

Urban Agriculture in the Food-Disabling City: (Re)defining Urban Food Justice, Reimagining a Politics of Empowerment

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Abstract: Recent literature has pointed to the role of urban agriculture in self-empowerment and learning, and in constituting ways to achieve food justice. Building on this work the paper looks at the potential and constraints for overcoming the residual and contingent status of urban agriculture. The first part of the paper aims to expand traditional class/race/ethnicity discussions and to reflect on global, cultural, procedural, capability, distributional and socio-environmental forms of injustice that unfold in the different stages of urban food production. The second part reflects on how to bring forward food justice and build a politics of engagement, capability and empowerment. Three interlinked strategies for action are presented: (1) enhancing the reflexivity and cohesion of the urban food movement by articulating a challenge to neoliberal urbanism; (2) converging urban and agrarian food justice struggles by shaping urban agroecology; and (3) regaining control over social reproduction by engaging with food commoning.

Keywords: urban agriculture, food justice, food sovereignty, alternative urbanism, urban commons, urban agroecology

Introduction: Urban Agriculture and Food Justice

In the past couple of years several scholars have started to draw connections between the emerging urban agricultural practices in the global North and the food justice and sovereignty movements (Agyeman and McEntee 2014; Galt et al. 2014; Heynen et al. 2012; Sbicca 2012).

Heynen et al. (2012), for example, in their attempt to build links between food, justice and the city, point out that one way to achieve food security and justice is to build on the experiences, practices and values of community empowerment and food sovereignty projects *within* urban agricultural initiatives.

These new approaches are interesting for two reasons. The first is that the authors encourage us to expand our understanding of food justice beyond the more familiar race-, gender- and poverty-based approaches, which have been well articulated in the work of Alkon and Agyeman (2011), Block et al. (2004), Dowler (2008), Gottlieb and Joshi (2010), Guthman (2012), Munoz-Plaza et al. (2008), Townshend and Lake (2009), and others. By pointing out how grassroots food-growing initiatives (commercial or otherwise) are able to merge

environmental ethics, land stewardship and socio-economic benefits to ensure a wider availability of “good” food, they encourage us to develop reflections on the link between food justice and environmental/spatial justice.

While this analytical direction is not entirely new, and dates back to at least Gottlieb and Fisher (1996:200), what emerges as a novelty is a confluence in understanding the radical message of *urban* food growing as part of a broader food justice struggle aiming to change the food system at its root (Sbicca 2012:456). They offer the ground for re-centring the discussion on food justice around questions central to the urban geography literature: what difference does the “urban condition”—and specifically the urban production of food—make in these attempts to achieve food justice?

A second merit, or point of interest, is a focus on the promises that direct forms of engagement with food production hold as possible pathways for empowerment. Rather than building on the rhetoric of individual consumer-based choices, these works suggest, explicitly or implicitly, that urban food growing, or the self-production of food, can be a way to go beyond the “politics of the possible” (Guthman 2008, quoted in Fairbairn 2012).

This paper aims to contribute to both these lines of reasoning, offering (1) a reconceptualization of “food justice”, based on the perspective of urban agriculture, and (2) a reflection on the politics of empowerment. In order to do so it will unpack the forms of injustice that are embedded in the urban production of food, grounding the discussion in a problematized notion of the “urban”—and in particular the neoliberal urban condition—that frames urban agriculture. In the remainder of this introduction I explain the rationale for this endeavour.

Despite the ongoing risks of co-option to the neoliberal project which have been raised in some of this literature (Galt et al. 2014; McClintock 2014; Tornaghi 2014) various urban agricultural initiatives have shown how they represent forms of empowerment and liberation in a number of spheres colonized by neoliberal relations: from improving the quality of neighbourhoods, to implementing fairer working conditions; making local, fresh and sustainably produced food affordable to the most vulnerable, and inspiring a large cohort of people to question the food “regime”. However, urban agriculture (UA) remains a residual, marginal and interstitial practice, fraught with contradictions and troubled by constraints.

During my work as scholar-activist over the past seven years—largely based in the UK and the Netherlands—I found that the large majority of the projects I have encountered is contingent. They happen within the cracks of the system, in marginal urban spaces reclaimed from aggressive urban development practices and policies; they strive within temporary land tenures with little hope for expansion, and often rely on volunteerism, self-exploitation and grants issued in a range of areas other than food (typically health or community development). Therefore, while a growing number of scholars (including myself) look for the promises of UA to bring forward food justice, the residuality and precariousness of the large majority of these projects show that they remain an inadequate answer to the failures and injustices of neoliberal urban environments and food markets. Additionally, in many of the projects, even the ones with less precarious and better funded arrangements, a number of constraints prevented them from fully achieving

their potential of breaking people's dependence from the agro-industry and from neoliberal exploitative and unjust socio-environmental arrangements.

While I am well aware that a number of food-justice-seeking projects are built on "the method of the crack" (Holloway 2010:8), hence they are trying to bring forward an alternative world through piecemeal, residual, acts of rebellion and spaces of creation carving out cracks in the capitalist system, I am interested in contributing to joining, enlarging and promoting "a confluence of the cracks" (Holloway 2010:11).

As I have argued elsewhere, I am convinced that UA's "ability to reconnect the sphere of reproduction to its ecological and physical substrate, opens important windows of opportunity for experimenting with radical mechanisms of territorial development and urban living ... [that can] counteract specific 'mechanisms of neoliberal localization' (Brenner and Theodore 2002:368–375)" (Tornaghi 2014:564). This paper aims to build on this ongoing project.

