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Chapter 26

THE POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF COLLECTIVE URBAN GARDENING

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Ioana Florea

The first Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology (Perreault et al., 2015) emphasized the link between theory and practice that lies at the foundation of critical political ecology and the significant contribution brought through this double embedding of this intellectual field. The key political ecology enquiries delve into the role of non-human nature for capitalist production and accumulation, and into tracing alternative paths towards a non-exploitative and non-alienating relationship between society and nature (Apostolopoulou and Cortes-Vazquez, 2019). Collective urban gardening is an especially fruitful ground – literally and figuratively – to explore these lines of enquiry and thus illustrates the benefits of a political ecology approach to urban natures and related activism and praxis.

Gardening develops at and reveals the intersection of human and non-human natures, rural and urban, land and water, food and housing, diverse infrastructures, and commons, and raises crucial issues of commodification, contention, and (de)politicization. Urban gardening has been associated with diverse practices and forms, from community gardens to guerrilla gardening, allotments, school gardens, etc. The increasing theoretical and practical attention urban gardens have received in the past two decades has been linked to controversies around "their utopian potential to create new visions for better cities" (Follmann and Viehoff, 2015: 2). In the following, we explore how this "utopian potential" has been strived for, practised, analysed.

This potential can take the form of the "micro-politics of garden activism" (Certomà and Tornaghi, 2015: 1123) such as do-it-yourself approaches to urban landscaping, countering neoliberal trends in urban development, endeavours at food sovereignty, experimenting with urban commons and community empowerment, and engaging in ecological praxis. Urban gardens have been conceptualized as spaces of civic engagement or urban citizenship (Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014) where people get a glimpse at the wider food, property, and power systems they are part of. Thus, people can become more than consumers and even take action beyond their own garden. Urban gardens' potential to transform the cities of tomorrow has sometimes been portrayed as spaces for "new economic becomings - sites where ethical decisions can be made, power can be negotiated, and transformations forged" (Gibson-Graham, 2006: 77). In between the micro- and macro-politics approaches, collective gardening has been seen as leading to enhanced social networks, social support, and social capital, facilitating community building (Firth et al., 2011), and initiating cultural sharing and safekeeping of traditional plant knowledge (Baker, 2004).

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Collective gardening practices have been also analysed as resistance practices against controversial urban development (Certomà, 2011) and neoliberal urbanism (Apostolopoulou and Kotsila, 2021), as ways of sharing, collaborating, and (re)building social safety nets – all essential in times of crises and recession (Galt et al., 2014). This takes us back to the structural conditions of urban life and transformations, "within which lurk both the constraints and possibilities for emancipatory struggles" (Ernstson and Swyngedouw, 2019: 8). Indeed, as these authors highlight, empirical research, theoretical paths, and practical engagements need to be (re)oriented to allow for an understanding and tackling of "the uneven urbanization of nature, the socio-ecological inequalities that pattern cities, and the perplexing socionatural landscapes that capitalist urbanization produces within, between, and beyond cities" (Ernstson and Swyngedouw, 2019:4). Collective urban gardening research and practice has been increasingly oriented towards addressing such concerns, thus contributing to urban political ecology and its endeavour at bringing back "the material" and the structural in social sciences (Heynen et al., 2006).

Political ecology research on collective urban gardening crosses with the political ecology of food and agriculture, which have played a vital role in the development of political ecology (Hall et al., 2015) before the field's turn towards the urban (Prudham et al., 2015). Gardening opens key questions about land and property, their uses and value, which can help illuminate new neoliberal enclosures, and the impacts of capitalist agriculture, and intensified capitalist food production. At the same time, collective urban gardening opens key questions about striving for food security, resilient water and waste management, particularly but not only in cities of the Global South severely affected by climate change, as well as for vulnerable populations in the Global North (de Zeeuw and Drechsel, 2015). As Galt et al. (2014: 140) highlight, "residents in urban areas of Africa, Latin America and Asia have widely depended on growing food to supplement diets and incomes. With recent food shortages and rising global food prices, this coping strategy takes on new importance".

This reveals not only urban gardening's vital role for a large part of the world population and its subversive potential as a collective practice but also the structural conditions which limit or enhance this potential. In the Global North, gardening is especially investigated as a counter-cultural and subversive practice, often linked to activism or urban movements (Certomà and Tornaghi, 2015; Schlosberg and Coles, 2016). It is important to point out here that research and practice experiences from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) would be highly valuable on the topic, despite being hitherto less prominent in scholarly debates. Forms of everyday environmentalism that have been recently celebrated in the North such as community gardens, farmers' markets, and food self-provisioning have been present in CEE for a long time, almost uninterrupted since modern city formation (Jehlička, 2021). These long-term collective practices, in the face of austerity periods and three decades of neoliberalization, reveal the wide subversive potential of gardening. Smith and Jehlička (2013) have conceptualized these practices as "quiet sustainability", namely sustainability by outcome rather than intention. Already a decade ago, "quiet sustainability" has highlighted a bias in dominant narratives about urban gardening as a new practice, linked to intentional social innovation, a phenomenon primarily attributed to First World middle-class environmentalists. Research on "quiet sustainability" was a valuable contribution to our understanding of practices produced within the workings of the global economy in non-core and lower-class positions, which can build "visions for better cities" that do not have to be "new" or "utopian" but rather mundane and pragmatic.

