put a lot of effort into it, but I couldn't reach an agreement with them and they then wanted to do it as a community scheme. They put a lot of effort in and did everything they needed to do for it, but in fact the landowner turned around and again couldn't reach an agreement. He did the same thing. The lesson for me then was that community groups community groups often make the false assumption that because something is in their locality, they have a right to do it [i.e., use local land and resources for the good of the community] – whereas of course everything belongs to someone and if you haven't actually got a legal agreement that allows you to do it, then you haven't even started. I think they hadn't properly looked at the grid capacity either. So you're wasting your time … you need to do things in the right order. If you haven't got permission from a landowner written in stone; if you haven't looked at things like grid capacity … and then there is the whole business of chicken and egg … And of course, you've got to look at the worst case scenario … but what is really important when you work in the community renewables –

well in any walk of life to be honest – is to have very high aspirations. You know, we really are very ambitious and we are genuinely excited about what we're doing. You know, we're trying to do something positive. We're trying to do something better than has been done before that other people can learn from. And I think when you take that approach it does make it easier for people to support you and invest and everything else.

SG: What is the potential for community renewables? What is the ambition here?

Distributed generation, particularly with PV costs coming down – you know PV is incredibly simple to install – it is at a point … and in terms of grid management techniques, battery storage – all these clever things that are happening – it is quite possible to have communities, towns, cities, villages across the whole country that are powered on this basis, that are completely clean, completely balanced … frankly, you don't need to have very large scale nuclear baseload, and it is cost competitive. That is the real excitement now and that has changed massively. Things are also changing now in terms of the legalities and technology in being able to trade energy locally … which again is something we're exploring. Feed-in Tariffs were deemed to be, politically, too expensive, they were … blah blah blah … Which I think was rubbish, actually, when you look at the true costs of the subsidy. But you can't assume that they are going to come back. So you've got to innovate. And one way to innovate is 'can we sell energy locally, slightly above wholesale price'? Now, I've been looking at this for the last five years – again, similar to my motivation to start looking at community renewables – equally, I thought that if we could sell, you know, we can offset some of the subsidy coming down if we can sell our electricity for more. Now five years ago I commissioned work on this and it wasn't really viable but now there is a lot of new thought on this and it is beginning to happen. So that is another reason why I believe that community-scale, balanced heat and electricity systems are … there is potential.

SG: Do you think that it is possible to regenerate through energy projects?

Well, if we want to have a world class community, then we need to have a 21st century energy system … this is literally my work at the moment – I'm beginning to research the very best modern vernacular design. This is a book about how British housing can rediscover its soul [he holds up a book]. There is a reason why there are so many NIMBYs in this country. It is because most development, for so long, has been crap. If it is purely based on profit, people will build the cheapest. You know, brutal modern architecture is cheaper if you don't add any nice detailing to it. You know, you don't want craftsmanship, because that is extra cost … All this stuff has to work economically. You know we have to be able to pay for people to deliver this stuff.

I just want this stuff to happen. And if we can create wealth … but the point is that by doing this through a social enterprise. Look … if we have surplus profit, then we can put it back into the

community. You know, because as part of creating a great community [in this area] … we need to spend money on street furniture, on planting trees, pavement surfaces – more money than has ever been spent there. We know that [in this austerity context] the council isn't going to give us that money – so we've got to make it.

You know, from my point of view there are huge moral issues with globalised capitalism and, you know, it is in the press right now, you know, Apple devices are incredibly designed, incredibly functional, they are almost too good, i.e., addictive, but these companies have the power to legally set themselves up so they don't even pay any tax – I mean, they are doing nothing for communities. *Nothing*. This is a massive problem. I don't believe that giving 100 per cent and going back to nationalising everything is [the way forward] … I think that communities can play a huge role here … But it doesn't necessarily have to be all about local communities. [What is needed is] more local ownership, more local businesses… I just think that the way to address [pressing social and environmental problems] is through local capitalism, where you bring back the ownership [of production] much closer to home … If [people] happen to have savings and investments, these will often be through their pensions. But they are totally disconnected from their investments – these are miles away and they have no idea where [their money is or what it is invested in] … This is a massive problem … And again a part of that is social enterprise essentially. So for me it is part of trying to … kind of do something positive that uses all the great advantages of capitalism and being able to finance things, raise money and, you know, be able to buy solar panels from anywhere in the world … to make use of this technology and everything else, but actually have the benefits accruing locally, the ownership being local so they actually appreciate how and why and where things come from. And you can apply that to food. And my two pennies worth on food, it is all about the same thing – it's all about the differential between the wholesale and the retail and who is benefitting. And whoever makes the profit out of it, where does that profit then go? Look at buildings today, for example … if you go to towns and cities up and down this nation and you look at what has been built in the historical past, it is a damn sight better than what is being built now – and one of the reasons is the tradesmen [i.e., business leaders] of the town, they owned the businesses, they lived in the town, they were very often, you know, the community leaders as well and they had every incentive [to improve their surroundings]. Of course, they wanted to have a good environment for them[selves] and their families and employees and everybody else to live in. Whereas now, that's not how it is any more …

SG: Looking to the issue of climate change more generally, what are the drivers of climate change, in your view?

Population growth number one – which people don't talk about very much. Population is clearly using up more and more resources. It is clear that man is making a difference. Look it's all obvious. You don't need me to tell you, the science will tell you how it is broken down. When you get into food you get into arguments about beef and methane … but look, I, I, climate change is a massive issue … I mean look, I mean look at globalization … it just speeds everything up … you know the quantitative population – and you marry that together with communication and transport network … this development is incredibly quick, then of course you get … the whole thing just speeds up, it's runaway. The problem is, actually, it's a global problem, you know, we're globalized now … I read a quote from David Attenborough recently … [he goes over to his computer and searches for the quote] … 'anyone who believes that you can have infinite growth on a finite planet is either mad or an economist'…

SG: You said you used to work for a financial institution a while ago, but what part do finance and technology play in tackling climate change?

Well, they are massive … the globalized capitalist economic system … is here to stay and it can work extraordinarily well. Clearly, it has impacts – but in fact it can also be used for good… finance and technology can be used very, very positively.

SG: And you think that through finance and technology it is possible to drastically reduce carbon emissions?

Yeah, absolutely. And it is happening. Yes, it is not happening quickly enough…

SG: And who do you think should drive the process of change? Are we talking politicians, business leaders…?

Well, ultimately the change will be introduced … politicians don't tend to build stuff. Maybe that will change. I think the politicians need to incentivise the business community to behave in a fairer manner – so this whole topic of fair taxation is a massive issue. I believe that companies that are transparent, that look after their people and the environment in a responsible way should be rewarded for that. I think there should be a carrot and stick here. And equally, people who are avoiding transparent taxation – they need to be punished. The problem is, actually, it's a global problem, you know, we're globalised now, so it all very well that the UK … let's say Jeremy Corbyn gets in and, you know, he's a very principled man who would have an even more principled Chancellor of the Exchequer, he could make some very ideological … things, but because it is not joined up with everyone else it drives people away, it's not joined up, that's the challenge. I don't know how you do it but I think all the countries have to get together and dismantle all this offshore nonsense. People should be paying profits [taxes] where their business is derived.

SG: Given your remarks on 'local capitalism' earlier, and what you said about the need to produce profits – while stressing the importance of keeping profits local – how do you square this with what Attenborough said [in the excerpt you quoted] about the impossibility of infinite growth on a finite planet? Do you think 'green growth' is possible?

It can all go round … I think that – whether as an individual or as a business – if you're actions are environmentally responsible then it's much better … if you're just using resources much better and more efficiently. We've still got a long way to go in this country with recycling levels. There is a role for technology there to make sure that things are recycled in the most efficient way. Governments can introduce laws that ensure that products are designed in such a way in the first place that ensure they are able to be recycled.

SG: And should this be imposed by government? Is this the best way to do it?

Yes, absolutely. There are masses of examples where government has led on … let's take emissions legislation, you know. Forget about CO_2 for a minute and think about SOX, NOX, I know there is a crackdown on diesels at the moment, but diesel exhausts in new cars now, you can look it up, they are a thousand times cleaner than they were a generation ago. Of course there are many more cars on the road, but there have been massive positive changes that have been led by governments.

And other thing … I'm slightly contradicting what I said earlier about if one country makes a stand it is not going to make a difference – actually, it can. So for instance, there are certain areas in the world that require packaging that has a higher recycling content of post-consumer waste – particularly it is Hong Kong and California – and you're thinking well there not even two countries, they're just states … that catalyses things because they say: 'well, if we've got to do that, we may as well do that for everywhere…' So you start at that level and, you know, it can catalyse global change.

SG: Do you think that climate change is irreversible?

We're already seeing the impacts of it and I think we're going to see it get a lot worse. Does that mean we don't do anything? Absolutely not. We should be doing all these things regardless of climate change. You know, it is far more efficient to generate energy more locally, in a clean way. It is the right thing to be doing. If it is cheaper, we should be doing it anyway. Whether it's going to be enough, I don't know, but we should be doing it anyway. Mankind is … yes, climate change is going to massively alter environments around the world, you know, it already is. Look at sea level rise – it's going to happen. In the long run, mankind will adjust, you know, we're not dumb. I remember seeing a programme a few years ago about an Eskimo sea hunter – I can't remember if they hunted polar bears or what they did – but their world was changing and he

said: ‘well, I’m going to move on, I’ll go here’. That’s what will happen. That’s going to have massive social and economic impacts like Africa being very hot and people wanting to migrate to Europe, pressure on political stability … there are all sorts of things that I think probably will happen, but that is not a reason to do nothing. In fact, that is a reason to do everything. In fact, I’m almost saying we just need to get on and do this and the question of is it irreversible … it might not be … but so what?

SG: You set out a very exciting vision earlier. Do you foresee any risks that endanger that vision? Do you encounter any particular frustrations?

Oh, there are countless. Look, if you’re in business and you want to deliver something, you know, invest in something, you have got to look at the worst case scenario. And in the worst case scenario, you think ‘can we somehow find a way that this still affordable?’ Actually, if you can’t, maybe you shouldn’t be doing it … Do you know what … Brexit is a massive uncertainty. I think equally as bad as that is the whole political uncertainty. I think there is a – I’m not ‘anti’ a Corbyn government – but it is almost inevitable that if there was a Corbyn government, they would be much less business-friendly because, you know, business is seen to be the enemy by a lot of people and I think that could have an effect on the British economy for a long time. You know, we’ll get through it – the point is that all these things could subdue the economy … to be honest the housing market needs to take a bloody dive to make it more affordable so you might argue that it you’re younger and you can’t afford a house, the economy going backwards, you know… it all depends if you’re salaried or if you lose your job, you know, so there are all sorts of – not everything is a negative but there are all kinds of risks like that that could fly up … So if you think about the speed we need to be moving now, if we break it down into chunks, if we hit a problem, we just stop and wait. Also, private enterprises are usually the pioneers and the first to market. They take up the best sites ... It is only later on that social enterprise kind of recognises that there is a possibility of changing how things are done … but by the time these local groups come on board, the best sites have gone. And so their returns are least.

Rob Naylor Interview 1

Date: 19 May, 2017

Attendees: Rob Naylor; Stephen Graham

SG: How did the [organization name redacted] come about and what is the relationship between that and Freshfair?

Sometime around 2010, 2011, [organization name redacted] wanted to do something about food through the Food Action Group it had at the time. That related to the formation of [organization name redacted] and we had a go at a number of things including some food production where we got a project to establish a community-owned market garden which failed at the last step with a lottery bid. We then turned to the question of distribution and whether we could somehow assist local producers come to local market as it were and –what were the barriers to doing that? – so we talked a lot about the labour intensiveness of trying to come out of the national meat and milk market and to set up local distribution at a significant scale and we talked to a number of farmers about that and about their basic unwillingness to risk the situations and the contracts they were in to get involved.

SG: When you say 'labour intensiveness', do you mean on the part of individual farmers or you as administrators?

Yeah, certainly as individual farmers, the idea that they would in effect form a local distribution network they would have to take their stuff to places to see it so we wondered if we could facilitate that so we in effect tried to set up a box scheme which involved collecting stuff from local farmers…

SG: Was that you collecting stuff as volunteers?

We had a project worker at the time who was organising it and then so we set that up and we signed up some people to take the boxes and we organised it and got some investment in a shed to keep it in and that kind of stuff… but the top and bottom of it was that it never took off, you know, we ended up with a handful of reliable takers of the food and we found out how small the amount of local production of – certainly vegetables where there was a few potatoes and that was about it really – and the meat and milk market was generally tied up with bigger contracts within the system… erm, anyway, we produced local stuff – produced as in acquired – and we filled boxes but we never really got off the ground in terms of any significant take up.

SG: Did any particular reasons come up at the time for this failure?

We didn't have a very good story to tell them, in that we had limited amounts of stuff. It was ok, it was locally-produced but it was often produced on the side… I guess there were problems with reliability and I guess mainly we were asking them to rearrange their food acquisition habits and it was therefore inconvenient and therefore you only got people who were ideologically committed I suppose in some ways who were prepared to do it. We run that for maybe 12 or eighteen months but take-up fell to only a handful of boxes. Se we explored with [the local city-based transition group] whether we could address this question of getting to a viable scale by having a wider population to serve because we were serving Brampton and surrounding areas so we did that and they were into starting that anyway so we contributed the remnants of our scheme, including [name redacted], for the remainder of his contract because he was grant funded so he put his weight into transferring what we'd set up and helped to expand that on a city basis. Well, I suppose that was sort of more or less jointly managed by [organization name redacted] and [organization name redacted] though [organization name redacted] was in effect running it as a [organization name redacted] project. And they got a room at the Enterprise Centre from the City Council and it became quite a substantial piece of infrastructure, like the idea and the system and the place that they developed and then there was a lot about how are we going to distribute this and the idea was to do it through workplaces, so large workplaces were tackled and connections were set up.

SG: How were these set up?

There were one or two people around who were working in these places and that was a way in. I think as a system it was quite successful for getting a foot in the door and established. And there was a lot of effort went in to try and promote it expand it, think of ways to advertising it of contacting people, there was a pick-up point set up at the Enterprise Centre base so all that was done through a lot of energy with [Pete]… much of it was very good but it wasn't able to translate into a fully-functioning system for the community.

SG: And why do you think that was?

I think there were probably things that can be criticised about the marketing, about the way we went about researching the impact of all of the adjustments that were continually being made to try and improve the take up. Actually I could say a number of things about the specific things that were done but I think my conclusion would be that the top and bottom of it is that none of them were really going to break through in any significant way. And then there was a running out of resources to underwrite it, to meet the costs that were involved in doing it and that itself rapidly started to have a negative effect on the extent to which effort could be put into improving it. There was a lot of infrastructure put in place by [Pete] in relation to the networks he set up with producers and getting workplaces to open their doors and it was successful. What

we didn't get was take-up and that's back to people being set in their convenient ways of doing things and there wasn't sufficient buy in to the ideas on a sufficient scale in that form, in that form. There may be other forms.

