

From Agriculture in the City to an Agroecological Urbanism: The transformative pathway of urban (political) agroecology

C.M. Deh-Tor (Chiara Tornaghi and Michiel Dehaene)

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From Agriculture in the City to an Agroecological Urbanism:

The transformative pathway of urban (political) agroecology

C.M. Deh-Tor

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In this article we capture three things at once: the reason for this special issue, the thinking behind the 8th Annual Conference of the AESOP Sustainable Food Planning (SFP) group (Coventry, 2017) and the core mission of the International Forum for an Agroecological Urbanism. The Forum and the Magazine will be launched at the AESOP SFP conference whose theme this year is “Reimagining food planning, building resourcefulness: Food movements, insurgent planning and heterodox economics”.

Background

In the past three years we have merged our research and activists interest for ecologically and socially just agricultural practices, appreciations for the emancipatory value of cities, and the search for modes of urbanisation which are led by principles of land stewardship, equity and solidarity.

The problem with food within western urbanisation

As urban scholars working on the politics of urban land and processes of urban development, we have been too well aware that the possibility to control and localise food provision has not been considered throughout the history of western urbanisation. Think for example of the modernist manifesto of the Athens Charter (CIAM/Le Corbusier), which in classifying different spatial urban functions in the city plan, did not include agriculture or food production. Modernism has driven zoning and urban planning for

decades and has been extremely influential since the beginning of the 20th Century. But western urbanisation has also been dominated by organic, piecemeal, processes of densification of the city, such as the building up of kitchen gardens and vegetable plots, during periods of population growth. Apart from some remaining gardens and allotment sites, the once common food growing spaces have largely disappeared from the map. We are also aware that the scale at which urbanism operates constrains the possibilities to make any real radical change of the ‘food regime’ possible. For example, land value and land management, fundamental components in the attempt to re-develop productive urban landscape, are largely driven by market mechanisms which value high profit activities (real estate) and de-value agricultural and agroecological and solidarity-based community led food growing practices.

The omnipresence of cheap food provided by the mainstream retail sectors – whose price does not take into account the ecological impact of transport, resource depletion and storing of unseasonal products – make it also very difficult for alternative local producers to compete and thrive, while paying their workers fairly.

Money saving austerity politics are also impinging on the food allocation choices of both private individuals and organisations, who find themselves struggling to enact more responsible and just purchasing choices.

Urban landscapes and educational approaches also tend to reduce the possibilities to nurture and reproduce in the new generations those skills fundamental for making healthy and environmentally sound food choices or engaging in food practices more substantially.

Seen together, the points listed above make clear that cities and urbanisation processes, with their life rhythms, financial drivers and collective arrangements for food provision, are the ones that need to be tackled for any progressive change to be made. Building alternative food systems has therefore to deal with these ongoing challenges. What we imagine is nothing less than the re-urbanisation of food.

Urban challenge and new value systems

Of course, there is a whole range of experiences – many of which extensively presented in the previous issues of the UA Magazine – that strive to build alternative realities and challenge the food system, from small community projects to broader city-wide food policies. They remain important. However, our aim here is to point out the full range of ways in which neoliberal urbanism shape and constraints opportunities for change, which are often overseen. Too many food initiatives tend to think of cities as a container, a place where to make change, disregarding broader ecological and social interconnections (issues of global justice, for example), as well as the valuing mechanism that shape decision making on a day-to-day basis. For example, if the main rationale for people's behaviour is time efficiency and financial convenience, then it will be very difficult to roll out a full range of coherent, equitable and environmentally sound choices, because a number of them will have financial implications (i.e. substitute chemical inputs with increased human labour, reallocate land ownership rights on the basis of land stewardship, etc.).

We contend that the “urban” – the high dependence from collective arrangements (i.e. housing, food, transport) and the impossibility of self-provision, and the way capitalism/finance work as its engine- poses specific challenges and conditions which are deeply structural and that to bring forward change we need to go beyond a ‘food in the city’ approach. As mirrored in the call for papers for the AESOP SFP 2017 conference, we are trying to enlarge a conversation that enables knowledge exchange between innovative practices, political strategies, alternative economic models, different forms of land management, and a new valuing system which together make up an alternative urbanism. In other words, an alternative way to organise our mutual interdependencies. We need to imagine logics of urbanisation that no longer systematically devalue food, displace farmers, destroy soils, turn nutrient, water and energy flows into waste streams, etc., and are based on a long working week with no time for food growing and cooking, but rather begin to imagine urbanisms that enables to incorporate food production and consumption in all its dimensions.

Our take is that urban food policies alone, or the food sovereignty of farmers, will not suffice in bringing forward a way of urban living which is environmentally and socially just, and that a more holistic view and spheres of change are needed.

The thought behind the theme of the conference was to recognise people's right to control the conditions of the knowledge, resources and ways in which food is prepared,

eaten and metabolised by humans, without undermining the ecosystem or ending in self-sufficiency discourses. At the core of this convergence we see a pivotal role for urban agroecology.

