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# Rethinking innovation through a moral economy lens: The case of alternative agro-food and mobility practices

Katerina Psarikidou

## abstract

In recent times of crisis, innovation has been recognised as a critical response to the multiple social and economic challenges contemporary societies have to face. Diverse organisations and actors have been constructing visions and imaginaries aiming at identifying various ‘sustainable innovations’ (Urry, 2011; 2013) that promise to provide their own remedies for such challenges. In many cases, however, such innovations appear to evolve into conservative, top-down projects of exclusion whose contribution is reduced to the production of constant economic growth and the participation of specific ‘innovators’, while overshadowing the role of other networks or actors involved in such processes (Felt et al., 2007; Suchman and Bishop, 2000). Among these organisations and actors, an increasing number of alternative economic organisations and initiatives have emerged that aim to develop their own pathways for transformation and change. Drawing on findings from the Liveable Cities and FAAN research projects, this paper is focused on a selection of alternative agro-food and mobility practices in the cities of Manchester and Birmingham, in order to explore their potential to constitute alternative innovation practices. More specifically, after an exploration of the different definitions, concepts and discourses variously used to describe, but also challenge, the concept of ‘innovation’ and its dominant understanding in policy and research (EC, 2013; Felt et al., 2007; Tyfield, 2013; Geels and Schot, 2007), this paper employs the political economic discourse of the ‘moral economy’ (Sayer, 2000; Booth, 1994; Thompson, 1971), as well as sociological and anthropological theories of value, money and commodities (Graeber, 2001; North, 2007; Zelizer, 1989; Appadurai, 1994). In doing so, it suggests an alternative perspective for approaching innovation through a moral economy lens. More specifically, by exploring the particular moral economic characteristics of alternative agro-food and mobility practices, it suggests going beyond a narrow understanding of innovation by situating it in the moral economy of such practices and the wider set of social values and symbolic meanings attributed to them.

In recent times of crisis, innovation has been recognised as a critical response to the multiple social and economic challenges contemporary societies have to face.\* Diverse organisations and actors have been constructing visions, research and policy agendas aiming at the identification of different innovations which could provide pathways towards potential transformations and change. In many cases, however, these innovations appear to evolve into conservative, top-down projects of exclusion whose contribution is reduced to the production of constant economic growth and the participation of specific ‘innovators’, while marginalising the role of other networks or communities involved in such processes (Felt et al., 2007; Suchman and Bishop, 2000). Among these organisations and actors, an increasing number of alternative economic organisations and initiatives have recently emerged that aim to develop their own strategies. In a way, they have come to construct critical loci for the articulation of and experimentation with various potentially ‘sustainable innovations’ (Urry, 2011; 2013). By employing and participating in diverse allegedly alternative socio-material practices claimed to save both money and resources, these networks of actors and organisations are said to bring their own responses to various socio-economic crises that challenge contemporary societies (Low-budget urbanities, 2013; Community Economies Collective, 2001).

Despite the many practices that could fall under the above description, this paper focuses on two different sets of alternative ‘saving’ practices, the alternative agro-food and the alternative mobility practices, both of which are intended to embody alternatives to the dominant agro-food and mobility regimes as well as the various socio-economic inequalities attributed to them. By ‘alternative’, this paper refers to the wider set of socio-material practices which are ‘alternative’ in terms of methods – e.g. production, distribution, consumption – but also in terms of the economies and economic relations enacted through these practices. Also, by using the term ‘alternative’ in terms of economies, it focuses not only on economic practices that engage in non-monetary and low-budget relations of exchange, but also on those where, as will be shown below, money becomes ‘media’, or else the means for accomplishing more diverse sets of goals and purposes (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Thrift and Leyshon, 1999; Zelizer, 1999).

Drawing on research conducted for the *Liveable cities* (<http://liveablecities.org.uk/>) and *FAAN* ([www.faanweb.eu](http://www.faanweb.eu)) projects, this paper focuses on a selection of alternative agro-food and mobility initiatives that not

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\* The article draws on research from the EPSRC Liveable Cities and EC FAAN research projects. The author would like to thank Professor John Urry and Dr. Claire Waterton for their valuable comments on previous versions of the paper. She is also grateful to the three anonymous referees for their useful and constructive feedback.

only employ or promote alternative agro-food or mobility practices – such as community gardens, permaculture, cycling, car-sharing etc. – but also engage in an array of alternative economic practices constructed around the particular materialities related to the above practices – such as informal networks of exchange, co-operatives, social enterprises, etc. For the purposes of this paper, my investigation is focused on two of the UK's largest cities, Manchester and Birmingham, both of which are currently challenged by socio-economic inequalities, as also manifested in the different food and mobility security issues within both cities.

More specifically, by looking at the alternative economic characteristics of such practices, this paper suggests an alternative perspective for approaching innovation through a moral economy lens – and, more specifically, through the particular 'moral economy' of alternative agro-food and mobility practices. To initiate such an investigation, this paper starts by exploring different definitions, concepts and discourses that have been variously used to describe, but also challenge, the concept of 'innovation' and its dominant understanding in policy and research (EC, 2013; Felt et al., 2007; Tyfield et al., 2010; Geels and Schot, 2007, etc.). It then turns to the employment of the political economic discourse of the 'moral economy' (Sayer, 2000; Booth, 1994; Thompson, 1971) as well as sociological and anthropological theories of value, money and commodities (Graeber, 2001; North, 2007; Zelizer, 1989; Appadurai, 1994). In doing so, the paper argues for the potential of these practices to constitute alternative innovation practices that can challenge the dominant understanding of innovation by situating it in the particular moral economic characteristics of such practices, the wider sets of symbolic meanings, and the social values attributed to them.

