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Editorial: Political gardening. Transforming cities and political agency

Chiara Certomà^a and Chiara Tornaghi^b

In the last decade a large variety of grassroots actors - urban harvesters, guerrilla gardeners, community growers and landsharers – have been promoting a diversified set of projects that, while interstitial and very often considered 'residual', are nonetheless significantly challenging the mainstream place-making of cities in the Global North, and sometimes changing the face of the neighbourhoods in which they are located. These initiatives unfold in a variety of forms: the spontaneous appropriation and rehabilitation of marginal and neglected spaces at the city periphery, new bilateral agreements for sharing private land, community stewardship of urban greens and parks in well-maintained city centres are just a few of the arrangements through which gardening in both public and private spaces is taking place in various urban settings.

While most of the existing literature on community gardens and urban agriculture share a tendency towards either an advocacy view or a rather dismissive approach on the grounds of the co-optation of food growing, self-help and voluntarism to the neoliberal agenda, this collection aims to investigate and reflect on the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of these initiatives, by questioning and interrogating them as forms of political agency that contest, transform and re-signify 'the urban'.

While as editors of this special issue we are interested in understanding the potential of urban gardening practices as agents of counter-neoliberal urban transformation, we don't take the progressive political stance as a starting point, but as a working question. We are interested in exploring what ideas about the city and belonging these practices embody and bring forward, how they make use of biological material as a means of political expression, what innovative relations of care, decision making and politics of place they build, and what weaknesses, contradictions or emancipatory potentials they carry with them. Our aim is to populate the link between political gardening and the politics of space with a range of reflections that, seen in their complexity, constitute the basis for furthering urban politics from the ground up.

As readers will be able to appreciate in this special issue, the claims expressed in the micro-politics of garden activism are quite diversified: DIY landscaping and engaged ecology, "digging for anarchy" and counter neoliberal development, food sovereignty and the reconstruction of the urban commons, community empowerment and the "right to the city". The social solidarities and divisions, empowerment and learning, conflict and negotiation of which these projects are fraught, are discussed in the seven papers in this collection. The analysis is largely based on empirical research and analysis of the forms, means and practices of urban gardening in 11 cities: Dublin (Ireland), Belfast (Northern Ireland), Leeds (England), Plymouth (England), three undisclosed locations in the West Midlands (England), Cologne (Germany), Toronto (Canada), Los Angeles and New York (US). We selected these cases on the basis of the distinctive character of urban gardening in the

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context of the neoliberal transformation of Global North cities, believing they can contribute to a critical discussion of the 'politics of urban space' (Tornaghi 2014), and to enrich the emerging debate on radical, critical and political gardening (see for example Certomà, 2015). This editorial paper is structured as follows: in the next section we locate the analysis of political gardening within a discussion on 'the post-political'. We then present four key themes that emerge from a transversal reading of the papers, and that in our view constitute the pillars of a discussion agenda for political gardening; and we then conclude with a synopsis of the seven papers of this special issue.

A new political activism in the city?

Despite the emerging institutionalisation, and perhaps even domestication, of spontaneous forms of urban cultivation, in this special issue we look into a range of practices including those that find their legitimation outside the traditional political arena: citizens-led and grassroots-led claims over public land management or private arrangements for land use beyond what predicated by conventional property rights. The point from which we start is the acknowledgement of 'the post-political age' (Mouffe 2005; Swyngedouw, 2007; Heynen, Kaika, Swyngedouw 2005) in which, instead of being the outcome of parliamentary activity based on antagonism, politics has been transformed by the emerging effects of negotiations by much larger networks of actors upon common matters of concern (Sassen 2007). In such a context, Swyngedouw suggests that the "rise of a neoliberal governmentality [...] has replaced debate, disagreement and dissensus with a series of technologies of governing that fuse around consensus, agreement, accountancy metrics and technocratic environmental management." (Swyngedouw, 2009, p.604).

