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Cultivating food as a right to the city

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Cultivating food as a right to the city

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This paper argues that there is much to be gained when we view struggles to cultivate food in the city through the lens of Henri Lefebvre's concept of the right to the city. Lefebvre's idea helps us better perceive the radical political and ecological potential of those struggles. And in the empirical details of the struggles we can see concretely the key action in Lefebvre's concept, an action that is only abstract in his work: urban inhabitants becoming active and producing and managing space for themselves.

Keywords: urban agriculture; community gardens; right to the city; Lefebvre; spatial autogestion

Introduction

There is a rich history of food cultivation in the city. Urban agriculture, community and school gardens, edible landscaping, and guerrilla cultivation of food in parking strips, vacant lots, and other interstitial and unused urban spaces are all long-standing practices that can bring people together, help them define common goals, and engage them in the process of negotiating physical space with their neighbours. This paper argues that growing food also has the potential to be a more radical intervention in urban life. Specifically, growing food in the city has the potential to challenge dominant regimes that structure how urban space is produced and used. In contemporary cities that dominant regime is neoliberalism, which values space predominantly for its exchange value, and prioritises private property rights over other claims. Under neoliberalism the priorities of the state have been greatly reoriented away from the needs of citizens, inhabitants, and users and toward the needs of the market.

Cultivating urban land very often emphasises and develops social and ecological values rather than market logics. It can generate nodes of solidarity, relations of reciprocity, and networks of self-sufficiency among urban inhabitants. It can emphasise the use value of urban space rather than its exchange value and it can prioritise the needs of inhabitants over the rights of owners. It can also prompt communities to become active as they engage in the project of producing food for themselves and actively appropriate the space (and other resources) needed to do so.

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In this paper, we understand and articulate the radical potential of food cultivation through the lens of Henri Lefebvre's concept of "the right to the city". Over the past 10 years or so, there has been a renewed wave of interest in the idea of the right to the city (Mitchell 2003, UNESCO 2006, Harvey 2008, Marcuse 2009, UN-HABITAT 2010, Mayer 2012, Smith and McQuarrie 2012), but we think few of those who have engaged the idea have appreciated its full political potential. Discussions of the right to the city typically gesture at Lefebvre, but they rarely offer a sustained analysis of what he meant by the idea.¹ We argue that the right to the city is, in its most fully developed form, a declaration by people that they intend to struggle for a radically democratised city beyond both capitalism and the state, a city where inhabitants produce and directly manage urban space for themselves, through free activity. We argue that the struggle for the right to the city is already underway, in the everyday practices of urban inhabitants. In this paper we focus on one set of such practices: the cultivation of urban land.

Henri Lefebvre² and the right to the city

In this section we offer a sustained account of how Lefebvre conceived of the right to the city. To do so, it is important *not* to begin where most do, with his book *The Right to the City* (1968, translated in Lefebvre 1996), which is vague and hard to decipher. Instead, we turn to one of his last works, from 1990, in which he outlines a "new contract of citizenship" (Lefebvre 1990, 2003a [1990]). In proposing this contract, Lefebvre is trying to reimagine the relationship between people and the state. The contract proposes several new rights, such as a right to information, to expression, to difference, to *autogestion*, and a right to the city. On its surface, this contract looks like nothing more than an addendum to existing liberal democratic rights guaranteed by the state. It seems to want to expand existing rights but leave their logic fundamentally unaltered. However, Lefebvre is aiming at something far more revolutionary than that. That is because he is taking his cue here from the young Marx and especially from "On the Jewish Question" (Marx 1994b [1844]). Marx's goal in that piece is to dissolve the relationship between citizens and the state. He imagines a process by which citizens will increasingly take up the work of governing themselves, civil society will absorb the state, and the state will wither away. As this process unfolds, "citizens" would be transformed into merely "people" who are no longer subject to the sovereign authority of the state. They would become people who manage their affairs for themselves. Lefebvre shares this vision enthusiastically. It is an idea he articulated most strongly in the 1960s and it is what the new contract is designed to bring about.³

To achieve this transformation, the new contract begins by radically deepening and extending existing rights. But Lefebvre does not see rights as liberal democracy does, as codified protections guaranteed by the state. Instead, he imagines rights to be political claims that are made through the action of mobilised groups. Rights are not an achievement that comes at the *end* of a struggle, as, for example, when the US Civil Rights movement resulted in the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Rather for Lefebvre, rights come at the beginning. He sees them as *declarations of an intention to struggle*. Rights are people voicing their commitment to become active and to move together in a particular direction, towards a particular horizon. Thus Lefebvre does not intend that his new contract and its rights will be enshrined into state law. The contract is instead a way to initiate a generalised political awakening among citizens in which they declare their intention to begin a struggle. Claiming the rights in the new contract is what touches off this awakening. He hopes it will launch a widespread and thoroughgoing mobilisation of the population.

