



HAL
open science

Introduction to Urban Agriculture in the Neoliberal City: Critical European Perspectives

Ségolène Darly, Nathan Mcclintock

► **To cite this version:**

Ségolène Darly, Nathan Mcclintock. Introduction to Urban Agriculture in the Neoliberal City: Critical European Perspectives. *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies*, 2017, 16 (2), pp.224-231. halshs-01597602

HAL Id: halshs-01597602

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01597602>

Submitted on 28 Sep 2017

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Introduction to Urban Agriculture in the Neoliberal City: Critical European Perspectives

Ségolène Darly

Département de Géographie, Université Paris 8, Vincennes-Saint-Denis
segolene.darly@univ-paris8.fr

Nathan McClintock

Toulan School of Urban Studies & Planning, Portland State University
n.mcclintock@pdx.edu

Keywords

Urban agriculture; neoliberal urbanism; critical geography

Over the past decade and a half, urban agriculture's popularity has skyrocketed throughout the Global North. Accounts of urban agriculture (UA) – in the popular press, in practitioner-oriented reports, and in academic publications – have proliferated apace, most celebrating the return of food production to the city and heralding its potential contribution to urban greening and sustainability, food security, and entrepreneurial innovation (Gorgolewski et al., 2011; Lohrberg et al., 2016; Viljoen, 2005). Critical geographers and other food scholars, however, particularly in North America, have pushed beyond this celebratory tone, drawing attention to UA's integument in processes of uneven capitalist development (McClintock, 2014; Wekerle and Classens, 2015), its role in reinforcing structural racism, settler colonialism, and other forms of oppression (Guthman, 2009; Lyson, 2014; Ramírez, 2015; Reynolds, 2015; Safransky, 2014), and its use as a form of neoliberal governance rolled out to replace the Keynesian safety net (Allen and Guthman, 2006; Pudup, 2008). Some scholars have used an equally critical lens to evaluate UA's potential to radically challenge these same processes of neoliberalization (Eizenberg, 2012; Sbicca, 2014).

Critiques along these lines have been markedly less common in European scholarship on UA, despite that UA has taken root with much the same vigor in Europe as in North American cities. Several recent scholarly interventions, however, point to a burgeoning European critical geography of UA (Adams et al., 2015; Certomà, 2015; Hochedez and Le Gall, 2016; Tornaghi, 2014). Indeed, the uneven landscape of economic growth and the ongoing siege on social democratic welfare provisions stemming from processes of neoliberalization – from the blatant impact of austerity measures to more subtle forms of governmentality – are now a mainstay of critical geographic scholarship across Europe (Agnantopoulos & Lambiri, 2015; Fraser et al., 2013; Peck et al., 2013; Rosol, 2012; Tonkiss, 2013). In light of such upheaval, scholars of UA have begun to engage with social justice or political economic concerns even more explicitly than in the past (Atkinson, 2013; Cabannes and Raposo, 2013; Domene and Saurí, 2007; Ernwein, 2014; Mudu and Marini, 2016; Rosol and Schweizer, 2012).

The five papers comprising this special Themed Section contribute to this growing body of critical European UA scholarship. Our original call for papers sought contributions that might help scholars and activists “come to terms with UA's contradictions” (McClintock, 2014), by demonstrating how UA articulates both with processes of neoliberalization in European cities *and* efforts to resist these processes. While we were eager to discover work that engaged with some of the theoretical frameworks that have shaped North American scholarship on UA, we also hoped for work that might introduce North American scholars and activists to axes of inquiry more common in Europe. This Themed Section arose, in part, in response to calls to “provincialize” analyses of neoliberalization (Brenner et al., 2010; MacLeavy, 2014), in hopes of prioritizing critical perspectives on the radical/neoliberal dialectic from a diversity of national contexts in Europe. Such a

“variegated criticality” is necessary to both defetishize UA and envision new possibilities for its use as an emancipatory tool.

The works herein are therefore both critical and hopeful, accepting of UA’s multiple, often ambivalent motivations and outcomes. They are nuanced in their critiques while guardedly optimistic in their assessments of UA’s potential as a site of transformative urban politics. The first two papers employ a Foucauldian framework of neoliberal governmentality to describe UA projects in Austria and Switzerland. Sarah Kumnig points out how conventional commercial farming is being excluded from Vienna’s booming periphery and replaced by “greener” forms of cultivated space subsidized by volunteer labor. Originally published in German in an edited volume on green space (Kumnig, 2017), this translated and revised version complements the others in our collection by illustrating how processes of green gentrification work through land use mapping, processes of public participation, and voluntarism.

