

THE ENTHUSIASM FOR URBAN FARMING FROM A CULTURAL POLITICAL ECONOMY PERSPECTIVE

Summary

Urban food growing has spurred much interest and enthusiasm among urban citizens, NGOs, and city governments of the Global North in recent years. While not a new practice per se, urban food growing is nowadays positioned at the nexus of a broad range of issues seen critical for urban sustainability, including ecological resilience, public health, community engagement, and education. In this paper we aim to provide three contributions. First, we explore the affective and dispositional roots of this enthusiasm around urban food growing. Second, we identify and describe the carriers of this enthusiasm from a political economy perspective. Third, we discuss the cultural potential of the practice of urban food growing to invoke or enhance a socio-ecological transformation through building stable assemblages of change.

Extended Abstract

The United States have witnessed several waves of interest in urban food growing during the last century, peaking in times of economic stress or war (Lawson 2005). In World Wars I and II, for example, urban food growing activities revolved around victory gardens that were located in private or public spaces. The main logic was to reduce the pressure on the public food supply brought on by the wars. Victory gardens were also seen as a civil morale booster and a means to empower civilians through their contribution of labour (Lawson 2005, Kortright and Wakefield 2011). In the late 60s and early 70s the contemporary community gardening movement took hold. These community gardens were mainly established by turning vacant lots into green spaces, often by immigrants for whom community gardening was also a means to maintain their culture heritage (Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny 2004, Lawson 2005). Since the 2007/2008 financial crisis we have seen the interest in urban food growing re-surfacing in many cities across the Global North. The current discourse on urban food growing has become integrated into the rhetoric of smart cities, local food, green jobs, and social entrepreneurship. Urban food growing projects are regarded as multi-functional spaces that deliver a broad range of ecological, cultural, and socio-economic benefits (Lovell 2010), such as biodiversity conservation (Bernholt, Kehlenbeck et al. 2009), enhancement of interpersonal skills (Allen, Alaimo et al. 2008), wage-earning opportunities (Ferris, Norman et al. 2001), and the fostering of healthy diets (Alaimo, Packnett et al. 2008, D'Abundo and Carden 2008).

Urban food growing projects have also received interest from academics of various disciplinary fields such as, for instance, public health (e.g. Alaimo, Packnett et al. 2008), urban planning (e.g. Lovell 2010, Cohen and Reynolds 2014), and geography (e.g. McClintock 2010). Many of these research endeavours focus on urban gardens where people cultivate food for their own consumption, or community projects which are mainly located in low-income neighbourhoods e.g. (Clayton 2007, Pudup 2008, Kortright and Wakefield 2011, Guitart, Pickering et al. 2012); others focus on the technological and efficiency aspects of urban food production (e.g. Specht, Siebert et

al. 2014). However, most of these studies remain on the material level and do not take into account affects, practices, habits and dispositions.

The present paper goes beyond the study of individual motivations and acclaimed benefits. It explores the roots of the current enthusiasm surrounding urban food growing and attempts to assess its transformative potential for inducing socio-ecological transformations. Thereby we address the following three research questions: (1) What is the socio-demographic profile of the practitioners driving the most recent generation of urban food growing? (2) What are their affective as well as rational motivations to engage in urban food growing? (3) How “powerful” are they as enthusiastic carriers of urban food growing practices in terms of socio-ecological transformation? In this respect it is not just a matter of sociological interest but the topic enters the domain of cultural political economy, asking who is inventing, carrying and diffusing culture. In our discussion, we follow Thrift (2010) who provides some first synthesis in terms of affective social philosophy and cultural political economy.

Our analysis is based on a qualitative empirical study that took place in the time period from May to December 2013 in New York City. Problem-centred interviews were conducted with urban farmers (n=19), regular volunteers (n=19), customers, representatives of policy, as well as educational and support organizations (n=14). Additional data has been gathered through participant observations, an online survey with volunteers (n=45), as well as a review of documents and social media content. Preliminary findings show that the practice of urban food growing is linked to meanings of mental and physical health, pleasure, and self-determination as it has been taken up by a new socio-demographic group. The majority of interviewees fit into the profile of the “new urban farmer”: young, well-educated, pre-dominantly female with high social and cultural capital. Many of them do not have a strong background in farming but bring in business, marketing, and engineering skills. Thus the enthusiasm they share for urban food growing is rooted in a complex assemblage of affective as well as rational motivational factors.

To analyse this shared enthusiasm, we discuss a theoretical strand reaching from Veblen to Bourdieu that has investigated the interconnections between affects, choices and practices. This socioeconomic theory brings together the Veblenian notion of habit (Veblen 1899, 1914) (in tradition of pragmatist philosophy, Massumi 2011) with its role for “abnormal” economic behaviour (e.g. conspicuous consumption) and Bourdieu’s (Bourdieu 1982, 1994) social theory of distinction on behalf of taste, cultural dispositions and economic status (as well as social class). Scholars standing in this tradition have focused foremost on consumer practices and the social foundations of evolving consumption preferences. However in the case of urban food growing we witness similar and common affective and dispositional foundations for the agents’ behaviour, but it is not about conspicuousness, distinction, imitation or bandwagons in consumption anymore. Here we are dealing with “conspicuous production” of food, its taste, affects and social aesthetics (Highmore 2010).

Finally we are interested in the societal role of urban food growing. Can this apparent enthusiasm play a distinctive role in socio-ecological transformation? How does such a transformation organise itself between different layers of society? Are we confronted with a short-term fashion of socio-ecological entrepreneurship or is it more than that? From a scientific perspective we analyse the affective emergence of this particular social practice and its potential for

(in)formal institutionalisation (Wäckerle 2014). This aspect implies indeed some kind of rationalisation since implicit codes and tacit knowledge become more explicit and therefore accessible to a greater public. We conclude by asking whether postmodern social practices such as urban food growing have potential to catapult the current “control society” (Deleuze 1993) into a “transformation society”, in a Marxist real utopian vision (Wright 2010).

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