The new political contract I propose will be only a *point of departure* for initiatives, ideas, even interpretations. This is not a dogmatic text. What is important is that this idea of contractual citizenship *gives rise to a renewal of political life*: a movement that has historic roots, roots in revolution, in Marxism, in production and productive labour. But the movement must go beyond ideology so that *new forces enter into action*, come together, and bear down on the established order. This movement would accomplish democratically a project that has been abandoned: the dictatorship of the proletariat. It would lead, without brutality, to the withering away of the state. (Lefebvre 1990, p. 37, emphasis added, our translation)

But what horizon does Lefebvre imagine this struggle would move towards? Notice in the quote Lefebvre proposes both the dictatorship of the proletariat and the withering away of the state. But he understands these terms differently than they were typically understood in Marxism. Lefebvre does *not* propose that a workers' party should seize the state and use it to achieve specific political ends. He vehemently rejects that option. Rather he imagines, with Marx in "On the Jewish Question", that the majority of society, which he understands to be the proletariat, becomes active and begins to manage their affairs for themselves. This is what he means by a dictatorship of the proletariat. It is for Lefebvre a movement that emerges from below, rather than one imposed from above by a workers' party that has seized the state. As people increasingly govern themselves, he suggests, as they gain experience and confidence at it, they will come to realise they are perfectly capable of managing their own affairs. The realisation that self-management is possible spreads throughout society, more and more people begin to govern themselves, and the state becomes increasingly unnecessary, obsolete. It withers away.

This idea of self-management, of people governing themselves, is the meaning of Lefebvre's right to *autogestion*. The French word means "self-management" and traditionally it refers to the factory, when workers take control of their workplace and begin to manage it themselves, without the factory owner and his or her hired managers. *Autogestion* is thus a quite radical project: workers re-appropriate control of the means of production and thus strike directly at the system of property rights on which the capitalist economy rests. At its root, *autogestion* is a concrete practice of revolutionary struggle for an economy beyond capitalism. Lefebvre accepts this goal entirely. But he also thinks we can go further that we can extend *autogestion* beyond the economy. He thinks we should struggle for *autogestion* in other arenas of life like the family, the neighbourhood, the school, the barracks, and so on. And of course *autogestion* can be applied to the relation between citizens and the state as well. In that case it would mean, again recalling Marx's (1994b [1844]) arguments in "On the Jewish Question", that citizens of the state do not leave their affairs to be managed by state officials, rather those citizens manage their affairs for themselves. As *autogestion* develops among citizens, as they increasingly show themselves capable of governing themselves, state officials will become obsolete, they will be "overcome" in Marx's sense, and the state will wither away. In a parallel way, as producers in the economy demonstrate to themselves that they are capable of managing economic production for themselves, capitalist relations of property and production will also wither away. "Each time a social group . . . refuses to accept passively its conditions of existence, of life, or of survival", he says, "each time such a group forces itself not only to understand but to master its own conditions of existence, autogestion is occurring" (2009, p. 135).

Lefebvre wants us to launch the struggle for autogestion, the struggle to remain aware, active, and in charge of our own affairs. This struggle has no end. It is perpetual. The revolution is continuous. Lefebvre imagines us moving towards a horizon, in the direction of autogestion, but we should not expect to arrive at that destination. Lefebvre is not proposing an ideal society that exists at the end of history and so he is not a utopian in the traditional