In the paper that follows, Marion Ernwein warns of the risks of embracing a binary assessment – progressive versus neoliberal – of institutional UA initiatives. Drawing on a case study of municipal garden projects in Vernier, a suburb of Geneva, she sheds light on the continuous replacement of traditional, autonomously organized allotment gardens (called “family gardens”) by smaller, more institutionalized and regulated community gardens. The gardens and their management are entirely framed by municipal officials for whom the new community gardens serve as a means of both maintaining green spaces at a lower cost (via volunteer labor) and challenging the dominance of the horticultural industry in shaping public green space. Scholars, she concludes, should “question their reliance upon a dichotomy between benevolent civil organisations and profit-oriented public institutions, and to account more precisely for the singular processes of neoliberalisation at play” (Ernwein, this issue).

Moving to Spain and Ireland, the next two papers trace the relationships between the global financial crisis, the boom-and-bust of housing markets, and the emergence of UA initiatives in its devastating wake. An international team of authors, Ana Espinosa Seguí, Barbara Maćkiewicz, and Marit Rosol demonstrate how the geography and functions of urban allotments in Spain have shifted since the crisis of 2008. During the “urbanization tsunami” of the previous two decades, which transformed Alicante and other tourist areas, allotments were tailored to the uses of pensioners, mostly foreigners, who brought with them specific gardening practices from northern Europe. Post-crisis, however, UA initiatives – and their geographies – have shifted in an effort to tackle poverty and “social inclusion of individuals most affected” by the crisis.

As in Alicante, new geographies of UA in Dublin can be linked to the crisis and resulting volatility of land markets. Mary Corcoran, Patricia Kettle, and Cian O’Callaghan examine the relationship between land vacancy resulting from the bursting of the housing bubble and the proliferation of gardens. Not only have post-

crisis vacancies created physical space for UA, the gardening itself challenges neoliberal subjectivities of personal responsibility and self-blame that many Irish shouldered during and after the crisis. The gardens have served, in essence, as a social and material space in which to “re-calibrate values and lifestyles in the post-crash period” (Corcoran et al., this issue).

In Paris, as in Dublin and Alicante, changing modalities of UA can be traced to the temporal rhythms of neoliberal urbanization. Kaduna-Ève Demailly and Ségolène Darly describe a succession from traditional allotment gardens – which always struggled to find permanent location in the dense center of Paris – to new, *temporary* forms of UA on vacant lots. While these “nomadic” gardens may articulate neatly with the temporal and spatial logics of capitalist urban redevelopment, the authors argue that they also foster social networks of activist gardeners that outlast the time frame imposed by public and private development.

The five contributions in this Themed Section succeed in coming to terms with UA’s contradictions by demonstrating how UA articulates both with processes of neoliberalization in European cities and efforts to resist these contradictory processes that tend to operate at different spatial scales (McClintock, 2014). The contributions herein not only provide empirical evidence of such tensions, but also shed new light on their temporal dimensions, from the shifting motivations driving UA initiatives in Alicante, or the knitting together of activist networks over the course of several temporary gardening efforts in Paris, to the emergence of new subjectivities in Dublin. By highlighting the often blurry boundaries between profit-oriented efforts and those committed to social welfare and community building, the articles add color to frequently black-and-white understandings of UA. Furthermore, they push us to move beyond a facile public-private binary that lends itself to a “good versus evil” analytic naiveté unfortunately all too common in the UA literature.

The ensemble of articles also nuances conventional analyses that pin UA’s cycles to economic crisis, where food production thrives as capital ebbs, then founders in times of renewed prosperity. While the crisis of 2008 certainly shaped the contours of UA according to this logic in Dublin and Spain, the Vienna case parallels that of other paradigmatic Green Cities such as Vancouver (Quastel, 2009; Walker, 2016) and Portland (McClintock, forthcoming), where gardens – rather than larger-scale agriculture – are part and parcel of new sustainability-oriented development. In the case of Paris, UA’s emergence remains tied to conventional patterns of investment and disinvestment, but the accelerated pace of development has led to an explosion of nomadic gardens, which has begun to replace more traditional forms of UA. These temporary gardens both contribute to neoliberal urban regeneration – functioning as beachheads of gentrifying creativity – while, as mentioned above, serving as material nodes in activist networks spanning the city at larger scales.

