

Chiara Tornaghi and Chiara Certomà (eds), *Urban Gardening as Politics*, New York: Routledge, 2018. ISBN: 9780415793803 (cloth); ISBN: 9781315210889 (ebook)

Together, and individually, Chiara Tornaghi and Chiara Certomà have made important contributions to the growing body of critical scholarly literature on urban agriculture. One of their latest collaborations has produced an edited volume, *Urban Gardening as Politics*, which interrogates the contribution of urban food production to creating more democratic, just, and sustainable cities. As the editors note in their introduction, urban agriculture is often viewed – in the public eye and in much of the academic research – in an overly positive light. Focus is often placed on urban agriculture’s potential contribution to food access or urban greening, for example, with less attention to the potential limitations or potentially negative effects of the practice, such as reinforcing processes of neoliberalization; race- and class disparities; or gentrification (for exceptions see McClintock 2014; Pudup 2008; Reynolds 2015). Though there has been an increase in critical analysis of urban agriculture published in the Anglophone literature over the past ten years, much of this has focused on the US context (e.g. Eizenberg 2012; Kato et al. 2013; McClintock 2014, 2018; Reynolds and Cohen 2016; Safransky 2014; see also Certomà 2011; Tornaghi 2014). With case studies from the UK, Ireland, Germany, Canada, as well as the United States, the book makes a valuable contribution to closing some of these gaps.

The volume consists of 12 chapters, many of which were previously published in a 2015 special issue, guest-edited by Tornaghi and Certomà, of the journal *Local Environment: The International Journal of Justice and Sustainability* (see Certomà and Tornaghi 2015). In Chapter 1, Tornaghi and Certomà set the stage for the book. In line with some of their own contributions to the critical urban agriculture literature, they discuss the potential for gardens, with their multiple functions and meanings, to contribute to justice and sustainability in a post-political age in which government has become delocalized and neoliberalization continues to strengthen its grip. In this context, they argue, gardens offer a place for a broader group of actors to participate in the

political arena. Yet, they acknowledge that all is not always good in the world of urban agriculture, as they explore iterations of what has become an appealing analytical lens in critical food literature more broadly: the connection between alternative food practices and neoliberalism. The chapters that follow contribute to, and complicate this gaze. Here, I offer reflections about how the chapters address several aspects of the contemporary critical urban agriculture debate, along with some constructive critiques.

Politics, Gardens, and Place

As the title of the volume suggests, all of the chapters examine one or more connections between gardens and politics. As an important entrée to this theme, in Chapter 3 Certomà asks “what, exactly, is the meaning of *politics* in the *political*?” She reviews two of the dominant trends in research on political gardening: neoliberalism (as noted above) and the “right to the city” approach (Mitchell 2003; cf. Lefebvre 1968). Drawing from research in Rome she argues for a third perspective: that political gardening promotes post-environmental political claims and actions that attend to a broader set of global environmental problems and the surrounding sociopolitical concerns.

In Chapter 5, Alexander Follmann and Valérie Viehoff approach their case study of allotment gardens and urban planning in Cologne through the framing of “actually existing commons” (Eizenberg 2012). They argue that gardening can be explicitly political *if* it strives for ecologically, socially just, sustainable, and radically different cities. In Chapter 8, Mary Corcoran and Patricia Healy Kettle’s case study of allotment gardening in Dublin and Belfast goes on to explore the extent to which gardens can contribute to a “shared politics of space” within the semi-private spaces of the allotment gardens in which broader social and public politics are often not discussed. They argue that gardens can contribute to equity, sustainability, and community cohesion through the bridging of class, status, and ethno-national identities, even if this bridging may only take place within the garden gates.

Gerda Wekerle and Michael Classens (Chapter 6) offer an analysis of political gardening in *privately held* spaces. The authors correctly point out that much of the

scholarly research on urban agriculture has focused on public land (especially community gardens, though there are exceptions, for example, Thompson 2015). They argue that growing land on private lands can be no less political than community or allotment gardens in which participants may articulate claims to gardens as a form of public good. Wekerle and Classens discuss three cases in Toronto that “problematize the notion of *private* property through usufruct rights” by sharing private land for urban food production and even commercial urban agriculture operations. They conclude that political gardening on private land has the potential to engage a broader swath of urban and suburban residents, and thereby expand urban agriculture both “spatially and politically”. Each of these chapters focuses on the intersections of urban gardens, politics, and place.