sense. He is saying that what we must do is to launch a struggle: a struggle against property, alienation, and the state and a struggle for autogestion. Certainly, this struggle will encounter difficulties. Capitalism and the state have thrown up barriers to autogestion in the past and will continue to do so. But we would insist, with Lefebvre, that we should think of this struggle not primarily as a struggle to destroy: its main activity is not to confront and smash the barriers that constrain us. It is, rather, *to develop our own powers*. To struggle must be to augment our own ability to manage our affairs for ourselves. We must realise the strength and delight that *autogestion* offers. We must put our energies towards building another polity, another economy, and another city. If we do that well, our own powers will grow and spread and we will create viable new self-managed alternatives. At the same time, the current structures of state and capitalist power will increasingly appear unnecessary, then obsolete, and, ultimately, absurd.⁴ The barriers they throw up to *autogestion* are formidable, but the way to overcome them is not so much to struggle *against* them as to struggle *away from* them and struggle towards the horizon of *autogestion* instead.

The right to the city

So that is Lefebvre's right to *autogestion*. But recall that the new contract also calls for the right to the *city*. Thus far we have discussed political and economic relations, but we have said little about space. For Lefebvre, political struggle must necessarily also be spatial struggle as well. "Any revolutionary project today must, if it is to avoid hopeless banality, must make the . . . reappropriation of space, into a non-negotiable part of its agenda" (1991 [1974], pp. 166–167). "Revolution", he goes on to say,

was long defined either in terms of the political change at the level of the state or else in terms of the collective or state ownership of the means of production Today such limited definitions of revolution will no longer suffice. The transformation of society presupposes a *collective ownership and management of space* founded on the permanent participation of the 'interested parties,' with their multiple, varied and even contradictory interests. (1991 [1974], p. 422, emphasis added)

These interested parties, for Lefebvre, are the inhabitants of space, the people who use and rely on space for their daily survival. In the contemporary city, he argues, the production of space is not managed by inhabitants, by the users of space, it is managed by a relatively few elite corporate and state oligarchs (see especially 2003b [1970]). Those elite managers value urban space as a commodity and think of it as private property. This vision reduces the urban space to a single economic function, capital accumulation, and it sees urban inhabitants as merely passive consumers who help fuel that accumulation. The capitalist city segregates those consumers from each other and it warehouses them in isolated, sterilised spaces Lefebvre calls "habitat".

Lefebvre's overall point here is that control over the city, over the production of its space, has been *alienated* from users (1991, p. 343). Here he draws again on the young Marx (1994a [1844]) to argue that urban space should be familiar to users because they inhabit it every day. But in fact it has been alienated, "made strange"⁵ to them because it is produced not *by* them but *for* them by others. To counter this alienation, Lefebvre says, users must *reappropriate* the production of urban space and they must make it their own again.⁶ They must reverse the process by which urban space is being made strange to them and reclaim the control of space for themselves, its proper owners. This idea is quite similar to that of classic *autogestion*, whereby workers reappropriate their

factory, its means of production, and the economic value that capitalism has been alienating from them. Similarly here, the inhabitants of urban space reappropriate the production of that space. It is an act of *spatial autogestion*. Inhabitants refuse to accept passively the existing system of spatial production in the city and they decide to take up the challenge of understanding and mastering that production (Lefebvre 2009, p. 135). In short, they struggle to manage urban space for themselves.

As we saw with *autogestion* more generally, if inhabitants are able to become active, if they accept the challenge of managing urban space and they are able to do so effectively, the current corporate and state managers of space will increasingly become obsolete, no longer necessary, and they will wither away. The regime of private property, of state planning, and of urban space valued in terms of exchange value: all of it withers away. And so for Lefebvre the right to the city is an *extraordinarily* radical proposal. It is “a cry and a demand” (1996, p. 158) by mobilised inhabitants that they intend to initiate a struggle to utterly transform urban life, to make the city entirely their own again.

It is important to reiterate that Lefebvre sees the right to the city, and the new contract more generally, as a *point of departure* for a new political struggle. Again, as with *autogestion*, the right to the city does not imagine a final utopia, a crystal palace of spatial self-management at the end of history. As with his politics more generally, Lefebvre conceives of spatial *autogestion* as a horizon we move towards but will never reach. The right to the city proposes a horizon beyond the contemporary city that is a transformed urban life, another city in which inhabitants themselves produce space in common. This other city is an urban community beyond capitalism and the state, a city that esteems use value over exchange value. It is a society where inhabitants are active participants rather than passive consumers. They struggle to make their activity increasingly free activity, which is the term Marx used to designate activity outside of capitalism, activity that is not labour for capital accumulation. Free activity develops inhabitants’ whole selves, their many different potentials as humans (Engels 1996). Spatial *autogestion* reverses the separation and segregation of inhabitants; it draws them together into common spaces where they would encounter each other and engage in meaningful discussions about the city and its future. These engagements would make clear, Lefebvre says, that users are not a homogeneous group, that they are marked by significant differences, and that they will have to negotiate those differences as they work out together what kind of city they want (Lefebvre 2003b [1970], pp. 117–118; see also Schmid 2012).