Finally, in provincializing critical geographies of UA, these articles illuminate how specific geohistorical contexts have differentially hewn the landscapes of urban food production, from the impact of an influx of northern European retirees on UA in Spain's Mediterranean coastal towns, to the historic relationship between *jardins ouvriers* ("workers' gardens") and authoritarian regimes in France (Demailly and Darly, this issue). In its more literal sense, provincializing UA also entails broadening the focus of critical scholarship to include smaller cities and towns, suburbs such as Vernier or the small towns of Alicante. Attention to these peripheral, politically separate municipalities – whether they are geographically isolated or part of a larger conurbation – can shed new light on the spatial politics of UA, which in turn should be compared with the conclusions drawn from case studies of food production taking place in major metropolitan areas.

Critical geographers have questioned the continued analytical purchase of neoliberalism as a framework for scholarship (Brenner et al., 2010; Parnell and Robinson, 2012; Peck, 2013); indeed, the pages of this journal have seen some of the most provocative calls to move beyond neoliberalism's ubiquity as an analytical lens (Springer, 2016). As the curators of a Themed Issue on "UA in the Neoliberal City", we certainly shoulder some responsibility in privileging – and perpetuating – a particular Marxian political economic register. The articles here respond boldly to some of the themes addressed in our call, notably UA's emergence in the era of neoliberal austerity and UA as technology of neoliberal governmentality. But our call also included a request for scholarship employing "a wide range of radical and/or critical theoretical perspectives, including – but by no means limited to – Marxist, feminist, anarchist, queer, and/or post-colonial approaches." We therefore hope that future work might build on the five cases presented here by thinking through how various critical frameworks might deepen our understandings of UA by paying closer attention to how neoliberalization works through difference.

Given that capitalist accumulation has always worked through with racialized difference (Robinson, 2000) and that race is a dominant theme in much North American critical UA scholarship, the absence of race/ethnicity in these and other European works on UA is particularly striking. While specific geographical and historical contexts may make race/ethnicity more or less relevant to UA scholarship across Europe, it is worth questioning whether an entrenched colorblind liberal universalism in European academia might also limit critical scholarly attention to such categories of difference in analyses of UA. To this end, we look forward to further critical geographic work on UA that privileges the perspectives of peripheralized voices in Europe and engages with some of Europe's most pressing issues. How does UA serve to as a means of inclusion and/or exclusion of migrants and refugees? How does UA counter or reinforce the re-emergence of populist/nationalist right-wing movements? What is UA's role as a historical or contemporary European technology of colonial power and/or territorial

expansion? Given the disproportionate number of immigrants and refugees engaged in urban gardening, it is essential to think through how UA articulates with the social, cultural, and political economic relations threading through the (post)colonial geographies of European cities. Finally, we hope that future work will delve further into what UA might look like “beyond neoliberalism”. As always, there is more work to do! But in emphasizing UA’s ability to forge anti-capitalist subjectivities, to foster mutual aid, or help redirect municipal priorities – and material support – towards more just and equitable social policy, the case studies here point to some potential new directions for scholarship and practice.

Acknowledgments

The two authors, listed here in alphabetical order, contributed equally to this introduction and to editing this Themed Section. Three of the five papers herein were first presented at the 2014 International Geographical Union Regional Conference in Krakow, Poland, in a session entitled “Urban Agriculture in the Neoliberal City”, organized by Sandrine Baudry, Ségolène Darly, and Johan Milian. The authors would like to thank Sandrine for her help in drafting the original call for papers for this special issue. Our thanks also go out to the contributing authors for their responsiveness to our comments and suggestions, and to Simon Springer, Robyn Bunn, and the rest of the ACME Editorial Collective for help in pulling this Themed Section together.

