



Tracing politicisation in community agriculture: a semiotic analysis of participatory mind maps

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Abstract

Debates on agriculture and food increasingly highlight the depoliticising effects of neoliberal governance, technocratic regulation, and consumer-oriented solutions. While a growing literature has examined collective action dynamics within grassroots agrifood initiatives, less attention has been focused on the processes through which politicisation may emerge. The article addresses this gap by examining how political meanings are constructed through collective processes of meaning-making in community agriculture. Building on a processual conception of the political as an ontologically present dimension of social relations, the study proposes a semiotic approach to analyse how practices of politicisation and depoliticisation unfold within everyday communication. Methodologically, the article combines political semiotics with participatory mind-mapping workshops co-created with three community agriculture initiatives in Italy. The analysis draws on linguistic functions to trace how different communicative configurations support or constrain the emergence of political meanings. The findings show that politicisation is encouraged by communicative environments where relational interaction, contextual interpretation, symbolic expression, and orientations toward collective action reinforce one another. Depoliticising tendencies, by contrast, tend to emerge when these linguistic functions become disconnected, for instance when discourse remains confined to technical descriptions, individualized narratives, or symbolic imagery without grounding in shared interpretations of socio-economic contexts. By foregrounding the communicative infrastructures through which meanings are negotiated, the article contributes to debates on Community Food Networks and environmental post-politics. More broadly, it advances a methodological framework for observing processes of politicisation empirically through the analysis of collective meaning-making practices.

Keywords Political · Politicisation · Community agriculture · Community food networks · Semiotic analysis · Processual approach

Introduction

In the European context, the current state of polycrises has brought agriculture and food back to the centre of public debate. A growing plethora of political actors has expressed the need to design sustainable food systems, contributing to a certain common understanding that food is a critical area of action for climate emergency mitigation. These discourses have often proved ambiguous and incapable of clarifying what is meant by sustainability of local food systems

and what the green transition in the agri-food sector entails. Part of this ambiguity can be explained by observing how these issues have been addressed differently by European political and economic institutions and local peasant communities. The former have established a hegemony of technical and scientific discourse that treats agrifood problems as technical issues to be resolved through technological inputs, thereby sidelining the role of politics; the latter, by contrast, have insisted on a socio-political rethinking of food systems that places the issues of environmental and social justice at the heart of the food transition and that is based on shared decision-making and collective management of natural resources. This opposition is a clear example of the simultaneous and contradictory emergence of practices of politicisation and depoliticisation of agriculture and food.

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These processes of depoliticisation are characterised by a tendency to neutralise the socio-economic conflicts that run through the agrifood sector; consequently, awareness of how food is linked to the wider neoliberal socio-economic system is often silenced in favour of normative discourses on individual choices and behaviours (Pellizzoni 2014). Depoliticisation is expressed through a technicisation of food governance, in which the way food is produced, distributed and consumed is managed as a technical and logistical problem. At the same time, however, agriculture and food have been politicised through material and discursive processes that highlight the economic and social inequalities inherent in the agrifood sector. Processes of politicisation involve a rethinking of agrifood systems rooted in food sovereignty: a concept originally advanced by transnational peasant movements such as La Vía Campesina (Nyéléni, 2007) and subsequently developed within critical agrarian studies (Claeys et al. 2021), which recognises the right of each community, in its collective capacity, to define its own agricultural and food systems.

The aim of this paper is to examine how local peasant communities engage in discursive processes of agrifood politicisation through relational modes of meaning-making. At a theoretical level, I move from substantialist conceptions of the political to a processual one: I embrace no single definition of the political, but rather a plethora of concepts that work as situated analytical tools rather than as essential and neutral notions. Methodologically, I propose a semiotic approach to politicisation based on the model of linguistic functions (Jakobson 1960) applied to mind maps (Buzan 2002). Semiotics is here understood as a qualitative, interpretive method rooted in structural linguistics and consonant with the relational turn in the social sciences (Selg and Ventsel 2020) that examines how meaning emerges from the relations between signs within a given communicative context. In the following pages, I begin from the premise that agriculture and food are political in their social ontology (Schmitt 2007/1932; Mouffe 2005; Laclau and Mouffe 2011) and that the analytical question should shift from whether this political dimension exists to how it emerges in practice.

To emphasise the relational dimension from which processes of politicisation emerge, I have chosen to focus on community agriculture. Community agriculture describes grassroots practices of land commoning for food production. Productive activities are coordinated through assemblies which deliberate by way of consensual decision-making. The benefits and risks of productive activities are shared among the community as both surplus and scarcity are redistributed. While maximising the possibility for everyone to enjoy periods of abundant harvest, agricultural activities are supported by solidaristic networks that ensure their

sustainability faced with frequent disruptions of cultivation due to climate unpredictability and ecological disasters. Community agriculture is a broad umbrella term to represent the internal diversity of Community Food Networks (CFNs). CFNs, coined from the literature on Alternative Food Networks (AFN) (Goodman et al. 2012) encompass experiences of redesigning local food networks through different community institutions that exceed single organizational models such as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) (Piccoli et al. 2021; Degens and Lapschies 2023). While CSA represents one significant form of community agriculture, the cases examined in this article also include different modes of land commoning. CFNs offer an interesting case to investigate the political because, similarly to AFNs, they are often labelled as ambiguous spaces where critiques of the agro-industrial system can coexist with the reproduction of social hierarchies and market logics (Parisi et al. 2026). Among the dense landscape of European CFNs, I chose to focus on Italy as it offers a fertile ground for the study. Italian agriculture is characterised by a persistent structural fragmentation dominated by small-scale farming. With over 1.1 million farms in 2020 and a mean farm size well below European averages, the sector has combined structural smallholding with exposure to unfair food chain practices (Fonte and Cucco 2017). This context has also sustained a long tradition of solidarity-based food initiatives, from the pioneering development of solidarity purchasing groups to the more recent growth of community agriculture.

Following the methodological approach developed by Huber and Lorenzini (2020) in their online mapping of urban agriculture initiatives in Geneva, I conducted a systematic online mapping of the landscape of CFNs in Italy. Based on their pioneering role within the field, longevity, geographical distribution, and organizational variety I have selected three representative communities: Arvaia, a CSA project in Bologna founded in 2013; the mutual help space Bread&Roses active in Bari since 2016; Mondeggi in Florence, a community who occupied the homonym estate in 2014 to cultivate the land and prevent municipal authorities from selling it. While these communities differ in their legal and organisational form, their comparability rests on a shared substantive definition of community agriculture as land commoning for food production, as well as on a similar social structure: each community is organised around a core group of active members, surrounded by a wider and more loosely engaged community. The composition of these core groups is diverse in terms of age and gender, reflecting the open and non-hierarchical ethos of these spaces, which tend toward an equitable distribution of responsibilities even if they always rest on precarious balances of power. Age and generational motivations vary across participants, with different cohorts engaging with community

agriculture for different reasons rather than along defined age lines. The most significant axis of social variation concerns ethnic diversity: all three communities are predominantly white, with the notable exception of Bread&Roses, whose membership is more ethnically mixed, reflecting the broader socio-economic context of Southern Italy where migrant labour has historically been central to agrifood supply chains and deeply embedded in the social fabric of cities like Bari. All three communities took part in a participatory research methodology lasting over three years from 2019 to 2023 (Kindon et al. 2010). Empirical results have been co-created through participatory diagramming like mind maps that capture the non-linear and collective dimension of meaning-making (Wiley 1994), complementing and expanding upon the ethnographic and participatory research approaches already explored in the literature on CFNs.

The text is structured as follows. In the first section, I will discuss the differences between processes of politicisation and depoliticisation, outlining the boundaries of two opposing paradigms for the sake of analytical simplicity, whilst emphasising their empirical inseparability. In the second section, I will introduce the semiotic method used to develop the analysis. Finally, the third and final section will present the case studies along with their associated mind maps and critically assess the discursive processes of the politicisation of agriculture and food.