Nonetheless, despite prominent economic actors and global political elites taking advantage from the outward delocalisation of political agency and largely contributing to the emergence of a neoliberal governmentality, it has been also noted that the unprecedented dynamicity of the governance sphere allows new actors to sit in a new, enlarged and fluid political arena (Castells, 1998; Escobar, 2001). This means that citizens groups are often engaged in direct negotiations with large private actors, companies and associations, without the mediation of national and local authorities whose exclusive authority over territory and people has progressively diminished (Massey, 1999). New political subjects emerge and advance their claims by deploying a broad array of means, some of which are very unconventional and radically different from the classic political ones. The complex political universe of urban gardeners includes different groups whose aims (taking power, contesting power, abolishing powers, etc.) and means (pacific protest, direct action, guerrilla, up-raising, riots, cultural opposition, DIY practices, etc.) are definitely heterogeneous; and whose struggles are often the result of their participation in, and learning through, translocal networks.

While heterogeneous and fragmented, we look at urban gardening as a distinctive and interesting new field of investigation where political activism and place making from below find a fertile ground for merging and mutually constituting each other.

Political gardening projects, in fact, advance a form of political commitment that materialises through the practical arrangements of things and living beings in the city space; and gathers together heterogeneous actors working towards an ideal future city they want to build in common.

Differently from traditional forms of political activism with their focus on discourse-based negotiation processes, urban gardening in the global North appears often primarily focussed on practices whose main appeal resides in the power of doing a state of things rather than merely talking about it. It entails, thus, common activity changing the matter and space of daily life in real places. Nonetheless, scholars' analysis clearly show how all of these

practices both entail material and semiotic aspects at once, i.e. they emerge as materialisation of politically articulated visions for alternatives to neoliberal urban arrangements. The direct commitment in the material transformation of public space, and the often implicit alliances forged with non-human agents (such as plants and animals) in reconceptualising and practically changing the "nature" of the urban space exemplifies these unconventional political means and processes (Certomà, 2011).

As a form of political urban activism, urban gardening stands in contrast to the pervasive neoliberal planning of city life, which produces the erasure of public spaces and commons, the decrease of social cohesion and solidarity links, the privatisation of leisure and free time activities and subjugation to exploitative food regimes. Not accidentally, in fact, many urban gardening initiatives are described as forms of "contested spaces" or "right to space" (Schmelzkopf 2002), "actually existing commons" (Eizenberg, 2012), counteracting and resisting against rigid social doctrines (McKay, 2011) or even means for contrasting social injustices (Reynolds, 2014). There are, of course, also positions claiming that urban gardening can be defined, on the contrary, as a neoliberal practice (Pudup, 2008; Weisman, 2009) fuelling gentrification processes and broadening the distance between subsistence gardening for the poor and leisure gardening for the wealthy (Johnston, 2007; Quastel, 2009). While acknowledging these trends and other forms of neoliberal enclosure brought forward through urban gardening (i.e. dismantling of social services and privatisation of public land as in Tornaghi 2014), it is nonetheless important to be wary of reading deprived people's interests as only consumption-increasing strategies, while most often many gardeners combine the two ideas of improving urban ecologies and having extra means for helping the need (Flachs, 2010). As a matter of fact, urban gardens are frequently described as initiatives improving the environmental and social quality of city space through solidarity, socialisation and education activities (Wekerle et al., 2009); community-building (Beckie & Bogdan, 2010) and contrasting food insecurity (Emmet, 2010; Milbourne, 2012 Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Schmelzkopf, 1995).

Unpacking political gardening

While narrating the role of these initiatives in transforming urban space and urban communities at once, we are interested in going beyond benign descriptions of community gardening, in shedding some light on what qualify them (or not) as political initiatives, and in exploring emerging issues for a research agenda.