References

- Adams, D., M. Hardman, and P. Larkham. 2015. Exploring guerrilla gardening: gauging public views on the grassroots activity. *Local Environment*, 20(10), 1231–1246.
- Agnantopoulos, A., and D. Lambiri. 2015. Variegated capitalism, the Greek crisis and SYRIZA’s counter-neoliberalisation challenge. *Geoforum*, 63, 5–8.
- Atkinson, A. 2013. Readjusting to reality. *City*, 17(1), 85–96.
- Brenner, N., J. Peck, and N. Theodore. 2010. Variegated neoliberalism: geographies, modalities, pathways. *Global Networks*, 10(2), 182–222.
- Cabannes, Y., and I. Raposo. 2013. Peri-urban agriculture, social inclusion of migrant population and Right to the City. *City*, 17(2), 235–250.
- Certomà, C. 2015. Expanding the “dark side of planning”: Governmentality and biopolitics in urban garden planning. *Planning Theory*, 14(1), 23-43.

- Domene, E., and D. Saurí. 2007. Urbanization and class-produced natures: Vegetable gardens in the Barcelona Metropolitan Region. *Geoforum*, 38(2), 287–298.
- Eizenberg, E. 2012. Actually Existing Commons: Three Moments of Space of Community Gardens in New York City. *Antipode*, 44(3), 764–782.
- Ernwein, M. 2014. Framing urban gardening and agriculture: On space, scale and the public. *Geoforum*, 56, 77–86.
- Fraser, A., E. Murphy, and S. Kelly. 2013. Deepening neoliberalism via austerity and “reform”: The case of Ireland. *Human Geography*, 6, 38–53.
- Gorgolewski, M., J. Komisar, and J. Nasr. 2011. *Carrot City: Creating Places for Urban Agriculture*. New York: The Monacelli Press.
- Hochedez, C., and J. Le Gall. 2016. Justice alimentaire et agriculture. *Justice Spatiale / Spatial Justice*, 9(1), 1–31.
- Kumnig, S. 2017. Zwischen grüner Imageproduktion, partizipativer Politik und Wachstumszwang: urbane Landwirtschaft und Gärten im Kontext neoliberaler Stadtentwicklung in Wien. In S. Kumnig, M. Rosol, and A. Exner (eds.), *Umkämpftes Grün Zwischen neoliberaler Stadtentwicklung und Stadtgestaltung von unten*. Bielefeld: transcript, pp. 139–160.
- Lohrberg, F., L. Lička, L. Scazzosi, and A. Timpe (eds.). 2016. *Urban Agriculture Europe*. Berlin: jovis.
- McClintock, N. (forthcoming). Cultivating (a) sustainability capital: Urban agriculture, eco-gentrification, and the uneven valorization of social reproduction. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*.
- McClintock, N. 2014. Radical, reformist, and garden-variety neoliberal: coming to terms with urban agriculture’s contradictions. *Local Environment*, 19(2), 147–171.
- Mudu, P., and A. Marini. 2016. Radical urban horticulture for food autonomy: Beyond the community gardens experience. *Antipode*, doi:10.1111/anti.12284.
- Parnell, S., and J. Robinson. 2012. (Re)theorizing cities from the Global South: Looking beyond neoliberalism. *Urban Geography*, 33(4), 593–617.
- Peck, J. (2013). Explaining (with) neoliberalism. *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 1(2), 132–157.
- Peck, J., N. Theodore, and N. Brenner. 2013. Neoliberal urbanism redux? *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 37(3), 1091–1099.
- Quastel, N. 2009. Political ecologies of gentrification. *Urban Geography*, 30(7), 694–725.
- Robinson, C. J. 2000. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. 2nd ed. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

- Rosol, M. 2012. Community volunteering as neoliberal strategy? Green space production in Berlin. *Antipode*, 44(1), 239–257.
- Rosol, M., and P. Schweizer. 2012. Ortoloco Zurich: Urban agriculture as an economy of solidarity. *City*, 16(6), 713–724.
- Sbicca, J. 2014. The Need to Feed: Urban metabolic struggles of actually existing radical projects. *Critical Sociology*, 40(6), 817–834.
- Springer, S. 2016. Fuck neoliberalism. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 15(2), 285–292.
- Tonkiss, F. 2013. Austerity urbanism and the makeshift city. *City*, 17(3), 312–324.
- Tornaghi, C. 2014. Critical geography of urban agriculture. *Progress in Human Geography*, 38(4), 551–567.
- Viljoen, A. 2005. *Continuous Productive Urban Landscapes: Designing Urban Agriculture for Sustainable Cities*. Oxford: Elsevier.
- Walker, S. 2016. Urban agriculture and the sustainability fix in Vancouver and Detroit. *Urban Geography*, 37(2), 163–182.