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HOUSE ORGAN

Urban Farming: The Right to What Sort of City?*[†]

On the 14th of May 2012, 100 University of California (Berkeley) police officers in riot gear raided an incipient farm in Albany, California and arrested several people, ending a month-long struggle against university plans to turn arable land into commercial real estate. Six years prior, in South Central Los Angeles, farmers were summarily evicted from South Central Farm, one of the largest urban farms in the U.S.A., following the city government's sale of the land for private gain. There were protests, arrests, and the farm was bulldozed, only to remain vacant to this day. Hundreds of families lost part of their food source and livelihood this way. That the transaction transpired under dubious legal grounds and behind closed doors has only made the long-term damage even more gratuitous. In the 1990s, relatively more successful struggles in New York City checked the Giuliani administration's attempt to annihilate urban farm space through privatization. A mere list of these kinds of urban struggles could fill many volumes.

This all sits in quite a contrast with the accolades showered on urban farming ("gardening" or "horticulture" to some) over the past couple of decades by academics, governments, and international institutions. Many see in it wonderful possibilities for improved nutrition, fresh food access, and new employment and market niches (Mougeot 2005, 11–13; Schmelzkopf 2002, 332–333). There are also many now-acknowledged ecological benefits of reducing greenhouse gas emissions (e.g., lower food transport distance), resource consumption, and municipal organic waste, and in raising biodiversity and attenuating urban heat island effects. Urban farming can alleviate soil degradation problems by conserving, restoring, and even generating soils, which can also function as sinks for contaminants and greenhouse gases (Ajmone-Marsan and Biasioli 2010; Lichtfouse 2010). City farming can simultaneously improve urban environments and public health. What better solution to urban problems than farming? The town-country divide at long last vanquished!

So what explains the violent repression of many urban farms? Briefly, the sort of urban agriculture desired by state officials and assorted capitalists is one that fixes problems created by denying people access to land through forced mass evictions in

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favor of, for example, mining companies, and/or by denying food through such decisions as cuts in wages and benefits or premeditated urban planning catastrophes like “food deserts.”¹ But urban farming better not interfere with protecting that sacrosanct of rights that is the exclusive property of the capitalist: to accumulate capital. In fact, it may well turn out that the frequent remediation involved in setting up farms in cities—especially in industrialized settings—will contribute to the sort of environmental clean-up that polluting capitalists or government agencies prefer to evade. Would it not be an irony if urban farming ultimately served to socialize the costs of urban environmental degradation?

But the problem with urban farming hardly rests with a self-contradictory mainstream beholden to bourgeois class interests. Leftists involved in urban social struggles, or writing about them as academics, have themselves failed to notice the repercussions and potentials of urban farming. A salient example is with movements inspired by Lefebvre’s approach to analyzing and acting upon urban processes (Lefebvre 1968). Because “nature” in cities is reduced to something at best secondary to political struggles (or reducible to the social, as “second” or “produced nature,” as if entirely malleable to social will), such leftism continues in part to reproduce the bourgeois practices it deplors (e.g., Harvey 2010; Purcell 2002; Smith 1984). It ironically repeats the error that Marx warned about in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, namely that

Labor is *not* the source of all wealth. *Nature* is just as much the source of use values (and it is surely of such that material wealth consists!) as labor, which itself is only the manifestation of a force of nature, human labor power (1875, Section I).

Cities are not, therefore, second or produced nature. They are part of nature and are manifestations of forces of nature, human and nonhuman. Most on the Left still appear to have problems with this basic understanding. The case of urban farming brings to even greater clarity the dire repercussions of socially reductionistic leftism. The struggle for “the right to the city,” for example, can only bring shallow and temporary political victories if it cannot account for the functioning of urban ecosystems and therefore people’s health.²

This is not to argue against turning cities into food producing areas, nor is it to suggest current urban leftism brings bodily ruin (it depends on the context and the content of the struggle). But the effusive assessments of such urban futures leave a trail of unrequited concerns waiting to explode and that are hardly allayed by urban left discourse and action.

¹These are neighborhoods with little to no food shops or which are served by sellers of food of low nutritional quality.