### **Innovation: A contested concept**

Innovation has been recognised as a critical dimension for the pursuit of future transformations and change, especially in times of crisis. However, traditionally, innovation has ignored various alternative economic organisations and practices and their potential to provide their own response to diverse socio-economic challenges. Among various economists and political scientists, Joseph Schumpeter (1942) was one of the first to underline the centrality of innovation as a key driver for change through economic growth. Mainly associated with technological advancements, innovation was introduced in his *Capitalism, socialism, and democracy* as a critical dimension for the 'creative destruction' of

capitalism, which he suggested as the necessary precondition for economic development and change<sup>1</sup>.

Despite the historical roots of such observations, this linear post-war model of 'science' to 'technology' to 'social progress' has been central to the articulation of more recent conceptualisations and understandings of innovation and their role in future economic growth (Sirilli, 1998). In particular, in recent times of global crisis, innovation appears as a response to various challenges contemporary societies have to face. The European Union's Lisbon Agenda (2000) as well as the more recent Europe 2020 Innovation Union (2010a; 2013) become manifestations of the centrality of innovation for overcoming such obstacles. As stated in the Innovation Union pocket guide, 'the main economic drive of economic growth in the EU is innovation... Innovation is our best option to help get the European Economy back on track... [to] innovate our way out of the crisis' (2013: 3). In this way, innovation is suggested as the best means for not only 'enhancing competitiveness', but also 'creat[ing] growth and jobs' and 'tackling major societal challenges such as climate change, energy and resource security, health and ageing which are becoming more urgent by the day' (EC, 2010a: 2, 6 and 7). Explicit references to a more 'inclusive growth' also highlight the social character of such innovations: as evidenced in the Horizon 2020 priority themes, such innovations are not only reduced to meeting the principles of 'smart' and 'sustainable' growth, but also of a growth which can tackle issues of poverty, social exclusion and inequalities, while securing equal opportunities in education and employment (EC 2010b: 6; 2011: 9).

By engaging with such narratives, these documents not only provide evidence of the centrality of innovation in responding to crises: as Felt et al. suggest (2007), they also facilitate the perpetuation of a master narrative in which innovation is narrowly perceived as the motor of economic growth through profit maximisation and competitiveness, as well as the development of laboratory-based techno-scientific knowledge. In this way, democratising processes become marginalised by dominant frameworks that promote capital-intensive techno-scientific developments through private sector or industry-driven interests and public-private partnerships (Levidow and Neubauer, 2012; Pigeon, 2012). Thus, as Suchman and Bishop argue, innovations appear to evolve into a 'conservative project', mainly becoming the 'preferred alternative to stagnation' or 'resistance

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1 According to Schumpeter (1942), the reproduction of capitalism lies in a process of 'creative destruction', which he describes as the 'process of industrial mutation that incessantly revolutionises the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one'. Such process was regarded as the engine behind economic progress; with the introduction of new ideas and innovation, entrepreneurs could be capable of challenging existing firms and bringing economic growth.

to change' (2000: 331). Despite referring to principles of 'inclusiveness', they tend to constitute top-down practices of exclusion whose production or orchestration is limited to the participation of specific 'innovators', while marginalising or overshadowing the role of other networks, creative communities or civil society in the production of such processes (Felt et al., 2007).

Such observations encourage an exploration of alternative ways of conceptualising and understanding innovation. In their attempt to develop a critique of the dominant framing of innovation, Felt et al. (2007) suggest a more inclusive and participatory process of 'collective experimentation', manifested in 'distributed innovation' among a diversity of actors and options. Thus, Von Hippel (2005) talks about new types of 'open' or 'user-centred' innovations – what Urry (2013) calls 'consumer innovations' – and suggests their centrality in a further 'democratisation of innovation' processes through the participation of a wider community of users of products and services, or of individual consumers. Such attempts at 're-inventing' innovation encourage us to reconsider the role of other bottom-up innovations in the materialisation of transformation and change. But, as Tyfield et al. (2010) crystallise through the use of the concept of 'disruptive innovation', they also help us to re-think innovation in a much broader way, going beyond traditional players, as well as its direct association with profit maximisation and high-technology. In a way, they encourage us to further explore the potential situatedness of innovation in different currently marginalised small-scale, bottom-up 'niches' (Geels and Schot, 2007).

This paper hence aims to investigate the potential of innovation in the small-scale, bottom-up practices undertaken by wider communities of actors. By doing so, it aims to challenge the dominant understandings of innovation associated with constant economic growth through profit maximisation and various technofixes. With the aim of contributing to the above attempts at a conceptual openness of the term, it aims to suggest its own alternative way of approaching innovation through a moral economy lens, and, more specifically, through the particular moral economy of alternative agro-food and mobility practices. Before turning to such an analysis, however, an investigation of the different theoretical insights into 'value', 'money' and 'commodities' appears essential for unpacking the particular economic characteristics which can also help us re-think innovation through a moral economy lens.

## Value(s), money and commodities in modern society

Ever since the earliest stages of industrialisation and urbanisation, an 'economising logic' has come to play an increasingly important role in constructing the foundations of societies and their innovation processes. The economy became an autonomous sphere governed by its own laws, where its magnitude could be measured by the commodification potential of land and labour (Booth, 1994); trade became an honourable business, and humans were gradually transformed into 'homo oeconomicus', into 'rational', self-interested maximisers led by a 'calculative' and 'instrumental rationality' and a constant desire to achieve material gains and maximisation of their utility through appropriate means (Weber, 1978; Evans-Pritchard, 1967). In a way, as Polanyi describes (1957), economic relations have gradually become 'disembedded' from social relations, shifting from traditional relationships of 'mechanical solidarity' to contractual relationships of 'organic solidarity'<sup>2</sup> able to free both markets and people from traditional ties, moral values and obligations (Durkheim, 1964; Hayek, 1976). As some came to describe, a detraditionalisation process was accompanied by a promise of personal liberation and, ultimately, the promise of a good life and the pure pleasure of autonomous, self-governed and self-responsible individuals – mainly translated through the possession and consumption of market-offered goods (Heelas, 1996; Abercrombie, 1994; Bauman, 1987).