In this journey I have been inspired by Beth Dixon's (2014) mission to "sharpen the lenses of justice". It is necessary to expand the notions of (food) justice—predominantly based on concepts of redistribution and representation—and to reflect on the processes and practices that limit current food sovereignty and justice projects, perpetrating their residuality. In doing so, I will *unpack the multiple forms of injustice—based on issues of capability justice, procedural justice, global justice, to name just a few—that are embedded in and reproduced through the urban production of food.*

The motivation for this work is threefold: (1) to contribute to an ongoing critical geography of UA aimed at enhancing the self-reflexivity and political strategies of a growing number of food growers; (2) to bring forward a politics of engagement with the radical transformation of the food system, applying the concept of resourcefulness (MacKinnon and Derickson 2013) to the reconceptualization of urbanism; and (3) to contribute to recent discussions on the urban commons (Bresnihan and Byrne 2015; Huron 2015) reflecting on urban agriculture as a matter of social reproduction.

The paper is structured into two main parts. In the first part I will discuss the various forms of injustice that unfold in relation to five areas pertinent to the urban production of food, which are: (1) the motivation to grow; (2) land access; (3) soil cultivation, tending plants and nutrient control; (4) harvesting, sharing, trading and reshaping the food system; and (5) cooking and eating. In the second part of the paper I will reflect on possible ways to overcome these injustices and will discuss three strategies that could pave the way for equipping the urban food movement with a politics of engagement, capability and empowerment.

Heuristics of Urban Food Justice: Constructing, Deconstructing and Redefining a Working Concept

To expand the notion of food justice, this paper interrogates empirical material on urban agriculture *as a food-producing practice* leaving aside reflections on other aspects often central to this practice, such as social cohesion or community building. It therefore questions whether or not, in which conditions and to what extent

the cultivation of urban land takes place and leads to the successful production of healthy food which is harvested, shared, prepared and eaten.

Seeking to Grow Food

Seeking to grow food *per se* has no statutory space in the city. While allotment growing and community gardens are generally accommodated by local government institutions as forms of leisure gardening, capable of building social cohesion and improving the quality of public space, seeking to grow food *for its own sake* has not received equal unanimous favours. The very first obstacle to UA therefore lies in the need to justify the desire to cultivate the urban soil as a means of food production. The urban citizen with no financial means to buy premium (and rare) urban locations with cultivable plots of land is expected to accept this limitation (and the insufficient provision of allotments) or to move to a rural area where food growing supposedly “belongs”.

The first step in a journey towards food justice has therefore to start by unpacking the injustice embedded in this framing approach to UA, and to strengthen the links between urban agriculture and the global ethics of food that inform many politically active urban agricultural projects.

Alongside more immediate concerns for the environment, a number of activist-growers in the global North claim the right to feed themselves through culturally appropriate and ethically sourced food. While these demands are gaining popularity through the international spread of the food sovereignty movement (Holt-Gimenez and Patel 2009; Wittman et al. 2011), the claims are still rather vague on the agency of food growing. Food security and food sovereignty movements are both about the right to food, but who should provide this food is still unclear and unresolved in the international political debate (Schanbacher 2010:79), leaving the conversations floating between positive and negative rights to food. While in this paper I argue for a politics of engagement and self-organisation more broadly, I would like to start this discussion with two considerations of global justice that point in the direction of *claiming the right to produce one's own food*.

The first consideration, from a consumer's perspective, stems from what the report of the Food Ethics Council (2010) has called “ethical market failure”. The financial measures embedded in Fairtrade are “a poor proxy for the environmental impact” (Food Ethics Council 2010:85) of food. Additionally, we could argue, food is traded in the absence of a global ethical certification that identifies whether commercialised food is coming from grabbed lands: fair trade certification says nothing on the relation between land rights, local communities, workers and food businesses, and an increasing amount of landgrabbing is actually feeding an expanding agro-industry (De Schutter 2011). Given the structure—and structuring power—of the food “regime” (McMichael 2013), and the limited space and diffusion of short food chains, for a number of products the choice may well just be “grow-your-own”. Obviously, within a global uneven distribution of assets and resources, intensified by climate change, pollution, desertification and water uncertainty, that constrain the possibility of growing food, the claim for the right

to grow goes hand-in-hand with the need to look beyond the defensive localism of UA, and to consider viable and just patterns for its global outscaling (Allen 2010:302). A call for global justice in the sphere of food must therefore rest on what Dupuis and Goodman (2005) call “reflexive localism”.

The second consideration focuses on the diversity of cultures, spiritualities and food values across the globe and builds on the debate that could be placed within the cultural justice literature (e.g. Shiva). Bradley and Galt (2014:173–174), for example, maintain that while “there is no essentialist link between particular foods and identities, racial or otherwise”, self-determination in all the phases of food production, exchange and consumption are crucial and “in contrast to promoting exclusionary dietary recommendations, food justice can, and should, promote self-determination through foodways practices”. More explicitly, Shillington (2013:104) states that:

food is implicated in the most intimate and necessary human-nature relations ... At the corporeal scale, the consumption of food contributes to the production of our material, emotional and cultural bodily spaces ... Food is an important part of producing our socionatural bodies.