Lefebvre argues that the struggle to become active and take up the challenge of spatial *autogestion* cannot be imposed, it must grow and proliferate on its own. It must come to pervade urban society and exercise “dominion” over the old order (1991, p. 348). That dominion must always be immanent: it cannot be codified by seizing institutions, establishing new hierarchies, and imposing new centres of power. The dominion of spatial *autogestion* can never be made permanent. It must be maintained by the active struggle of inhabitants to govern themselves. They must struggle actively and perpetually towards the horizon of spatial *autogestion*.

And Lefebvre insists that this struggle is not some wishful fantasy. Rather the struggle is *already going on now*, in the midst of the contemporary capitalist city. Even though the prevailing condition of inhabitants is often one of alienation and passivity, even though private property and economic competition tend to dominate political discourse, nevertheless there are also innumerable instances in every city of inhabitants taking up the struggle for spatial *autogestion*, the struggle for the right to the city as Lefebvre understands it. That struggle is going on here, now, all around us, even if it is often fledgling and overwhelmed by the capitalist city. Lefebvre says that what we must do in this situation is to seek out that struggle,

we must learn to *see* it in the midst of the capitalist city, and we must do what we can to help it grow and spread. We could choose to fix our attention on the structures of power that will seek to stifle spatial *autogestion*, but for Lefebvre the key is to focus instead on the fledgling struggle, to spend our energy cultivating it however we can.⁷

In the remainder of this paper, we try to follow this method: to seek in contemporary practices of urban agriculture the kinds of desires and struggles among inhabitants that Lefebvre's right to the city imagines. The capitalist city may work to suffocate spatial *autogestion* and to prevent it from growing. But we can, if we choose, seek out and learn to recognise the many struggles for a right to the city and we can narrate them, augment them, and try to help them flourish. In that way they can continue and strengthen the ongoing struggle to create another city. If that struggle becomes strong enough, it will eventually overcome the capitalist city and the latter will be rendered obsolete. And it will wither away.

Two cases

Recently, there has been a resurgence of interest in practicing, studying, and legitimising urban agriculture and so there are many examples we might turn to in hopes of discovering fledgling struggles for a right to the city in the practice of growing food. This paper focuses its attention on two struggles over urban space: community gardens in New York City and South Central Farm (SCF) in Los Angeles. We do not present these cases as paradigmatic and they are not necessarily more important or more resonant with Lefebvre than other cases. Neither case is particularly new or unknown. What we are trying to do in presenting these cases is to discover spatial *autogestion* in practices of urban agriculture. The paper does not report original research and it has not uncovered new findings. Rather it reads the original research of others in order to revisit and re-present two well-known cases through the lens of Lefebvre's right to the city. We are trying to flesh out what spatial *autogestion* would mean in the context of struggles over urban agriculture, what it looks like, what difficulties it encounters, and what successes it has had. We are joining the struggle for the right to the city by practicing the activities Lefebvre advocates: seek out, learn to recognise, and nurture, however we can, the emerging instances of spatial *autogestion* in the contemporary capitalist city.

A note on cultivating urban space

Neither the network of community gardens in New York nor SCF is exclusively a site of food production.⁸ They also provide access to open and green space in urban areas where such spaces are rare. They afford an opportunity to cultivate non-food plants like flowers and other ornamentals. In contrast to the capitalist logic of property ownership and exchange, urban agriculture engages the complexity of cultural, social, economic, biological, and spatial aspects of urban land and human labour.