²This is where such approaches as subsistence (Bennholt-Thomsen and Mies 1999), hybridity (Swyngedouw 1996), and eco-sufficiency (Salleh 2009) can be useful to advance a more effective urban politics, since their combination gives prominence to nonhuman and gendered rural-urban linkages and health consequences.

One might, for example, be tempted to believe, given that Cuba offers the most comprehensive example of how to devise and implement policies favoring urban agriculture (Levins 2005), that a worldwide Cuban revolution is soon in the offing. Of course, this is not the case (and the Cuban case anyway tends to be stereotyped as a response to economic duress; e.g., Mougeot 2005, 3). It would imply land distribution reforms unconscionable to landed and financial capitalists and the vast armies of clerks, realtors, bureaucrats, and assessors, among many others involved in the sordid trade in and speculation on pieces of land. The land question is something urban leftist activism has done much to bring to the fore, to its credit. Still, in the case of settler colonial regimes like the U.S., Canada, Israel, New Zealand, but also Cuba, the matter of land implies decolonization—that is, land restitution to Indigenous Peoples. And, in places like the U.S.A., leftist attitudes towards this has often been dismal (Tuck and Yang 2012).

One might, as another example, be forgiven for expecting the diffusion of urban agriculture to help usher in a new gender-egalitarian era, since it is largely women that produce and process food from urban farms (Hovorka, DeZeeuw and Njenga 2009). But, again, this is just too fanciful in this overwhelmingly patriarchal world, and (finally) most urban leftist thought and practice has been devoted to fighting against patriarchy, again to its credit. As Thomas Sankara put it on the occasion of International Women's Day in 1987, "in its conquering phase, capitalism, for which human beings are nothing but numerical figures, has been the economic system that has exploited women with the most cynicism and refinement."³ Privileging women farmers would surely undermine male rule (Sankara's assassination was also an act of misogyny). This is clearly beyond the pale of possibilities, as reflected in the writings of Mougeot, the eminent (male) urban farming scholar, who is quick to reassure readers that "Women's ability to perform their multiple roles in relation to food security may be enhanced by their participation in [urban agriculture]" (2005, 4). Here also lies a fine specimen of social status conforming most predictably to reasoning ability. It is unfortunate, however, that "right to the city" advocates and others of like persuasion have not placed gender at the forefront of urban struggles.

Then there is the possibility of life-long ailments and premature death resulting from exposure to contaminants. This is where both many urban leftists and bourgeois ideologues converge in failing to appreciate the consequences of urban farming or struggles over urban space more generally. Contamination is often a lasting legacy of decades if not centuries of capital accumulation through ecological devastation, especially through heavy metal contamination (e.g., Hough, et al. 2004; Meuser 2010; Thornton 1991). However, parent material (out of which soils form) unrelated to any human activity can also contribute to high soil-heavy metal content, so one must be very careful when imputing causation (e.g., Pouyat, et al. 2007). The emphasis here on heavy metals is because, unlike most other

³The original reads: "*dans sa phase conquérante, le capitalisme, pour lequel les êtres humains n'étaient que des chiffres, ait été le système économique qui a exploité la femme avec le plus de cynisme et le plus de raffinement.*"