In the following two sections, the contradictions and controversies over urban gardens' potential to open pathways for radically different urban futures are further discussed, with an emphasis on spatial transformations, temporal aspects, and class differences. I propose this as a heuristic frame for reviewing previous research on urban gardening in a way that can further the project

of political ecology, by revealing connections between aspects of space, time, and class. Space is vital for the materiality of gardening, time is ingrained into plant growing, and class differences condition gardeners' access to and actions in space and time. This heuristic frame highlights the importance of the political – understood as "the recognition of the antagonisms that cut through the social" (Ernstson and Swyngedouw, 2019: 8) – which transpires through the ecology of gardening. It is also useful for tracing the contradictions embedded in urban gardening (and within which urban gardening is embedded). As McClintock (2014: 148) argues, "analysis of multiple scales, both spatial and temporal, should reveal that urban agriculture, in its many forms, is not radical or neoliberal, but may exemplify both a form of actually existing neoliberalism and a simultaneous radical counter-movement arising in dialectical tension".

Guided by this heuristic frame, in the next two sections, I discuss research on collective urban gardening by paying attention to its (limited) potential to "bring back the political" and politicize activist practices in the city (Apostolopoulou and Cortes-Vazquez, 2019; Ernstson and Swyngedouw, 2019).

Gardening across space and time

Land, property, and temporalities

Research on collective urban gardening has been concerned with gardeners' possibilities of accessing land, of collectively using and governing gardening spaces, of owning land. This direction of enquiry has opened a fruitful discussion about property rights over socio-natures versus access and use rights (Bell et al., 2016). Property and access rights are understood by political ecologists in the Marxist tradition as going beyond the land/spaces/gardens themselves, as "social relations between people", which "help make 'us' who we are but also help define important differences across space and time" (Prudham et al., 2015: 439–440). Access to land (and not necessarily property) has been analysed as key for enabling food sovereignty and as a vital resource for reducing inequality in food systems. In most research, the allotment garden is seen as performing this role. However, allotments also perform other key roles (e.g. providing housing for the impoverished) or are totally absent from some regions. This illustrates the importance of understanding different histories of agriculture, urban development, and embedded social relations and, therefore, the importance of analysing time, space, and class in conjunction.

Looking at short-lived collective gardening projects or at spontaneous gardening practices is especially revealing for the topics mentioned above. In times of heightened social and economic crises, such practices spread out into the wider population and more numerous spaces but become harder to sustain after crisis periods pass (Dombroski et al., 2019). Temporary gardening initiatives are an indicator of social relations with urban natures changing in space and time, with cyclical capitalist crises. At the same time, temporary community gardens can reflect a tension between diverse forms of spatial engagement: gardening can be used as a "new politics of public space", as a practice oriented towards the local and momentary quality of life. This comes sometimes in antagonism with longer-term and beyond-local activist commitments (Certomà, 2011), other times in accord with such wider politics (Follmann and Viehoff, 2015).

In the latter form, gardening practices can harbour both place-making from below and political activism that strives to transform cities and structurally bound relationships to socio-natures (Apostolopoulou and Kotsila, 2021; Certomà and Tornaghi, 2015). In such cases, the political materializes as cultivated spaces that struggle to endure and expand, as "practical arrangements of things and living beings" (Certomà and Tornaghi, 2015: 1124) generating material transformations

of urban space and urban natures. Reciprocally, these generate transformations of social relations that try to endure in time.

The politics of place-making

Collective urban gardens have been conceptualized as "spaces of potential" due to the fundamental commitment of participants to use individual labour for a common cause (Corcoran and Kettle, 2015). The potential arises because collective cultivation tends to generate new practices, new soils, new forms of organizing and governing space, and new attachments to places that may pose challenges to existing social divisions and inequalities.