A transversal reading of the papers in this collection has highlighted the emergence of four cross-cutting themes which we see as peculiar to political gardening: (1) a new urban land question: an emerging debate over urban struggles for land access, mediated by the spatiality of community gardens; (2) the multiplicity of forms in which the political unfolds in the gardens, with glimpses of issues of radicalism and domestication; (3) the transformative, cohesive or divisive effects of gardening on the new communities of practice that form in the gardens and around them; and (4) a reflection on the role and practices of action-researchers involved in these initiatives.

The *first theme* refers to the peculiar spatiality of community gardens. Political gardening projects, in fact, first and foremost transform the urban fabric, re-shape or reinvent public space, and create new physical, material and aesthetic contexts for action and interaction. Sometimes they indeed oppose neoliberal redevelopment, create new urban commons and constitute themselves as agents for neighbourhood change. While these might seem intuitive and conventional approaches to the analysis of urban gardening, the papers included here are indeed critically interrogating the relationship between these gardens and

the place-making dynamics associated with them in the neighbourhood and the whole city. Here the new political gardens are represented either as challenges to the mainstream market-driven spatiality of the city, as activators of neighbourhood change, or as drivers for wider public agenda settings.

The papers in this special issue are drawn together by a common denominator in their contribution towards defining a new 'urban land question', i.e. the emerging urge for access to, and direct control of, urban space, away from the hegemonic logics of neoliberal urbanism. This becomes manifest through an increasingly explicit self-awareness – on behalf of the political gardeners – of both the exposure of urban gardens to 'regressive public land management', and 'the agrarian potential of privately owned land' (Wekerle & Classens in this issue). While land scarcity (and its complementary land enclosure) is perhaps the most acknowledged issue underpinning rural movements around food and natural resources (i.e. *La Via Campesina*), what political gardening projects are bringing to the public debate over rights to *urban* land is an innovative re-articulation of property ownership relations in urban contexts. Complementary to Wekerle & Classens argument on privately owned land, Purcell & Tyman unpack the extent to which the cultivation and 'autogestion' of urban land can enact the Lefebvrian 'right to the city'. Follman & Viehoff take this forward showing how to claim the right to the city through the making of an 'actually existing common'.

The reasons and means by which control over urban land takes place are then further investigated. The multifaceted and diverse practices of place making that unfold in the gardens represents *a second theme* emerging from this special issue: the way/s the experiences narrated in the papers are materially escaping and challenging dominant architectural, planning or governmental protocols, market-led urbanism, food regimes, and the enclosure of nature. Nevertheless, their radical meaning does not always take shape through radical actions: indeed, as Adams, Hardman & Larkman show in their paper, despite its radical stance even guerrilla gardening is often a domesticated practice that can be largely in tune with top down, non-participatory, place making. Similarly, Miller (in this issue) reminds us that the allotment movement in the UK is now largely institutionalised or even de-politicised. Yet the self-governance of garden associations, the opportunities for new solidarities, and the contribution to land access and food sovereignty significantly contributes to the ongoing re-drawing of important reconnections between food production, land rights and food consumption, which are essential and increasingly at the centre of emerging claims from the food sovereignty constellation. While allotment communities *per se* might not often be explicitly politicised, allotments remain symbolic and concrete places for the preservation of the right to land and to food growing. Wekerle & Classens and Tornaghi & Van Dyck point out a piecemeal yet symbolically crucial pathway of change through, respectively, the stipulation of bilateral agreements for 'landshare' between private actors – therefore a new public sphere emerging out of private property (on the commoning of landshare see also Tornaghi 2012); and the cultivation of a patch of public land obtained through lengthy, protocol-following negotiations with the local council, readdressing the public food and land agenda.