Like other elements constitutive of human identities, cultures, values and personalities—such as clothing—food is intimately connected to multiple spheres of meaning. If we value the right to self-determination in respect to how we sustain and nourish ourselves, and accord recognition to global food ethics and human rights, then *we have to consider the right to produce one’s own food—which includes the right to engage with nature and to grow our own*. These reflections inevitably invite considerations on the urban environment, on private property rights and on the management of natural resources, which pose a whole set of constraints towards people’s empowerment in the fulfilment of their right to produce food.

Land Access

The most widely experienced form of injustice related to the urban production of food is the availability of land.

While vertical gardens, rooftop gardens, aquaponic/hydroponic systems and container growing are being progressively considered as integrative options for growing substrates, land remains a fundamental, alienated resource, centred in the hands of a few landowners.

In many cities of the global North (including their peri-urban areas) potentially cultivable land is scarce. When non-built-up land is available, food growing is not usually high in the priorities of city managers or planners. Disused brownfields are almost always the best choice for urban food growers, provided they are happy with temporary leases and container growing and are willing to make room for redevelopment plans once those sites regain the attention of developers. Small urban greens are occasionally given in temporary concession to community groups for the purpose of short-term beautification with an ethnic touch. More commonly, parkland and potentially food-producing soils such as street verges or small green spaces are underused (planted with vegetation which is ornamental but not

edible), when not polluted or exhausted of their nutritional and fertile properties by conventional park maintenance practices or professional horticultural methods (heavily reliant on chemical fertilisers, herbicides and pesticides). Long-term land tenures that would enable investment into infrastructure; eligibility for medium–large start-up grants and planning for larger food production are either not available or agreed on commercial leases only, then charged at commercial rates (which are usually unaffordable), which discourage non-professional, bottom-up attempts to grow food at larger scales. This is just as true for many of the cities that have signed up to a commitment to develop sustainable food plans. Little of that effort has percolated into—or radically changed—the logics that govern their land tenure and urban planning systems.

A number of scholars have pointed out how “millions of people are rethinking and changing how we use contemporary urban spaces in relation to food” (Galt et al. 2014:133), and indeed how communities fight for interstitial community gardens and urban farms facing gentrification and development initiatives (Schmelzkopf 2002).

While these are important contributions my claim here is that from the perspective of the human right to grow food, and the aim of taking UA beyond a merely residual practice, we need a more proactive and assertive approach towards the forms of injustice that punctuate food growing across its trajectory from soil to plate. From a socio-environmental perspective, for food justice to be achieved, *we have to recognise the crucial importance of land as a common good to enable the production of food.*

A number of works contribute thinking in this direction. For example, in her recent work, Passidomo (2014:10, quoting Purcell 2002:103) connects food sovereignty with claims for the right to the city:

Lefebvre’s “right to the city” ... reframes the arena of decision-making in cities to enfranchise inhabitants to produce urban space that meets their own needs ... Appropriation articulates the right of citizens to “physically access, occupy, and use” urban space, and to produce urban space “so that it meets the needs of inhabitants”.

In a similar vein, Purcell and Tyman (2015:1136) argue that community food-growing initiatives represent actualisations of Lefebvre’s concept of “autogestion”, where citizens fight the alienation of space through the reappropriation of processes of space production:

... Lefebvre conceives of spatial autogestion as a horizon we move towards but will never reach. The right to the city proposes a horizon beyond the contemporary city that is a transformed urban life, another city in which inhabitants themselves produce space in common.

While Lefebvre’s ideas have the extraordinary property of never ageing, to construe their revolutionary potential as somehow beyond reach is limiting. The idea and the practice of “autogestion” is clearly confronted by issues of scale, but the contemporary specificity of food-justice-seeking UA as a particular type of space making can already give us hints about the types of city that such projects envision. Indeed, as Bresnihan and Byrne (2015) and Huron (2015) illustrate in their reflections on

the urban commons, insurgent experiences of commoning that deal with the crisis of social reproduction are multiplying.

To go a step further into a discussion on “rights”, we can go back to Shrader-Frechette’s (1984) work on agriculture, land and property rights, and take this line of reasoning even further. In her analysis of the practice of land acquisition, property concentration and the disappearance of small independent family farms, the author investigated legal grounds of contestation.

In a similar vein, local authorities’ wasteful and unjust land management practices (read mismanagement and unproductive) can be resisted and explicitly opposed. As Wilson and Swyngedouw (2015:306) put it, “the state has become (and arguably has always been) just another instance of the private alongside private capital and private individuals, in relation to the commons, understood as the bio-political conditions of existence”. Given that our survival depends on the existence and health of natural resources and ecosystems for food growing, as well as the availability and accessibility of food, questioning the misuse of natural resources (i.e. parkland, urban greens, etc.) in urban as well as non-urban environments is an ethical imperative for food justice.

The crisis of social reproduction and the shameful rise of urban hunger and malnutrition urge us *to question* the ongoing enclosure of the city and *the ethic of private property rights and public land management specifically when they go hand-in-hand with the depletion of natural resources* (Shrader-Frechette 1984).

Cultivation and Animal Breeding

Land access or land ownership is not a sufficient condition for food growing. A number of procedural and capability issues constrain the ability to achieve a produce from the land.