As it is usually practiced, urban agriculture has a distinctly social quality that can catalyse community organisation (Staeheli *et al.* 2002, Lawson 2007, Barraclough 2009, Irazábal and Punja 2009, Shillington 2012). The social coordination and physical labour required to establish and maintain sites of cultivation is immense. Preparing an urban site for planting intimately involves the participants in urban metabolism, it helps them learn about the "circulatory processes that underpin the transformation of nature into essential commodities such as food, energy and potable water" (Gandy 2004, p. 374, quoted in Shillington 2012, p. 104). Soil, for example, must be tested and often remediated.

Gardeners often refer to the process of “building” soil, increasing its living matter and nutrient content over the course of many cycles of planting, cultivating, and harvesting. This process can take years to refine and speaks to the long-term nature of the project to cultivate gardens well. This process is starkly different from a capitalist approach to urban land, which conceives of it as property, reduces its value to exchange value, and is only able to imagine a financial return on investment.

People join together into communities of mutual interest in order to understand and manage the complex task of building and maintaining their gardens. This task requires collective effort that typically engenders social relations like cooperation, solidarity, and mutual respect for the space of others, though of course it also highlights differences as well. In most cases, gardeners produce and manage their garden largely outside of the circuits of capitalist accumulation and commodity production. Urban agriculture is, therefore, often an experiment in free activity rather than capitalist labour. Moreover, it has significant potential to work against the *alienation* of people – from their labour, from other people, from food, from ecological processes, and from urban space – and it very often offers people an opportunity to *reappropriate* food production, urban ecologies, and urban space. Urban food cultivation is, in short, fertile ground for the development of spatial *auto-gestion* among urban inhabitants.

Community gardens in New York

In New York City, a struggle has been underway since at least the 1970s to create and maintain community gardens in the face of pressures to realise profit through commercial development (Ferguson 1999, Staeheli *et al.* 2002, Smith and Kurtz 2003, Shepard 2009). In that decade, the City of New York was facing an economic recession and fiscal collapse. It was also receiving an increasing number of properties through default, but it did not have the capacity to manage them effectively. Partly as a result, a group called the Green Guerillas began to take matters into their own hands. They were soon joined by other inhabitant groups and they set about transforming vacant lots into garden spaces, most of which were managed by the gardeners themselves (Guerrillas 2013). This initiative emerged from the inhabitants: they had very little support from City government. As Sara Ferguson observes, “the diverse patchwork of over 800 community gardens that have taken root in New York since the 1970s [was] born not out of government support, but rather its neglect” (1999, p. 83). Participants in this surge of activity had diverse motives. Some considered themselves activists in a movement, engaging in civil disobedience against private property or struggling against a capitalist economy of endemic crisis. Others were less overtly and consciously political. They saw themselves simply as taking necessary steps to meet the need for food and green space in the city. Either way, the community garden initiative emerged from the activity of the inhabitants themselves. The “genius” of these community gardens, observes one interviewee on the gardens in New York City, is “*the community deciding* to put [empty space] to use” (Staeheli *et al.* 2002, p. 201, emphasis added). Eventually, these inhabitants decided to begin producing and managing garden spaces all over the city.

Near the end of the 1970s, the City became increasingly active in managing community gardens. In 1978 it created the Green Thumb programme, which was a way to regularise and manage the insurgent garden activity. Most of the gardens were illegal initially because the gardeners did not own the land. Green Thumb helped establish leases for the gardens and it provided limited public resources for their operation. As one might expect, Green Thumb also imposed some controls and conditions on gardeners’ activity,

trying to manage their energy in a way the City could control. Green Thumb's governance and funding structure is tailored to manage that activity. But at the same time, the gardeners' activity fundamentally shaped Green Thumb. The programme's very existence is an evidence of a reactive City: it was searching for a way to respond to the initial activity of inhabitants who were producing garden spaces for themselves. The gardeners were a new force actively transforming not only the land itself, but also the political management of it. Jane Weissman, the former director of Green Thumb, describes this era of New York City as a time when "people were beginning to take control of their own environment" (Brooks and Marten 2005).