While not necessarily confrontational, nor conventional, the experiences portrayed in the collected papers interestingly show the relational dynamics taking shape in the 'communities of practice' that largely form anew in these gardens. *A third theme* crosscutting the papers is exactly an exploration of the transformative, cohesive or perhaps divisive, effects of these relationships. New solidarities, new experiments in citizenship (or "cultivating citizenry" in the words of Corcoran & Kettle) and governance, unexpected learning curves, group and community building emerge from the gardens. A number of scholars in the past have already addressed the issue of green citizenship as the progressive

effect of urban gardening projects on governance processes (Carolan, 2007; Hobson & Hill 2010); however contributors in this special issues adopt a critical gaze that does not hide, and indeed interrogates, the contradictions, limitations and reproduction, at least in part, of existing social divisions (as discussed by Tornaghi & Van Dyck) or even conflicts (as in Adam, Hardman & Larkham) in political gardening. At the same time, however, these papers provide evidence of how the constellation of self-governed gardening places, reclaimed from the market logic, re-shaped and re-designed through new biological and social arrangements, represents an opportunity for practicing tolerance and inclusion, a bridging ground of individual labour and common visions in-the-making.

The *fourth theme* is an insightful journey into the authors' personal trajectories throughout political gardening projects, their positionalities and methodological conundrums. Despite being often relegated to the background, similar reflections appear in most of the papers included. In fact, most of the researchers cultivate the land and are out in the gardens with the people they are researching, performing themselves the very same practices they are investigating. Their double role not only poses methodological questions and calls for dedicated investigation strategies, it also requires an understanding of the reasons for, and effects of, their personal engagement, far beyond their mere commitment to reciprocity. Whether 'discovering and narrating what these projects are capable of producing' as Purcell & Tyman remind us, or in building an active memory of political gardening (as in Tornaghi & Van Dyck's paper), for example, the researchers begin to overtly unpack their roles as engaged citizens, critical voices and storytellers, coffee makers and activists, video-makers and plant tenders. While always exposed to the dangers of taking an advocacy route we believe the authors involved in this special issue are presenting a well articulated range of critical reflections about where to start reframing the debate on urban food growing within a political project for an alternative urbanism.

Synopsis

The potential for urban agriculture to disclose the inner and hidden mechanisms of governing urban space is investigated by **Purcell & Tyman**. They claim that the radical potential of food cultivation resides in its being an immediate materialisation of Lefebvre's "Right to the City" and a powerful means to achieve the *autogestion* of biophysical systems. By investigating the *Green Thumb* gardening group's activity in New York and the creation of the South Los Angeles Community Garden in Los Angeles they unveil the radical political and ecological potential of urban food gardening struggles for the generation of a city where inhabitants produce and directly manage urban space in a radically democratised city beyond both capitalism and the state. A new Lefebvrian "contract of citizenship" signals the beginning of a struggle for a generalised political awakening among citizens against the alienation of people, and towards the re-appropriation of food production and the collective production of urban space.

The same interest for linking urban gardening initiatives to tangible contestations of neoliberal processes in the city is addressed by **Follmann & Viehoff** who present a case-study from Cologne and engage in an analysis of urban gardeners' motivations in managing urban space as a common. They examine the origins of the emergence and functioning of the community garden *NeuLand* by linking local problems – such as the trajectory of the regeneration of a former brown field - to wider debates on alternative and more sustainable socio-ecological futures that challenge the neoliberalising trend of mainstream redevelopment within German cities. While they acknowledge that the cohort of community gardeners is more likely than traditional allotment holders to be aware of their potential in

terms of political impact, they investigate whether this is true in their case study, putting into critical scrutiny the intentions and strategies of the NeuLand project. Moreover, the authors investigate whether the growing of food in common is intentionally designed to demonstrate that commons are a liveable alternative to neoliberal urbanism and a strategical (rather than incidental) path for citizens to gain their right to be involved in the shaping of the city.