SG: And what part did supermarkets play in all of this?

We were up against all of that. And without a conventional retail outlet to promote it I mean this was all off-to-the-side networks really and therefore the commercial markets never saw it.

SG: And going back a bit, what were the motivations behind the whole project? Was in environmental? Was it social?

It was both of those things. I would say our original approach was based on carbon reduction and resilience. And we were angry about shitty food all over the place when in some cases you could just to get it from the farm down the road and into Brampton, I mean there was a bit of that. And then there was all of the importing food in order to sustain people in the way that they were eating. First of all we felt that this was carbon intensive – and transport was a clear element of that. And it was vulnerable to collapse. Certainly when we started thinking of this ten years ago this notion of collapse was quite strong at that time. We'd just discovered we were going to wreck the world for sure and we kind of need to something about it without quite knowing how the market was going to deal with that – other than it would collapse a bit here and a bit there and, you know, the people with money would probably be alright.

So we thought it was important to do something about food security… and this all contributed to the notion that this was vulnerable and it needed to be turned around. I think my own interest in it came from seeing if we could produce community-based production some significant scale that would allow us to make a contribution to the local need for food. And we found out through the project that failed to materialise that that was going to be difficult…

SG: Are you talking about [organization name redacted] here?

Well, it was the predecessor of the box scheme. This is when we were locked into production… no production on the vegetable front… the market doesn't allow it, maybe we can make it happen I think was our approach to it. So we then suffered all of the problems associated with people who've got no money and no resources, no assets, trying to do something on a commercial scale and it became clear that that would not be easy. So we set about trying to get grants and we set about trying to find assets that would allow us to work with it so we were into buying bits of land and we opened dialogues with farmers about 'would you flog us five acres' and they would say 'yeah, you can have five acres for twenty grand' – I can't remember the actual figure but it was something enormous – and the reason the Lottery bid failed was because the land acquisition was a requirement for the programme we were bidding into – and you

couldn't rent it, you had to buy it so that it was secure – the price for the land was far too high to consider funding the project. So that, well this is the land thing… private ownership stops things happening and puts it in the hands of the owners. And I think that works on food and works on housing and that works on, you know – it's that private ownership of the land thing that screws it up really.

SG: Was this also a problem for Freshfair? Didn't they also try to get some land for growing food?

We knew that production was obviously going to be difficult. If I can just switch to the side slightly, we've now got an opportunity with the anaerobic digester to link the production within that to the production of food and for me – now still hooked to the idea that we need some substantial production here to make a mark – then this is the opportunity to see what we can do on that front… we can produce heat with a residue that can be used as compost. So you've got some heat and you can use it for whatever you like really, like electricity – which will be a main element – but it will also produce heat itself which can be exported into the grid… there are a number of outputs you can do with this but one of the outputs is that you can produce heat which can be run through a heating system… which on a food production site could be polytunnels. And you can even light the polytunnels from the electricity you are producing. So you can have lit, hot, polytunnels 365 days-of-the-year if you want to.

That is the idea and has the potential to grow stuff in a fairly neat, compact way. So at the minute we're trying to get a site that is big enough that would allow the beginning of a food production operation alongside the anaerobic digester.

SG: Would this help address the problem of the limited range of veg?

The point that we're at is that we've got to develop a new project to take this forward. That's what we will do… So we need a project and we need more people than we've currently got in [the local food network] to do that. That needs to be done…

SG: Do you think that, in light of the failure of Freshfair and [organization name redacted]'s box scheme that enabling food production could help bring this type of project to a whole new level?

I think so. It would certainly be a story with a new dimension to it. It may be that production can occur on a scale which starts to make it possible to reliably supply a substantial local market which could get a snowball rolling. That's a concept. We've got to work up the project before we can know if that's going to work and that's really the next task.

SG: Will you take any lessons from Freshfair into this project?

I think the buying market has got to be mainstream, really. There's got to be some serious retailer involvement. Like a vegetable shop maybe, or organisations that use food and who want food. I mean everybody uses the message 'home cooked', 'locally-sourced food. I don't know how true that is. Everybody's saying it, so they clearly think that it is a clever marketing thing to do. I think this idea could give some credibility to that and take advantage of that so places like this [a local pub] which are using food every day might be another market for selling locally-produced food. At the minute I just haven't got a clue what scale we could get this to. We need to develop that through the project. But there's a possibility here that we've never had before and it seems to have dimensions to it which could make it easier to succeed in a highly competitive market than it was just getting a bit of land to try and grow some stuff. I think the anaerobic digester idea is useful as it naturally produces as its primary product heat, and heat is the thing that can change the dynamic of the food growing operation if you can capture properly. Even if you're just lengthening the season or able to grow more difficult produce which has more value. There are possibilities to make a contribution even in the existing marketplace at a different level from what we were thinking previously because of the link with this energy production plant.

SG: Do you think the Freshfair model could work in other places or at different scales? What factors stopped this project working in ways that might not be the case at other times or places?

I would say that the scale the scope and the reliability at the producer end was limited certainly in terms of primary production. There are always a fair bit of getting into processed food production – jams and chutneys and various processed things which it was thought was improving the quality of the box and was making it more attractive to people. I'm sure that was the case. But is just didn't translate into take up.

SG: How do you see the relationship between projects such as this and supermarkets, which offer shoppers convenience and reliability?

This is the situation we're operating in. I think it's plainly obvious that that's where people are at and trying to unhook them from that is not easy unless you've got something that is equally attractive. That's why I think that in the first instance if you can get the production [part of the project to] consider using existing retail outlets as a place for the produce rather than trying to control the whole process from start to finish, that is a big deal.

SG: What do you think are the main drivers of climate change?

Lots of people. Lots of consumption, much of which is frivolous, I would say. And a mainstream political acceptance that you're not going to do very much about either of those things. And a general unwillingness to try. I think there was a tipping point about ten years ago

when there was some serious talking going on in mainstream political circles about things like carbon allowances which would seek to progressively cap the amount of carbon people were producing and this would translate into what the market would need to produce to allow people to operate within those limits. But it pretty quickly evaporated. I mean, first of all the economy collapsed in 2008. Which of course brings us to the whole capitalism thing, really. This was when the whole set of ideas was getting to quite a difficult point as it was going to have be translated into something practical. But it was overtaken by that event and it has never surfaced since.

SG: What needs to happen to stop climate change?

The key point is the political viability of the action which is necessary. So what is going to make it politically viable? We're in a situation where it is still fairly invisible in terms of doing something about it despite the profile of the Green Party in the 2015 election. They just never really surfaced. So what needs to happen in order to change the mindset of mainstream voters around that? Some market has to collapse which is clearly relatable to the emissions issue. It was once thought that the oil market might collapse but it didn't quite collapse. We've ended up in a situation where we're still going hell-for-leather to exploit any source of fossil fuel that we can manage.

SG: What drives that?

Because it is not politically acceptable to do anything else. So what is it that is going to make it politically acceptable? I think some kind of easily understood relatable catastrophe, possibly involving lots of people dying. I can't see, in the way that I might have done ten years ago, see a political will emerging to seriously tackle it other than at the rather pedestrian pace that it is already happening. I mean this is continuing at the moment through market mechanisms of various sorts, though painfully slowly and probably not fast enough.

SG: Therefore do you think that it is possible to effectively tackle climate change within the prevailing social and political structures?

I think something sweeping can happen only by something else sweeping happening. What is that? You can have some kind of natural collapse. I mean, I think that that is happening already – it's just that people here aren't seeing that and don't really care about that. I mean the people who are affected are people on the margins of deserts basically and they are dying in large numbers but it is not registering because they are the wrong people and they are in the wrong place. So it remains a very weak force on changing minds in places like this. The current political set up doesn't appear to facilitate it.

SG: Do you think that climate change is irreversible yet? Is it containable?

As I understand it, in practical terms it is still possible to control it. But there is no evidence that the political measures will be taken to make that happen. So we're back in the same place.

SG: What role can local food projects can play in tackling climate change? If scaled up and replicated?

I think it needs to show itself to be successful and that is proving quite difficult on any scale. There will be ways in which that can be brought about and that could change people's thinking about the wider situation and I think it could change people's behaviour but there needs to be opportunities to see that way forward and these ideas that we're trying to develop locally can be a contribution to that. I think they would be a contribution to that but is proving so difficult to effectively make things happen from a local level. Again, it is so painfully slow. And that is not because there is no support. I meant there is government support for this kind of initiative and the reason that we're able to do what we're doing on the anaerobic digester front is because the government has been prepared to put up money to allow an org like ours to get established and to do some groundwork on what the project could be. So we've spent 20 to 30,000 [pounds] on doing that. And having decided that that is the way to go… we have got hold of 130,000 [pounds] of soft loan. If the project collapses it is written off. If it doesn't we pay it back in due course – if the project is successful. So there is a certain amount of risk removal there which we transfer on to the government and that is allowing us to get where we have got to on this project.

And you might say "well, that's good". But this is like peanuts, really. We want 10 of these, 20 of these, 50 of these. We want a plan for rolling out this kind of thing across our area, everybody's area. There needs to be some determination to make this happen.

But really, I think this is a token. It is slowly effective in the way that is has gone about it. But it is on a wholly different scale from the scale of the problem and the take-up is therefore limited, There is a limited amount of money available. It is a token effort to be able to show that they're doing this kind of thing [i.e., taking action on climate change]. And it is keeping quiet the people at the frontier who are pushing for something to happen but it is not transforming anything [46:13].

SG: Do you think that other people working on local sustainability projects share this view? Is this a commonly held view?

I think there are two camps in the sustainability fraternity. One is happily beavering away doing their local projects; and people who have a broader approach to what this could potentially be part of. There problem is that there aren't too many people in the latter camp, really. I'm not meaning to be too critical of the people who are not in the latter camp. I think there is good resilience stuff. It is very important. But the idea of strategic approaches as to how you crack

this thing [i.e., capitalism]… And only how you crack this from a community perspective. I mean that's a limitation of what I'm describing – I understand that that has its own limitations. But I do think that is has got some serious potential but it just that it is very difficult to bring people into that circle when the prospects of actually doing something tangible appear to be quite slim. It is difficult to break into a level which can be sustained. I think there is the money and there are the assets and there is the market. All of which conspire to make it difficult to get off the ground.

SG: What do you consider your overall political outlook?

In practical terms I've been in the labour party for 40 years and I think that, in practical terms, that is still the way of changing the current political practice in this country.

SG: As in, through a mainstream political party?

Yes. That's how I've always seen it despite all the opportunities to do something otherwise at various points I've never in the end thought that that was going to produce anything else other than a skirmish at the side as opposed to making something significant happen. Within that tradition – that labour tradition – I've retained some kind of radical socialist approach to it which has always been thwarted by the realities of the electorate through the democratic process.

SG: Do you consider these skirmishes on the side to have any value? To affect more mainstream politics?

Yes, of course. Because you don't know what's going to happen next. Even just for political education processes there should be a lot of skirmishing going on. Yeah, that is fine. I think it's when you get to the engagement with the existing democratic process that I reach the conclusion that I've always reached: that I'm going to stick being a member of the Labour Party.

This also depends on technology. There is a thread of thought which says that technology is moving in a direction which is going to make the corporate-controlled market unsustainable. It's going to fracture in some way. And if you take energy, for example, there appear to be emerging ways of generating energy which are going to make it much more difficult for traditional energy generators to control the market. And there appears to be emerging the potential for that to fragment in a big way. Particularly the way that it is dependent on the grid. And what the future of the grid will be and the future for generating local sources of electricity what effect this can have on the way the energy sector functions and where that leaves localised collective activity to fit into that new future. Maybe. In some ways the market is capable of destroying itself. Electricity suppliers can now multiply significantly.

Some of these people like Ecotricity are energy suppliers investing in energy production. How scalable up is that? Even at that level of company which his quite small and how the community end of it can knit into that… Just from a technological possibility point of view, that could radically alter the way the current market is dominated by some sorts of people. And I think there are some grounds for being quite optimistic about that.

Rob Naylor Interview 2

Date: 20 October 2017

Attendees: Rob Naylor; Stephen Graham

SG: How do you think the project fared overall?

If I'm honest, I think we were really overstretched a lot of the time. It was a lot of hard work and a lot of the time that was kind of okay. We knew what we were getting into, really, and we knew that this is what the community sector is like. You know, it is based on a lot of volunteer labour which is not idea, but there isn't much money about so that's just how it is, really. At least in a society like ours. But yeah, we were stretched.

I think we did some really good work and it is a shame things got too much in the end. When we had to lay people off things got even harder for the people that were left. It made it hard to manage the workload and things started to slip even more. At the very end it just got too much for us all, really. But I think it did some good – we just couldn't keep it going. It got too much.

SG: What was it about the society you were working in that made it so hard?

Having no resources made it difficult. We were always struggling. We never really hit the ground with sales in the way we thought we would. People were used to shopping at supermarkets and we found that it was hard for us to get them to break with that. We were trying to compete with big supermarket chains – and you just can't do it. It's that competitive nature. They have economies of scale and they're happy exploiting people, whereas we were trying to not do that as that was the nature of our project. It's no wonder we struggled, really. So yeah, I think it is hard to do this kind of project in a society like ours – at least in a way that can make a difference overall instead of just staying at the margins. I don't think we ever managed to get away from that. But of course that is what will have to happen if we're going to change things at larger scales.

SG: What do you think about the way politics and society have changed over the past 40 years or so, and do you think this relates to environmental politics?

I think it all starts with Thatcher, really. The problems I mean. Actually, no, not quite – I think the problems go back much later, but Thatcher was a big moment in all this. You know, the neoliberalism thing – it has really destroyed society and the environment. Social cohesion has totally gone. There is a lot more individualism now. Globalization means that when we're buying stuff we're getting it from the other side of the world which wasn't the case in the past. And half the stuff we don't even need. And transporting it means burning lots of fossil fuels with shipping and aviation and things like that. It's a total disaster for the planet. Neoliberalism has completely destroyed the institutions that were set up in that period after the second world war. These policies have destroyed the unions – unions are nothing like what they used to be, they're nowhere near as powerful. They've gutted the state. They flogged off all the council houses so people are finding it difficult to find affordable places to live. And they're completely wrecking the NHS. This is an institution that most people will rely on at some point in their lives, but I don't know how much longer it is going to be around for the way things are going.

SG: And what about after Thatcher? What about New Labour?

Really it was kind of the same. When you look at what Tony Blair and New Labour did, yeah, in a lot of ways you could maybe say it was a continuation of what had already gone before. Maybe in some ways it was not as bad. You did get some more positive aspects here and there. But it still involved things like PFI and it was still all about businesses and doing things through markets. I think it is obvious that things haven't exactly been going well over the last few decades and at the moment it doesn't really look like things are going to get any better any time soon. Something really big will have to change I think for that to happen. But it is hard to know where it is going to come from.

David Porter Interview

Date: December 2, 2017

Attendees: David Porter; Stephen Graham

SG: How did you get involved with Freshfair and when?