Today, Green Thumb still exists and administers the 250-plus community gardens that continue to operate on City-owned land. It offers some useful protection and legitimisation to the gardens and so it allows gardeners to focus more on necessary and everyday tasks. But this protection is by no means iron clad: the leases contain the stipulation that gardens can be removed with 30 days notice (Smith and Kurtz 2003, p. 197) and, historically, long-term leases have been difficult to secure for any garden on land valued over \$20,000 (Ferguson 1999, p. 86). Consequently, many gardens have been lost to real estate development over the years. In 1999, for example, under Rudolph Giuliani's administration and in the midst of a housing crisis, the City put more than 100 community gardens up for auction (Smith and Kurtz 2003, p. 193). Though these were not the first gardens to face eviction, the sheer number of properties for sale attracted wide-spread attention.

So while Green Thumb has provided some stability to the gardens, they nevertheless remain very much contested spaces. The struggle for spatial *autogestion* is perpetual. As a result of Green Thumb's limits, inhabitants have created their own organisations beyond Green Thumb to defend the gardens (Marcuse and Morse 2008). The New York City Community Garden Coalition (NYCCGC), for example, was founded in 1996 "to promote the preservation, creation, and empowerment of community gardens through education, advocacy, and grassroots organizing" (NYCCGC 2013). More Gardens were formed in 1999 to collectively organise the defence of the gardens. It is "a group of community people, community gardeners, and environmental and social justice activists who promote the development and preservation of community gardens as well as the cultivation of fallow land in NYC" (More Gardens! 2013). These inhabitant groups have defended individual gardens, procured needed resources for gardeners, and helped inhabitants learn about urban land use politics. Such activism operates both within formal institutions and outside them, through tactics like information campaigns and public demonstrations. It also provides opportunities to link the politics of gardening to other political causes such as land use development and environmentalism (Smith and Kurtz 2003).

For many activists, the struggle to save neighbourhood gardens is part of a broader struggle to control their neighbourhoods and communities. As one interviewee put it,

there are people, young kids, who through nothing more than gardening, are now becoming community activists, are standing up for a right. Because of the fact that if it's a community garden today, it's your apartment tomorrow. It's your school the next day. So it all interrelates. And as a community, you must take a stand. You must take a stand for the control of how your community is run. (Stacheli *et al.* 2002, p. 200)

As the above quote suggests, for many involved in the struggle, it is about more than saving a specific garden and it is also about increasing the control inhabitants have over the production of urban space.

Interviews conducted by both Smith and Kurtz (2003) and Staeheli *et al.* (2002) reveal that the gardens had a very different meaning for City officials than they did for gardeners and many inhabitants. The former saw community gardens as an interim use for the land until development could occur, whereas the latter saw the gardens as long-term investments in their neighbourhoods that they hoped would return social, cultural, economic, and ecological benefits.⁹ The struggle to save the gardens was also a struggle about the meaning of urban space and how it should be used. The City maintained that financial, market-driven values should take priority. Urban inhabitants, through more traditional political organising and through the act of cultivating land, insisted on a different way to understand the urban landscape and they struggled to make this meaning manifest in the space of the city.

In New York this struggle over space also involved an important racial dimension. In their interviews, Staeheli *et al.* found a common sentiment expressed by NYC gardeners that land use policies under Giuliani's administration promoted the interests of white, middle class New Yorkers, rather than the public interest more generally. Moreover, gardeners felt the policies implicitly (and sometimes more explicitly) excluded others, especially those in non-white neighbourhoods that had been historically ignored by the City (2002, p. 200). They felt the City had much less interest in defending and managing gardens in these neighbourhoods. Interviewees thus remind us that often a politics of race helps structure the relations between the City and inhabitants, not to mention the relations among inhabitants themselves. The same could be said, of course, for a politics of gender and sexuality.

The case of community gardens in New York City thus offers us a sustained look at a concrete example of the desire for spatial *autogestion* that forms the core of Lefebvre's idea of the right to the city. In New York, urban inhabitants are engaging in a long struggle to produce and manage for themselves spaces that are useful and meaningful to them. While the intensity of this activity has waxed and waned, the spaces created in the initial wave of gardening, even after they came under the Green Thumb programme, have continued to serve as the impetus for wider political activation among inhabitants.