For some, detraditionalisation has also come to signal a stage of 'demoralisation' of economies and a shift away from the moral economies of traditional societies (see Scott, 1976; Thompson, 1971). The latter has been supported by the gradual disembeddness of economic relations from social relations (Polanyi, 1957) and the loss of an economy based on relationships of reciprocity, moral solidarity, mutual assistance and trust, village egalitarianism, subsistence ethics and survival of the weakest (Scott, 1976; Thompson, 1971). It has however also been encouraged by the perpetuation of a reductionist understanding of value as economic value, mainly translated into money and a specific price that could reflect the 'worth' of a product (Dodd, 1998). In modern economies, money has become the universally exchangeable commodity or 'common unit of

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2 In *The division of labour in society* (1964), Durkheim argues that in pre-modern societies, with their low division of labour and little mutual dependency, members of society are bound together by a 'collective conscience' of shared beliefs and values, periodically revived through ritual. However, in modern urbanized society, with its developed division of labour, urbanisation, geographical mobility and social and cultural diversity, collective conscience is weak and prior forms of 'mechanical solidarity' give way to a more individualised form of social solidarity, namely an 'organic solidarity', which could coexist with the norms of the rationalised ethos of capitalism.

measurement' that could enable relationships of exchange by acting as a method for valuing other, non-equivalent commodities. In a way, it is perceived as the commodity that can operate as a 'medium of exchange' and store value, and, thus, objectify the value of other commodities. As Marx (1978) and Simmel (1990) observed, money was the commodity with the capacity to not only commodify objects and labour, but also all aspects of social life.

However, for others, this same process of detraditionalisation cannot be associated with the end of 'moral economies' as, according to Sayer (2000) and Booth (1994), all economies constitute moral economies. This not only suggests the attachment of a more inclusive meaning to the term 'economy' by referring to all forms of provisioning, including those inside and outside the cash economy, as well as both formal and informal economic activities, involving production, distribution, consumption and exchange (Sayer, 2006; Gibson-Graham, 1996; Community Economies Collective, 2001). It also points us to the moral judgements and dispositions, valuations, norms and behaviours, or else, what Sayer calls a 'tacit lay morality', that are always present or latent within economic relations (Sayer, 2000; 2006). Such 'tacit lay morality' is not only reflected in processes of justification of specific economic actions through the economic agent's association with a specific moral world<sup>3</sup> (Boltanski and Thevenot, 1999). It also becomes evident in the possession and consumption of specific goods and commodities due to the specific immaterial values – or else, following Baudrillard (1972), the 'sign values', associations or social and cultural meanings – attached to them on behalf of their users. From this perspective, commodities acquire a value which goes beyond their exchange value and its usual association with monetary value (Sayer, 2003). Their use value gets reconceptualised around not only the satisfaction of basic human needs, but also the achievement of skills or satisfaction that can be obtained through participation in a practice or a particular type of relationship (MacIntyre, 1981; Sayer, 2003). Along these lines, labour and money also become reconceptualised as they come to constitute means for accomplishing purchase practices that would lead to the acquisition of commodities for their use value (Sayer, 2003).

The above analysis provides some clues to the wider spectrum of values that might be attributed to contemporary economic relations, money and commodities. In *The gift*, Marcel Mauss (1967) encourages us to consider the

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3 Boltanski and Thevenot (1999) claim that we live in a plural world where actions can be justified in multiple ways depending on the person's world of justification. They identify six worlds of justification – domestic, industrial, civic, market, fame, inspiration – according to which different groups of people justify their actions to those who disagree.



social nature of all economic relations, and hence go beyond a reductionist approach to values in economic relations as purely economic values. In particular, he encourages us to develop a different anthropological understanding of value, based on which value is the meaning or importance a society ascribes to an object. David Graeber offers a similar approach to value, according to which it constitutes 'the way actions become meaningful to the actors by being placed in some larger social whole, real or imaginary' (2005: 254). In this context, the commodity becomes decontextualised to the extent that, according to Appadurai (1994), it can exist outside of capitalist economic relations by referring to any object that someone can acquire in exchange for something else, or that they would be willing to give up in order to get something that is more desirable to them. However, money also acquires a more inclusive meaning: not only by attending to its potential to work as a 'medium' for the acquisition of some other goods or relations whose significance lies in their 'use' or 'sign value'; but also by attending to its potential to take on different forms, and thus become the 'media' – or, according to Zelizer (1989), the 'multiple monies' – through which money becomes socially and culturally defined and obtains multiple uses and meanings depending on the different monetary forms and contexts deployed (Thrift and Leyshon, 1999).

All the theoretical approaches and enquiries above provide inspiration for understanding the situatedness of the dominant framework of innovation within the prevailing 'economising logic' of the 'homo oeconomicus', but also for investigating its potential to be framed by a more inclusive meaning of 'the economic', and the diverse set of values related to it. In a way, they encourage us to realise the tacit moral economic character of all innovation processes, a fact reflected in the moral judgements, valuations and claims embedded in the justification of all innovation practices – for example through their promissory narrative of providing a response to multiple crises. In other words, they encourage us to realise that all innovations have a moral economy, and, based on that, urge us to further investigate innovation through a moral economy lens, and, more specifically, through the lens of the particular 'moral economy' of alternative agro-food and mobility practices. They provide grounds for exploring the nature and particular characteristics of the economic practices related to these agro-food and mobility practices, and further examine the particular moral economic characteristics and sets of values that can help us develop an alternative approach to innovation: an innovation that can go beyond its dominant understanding and associations with constant economic growth.