Politicisation and depoliticisation in the field of agriculture and food

Formulating a definition of what constitutes the political is a complex conceptual undertaking, one that has already been extensively addressed in the literature (for a synthesis, see Wiley 2016). In its most common usage, ‘political’ functions as a generic adjective denoting belonging to the sphere of formal politics: parties, institutions, policies, and public debate. In a second, more philosophical register, ‘the political’ – rendered as a substantive – designates an ontological dimension of social life: the irreducible presence of conflict and power in human relations (Schmitt 2007/1932; Mouffe 2005; Laclau and Mouffe 2011). This article draws on this second register as its theoretical foundation while operating primarily in a third: politicisation and depoliticisation as processual phenomena. In this sense, the question is not whether agriculture and food are political, as they inevitably are, nor where the political is ultimately located, but rather how political meanings may or may not emerge through the everyday communicative practices of peasant communities within the neoliberal food regime (Bové and Dufour 2001; McMichael 2009). It is this processual and empirically oriented understanding of politicisation that the semiotic

framework developed in the following section is designed to capture. Classical political theory identifies a paradox in democratic expansion: as more social issues become subject to public deliberation, the boundaries of the political broaden beyond traditional institutions (Sartori 1973; Schmitt 2007/1932). While conventional approaches locate the political in specific arenas such as the state, government or identifiable institutional features, the processual perspective adopted here treats this expansion as an emancipatory opportunity (Foucault 1980). It shifts attention from the state or the polis (Schmitt 2007/1932; Ricoeur 1975; Weber 1994; Arendt 1977; Wolin 2004) to society as a whole as the primary site of the political (Lefort 1988; Mouffe 2005; Laclau and Mouffe 2011).

The aim of this paper is to examine how processes of politicisation of agriculture and food are contested in the experience of peasant communities, within an institutional and economic context marked by profound depoliticisation in favour of techno-scientific approaches. From a processual perspective that conceives social phenomena as fundamentally contingent, both politicisation and depoliticisation are understood as dynamic practices that allow for the political to become voiced or silenced. Accordingly, I conceptualize depoliticisation as a set of unfolding practices that stabilize and naturalize particular arrangements, presenting contingent choices as necessary, technical, or self-evident, thereby limiting their exposure to public contestation. Depoliticisation relocates decision-making away from open political debate and toward arenas that appear neutral such as expert bodies or bureaucratic procedures. Politicisation, by contrast, involves practices that disrupt such closures by exposing the constructed nature of these arrangements and re-opening them to disagreement, often by reconnecting them to broader normative conflicts and competing visions of the collective good. Rather than being treated as settled or taken for granted, a matter becomes politicised when actors frame it as involving competing values and interests thereby expanding the scope for conflict and participation, as different subjectivities can advance alternative interpretations and justify their positions with reference to broader political principles. It is worth emphasising that politicisation and depoliticisation do not map onto the presence or absence of ‘political’ content in discourse. A community may use the language of politics – invoking rights, justice, or collective action – without this necessarily constituting a process of politicisation in the sense developed here. What defines politicisation lies in the communicative configuration through which meanings become open to contestation, collective reinterpretation, and orientation toward collective action.

In the agrifood sector, processes of depoliticisation have been addressed in the literature by discussing the technocratic

management of socio-economic issues with reference to pesticides regulations in the EU (Hokkanen 2026) or biotechnologies in the US (Das et al. 2025); agritech (Sullivan 2023); the tendency to shift responsibility for agrifood matters to individuals and their habits or bodies (Boling and Cervini 2024); hunger and food insecurity (Warshawsky 2023; Kurtz et al. 2019); food systems transformation (Contesse et al. 2024). In these instances, depoliticisation is characterised by the acceptance of existing economic and managerial systems in agrifood governance and the avoidance to challenge them. Agrifood issues exemplify processes of depoliticisation (McCarthy and Prudham 2004; Swyngedouw 2009) also through the production of neoliberal subjectivities that frame consumers as autonomous and responsabilised agents expressing ethical and political commitments through consumption choices (Guthman 2008; Harris 2009). Food has become a key arena for this dynamic, with plant-based diets, superfoods and SmartFood trends promoted as environmentally responsible lifestyles, amounting to practices of food greenwashing (Blüdmann 2015). The depoliticisation of agriculture and food is part of a broader discursive phenomenon that constructs nature as an apolitical domain (McKibben 1990; Reynolds and Szafranski 2015). Rooted in Western thought, from Hobbes' nature/society divide (Hobbes 2011/1651) to Cartesian human–nature dualism (Descartes 1993/1637), this conception was reinforced from the 1980s through the extension of neoliberal principles to the biophysical world (Crouch 2004; Rancière 2006). Market mechanisms govern agrifood resources, reducing democratic oversight and accountability, while food, agriculture, climate and the environment are reframed as key domains for market and corporate intervention (Bakker 2015).

An unsolved inquiry remains about the paths of politicisation of agriculture and food, whether and how these have found fields of resistance to be tended to. Even the literature is less focused on politicisation with seldom analysis of participation in CSAs (Giovannini et al. 2024); reactions to hegemonic depoliticisation in the field of hunger (Oleschuk 2022) or failed attempts in the experience of community gardens (Spilková 2017). At a theoretical level, several contributions have advanced the understanding of politicisation in ways that directly inform this analysis. Anderl (2024) distinguishes politicisation from above – where agrifood issues are shifted from technical-administrative to political sphere by governmental actors, as in the historical case of the Green Revolution – and from below – where food sovereignty movements such as La Vía Campesina reframe agriculture as a site of collective struggle. This distinction provides a useful entry point for situating the communities examined here as their practices of meaning-making belong to the latter trajectory, emerging from grassroots agrifood initiatives. Daphi (2020) further advances the debate by

differentiating between internal and external depoliticisation within social movements, drawing attention to the ways in which political closure can operate from within a collective as much as from its institutional environment. Feindt et al. (2021), focusing on policy change, understand politicisation as a process, a strategy, and an outcome: a tripartite framing that underscores the multi-dimensionality of the phenomenon and its embeddedness in specific political conjunctures. Hay (2007) maps three arenas of politicisation – the public and governmental, the public non-governmental, and the private sphere – providing a spatial vocabulary that locates the experience of peasant communities within the non-governmental public domain. What remains less developed, however, is a methodological framework for observing how politicisation emerges in the moment of its formation, in the communicative practices through which peasant communities collectively elaborate political meanings.

It is indeed this observational gap that the semiotic approach proposed here seeks to address. Starting from the theoretical premise that the political is ontologically present in social relations, it can be understood as emerging through conceptual morphologies (Freedman 2005): relational configurations of concepts and meanings that orient collective interpretation and action. Freedman's insight that ideological formations are dynamic arrangements of concepts in relation to one another provides an insightful framework for understanding how political meanings take shape in practice. Similarly, Palonen's (2003) distinction between policy, polity, politicking, and politicisation as situated practices opens the analysis to the temporal and contingent dimensions of political life. Building on both contributions, this article extends their logic to the micro-level of collective meaning-making by analysing the conceptual morphologies that emerge in peasant communities' everyday communicative practices and through which they negotiate their understanding of agriculture, food and their situatedness in broader social relations. Processes of politicisation emerge when existing configurations of meaning are reworked, enabling actors to redefine problems, articulate claims, and coordinate collective action. This article therefore examines the shared production of meanings that contribute to the politicisation of agriculture and food and that, beyond the discursive realm, can shape collective practices. The aim is to show how politicisation arises through the negotiation, and contestation of meanings, allowing peasant communities to imagine and construct social realities and power relations differently from how they are experienced (Haugaard 2006). From this perspective, the continuous contestation of meaning is an ontological feature of politicisation, rooted in collective processes of signification. Political experiences emerge through the questioning and reconfiguration of established boundaries, enabling resistance to hegemonic

narratives and challenges to their validity. Conversely, the uncritical acceptance of dominant meanings, roles, and social arrangements reinforces depoliticisation. To locate political pathways within food and agriculture, and to contribute to the theoretical debate on environmental post-politics – the depoliticised management of ecological and agri-food issues through technocratic, consensual, and market-based governance arrangements that foreclose alternative imaginaries (De Moor et al. 2021) – I turn to a semiotic approach.

Political semiotic analysis of participatory mind maps

Semiotics is a qualitative and interpretive methodology rooted in structural linguistics that examines how meaning is produced through the relational and arbitrary nature of signs rather than their intrinsic properties (Lévi-Strauss 1963; De Saussure 1983). By tracing the emergence of meaning through relations among signs, political semiotics (Selg and Ventsel 2020, 2022) aligns with a processual understanding of politicisation and depoliticisation as dynamic and situated practices, thereby strengthening the research design.