South Central Farm

The South Los Angeles Community Garden, known as SCF, was a community garden that for over a decade provided almost six hectares of gardening space for more than 350 predominantly Latino families (Lawson 2007, Barraclough 2009, Irazábal and Punja 2009, Foust 2011). Begun in 1994, SCF was conceived of as a peace offering from the City of Los Angeles to non-white communities in the wake of the 1992 beating of Rodney King, the subsequent outrage at the acquittal of the officers responsible, and the destructive and violent urban uprising that followed (Lawson 2007). SCF was initially proposed by the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank's Urban Gardening Programme. They hoped the farm would improve community health by providing better access to fresh, nutritious produce. The City of Los Angeles, through its Harbour Department, happened to own land adjacent to the food bank in a highly industrial area. It supported the project by issuing a revocable permit for the Food Bank to use the land as a community garden.

The land in question, at South Alameda and East 41st Street, had a contested history long before 1994. The City had originally seized it in the mid-1980s under eminent domain, intending to build a trash incinerator. The incinerator, known as the Los Angeles City Energy Recovery Project (LANCER), was opposed stridently by the local residents. The area's population at the time was predominantly low-income and African-American. It had some of the highest toxic pollution rates in Los Angeles County and

the fewest number of public parks. This situation prompted claims of environmental injustice (Barracrough 2009, p. 183). Organised protests against LANCER by Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles (CCSCLA) eventually forced the City to abandon the plan for the incinerator in 1987. At that time, the permit to use the land was issued to the Food Bank. However, the fate of the land remained uncertain. After LANCER was abandoned, the City faced legal pressure from the original owners, who wanted to buy it back. Despite a protracted legal struggle, the City was never ordered to sell the land (Philpott 2006). In 1994, SCF began operating, growing food, and providing a gathering space for local inhabitants.

The legal struggles over the land continued and they became more acute after 2002, when construction was completed on the Alameda Corridor, a rail-cargo expressway from Los Angeles to the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, which greatly increased the land value of the SCF property (Philpott 2006). Eventually, the City decided to sell the land to one of the previous owners. It entered into negotiations with Ralph Horowitz and in 2003 they reached an agreement for Horowitz to buy back the land for just over \$5 million (Lawson 2007). The SCF farmers were not invited to participate in the negotiations, even though many of them had worked the land for almost 10 years.

As was the case in New York, the City of Los Angeles thought of SCF as a temporary land use, one that should properly give way when the market value of the land rebounded. The lease given to the food bank was never permanent – it could be revoked with 30-days notice. Most of the gardeners, by contrast, saw SCF as a long-term economic, ecological, and cultural investment. They did not plant just annual crops, they also planted fruit and nut trees that take years to reach their full harvest potential. They did the considerable initial work of clearing the land, removing what one farmer described as “barrels and barrels of concrete and glass and metals” from the site, and preparing it for cultivation (Hoffman and McCracken 2006). Through their considerable labour, the farmers thus reclaimed what had been vacant land and they transformed it into a space that played a vibrant role in the life of local inhabitants (Lawson 2007). In addition, the farmers and other inhabitants participated actively in governing the garden. As one of the farmers put it:

The original process [of giving the land to the farmers] was done through the Food Bank. Then in 1994 the Food Bank said, “We can’t afford to hire a person [to manage the project]”, and they were gonna close this place down. But the community came together and told the Food Bank, “Let us run it”. We have an internal government. We have a general assembly and representatives from different sections. It’s based on the Mexican ejido system, the communal-land structure, where they have a junta and all of the general assembly come for decision-making and all that. (Hoffman and Petite 2006)

When the land was sold back to Horowitz in 2003, this governance structure had been in place and running effectively for nine years. Residents had been practicing for some time the political habits and skills they subsequently used to defend the property as a working farm. They formed South Central Farmers Feeding Families (SCFFF), a group described by Foust (2011, p. 351) as a “self-governing advocacy organisation”. It was SCFFF, not the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank, that led the struggle to defend the farm against Horowitz’s attempts to remove them. The farmer activists insisted that the space was serving the needs of more than 350 families who had, by their gardening practice, demonstrated their commitment to the land and their ability to manage and care for it effectively. Moreover, through the cultivation and defence of the farm, inhabitants had become active and had developed their ability to govern themselves and manage the land. They also came to “articulate an alternate vision of community ownership based on self-determination

and years of labour spent improving the land, both at the farm itself and in the larger industrial districts of South Central Los Angeles” (Barracough 2009, p. 180). For most farmers, the value of the land lay not in its market value as property, but in its productive capacity, in the plants that they cultivated, in the physical structures they had built, and in the shared sense of achievement and well-being the work had engendered (*The Garden* 2008). SCF was also an important source of nutrition in a low-income neighbourhood where affordable fresh produce was difficult to find. For the participants, the land was made valuable through their use and stewardship of it.