## The moral economy of alternative agro-food and mobility practices

### *The background*

Across the UK, the recent austerity measures, increasing levels of poverty and unemployment, cuts in public services, unequal access to goods and services, phenomena of social exclusion and health inequalities have all triggered public concern and stimulated interest in the organisation of different initiatives that are intended to provide their own response to such challenges. Food insecurity and transport poverty have undoubtedly been recognised as significant parameters for growing socio-economic inequalities (FAO, 2009; Rothengatter, 2011), which have also resulted in the emergence of various alternative agro-food and mobility organisations (Renting et al., 2003; Psarikidou and Szerszynski, 2012a; Horton et al., 2007) addressing such issues. Drawing on findings from web-research and interviews with representatives of various organisations involved in the alternative agro-food and mobility sectors<sup>4</sup>, my analysis focuses on an array of alternative agro-food and mobility initiatives in Manchester and Birmingham – two of the UK’s largest cities, and ones which are currently challenged by a combination of crises manifested in increasing socio-economic inequalities.

With a population of 483,800 people, Manchester currently ranks as the second most deprived core city in England<sup>5</sup> (Manchester City Council, 2011a). The recent economic recession – also triggered by the city’s historic economic dependence on industrialisation and its gradual post-war decline – have significantly changed the city’s socio-economic landscape. Currently, many areas suffer from unemployment, poor physical and mental health, social exclusion and unequal

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4 The material used for this paper comes from research conducted by the author for the EPSRC *Liveable cities* (<http://liveablecities.org.uk/>) and EC FP7 *FAAN* ([www.faanweb.eu](http://www.faanweb.eu)) projects. Findings for the alternative agro-food practices in Manchester have been extracted from internet websites, official documents and a series of 4 out of 11 semi-structured *FAAN* interviews with representatives of different organisations and initiatives involved in the alternative agro-food sector. Data concerning alternative mobility practices in Birmingham come from internet sources, official documents and 5 out of 12 semi-structured *Liveable cities* interviews with representatives involved in different organisations and initiatives involved in changing Birmingham’s mobility system. For the purposes of this paper, specific interviews have been carefully selected from the ranges provided in each research project, helping the author to construct a comparative and complementary analysis of similar initiatives in the two different sectors.

5 According to the 2011 Indices of multiple deprivation, Manchester ranks as the second most deprived local authority in England for income deprivation, third in terms of employment deprivation, and fifth in the extent of deprivation throughout the city (Manchester City Council, 2011a).

access to employment, education and health – particularly for vulnerable sections of the population, such as women, disabled people, black and minority ethnic communities, young and older people (Manchester City Council, 2011b). As for the agro-food sector, with the majority of the food imported as part of global agro-food chains and the more recent increase in food prices, there are growing concerns about food insecurity, food poverty and malnutrition, but also obesity, poor dietary habits and mental health problems that are all claimed to have contributed to an increase in food deserts, as well as unequal access to food of good nutritional value<sup>6</sup> (Food Futures, 2007; Small World Consulting, 2011).

With the second largest population in the country<sup>7</sup>, Birmingham is its third most deprived city and one of the key sites of socio-economic inequalities and deprivation<sup>8</sup> (English indices of deprivation, 2013). Its recent socio-economic inequalities and high rates of unemployment<sup>9</sup> are not unrelated to Birmingham's historic economic dependence on its currently declined car industry (Cherry, 1994). The dominance of cars<sup>10</sup> provides significant evidence for the wider mobility security issues and the various socio-economic and health inequalities constructed around them (Centro, 2011). More specifically, the recent economic recession has particularly served to exacerbate phenomena of fuel and transport poverty – also manifested in the rising oil prices and public transport fares (Birmingham City Council, 2013b). As a consequence, social exclusion and unequal access to employment, education and health, as well as poor physical and mental health have all come to constitute important aspects of the city's socio-economic inequalities that diverse sets of organisations in the city have attempted to address.

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6 Only 16 % of adults within the city have a balanced, healthy diet, while approximately 15% of the school children are obese. Depression and other mental health problems are attributable to diets with low nutritional value, while mortality rates in Manchester remain among the higher ones in the UK (Food Futures, 2007).

7 Approximately 1.1 million people in the city itself and 2.5 million in the conurbation.

8 According to the 2010 Index of multiple deprivation, Birmingham is the most deprived city in both income and employment deprivation, with 40% of its population living in 10% of the country's most deprived areas (Birmingham City Council, 2013a).

9 Currently above the national average and affecting 13% of the population.

10 Based on statistics for morning peak journeys, car driving currently amounts to 42.2 % of everyday travel, followed by buses with 29.2 %, rail with 27 %, and metro and cycling with less than 2 % (Centro, 2011).

*The initiatives*

In response to such crises, the alternative agro-food and mobility initiatives under investigation employ an array of alternative economic practices providing an alternative 'economic imaginary' (Jessop, 2008) based on saving both money and resources. Thus, by focusing on the specific areas of food and mobility, these initiatives aim to challenge the dominant agro-food and mobility regimes, and the socio-economic inequalities within them through the development of alternative economic relations. By doing so, they are simultaneously also intended to address the wider spectrum of socio-economic inequalities and suggest their own 'alternative innovations' in response to crises. Such attempts are also prevalent in relevant city council reports, which acknowledge the centrality of both food and mobility in tackling major socio-economic problems in both cities. As stated:

The food system is complex and impacts on health, the environment, regeneration, social cohesion and the local economy. As a city we have a great opportunity not only to improve the food eaten here but in doing so to contribute to many other priorities for the city and so improve the health and quality of life of our residents. (Food futures, 2007)

Our planning system penalises people who cannot afford a car... As we take the difficult decisions necessary to tackle the impact of the global recession we are determined to do so fairly, protecting the most vulnerable and prioritising equal opportunities for all. (Birmingham City Council, 2013b)

Yet despite their common aspirations of challenging the dominant agro-food and mobility systems and inequalities prevailing within them, these initiatives vary in terms of the economic practices they employ in order to meet their common goals and objectives. Based on the specific characteristics attributed to the term 'alternative' in the introduction above, and in particular the specific understanding of the term 'alternative' in relation to economies, this paper focuses on the investigation of a diversity of alternative economic practices that relate to the area of food and mobility. These practices are not only related to initiatives that engage in non-monetary or low-budget informal economies and networks of exchange. They also refer to initiatives that, despite their situatedness in formal market economies and participation in money-based economic relations of exchange, are developing alternative ways of going beyond a narrow understanding of money, labour and commodity and their overarching association with the accomplishment of capitalist, profit-maximising economic relations. Thus, based on these criteria and for the purposes of this paper, the initiatives under investigation are divided into three different categories:

- a. Citizens' initiatives:
  - i. Citizen-led initiatives set up by local community members who are interested in permaculture and the principles of organic agriculture and undertake, organise or support several community food-growing projects across the city (Interview RS290708).
  - ii. Citizen-led initiatives set up by local community members interested in developing more collective ways of commuting within the city through car-sharing schemes (Interview AG210613).
- b. Workers' co-operatives:
  - i. A workers' food co-operative, owned and run by its workforce, which supplies fresh produce on a daily basis and sells local, organic and fair-trade products, provides employment for its members and people with learning disabilities, and encourages co-operation with other local businesses and co-operatives while donating 5% of its turnover to projects consistent with its principles (Unicorn, 2013).
  - ii. A workers' bicycle co-operative, owned and run by its workforce, which repairs and sells discarded or donated bikes or bike parts, while offering maintenance or training courses for individuals and supporting the creation of self-help support networks through the organisation of tool clubs in its workshops (Bike Foundry, 2013).
- c. Third sector organisations:
  - i. A social enterprise initiated by the community voluntary sector, that aims to engage mental health service users, young people and the community in healthy local food permaculture growing, cooking and retailing activities and thus provide work-based learning opportunities, and 'moving-on' services which help people improve skills, confidence and overall health in order to join mainstream society (HeLF, 2007; Manchester Mind, 2013).
  - ii. A social enterprise that aims to engage vulnerable parts of the population – such as people with specific learning needs and mental distress, the unemployed, women and ethnic minorities – in cycling-related activities as a means of delivering mental health wellbeing and recovery, as well as enhancing their future learning, training and employment and sustainable opportunities in the city (Cycle Chain, 2013; Urban Cycles, 2013).
  - iii. A charity that runs many different sustainability projects, including a mobile greengrocers providing affordable, fresh produce in areas of Manchester with low levels of social and physical mobility or access to fresh foods (MERCi, 2012; Interview MB160109).
  - iv. A charity that runs different projects in order to make slow forms of transport more inclusive, accessible and easier for larger parts of the population (Sustrans, 2014; Interview LD110713).

*Their moral economic practices*

Some of the initiatives listed above engage in alternative, low-budget economic practices that go beyond a monolithic focus on money as the only means for accomplishing economic relations of exchange. In Manchester and Birmingham, both community food-growing projects and car-sharing schemes provide the space for saving money and resources through the development of informal networks of exchange and a 'gift economy' (Mauss, 1967) embraced by relations of mutual aid and trust, and a feeling of reciprocity and mutual obligation to return a gift or service of at least comparable value.

In Manchester, for example, citizens overcome the conventions of mainstream economies by engaging in more co-operative ways of agro-food production and consumption, and a culture of a peer to peer unmediated economy based on mutual self-help support and sharing of food which becomes a product of communal effort. Or as one of the representatives of a citizens' initiative involved in setting up food growing projects puts it:

If you have an overabundance of produce, you are not allowed to sell anything that's grown on an allotment. This is good in one way because it encourages people to think outside the box about what they can do to store vegetables or work in a more public community-spirited way and swap things. (Interview HSK020909)

Along similar lines, in Birmingham, in times of economic recession, citizens develop their own informal networks and arrangements of car-sharing whose reward usually appears in other, non-monetary, material and non-material, terms of goods or services. As one of the people involved in an informal network of car-sharing explained:

Probably there is no financial gain; it is like a network of friends and your friend is not going to say you owe me £ 72.86 for fuel this year. It might well be that... we just have a meal or when we're out I'll drop in a bottle of wine or they look after my son on a Saturday so it's just things that friends do. (Interview MS180713)

In this manner, the different materialities and services involved in the accomplishment of the above economic relations of exchange help us attribute a more inclusive meaning to the notion of 'commodity' that can go beyond its situatedness in profit-maximising economic relations for the production of surplus value. As described above, in the case of community food growing projects, food products become objects of informal, non-monetary barter economic relations of exchange that extend beyond the conventions of formal trading relations and their primary focus on the use of money. In the case of car-

sharing, the lift is a service whose return is offered in the form of other non-measurable goods or services – such as a bottle of wine or baby-sitting. In both cases, by participating in such economic relations, both objects and services constitute commodities that get re-contextualised around their use value, whereas their exchange value goes beyond its dominant interpretation as monetary value and its usual association with profit maximisation.

Due to the wider spectrum of associations attributed to these practices, commodities are also attached with a wider set of ‘sign values’. The latter is prevalent in the new forms of socialities and friendships emerging in the development of community food-growing and car-sharing practices in both cities. In a way, such alternative economic practices not only constitute means for saving money through an engagement in the above-described informal networks of non-monetary exchange relations, but also provide the space for social relations and the empowerment of local communities.

More specifically, in Manchester, social isolation constituted a major incentive for the materialisation of various community food-growing projects which then became pivotal for the enhancement of social cohesion and community development in various areas within the city. Thus, through their active participation in various community food-growing initiatives, residents of local neighbourhoods get to know one another, create new friendships and become socially integrated in their local communities. As one of Manchester’s community food activists described:

... in an area like Hulme, when I started to talk about social isolation, not only do we lack a food culture, we just lack a community culture generally. So by setting up local food produce it’s a great way of getting people to have exercise and engage with each other – it’s a social integration and it’s also they get to grow food and eat healthy food. (Interview RS300708)

In Birmingham, car-sharing has also become a means of developing new forms of sociality, sociability and common belonging. Thus, in this case, the ‘commodity’ of the car acquires a ‘sign value’ associated with its capacity to not only help individuals engage in new social relations and interactions, but also to develop their social skills and links between each other. Thus, while sharing journeys, people not only find the opportunity to make new friends, but also to sustain friendships that have initially been constructed around the practice of car-sharing. The personal story of one of the network’s active members is indicative of this particular character of the practice of car-sharing:

The key thing is getting on with the person you are sitting next to and we get on very well... A[] and I started doing it a couple of years ago, it might even be three years... we have now become friends and basically we have a bloody good laugh.