Purcell and Tyman (2015) consider gardening and food cultivation as an immediate materialization of Lefebvre's "right to the city" due to their potential to achieve forms of autogestion of biophysical systems. An act of spatial autogestion is defined by "the idea that city inhabitants must reverse the process by which urban space is made strange to them and reclaim its control for themselves through the re-appropriation of urban space" (Apostolopoulou and Kotsila, 2021: 5). In this sense, gardeners' work together with non-human nature (insects, plants, soil, water, etc.) creates a common space (Schmelzkopf, 2002). This space-making, day-to-day labour, and collaborative knowledge production can lead to a sometimes incremental and other times explosive, sometimes short-lived, and other times long-term (re)appropriation and (re)claiming of sites, neighbourhoods, or even the city as a whole (Apostolopoulou and Kotsila, 2021; Follmann and Viehoff, 2015; Harvey, 2012). Thus, collective gardening can materialize "the right to the city" as it represents a form of space-making and "some kind of shaping power in fundamental ways over the process of urbanization" (Harvey, 2012).

Amid such processes, both social relations and relationships with urban space/socio-natures transform, materializing what has been theorized as "the right to nature" (Apostolopoulou and Adams, 2019; Apostolopoulou and Cortes-Vazquez, 2019). Defined as "the right to influence and command the processes by which socionatural relationships are made, remade and disrupted by urban development and economic growth" (Apostolopoulou and Adams, 2019; Apostolopoulou and Cortes-Vazquez, 2019), the right to nature collides with capitalist urbanization. Thus, its potential and limits are also framed by structurally bound relationships to socio-natures, where class differences and tensions are key (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). Collective gardening – labouring together, producing food together, striving together for autogestion, and creating common spaces such as greenhouses and outdoor living-rooms – can render class differences less salient (Corcoran and Kettle, 2015). However, this does not always mean that they are less pressing and divisive outside a specific garden space, and that place-based social cohesion transpires into wider and longer-term solidarities. The next section explores these possibilities and limitations for cross-class solidarities.

Gardening and class differences

Commoning against commodification

Collective urban gardens have been also analysed as spaces of social inclusion, spaces for diversity where underprivileged groups may strive for claims at inclusive urban development, and community empowering spaces in ethnically diverse and poorer neighbourhoods (Cabannes and Raposo, 2013; Schmelzkopf, 1995). Collective gardening work can nurture new relations of trust in communities affected by racism and marginalization, turning gardens into sites of urban resistance (Shostak, 2022). Glover (2004) talked about the benefits of community gardening, and the

enhanced social capital, but also about the unequal distribution of benefits and costs, according to the complex positionality of actors across lines of class, gender, ethnicity, and colour, within existing and emerging social networks.

The social justice outcomes of gardens as "spaces of potential" are never straightforward and complete (McClintock, 2014). Political ecology research on urban gardening has been valuable at revealing inequalities in food systems, leading to a stronger recognition of class tensions and racist dimensions in urban agriculture (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011) and improving both theory and activism on these topics. In CEE, Daněk et al. (2022) have unveiled a longstanding gardening tradition characterized by its breadth and endurance. Despite occasional precarity, it is regarded as a source of joy, maintaining rural connections even within urban settings, albeit being both tolerated and discouraged by neoliberal authorities. Historically, gardening in CEE has had a significant contribution to reducing inequalities as part of the socialist redistribution infrastructures. Moreover, in the decades of post-socialism, it continued to ensure access to food, leisure activities, knowledge, plant and land commons, and even housing (in the former allotments), for a wide population. It has been more than a decade since Marxist geographer David Harvey was publishing the inspiring book *Rebel Cities* (2012), sparking enhanced scholarly and activist attention to the role of urban commons and processes of commoning in changing urban politics. But research on these topics in the CEE region has remained largely under the radar (Jehlička and Jacobsson, 2021). Thus, paying more attention to gardening in CEE cities would offer valuable insights into diverse forms of commoning that cut across space, time, and class.

Generally, commoning processes unfolding through urban gardening have been receiving increasing attention in the last decade (despite a still disproportionate focus on Northwestern contexts). One of the most influential approaches is Eizenberg's (2012) conceptualization of community gardens as "actually existing commons", defined as "live relics of the ideal of the commons" that "are never complete and perfect and may even have components that contradict the ideal type. Nevertheless, [they reveal that] even in the face of pervasive neoliberal ideology and practices, 'alternatives do exist' and they pave the road to new politics and another possible world" (Eizenberg, 2012: 765).

Commoning processes initiated through collective gardening explore – and sometimes demonstrate – whether the commons can offer alternatives to neoliberal urbanism (Certomà and Tornaghi, 2015). When collective gardening practices succeed in outgrowing new forms of governing (e.g. when school pupils take over organizing works in their school garden) and new institutions (e.g. new networks of schools, universities, artist collectives organized around gardening), they move closer to the ideal of the common. When, for example, a refugee accommodation centre in Bucharest, Romania, reorganizes its courtyard as a community garden, it engages with "a different production of nature based on social needs" (Apostolopoulou and Cortes-Vazquez, 2019: 7). The next subsection illustrates how collective gardening has been studied (and practised) to achieve this.