It's kind of a small world, that organicky [sic] thing around here. So I knew a few people. I'd met [another local farmer who was heavily involved in Freshfair] and I knew a couple of the organic farmers … through various Soil Association things but basically conversations happened. They did a hundred-mile meal. I had some conversations with Pete [Forrester] and also I got interested in CSA stuff [community supported agriculture] so I had been around the country to a few places because I thought this CSA was interesting. Anthony Upton had done one of the earliest CSAs in the country. Anthony was very early on ... so I got interested in that and I had an interest as I wanted to grow some fruit and veg basically. I was interested in growing [produce] and had wanted to grow fruit and veg for some time. I grew a little bit for myself in the corner of a field. I wanted to do more but it was very difficult to get into because of having to grow [the produce] and then market it when I already had a farm to look after. And I could never see a way into it because the marketing would take up too much time. In April, with lambing and trying to sow all these crops, it could never be done. Anyway, I played around with it and did a few things and looked into this CSA which would hopefully take care of the marketing but what I did is I decided that I would do top fruit. I really wanted to grow vegetables but I couldn't see a way to do that so I did top fruit. My theory was that top fruit is busy in the autumn and sheep and cattle – lambing and calving – is busy in the spring ... so I set up a CSA orchard of about 200 trees that has got a membership ... people pay to be members and then the harvest is divided up amongst them. So it costs £25 to be a member and you get a voucher of the equivalent of £30 of what would be the supermarket price at that time. It really took off and people were very keen on joining and I think I met Pete at that time. They helped to plant it and they brought people along.

So we set that up and I went to those hundred-mile meals and got talking to Pete and various people, and then he contacted me about 2011 and he contacted me and said ... because I did sell a little bit of meat direct … I tried to do a meat business as well – direct selling meat business which was very hard work. And I got other people involved with chicken and pork, and I did beef and lamb. But I found that very hard work. There's a really good butchers in [the local town] for one thing. There were three butchers and two of them were very high quality which I think didn't help. So that didn't go great guns, although I tried it for quite a few years and didn't get very far. Anyway, Pete rang me or emailed me and said they were setting up Freshfair with Anthony Upton and all that, and was I interested in supplying meat to it? I said yeah, I would

be, and I thought about it for a day or two and I got back to him and I said, actually, the thing I really want to do is grow vegetables. And I said 'I bet you've got loads of meat'. And it is the case in round here – if you want to get good quality local meat, well it's just anywhere. You don't have to look that hard. And I said I'd really like to grow fruit and vegetables and I said what about supplying that because I bet you haven't got any of those. And he said no we haven't, so I said why don't we do that. We had various conversations. I was thinking about putting up a polytunnel. So, we talked about it. And with the confidence I got from that, I decided to put up a bigger polytunnel than I was going to. So, I put up quite a decent sized commercial polytunnel to supply *Freshfair* … For me, overall, it was fantastic because it put money in the system to pay for the polytunnel and everything and it really got me going on the vegetable side of things … There would be some fruit coming from the orchard. So I said to him that if he got other people interested - because I knew the vegetable job was going to be really difficult. So I said you tell me what you can get out there and I will try to fill the gaps that you don't have ... the great thing for me of course was I didn't have to worry about the marketing. That was very attractive to me as there was no time to do that. And there was still a lot of learning to do about growing. I was doing radishes and beetroot ... [a local box scheme] did all the leafy stuff. But there was a difficult relationship between them and Freshfair. So I ended up doing what they were going to do. I remember that when I first started, I had grown one lettuce in my life. It had never interested me ... But they [the local box scheme supplier] pulled out they asked if I would do it, so I said I would do lettuce bags and all that, do you want to do that? So I said I'll have a go. I managed it ok. I mean there were a few cockups along the way. I did a bit of reading and yeah, it was okay … it gave me confidence to have a market. And I had money coming in straight away. Not a huge amount. But Freshfair was a massive benefit to me … It totally got me going.

SG: So, did you sell much produce through Freshfair?

They had projections as to what they were going to shift [i.e., sell], and I remember, because of having experience with the meat game [i.e., selling meat], that I thought this looked a bit iffy … I had to put stuff in the ground, and they were my only outlet at the time, so I had to be quite careful. And to be honest I was slightly sceptical as to the starting point they were talking about for the level of their sales. I was a bit short of space that was prepared [for growing vegetables], and I was pretty sceptical … so I never hit the [vegetable growing] targets that they had set. Which was ideal really because they couldn't sell that amount. So between circumstances and an educated guess ... so it started off pretty slow and it built up to a reasonable size and then it tailed away again over a longish period. So there was a period when it was pretty good. For me, overall, it was fantastic because it put money in the system to pay for the polytunnel and everything and it really got me going on the vegetable side of things.

SG: And would you have done this without Freshfair?

That's very difficult to answer. I think I would have had a go on a smaller scale. But they gave a push. I mean I was going to spend a couple of grand on a polytunnel and I ended up spending about four ... four-and-a-half grand on one … I was always ready to drop certain items from what I was doing to let other people take those over. There were certain items I didn't want to drop in the end. I was always talking to Pete and I would give him a list and say I'm happy to drop any of those if anybody else will take it on – like some retired people, or someone who would want to grow a little of veg on their allotment to sell. I was always waiting for them to come forward, and it never happened. And that was a surprise to me because it was such an opportunity for me to do that, I thought there must be other people thinking the same way who must appear – but they never did.

SG: So was this because they didn't exist or because Freshfair couldn't find them?

That's a difficult question. I've always felt that Pete [Forrester] was let down. He didn't let anybody down – he was absolutely brilliant. He was working over his hours. He never got paid enough. People would get involved in this exciting new thing but after a few months they were just like 'we've had enough of that' and they would just give it all to Pete to do … He got a lot of stuff dumped on him and a lot of hassle and not much money or credit that he should have got. I used to think that people were taking the mick a bit with that set up. I could see a point where he got a bit fed up which is completely understandable. There is no blame attached to him. I think he did a tremendous job and I think everybody else let him down a bit.

SG: Is there anything that Freshfair could or should have done differently?

That's a really difficult question. It's a very flippant answer this but I think there is a real grain of truth in it. Being in the northwest of England is a big problem. Because everybody I speak to who is in this kind of organic local food sort of set up they all say this area is crap for selling. You just hear it again and again – it is almost like a bit of a running joke. I've heard it so many times, it's like "Gees, I went to [a local farmer's market] and sold about 50 quid" and then you'll be at some market further south [and sell a lot more] ... I really don't know what it is about this area but it is a really difficult place to shift stuff. It is a really difficult place to sell.

SG: Do you think the marketing capacity at Freshfair might have been a problem? And what other limitations were there?

Now, this is all hindsight – I wasn't saying any of this at the time and I am not criticising what people were doing as I think people really did their best but looking back possible the set up was a bit complicated and I think you have to keep stuff really cheap and simple – those are the keys. And one that I've thought of a few times after the event... because Freshfair did the 30-

mile radius... It was a very purist approach. That 30-mile radius thing was a really tough ask. If you were looking at a 30-mile radius from Hereford, or from Lincoln, you would have a very different set up ... But a 30-mile limit in [the northwest of England] is very tough. Actually, I don't think we realised quite how difficult an ask it was at the beginning. However, having said that, that was the thing that really attracted me to it. I was really involved in *Freshfair* and I thought it was great … And part of that, definitely, was the purist thing. Because this project was the real deal. You know, 30 miles is really difficult. And that really attracted me and that really kept me with it.

SG: What makes a 30-mile radius here so difficult?

There is such a limited selection of fresh produce [in this area] … it is all just beef, sheep and dairy within 30 miles of [the *Freshfair* hub]. You drive in your car and you will have to drive a long way before you see a field with vegetables in it … [in this region,] you can drive all day and never come across a field of vegetables or fruit or anything.

SG: Why is that? Why meat and not vegetables?

Because transport has become so much easier in the past 100 years, everything has become much more ... the mixed farms have gone basically. Everything has got much more ... one or two enterprises ... and the enterprises that are most efficient in that area ... even in my lifetime places that used to grow some potatoes and have dairy cows have gone. Dairy herds have got much bigger and it is like it has all become more monoculture. And considering all the rainfall on the west coast, that means that grass grows really well. Tomatoes don't grow so well. It's basically that. Even going into Yorkshire you get a lot more arable land – although still not any vegetables. This has become kind of specialised and there is just very little. You drive around in Herefordshire and you'll pass a vineyard, pass an orchard, a field of cabbages, a field of cattle, a field of sheep – within 30 miles of that you can have God knows what ... It is never going to be like that in here of course, but we could certainly grow a lot more. And I just hoped Freshfair would have given people the opportunity to emerge ... people who had an ambition like me … The other thing that I thought of later was that because it was tied into the 30-mile thing … because that was the focus of attention ... that was the sole focus and what I think was that if you go to Sainsbury's or Marks and Spencer's or Tesco they have like a market niche. You know what kind of standard of product when you go into Waitrose or Tesco. You know what you are getting. There is a level, a standard that they aim at and that is their target audience. Freshfair never had that and I sometimes wonder if that was an issue. Because what you had on that website was organic longhorn rib-eye steak – three-week matured – and next to it you could have the cheapest cake or bread or something that was made locally but there was no ... it could be made out of anything. It could be made out of chalk and baking soda. But because it was

made in the local area that also was alright. And I really think that somewhere – because people tend to stick to a supermarket, don't they – and I think that there was an element of that. And also, I'm growing vegetables – I'm growing cucumbers in a polytunnel in the west of the county. Well if someone had a shop and they were doing a mixed salad, well they process it in [this county] but the cucumbers have come from Spain. If it was a shop in [the local city] that made this salad, that counted as being within a 30-mile radius. I think I argued about that – you know, I said 'we can't do this'. So it didn't have a target. It was trying to be all sorts. We were trying to compete with the supermarkets on price. Pete (Forrester) was always keen on that. And I was to a degree. But as time went on, I knew I couldn't supply some of this stuff. Some things we could get close to supermarket prices. But some things we couldn't. You know, you want it local, you want it organic, and you want it cheaper than the supermarket – and there were so many criteria to fill you just couldn't fill them all.

SG: And are you still growing vegetables now?

Oh yes. On a bigger scale than I was before. Freshfair totally got me going. And when it packed in ... I worked really hard to sell meat to people but vegetables – I don't do anything. They sell themselves. I sell a handful of private boxes of mixed veg. I sell to a couple of cafes and restaurants. We also have an informal ordering thing in [the local town] where a guy who bakes bread sends a text – I text him what I've got available that week and he sends a text out to people who buy bread and I send it to the shop. Various things like that.

SG: So without Freshfair, you might not have done that?

No. Or if I had got to this point it would certainly have taken longer.

SG: And you said the 'purist' thing got you into Freshfair?

Well, it certainly made me try harder with Freshfair. So many things are bullshit in local food. It is so full of shit and it really amuses me now. You go to any half decent restaurant around here and they've all got 'local' and 'organic' all over it. But if you go in and ask them where they get their vegetables from … And now they say that if you buy from the local wholesaler who bought them from Spain, well that's local because we got them from ten miles down the road. You know. Everywhere has 'local produce' on their menu and it is absolute horseshit. Because there isn't any [in this region]. They'll get eggs and they'll get beef and lamb and maybe even a bit of cheese. But as far as fruit and veg goes there isn't any for them to buy ... I talk with other producers and they've said they have contacted local restaurants to try and sell them stuff. And they say that they might buy off them for a couple of weeks but then they stop as they find it easier to go through a big wholesaler. They all told the same story.

SG: Why do you find local food so important?

That's a really good question. I don't think I ever really think about it … [long pause]. Yeah, that's really difficult. Yeah, it is just one of those things that I think is the right thing, so I never actually think why. I just think … [pause]. I don't know. So much is driven by money and some ridiculous things happen because of money. And it is perfectly possible to grow stuff round here. We've just got in the mindset that you can't and that you've got to buy it in and transport it miles and the quality of stuff is so poor after it has been shipped around and … I don't know. Providing opportunities and training for people to work outside – I really like that because I've seen people really benefit from that. You know, we get people helping in the garden with the veg and I can see them improve – their health and mental state. They really enjoy that bit. That lost connection to the land is really important. There is so much chemical treated shit around – stuff done unnecessarily to make a couple of quid – if people want to spend their money on a chemical-free product, because I have land, I almost feel an obligation to make that available to them. People say they want local organic vegetables, but they haven't got any land. Well, I have got land – so I will grow some stuff and we will see if you want to buy it. And if you want to buy it, great – I'll grow some more. And if you don't want to buy it, no problem ... put your money where your mouth is.

SG: Do you have any views on the relationship between climate change and food?

Climate change is a very complicated thing. My pet dislike isn't so much spraying vegetables, but GM. I am really against GM. I just think that is a massive capitalist scam. Not that I'm against capitalism – but it is just a massive lie and a scam and I'm watching it happen and I'm really against that. People say that this needs to happen so that we can feed the world's population by 2050 – but companies don't think like that. They just think about how to make money. They are selling it like it is some benevolent thing for mankind – which it clearly isn't. All we need to actually do is eat less meat. But people don't say that. It's like the fight is on the wrong territory.

SG: So are your vegetables organic?

Yes. The whole farm is certificated by the Soil Association. The meat side as well.

SG: And is that a selling point?

I don't know. My best customer is a bistro in [the local town]. And they never mention that the produce is organic. And I've been supplying another place, and I've realised that they don't mention it either. Does it put people off because they think it is a bit ponsey? I don't know. I think that, for most people, knowing where it came from is more important than the fact that it is organic. The organic certification seems to be more for the supermarkets. I think that a lot more stuff should be grown locally. Then people would be able to see it in the field and people

would see if the guy was spraying it or not. And you would have that connection. It's almost like the big body of certification is a substitute for actually knowing. I don't think I would lose anybody if I just said 'I'm just going to carry on doing what I'm doing but I'm going to stop paying the Soil Association to come up and check on me'. I kind of pay them because they are a good organisation. I don't pay them to get certified – I pay them to make a donation.

SG: And how did you get your produce to Freshfair?

I had to drive my stuff to [the depot] once a week, which was a bit of a pain. I think it is 18 miles. It wasn't too bad. It didn't take that long but it became an issue especially towards the end when there wasn't enough stuff to justify the time. I always said that I needed to be selling 50 quid of stuff a week and then everything was fine but there was quite a long time when I wasn't getting 50 quid.

SG: Would you get involved in a similar project again?

I am very sorry that it packed in and it was great for me so I definitely wouldn't say I got burned by the project. Quite the opposite … Basically, with what I've got rolling, I already can't grow enough. We doubled the size of what we grow this spring. And it is still very small scale. But I still cannot grow enough. So, I kind of don't need it because I've got enough going on. I can sell everything I need to without joining [another project] … I'd be robbing Peter to pay Paul if I joined.

SG: And do you deal with supermarkets?