contaminants, they present a long-term, if not permanent hazard. They can negatively impact people through soil-particle ingestion or inhalation or through assimilation by eating food produced on contaminated soils (Kabata-Pendias and Pendias 2001), which can lead to such destructive effects as neurological impairment and cancer (Centeno, et al. 2005). A realistic assessment of contamination actually necessitates multiple tests⁴ on soils and crops because high total soil-heavy metals content does not necessarily mean that the heavy metals will get into crops. This is because heavy metals have to become soluble and enter root-accessible soil water to then be absorbed by crop roots (this is also known as bioavailability). The process depends on the interplay of many variables, namely plant characteristics and the interactions between chemical processes (largely pH and reduction-oxidation potential) and the kinds of minerals (clay mineralogy, carbonates, iron oxides) and organic matter (humin, fulvic/humic acid) that make up or are added to a soil. Heavy metals, for example, can be stored on mineral and organic soil particles for long periods of time and then be released sometimes suddenly into root-accessible soil water as a result of changes in pH (Allen and Janssen 2006; Impellitteri, et al. 2001, 149, 154; Kingery, et al. 2001). What complicates the process even further is that with changing environmental conditions, heavy metals characteristics can change (speciation), so that they will change their degree of solubility and the kinds of substrates on which they tend to bind (D'Amore, et al. 2005; Violante, et al. 2010). For these reasons, total heavy metal content tells us very little, yet it is typically the only information the public receives. The screening and monitoring of soils and crops is anyway beyond the reach of most people's resources. Most people's knowledge is also insufficient to comprehend lab results, and most people often do not know of preventive or mitigation strategies (for examples, see Iskandar 2001; Stuczynski, et al. 2007). Even when such strategies are known, there can be formidable obstacles to surmount, such as when soils are so polluted that they must be sealed (if not hauled away) and new soil imported as replacement. Yet even raised beds may be insufficient because of heavy metal deposition from airborne dust from vehicular traffic and nearby polluted soils and sediments (Clark, Hausladen, and Brabander 2008; Säumel, et al. 2012). There is, therefore, much more involved in urban soil contamination than most are willing to explore.

The matter calls into question the ways entire cities are set up and structured and their relationship to places far away. For instance, urban farming in places like New York City, Milan, or London relies on vast quantities of resources from the countryside (e.g., water supplies from nearby regions) and from most of the rest of the world (e.g., wood and metal products for crop supports and weeding). There is no New York City, for instance, without a destructive parasitic relationship with other ecosystems elsewhere (in this respect, the "right to the city" in New York, if not premised on internationalism, ends up being a right to partake of the spoils of world colonial domination). Urban farming in such a context would remain part of

⁴Among them is sequential extraction to evaluate what kinds of soil particles bind with what species of heavy metals under differing conditions (Allen and Janssen 2006; Zimmerman and Weindorf 2010).

the problem, especially when soil, water, and much else has to be imported as a consequence of pollution. That is, urban agriculture and associated movements would, whether intentionally or not, still contribute to environmental and hence social damage elsewhere and end up preserving existing relations of domination while temporarily and selectively cleaning up the mess generated by the capitalist mode of production. This is likely to be the case unless urban agriculture means striving for a complete overhaul of the city that enables reliance mostly on local resources and that establishes mutually constructive linkages between cities and other ecosystems. This overhaul would require, among a great number of changes, the dissolution of settler and other forms of colonialism, egalitarian management of urban space, an end to fossil fuel consumption, replacing impervious pavement with soil, the replacement of all hydraulic media in all buildings with completely water recycling apparatuses based mainly on rainwater catchers, composting toilets for fertilizer production, open areas to establish pastures, remaking of diets and medical care so that human waste is safely compostable, and so forth. Cities that are not highly industrialized would probably require less drastic modification. Ultimately, an urban farming worthy of the name means the end of the town-country split resulting from the capitalist mode of production, and therefore an end to that mode of production.

These crucial questions are carefully avoided by mainstream urban farming promoters. The world of urban farming is instead turned on its head and made into yet another lucrative venture, though with bright humanitarian linings. Such venerable national authorities as the Canadian government's International Development Research Centre (IRDC) therefore generously disburse funds for urban farming research seeking to conquer the universe (Mougeot 2005).⁵ The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) devotes resources to promote urban farming in their usual crass ways as a business opportunity or as a source of government savings through meals programs and other palliatives (<http://afsic.nal.usda.gov/farms-and-community/urban-agriculture>). But the crowning intellectual achievement belongs to such esteemed agencies as the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), branding the recent spurt in city food production as a prospect for "Greener Cities" that will rescue the "developing world" from guaranteed urban overpopulation catastrophe. This is to be realized by having officials freely appropriating those "creative solutions that the urban poor themselves have developed," including producing food in and around cities under life-span reducing living standards (FAO 2010, 3). Perhaps such officials, including the FAO's authors of this most enlightened report, could instead trade places with slum-dwellers and apply such innovative spirit themselves.

⁵Mougeot (in the preface to the edited volume) takes special pride in informing readers that this "Agropolis programme" was inspired by the National Integration Programme of Brazil, which he strangely fails to mention was instituted under military dictatorship in the 1970s and serves as a settler colonial policy against Indigenous Peoples in Amazonia (Fearnside 1984).