Democracy, Citizenship, and Neoliberal Capitalism

Other chapters in the volume interrogate understandings of the very notions of democracy or citizenship, or take to task the hegemony of capitalism or neoliberalism in defining peoples’ various life stations. In Chapter 2, Paul Milbourne discusses how “everyday environmental justice” is enacted through urban gardening, beginning with a review of the US community gardening literature, and noting that research on urban gardening the US has neglected ecological and environmental justice themes (though see McClintock 2015; Reynolds and Cohen 2016; White 2011). The following sections of the chapter detail ways in which urban gardeners in the UK enact environmental justice through day-to-day actions that address environmental *in*justices beyond “spectacular conflicts” (e.g. conflicts over hazardous waste siting). These everyday actions include creating green spaces in high-density neighborhoods, supporting cultural integration of refugees and asylum seekers, or addressing issues of racism. Milbourne also offers a provocative reflection on Pudup’s (2008) analysis of urban gardens supporting processes of neoliberalization by creating what she has termed “citizen-subjects”. Milbourne complicates this analysis in his chapter, arguing that the “‘new’ politics of austerity” may

create a context in which community gardening evolves to address deeper questions of (in)justice.

Mark Purcell and Shannon Tyman (Chapter 4) critically re-examine the frequent application of Lefebvre's (1968) conceptualization of the "right to the city" to understanding urban agriculture. They argue that much existing urban agriculture literature making use of Lefebvre has done so somewhat superficially, and that Lefebvre's later framings of a "new contract of citizenship" and "autogestion" (i.e. self governance of a people) offer a clearer and more radical vision of a democratized city (see Lefebvre 1990). These latter Lefebvrian concepts, the authors explain, emphasize the right to the city as a process, or a "struggle", not an end-goal, and they help us to see that the "droit à la ville" is already taking place. In the chapter, Purcell and Tyman provide two examples of how such a framing can be used to understand urban agriculture drawing from existing bodies of research in Los Angeles and New York City. This is a compelling discussion of the way that Lefebvrian analysis has been used to understand gardeners' claims to public land, and offers a potentially more liberatory use of the theory in that it allows for more diverse, and unknown, future scenarios for democratic urban governance.

In a similar vein, John Crossan, Andrew Cumbers, Robert McMaster and Deirdre Shaw (Chapter 11) explore the idea of "do-it-yourself" (DIY) citizenship (which they discuss as citizenship "constructed from the bottom-up") through urban gardening in the context of Glasgow.¹ One of their aims in the chapter is to counter dominant (Marxian) claims about the hegemony of urban capitalism (akin to the central argument in seminal work on diverse economies by geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham [2006], though this is not mentioned in the chapter) by showing how gardens create spaces for alternative forms of citizenship. They conclude through their analysis that community gardens in Glasgow are places where new relations between urban residents are being formed, albeit within the broader construct of the neoliberal city.

Wendy Miller (Chapter 7) more explicitly evokes Gibson-Graham's (2008) diverse economies framework in her analysis of the role of allotment gardens in reducing

¹ The chapter is a revised and updated version of a paper the author's published in *Antipode* (Crossan et al. 2016).

urban food inequalities in the UK. She uses the term “diverse food networks” to describe household food procurement strategies that reach beyond the conventional routes such as supermarkets and mainstream grocery stores, and she explores the non-monetized economic exchanges (e.g. mutual aid; exchange of garden products) that take place within UK urban garden allotments in her study area and urban food initiatives more broadly. She concludes that non-monetized food exchanges can enhance human capital, and that urban allotment gardens provide distinct possibilities for such exchanges particularly for low-income people.

Research, Positionality, and Scholar-Activism

Beyond politics and gardens themselves, several chapters in the volume address research approaches and the positionality of scholar-activists in urban agriculture research. In Chapter 9, for instance, Michael Hardman, Peter Larkham and David Adams expand discussions on guerrilla gardening, noting that research on the topic has mostly been conducted as a part of graduate student thesis work, and has also tended to over glorify guerrilla gardening (and gardeners). Focusing on the Midlands area in England, Hardman et al. argue that research on guerrilla gardening has neglected the perspectives of existing community residents, and they propose a potential reading of guerrilla gardening as colonization. They call for future studies to further critically interrogate guerrilla gardening practices and the contexts in which they are situated, including soil testing of sites, but also analyses of guerrilla gardening’s impact on respective resident communities and attention to the perspectives of the residents. Milbourne (in Chapter 2) also argues for different approaches to understanding urban agriculture, particularly calling for more diverse approaches to research that extend beyond case studies (which do tend to dominate the literature).