I have in the past in a roundabout way. I used to sell lamb to ASDA via an intermediary. I wasn't very happy with it. There were problems supplying them. Because it was always done dead weight, so you used to send batches of 25 lambs and every single time I sent 25 lambs, one of them, in their opinion, was crap. And I used to get hammered on that because it wasn't in the supermarket specification. So any premium I was getting would be wiped out by one animal. I'm not sure if that was a strategy or not, but there was a lot of coincidence. So now I sell a little bit of meat privately. I just email when we're going to kill something. The majority of my livestock goes into a local livestock market.

Mike Sabatini interview 1

Date: 12 May, 2017

Attendees: Mike Sabatini; Stephen Graham

SG: Can you tell me about your involvement with Freshfair?

I was taken on by [the local transition group] as a development co-ordinator – a six-hour a week post. My role was to develop a business plan for the group and identify projects for them to set up to enable them to function as an effective organisation. They'd just got their legal status sorted out. They'd just set up as a co-operative, as an Independent and Provident Society. So before I was recruited, they spent a year going through a participative process, looking at different forms, you know, community interest companies, co-operatives, Independent Provident Societies, charities and they'd decided on the legal status as in 2010 they were just an e-mail network that carries out activities such as tree growing, political actions, lobbying, things like that. But they decided by 2011 that they wanted to constitute themselves. This meant that directors could issue shares and split among themselves any profits they might make from projects. So I was taken on to develop those projects. There was nothing at this point. So I put together plans. At the time there was this [local box scheme in a nearby town], who came to address our AGM. A guy gave a presentation on the box scheme and he talked about the model they were doing – trying to do food growing around the town and selling it through networks. So I met with him afterwards to talk through what his plans were. He said that he thought it would be good to sell food to workplaces. So I said let's develop that further. As I was trawling through stuff I found that what was BIS – the Government department for Business, Innovation and Skills – it's been restructured now, that they put out what they called a buying group challenge, where people had to submit projects based on getting people together to buy collectively. It's actually based on a Japanese concept where a lot of housewives in Japan in the post-war period got together to buy things cheaper. This was something that was doing the rounds in policy circles. We were starting up during the time of austerity and ideas around what I would call the ideology of community resilience were emerging. It was where communities were encouraged to do things for themselves and things like the Big Society were around - it was before that was kind of silently abolished. So, I see [*Freshfair*] as a paradoxical response to the Big Society … [Despite our opposition to what the government was doing] we entered this competition, because the government themselves were putting out buying group challenges with awards of £10,000.

So we felt that we could put up a first stage application. It was a competition with over a hundred applicants … So we negotiated with the box scheme group to form a joint project with and based on the conversations I had with them I developed a draft application. At that point the

concept was that we would use the scheme's connections with farmers to supply food to a point in the centre of [the city] from which we would then distribute it out to workplaces, and each workplace would have a buying advocate who would co-ordinate a group among the workers. But at that stage all that we had was a network of farmers and a concept. I think only 12 got selected for stage 2, and those 12 had a business advisor … I'll get you his name later. He was someone you could interview. He was a capitalist. We had to work with this capitalist fella to thrash out a business plan and make it [the project] a bit more real. So, every Tuesday morning we were having a Skype call between the [steering group] and this Colin geezer [the business expert]. It was all very bourgeois really as we were setting up this company. At the end of that process, by the time we submitted the second bid, we had secured a pilot buying group … with up to ten or a dozen buyers and then we submit. Through that we made it to the next round and we used the experience of the pilot to demonstrate our sales.

And what this fella taught me, which I kind of knew from Marx's rate of profit theory anyway, is that you have to look at not just how much food you sell but look at projecting forwards the rate at which food has to sell and the money you have to recoup against the costs that go into it and work out at what point does it break even? Because what we were aiming to use was the prize money to subsides sales. So from day one Freshfair would have to increase sales … so what I did was I tried to work out based on the pilot what a reasonable rate of expansion would be. So I was trying to get from the farmers how much food can they produce; from the buying groups how much can you sell. And I tried to work out that if the advocates in each workplace were pushing it and doing the sales job that we might be able to grow at a certain rate. I worked out the rate of growth against the amount of money we can raise to the point where we wouldn't need a subsidy and the project would be self-funding … but it wasn't about profit – it was about self-financing … The idea was to not need a subsidy. So I used Marx's theory of the rate of profit to guide my understanding of what the pressures were. But actually this capitalist fella was looking at this same thing from his point of view. And then we had our interview. All four of us went to London. I turned up [to the interview panel] in a sharp suit and Pete turned up with his dreads [dreadlocks]. And the irony was that they commented on the guy in the suit saying that he didn't fit with all the others. What [the judges] didn't realise was that I was actually staying on in London as I was going to the *Historical Materialism* conference while the rest [of the team] took the train back. So they didn't realise that the guy in the sharp suit was actually a complete enemy of the system. To cut a long story short, we came second. And they decided, because they struggled to determine who was first, that they would chuck in a four grand consolation prize. So we actually started with that. We wanted to get going in time for Christmas as that is the best buying time. And in those days we'd got beer on board so we wanted to sell a lot of that. But later on we couldn't do that as there is quite a lot of bureaucracy

around selling beer that we hadn't got our heads around and we ended up withdrawing it. So that's the point at which Freshfair began properly ...

SG: And how did things fit with projections from then on?

Fell far short from the very outset. My projections were completely unrealistic. The assumptions were based on a pilot of one workplace and the assumption that you have a very active buying advocate who knows how to expand. And I think I took the concept of how a political activist might emerge, you know, who would operate with full conviction and I think I was suffering from certain idealistic illusions about how you could overcome barriers. And I don't think I took into account the full degree to which the entire model and the behaviour it is predicated upon runs counter to everything that happens in supermarkets and home deliveries and that also we couldn't compete on price. We could on some things, like potatoes for example – potatoes were roughly the same. But we couldn't offer price. And this was a period of austerity and Aldi and Lidl are coming in. There's a restructuring of the market with the bourgeois capital sphere towards lower cost providers. And so we are entering a moment where on the one hand there is a weird policy consensus left-to-right where communities should set up co-operatives and help themselves and not be reliant on the state or the market. But on the other hand the market itself is recovering very, very unevenly from a deep economic crisis which is leading to a restructuring of the food retail sector in a way that broke up the monopoly of the four key supermarkets. And they were then squeezing their suppliers. So farmers, although we could offer farmers better prices we didn't have the same access to the farming economy that these supermarkets had. So again we were dealing with what I call petty commodity producers who were largely not producing for profit. They were producing commodities but they were barely managing to survive on what their own commodities were worth. They were not subsistence farmers in that they consume their own produce, but they were petit commodity producers in the way that Marx would understand that. i.e., if you think about *Capital* chapter 1, C-M-C rather than M-C-M. So I would characterise the economic model of Freshfair as trying to live a kind of utopia of petit commodity capital as if chapter 1 of Das Kapital was a real existing historical mode of production rather than a conceptual structure to enable him to go on to talk about capital as M-C-M … I think to understand the logic behind things like Freshfair you have to get to grips with the concept of petit commodity production as a self-standing economic form. My experience of Freshfair is that is very, very fragile and it never escapes the need for subsidy.

SG: What were the initial motivations of the project?

We had debates around that. I was moving towards revolutionary socialism at the time and Pete was more embedded in anarchism. Anthony was deeply committed to grassroots community-led projects and had been through a very difficult experience on his journey, and I think the debate

was a turning point for [those who had been involved in the pre-cursor box scheme group in the nearby town] particularly, but less so for [those of us from the city-based transition group]. There was a tension – I wanted what I call food for the masses, which is about cheap food that can be sold to everybody – and I had a very working class, proletarian conception of what I wanted to achieve, which was to get into where people worked and to make that link between collective purchasing, ecological habits and the workplace. It was consciously based on a very organised working-class, trade union-type model where the workplace should be the cell of societal transformation. Whereas [the members behind the box scheme] still operated with a petit bourgeois view, which is where you have small sellers interacting though the market with atomised buyers, [and] where you try to use consumption as a way of educating and changing behaviours. So, the idea there is that if you change people's consumption patterns and behaviours, you somehow generate a beneficial effect on society. Whereas I wanted to generate a sort of beneficial effect on society by using the workplace to change behaviours, so that people could learn collective ways to consume. So those value discussions were in the background [at the time we were developing the project].

If I'm honest I was almost playing a semi-CEO-type role in making sure that we were really staying focused on the project, so I think a lot of the discussions were purely operational. They were not based on values and ideas … They were based on 'now we have this idea, how do we make it work?'. This had to be done to get to where we got to. I don't think we'd have got to number two out of 100 if we'd not done that. I'm always reminded of Lenin with things like this because there's a difference between sitting around talking about something and actually doing it. And in a sense we broke through that theory-practice divide by taking an idea and not spending too much time on it as an idea and really running it hard as practice and I think I learnt a lot from that … In the conversations we had at the time I had a kind of imagined the idea that you could create a kind of Maslov's hierarchy of need, where we could do food first and then move up to getting collective purchasing for things like furniture, then we could go to white goods through getting people to repair things like fridges, TVs, computers, things like that … the idea would be that in a kind of molecular way, people would no longer buy commodities from capitalists. But what I didn't realise at the time was that I was imagining buying commodities from petit commodity producers, which is an impossible mode of production unless you have massive state subsidy.

SG: Did you see this project at any point as a vehicle capable of changing class relations in the city itself?

Oh, totally. That's what we talked about at the time.

SG: Had you attempted to set up anything like that before?

Not with food. I'd managed projects and dealt with funding before and I've got a much better grounding in economics than the others. And I understood from Marx and Marxism how crucial profitability is and that you shouldn't keep an eye on the mass of stuff you sell but the ratio of what you sell to what you keep. So, I think I had an acute sense of what profit is or what surplus is in financial terms rather than in use-value terms. Marx helped here because through Marx I understood what to look out for and how to manage. And Lenin helped me to understand how to stay absolutely focused on how to get things done and [the necessity of] being unpopular at times or risking unpopularity.

Mike Sabatini Interview 2

Date: 18 October 2017

Attendees: Mike Sabatini,

SG: Do you think staff members at the hub were treated fairly?

We started to take on workers after a while. We took on one worker through an agency where he'd been unemployed for quite a long time. He started as a placement. And we took him on to do administration work. He was working – we originally paid him minimum wage. He had a fixed hours contract … but he was self-employed. We did have discussions about whether we were unfairly exploiting him, so we decided to up his wages to the national living wage at the time. But without getting further funding we were never going to be able to continue to employ him. So, we had to lay him off. It was round about the same time that I left as well as I felt that I was a drain on their finances. But basically the other things we did strategically was I applied to get more funding. The rationale of my grant was that the BIS buying group challenge money was like seed funding to get it going, but it struck me that we might need around three years before we could be fully self-financing, and so we needed more money as subsidy. So I re-worked and re-calibrated using slightly more pessimistic assumptions what the rate of buying group expansion would be to break even not in a few weeks but further down the line. So I was constantly recalibrating forward projections but even then it was not going to work out.

SG: How did these pressures affect the project?

We became quite neoliberal over time, I think … from my perspective, I can now see that I was getting completely finance dominated [i.e., overly focused on sales]. And also, by expecting individuals to be able to commit more and more, we ended up focusing on the individual rather than the collective in the end. And because you get some individuals who buy more [than others], you try and work out where your best sales are and then dump the rest [i.e., those who don't buy as much]. So you end up being very instrumental and operational in your attitude to

people around you. And the financial element completely takes over the project. As a result, the whole thing, although it appeared to be based on a principle of co-operation, was predicated on this kind of neoliberal style of entrepreneurialism. I now think that *Freshfair* was turning the local *Transition* network into a neoliberal project because all the effort was on that [the food hub]. There was no campaigning, there was no sort of politics or activism anymore, it was all sort of a business.

SG: Did that change the way you thought about the project?

Yeah … I now think this is an impossible model. I think [this type of localist project] only works with subsidy – with somebody willing to fund it so that it can offer food at such a low price that people will take it up … I think the idea of a petit bourgeois commodity capitalist model whereby local farmers, who themselves are barely managing, supply a central depot, which then takes food out to workplaces where it is sold among their mates … I think in a neoliberal society it is virtually impossible … I think social solidarity isn't there in the workplaces. I now see that [such a model] assumes levels of social solidarity and collective activity that we haven't got in civil society at the moment, [a civil society] that has been structured by the way in which commodity production and consumption takes place in the wider economy … We couldn't replace at any deep level structures of consumption that are based around individuals in cars going to supermarkets. All we were doing was adding a layer on top. We didn't have the heft to completely change the models, which is what [bringing about the wider changes we wished to see] would require. It would have to compete on price. It would have to compete on quality. It would have to compete on availability at different times of the year, which runs against the ecological principle of seasonal only. So you've got structures in the way. It is not that I think *Freshfair* is impossible. I think it is possible – but only under the right political conditions. I think it still offers the germ for how one would run a socialist or a communist society. And eventually you might start to see the dismantling and abolition of state structures if this became the dominant form of behaviour. But only in a society that is not ruled by commodities can consumption rule production. As long as there is commodity production and commodity ownership, and the ownership of wealth is being driven by investors rather than consumers, the idea that any form of consumer-led activity can change society is upside-down. In a socialist society consumption will drive production because we will be in charge of what gets produced. So it would become a political decision, not an economic one, as to where you place your priorities.

Mike Sabatini Interview 3

Date: 13 January 2018

Attendees: Mike Sabatini; Stephen Graham

SG: Can you tell me how the strategy changed over time to help deal with the lower-than-expected sales?

We set up a steering group for. We met monthly. I would present the figures and we would work to continue adjust our strategy. We had a lot of fine tuning. So we originally had a 30-mile circumference, where everything was sources within 30 miles of [the hub]. Later we had to expand that to 50 miles for some things. I noticed that Pete wasn't always chasing up creditors and debtors so sometimes we were owed a few thousand pounds. So we would chase them up and get them to pay which improved cash flow. The Freshmeals thing helped a bit, too, as this provided another income stream. The problem was a lack of resources, a lack of time. Pete is not a business-minded person. We had a depot – which was an overhead – which was a great resource for getting all the food in and separating it out and dispersing it. I think Pete was excellent at working with all the volunteers we needed. Basically, we had a very minimal staffing model – that's the other petit bourgeois element of it. There are no workers. And I think we were exploiting people. We were exploiting unpaid labour. Pete was self-exploiting. I was the only one that wasn't exploited as I wouldn't do it. I think in some level I was in it for the money. It relied on volunteers and exploitation. Pete was superb at co-ordinating volunteers and motivating them. He was very good at handling what was a mass of queries and enquires form buyers, farmers, volunteers, the press. He was the face of it. I couldn't do that as I was working for another organisation at the time. I had to be a background figure. I was fully focussed on the finances, the strategy, on looking ahead. I tended to be the bad cop in the meetings. I had to tell them the bad news about the finances. I also had to get quite strict and hard around what we need to do. But some of the things we looked at strategically. We carried out questionnaires and phone calls with buyers to get their reaction about what they thought about food, quality, price, that kind of thing. We restructured our costs. There were certain things that I realised if we jacked the prices up 20 per cent you get a better return because the rate of return was different on different products. So I was doing all the economics.