Contention

The ideal of cross-class solidarities is inscribed in the conceptualization of collective gardens as actually existing commons, although their potential might not come to fruition (Eizenberg, 2012). In the structural frame of class antagonisms, urban gardens have been straightforwardly described as "contested spaces" (Schmelzkopf, 1995), as radical endeavours of resistance (McKay, 2011), and as political spaces of cross-class action (Certomà and Tornaghi, 2015). Class conflicts play out as gardeners oppose for-profit real estate developments, gentrification, uneven transformations of public spaces, or the precarization of their land rights (e.g. when lease contracts from municipalities become short-term, paving the way for gentrification). Follmann and Viehoff (2015) show that new

gardening projects have been used intentionally to demonstrate the power of the commons, intervene against neoliberal planning decisions, and allow gardeners' direct involvement in shaping their city.

On the other hand, research in the Northwestern contexts has also shown that collective gardening can be a neoliberal practice (Pudup, 2008), sometimes organized or encouraged by real estate developers-investors themselves, in order to boost prices, and legitimate or beautify new projects. It can also facilitate gentrification processes (Rosol, 2012) and enclosures that separate subsistence gardening performed by the poor from the leisure or lifestyle gardening of the wealthy (Tornaghi, 2014). This reveals the double-sided nature of contentious politics in which gardening is embedded reiterating that any collective practice is not a priori radical but can also be reactionary, or de-politicized (McClintock, 2014).

Indeed, most collective gardens are forms of political engagement based on local actions (in one garden or allotment) and focused on solving local problems such as limited access to and knowledge of fresh food, limited access to public and common space, or maintaining green infrastructures. For many gardeners it is challenging to engage with beyond-local political actors and to rescale their contention towards structural factors (e.g. international requirements and national policies that commodify and financialize land) that created those local problems in the first place. Many gardening initiatives do not succeed at this. As Follmann and Viehoff (2015) argued, some remain "lifestyle-revolts" of middle-class urbanites. Even claims for the "right to the city" and "the right to nature" sometimes ignore class disparities among different claimants: rights to garden can come into conflict with rights to housing or other essential urban services and infrastructures. Thus, collective gardening research and practice can illuminate conflicting rights to the city (Staeheli et al., 2002), allowing for a more complex and nuanced understanding of the contradictions of urban life in advanced capitalism.

Conclusions – political ecology research and praxis on urban gardening

Guided by a heuristic frame that examines space, time, and class in conjunction with collective urban gardening research and practice, I argue that urban gardening is a valuable field of enquiry for political ecology for several reasons. Firstly, it provides insight into the "interconnections among property rights, commodification […], and conjoined dynamics of social and environmental change" (Prudham et al., 2015: 430), all of which are central concerns in the political ecology tradition. Secondly, it helps bridge the gap between "the city" and the "countryside", as well as between society and nature (Apostolopoulou and Cortes-Vazquez, 2019) in both theory and practice. This is achieved by revealing the interconnections between food systems, agricultural knowledge, and traditions, historical rural-urban interlinkages, and histories of property regimes and spatial transformations. Moreover, paying more attention to urban gardening in CEE can mitigate the bias of Northwestern-focused research which tends to emphasize contention and class contradictions, and Global South-focused research which tends to prioritize food provision and self-sufficiency. Research on gardening in CEE can uncover the on-the-ground complexities, the co-existence of diverse practices and motivations, and broader ecological impacts. It can also reveal the benefits of considering temporalities such as the long histories of rural-urban co-transformations, cycles of gardening practices, and the contradictory effects of temporary uses.

Such an understanding simultaneously encourages radical action and praxis, aimed at realizing new visions for creating more equitable cities in opposition to capitalist development – an objective central to the intellectual project of political ecology. By examining collective urban gardening practices through the lenses of space, time, and class, we can empower these initiatives to fully realize their potential as "searching attempts to continue the struggle towards the horizon of urban

society" (Purcell, 2013: 323), where inhabitants "appropriate space, make it their own, and use it to meet their needs" (Purcell, 2013:318).

Exercising self-governance, fostering old and new solidarities, and ensuring access to land and means of food production are significant promises of collective urban gardening. Initiatives such as creating new and cleaner soils, allowing certain plant, insect, and bird species to endure in the city, multiplying endemic seeds, and promoting natural ways to limit pests are valuable efforts aimed at maintaining urban socio-natures healthy for future generations. The "utopian potential" of collective gardening thus encompasses a spectrum of activities, from daily labouring side by side to preserve or restore green urban infrastructures, to broader struggles aimed at safeguarding land from speculative real estate development. This potential arises from the fact that gardening embodies both urban/human and non-human elements, operates in the present and future, and is entwined with class inequalities and tensions, as well as local and global dynamics. Despite its limitations and contradictions, the value of this potential extends far beyond its immediate context.

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