There are yet other clever examples of evading fundamental issues. One is by deliberate pro-capitalist revisionism. In the Panglossian view of the FAO, “cities have been places not of misery and despair but of opportunity—for economies of scale, employment and improved living standards, especially for rural people seeking a better life. They have served as engines of social progress and national economic development.”⁶ And to add farce to tragedy, the report then claims that, unlike “low-income countries,” in regions like North America, “urbanization . . . took centuries, spurred on by industrialization and steady increases in per capita income” (FAO 2010, 3). How cities act as “engines of social progress” where people enjoy “steady increases in per capita income” has already been illustrated above. It gives little comfort and commensurably little surprise to know that such an internationally influential agency could still repeat the tales rich white males tell themselves and force upon the rest. For those very sharp people at the FAO, urban farming has little to no connection to relations of power; nor, apparently, to struggles over land that subtend urban agriculture. But in the wonderful bourgeois world of conveniently fragmented reality, one must stick to the decontextualized topic at hand.

The world, however, is not composed of isolated compartments and replicable units. In Kobaya, just outside of Conakry, Guinea, the expansion of urban area, where land is a market commodity, threatens women farmers’ livelihoods, which sustain many men and is based on producing on non-marketable land to sell fresh produce to urban dwellers (Keita 2012). The issue here would then hardly be how to enhance urban farming and more about the town-country linkages that enable survival in Conakry and that are being undermined by urbanization. It should also be occasion to question the treatment of urban land as a commodity and the social relations (arguably well beyond Conakry, seeing Guinea’s international role as bauxite exporter) that create urban sprawl and mass dependence on food grown outside the city. In most of the world, cities have anyway rarely excluded food production, even when under direct European colonial dictatorship (Smit, Nasr, and Ratta 2001). Unlike most urbanized European and European settler colonial regimes (e.g., North America, Australia), agriculture forms part of inter-generational continuity among the majority of urban dwellers worldwide. The murderous policies that brought about sustained conflagration and mass depopulation in the countryside in parts of Far West Asia (“Europe”) should not be confused for universal historical trends (Moore 1984). In this light, the very notion of greening cities belies an obdurate Eurocentric misunderstanding of reality, a misunderstanding sustained by power relations.

Lest one be too quick to judge, the urban farming struggles described above and that confront such power relations make it by no means clear that urban farming promotes egalitarian objectives. There is a sometimes latent and sometimes explicit questioning of land distribution and private property, especially through community

⁶There seems here to be a hint of malodorous convergence with those on the “Left” that continue to view the non-urban as political backwater.

gardens, and such could form the basis for an organized anti-capitalist front at the national level if alliances can be forged effectively with, say immigrant rights, prison abolitionist, feminist, and environmentalist movements. Some linkages are being made, but they remain limited to a small minority of people involved in direct political struggle. The Obama presidency symbolically manipulating urban farming (making it, among other things, appealing for the real estate market) and the USDA, through extension agents and other means, being involved in fostering urban farming as a business may portend less promising horizons. In the U.S.A., as elsewhere, the social and ecological ends of urban farming are contingent, as much else, on the outcome of struggles over the control of the means of production and the evolving relationship between people and (urban) ecosystems. And for those living in urban ecosystems like the area of Garfield Avenue in Jersey City, New Jersey, U.S.A., a majority African-American and Latin community, poisoned by capitalists through decades of carcinogenic hexavalent Chromium emissions, any mellifluous depictions of urban farming must seem a cruel racist joke, as would be any facile calls for the right to the city.

For regardless of political victories, ecosystems cannot be reshaped at collective will, especially not those that are scarred by heavy metal pollution. Lefebvre-inspired urban leftist activists therefore beware: the right to the city can be a most suicidal political demand when biophysical processes and the state of ecosystems elsewhere (on which cities depend) are not made central to the struggle. Nevertheless, urban farming, if its anti-capitalist potentials are understood, linked intimately to social and ecological processes in the countryside, and put into practice on egalitarian principles, could be a way to an ecosocialist future.

— Saed

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