Some theoretical and methodological approaches linked to semiotics are already used in agrifood literature, for example to study the alternative pet food movement (Baker 2025); strategies for commercialising certain food products (Andersson and Smith 2021); consumption trends (Evans 2020); superfoods (Reisman 2020); and the Farm to Fork strategy (Omar and Thorsøe 2024), but not through a systematic analysis of communicative forms as in this article. I have applied this methodological framework to the study of mind maps (Buzan 2002) adapted as collaborative diagrams (Kesby 2000): the maps analysed in this article were co-produced by community members during workshops. Participation in the mind-mapping workshops was open to all community members, though attendance tended to reflect the core group of most engaged participants within each community. Community leaders and reference figures were also present during the sessions. To mitigate the potential influence of these figures on the contributions of other participants, facilitation was conducted with attention to balancing speaking time and encouraging contributions from less vocal members. Moreover, the use of creative, diagram-based activities rather than verbal discussion partially decentred dominant rhetorical registers, fostering a more equal distribution of participation across the group.

On this basis, I have adopted political semiotics (Selg and Ventsel 2022) as a methodological framework linked to Jakobson's (1960) model of communication. In this model,

– sender, receiver, message, context, code and channel – and, depending on which of these elements is emphasised, language performs a specific function. Although every communication simultaneously activates all six functions, one of them tends to prevail and shape the overall meaning of the utterance. The order in which the linguistic functions are hereafter presented does not follow the standard sequence of Jakobson's model (*ibid.*) but reflects a progressive analytical framework that moves from the conditions of possibility of discourse towards more interpretative and pragmatic elements. There is an often implicit yet fundamental dimension of communication that concerns the very conditions which encourage or inhibit it. An example of the daily life of a peasant community might be the informal conversations held at markets or whilst cooking together where a shared space allows for experiences and interpretations to circulate and be processed. These situations express the phatic function, which concerns the communicative channel and has as its purpose the maintenance of contact between participants in the interaction (Jakobson 1960). These interactions rarely produce explicit claims but constitute the communicative infrastructure without which political meanings could neither emerge nor consolidate. In collective mapping activities, this dimension becomes observable in the very construction of the diagram as a space for shared enunciation.

Starting from this shared relational space, it becomes possible to observe how meanings are organised in the representation of reality. A second analytical observation concerns the way in which language constructs what is being discussed as a shared reality. The referential function (Jakobson 1960; Hébert 2020) is context-oriented and determines the way in which an utterance presents itself as a plausible description of reality: the way in which what is said is constructed as factual within a shared frame of reference. In mind maps, this function becomes empirically observable in the selection of the problems represented and in the formulations that present certain conditions as objective facts. Using this discursive function, descriptions of the agricultural context become interpretative frameworks that can make power relations and inequalities visible, or be presented as technical and necessary matters, thereby restricting the space for dissent. If a peasant community identifies the unfair distribution of land as a problem and the issue of access to cultivation, it is transforming a material situation into a public issue, placing it within a context of potential conflict and politicising it. Describing the same situation as a restructuring of the agricultural market would tend to present factual elements as technical and impersonal processes and thus depoliticised.

Alongside the construction of a shared reality, every communicative act reveals the social positions from which

a given discourse takes shape as it bears the traces of the speaker. The emotional function is centred on the sender, on their attitude towards the content of the message (Jakobson 1960). Often interpreted as a representation of affective states, it can be understood more generally as an expressive function (Klinkenberg 1996): even the most neutral discourse reveals something about the social position, material conditions or competences of the sender. In mind maps, this dimension emerges in the presence of experiential narratives or technical language, and the traces of lived experience. The expressive dimension of language contributes to processes of politicisation because it makes visible the social positions from which certain interpretations and claims emerge.

Whilst the expressive dimension makes the subjects of the utterance observable, a further level concerns those moments when language becomes the object of reflection. The code-oriented metalinguistic function emerges when speakers discuss the meaning of the words they use and verify that they share the same interpretative framework (Jakobson 1960). In mind maps, this function can be traced in moments of terminological negotiation, in lexical alternatives and in concepts discussed collectively before being graphically fixed. Debating whether the term peasant conveys backwardness or belonging to a productive tradition means intervening on the symbolic boundaries of collective

identity, opening spaces for political debate. Conversely, when certain definitions are accepted as self-evident and indisputable, their meaning becomes fixed and tends to depoliticise language.

Once the content and conceptual categories have been considered, the analysis can turn to the way in which meanings are rendered symbolically rich and culturally accessible. The poetic function is centred on the message and concerns the formal organisation of language, that is, the way in which the form of the utterance contributes to the production of meaning (Jakobson 1960). Protest slogans, narratives about the land and agricultural labour constitute symbolic devices that make messages more recognisable and shareable within the community. In mind maps, this dimension takes shape by visual metaphors or emphasised keywords that condense and reinforce collective meaning. Politicisation thrives on languages capable of evoking, synthesising and making experiences and conflicts shareable; depoliticisation, on the other hand, tends to rely on standardised and technical registers that diminish the symbolic power of discourse and limit its public resonance.

Finally, the transition from the symbolic construction of meaning to its practical application brings to light the pragmatic dimension of language. Far from being confined to an exclusively symbolic dimension, language can directly prompt action. Appeals, invitations, but also orders and imperatives constitute the conative function of language (Jakobson 1960), which is directed towards the addressee. In the processes of politicisation of peasant communities, this function becomes particularly significant at moments when the discourse shifts from defining a problem to proposing a collective response. In mind maps, this dynamic emerges through the presence of organisational proposals, requests addressed to institutions, or calls for collective mobilisation. Here, language contributes to the material emergence of the political, transforming shared visions into guidelines for collective action. Depoliticisation, on the other hand, emerges when discourse discourages involvement, systematically delegates decisions to external authorities, or presents collective action as ineffective. The correspondence between each communicative function and the two poles of politicisation and depoliticisation, summarised in Table 1, was derived deductively from the theoretical definitions developed in the previous section. Each linguistic function was thus associated with the way it can either sustain or foreclose contention and conflict. This theoretically derived mapping was subsequently examined against the empirical material: the recurring configurations observed across the mind maps confirmed the plausibility of these correspondences while also clarifying how the functions interact in practice.

Table 1 Correspondence between communicative functions and forms of the political

Communicative functions	Communicative factors	Politicisation	Depoliticisation
Phatic	Contact	Creating shared spaces for communication	Relational fragmentation and discursive isolation
Referential	Context	Questioning reality, highlighting conflict	Naturalisation, technification, inevitability
Expressive	Addresser/sender	The emergence of collective subjectivities, the visibility of social positions	Depersonalisation, neutralisation of viewpoints
Metalinguistic	Common code	Redefinition of concepts, semantic openness	Stabilisation, interpretative closure
Poetic	Message	Symbolic condensation; cultural resonance	Technical language; loss of evocative power
Conative	Addressee/receiver	Mobilisation, coordination of collective action	Delegation, passivity, discouragement of action

Mapping meaning-making in community agriculture

The participatory workshops generated a collective process through which participants negotiated how to represent their communities. Observing how this process unfolded provides an important entry point for understanding the communicative environments within which practices of politicisation and depoliticisation may emerge. This section therefore begins by examining how the exercise was collectively organized: these dynamics are closely related to the phatic and metalinguistic functions of communication, which regulate both the maintenance of communicative ties and the collective negotiation of shared meanings. Although Arvaia, Bread&Roses, and Mondeggi have followed different directions in their participatory research experience, the session always began and ended with check-in and check-out exercises that respectively helped the group enter the situation and concentrate or evaluate and leave the moment. The core activity started with a preliminary phase of brainstorming to generate as many ideas as possible around the prompt *[community] is....* After collecting some entries, participants sketched their maps on white posters by dividing the notes into thematic groups. They have been left with complete autonomy to decide the format, colours and design of the diagram. Then, the group moved to a broader discussion around the overall significance and representation of the map. Every session lasted for a total of 3 h with the participation of around 10–15 community members in plenary.

Arvaia

Arvaia is one of Italy's first and most important Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) initiative; it was founded in February 2013 in Bologna, Northern Italy and is part of the Italian National CSA Network. Its creation was inspired by a German CSA in Freiburg: after months of weekly meetings and exchanges with the German group, farming activities began with a small group of people cultivating land made available by a local association. In 2015, a local council tender for the allocation of surrounding land enabled Arvaia to consolidate its operations across 47 hectares. As is typical of CSAs, all farming activities are funded through an annual solidarity-based auction held between February and March: each member contributes a minimum amount or more than the auction base price, according to their means, to ensure full funding for the year's production. Throughout the year, members receive a weekly basket of fresh vegetables, which can be collected from the fields or at distribution points in town, and are encouraged to play an active role in community life through volunteering, financial support and participation in organised events.