SG: Can you say more about the politics of the project?

If I tracked back it would be based on a manifesto I worked with the Green Party on in 2010 where we looked at re-imagining the city as a green city, where we would do things like, if we won the council elections, we would reintroduce council housing by buying up everything that's in the estate agents and letting it out as council housing. The idea was about how you

disintegrate markets. We were looking to invest the entire council portfolio of funds and pension funds into things like the credit union so that any money was spent on the local economy and taken out of the international finance system. These are ideas that actually on a bigger scale have actually been taken up in Corbyn's manifesto where they're looking at setting up a £125bn infrastructure project based on regional banks. So we were taking that concept – but it was tied to a vision of gaining political power in order to release that. I would say that Freshfair was a *progression* on that electoral approach … in the sense that it gave up any illusion in the state as it is as a vehicle for achieving those kinds of changes. But on the other hand, it was also a *regression* [on the electoral approach] because it gave up the on idea of a *political* struggle for power. Through the hub, we were looking for a non-political way of changing society – as if we could burrow around capitalism. And now I see that was really a half-term measure to reconceptualise things while I was coming to terms with what had been a move away from electoral base reformist politics.

SG: Can you say more about the problems with the model?

I think that the level of class struggle [in contemporary society] isn't strong enough to switch cultural and consumption behaviours … [At *Freshfair*,] we were imagining higher levels of class consciousness and class solidarity than actually exist. We've been putting the cart before the horse. Projects like *Freshfair* cannot work. They are idealistic, not materialist, because you start with a great idea and imagine that if you have a good idea, people's behaviour will change – that you can convince them because of the quality of the idea. Whereas in reality, people's behaviours change first, and then various forms of new practice open up. But at no point did we change the balance of power. I really thought we could. But I now see that the only people really with any political power were those driving this whole agenda – the Tory government and the Lib Dems who were championing localist projects to try and sugar the pill of austerity. After all, the Big Society was all about getting communities to do things instead of the state.

SG: So how could a project like Freshfair work?

Subsidies. It can only operate in a neoliberal society at a loss, or by exploiting workers and volunteers. At best it can become a tiny little niche. You might get a few farmers and 30 or 40 people who buy a few bits and bobs and they feel good about themselves, but really it's about a load of people giving time for free and a load of people being willing to buy stuff for twice the price they could get it in Aldi or Lidl. And it might be better [quality food]. Certainly, it is safer eating that way … But is it ethical consumption? It is not ethical in my view because it is based on underpayment and exploitation. Producers are barely making a profit. If they sold their farms and then went to work in [a well-paying local factory], they'd be exploited by capital but at least they'd take home more money. So if you had, say, a Corbyn government and they were willing to put money into the development of co-operative models of delivery of alternative platforms

of production and consumption then we could actually try this out as a proper experiment. But first of all you've got to resolve the question of political power and you've got to resolve the question of class power. What I've noticed is there is a huge diversion of class struggle and a huge diversion of activist time spent on trying to keep these things [i.e., 'conventional' eco-localist projects] going when actually time could be better spent fighting the powers that be on health and education, and learning through that process how to gain forms of power that might one day be used to good effect.

SG: How do you feel now about you involvement in the project?

It was thoroughly worthwhile – as long as we draw the right lessons. I think it taught me a heck of a lot about what can't be done. I would say it is a negative lesson. But in a society that is structured around class antagonism, negative lessons are the best ones. And I think in the end it helped to convince me of a more revolutionary Marxist understanding of how to change society.

SG: Did any major benefits come out of this project?

Definitely. [Freshfair] helped to create among a certain network of people a kind of solidarity that has enabled them to then spiral that out into other political activities. It has to be said that the people who were involved [as project organisers and volunteers, not customers or producers] are the people who are now involved in things like hospital protests [against NHS cuts]; they were also involved in migrant solidarity work … I think it has been a step in the evolution of a network of activists whose role will continue to develop. I don't think it has been caused by Freshfair, but I think Freshfair gave them an opportunity to really cut their teeth on some serious organisational activity. I think the experience that came out of that has been valuable ... I think it has given both traction and a certain degree of credibility to a number of people, which means their views are being heard and reflected by the wider activist community. And I think it has also [generated an understanding of] how to operate with divergent interests and divergent pressures. So that's one of the reasons why in this area we now have an unusually mature, developed activist community for a city of our kind and one that is relatively free from the usual sources of being co-opted by either trade union bureaucracies or by the Labour Party, or by local authorities, or [by being] sucked into big charities.

SG: What do you think is the major driver of carbon emissions?

Commodity production. The biggest extraction of carbon lies in the way extract materials from the earth, turn them into commodities and then have to sell them at a profit. That process drives a certain level of extraction and consumption that is way above the planet's carrying capacity.

But the reason for that is because it is ruled by a competitive process driven by profit so any idea of a steady state economy would be anathema to the capitalist class because it would mean that you couldn't have a profit which means that people would go bust or we'd have to collectivise everything. So it's the hitching of the economic needs of society to an accumulation process driven by profit and competitive capitalism that is the dominant reason why we're emitting so much carbon.

SG: What would need to change in order to tackle rising carbon emissions?

You'd need to have a complete political revolution because what you'd need to have are forms of power by which decisions are made about what we use and how we use it that is non-market. The decisions would have to be made collectively in society through a political and not an economic process. By that I mean by a process of an autonomous economic sphere that makes decisions regardless of the political consequences and where politics tries to retrofit those decisions into various state policies … What we need to do is to be able to determine what the population needs – and those are decisions that populations need to democratically participate in – which may result in things being done differently to the way they are now … Another factor is that in order to change, people need to change themselves. I think people's consumption patterns reflect a constitutive split in their consciousness between their working identities which they feel aren't theirs and their consuming identities which they do feel are theirs and that split in self-identity, that split subjectivity drives consumerist behaviour that leads people to try to consume individually everything that they could potentially share collectively. I don't think you can change that model without a big radical shift in society. Just as people are being politically educated by watching police beating up demonstrators, they get politically educated by leaning that they've been fobbed off with 20 different brands of water they've been sold when actually, you can just turn the tap on. A process of historical radicalisation would be needed.

SG: Where do you think change in society comes from?

I think change happens in the cracks between players such as politicians, scientists, businesspeople, social movements and so on. To assume that there is a player that can initiate change is to assume that the other players are all passive. If you understand capitalism as a totality, it is a totality made up of competing classes, or fractions within those classes, of state powers, different nation states. It is made up of fractions that are reproduced in civil society, different forms of competing knowledge. Science isn't a neutral thing, it is a product of the environment within which it is produced but also competing paradigm's and frameworks that are then competing for government time and resources which are then replayed in dominant theories about how societies hang together … Contingent events, conjunctures emerge which enable people to be thrown out of their customary way of looking at the world but that creates the moment where change is possible. Its consummation relies on a conscious political element

intervening which is where different social movements coalesce into a single social movement that suddenly is able to articulate our different strains and pressures and direct that ultimately against the state.

SG: Is it still possible to avert irreversible, runaway climate change?

It's here. Anything else is just crying in the wind. There's already too much pollution. The legacy of what we've put into the atmosphere and what we've put into the ground is so great that all we can hope for is that the worst doesn't happen. The degree of planetary warming is still here I think – depending on government policies, push-back by people, how corporations behave. Although I wouldn't underestimate the degree to which different factions within the capitalist class could pull it in different directions. I think the military will play a very important role as well because the military will be in a position if climate change kicks off to protect certain areas and sacrifice others. The world will be full of razor wire and walls.

SG: How would you describe your political views?

I would describe myself as a revolutionary socialist. My understanding of how society operates is rooted in Marx's *Capital* and I have a critical acceptance of the Russian revolution as the way to organise a transition of power that I take from Trotsky's conception of international socialism as opposed to socialism in one country, and that the October revolution demonstrated to me the combination of conscious political party forces and spontaneous mass uprisings and without those two elements coming together I don't think you get social change … Therefore, I never fully accept the sort of reformist strategy. I think Marxism is not a closed system like dialectical materialism was considered to be in the twentieth century. It is a framework for posing questions about the world we live in and I think it is only as good as that. I think that Marxists cannot fully understand their society – but no-one can. There has to be some acceptance that as long as commodification exists there is a deep fracture in our very selves, that we cannot even know ourselves properly. I think there is a massive gulf in us all, a void that is so deep that even a socialist society wouldn't even be able to get rid of it. And I think that a lot of the projected utopias were imagined in the 19th and 20th centuries about socialism have got to be rejected. Socialism is just another way organising human society in the interests of need and a collective determination of what we want.

David Stevens Interview 1

Date: 20 August 2017

Attendees: David Stevens; Stephen Graham

SG: What is your role in Greenstar and what were the projects initial aims?

I'm currently the chairman of CEC and I guess I'm one of the founders of it … so a personal motivation was that I'd seen lots of renewable energy projects happen in Cumbria – particularly wind and especially wind – but had seen none of the benefits coming back into the local area. Commercial developers operate here, but we're talking about commercial investments from companies based outside of the region and sometimes outside of the UK. Procurement goes to outside companies to install equipment, profits go back into those commercial companies and back into stock markets, and then there is pretty much nothing left for the local community in terms of a fair and proportionate community dividend. That's not to say that the communities in the vicinities of windfarms and other projects don't receive community benefit. But when you actually work it out finically, it is usually far less than 0.5 per cent, as opposed to the 25 per cent that you often get in a community energy programme. So it was to try and address the issues of fairness to make … it was really more a circular economy thing than anything else. Was it driven by climate change? The vehicle for circular economy needed for me personally to be based on something ethical. It didn't matter whether that was food, energy, transport, whether it was a community transport project. It just struck me that there was continued development in renewable energy around here and that local communities were not benefitting in the manner that they should have been. With Greenstar, the hydro engineers, the diggers, the civil engineers – they come from five miles down the road. This isn't going to China, it is not going to Japan. It is going to people who live and work locally. That is just so important to the whole point of community energy. It's about value for money and it is about keeping money in the local economy.

SG: So there were social and environmental dimensions to this from the very beginning?

As part of ethical – my umbrella of ethical – is environmental and social. So yes. Absolutely driven by … I couldn't do it purely for commercial purposes. Having said that since then I think that, having gone through the process of developing community energy and understanding more about business investment, I think sometimes communities need to be more commercially minded. But for me personally it is not the generation of profits per se, [but their] distribution. It is a matter of where those profits go and how they are spent. If they are used for social benefit, and for environmental benefit, and if in the process of making those profits there is nothing detrimental happening to communities or to the environment, then … I can live with that.

[However,] I can't live with profit if profit means exploiting the environment and the degradation of that environment and exploiting people to the detriment of their opportunities. So this is really fusing a business model but it is a social enterprise. [With our project,] the excess profits ... go back into the community. Those communities will decide how that money is spent … So, they might decide to put it into subsidising their bus services which are being cut here in [this area], or they might decide to develop their new playground, or it might help pay for meals on wheels.

SG: So these were the initial aims of the project. Have they changed since it began?

No they haven't changed. Not in the slightest. They are absolutely anchored.

SG: So you haven't had to compromise to make the project survive or compete?

No. I think it has been a total success. But lots of advice and people who have been through this will tell you that first and foremost the business has to work. If the business can't work, then you can't distribute benefit. You can't reduce carbon emissions if the turbine is not turning. So it is a lot of hard work that has to go in. If the business can't work, then you can't distribute benefit … A lot of work has to go in just to make the business work. That is the key. If you have got a healthy business, then you have got the opportunity to make profits and direct the profits of that business into social good.

SG: So you think a certain amount of business savvy is important to projects such as this?

Critical. Absolutely critical. You have to have a good business case. We knew we had to look professional if people were going to hand over their money to us. That is where other [local community] groups go wrong. They don't look competent. Having gone through the process of developing community energy and understanding more about business investment, I think that communities need to be more commercially savvy. We wanted to build a slick business that could look after people's money and give them a solid return on their investments.

SG: So that is the way to protect the environment? So you need to get the business to work in order to distribute what you create?

Absolutely. I think that you have to consider these community energy projects are financed by people's investment. Now some people will want no returns, some people will want decent interest on their investment. Now it is essential that you understand business … The key to attracting investment is confidence, okay? Now we know that people gain confidence if things are well organised and well regulated, if there are people on the board who have business skills and experience. And that is the reality … if you are trying to raise a significant amount of

money, it just gives [potential investors] more confidence if they know that [the enterprise] is being run in a business-like manner.

SG: Who was involved in this project's formation? It sounds like there were people with the relevant experience to give potential investors the confidence they needed to get involved.

Right. If I'm honest I've driven it. And I think you need a driver. And you need someone to take risks. But like anything you need a whole load of support. Whether it is at the front or behind. So we… on our first project we worked with a hydro developer that had already developed ten or twelve hydros, so potential investors could already see that we have got a proven track record of delivery. So one of our board members is also the director of the hydro company. We worked with the existing charity that I'm involved with. We worked with their board and their Chief Executive so there was support from this organisation – a charity that had already got about 3,000 supporters or people on their network. So that was important. And on the board we also started with someone who was already involved with another community energy project. And I think when you looked at the board members in the share offer you would see that We had project management experience, they had finance experience … some people had hydro development experience, some had governance experience … because of this, [potential investors looking at *Greenstar*] got the sense that the people who were at the helm of this project were trustworthy and had got the necessary experience [to make it work]. And the idea of confidence is just that is the starting point. It is the starting point – but you have to hold on to it. You have to have communications channels going to the members of the community energy scheme because otherwise people start to think 'what has happened to my money, where has it gone?' So it needs constant communication.

SG: And how is it going?

It is going to plan … We have put in our solar project and our hydro project on time and on budget so that is all going well. I would say though that the structures of the company probably need to be tightened in terms of processes and just annual processes that … the governance processes, the members of the board, that have been assigned tasks and it sounds very droll but we are running a board on a voluntary [basis] … so there are things like who's looking after the insurance?, who is looking after the maintenance, who is looking after the monitoring, who is doing the VAT returns, who is doing communication to the shareholders or to the members, who is organising the AGM, who is looking at risk, who is updating the risk register, who is answering the questions about investors and their tax issues. There is a heck of a lot to do and most community organisations only become aware of that after they have set up.

SG: And do you feel that you have sufficient capacity to keep on top of such tasks?

The short answer is not currently. That's why we need to tighten things up. It is a big task and it is the same task that is faced by any organisation which a based on voluntary board members … So, it is learning. But I think what is critical here is that the learning that is achieved in the first year is just massive, and so then to park that learning rather than use it would be a retrograde step. We want to be able to use that develop other community projects …

SG: Do you think his project provides a model that can be used in other places? And can it be used at a much larger scale?