Wekerle & Classens, drawing on three cases from Toronto, document how urban residents assert their right to grow their own food and challenge naturalized notions of private property and ownership by temporarily soft-squatting a private development site; and by re-designating private suburban backyards for commercial community food production and for garden sharing among individuals. The authors articulate the idea that the increasing interest in the agrarian potential of urban private property is a manifestation of the evolutionary development of urban food activism, focussed around 'a new ethic of care for the land and for others', counteracting regressive public land management and articulating alternative visions of sustainability and food security. Taking Gibson-Graham's political agenda forward (2006), Wekerle & Classes convincingly argue that engaging with private property for urban food production is "a profoundly political expression of challenging the neoliberal condition by 'starting where you are'" (p. 2, in this issue).

Drawing on a case study from Plymouth, South West England, **Miller** looks at a rather classic form of gardening in contemporary Europe, the allotment, stressing its role in enabling access to one of the key resources that enable food sovereignty: land. Miller explores the highly politicised debates around their inception, and analyses the narratives that are mirrored in present day debates on urban gardening. Building upon the benchmark of the UK allotment system, Miller examines the opposing positions of those claiming gardening practices are able to enhance cohesive neighbourhoods and food justice, and those who view them as exclusionary practices. She uses food cycles and the capital-assets framework to see more clearly the different impacts of the many kinds of food-related activities seen in (peri-)urban areas in Plymouth and to evaluate the potential for reducing the inequalities of different food ventures. Conclusively, using allotments as a comparator, the author suggests that the key contingent factor for reducing inequalities on any parameter is the allocation of urban land.

A comparative study of allotment gardening in Belfast and Dublin allows **Corcoran & Kettle** to critically interrogate the capacity of urban gardening to act as a 'space of potential' or public sphere wherein social divisions derived from ethno-religious divides and social class distinctions can be challenged and transcended via conviviality and gardening practices. Challenging the contentious view of allotments as apolitical sites for petty and increasingly bourgeois gardeners, the authors direct our attention to one of the fundamental premises of allotments as a public space: the commitment to individual labour (cultivation and cooperation) rooted in a common cause. Their analysis contributes to the debate on the possibility of a shared politics of place, nurtured by new citizenry's solidarity, mutuality and trust that unfold in and through the cultivation of allotments. Urban gardening is thus presented as a kind of social leveller and allotments are described as public spaces where differences are rendered less salient because on the site processes provide the basis for renewed social cohesion.

On the basis of their on-the-field analysis, **Adams, Hardman & Larkham** contest the widespread celebration of guerrilla gardening as a radical practice, and instead show that it can be largely harmonious with the pre-existent uses of a place. Their research focuses on

the daily activity of three guerrilla gardening groups in the Midlands region of England, and the social reaction of local inhabitants not directly involved in the gardening practices. This is intended to contest the non-relational understanding of guerrilla gardening of many writers, which often lacks recognition of the perception of those who live or work in nearby areas. The authors argue that romanticised commentaries on guerrilla gardening are adopted/provided by the majority of academics; these however show only one side of reality. Despite the very mixed reactions from local dwellers and workers that were collected through their research, what clearly emerges from their analysis is that in all the investigated cases the guerrillas colonised land without the notification, consultation or involvement of those who interacted with the area on a more frequent basis.

Tornaghi & Van Dyck conclude this special issue with a contribution on their experience as activist-researchers setting up a community garden in a public space in Leeds, UK. Framing their micro-intervention of political gardening as an example of an 'insurgent planning arena' which transcends the usual plan-build-use logic, the paper highlights the empowering outcomes of the project (and its shortfalls) and its success in steering the local public food and land agenda, by interrogating the relationship between research-informed political gardening and critical urban theory. A key point around which Tornaghi & Van Dyck's paper is built is the reflection on their own positionality and role as scholar-activists, which includes considerations of their own commitment through a 'talk-plus-walk' approach (Pulido 2008), and distance (i.e. recognition of their constitutive role in the project). The paper calls for a much needed debate on engagement and reflexivity among the new generation of researcher-environmentalists who are turning to urban agriculture and gardening; and for a reflexive approach based on the creation of an 'active memory' of the political gardening movement (Vercarauten 2011, Stengers 2005).

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