Barbara Van Dyck, Chiara Tornaghi, Severin Halder, Ella von der Haide and Emma Saunders’ original contribution (Chapter 10) comes in the form of letters the authors had written to each other in the context of the International Conference of Critical Geography in 2015. In the curated set of letters, the authors, who live and work in

different countries, reflect on their experiences being engaged in both urban agriculture scholarship and activism. Recalling the dominant scientific paradigm that insists on a value-neutral objectivity in research, the authors explore ways in which either the motivations for their respective research (e.g. “indignation about injustice and environmental destruction”) or their closeness to the communities or topics of study have at times been cause for critique. However, these instances have also prompted the authors to reflect on own positionalities vis à vis their research, and the meanings that all of these aspects hold for their activism, scholarship, and engagement as “active citizens”. The final letter in this collection notes that having exchanged ideas about these topics in the “letter” format has also helped all of the authors reflect on some of the difficult aspects of scholar-activism, notably the “ambiguities/ambivalences/problematics” of the roles of scholar-activist, “both within the movement[s] and within academia”. They close with a focus on building relationships and trust.

Garden Politics or Political Gardening?

In the final chapter, co-editors Tornaghi and Certomà conclude the volume with proposals for a research agenda focused on political gardening, equity, and justice. Returning to ideas put forth at the beginning of the book, they insist on the need to distinguish between *politics* (e.g. governance) and the *political* (which they describe as “corresponding to political activities aimed at radically changing and re-grounding the social order, looking for equalitarian arrangements”). They offer a set of categories or “clues” for future research on political gardening that include “collective subjectification; antagonistic practices; and open ended, emancipatory, and egalitarian events”. Tornaghi and Certomà close with a return to the discussion of the post-political, which began the book, reminding readers that for all of their emancipatory potential, gardening projects can become institutionalized or coopted, and that researchers ought to continue to question whether, and to what extent, particular urban garden initiatives “advance alternative socio-political-economic models”.

Some Constructive Critiques

This book is a valuable contribution to the urban agriculture literature, particularly in its inclusion of research and initiatives in Europe and the UK, as well as its examination of urban gardening and multi-scalar politics. In the spirit of critical scholarship, I offer two critiques.

First, though the editors set out in Chapter 1 to critically examine urban gardening, noting the at-times overly positive bias in urban agriculture research, some of the case studies do tend toward the adulatory, or presuppose that gardening will lead to more democratic cities beyond the garden pale. Part of this may be contextual. In places where policymaking is highly centralized, collective decision making, even within the confines of a garden, may be a step toward greater self-governance and more democratic participation in public decision-making. Nonetheless, I am left wondering: Are the initiatives examined in the book changing urban or food policy-making processes in their respective neighborhoods or cities? If so, how? Are these changes benefiting those publics (often ethnic and/or racialized minorities) who are often excluded from political decision-making and the mainstream/capitalist economy that are critiqued in this volume? How do we know, and are these same publics involved in evaluating such outcomes? What might any of this mean for “food democracy” in contexts, like the EU, where this idea has gained more currency (De Schutter 2014; see also Hassanein 2003)? A few of the chapters (particularly those by Harman et al.; Purcell and Tyman; and Wekerle and Classens) do discuss these concerns to some extent, but further interrogation along these lines throughout the volume would have been welcome.

Relatedly, with the exception of three chapters by Milbourne; Purcell and Tyman; and Corcoran and Kettle, there is less discussion of ethno-racial disparities in, or addressed through, urban gardening in the volume than there might have been. While these themes are now regularly discussed in the North American urban agriculture literature, this is less so on the other side of the Atlantic (cf. Darly and McClintock 2017). Perhaps this, too, is contextual – for example, if discussing ethno-racial identity is socially or politically taboo in some sociopolitical spaces, scholarly research and writing

need to navigate these realities. Then again, as colleagues and I have argued elsewhere (Reynolds and Cohen 2016; Reynolds et al. 2018), one role that critical scholars and scholar-activists can play is to push these types of boundaries to contribute to broader public understandings of the possibilities and limitations of urban agriculture projects. Doing so can be part of addressing white supremacy as an essential part of the struggle for global social justice.

Overall, *Urban Gardening as Politics* makes an important contribution to the growing scholarly literature that gets beyond the *fact* of urban agriculture – that it exists and has multiple functions that extend far beyond the exchange value of land in the neoliberal city. Through their examination of a diversity of urban agriculture types and geographies, the chapter authors collectively provide a glimpse of the heterogeneous ways in which urban gardening may be political even in, or perhaps because of, the “post-political” moment. They also help us to further consider the limitations of political gardening, which is crucial in understanding the roles that gardening may, and sometimes may not, realistically play. For these reasons, among others, the book is a useful resource for urban agriculture researchers, especially those working in European and UK contexts who may have fewer geographically-relevant critical analyses of urban gardening from which to draw. It will also be helpful for graduate students or even advanced upper-level undergraduate students in fields such as urban studies, politics and geography. For those of us interested the existence of democracy in cities, even within the context of the contemporary global emboldening of right-wing populism, Tornaghi and Certomà, and all of the volume’s authors, provide further glimpses of the deeper possibilities for urban gardens to contribute to more socially and environmentally just systems through critical and reflexive research, activism, and practice.

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March 2019