Arvaia was the only community to choose to conduct the workshop in five sub-groups rather than as a plenary session, producing five distinct mind maps. This choice is a key point for analysis, as it suggests that the community identified the plenary discussion as a source of difficulty and therefore preferred to reduce the number of participants in each interaction. To some extent, this observation can be explained by the very structure of the community: Arvaia is constituted as a CSA initiative whereby members pre-finance agricultural activities through subscription fees and receive weekly vegetable shares in return. Plenary assemblies occur only twice a year: once to collect advance payments and once to present the annual social and financial report. Outside these moments, weekly meetings are primarily organized around operational working groups – farmers, distribution, events, coordination. Although formally open to all members, participation typically involves a small, highly active minority. This organizational segmentation appears to translate into difficulties in collectively managing large deliberative settings. The most frequent meetings focus on technical and productivity-related matters, limiting opportunities for broader collective meaning-making and encourage a form of discursive insulation within the community. These observations may point to less familiarity with the plenary assembly format and a looser communicative infrastructure that constrains the emergence of shared discursive spaces where political meanings can be collectively negotiated. In terms of the phatic function, this fragmented communicative infrastructure aligns with the depoliticising pole identified in Table 1: the relative insulation between subgroups limits the formation of a single shared arena of discussion, constraining the extent to which contingent arrangements can be collectively exposed and contested across the community as a whole.

Figures 1, 2 and 3 display a relatively wide range of entries organized into thematic clusters such as *community*, *work*, *environment* or *nature*, *emotions*, *food*, and *politics*. These categories portray multiple facets of the CSA experience, yet they do not immediately clarify the collective's broader positioning. Presented without strong qualification, the terms appear relatively neutral and require the sub-branches of the maps to gain specificity. The bullet-pointed articulations associated with each thematic area add informational detail, but they only partially situate these meanings within the wider socio-political context in which the community operates.

Expressions such as *socialization*, *ethical work*, *nature*, *inclusive*, *healthy and fair veggies*, and *life change* may indicate an underlying critical awareness of agricultural and food systems. At the same time, their breadth and generality make it difficult to identify clearly articulated socio-economic tensions. A degree of implicit contrast with



Fig. 1 Arvaia mind map #1 (November 2021)

alternative models of agriculture can be inferred, particularly in the clusters connected to *politics*, yet the vocabulary used remains open-ended. Terms such as *revolution*, *against*, and *life change* evoke transformation, but the agents and concrete stakes of this transformation remain only loosely specified.

A similar dynamic emerges in relation to the community's constructive vision. In Fig. 2, the term *alternative* recurs, suggesting a desire to differentiate the CSA model from dominant systems. However, the practical and political substance of this alternative is not extensively elaborated. The presence of concepts such as *cooperation* may point more clearly toward internal politicising practices and toward a more action-oriented (conative) dimension of discourse. Since this term does not recur across the other maps, however, its degree of collective consolidation remains open to interpretation.

Figure 3 presents a somewhat different configuration. Here, most thematic areas, except *environment*, are further

articulated, and an additional cluster labelled *values and vision* is introduced. This structure contributes to a stronger referential dimension of discourse, in that the community's internal relational frames (*community and mission*) are distinguished from outward-looking and more explicitly transformative orientations (*challenge and utopia*). The cluster work and production foregrounds the economic dimension and names tensions that are more clearly situated within debates on agricultural labour and ethics. Similarly, food and consumption broaden the semantic scope of the theme by framing food as an object of consumption and commodification: an aspect that is implicitly questioned. This referential ambivalence – naming economic and commodification-related tensions without fully exposing their underlying contingency – typifies a partial form of politicisation in which a matter is rendered visible as potentially problematic without being decisively opened to contestation.

By contrast, Figs. 4 and 5 do not explicitly identify thematic clusters and instead group entries into only three

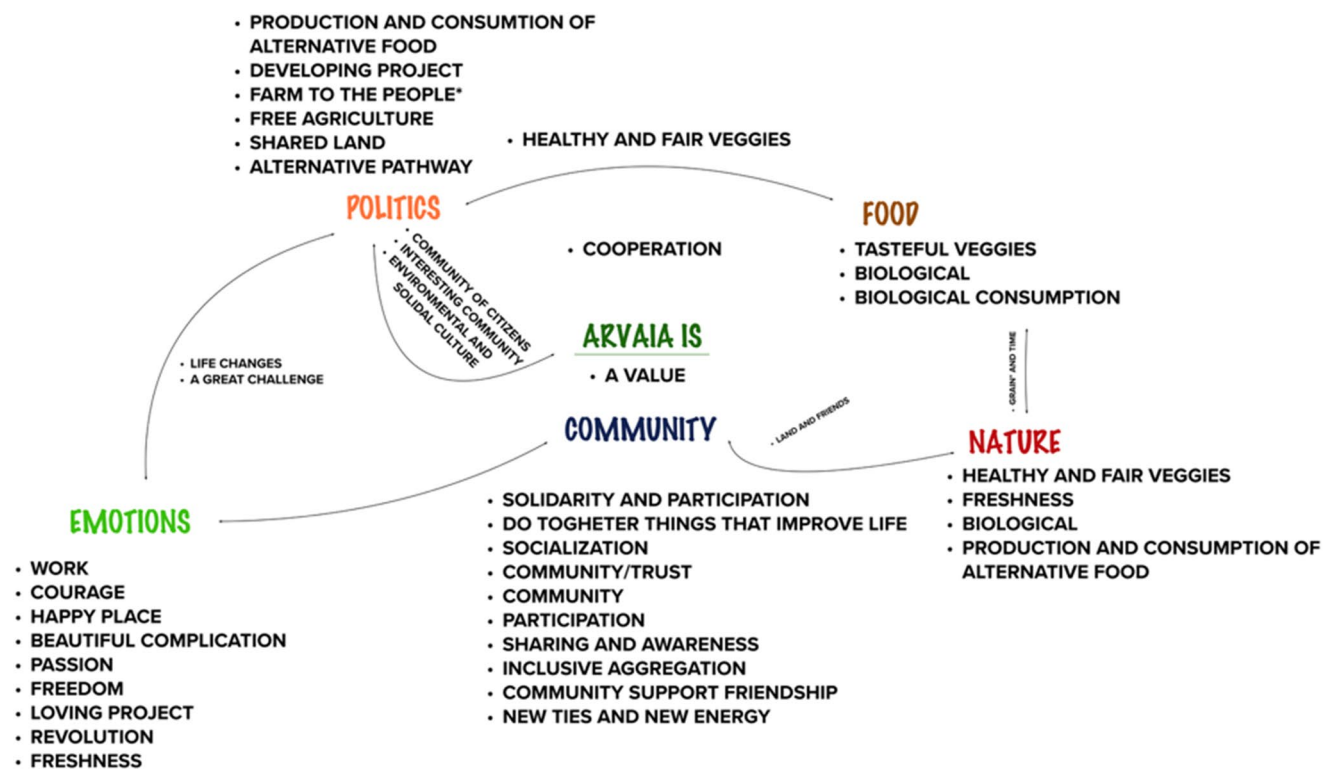


Fig. 2 Arvaia mind map #2 (November 2021)

subsets. This organizational choice may suggest a different level of contextual specification in the representation of the community's positioning.

Comparable patterns across the five maps appear in the expression of members' positionality. Terms used to describe the human dimension of the community – such as *citizens*, *the people*, and *friends* – convey collective subjectivity, though in relatively general and socially undifferentiated ways. In Fig. 1, *friends* points toward a more private and affective sphere and is indeed placed close to the emotional cluster; *the people*, when located within the politics area, takes on a more populist resonance. In Figs. 4 and 5 references to members' positionality are largely absent, with community functioning as the primary marker of collective identity: broadly inclusive, though conceptually open-ended. Alternatively, the group could agree on identifying itself as a community of citizens, united by a shared purpose. In the words of one participant, with long a long experience in the CSA but no relevant political engagement beforehand: “we, as citizens primarily, come together to engage in a thought process that starts from the grass-roots” (w.ARV5) expressing a perspective that leaned more towards civic rather than political engagement (Henk et al. 2012). The connection between referential and expressive communicative functions was further discussed between participants. The extent to which the community recognises and challenges structural disparities within its larger

context was not considered as qualifying of the project and remained a matter of individual interpretation. One of the older members in the community with a history of engagement in the local communist party stated:

those who believe that to join Arvaia, you must be left-wing and revolutionary, and those who are not, it means they haven't understood it, I have never accepted that. To bring a paradox: if someone who openly supports the League [right-wing, conservative Italian party] wants to join Arvaia and accepts Arvaia's rules, that's perfectly fine. There is no ideological position that represents Arvaia (w.ARV5).