Absolutely. And I think there are trite words that can trip of the tongue like empowerment and enablement but there is definitely, having set these up … it is the process and the regulation that you need to understand – and once you understand those things you've got the confidence to set something else up. And actually a year ago or so there was a local superstore that was being sold and I thought we could buy this as a community, we could have a share offer into it, we could turn it into an ice rink. So I talked to a few people and they were absolutely up for it and the only thing that really stopped us was that the planners told us that it was in an area of town designated to retail and not for leisure and we wouldn't be able to get it through. But the model is no different. It is about community ownership, it is about how you register with the FCA, how you manage that company, how you manage the shares, how you manage the distribution – it is just the same. So, once you have done it once, you can do it again and you can do it bigger. And I think the critical issue there, the critical challenge is we have a project at Greenstar – it raises about £38,000 a year in income. It costs about £12,000 a year to manage in terms of insurance and running costs and administration and one thing or another, and so we can distribute £26,000 a year but we need to pay back the capital. So effectively we might pay back £23,000 of that back a year so we are left looking to pay somewhere around £3,000 [each year] to the local community. But really that means we're not paying them enough. I mean, really, we want to add another zero to that – at least. I mean, we really need to scale this up if we're going to make a difference.

SG: What, if anything, stops this from expanding further?

The time of the voluntary board. I mean, it is a resource issue ... absolutely. I mean, look, if a big investor came to me and … said, right, go and set up another project and we will pay you to go and do it, and pay for the time you would otherwise have spent managing your other projects, then I would go and do it. But I'm already at capacity. I'm already absolutely stretched. I'm already the chair of two community energy companies and I work for an environmental organisation and I'm absolutely stretched. My time to set up other things is really limited. That's just me personally. But there are also other regulatory and policy changes that you will have heard about – the change in the Feed-In Tariff, the changes in the tax incentives for investment,

the changes from OFGEM for charging for microgrids, the changes in renewable heat incentives, the changing of business rates on community energy, and so on and so on and so on. All of these have had a massive impact … And I think that it is critical about scaling things up and that's why at the moment my ambition – if I can find time – is to find two offshore turbines worth between £8–£15m to get community investment in. Because that would potentially provide between £200,000–£300,000 a year in a community benefit, so after we paid off investors and capital every year for 20 years, think what we could do with £200,000–£3000,000 pounds a year of money that is not tied down. You know we could use that to set up loads of community energy programmes, employ a staff team to do that, or, in this time of austerity, we could commit to social projects or environmental projects. But at the moment we are distributing twos and threes. It needs to be not twenties and thirties, it needs to be two hundreds and three hundreds of thousands of pounds. Then you can get a staff team of five or six people dedicated to doing something and that is when you see change and that is what companies do.

SG: So it is possible but is just a resource issue at the moment?

It is a resource issue at the moment. Absolutely.

SG: And do you encounter any particular frustrations or challenges in the way the project operates?

Yes, there are some technical issues. I mean it is really, really, really important that these social enterprises and these companies consider contingency because when you are doing any capital build there needs to be, you know sometimes there are unforeseen things – they are very complex systems quite often. So that even solar things – inverters … there are guarantees for equipment but sometimes you might find that with cabling or with hydros that you're getting debris in a turbine and you have to send divers to sort it out. Whatever it might be there needs to be contingency. And it takes a while to get the structures of governance.

David Stevens Interview 2

Date: 17 November 2017

Attendees: David Stevens; Stephen Graham

SG: What do you think the major drivers of climate change are?

Consumerism. Absolutely consumerism. Consumerism driven by an insatiable advertising system that presents an aspiration, an unachievable aspiration to us such that even once you've consumed and bought what you think is going to make you happy, they will tell you that there is more that you could be doing.

SG: And who do you mean by 'they'?

It is us but I also think that public limited companies and private companies in a globalized system … but big companies driven by profit and almost legislated by that drive for profit so even the system is already rigged to consume and to produce, to consume and to produce.

SG: And how do you differentiate between profit that is causing the problems you identify here, and the profits generated by community energy projects? Do you differentiate between these two types of profit -making?

Yes, because we even regulate ourselves in community energy by establishing ourselves as a BenCom … we are regulated and that gives our investors confidence in a way that they are investing because our intention is to do social good. They can rest assured in the knowledge that the FCA at the end of every year will do … we have to submit a social audit. So big companies produce their profit and loss accounts, we produce a social audit. But we've only been around for a few years, so the distribution of what we call surplus – i.e., once we've paid the running costs and the interests payments back and our capital, then we haven't really had an opportunity to distribute that, but that will come.

SG: And what needs to happen in coming decades is irreversible climate change is to be averted? What actions need to take place?

I think the move away from fossil fuels into renewables is absolutely critical as that is the largest basis of our emissions. I think a change in values – a massive change in values – to what our aspirations should be. A shift away from materialistic consumerism. A shift away from a global system. Changing measurement of wealth to older forms of measurement of wealth – sorts of indigenous ways of measuring wealth, by measuring wealth by how much you can give away, by how much you share. There are lots of different ways that you can measure health and wealth and well-being. And globalization. This is a huge problem today. The things we are consuming and the investments we make are not happening locally – they are happening at the other side of the world. We are so alienated from it all that it is really damaging for us and for society and the environment. Because businesses are separated out from their local communities, many of them don't care about the wreckage they are causing – because they don't have to. And the other side of that is they can't see what positives good companies can bring to communities. These are the kinds of changes we need to see.

SG: And how to encourage that? Are these values inherent to capitalist systems? Do we need to change the systems to change these values?

I think there will be some leading companies … that have to set the agenda. And, you know, companies like Patagonia, companies which are hugely respected, need to take the lead.

Consider that the top six billionaires have the same wealth as the bottom 3.5 billion people. What happens if you change those six individuals? You know, they are the gatekeepers … and big companies are the gatekeepers, too. What happens if mining companies were to decide that with exploration, you know, that for every acre of forest that they took out, they put two acres back? You know – it is possible. You know, Shell talked about Beyond Petroleum back in 1997, you know their Chief Executive, or maybe it was Exxon, sorry, Exxon … so I think we need to believe that [responsible eco-capitalism] is possible.

SG: And what role do you see for technology in tackling climate change.

Huge. Absolutely massive. I was just talking to someone the other day who said that we need to let people not have to make the decisions – a lot of the decisions are made for them. So we don't need to decide which tariff to buy in our electricity, it is just done and it is done by solar and wind and renewables so that everything that comes down, we don't have to worry when we go to the supermarket to choose whether it is organic or whether it is Fairtrade – it is just there. That is what they stock because we know that consumer choice is a force for good but it is also a force to the bottom rung of the ladder. And I think innovation and the falling costs of renewable technologies like solar are also really important here. This development is making project possible that would not have been possible a few years ago. These costs are only going to keep falling as businesses keep developing and it is going to make more projects viable in the future.

SG: How would you describe your politics?

[Long pause] Well, I'm interested in the environment … and I'm interested in people – but I'm not really interested in politics. I don't actually know enough to be able to put myself in one [camp] or the other … I mean, I do have liberal values, I suppose. I believe in fairness, I believe in opportunity … I believe in values and those values tend to be green, they tend to be about ethics, they tend to be about a fair distribution, they tend to be about reducing the mass of inequality, the massive gap between the wealthiest and the poorest. Yeah, so, maybe you could call me a liberal… but, well, I don't know really …

SG: Where do you see changes in society coming from? Politicians? Business? Social movements? Who drives change in society?

The easy answer is everyone. But if I was to stick close to home I would say that in the small things that we do in community energy and in social enterprise. I think that if you can roll it out and make it big enough to involve enough people then people will see that the opportunities are there for them to take control. I think that if we wait for politicians to change it is going to be too late. But that is not to say we shouldn't influence politicians and we shouldn't influence

businesses ... But I think that is why getting people to understand that they can set these things up themselves. They can take control of their resources, and that involvement and participate and their enablement – all of those words they are real and they make people feel better and they make people feel part of something big and important and that is where – you know, I heard Peter Holbrook the other day who is of chief Executive of Social Enterprise UK – so he is a bigwig, he sits around with John Lewis and co … but he has worked in social enterprises all of his life and now he's interfacing with the politicians so there is an interface everywhere. It is neither one nor the other.

Charlotte Taylor Interview 1

Date: 15 May 2017

Attendees: Charlotte Taylor; Stephen Graham

SG: What principles guided Greenstar's activities at the beginning of its journey?

We wanted to do something practical and had some initial discussions and wanted to see a project come out of it. So it was about carbon reduction, community renewable energy, it was about energy being local, about local investment, returns back to local people, about low interest rates, about people having a desire and a will in this region to invest in renewable energy and there was no outlet for that – people could not necessarily put stuff on their own homes. There are a lot of people who can't afford to put stuff on their own homes but still want to have something [i.e. renewable energy infrastructure]. So the main drivers were reducing carbon, promoting renewable energy, developing alternative forms of energy. We always had a strong view that it should be locally developed and we should try and keep it as local as possible. We didn't necessarily believe in a community of place, we thought a community of interest was okay. And we thought we could use our [i.e., Greenstar's parent organization] supporters as people [whose interests aligned with the idea of expanding local] renewable energy. We thought that we have got a load of people who can provide capital and we would like to see a scheme somewhere in [this region] and we want [local] people to invest. We wanted to give people an opportunity to invest in something local… something that benefits you financially, supports our communities, and generates renewable energy, taking us away from fossil fuels.

SG: How did the project get going?

We were looking around for [potential] projects but we realised that we already had them [i.e., had already identified them through their environmental networks] – so you want to conquer the world and tell everyone and get these fabulous buildings you can see in the town but ultimately we already had projects sat there, so it was a goer. So unlike some of the community energy schemes where you have to go out and consult with the community and work out what kind of project they might want to see – if you're doing a place-based scheme and you want to find out what is best for them, we didn't do that. We just had a good opportunity presented to us and we were like, yeah, that will work and that will get it going.

SG: What is your motivation for getting involved with this project?

I was inspired by the original vision ... it sat well with me and I thought it would be really good to be a part of that.

SG: Over the course of the project, have the main aims changed?

No, I don't think so. We've stuck to our initial plans.

SG: Who were key strategic partners?

There was a local renewable energy company who we worked very closely with. Ben [Merchant – CEO of that company] obviously has ambitions about community energy. Whether he thinks about it in the same way that we do, I don't know. But he has a vision ... they know about all the hydro sites in this area, they know which ones are goers and which are not. He already seems to have a plan and obviously that helps with his business. They know what hydros will be commercial and then with the changes to the terms and the SEIS, rapidly, investors are less interested so. He must also be an investor in a lot of hydro schemes personally. Some of those people had invested a lot of money in doing feasibility studies and I suppose he didn't want to let his clients down because I suppose if no one was going to stump up the capital ... so our project was a bit of a solution for him and so we had to have open eyes and think, well, are we having the wool pulled over our eyes here – is this actually going to work out or have we been sold a dud? It is a bit bad when you say that this scheme is not suitable for commercial [development] because it is not 10 per cent, but it suitable for community because it is five per cent return and you feel a bit bad about that but then you think well, if people are happy with that [rate of] return then that is a hydro that will not get built otherwise and it is still generating energy and the other one will still probably get built. There is a disparity there between the return on community investment ... If you found a stream with the kind of return that would interest a commercial investor and the landholder was prepared to let you have it at whatever price ... and not sell it to a commercial investor, then of course you can do a community hydro. But if people are going to get more money elsewhere will they still stick with the community? You know, the corporate sector is more innovative and has more capacity. You would have to have the right kind of landowner ... if they feel that they can make a packet out of it then, you know...

SG: Were the local authority involved in any way?

No, they weren't really involved. Some of the estates managers for the local authorities could open their minds a bit more [to get more schemes going]. We talked to the local authority about the leisure centre when the roof was being renewed and they were like yeah, yeah, we could put renewables on that and then the next minute they were like, we can do it ourselves – which is fine but they didn't think, well we could put on twice the amount and half of it could be community [owned]. So, they will have invested their council reserves, I suppose. But in the end, I suppose it doesn't really matter because local authorities can be considered as a community organisation. And I rather they were doing that to raise money to keep services going. So, we could do more to get [local authority] estates to do something or kick-start that

thinking process. We used to talk to local authorities about renewable all the time, but they don't just get on and do it because it is the bottom of the list of things to do. And they never know whether they are going to be keeping or losing their buildings or what so I can understand but by know they could have raised a shed load of money.

[We have been in touch with local authorities and] all the officers were all happy about it but when you get to the legal department about the lease and how you can stick a thing on their roof and the implications of that there was quite a lot push back from the finance department who weren't that keen as they thought that energy prices were going to drop and that it wouldn't be a good deal as we were tying them in. So that took a lot of hard work to convince them. The more people you have involved the more people you've got to convince – that is why doing things with local authorities is hard. But if you just have a farmer who owns the land, that is a lot easier ... so now we're looking at schemes on United Utilities land and they all are up for it. But when you get down to it the estates teams don't want it and you have to battle with them to get the right person to say yes and then get the others to line up in a row because there are so many people in the chain.

SG: Could this model be replicated?

Yes. I know one group that has replicated this again and again and again. They have done it loads – they have done the role that we have done for several different communities. It just happened that when we were starting they weren't interested in solar or hydro they were only interested in wind. Now they have branched out and they have spread out across the country. So it is possible. Our aspiration has been to be an umbrella [organisation] to help projects get off the ground and we've in part done that – we have provided a platform. An easy website platform to do a share issue, some expertise with that. We work with budding community energy projects and so we thought that we can provide the framework to help try and take some of the difficulties away from it. Communities that have come up with their own local projects ... they want to do it themselves and they are so used to doing things from scratch ... so we have not quite got our offer sorted.

SG: Does the project manage to generate income?

Within the income we do take out stuff to cover our costs, but we try to keep it as slim as possible therefore there is never enough to do it properly. So we do some admin but there isn't much time. We have to pay the renewable energy company to manage the hydro. There's the contract lease. And then there's the trustee expenses. So it mostly voluntary, really. The idea was that there would be enough to pay the project to do a lot of the stuff that communities would normally have to do themselves like sort out insurance and finance and all that. Because none of us has the time and no one wants to do really do that – but we know that it would all turn to

rubbish if we don't do it. So that was our way of trying to minimise impact on trustees. Of course, we still have to do a lot of that stuff. I think that getting communities involved is in one sense a way to ease our conscience ... In one particular case United Utilities has already given the rights to [the renewable energy company]. So that means that the community can't go ahead and do it. So, we can bridge the two ... because [the renewable energy company] can't do it for commercial [purposes] because it has not got enough return .... So this partnership is mopping up the schemes that fall through the gap. And it is quite easy. It's easier than going out and looking at loads of buildings ... because we haven't got time to go out and look for projects. And whenever you try and do anything through local authorities, it takes so long and goes through so many committees that [all the cost factors] will have changed ten time before you can get on and do it.

SG: What barriers has your project faced?

Having no resources is definitely a problem and it does get in the way. We don't have much time, people are stretched and tired, and there isn't much time to look for opportunities. But the thing is, to get the money we need to do that [i.e., build a solid resource base], we'd have to be looking for something like a 10 or 15 per cent return on the energy projects, which given the lack of resources, there is no way we can get. So it’s a bit of a catch-22 situation.