Starting with the procedural injustices, and building on the work of Gould (1996) and Young (1990) on participatory democracy and recognition, we can recall the case of Newton, Massachusetts¹ and Orlando, Florida.² These two cities have in common citizens’ struggles for the right to grow edible plants in their own front garden—in both cases sanctioned or banned by local authorities. Ridiculous as it might seem, these are not isolated cases. In many urban areas of the global North, pig-rearing is forbidden or bound by restrictive regulations, and chicken or bee-keeping requires specific permission (see the NY campaign to legalise beekeeping).³ Beyond these obvious limits, which are challenged often on an individual basis, there are more subtle disincentives to grow: for example, regulation that forbids the collection of rainwater even in the absence of water access points. Short, precarious land leases pose many barriers: they impede access to many start up grants for medium–large-scale growing, and discourage the planting of perennial plants (e.g. fruit trees) because the sites are subject to a quick “ground clearing” (in the event of the site being redeveloped) which necessitates growing in movable containers, which can be expensive to build or to buy.

In one of my case studies, council support for UA, in the form of making park land available for community gardens, happened alongside recommendations to avoid using permaculture principles (labelled as “weed growing”) and banning fencing

and water collection for irrigation. The argument was that they would compromise the aesthetics of the parks, which leads on to the question of what food growing is for, and how it is supposed to happen, in their view. Other legislative constraints that I have encountered through fieldwork include limitations on composting people's own kitchen waste at garden sites—because transport of foodwaste through the city is forbidden (a particularly serious problem in Dutch cities). Or, a prohibition on keeping small water tubs and ponds for frogs in allotments (e.g. in many British allotments). These regulations, often based on aesthetic, safety or hygiene criteria, limit the possibility of exercising bio-control of pests and other natural ways to look after the fertility of the soil: they impose and perpetrate dependency on the agro-chemical industry. They constrain what Shillington (2013:106), building on the work of Heynen et al. (2006), has called *the right to urban metabolism*: “the ability of individuals and groups to produce socio-environmental conditions which create socially and ecologically just living conditions”. They also limit the possibility of intervening in the chemical structure of the soil, the use and re-use of natural resources, and even impose restrictions on the disposal of household and human waste (rather than regulating alternative uses), thus preventing the self-control of body-urban metabolic processes.

The ability to cultivate and look after the urban soil is also constrained by a number of “dis-abilities” that emerge from a capability justice perspective, as developed by Sen (2005) and Nussbaum (2006). This means that even when there are no explicit external barriers, a lack of knowledge and capacities restrains individuals from fully benefiting from the opportunities available, or from behaving in ways that nurture their own wellbeing. This lack of capacities extends from not having knowledge of existing resources such as available land or grants (this is typically the case for the vulnerable populations that UA could potentially benefit most); lack of time and/or skills to seek support, or to set up land stewardship agreements with local authorities; lack of skills to check soil and crop quality for dangerous pollutants (a precaution which is often left to individuals/groups' own initiative) or for the appropriate balance of nutrients; lack of skills to break the dependency from the agro-chemical industry with regards to the biological/genetic quality of the seeds and the soil.

As Agyeman and McEntee (2014:217, quoting Heynen 2006:131) have pointed out:

there is likely no other resource required for human survival that is as culturally bound yet so dependent upon material realities of the natural environment. These material realities and corresponding physical, chemical, and biological metabolic components they are tied to “generate disabling socioecological conditions that often embody contradictory relations”, what Heynen calls “the political ecology of urban hunger”.

A particularly crucial point is the lack of knowledge and skills to assess and deal with soil and water pollution. While scientists have not yet disseminated clear growing guidelines that predict plant behaviour and clarify the conditions for the bioavailability of nutrients and pollutants to plants and their presence in crops (see Saed 2012), there are often unquestioned double standards as to what to test (soil or crops), and what actual quality measures are in place for UA (read hobbyist)

compared with commercial agriculture. One of the assumptions that presumably drives these differences is that the (supposed) human intake of self-produced food is minimal, therefore quality standards can be relaxed. This also means municipal guidelines on urban food growing and soil/crop contamination are poor and vague, and soil quality testing is mostly devolved to the willingness of the growers. In this dismissive scenario, not only will soil and water pollution impact unevenly on urban growers, depending on their skills and financial resources (reproducing the exclusionary dynamics that environmental justice advocates have been pointing out for a long time), but there are very few incentives and opportunities for filling the knowledge gap related to soil quality assessment.

If we look at these constraints together, it becomes clear that in order to establish viable projects and to scale up UA we need to ensure a range of procedural and capability rights that make it possible to produce healthy food. A positive step in this direction is not just a matter of individuals' will—it requires a much more systematic education across the board, and particularly within the policy sector.

Sharing and Trading the Harvest

Distributional justice issues (pioneered by John Rawls) are probably the most explored aspects of food justice, yet these are the least discussed within UA. While it is often assumed that urban food growing is beneficial because it provides food and jobs for people in poverty, a sharper look at the distribution of produce and the remuneration of work within both commercial UA and volunteer-led growing projects, shows a more nuanced picture.

While it is perhaps unsurprising that business-led food growing initiatives do not always target vulnerable communities in need of fresh, affordable, produce, it is more surprising to see unfair dynamics of harvest share within grassroots-led projects. Here, a whole range of practices are observed: volunteers are allowed to take away only a symbolic part of the produce on the grounds that this is to be distributed to people in greater need, therefore internalising a paternalistic/charity approach rather than assuming that food self-provision can be a driver for actively engaged citizens; “first come first served” approach to the produce; exclusivity of the right to harvest to the core volunteers, and banning of passers-by and foragers, even when the project is on open ground, which implies an appropriation of the produce based on labour inputs.