Driving back home is now the time for catching up with another friend for that 20 minute drive in the morning; it might be quite personal... that's the time we can relax and have a personal conversation. (Interview AG210613)

However, as discussed above, such alternative economic characteristics also go beyond a narrow association with non-monetary economic relations of exchange. The emergence of food- and cycling-related workers' co-operatives in Manchester and Birmingham provides some evidence of the significance of other initiatives which, despite their engagement in the mainstream market economy and currency system, can contribute to tackling socio-economic inequalities through a reconfiguration of the 'economic' and an attachment of a diverse set of social and cultural meanings to their economic practices. Thus, even though such initiatives participate in conventional economic relations of exchange, money and commodities become socially and culturally re-defined due to the wider socio-political meanings and associations attributed to them by their users (Thrift and Leyshon, 1999; Baudrillard, 1972). In the case of the food co-operative in Manchester, for example, the retailers' purchasing and trading practices of 'fair trade' products embody expressions of an ethics of care and solidarity towards disadvantaged proximal and distant, human and non-human, others that might be also subjects of global economic crises and injustices. As stated in their principles:

We trade preferentially in products which follow the 'Fair Trade' ethos and alert our customers to the problems of cash crop agriculture. We are concerned that much of world trade is to the disadvantage of poorer nations with a consequence for people's health and lives. We aim to trade in a manner which supports a sustainable world environment and economy. (Unicorn, 2014)

However, a similar ethic of responsibility, social solidarity and care is not only reflected through the active participation of such initiatives in practices of 'fairtrade'. In various cases, the marketplace provides the space for challenging the dominant market economies not only through the establishment of more humanised trade relationships, but also through networks of co-operation and common belonging, and moral obligations of mutual assistance and work-sharing. The economic organisation of a co-operative is indicative of such a direction. As discussed, both co-operatives, run and owned by their workforce, provide the space for the articulation of an alternative economic vision in which food and mobility become the means for establishing not only fairer working conditions, but also a more socially just, non-hierarchical economic system based on the principles of community self-governance and collective ownership (Unicorn, 2013; Bike Foundry, 2013). As said by one of the representatives of the cycling co-operative in Birmingham:



[We] started with a love of cycling, a desire to remove ourselves from wage labour over which we had no control... Together we wanted to create something that went beyond the restraints of '9-5'. A radical, non-hierarchical workers' cooperative seemed like the obvious solution.... Our benchmark of success is not only financial viability, but making sure that we remain a democratic workplace which is rewarding to work in, and that we are contributing to the social revolution. (Radical routes, 2012)

In this way, a gradual decommodification of the labouring processes is manifested not only in the rejection of money as the primary goal of action, but also in the development of more equitable processes of participation and decision making. As explained in the case of the cycling co-operative, all members obtain an equal share and contribution to the ownership and running of the business, and, thus, become central in the performance of an 'emancipatory politics' (Habermas, 1987) for community governance that can go beyond traditional hierarchies, dependencies and restraints. The marketplace becomes the socio-political space for the manifestation of a 'purposive political act' of the self-reflexive individual for self-control and community self-governance (Giddens, 1991; Szerszynski, 2005). The active and equitable participation of retailers in these alternative, self-governed labouring processes becomes an expression of a more collective 'project identity' (Castells, 1997) that, as described above, aspires to lead to a 'revolutionary' joint political action for the pursuit of a wider socio-economic transformation in times of crises and economic recession.

A similar observation can also be made with regard to various citizens' participation as voluntary labour in different agro-food and mobility practices. Their voluntary work in the above food and cycling co-operatives, but also in most charities and social enterprises under investigation, is vital for the future sustainability of such initiatives. Their active involvement in these initiatives becomes not only a manifestation of a personal 'life politics' of the contemporary self-reflexive individual (Giddens, 1991), but also an expression of an ethics of solidarity and care towards initiatives that aim to challenge the dominant economic system. In a way, it constitutes another form of a 'purposive political act' through which an individual's personal and lifestyle choices of volunteering become a step towards the articulation of a project for a not only personal, but also greater societal transformation that can tackle social inequalities and environmental injustices within the agro-food and mobility systems, and beyond (see Szerszynski, 2005; Horton, 2003). As one of the volunteers working for one of Birmingham's cycling charities said:

I like the fact that it's environmental... I like to work collectively with other people for a better society and environment. As a volunteer, I am learning to work in a way that is more fair and equal. I help people to walk and cycle more of their

everyday journeys. And this makes me feel better... I have an impact on the community. (Interview BL 210613)

However, voluntary labour is not only part of an enactment of a collective project identity on behalf of citizens and consumers. Aspects of labour de-commodification through voluntary, non-wage labour have also been prevalent in other third sector organisations within both cities. With a vision of responding to the multiple economic crises, these alternative economic organisations engage in a wider set of agro-food and mobility practices which are used as a means for social inclusion of 'unemployed' or other 'economically inactive' parts of the population (Gibson-Graham, 2006). By acknowledging the possibly elitist nature of the above described labour processes, their aim is to transform voluntary labour into a means of ameliorating socio-economic inequalities and securing equal opportunities for the economically deprived parts of the population.