From the standpoint of the expressive function, there is a prevalence of broad, depersonalised subject positions over the articulation of distinct collective subjectivities with situated interests and when referential and expressive dimensions remain general, they may hinder elaborate metalinguistic functions too. A similar tendency leans again toward the depoliticising end of the spectrum mapped in Table 1, in which diverging opinions neutralised rather than foregrounded as positions to be defended or contested. In Fig. 1, the circular layout suggests an interpretive configuration in which concepts coexist but are not extensively integrated into a more complex relational structure. A degree of semantic compartmentalization can also be observed in

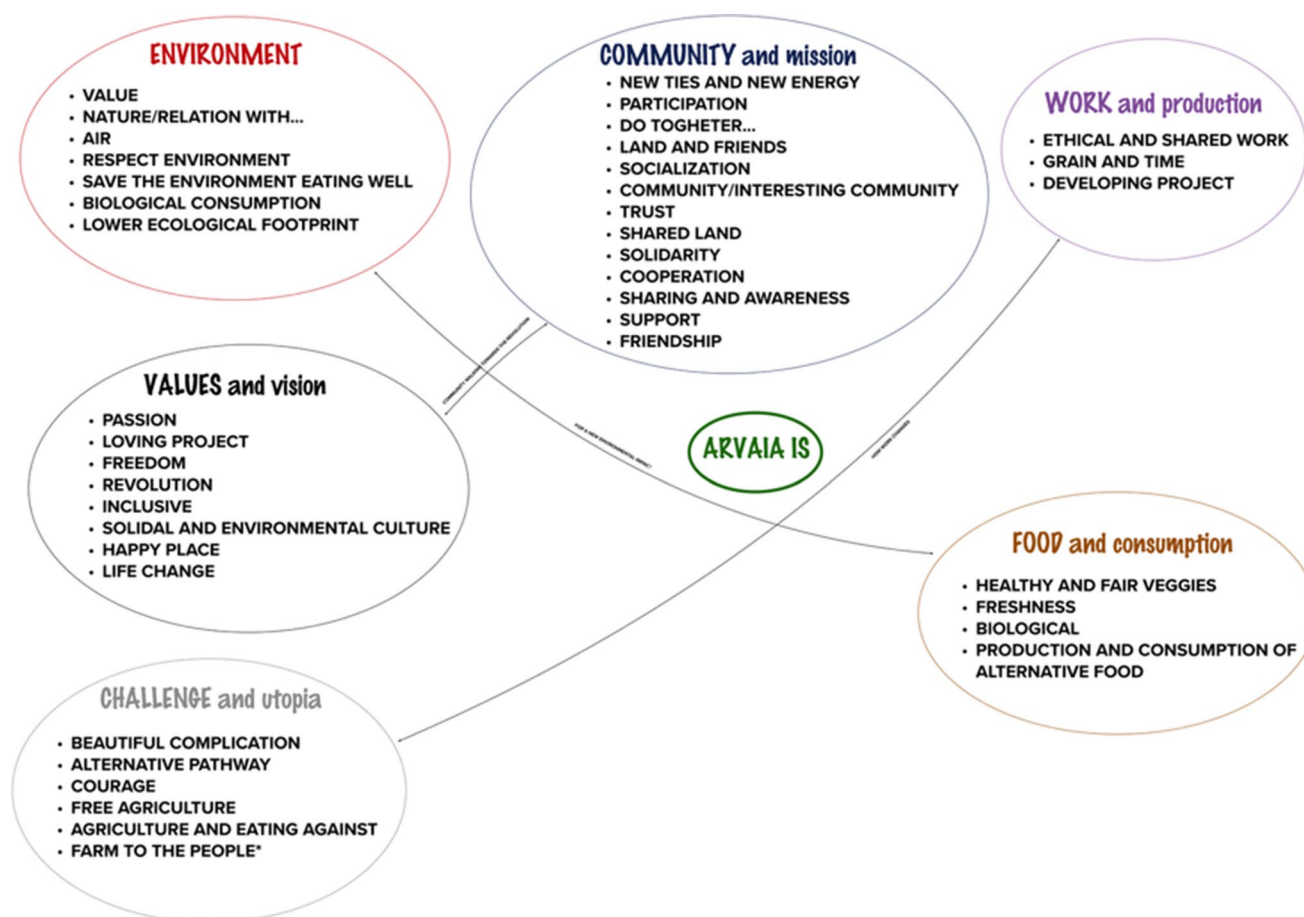


Fig. 3 Arvaia mind map #3 (November 2021)

Fig. 4 Arvaia mind map #4 (November 2021)

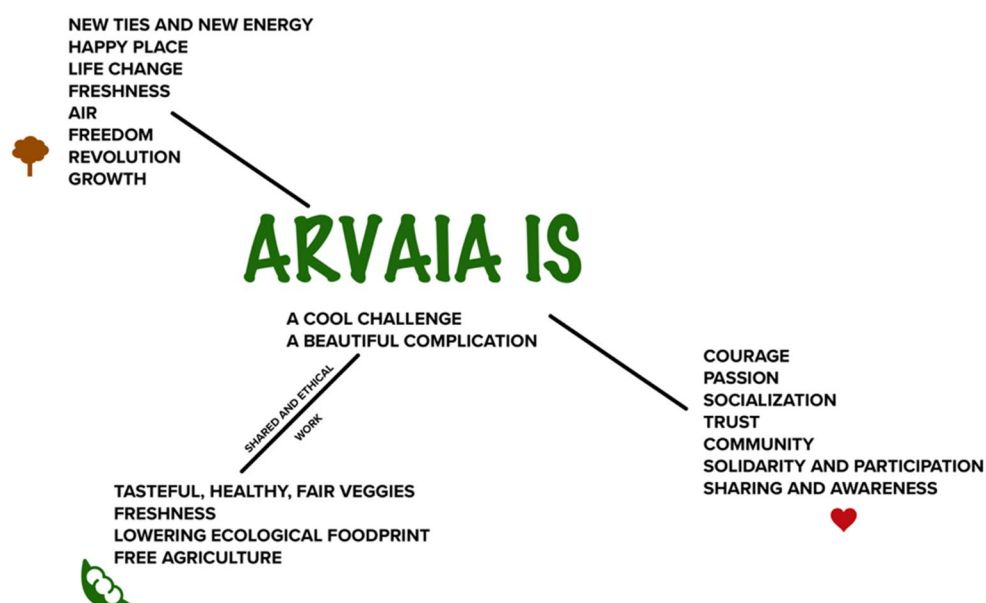
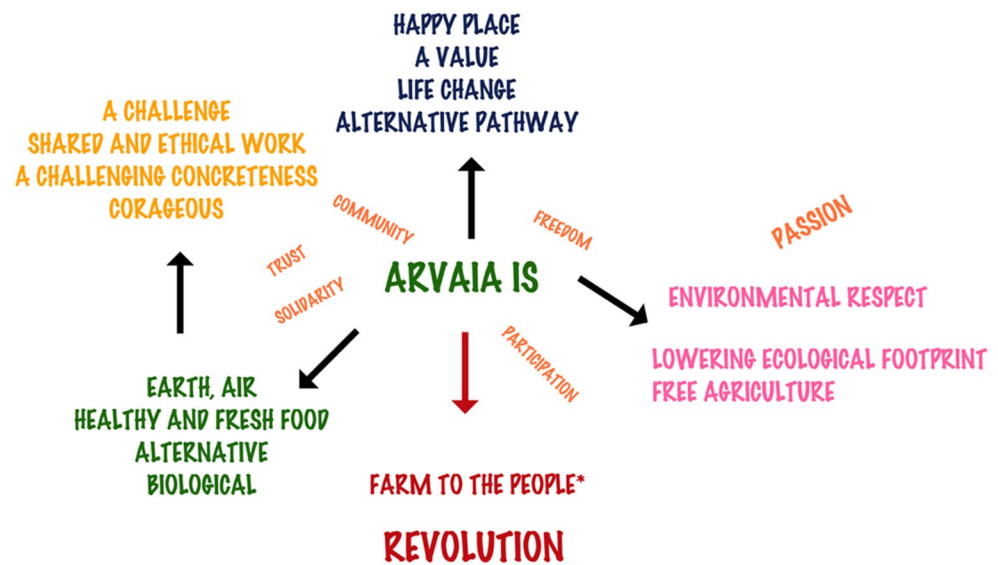