In almost all of the projects I visited, the right to forage or to harvest is not considered for the “citizen of the street”; rather, it is sometimes explicitly discouraged. Clearly, every open access garden poses the question “how can the community implement rules which protect the urban common from misuse by outsiders, whilst also encouraging those outsiders to become commoners?” (Follmann and Viehoff 2015:1162). Observing the dynamics of appropriation, and sometimes enclosure, reveals forms of exclusions based on the idea that it is the labour input that gives exclusive rights to a “reward”. Many voluntary-based urban agricultural initiatives therefore embed forms of exclusion and appropriation within their very form of self-empowerment and lead us to question whether their

anti-hegemonic nature is sufficient to justify them; or, should we rather regard them as particularistic forms of enclosure facilitated by the dismantling of common goods in the name of the “Big Society⁴” rhetoric? This ultimately leads us to wonder how UA can become a field for experimenting with post-capitalist management of resources and alternative economies, and what could be the most appropriate scale for such an experiment (Purcell and Brown 2005): a point that I aim to discuss further in the next section.

Looking at the commercially oriented initiatives of urban food growing reveals a rather different range of distributional/economic injustices. None of the initiatives I have explored in the past five years in the UK and the Netherlands are able to remunerate the time needed to keep them up and running. Without a certain degree of self-exploitation, external grants, special temporary conditions (typically waived rental fees for the land) or the support of volunteers, these initiatives would not exist. A considerable, and growing, number of projects are funded for the social or health benefits that they provide to the community, rather than for the food actually produced, and in this way manage to pay the salary of a key, usually part-time, worker.

While, of course, volunteering and self-help are a constitutive part of these initiatives, it is evident that they are very fragile in the food (and labour) market (Rosol and Schweizer 2012). The precariousness of intermittent funding and/or changing numbers of volunteers gives urban agricultural projects a residual character which is not only due to their often marginal and interstitial geographical location. In the language of mainstream economics, they are economically *un-viable*, if not directly an expression of “roll-back” neoliberal urban politics (Rosol 2012).

This is not news and indeed much of ongoing research is exploring ways to mainstream local food and to amend the current market-based food system. However, there are at least two major obstacles which call for more radical alternatives. On the one hand, UA is often economically unable to compete on the food market, for obvious reasons related to the configuration of the current food regime (i.e. expectation of low prices based on exploitation of workers and selective subsidies, lack of value/appreciation of engaging in food-producing work, high demands for non-seasonal vegetables and fruits, land rents, etc.). On the other hand, food poverty and hunger make very explicit the failure of the market as a mechanism for a just food allocation. So, while the large majority of the population considers the almost total externalisation to the market (and disappearance from daily experience) of food-related incumbencies (food growing, processing, storing, if not also cooking), as a symbol of human emancipation, *it is crucial to question whether food should fall under such an extreme social division of labour, and be handled via the capitalist market system at all*. As Weissman (2014:9–10) pointed out:

[u]rban agriculture is regularly viewed as inherently political, yet this is not necessarily the case. Indeed, even the projects that explicitly articulate a politics of food justice find the confines of neoliberalization hard to escape ... in practice, urban agriculture often reproduces and/or exacerbates contemporary agro-food problems borne out of commodity fetishism and market ideology.

The question then becomes: under what conditions can UA escape its marginality and contribute to reimagining, reshaping and radically changing the food system, and in so doing liberate us—at least partially—from the absolute capitalist control over a fundamental sphere of social reproduction? As I will discuss more substantially below, this paper does not suggest there is a clear recipe, but it advocates for a *politics of engagement* with food, starting from a very practical approach.

Cooking and Eating

A final sphere of injustice related to the urban production of food relates to the actual transformation of produce into food and brings to light issues of capability. Few urbanites have direct experience of food growing and an increasing number are unable to prepare meals from basic ingredients.

A disproportionate part of edible plants that are grown in cities never reach the table: plants are not harvested, or fruit and vegetables are picked too late and then binned/composted, or the produce is parked in the fridge/the pantry (before going into the bin) because, despite good intentions, poor cooking skills make a large harvest quite boring to eat in full. While this sounds drastic compared with Follmann and Viehoff's (2015:1162) view on the timidity of "harvesting the commons", it is a rather sad reality which I have encountered quite often in my fieldwork over the last few years. A diet change not only requires access to fresh and nutritious food produce, but crucially, also the skills to make it into tasty, healthy and diverse food which can overcome the appeal of cheap, non-seasonal, easily accessible and often artificially flavoured food.