For example, in both social enterprises, mental health service users, people with sensory or other learning disabilities, and rehabilitating offenders constitute voluntary labour for the accomplishment of various agro-food and mobility-related practices – such as growing, cooking and distributing food, but also repairing and selling bicycles – whose commodities become integrated in the mainstream market economy. By involving vulnerable parts of the population, these alternative socio-material practices not only contribute to a more egalitarian and socially inclusive organisation of local economies, but also to the establishment of a more humanised trading system whose commodities become objects for the expression of solidarity and support towards disadvantaged others. In doing so, their commodities also reflect a wider set of 'sign values' (Baudrillard, 1972), or what one of the interviewees called 'a fair price' (Interview MB160109), which becomes associated with the wider social visions, purposes and goals of their projects for social inclusion and justice. Or as one of the representatives of a social enterprise in Manchester describes it:

It was a good idea to create more opportunities for mental health service users... to learn how to cook differently, work in cafes, grow food... [they] just have the therapeutic element of being outside and growing... we are trying to make it inclusive for people who have certain needs, mental health needs and can't always work in mainstream jobs.... (Interview RP190808)

Thus, despite their association with the mainstream economy, third sector organisations contribute to a reconceptualisation of monetary economic transactions as morally justified actions (Boltanski and Thevenot, 1999) that also succeed in going beyond the natural habitats of affluent consumers. By engaging people from disadvantaged communities in an array of socio-material agro-food practices involving skill and judgement, these organisations have played a significant role in not only enhancing community engagement, but also in

tackling socio-economic inequalities through the provision of equal access to food, services, employment and educational opportunities. Manchester's mobile grocers, for example, has been set up to provide affordable, fresh fruit and vegetables to residents living in food deserts throughout the city. By aiming to reach the most vulnerable and socially deprived parts of the population, this initiative plays a pivotal role in the gradual decommodification (Sayer, 2003), but also gradual resocialisation of the economic processes. Residents of different food deserts not only have access to fresh food, but also obtain access to knowledge about different varieties of plants, fruits and vegetables, as well as techniques for cooking and growing their own food. In this way, the marketplace becomes the space for the exchange of knowledge and ideas, but also for empowering local communities and establishing new social relations of mutual aid and trust between retailers and consumers. As one of the representatives of the mobile grocers put it:

Some of our customers don't see another person for a whole week... when they come on the van and they have a chat with the driver and they haven't actually been out of the house for a week... it's more for people's mental well-being that they actually have someone to talk to and it's a regular face, it's not just whichever person is on the check-out looking miserable... it's a natural interaction. (Interview MB160109)

Thus, community building and social inclusion become central in the organisation of such initiatives – a fact also demonstrated in the case of cycling training courses in Birmingham. Acknowledging the socially exclusive character of the current mobility system, such initiatives mainly target people who have been adversely affected by the consequences of recent economic crises. In doing so, they aim to use cycling as a means for addressing socio-economic inequalities within the mobility system and beyond. As the representative of a social enterprise that supports cycling in cities said:

At the moment one of our real cautions is that cycling is becoming increasingly elitist... we particularly have a trust in work with non-traditional groups... people who could deliver the highest level of social impact... people who are on low-income [and] will spend a fifth of their income travelling to and from work....so they are service industry employees... people who clean offices... chamber maids in hotels... all these people live within a cycleable distance, so argument would be they ought to be the priority; we need to forget about affluent suburbs and focus deliberately on that point; not of the highest need but of high social impact. (Interview AS280613)

Thus, reminding us of the class hierarchies that are embedded in contemporary societies, such initiatives become harbingers for the creation of new spaces of 'social centrality' where ideas of the good society are put into practice (Hetherington, 1998). By engaging a wider spectrum of the society in cycling

practices, they aim to contribute to the establishment of a fairer and more equitable society in which all members can have equal access to goods, services and opportunities. For example, as explained above, by providing affordable cycling equipment as well as training sessions to economically deprived parts of the population, they aim to increase those groups' accessibility to their work or other working opportunities which are currently proving prohibitive because of their excessive travel distance and expenses. Thus, by doing so, they attribute a more inclusive aspect to such alternative economies through their attempt to not only create a more socially just and inclusive mobility system, but also use it as a means for a wider socio-economic transformation through the provision of equal opportunities for engagement in the city's social and economic life.

The alternative agro-food and mobility practices studied here thus unfold various combinations of characteristics that can help us speak in the language of the 'moral economy' and, more specifically, the particular 'moral economy' that is embedded in such practices<sup>11</sup>. They provided clues to a moral economy that, in the case of the community food growing and car-sharing citizens' initiatives, goes beyond money as the primary unit of exchange in order to establish relations of mutual self-help support, sharing and co-operation among proximal others. But, it also provides a medium for the development of new socialities and friendships which, in specific cases of socially deprived areas, can also contribute to the enhancement of social cohesion, community engagement and common belonging. However, they also provided evidence of a 'moral economy' that, despite its engagement with the mainstream economy, can become a vehicle for the pursuit of wider social benefits, goals and objectives. In the case of the food and cycling co-operatives, for example, the use of fairtrade products became an expression of ethics of care and solidarity towards both proximal and distant others, whereas the introduction of non-hierarchical processes of participation in the running and ownership of the economic organisations manifests an emancipatory politics for the establishment of fairer working conditions, self-governance and determination. Both become expressions of a more collective 'project identity' (Castells, 1997) which, as in the case of the voluntary labour used by different charities and social enterprises, aspires to lead to a wider socio-economic transformation based on a more egalitarian and inclusive organisation of social and economic lives – a fact that also becomes manifest in the provision of equal access to different goods and services as well as employment and educational opportunities, for vulnerable and economically inactive parts of the population.

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11 For a further analysis on 'The moral economy of civic food networks in Manchester', see also Psarikidou and Szerszynski (2012b).

## Rethinking innovation through a moral economy lens

The above analysis of the ‘moral economy’ of alternative agro-food and mobility practices encourages us to develop an alternative approach to innovation that can challenge its dominant association with an ‘economising logic’ (Weber, 1978). By focussing on the alternative economic characteristics of such practices, it encourages us to develop an alternative conceptualisation of the term that aims to situate innovation in the particular ‘moral economic’ characteristics, symbolic meanings and social values attributed to their practices.