Fig. 5 Arvaia mind map #5
(November 2021)



the limited connections between *politics*, *food*, and *environment*, and in the *food* cluster's emphasis on technical aspects and intrinsic qualities, such as taste and health, rather than explicit political framing (aside from the term *fair*). In Fig. 2, relational lines between major thematic areas offer clearer indications of connections between *politics*, *food*, and *emotions*, though the overall metalinguistic architecture remains relatively concise. Even where referential elements are comparatively stronger, the third map primarily juxtaposes paired thematic areas, particularly food and environment: an association that may align more readily with technical or ecological framings than with overtly political ones. Figures 4 and 5 present simpler structural configurations; the former appears highly streamlined, while the latter adopts a more dispersed arrangement in which entries are less clearly organized into relational patterns. This relatively limited metalinguistic elaboration across the five maps suggests that the conceptual boundaries of key terms like food, community, politics, alternative remain largely unchallenged: a condition more conducive to the stabilisation of shared meanings than to their contestation.

Finally, the evocative dimension of the maps and their potential orientation toward collective action remain relatively understated. *Farm to the people*, which appears across all maps, comes closest to a slogan-like formulation, yet a broader symbolic horizon that might resonate more deeply with the conceptual content is less evident. More generic expressions such as *save the environment* can be read as widely recognizable but also as rhetorically broad, sometimes associated in public debate with limited political specificity. From a poetic standpoint, the emotional domain appears the most developed: emotions are explicitly named and differentiated, and some are framed in active terms such as *sharing* which suggest the possibility of collective

practice. At the same time, their framing tends to situate them within a personal sphere, reinforcing an individualized portrayal of members as friends rather than as politically mobilized subjects. This relatively soft symbolic register also shapes the conative dimension of the discourse, which relies on a small number of general verbs such as *do things that improve life* and *do things together*. These formulations gesture toward collective engagement, while leaving its political direction relatively open. Taken together, the five maps depict a communicative configuration in which referential, metalinguistic, and conative functions remain loosely articulated. This configuration does not foreclose politicisation outright, but it constrains its development: economic and social tensions are intimated rather than named, conceptual boundaries are rarely contested, and calls to action remain generic.

Bread & Roses

The mental maps produced by Bread & Roses and Mondeggi were developed entirely in plenary sessions from the outset. This suggests a comparatively stronger phatic dimension of communication, sustained by dense informal exchange networks that make collective deliberation habitual. Both communities rely on frequent assemblies in their day by day, involving a large share of community members. These regular collective interactions may then normalize extended discussion and facilitate shared discursive environments (Habermas 1984; Eliasoph 1998). Bread&Roses, founded in March 2016 in Bari, Apulia, is one of Southern Italy most prominent agricultural projects, combining food production with broader community engagement and political activism. The initiative emerged from local networks tracing back to the late 1990s and was shaped by the involvement of

migrant communities, particularly in response to restrictive immigration laws. Agricultural activities are managed collectively by members through shared workdays, while food is distributed via a weekly market and, since the pandemic, home delivery. The community space was initially squatted and later formally recognized by the Municipality of Bari, while the fields are rented from a private owner.

To engage with the complexity of Bread&Roses' mind map (Fig. 6), it is useful to begin by examining the concepts in their singularity before moving to their relational structure. Several concepts directly connected to the central prompt already illustrate how different communicative functions operate as modes of political articulation. The density of the map already shows the community leaning towards the politicising pole of the phatic function (Table 1) thereby a habitual communicative infrastructure with frequent and broad-based assemblies has nourished the ability of its members to name and contest their social reality collectively. Expressions such as *overcoming the bureaucratic approach*, *conflictual self-help*, and *rethinking new forms of organization* situate the community within an openly contentious stance toward existing institutional arrangements.

Terms such as *feminist* and *convergence of needs and necessities* signal reflexive awareness of internal composition, inequalities, and the possibility that broader power relations may be reproduced within the collective itself. The phrase *slow impatience* evokes a radical political sensibility oriented toward rethinking everyday life as a site of transformation, mobilizing a shared symbolic horizon with strong evocative force. Finally, entries such as *practices* and *tools and spaces for political action* express a clear conative orientation, pointing toward the translation of this semantic configuration into concrete action repertoires (Tilly 1986).

The referential dimension of the map becomes particularly visible through its branching structure. Diagnostic frames – understood as interpretive elements that define what is problematic in the existing context – emerge most clearly in the upper-left section. Expressions such as *social struggle*, *social change*, *rebel by doing*, *reappropriate once own time*, and *live, not survive*, all connected to *politics*, articulate a reading of reality that foregrounds conflict and structural tension. These elements construct a shared interpretive frame that renders the socio-political environment intelligible as a field of contestation. A more explicitly



Fig. 6 Bread&Roses mind map (November 2021)

prognostic orientation – concerned with envisioning alternatives – appears primarily in the upper-right section, organized around *feminism* and *reciprocal care*. Related terms such as *antisexist*, *self-determination*, and *concrete help* clarify how contextual critiques are accompanied by a constructive imaginary grounded in shared values and practices. Diagnostic and prognostic dimensions thus operate in tandem, reinforcing the referential function as a politically situated construction of reality. The lower section of the map continues to support this referential architecture while interacting more directly with the conative function. Here, the emphasis shifts toward practices, ranging from broad organizational principles to more situated forms of action, through which diagnostic and prognostic orientations converge into operative strategies. Moving from left to right, one encounters general frameworks such as *participatory democracy*, *self-governance*, and *horizontality*, followed by more specific practices including *consensual positionality*, *sharing specific competences*, and *responding to claims*. This convergence of diagnostic and prognostic framings into concrete practices also reflects a strong conative orientation, which, per Table 1, supports politicisation insofar as it translates contested readings of reality into actionable and collectively endorsed forms of engagement.

From an expressive standpoint, it is noteworthy that the community is not defined through categorical labels describing its members, unlike in Arvaia's case where terms such as community, friends, or citizens were used. Here, no explicit descriptors classify the human component according to predefined social identities. At the same time, the evocative and symbolic density of the language conveys a strong sense of shared orientations and commitments. The community is less articulated as a fixed identity and more as a relational and processual subjectivity. This is made explicit in the lower-right area, where the expression *not identitarian* signals a reflexive stance toward belonging itself. Mediated through shared values and practices, collective subjectivity emerges as dynamic, critical process attentive to how structural power relations may be reproduced internally. This refusal of fixed identitarian categories, combined with a reflexively constructed collective subjectivity, exemplifies the politicising pole of the expressive function identified in Table 1, in which even diverging perspectives are foregrounded rather than neutralised. This reflexive attention to internal positionality – although not developed here as a fully intersectional analysis – resonates with feminist political ecology's attentiveness to how gender, race, and class intersect within collective subjectivities (Perreault et al. 2015) and is consistent with Bread&Roses' own historical roots in migrant communities.

The metalinguistic dimension is also particularly visible, both conceptually and visually. The richness of individual

entries is matched by the density of their interconnections, producing a layered semantic structure that supports nuanced interpretation. Concepts are actively redefined through their relations, generating a sense of semantic openness and ongoing conceptual work (Makarychev and Yatsyk 2017). Four densely connected clusters are particularly prominent. The first revolves around *practices*, linked to *feminism*, *eat figs*, *cooperation*, *rebel by doing*, *solidarity*, *conflictual self-help*, and *slow impatience*. A second cluster develops from *self-governance*, connected to *tools and spaces for political action*, *horizontality*, *self-organization*, *participatory democracy*, *shared management*, and *overcoming the bureaucratic approach*. A third one centres on *converging differences*, linking to *convergence of needs and necessities*, *consensual positionality*, *shared principles*, *not identitarian*, *shared creative freedom*, *observe and gather*, and *respond to claims*. The prominence of these clusters suggests a strong diagnostic grounding (Table 1) that sustains an equally developed prognostic orientation, supported by a clear conative tendency directed both outward, toward broader political engagement and inward, toward reflexive collective practice.