The absence of meaningful food experiences coupled with (and made possible by) the agro-food industry and corporate global supermarkets in its double grip on land control and the commodification of the food experience, has created what I could call a deep "food dis-ability". Alongside this, modern education and the quality of the urban environment, do not generally equip individuals with the experiences needed to build up the skills for a crucial element of their survival: there is little or no food and horticultural literacy in primary and secondary education, rare exposure to edible plants in public space, and there are no systematic opportunities for urban farming and foraging. *Most of these dis-abilities, for example the lack of growing and cooking skills, are socially produced and normalised, and often hidden behind discourses of human emancipation.*

I do acknowledge here that for some groups/populations—i.e. some African-Americans and Latinos in the US or immigrants leaving behind rural backgrounds in oppressive societies—land cultivation is reminiscent of exploitation, and the choice made available by the current food system is a symbol of freedom. Poor cooking skills and unhealthy eating have broad socio-economic roots which will not disappear with cooking sessions and gardening clubs—i.e. lack of interest, cultural preferences, lack of time and resources, and a whole set of structural conditions of injustice. My point here is not to deny these differences, and their roots in current or past logics of capitalist exploitation, but rather to raise the point that for food justice to be achieved in the long run *we need a greater investment in*

the creation of urban environments that nurture a re-skilling culture in which everyone has plenty of opportunities and incentives to learn, value, engage and take full control of his/her own nutrition as part of a normal living experience. Given the rhythms and family structures of contemporary lifestyles, such enabling environment would probably have more chance to come into existence if rooted into urban collective arrangements based on conviviality and socialised consumption. Rather than looking for individualised solutions, which ultimately put the onus of just-ethical-sustainable-healthy food choices on the individual, we should perhaps reflect on how a politics of empowerment reframes food (production and consumption) as a commons. A point that I will develop further in the next section.

Redefining Food Justice

In this last part of the paper's second section, I want to summarise the discussion above, and clarify how it might contribute to building a food-justice-seeking UA. The discussion aimed to expand the more classical poverty-gender-ethnicity-race approaches built on distributional and representational justice: it unpacked the meaning of food justice within and around food-growing projects in order to nurture a politics of engagement and empowerment.

Endorsing those reflections and articulating them in the form of claims, would mean bringing forward at least five assertions, or "positive" definitions of rights, that substantiate food justice in relation to UA. These are:

1. *The right to grow food in urban contexts*, as an expression of a fundamental control over the culturally and ethically informed practices that govern our own nutrition.
2. *The right to access cultivable land and to care for it in common*, questioning the ethic of private property rights specifically when they go hand in hand with the depletion of natural resources fundamental for our social reproduction.
3. *The right to urban metabolism and nutrients sovereignty*: the right to cultivate, harvest water and recycle nutrients for growing food sustainably.
4. *The right to harvest, share, trade and initiate processes for reshaping the food system* driven by the values of solidarity and equality.
5. *The right to live in urban environments that enable the retention and expansion of traditional and innovative knowledge on food growing, food preparation, and on the medicinal and nutritional properties of food.*

"Rights", as Merrifield (2014:86) reminds us:

including the right to the city, have no catch-all universal meaning in politics, nor any foundational basis in institutions; ... questions of rights are, first and foremost, questions of social power, about who wins ... They involve struggle and force ... What has been taken must be reclaimed, by force, through practical action, through urban insurrection.

And this is the critical point. Not only have the five rights above been built on the claims and practices of a number of often isolated and precarious projects across

Europe, and have not yet been coherently and extensively articulated as a whole within the urban food movement. But perhaps more crucially we still need to envisage pathways for their achievement.

Given the multiple ways in which UA is linked to various forms of injustice, what scenarios can we see ahead? Is UA destined to remain an interstitial, marginal practice of resistance? What would it mean for the “urban” condition to take these assertions of justice forward? Would “the right to grow” become a justification for endless suburbanization and sprawl? How would an engaged and empowerment-seeking UA transform the food system without serving the games of regressive, pro-capitalist self-sufficiency discourses? How can UA help to amend and revert the current dis-abling environments hidden behind the commodification of the food system? How would it even become appealing to the multitude that feels liberated (rather than deprived) by the current industrial food system? What would “the right to nutrient sovereignty” mean for the collective arrangements currently in place for the disposal of waste? Under what economic models would a just UA be implemented? I attempt to tackle some of these questions in the following section.

Taking Food Justice Forward: For a Politics of Engagement, Empowering and Commoning

From the discussion above, it should now be clearer that the capitalist city as we know it, with its land markets, development and planning priorities, circulation of pollutants and nutrients, pockets of food deserts and obesogenic environments (Nelson and Wood 2009; Procter et al. 2008), is deeply involved in the reproduction of food injustice. It is, in this sense, a dis-abling environment.

The paper has so far described the multiple ways in which urban agricultural practices are embedded in and constrained by neoliberal urbanism and capitalist logics of exploitation and delegitimation, and pointed out areas of self-organisation and control that need to be reclaimed by the urban food and agricultural movement in order to achieve food justice and sovereignty. But how do we strengthen and outscale this movement against capitalist and neoliberal forces, blind reliance on market food provision, and lack of interest and care on the part of individuals?

In this section of the paper I start a tentative discussion on what an empowering, resourceful urban environment would look like, and how could a politics of engagement and empowerment counteract the capitalist logics that reproduce urban food injustice. In particular, I will propose three interlinked and complementary strategies, aimed at paving the way for a more thorough discussion within the urban food movement, rather than the ambition to provide a definite answer: (1) boosting the UA movement’s capacity to challenge neoliberal urbanism; (2) helping urban and agrarian struggles to converge by shaping urban agroecology; and (3) experimenting with food commoning.

Boosting the UA Movement's Capacity to Challenge Neoliberal Urbanism

The first strategy for a politics of engagement and empowerment consists of boosting the urban food movement's capacity for critical analysis and self-reflexivity.