As discussed above, despite the centrality of innovation in driving socio-economic change, a dominant understanding of the term has contributed to its direct association with constant economic growth through profit maximisation and laboratory techno-science (Felt et al., 2007; Levidow and Neubauer, 2012). However, such narrow conceptualisations are not without internal contradictions: first, despite its attempt to respond to socio-economic crises, innovation results in perpetuating a particular economic system which has been widely accused of being one of the causes of such crises; second, despite its intention to contribute to future transformation and change, innovation results in becoming a top-down, socially exclusive ‘conservative project’ (Suchman and Bishop, 2000) mainly contributing to the reproduction of the existing socio-economic order which it aims to address.

Such a problematic opens up some space for exploring alternative frameworks for conceptualising innovation around some other, currently marginalised, small-scale, bottom-up practices. As discussed above, the concepts of ‘distributed’ (Felt et al., 2007), ‘open’, ‘user-centred’ (Von Hippel, 2005), ‘consumer’ (Urry, 2013) and ‘disruptive’ (Tyfield et al., 2010; Geels and Schot, 2007) innovations have been used in order to suggest a more inclusive meaning of the term through the establishment of more collective forms of participation and a further democratisation of its processes. Such concepts have also provided inspiration for this paper to develop its own alternative framework for conceptualising innovation through the particular lens of the political economic discourse of the ‘moral economy’: a framework which has helped us realise the moral economic character of all innovation processes – a fact which also becomes reflected in the discourse on crisis resolution that is commonly used by different innovators in order to provide moral justification of different innovation processes and practices. By doing so, it has also encouraged us to investigate innovation through the lens of a particular ‘moral economy’, this of some small-scale alternative agro-food and mobility practices. It has urged us to re-think innovation by situating it in other economies and the other, non-monetary, social and symbolic values and meanings attributed to them.

As seen above, the alternative agro-food and mobility practices in Manchester and Birmingham engage in an array of alternative economic practices that seek to provide their own response to crises and the socio-economic inequalities related to them. More specifically, by employing multiple economic forms – monetary and non-monetary, based on productive, reproductive or voluntary labour, based on formal or informal networks of exchange, the exchange of both material and immaterial goods and services, the articulation of use, exchange, but also other socio-cultural and ‘sign’ values and meanings attributed to money and commodities – such initiatives constitute part of an alternative ‘economic imaginary’ (Jessop, 2008) intended to provide alternative solutions in times of crisis. Thus, by doing so, such initiatives provide some fertile ground for an alternative conceptualisation of innovation that is situated in the particular moral economy of alternative economic practices: an innovation that can be organised around relations of sharing and co-operation, social cohesion, community development and self-governance, an ethic of care and solidarity towards proximal and distant others, of equality and social inclusion of the disadvantaged. They provide clues to the potential of other small-scale, bottom-up practices to constitute alternative innovation practices. And, in doing so, they help us re-think innovation by situating it in a more inclusive understanding of the ‘economic’ (Gibson-Graham, 1996; 2006) and the particular moral economic characteristics (Sayer, 2000; Booth, 1994; Thompson, 1971; Scott 1976 etc.) and the specific sets of values and relations (Baudrillard, 1972; Appadurai, 1994; Mauss, 1967; Graeber, 2001 etc.) – economic, social, cultural, environmental – attributed to them.

However, it is important not to overstate the extent to which the above practices can currently constitute alternative innovation practices. Despite the significant ‘moral economic’ aspects attributed to them, in many occasions, both agro-food and mobility practitioners expressed concerns about the initiatives’ future vitality. Despite their attempts to reach the most vulnerable and socio-economically excluded parts of the population, many of them remain ‘elite practices’ (Birtchnell and Caletrio, 2013), manifestations of an individualistic, middle class life-political project of transformation that also remain exclusive towards parts of the local populations. Also, according to others, some of these practices embrace high-budget aspects, usually hidden in the economic organisation of the initiatives and expressed in the lack of financial and policy support towards their practices. Thus, future research needs to address these questions that appear crucial for exploring the future potential of these practices to go beyond the specific lock-ins of the current economic system. It needs to investigate the ways such initiatives can go beyond a ‘niche’ level (Geels and Schot, 2007) and establish an alternative regime that can transform their alternative ‘economic imaginary’ (Jessop, 2008) into a ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ (Merton, 1948) which

can also succeed in shaping future socio-economic realities in its own image. In other words, it needs to explore the potential of such innovations to constitute long-term 'sustainable innovations' (Urry, 2011; 2013) that will be able to challenge the lock-ins of the existing systems.

However, the above analysis provides some space for rethinking innovation through alternative agro-food and mobility practices. In particular, by focusing on the alternative-economic characteristics of these practices, it contributes to rethinking innovation through a moral economy lens. By pointing to the potential of alternative economic practices to constitute alternative innovation practices, it opens up some space for challenging the dominant understanding of innovation usually contributing to the reproduction of the existing socio-economic order (Suchman and Bishop, 2000). By situating innovation in the moral and diverse economic characteristics of different socio-material practices, it encourages us to develop a more holistic and inclusive understanding of the term and explore the innovation potential of other, currently marginalised micro-practices. In doing so, it can also provide some space for opening up new opportunities for enhancing the future vitality of such initiatives. By highlighting the particular moral economic aspects, as well as the wider benefits deriving from the social relations and other, non-economic values related to their practices, it can have an impact on a future re-orientation of official support and funding towards those 'other' projects and initiatives which mostly remain silenced and ignored by current research and policy agendas on innovation.

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Interview BL210613, Birmingham, 21 June 2013.  
Interview HSK020908, Manchester, 2 September 2008.  
Interview MB160109, Manchester, 16 January 2009.  
Interview LD110713, Birmingham, 11 July 2013.  
Interview MS180713, Solihull, 18 July 2013.  
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Interview RS290708, Manchester, 29 July 2008.

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