Urban agroecology

Agroecology -in our view- is not just an agricultural method: it is a ‘package’ of value-based practices which are explicitly addressing social and environmental justice, are culturally sensitive, non-extractive, resource conserving, and rooted in non-hierarchical and inclusive pedagogical and educational models that shape the way food is produced and socialised across communities and generations. Agroecosystems, while specific to each geographical context, share a number of ecological and social features including “socio-cultural institutions regulated by strong values and collective forms of social organisation for resource access, benefits sharing, value systems”. The principles and practice of agroecology, centred around multi-species solidarities, biodiversity and environmental stewardship, have been extensively noted for their ability to conceive of and deliver *alternative ways of producing food*.

Agroecology is also being strongly mobilised as a *political tool*. Its strong links with the international food sovereignty movement, and its inclination to action-oriented, transdisciplinary and participatory processes has led to defining it simultaneously as a science, a movement and a practice. Political agroecology and urban political agroecology are taking shape at the crossroads between scholar activism and urban movements, although its full political potential is yet to be metabolised. The work of Barbara Van Dyck in this issue (see page 5) is very telling and an important step in this journey.

Striving for resource sovereignty in profit-driven urban environments, a number of politically-active food growing initiatives are effectively building the ground for a nascent urban political agroecology (see Just Space in London, for example, and a number of contributions here). So, while La Via Campesina and other coalitions striving for food sovereignty are framed predominantly within rural, agrarian and peasant imaginaries and communities, an urban political agroecology, which focusses on how the ‘urban’ differently questions and provides opportunities of food provision, is slowly taking shape.

We believe that agroecology as a praxis, and urban political agroecology as a politically aware way of enacting agroecological dynamics of food production and consumption in the city, can provide the social glue (the value system) and the political twist, upon which to build a new mode of urbanisation.

International forum for an agroecological urbanism

What if solidarity, mutual learning, interspecies (more than human) exchanges, environmental stewardship, food sovereignty and people's resourcefulness were the principles of a new paradigm for urbanisation? How would urban



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design, property regimes, food provision, collective services, and the whole ensemble of planning and socio-technical arrangements change, if they were informed by urban agroecology? How can we begin to radically transform the food disabling urban landscapes that have systematically displaced food production, recovering both historical food growing practices and imagining new urban arrangements?

We contend that agroecology contains the political, social and ecological foundations for a radically alternative model of urbanisation – what we call a resourceful, reproductive and agroecological urbanism.

We call for building a shared journey with social movements, food activists and scholars and to multiply the spheres of urban life in which the values and logics of agroecology are articulated and engendered. We wish for a collective journey, a generative encounter of practices and ways of knowing and doing through which it can be possible to substantiate what an agroecological urbanism might look like.

As a vehicle for such a collective endeavour we commit to nurture an International Forum for an Agroecological Urbanism (IFAU). The Forum is a statement against the isolation of disciplinary specialisation. A way to acknowledge the need to see the big picture. To think of transport, housing, food, the environment, private property rights, inequality and injustice all at once. From theory and practice. A space where social reproduction, agroecology, and resourcefulness are pillars of a new urbanism.

Building an agroecological urbanism. The Forum is a way to bring in conversation the knowledge that already exists into a coordinating and strategising platform where new planning practices and political trajectories can be imagined. There are thousands of individuals with solid knowledge relevant for this project, which we would like to reach out to. We mean individuals with practical knowledge (i.e., in agroforestry, organic indoor or rooftop horticulture, waste management, renewable energy, social economy, neighbourhood kitchens schemes, etc.). But also individuals working around conceptual models (transport systems, waterways, alternative land management), willing to

engage in the challenge of rethinking the pedagogies and paradigms of urban planning. We also mean to reach out to individuals or organisations and movements/communities with direct experience in policies and activism, to share how they have developed, deployed, tested, and learn from their main obstacles and successes in building new collective arrangements (i.e. community kitchens) and/or mobilising heterodox agroecological practices and ethics. In sum, we aim to gather, share and give visibility to knowledges and experiences that together will help visualising, imagining and conceptualising an agroecological urbanism.

Empowering an agroecological urbanism. The Forum is also a space for dialogue where to reflect on the political, social and ecological processes that are needed for building an agroecological urbanism. A place where to build an international movement, where to imagine political trajectories of empowerment with unusual combinations of actors (i.e. agrarian and urban movements), to build new solidarities, to share activist tactics. To map out what spheres of life need alternative arrangements (i.e. waste and metabolic cycles, land stewardship, private property rights, global justice of natural resource distribution) and build a post-capitalist urbanism.

C.M. Deh-Tor

C.M. Deh-Tor is a collective pen name for critical urban scholars Chiara Tornaghi (Coventry University, UK) and Michiel Dehaene (Ghent University, Belgium).

CM.DehTor@gmail.com

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