By enabling more comprehensive views that link apparently disparate phenomena (i.e. urban waste management, practices of harvest share, or water and land access), the discussion above could help the food justice movement to understand the specific way in which "urban neoliberalism" impacts upon urban food justice. This could potentially lead to new reconfigurations of alliances between social struggles in these different spheres, bonded together by an agonistic, five-pronged, enacted critique of neoliberal urbanism that:

1. challenge the aesthetics, logics and mechanisms of reproduction of traditional built environments, calling for a creative, radically alternative urbanism re-centred around food education and production and grounded in the concept of people's right to the city (Purcell and Tyman 2015);
2. challenge mainstream market economics which have been unable to provide food for all, leaving entire neighbourhoods in chronic lack of affordable and healthy food; rising urban food deprivation and role of food banks have put food justice in the public domain: the time is fertile to bring forward empowering solutions based on alternative models of solidarity economy and shared resources, striving to go beyond the obvious limits of charitable giving and to build a state of resourcefulness (MacKinnon and Derickson 2013);
3. challenge the rigid spatialised division of labour between the "urban" and the (idealised) "rural", that de-legitimises claims in support of UA, erodes control over means of social reproduction and condemns urbanites to simply being food consumers by virtue of inhabiting a space in which food production (supposedly) "does not belong";
4. challenge the effectiveness of an educational system that does not train new generations to handle the basic skills for their own survival, such as healthy food behaviours and sustainable food practices;
5. challenge the neoliberal management of collective services such as water, waste and sewage, making it extremely difficult for citizens and urbanites to keep control of, retain and sustainably manage important nutrients and resources for food production and social reproduction.

Urbanism as we know it, from the marriage of industrialisation and capitalism, has brought forward and progressively consolidated, through the control of land and water, housing provision and labour conditions, the disembedding of food production—as a fundamental component of social reproduction—from human daily life. At the same time, the rise of the food regime and the availability of cheap food coming from "nowhere" (Friedmann 1987) has enabled capitalist forms of production and neoliberal economics to endure. There is perhaps a different story of urbanism yet to be written.

For the many food-justice-seeking UA projects that aim to redefine the collective arrangements typical of contemporary western urbanisation, the development of a food movement able to discern how liberal, neoliberal and post-political agendas disempower them is a programmatic goal that needs to be grounded in new abilities to see injustice and to build challenging pathways of political engagement.

Converging Urban and Agrarian Struggles: Shaping Urban Agroecology?

The second strategy for a politics of empowerment is a call for a more deliberate, substantial and strategic alliance between urban and agrarian food sovereignty and justice movements. While the blurring of the rural/urban dichotomy (Fairbairn et al. 2014:659), the rise of hybrid livelihoods, and the increasing importance of urban and peri-urban food production and movements (Edelman et al. 2014:919) has been recognised within agrarian studies and food sovereignty literature, more could be done to link and coordinate debates and strategies on the ground.

As a large part of western activists driving forward the food sovereignty movement live in urban areas, it is striking that the focus of their struggles (and the imaginary for change) remains largely that of farmers and peasants often in distant lands. These are often rooted in the tradition of agroecology: the application of ecological principles to the study, design and management of agroecosystems that are both productive and natural resource conserving, culturally sensitive, socially just and economically viable (Altieri and Toledo 2011; Gliessman 2012; Fernandez et al. 2013). Agroecology is “a practice, a science and a social movement” (Anderson et al. 2015:3) that has been embraced by the international food sovereignty movement through the Declaration of the International Forum for Agroecology (Nyéleni Declaration, Mali, 27 February 2015).

Despite this predominant focus on peasant struggles, there are germs of confluence. For example, I find very intriguing and fertile the intellectual convergence of new “revisited” and “reconstituted” urban and agrarian “questions” applied to the urban context, as raised in the recent work of Merrifield (2014) and Weissman (2013). They question, for example, in light of austerity reconfigurations of capitalism and the state, how can urban movements reconfigure a mode of dissent and revolt against “parasitic urbanisation”? How can the public realm be reconstituted today as an expression of affinities and common notions? And what is the transformational potential of these growing urban agrarian movement/urban farmers—retaining their means of social reproduction—for the reconfiguration of a post-capitalist, de-commodified food system? I see these debates as important steps in re-focusing strategies around the importance of the “urban” as a promising context for building radical alternatives to capitalism, in line with a tradition initiated by Henri Lefebvre and taken forward by David Harvey (2012) among many others. I believe it is around struggles for an alternative urbanism that this convergence can be most productive.

A promising ground for reconnecting urban and agrarian food movements (and perhaps a conceptual foregrounding for a radical alternative urbanism), is the one

emerging under the banner of “urban agroecology”. Loosely defined, and yet largely under-theorised (for some initial conceptualisations, see Dehaene et al. [2016] and Van Dyck et al. [forthcoming]), urban agroecology is taking shape as a political praxis that foresees, debates and takes forward ideas and alliances for building productive ecosystems in the urban realm, and identifying forms of coexistence between urban functions, agroecosystems, human and non-human biotopes. We could say, with Holloway (2010:43), that it leans towards the erasure of the gap between ethics and politics. It aims to explore and substantiate the “urban specificity” of struggles and practices born and largely confined within rural/agricultural settings exemplified by the peasant agroecology movement mentioned above.

Urban agroecology as political praxis could therefore help to break the isolated and residual character of (food) justice-seeking urban agriculture, helping to see and enact the deeper socio-ecological changes and the state of resourcefulness (MacKinnon and Derickson 2013) that the philosophy and social project of agroecological practices (built on social relations of respect, mutual collaboration and learning) could bring forward in the city.