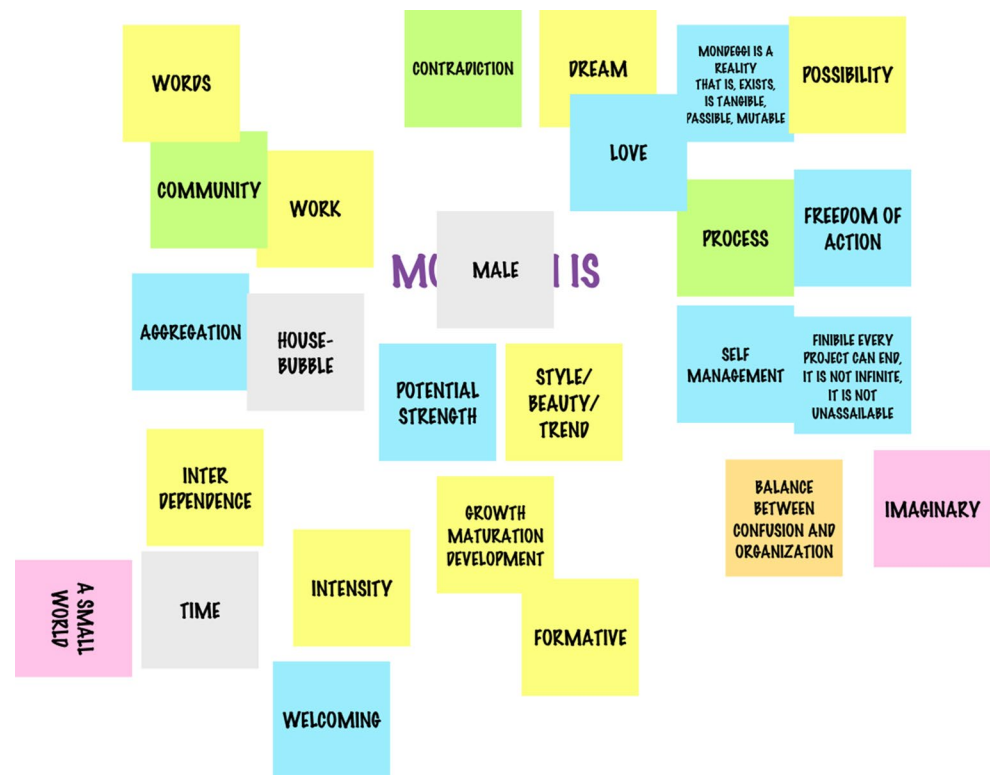
The poetic function emerges clearly across these elements. Rather than relying on technical language, the map mobilizes evocative expressions and dense symbolic condensation. It resonates with broader political cultures beyond the community itself (*feminism*, *antisexistism*, *mutual aid*, *participatory democracy*, and *self-management*) embedding local experience within wider traditions of political thought and practice. Alongside this macro-symbolic layer, a more everyday poetic dimension also appears. The image of *eating figs* as a simple and local act embodies a powerful convergence of meanings, condensing social and political orientations into an ordinary gesture.

Taken together, the six communicative functions identified in Bread&Roses' map reinforce one another into a coherent configuration: frequent and broad-based deliberation, a referential frame that foregrounds conflict and structural critique, a relationally constructed collective subjectivity, ongoing conceptual contestation, and a symbolic register that anchors everyday practices to broader political traditions. This convergence exemplifies the kind of communicative environment in which politicisation, as defined in this article, is emergent.

Mondeggi

While equally rich in themes, Mondeggi's map (Fig. 7) displays far fewer explicit links between entries, and relations are expressed more implicitly. In the former map (Fig. 6), numerous lines connected labelled boxes whereas here meaning is conveyed through spatial proximity, distance,

Fig. 7 Mondeggi mind map (March 2022)



and overlap. Part of this difference may be explained by material conditions such as availability of markers, post its, and the practical choices each group made in using them. Yet the contrast also suggests a different balance between linguistic functions, particularly the metalinguistic dimension. Mondeggi is an agricultural commune that was occupied in June 2014 and is situated in the southern hills of Florence, central Italy. The area, owned by the Province of Florence, had been abandoned, comprising around 200 hectares of agricultural land and farmhouses in a state of progressive disrepair. The initiative came about thanks to the collaboration between local communities and the student collective of the Faculty of Agriculture in Florence, active since the 1970s, which was engaged in mapping abandoned public land in Tuscany. The first practical activities on the estate included the spontaneous harvesting of olives and the production of oil distributed on a voluntary contribution basis. Subsequently, following the failure of various attempts at institutional dialogue and the involvement of the Metropolitan City of Florence, the community decided to formally occupy the land, launching one of the best-known rural cohabitation projects in Italy.

In Mondeggi's map the phatic dimension remains strong, similar to the other communities, but the metalinguistic function is less pronounced. This pattern can be understood considering the specificity of the community as a rural commune where collective and private life are deeply intertwined. Because the boundaries between personal and

communal spheres are more porous, semantic categories remain flexible and less formally negotiated, creating a discursive pattern that may serve as a compensatory boundary between individual and collective. At Mondeggi, the integration of communal and personal life fosters greater semantic tolerance: conceptual categories do not need full collective alignment, and differences can coexist without explicit negotiation. Indeed, the map reflects a loose coupling between phatic and metalinguistic dimensions (Table 1), allowing plural meanings to circulate without necessarily converging into the kind of shared, contestable arena that sustains politicisation elsewhere. These differences illustrate how the configuration of everyday interactions, the balance between shared reflexive work and semantic flexibility, directly influences the ways collective subjectivities and political possibilities are constructed (Agha 2007).

From a referential perspective, the map contains almost no explicit elements describing the broader socio-political context. The community is not defined through opposition to an external system, and the surrounding reality is not explicitly problematized. As a result, the map does not immediately render social conflict visible marginalizing the referential function of the diagram. However, unlike what was observed in Arvaia, where the referential dimension was also relatively limited, Mondeggi's map develops a strong internal characterization of the community. Rather than framing the collective by referencing structural conflicts external, the map emphasizes the community's internal

identity and experience. In the lower-left area Mondeggi is described as a *small world*, while near the centre it appears as a *house bubble*. The person who shared these words in the map, a member residing in Mondeggi since a couple of years, elicited them as follows:

it's about how relationships among people are formed, about how one can live in general, or about the products that are produced here. For the political aspect, it's about envisioning a different world because it's on a hill a bit higher than the rest of the world. I placed it close to time because perhaps it's time that creates this world, the fact that time is different because we perceive it differently (w.MON4).

These expressions suggest that the boundaries of the community are relatively clearly perceived and that they contribute to the emergence of a shared collective subjectivity. At the same time, this representation does not strongly foreground internal social positions or inequalities. The kind of reflexive attention to how broader structural dynamics might be reproduced within the community, observed more explicitly in Bread&Roses' map, appears less developed here. One small but noteworthy exception is the word *male*, which was placed directly over the name of the community at the centre of the diagram. Its positioning can be interpreted as a subtle indication of internal tension, possibly referring to gendered dynamics within the collective when the map was produced. Although not further elaborated within the diagram itself, this element suggests that internal critiques may surface in indirect ways within the shared communicative space: a sign that politicising potential is not entirely absent from Mondeggi's discourse but remains latent rather than explicitly voiced.

Other aspects of the referential function appear in a more philosophical register, which also overlaps with the poetic dimension: an area where this map is particularly rich. Evocative elements are numerous, but they differ from those observed in Arvaia. Whereas Arvaia's symbolic language tended to emphasize individual emotional experiences, Mondeggi's poetic vocabulary is oriented toward more philosophical and collective imaginaries. Concepts such as *imagination*, *possibility*, *love*, *dream*, and *the potential force of beauty* evoke a vision of communal life rooted in political conviviality (Illich 1973) as a mode of collective life in which communities reclaim autonomous and creative control over their shared resources and practices primarily based on interdependence and interaction. In the upper-right section, Mondeggi is described as something *that is*, *that exists*, and *that is tangible*. At the same time, this existence is characterized as *transitory* and *mutable*, suggesting that what exists cannot be defined once and for all but remains

open to transformation. Yet the map does not further specify how this philosophical orientation translates into everyday practices within the community so that its evocative force remains suspended above the more concrete, contestable ground that referential and metalinguistic elaboration would provide (Table 1). A similar idea appears in the description of the community as a process. In the lower-right area, another entry refers to the *balance between confusion and organization*, pointing to the challenge of reconciling the community's constant transformation with the need for some degree of structure. This emphasis on processual identity has implications for the expressive and metalinguistic dimensions of discourse as well. Because the community is framed as inherently open and evolving, interpretive stabilization appears to be somewhat discouraged. Numerous concepts suggest semantic openness and the possibility of redefining meanings such as *community*, *work*, *interdependence*, *aggregation*, *time*, or *intensity*. These concepts are rarely accompanied by more explicit definitions, and the map seems to reflect the negotiated balance between shared understanding and individual interpretation. The absence of stronger metalinguistic clarification means that these terms, while evocative, are not always articulated in ways that fully connect them to specific political cultures or action repertoires characterizing the community with a semantic openness that, if left uncontested, may tend toward the stabilisation rather than the disruption of shared meanings.