SG: Do you think you need a business mindset to get a project like this to work?

I think you need someone who is sharp and business-minded to get it to work in a sustainable fashion, definitely. And you need someone to prop you up. This project would not have happened without [the parent organization] – they gave [i.e., loaned] it the 15 grand it needed to pay for development time because they believed in it – but that was based on the figures that Ben had provided and the renewable energy company had already paid for all of that in the hope that something could happen and then they were stuck with it so they would have lost all that if it did not happen. So, they are trying to get their costs back from that – and they charge a lot more than [our parent charitable organization does] for anything, as you can imagine ... but because they charge more for their standard work, they have got the ability to do a loss leader, whereas a charity just doesn’t. It's quite tight. And so that is a main blocker for community organisations. You know, who has got the money to do the loss leader work...? Sometimes these projects take so long that the community gets bored of it and then you are just down to five or six people just doing this whole big thing on behalf of the community who aren't that engaged with it anymore. So in a way it is easier being a community of interest – you get a way out of all that as you are not beholden to your local people. You can walk down the street without people asking you what's going on with this project and why haven't you don this, that, and the other? But then if you're not in the area you just become anonymous like any other developer. We do

not want to just come across like a [commercial] developer – that is what we're trying to avoid. We do not want to be anonymous. We want to be in the local community, and we want to know that the money [generated through the sale of energy] goes back to local people, and not to France or the US, or wherever.

SG: Who are the key decision makers at the organization?

We have six directors. And then there are the consultants. So the key decision makers are the three or four more engaged people on the management committee – but really it is mostly David [Stevens], who should refer decisions back a bit more often than he does but he just gets on and does it.

SG: *And to what extent does it rely on volunteers?*

Yes, a lot. It is as much as anyone is willing to delegate. David has had some time paid to support Greenstar but now he doesn't as far as I understand it, and neither do I. But we have a bit of flexibility within [our parent organization]. So I do stuff voluntarily, David does stuff voluntarily ... directors are all volunteers but they are less able to do it. It is easier for me as I'm at [the parent organization] and I can get into the systems and do stuff a lot easier … It does definitely need volunteers to power it. Even sorting out the insurance took two weeks. Having no resources is definitely a problem and it does get in the way. I feel frustration all the time. Communication within [the organisation] is a problem. Everything is done last minute – but that has just become normal. It all goes back to a lack of resources … and that leads to a lack of planning … everything takes so much time to sort out, it's just like, ugh. It's such a faff. You think that something will take an hour and it doesn't. You think that something else will take half an hour and it takes three. Really we should communicate with our investors more and we don't. We've tried to give everyone clear roles but we have to get people to pick up on those roles and be proactive, but they are all waiting for direction from somebody else. Greenstar is completely dependent on volunteers … and it gets really hard when everyone is volunteering their time. Everyone is waiting for direction from somebody because they are used to it [in their professional lives in the corporate sector or in their 'day jobs' at environmental NGOs]. I actually think people would give more of their time if they were directed [i.e., managed] properly… but we don't have the resources for that. Really there is one person [Stevens] who has always done everything because nobody else can really get to grips with it all … and because [this person is always over-stretched], it can be hard for volunteers to know what they can do to help. Whereas if you started with people responsible for different aspects from the start, and divided everything out, it might have been different.

SG: Do you feel any frustration?

Yes, I feel frustration all the time … We're a disparate bunch of people. I don't think we've all met together in one room for over a year. We don't meet often but supposedly that is because there is no need for it – but there is probably a need.

Charlotte Taylor Interview 2

Date: 20 May 2017

Attendees: Charlotte Taylor; Stephen Graham

SG: What are the major drivers of climate change?

I would say consumption. Energy use – especially with business and goods and services Personal transport. And also people in developing countries wanting to be like our over-consuming society.

SG: What needs to happen to stop climate or slow it down?

A rapid shift to renewable energy. A rapid shift to renewable products. A change in thinking regarding wants and desires instead versus needs. And some more unpredictable weather, really.

SG: Who should drive this process of change?

Politicians have the ability to ban or cease things that are bad for us ... So I do think political agreements like the Paris ones are really where it is going to have to be. There is going to have to be a collective agreement for the planet's good. No-one is perfect. You know, I need to be banned from doing stuff or else I will just keep on doing it – and I'm a person who wants to stop climate change.

SG: So, do you think it is difficult to change things when you are living in the middle of it?

Yes, because you've got other factors to consider – family pressures, and so on. So I need people to tell me not to do things and I won't do them. If I can't buy a disposable cup, then I won't be able to get one on the days I forget my reusable one. If I can't buy it, then I miss out on that thing. But did I need it? No. Will not having it kill me? No. But climate change might kill other people.

SG: Do you think there are any limitations to what politicians can do?

Yes. Personality. If something is not popular, no-one is going to do it. And I don't know how you get around that until we're facing some dire circumstances ourselves. I don't know who will voluntarily ban international flights and all that kind of stuff. It would not be a vote winner. But what other ... I just don't know the answer, unfortunately.

SG: Do you think climate change is irreversible?

It might be possible to slow it but we're not going to stop it.

SG: What have been the benefits for local communities so far?

The community of benefit – i.e., our investors – I think they have raised awareness of renewable energy. I think some of them have been really excited about being involved and they tell others about it. So, I think it has some localised effects…

SG: What has been the most successful thing about the project?

Having two schemes in place that would not already be there.

SG: And problems?

No. There haven't really been any [problems]. We have worked to time and to budget. We have had a few teething problems with the hydro which will affect our profit but they should be sorted soon. I think it is all going well.

SG: Could it be improved with the resources that you have?

Communications need to be improved – just so you feel part of it as a director. Because we've had people who volunteer to do stuff but then it just never happened. And we need to work out what we can do better to help speed up or help somebody else's project. So they don't have to go through all the pain. Is there a way we can take that pain away? But without putting ourselves through a massive load of pain as well? But there are ways in which we are competing, too. I mean we do compete with other community energy organisations ... Sometimes you see that a community group is working with someone from the north-east or something and you're like, ohh … [sighs]. So the major stoppers are... financial backing – that is something that blocks a lot of projects and takes the time. We were very lucky to have a developer on the board. That means we didn't have to pay for a lot of the technical stuff other groups would have to pay for. And if a community group want to do a hydro they have to look at all the pre-feasibility stuff, and the feasibility stages – we had a scheme that was presented to us that had gone through all of that. Funding that is usually a stopper for other projects. Or you might get funding for that bit but then you've got a problem [finding other funding for the things you need to do]. Between that and doing the share issue you still got to apply and pay for all the planning and your licenses and that's before you can even raise some money – because who wants to give you money to do a scheme if there is no planning? So that all costs quite a lot of money – and I think that is the bit where many projects get stuck. Because you then have to go the bank to get a 20 grand loan for a project that doesn't have any planning. You can't. You might be lucky and get some high-risk investors to invest. But even to do that you need a professional approach, so you

need to have spent some money on making yourselves look good. So that is a struggle. Committee time and resources and roles and responsibilities is tricky. And the government changing their minds about feed-in tariffs just when you are ready.

SG: Where would you like to see the project in five or ten years' time?

I would like to see both schemes operating above projections. I would like to see returns going back to shareholders and yet some of them hopefully waiving that dividend to help us set up new schemes and to have faith in us. I would like to see shareholders get more involved in new schemes and see some of them come on board to help with these schemes. And I would like to see us have at least another one or two projects operational. I mean more would be nice but realistically we'd have to stick with another couple …

SG: And where do you actually see it in five or ten years' time?

I reckon another project. Maybe two. And I do see the schemes operating and giving returns. I don't see masses of money because we've got an element of community benefit – we put money aside so it can go in a pot for the community. I mean, it is quite depressing how small [the level of community payback] is … It's hardly going to change the planet. There is a trade off because anything that goes to the local community is then not going to the private shareholders. I mean, we have projected around 5 per cent [return on investment to shareholders] and we can't really turn around and say to investors 'well, now we only want to give you 2 per cent because we want to give the community 4 per cent instead of one'. They might be a bit cheesed off and sue us or something. We knew when we set the project up that when we set investor payments at 5 per cent, that the communities were not going to get a great deal. We decided to set the limit for community payback at around 1 per cent – but that isn't very much money, really.

SG: Do you think people would invest if the return were lower?

But I think you would you get a lot of people investing just a thousand or a couple of thousand [pounds] at three per cent just because they thought it was a good thing to do. But you probably wouldn't get the people with the 30 and the 40 thousand [pounds] – and you need those as well.

Anthony Upton Interview 1

Date: 24 May 2017

Attendees: Anthony Upton; Stephen Graham

SG: How did the idea for Freshfair first come about?

Initially Rob and I were involved in a group that set up a veg box scheme in [a local small town]. It did ok for a while but we found that we couldn't really expand beyond a certain point. Working in [the rural town] meant that the population was too small. We needed more people, and we therefore realised that we needed to get into [the city situated nearby, which had a much larger population]. We thought that would give us a better chance [of success] and it felt logically as though this was a step in the right direction. So we started talking to Pete at [the local transition group]. Out of that we started to develop the idea of workplace buying groups. I had been talking to people over the years about getting food delivered to people in their workplaces as a way to make shopping more convenient. And it grew out of that, really. We wanted an online system that could provide a convenient way for people to get local food delivered to them at work. And we wanted to set it up so it could go to scale.

SG: Can you say more about the model?

The model was based on workplace advocates. The idea was that the advocate would be like a shop steward in a workplace. So the advocate was the main point of communication for organising orders, promoting the service, picking up problems and communicating with the project. Freshfair provided training for advocates. It looked like a really good model for a more socialist business and a different type of economy. I'd had quite a lot of experience with … the word is social enterprise which was bandied around an enormous amount at that time – there were grants for social enterprises everywhere. There was very much a misunderstanding about this at the council end of things, these were seen as opportunities to solve ... to introduce voluntary activity to shore up their resources at a desperate time and that's what they meant by a social enterprise – an enterprise which runs through good will and commitment, whereas at the other end of the spectrum was the true co-op. There's the market issues for co-operatives – that is they have got to compete in an increasingly competitive market where the only winners are the unscrupulous ... The thing that I think is particularly critical is to get people into management positions is difficult because on the one hand you want people who have experience of the capitalist market out there, but on the other hand you want people who are prepared to share decision making very democratically with workers – which is not the way of the autocratic management systems which are seen to only work in a very competitive market. And indeed, if you have a very competitive market where everybody else is being autocratic

about decisions ... And I've seen problems of how to get small co-operative enterprises like this managed because you can't get people who have had the experience of the marketplace, that also share properly the co-operative ideals – or there are very few of them around.

SG: What kind of produce were you selling?

Vegetables were the top produce we were trying to sell as they are a lower price item and therefore a wider cross-section of people can afford them. And they have important health and environmental benefits over meat and dairy products. A key structural problem was that there is very little vegetable production in [this region]. This is in part due to the climate. The more important one is that farming subsidies have always been for dairy and meat products and never for vegetable products. This means that the best land has become more valuable and therefore vegetable production is pushed onto the less good land. As a result of that, there are virtually no big vegetable producers in [this region] at all. So at one point we actually had to get some of our vegetables from south-east Scotland and from the Fylde in Lancashire. Because we found that difficult, we began to see that the way forward was growing this stuff [vegetables] ourselves … Because it was so difficult to get enough produce from other farmers… [and] because they needed to take every opportunity they could to sell it and they needed to maximise their prices. So, a natural solution was to look for land. When that penny dropped, that was a big turning point for us. However, in the end, it has got to be said that the model proved to be very disappointing. We found that the workers in the workplaces [that signed up to *Freshfair*] had very little solidarity and very little recognition of shared aspirations [with their colleagues]. Although people worked in same workplace, they lived in very different communities [outside of work]. The few [buying] advocates that we got going actually found it very difficult. What they were doing was countercultural in the workplace – counter the individualistic culture. I used to get quite frustrated by this. The advocates would invite people [colleagues] to a meeting at lunchtime and we would take in produce and go and speak about Freshfair. But it became very clear that there were very few people that the advocate could get to those meetings. There was no relationship of solidarity with other colleagues. People were very shy about coming forward. We did try a system of rewards for a bit but that didn't seem to make a lot of difference. I think the main reason was they people were shy about trying to put pressure on their workmates because they didn't have the close solidarity relation to make that comfortable for them … People were often too busy and too distant socially from their mates … And I can see why that is … since the 1980s, there has been a real change from the atmosphere of co-operation to the atmosphere of competition in neighbourhoods, between people. This [realisation about the lack of solidarity in local workplaces] was a real downer. We kind of knew we were up against it then. It was such a weakness of that model. Everybody was too busy to do voluntary work [which made finding advocates difficult]. So the advocate idea died a death.

Another reason was that we were having to look at the time to underpay producers. And that was utterly counter principles.

SG: As I understand it, the hub struggled financially for some time. Can you tell me about that?

Yes, it kind of always struggled in that regard really. But community businesses do struggle to get start-up funding. It is very difficult at a non-capitalist level as they are not paying back investors. That's why you have to rely on grants. And grants for community projects have become very competitive. Small organisations have to spend so much of their time raising money in an increasingly competitive environment.

SG: And what about sales of produce?

Yes, we did struggle with that. That partly goes back to the model, I think. But also it is about the kind of society we live in. And the power that supermarkets have over the way we but and consume food. They structure our whole relationship to food and this is deeply problematic. We are alienated from food production. People have no knowledge about how to grow food. Land is a real problem here – most people don't have access to land to be able to grow stuff. But even if they had land, typically nowadays people wouldn't know what to do with it anyway. It is tremendously sad. That is one of the things we wanted this project to change.

Anthony Upton Interview 2

Date: 20 November 2017

Attendees: Anthony Upton; Stephen Graham

SG: How did you find producers who were willing to get involved with Freshfair?

It took an enormous amount of work and a hell of a lot of foot stomping around [the region] to find people. We but we did. In the end we had quite a good range [of produce]. It was very hard work but we did manage to have a broad range of high quality, organically grown stuff. We spent a lot of time looking for people to supply things, but in the end, we found that we didn't actually have the demand. That was the main problem. And although we tried to make it convenient, we found that people with two jobs and a family, people very short of time for the buying and preparation of food, one of the things that they like to be able to do is get everything at once. So, if you couldn't get absolutely everything from our website, people would still be tempted to go to the supermarket. We found that shopping habits … are very difficult to change.

SG: What was the relationship like with producers?