Regaining Control Over Social Reproduction: Food Commoning

The third strategy for a politics of empowerment is a call for a hands-on, pragmatic engagement with collective tangible experiences aimed at re-commoning the city and nurturing transformative politics (Caffentzis 2010; Eizenberg 2012; Follmann and Viehoff 2015). Alongside processes of awareness building and political strategising, UA can also be the very tangible tool to reground political action, retain and exchange knowledge and re-appropriate means of social reproduction.

While austerity policies are slashing what remains of the welfare state, there are opportunities—cracks in the system (Holloway 2010) of monopoly of land management, for example—that can be fruitful. Council budget cuts and the related lack of workforce in managing public green spaces and parks are leading to cities selling off or looking for stewardship partnerships with the private sector. As Wilson and Swyngedouw (2015) have beautifully summarised in their anthology on the post-political, the governance of cities is increasingly subjected to contractualism, privatisation and a new managerial utopianism (Raco 2015). Rather than becoming new forms of enclosures of the commons, urban green spaces could for example become experimental grounds for the decommodification of food.

What I am suggesting is to experiment with a praxis of urban commoning which includes open and enclosed land, produce, and locally processed food. Managed by associated communities in the form of cooperatives (see also McClintock 2010), these experiments could trade using alternative currencies (Seyfang and Longhurst 2013) such as time, skills and services alongside money. People could join in by donating/sharing different resources depending on their preferences, cultures and available resources: land, labour, produce, cooked food, organic waste, storage space, transport, time and skills. A whole range of urban spaces

could be used, including front and back gardens, indoor planters, vertical walls, schools, courtyards, public space, etc.

These experiments would not obviously aim at self-sufficiency, nor would they be able to decommodify food completely. But they would be tangible examples of responsible and resourceful land management run by regionally and globally networked food-producing societies which integrate control of resources (MacKinnon and Derickson 2013), principles of solidarity economy (Rosol and Schweizer 2012) and prioritise self-education. While Eizenberg noted in her analysis of New York community gardens as “urban commons”, that “the very idea of communal authority of space challenges contemporary common sense” (Eizenberg 2012:768), we can already find a number of initiatives—from land trusts to farm starts—that endorse “the commons” as a working principle. Scaling out and up the principle of the commons to the sphere of food production and consumption would mean recognising the centrality of food in our social reproduction, and the need to reinvent urban collective arrangements (i.e. community kitchens/pantries, public canteens, and other convivial initiatives), able to supersede market-driven, unsustainable, unequal and individualized approaches. In a time of austerity, many of these initiatives, such as soup kitchens and “pay as you feel” cafés, are already multiplying. The challenge is to shift them from merely charitable initiatives for the poor, to empowering projects for all.

This is obviously not an unproblematic proposal, nor does it ignore the multiple challenges of finding forms of engagement that speaks to different cultures/identities, suit different abilities/vocations, and the working out of how food commoning might actually come about. While individuals’ own cultural or socially induced barriers to food growing are undoubtedly the most crucial point, this proposal rests on the belief that a just food system will not come from above (i.e. the market), but must be built out of re-capacitation, direct engagement, and re-skilling of people to meet the challenge of reimagining new collective and just arrangements. Just as we would not renounce our literacy and numeracy education simply because we have invented sophisticated machines that read, write and count for us, this paper rejects the total externalisation of food knowledge—and the fake surrogate we get as consumers—promoted by the current system. The lure of cheap, effortless ready meals and omnipresent industrial food is embedded in our lives—including those of food activists—every day, three times a day. Decades of mindless eating, current difficulties in accessing just alternatives, and lack of time make the challenges ahead appear insurmountable. Yet, the change has to start from the daily experience of urban space, and can be resourced from where we are. While the utopian side of food-producing urban neighbourhoods might leave us hesitant, the food industry—and a number of local authorities—have already recognised the nutrients, energy, land and market potential of cities and are already exploring business models and technologies for upscaling urban food production. The question now is what kind of urban green “revolution” are we ready to engage with?

Conclusions

This paper aimed to build on current existing debates that point at the potential of UA to achieve food justice and sovereignty. The first part of the article, based on

empirical material collected through research and scholar-activism, has unpacked the multiple forms of injustice that unfolds throughout the phases of urban production of food, and articulated the struggles to overcome them in the form of five claims for positive rights. The second part of the paper has dealt with the task of reimagining how to bring forward food justice and build a politics of engagement, capability and empowerment. Three interlinked strategies for action have been put forward, based on a critique of neoliberal urbanism, an exploration of the promises of urban agroecology and a reimagination of urban food commoning.

These strategies are tentatively presented, but offer ground for exploration and experimentation. The “urban” realm of the food-disabling city is a pivotal point in these strategies: a space that need reconquering, reimagining, and commoning. A place where to start rethinking an alternative urbanism.

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Endnotes

¹ See for example Modern Farmer (2013) and WCVB (2012).

² Details on Orlando’s fights for the right to grow can be seen in Mother Earth News (2012) and Patriot Gardens (2013).

³ On the NYC campaign to legalise beekeeping and the right to grow, see Just Food (2016).

⁴ “Big Society” is a motto promoted by the British Conservative government. It refers to communities taking on responsibilities for mutual support, care, and the running of services once delivered by the welfare state. While this motto seems to embrace a culture of participation, in practice it serves as justification for austerity politics and the dismantling of welfare institutions.

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