Consistent with this metalinguistic blur, the map displays a discernible conative dimension which differs from the previous instances. Unlike Arvaia – where action sometimes appeared individualized, or Bread&Roses – where it was linked to explicit political practices, Mondeggi's orientation toward action remains somewhat more implicit. The map gestures toward practices associated with other political cultures, such as self-management and freedom of action. The discourse evokes a political sensibility that may share affinities with anarchist traditions, emphasizing autonomy, experimentation, and collective self-organization rather than clearly defined strategic programs. Taken together, these elements suggest that Mondeggi's communicative configuration places particular emphasis on poetic and relational dimensions of political meaning, while leaving other functions, especially referential and metalinguistic ones, more open-ended. The political therefore emerges less through explicit problematization of external structures and more through the cultivation of a shared imaginative horizon and practices of communal autonomy.

In conclusion, the comparison between the three cases illustrates how different communicative configurations give rise to distinct ways of articulating the political. In Arvaia, the maps reveal a communicative environment in which referential and expressive dimensions remain relatively general

and loosely connected. As a result, the broader socio-political context and the conflicts surrounding agri-food systems remain relatively implicit. The political here tends to appear primarily in a civic or communal sense, closer to the classical notion of the polis, where collective organization and shared practices are foregrounded without necessarily developing a strongly antagonistic reading of the surrounding system. Bread&Roses, by contrast, displays a communicative configuration in which referential, metalinguistic, and conative functions are tightly interconnected. The map articulates a dense network of concepts linking diagnostic interpretations of social conflict with normative visions and concrete practices with political language being both reflexive and operational. In this case, the political appears as a relational and processual construction of collective subjectivity through discourses that emphasize ongoing negotiation of positionality and difference. Mondeggi presents yet another configuration. Here, the phatic dimension of communication is particularly strong, reflecting dense relational ties and a shared space of interaction. However, explicit metalinguistic articulation remains more limited: relationships between concepts are often suggested rather than systematically defined. The community's discourse emphasizes process, transformation, and the openness of collective life. The political tends to emerge less through explicit problematization of external structures and more through the cultivation of a shared imaginative horizon centred on autonomy, conviviality, and experimentation. In this case, practices of politicisation acquire a more philosophical or even metaphysical dimension, oriented toward rethinking forms of life and the conditions of collective existence.

Conclusive remarks

This article examined how practices of politicisation and depoliticisation around agriculture and food take shape through collective processes of meaning-making within community agriculture. Starting from the theoretical premise that the political is ontologically present in social relations, the study investigated how this presence becomes articulated or stabilized through everyday communicative practices. The semiotic framework offers a methodological bridge between abstract theories of the political and the everyday dynamics of grassroots initiatives. By focusing on the interaction of linguistic functions, it becomes possible to trace how political meanings take shape through collective interpretation, rather than assuming their presence or absence as predefined attributes of collective action (Dewey and Bentley 1949). At the same time, the study suggests the coexistence of politicising and depoliticising tendencies within the same practices. A semiotic approach makes

it possible to observe how these tensions are negotiated at the level of everyday communication within initiatives that seek to challenge industrial agrifood business but that may simultaneously reproduce elements of lifestyle politics or market logics. Furthermore, the findings argue that communicative infrastructures constitute an important dimension of political life within CFNs as the political unfolds through the ongoing work of maintaining relationships and negotiating collective interpretations of agriculture and food systems.

The empirical analysis of Arvaia, Bread&Roses, and Mondeggi – taken as exemplary cases of CFNs in Italy – suggests that processes of politicisation are linked to the configuration and interaction of different linguistic functions within collective communication. These functions do not operate independently; they form relational morphologies that shape how communities interpret reality, position themselves within it, share common meanings, and imagine possible courses of action. Politicisation therefore appears less as the outcome of a particular ideology or organizational structure and more as the result of communicative dynamics through which meanings become collectively articulated (Laclau 2006). Within these dynamics, the phatic dimension of communication plays a foundational role. By maintaining channels of interaction and enabling ongoing exchanges between participants, it establishes the relational infrastructure through which discourse can develop. The referential dimension of discourse then anchors communication to recognizable aspects of the socio-economic context. The absence of concrete references to material conditions prevents discursive practices from becoming vectors of politicisation, underlining how the capacity to situate local practices within broader social relations is essential to render structural dynamics visible as potential objects of collective reflection and disagreement. By contrast, the poetic function appears to be the easiest to mobilize, anchoring themes of agriculture and food to shared images, narratives, and symbols. Agriculture and food practices lend themselves well to this form of symbolic expression, as they are embedded in cultural traditions, sensory experiences, and intimate or collective memories. Poetic language can therefore amplify the communicative reach of political meanings, making them more recognizable and emotionally engaging within the community. However, when activated in isolation from the other functions, its capacity to generate politicisation remains limited: although it produces emotional and cultural resonance, it alone cannot foster relational transformations or consolidate collective subjectivities.

Referential and poetic functions also resonate across the expressive and metalinguistic dimensions of discourse. When situated perspectives circulate within a shared communicative environment, they can foster recognition and

identification among participants, allowing individual experiences to be interpreted within a broader collective frame. However, when the referential dimension remains weak, the expressive dimension also becomes more difficult to interpret. In these contexts, poetic forms of communication may partially fill the gap by mobilizing evocative images, shared symbols, and culturally resonant narratives. While these symbolic resources can reinforce emotional attachment and a sense of belonging, they may also obscure the positionality of participants within the community and the broader agri-food system, limiting the extent to which personal experiences are translated into collectively intelligible political meanings. The metalinguistic dimension further contributes to this process by opening spaces in which the terms and categories used within the community become objects of negotiation. These reflexive practices can play an important role in sustaining both expressive and poetic dimensions of communication, as they help stabilize shared vocabularies and enable communities to reconnect symbolic narratives and personal experiences with more explicit interpretative frameworks. Taken together, these observations indicate that politicisation emerges from the dynamic balance among linguistic functions rather than from the predominance of any single one. Conversely, depoliticising tendencies tend to appear when certain functions become disconnected from the others.

Several limitations of this research should nevertheless be acknowledged. The analysis is based on a limited number of cases and relies on mind-mapping workshops as its primary empirical material. While these collaborative diagrams provide valuable insight into collective meaning-making processes, they capture specific moments within broader communicative trajectories. Everyday interactions, informal conversations, and longer-term organizational dynamics may shape political articulation in ways that extend beyond the situations observed here. Moreover, the semiotic framework emphasizes discourse and symbolic practices, which means that other dimensions such as institutional relations or material constraints remain partially explored within the scope of this study. Future research could extend this approach in several directions. Comparative studies across different national contexts or types of agri-food initiatives would help assess how communicative configurations interact with varying institutional and economic environments. Longitudinal research following communities over time could also illuminate how communicative infrastructures evolve and how politicising or depoliticising tendencies shift as initiatives develop. Finally, combining semiotic analysis with ethnographic observation could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how communicative processes intersect with organizational practices

and broader political struggles around the ecological transition of local food systems.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the analysis developed here suggests a broader theoretical and methodological contribution. Politicisation and depoliticisation emerge not as fixed properties that peasant communities either possess or lack, but as the contingent outcome of how communicative infrastructures sustain or fail to sustain the interaction across linguistic functions. When phatic, referential, expressive, poetic, and metalinguistic dimensions reinforce one another, discourse acquires the capacity to connect lived experience, shared interpretation, symbolic expression, and practical orientation into a coherent politicising force. When these dimensions become disconnected, politicising potential remains latent, fragmented, or vulnerable to reabsorption into depoliticising tendencies. This dynamic and relational understanding of the political offers a methodological bridge between abstract theories of politicisation and the everyday, often unspectacular work of meaning-making through which CFNs construct pathways of political transformation.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares they have no conflict of interest.

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