Freshfair provided an outlet for small producers who could not get into supermarkets. We only worked with small producers. They typically have to rely on farmers' markets, which are quite labour intensive. These small producers have a lot of expertise, but unfortunately, they have to dilute what they are good at as they have to spend time struggling to find outlets for produce … It is an extremely bad use of time and producers' skills are wasted. Let the producers produce the stuff, let the customers get together and deal together and deal with buying it. [Producers] can't do both – it just breaks down. Farming is what these people are good at and in a different society they would be valued [for it … As it is, they] might have to stand in a farmers' market from six in the morning until four in the afternoon and not sell very much. Or they might try and struggle to run box schemes or attempt to negotiate impossible contracts with supermarkets – which are very difficult [for small-scale producers] to get into. Freshfair was a theoretical solution to these problems for these producers. I mean in one sense [farmers' markets] are wonderful – there is lovely camaraderie and you are displaying your produce and you engage with the people who are buying it. But you spend an enormous amount of time there and sometimes you come back with quite a bit of money but sometimes you come back with more or less everything you took and put it back in the freezer. [At Freshfair,] we were very aware of the pinch on them in terms of market realities and the narrow opportunities they had to make a living. It was clear that the conflict around that was constant for them.

SG: And how did the project relate to supermarkets?

We tried to peg our prices to those in the major supermarkets. … we really tried hard on price. We watched supermarket prices, and we tried to keep very close to supermarket prices. However, we only had to be a penny or two out [from supermarket prices] and we discovered that people will do anything to get a penny off [produce] … they [customers] have been brainwashed by the supermarkets into thinking that it is all about cost. It's not about quality, and it's not about health, and it is not about supporting your local producers and it's not about saving the planet. It's all about price.

SG: Can you tell me more about Freshfair's co-operative approach and the buying group model?

The whole model was built around group buying. The idea here was to do something that ran counter to people buying food as individuals going to supermarkets. It was a great idea and we really thought it was going to be successful – even in a context that was primarily shaped by capitalism. Our co-operative model and our business plan persuaded the Government to choose us for a national award. We went to dance with the devil in Westminster and returned in triumph, blinded by glory. The hysteria spread. It really felt like things were going well and like the project was going to be a huge success. We were getting really excited by this point. Was it

remarkable that we hadn't yet put the idea into practice? It was more of a pilot at that stage, but we really were getting excited. However, in the end, we actually struggled a lot to get groups together to buy stuff. That's why later on we decided to allow individuals to order. We were then dealing with individuals instead of groups, and the whole thing … lost its co-operative ethos.

SG: Why do you think the project struggled so much?

I think a fundamental reason for failing was capitalist social relations and the politics which supports it. Because of that you end up with a very, very narrow margin to pay any workers or [to pay] any expenses if your workers are volunteers. We were working so close to the line all the time … you are dealing with people who are often disabled or don't turn up at work. It was wonderfully inclusive. We had people who were getting relatively small amounts but who wouldn't have got jobs anywhere else, people who were re-emerging from mental health issues, so all that was really good, but we were working so close to the line … [At small, localist projects] you find that you have the same people flogging themselves into the ground. If those people could only see what they are doing in the wider context of a capitalist economy, their contribution would be so much better. That's why I think Freshfair is a classic example of a good idea that can't get anywhere in a capitalist system. [Such projects] are always going to struggle. They're always going to be vulnerable. They are always going to depend on the commitment of small numbers of people to work for nothing because they believe in it … They are tragic because some of the best people get exhausted and frustrated. And there is so much that could be beneficial about these projects in terms of climate change.

SG: Can you tell me more about the project's efforts to obtain land?

This came about because we started to think that maybe we should grow our own produce and sell that. That's when we began our massive hunt for land and we had massive support from the local authority. The initial reception was extraordinarily positive and extraordinarily encouraging. [The officers there] said 'let's get the maps out. I'm sure we can find you somewhere. And look, what about this? And what is it exactly that you want to do? How interesting. Goodness me, that ticks a lot of boxes' [i.e., aligns with the council's own goals], and stuff like that. But unfortunately, it didn't work out in the end. Some of the public land in and around [the city] is owned by the local authority and some by the regional authority, and a tiny bit by parish councils. It turned out that if we wanted commercially viable land, it had to be five and preferably ten acres. We had to be able to own it or have a ten-year lease on it for security. We did find some land in the end that would have been perfect for what we needed. We put a lot of work into trying to secure it and we had a lot of support from the local authority, but

unfortunately it ultimately all fell through. One of the reasons it failed was because we were in the middle of a recession. Because of austerity politics, the council turned more to selling off assets, instead of keeping them as investments, such as buildings and land. It was a long and heart-breaking process. It did show us though that there are a hell of a lot of good officers [in the local and regional authorities] who are trying to support these projects [i.e., 'progressive' community initiatives like *Freshfair*] – people who are superbly quite radical but who were so restrained by what they could do. Which comes back more and more to austerity cuts in 2010 and the absolute prerogative of having to hold on to land – their most important asset – until they could sell it for the absolute maximum market value. All this stuff chasing the city council and the county council for land which went round in circles for lots of reasons I now understand, so I learned a lot about local government through looking for land. An enormous amount. And I learnt a lot about the deviousness of politicians, about the poor quality of people – which sounds awfully arrogant. But if you give people only a little bit of power, then those who have more initiative, more get up and go, aren't going to be terribly interested in [local politics]. But then there are going to be some people who are keen [to get involved] even to grasp a little bit of power because they are lacking it and for their own self-image and that's what they cling on to. I've met an awful lot of people like that in local government. The officers are controlled by the politicians, and the politicians are desperate to stay in power ... these people are desperate to cling on to positions of power, for their status in society because what else have they got? So, this gave me a tremendous awareness of how people would say one thing and do another.

SG: How did this change your political outlook?

It is wonderful to know that lots of people are doing good in the world [through small-scale organisations], but this gets trumped not by cynicism but by a sense of how tragic it is. And of course, it isn't that people shouldn't be doing these things – if they could only do them with more political understanding and more political education and understand the limitations and what they're up against, and also begin to choose what they do. So, if they choose reforms that are about attempting to shift the balance of power then there would be far fewer broken hearts and probably a far stronger movement. In the end, because you can't measure community benefit tidily, and you can only measure money tidily, you end up with a market-driven situation.

SG: Did this project catalyse your break with reformist approaches to social change?

It was the experience of Freshfair and then trying to strengthen that by getting land. The strengthening idea was that we would be able to produce more produce for distribution but also that we would also be able to build around a particular bit of land solidarity between producers

and consumers and opportunities for less fortunate people to come and enjoy working there and, er, I think it was the combination of the two things: one, of realising that Freshfair wasn't working and then, two, the ridiculous difficulties we had getting land – it was quite unbelievable. You couldn't believe the deception and cynicism of politicians and the ways their officers were called to heel if they even talked to us. There was one meeting that stands out. It was idyllic at this stage. We had found this place [the depot] ... it was perfectly placed right in the centre of the city. Pete [Forrester] had made it into a wonderful space inside by borrowing sofas and technical equipment. This was a place for people to drop in and meet – above all it was a place with good access for producers to come and drop their stuff off. It was where the packing happened, it had deep-freeze storage. That combination of a workplace and where people could drop in was just incredible. Also, because we'd got some grants, we had enough money to pay workers – some of whom had been out of work or who had a disability and were looking for part-time work or looking for a way of getting back into work ... so there was that side of it too. It felt really revolutionary. We had meetings that were revolutionary – the way they were run … [i.e., in a democratic and open manner]. The whole thing was very refreshing after years of parochialism [working with other localist projects]. It was getting bigger, more established. And it all felt as though the project was going in the right direction. We'd had so much publicity and it felt like in the workplaces we were delivering to there was so much good will. We were really expecting that this would take off. And we had a wonderful range of produce and it looked like there was the potential to increase. I did a lot of travelling [across the region] looking for more vegetables ... and I spent a lot of time with farmers looking at how we might organise this logistically, support them with transport, looking at their existing markets, and feeling fairly confident that we could increase their profitability. So there was a lot of enthusiasm. But in meeting after meeting, we could see that sales were not going up. We'd had several of these meetings, but I remember there was this one particular meeting when it started to feel like there might be a problem with the project. We were all looking at Mike's [i.e., Sabatini's] report and we could see that the sales were still tiny.

SG: Did you reveal your political commitments to others at the project?

No, the political motivation of the project – which [for me] is what was going for it – was never shared, never openly [i.e., outside of the steering group] ... it was never put on the line [i.e., broadcast publicly], and it would never be put on the line because it wouldn't have been any good for marketing. But this is not surprising given the type of society we are in ... I think very, very few producers and customers would have shared this political view.

Anthony Upton Interview 3

Date: 3 February, 2018

Attendees: Anthony Upton; Stephen Graham

SG: What do you think about Freshfair now, looking back?

Community projects [like *Freshfair*] are not useless. You've got to start somewhere in the real world. And in many ways, this is the best project I've ever been involved with. That fact that it has failed has made me take a completely different approach to how society can be changed. It has completely changed my thinking. [Localist] projects must realise their limited ability to make fundamental change and [those involved with them need to] look at the limitations of reformist activities. Often, we look to do things [i.e., set up new projects] where no one else is already doing it [that is, focus attention on trying to find a niche]. But instead, we should be looking to contribute where there is already a significant number of people moving in the same direction … [and then try to draw them towards a more class-based, anti-capitalist position]. It might be to do with food, or health, or housing, or zero-hours contracts. Community projects should be looking at how to contribute to mass movements in the right place, at the right time, depending on political and economic circumstances. This project has turned my world upside-down. My experiences as Freshfair helped me to finally understand my history of stumbling from children's doctor to farmer to climate change activist … [and to] make sense of why I'd spent such a long time getting nowhere. Every day it becomes clearer to me that physical and mental illness is a direct result of the market economy and the political ideology. To me, many of these experiments are important in a separate way in that if we go on believing – and I do believe – that a time of a better and fairer society will come, then there will be a history of ideas for the people of that time to draw on.

SG: When you first got involved with this project, you were heavily influenced by Transition Towns-style localist approaches. How did this change over time?

Yes, it really did change my thinking. As the wounds of disrespect for myself and the others began to heal, and I started to emerge from the cocoon of localism, I realised that its limits had not only been geographical [i.e., related to the difficulties associated with sourcing and selling produce locally], but it had blinded me to the historical process … In my view, an alternative to the deeply flawed society we find ourselves living in is possible. But creating this fairer society is going to require a stepwise change – and class [i.e., class analysis, not just localist thinking] has to be central to this.

SG: How were decisions taken at Freshfair?

It did feel very democratic at the beginning. And then I think those principles got compromised as it began to go under. As things became difficult one person [Sabatini] tried to take charge a lot more. By this point we were getting very short of money, and we had to lay off a worker who was just tremendously good. And from having had a very difficult path, this guy was working really well on a relatively small wage ... and it began to feel as if we'd lost the way really. We were having to compromise on our values. Mike [Sabatini] was getting more and more defensive. Rob [Naylor] was getting more aggressive about the fact that things weren't working. And then Mike of course realised it himself – realised that all the promises that he'd made to everybody, about how it was going to be okay ... they were all starting to look empty. But to be clear, I don't think it was until afterwards that we realised the potential conflict between our principles and the market. I think we kind of knew and we kind of understood that it was going to be difficult and that there was going to be potential conflict ... in fact we started to realise fairly early on when we tried to work out what price to set for producers. That setting of prices was often quite controversial and we ended up with a policy of setting it within a very small margin of supermarket prices. We quite soon began to butt up against producers who said 'we can't sell it for that', and then we had to choose between having prices which were higher than supermarket prices which you knew were going to challenge your consumers, erm, or losing that producer. I remember [Fowles, one of the producers] ... I remember that we got to a point where we thought that if we were to be successful at making the profit we needed from meat in particular then we couldn't go on buying it in small bits from producers. It only made sense if we increased our cold storage and bought it as animals – or half an animal – either a whole lamb or pig or half a beast. And when we went to [Fowles] – who is really on the side of what we were doing and all the rest of it, it really fitted with her sustainability beliefs and ideas and values, you know we were the best thing since sliced bread to her – when we actually said to her that we need to buy from you in bulk, she said 'no, because I can get twice the price in markets'. She wouldn't do it. We live in a society where the concept of maximum profitability has become so ingrained that even people who are really well-intentioned are afraid are looking out of that box. She is not switched on politically because she has a deep upper-class upbringing. They are landed people and she is extremely politically naive. She is also very autocratic. I think this says a lot about the state of political education in UK society. There are very few people who come to Marxist conclusions or socialist conclusions … and I can see why that is. I mean, if you look at education, if you look at the competitive consumerism which dominates our society ... which has been ongoing since the 1980s, there has been a real change from the atmosphere of co-operation to the atmosphere of competition in neighbourhoods, between people. And then you have the massive influence of supermarkets in food, or the energy companies in relation to energy which all the time are pushing people towards looking for the best price over anything else.

SG: What about the Freshmeals service. Where does that fit in?

That was a wonderful thing when it first started. We used the same volunteers and the drivers who had delivered before [the hub took over the service]. I did a bit of delivering, a bit of cooking and supported in the kitchen. And it was fantastic because all our cooking rubbed off onto people living in the hostel. There was a hell of a lot of good stuff there. It really helped as is subsidised the rest of the project.

SG: Can you tell me about Freshfair's relationship to the Big Society?

The Big Society thing which is now quite forgotten was a huge early Cameron initiative and it took us all by storm. I mean, we thought, naively … bear in mind at that point that I didn't have any kind of Marxist or historical perspective at all so I was easily hoodwinked into thinking that this was a real example of communities being of some central importance in things … and I went to a host of meetings with whoever, you know, whichever bloody agency it was at that point sent out to rally the troops for the Big Society and it was quite inspiring ... So it was some time in those heady days when we thought communities were going to be able to change the world particularly in relation to climate change and we had very, very little political understanding. And if you got into anything about politics somebody like [the chair of the local sustainability network] would say 'we can't be political', you know ... In the end, the Big Society really nailed it for me. [There came a point where] I suddenly realised what was going on really, which was this shift to expecting voluntary activity to fill the gap left by the retreat of the state ... So, I now see that we turn up as volunteers in [the City Council Deputy Leader's] office, and he knows he is moving with the political current [i.e., getting volunteer groups to make up for services cut due to funding shortfalls]. But fundamentally the retreat of the state is a catastrophe. There is an ongoing urgent issue about the ongoing privatization by stealth of land and that it is really important that the movement against capitalism realises how fundamental that is, you know, that history shows that it is absolutely catastrophic and that is based on the Tory belief of an individualised entrepreneur society which was most fervently pursued by Thatcher and so ... and we have got to fight privatization of land tooth and claw. They [the government] had persuaded people to get enthusiastic about some of these [Big Society] ideas ... What stood out for me is the hope given to communities in terms of actual legislation for rights to have first refusal, or to actually acquire public land, on which a lot of [our] enthusiasm was based, [and the fact that this] was actually contradicted by other legislation [i.e., selling public land at market value, austerity policies, etc.]. I admit that I was starting to get a little seduced by the Big Society idea. Of course, I was sceptical of the government – but I did think that the idea of opening things up to local communities sounded interesting … It was only years later [that is, after they had failed to get land and after the hub had closed down] that we would realise that, at

the end of the day, it [the government’s promise of support for local community groups] was nothing but empty-handed exhortation, pure and simple. We realised that there wasn't any support to do anything.

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