In their effort to defend the farm, activists engaged in letter-writing campaigns, marches, protests, and civil disobedience, including an occupation of the land. They were even able to secure the help of the Annenberg Foundation to raise \$16 million, which they used to make an offer to buy the land from Horowitz. He refused their offer at the last minute, citing what he perceived to be harassment and character attacks on the part of those defending the farm (*The Garden* 2008).

As in New York, race also played a role in the politics of SCF. Barracough’s research (2009) finds a perception among non-whites in Los Angeles that City land use policies systematically benefit white neighbourhoods more than non-white ones. This observation closely mirrors that of the interviewees cited by Staeheli *et al.* (2002) and Rosenthal (2003) who identified a similar perceived racial bias in New York. Moreover, it is important to note that the community of inhabitants in South Central was itself marked by difference and that difference had a strong racial component. SCFFF represented a primarily Latino constituency and it sought to defend the land as a working farm (LeGreco and Leonard 2011). CCSCLA, who had previously led the fight against LANCER, was a predominantly African-American group that was less concerned with the farm per se and more concerned with other sorts of community benefits, like jobs and a soccer field (Irazábal and Punja 2009). This difference should be understood in context: South Central was historically an African-American area of the city that over the last decades has become primarily Latino. The case of SCF reminds us of what Lefebvre affirms: that inhabitants and their interests are plural and that when they become active and encounter each other in the course of their struggle to manage space for themselves, they will be made aware of, and will need to negotiate, the differences that exist among them (see especially Lefebvre 2003a [1990], 2003b [1970], p. 38ff).

In the end, the effort to save SCF failed. It was bulldozed on 5 July 2006. At the time, it was an actively tended, ecologically diverse, working farm in the midst of an industrial warehouse district and the largest urban community garden in the USA (Irazábal and Punja 2009, p. 2). Various plans for the property have been proposed since the bulldozing, but none have been implemented and the land remains vacant. Nevertheless, seven years later, the farmers remain active. Some of them farm a smaller community garden space that was offered by the city. Others began a Community Supported Agriculture operation. They operate a cooperative farm outside the City and deliver boxes of organic produce to members weekly. SCFFF remain an active organisation that advocates for access to healthy food and more democratic food systems. Though the SCF itself is no longer operating, it did serve as what Lefebvre would call a point of departure, as the beginning of a larger political awakening among many inhabitants of South Central Los Angeles who now struggle for greater control over the production of food and urban space in their local area. Even those inhabitants in CCSCLA, who favoured uses of the site other than farming, were active and engaged in the politics of land use in their local area. They advocated other kinds of uses that inhabitants also desired. Though the farm is gone, the local inhabitants are not the same inhabitants they were before. Through the acts of cultivating an

agriculturally productive space, struggling to produce space in their local area, and learning more about how and why to govern themselves, they realised that they were more capable than they imagined. Many have carried this feeling on into other activities and struggles.

If Horowitz had accepted the \$16 million offer to buy the land, the farmers would have been able to continue their experiment. Instead, the farmers have had to redirect their activity and to seek other creative ways to cultivate land, grow food, and manage urban space for themselves. Certainly, this activation among inhabitants is not total. Some have remained active in the struggle over the Alameda property, others have put their energy into other pursuits, and still others have given up and become passive. We only want to highlight the fact that, even in a case where a flourishing community garden was lost to the regime of private property and exchange value, there remains a glow of spatial *autogestion*, a persistent desire among inhabitants to produce, cultivate, and manage urban space for themselves, together, on their own terms.

Conclusion: cultivating a renewal of political life

Cultivating land in the city is an extremely complex process that is always made up of many different actors, agendas, and desires. In our account of the two cases, we have focused on those elements that resonate with Lefebvre's idea of the right to the city and in particular, the way inhabitants became active and began producing and managing urban space for themselves. This activation was certainly partial: not *every* inhabitant became active. And inhabitants' spatial *autogestion* was also partial. They did not create a city in which urban space was *entirely* produced and managed by inhabitants, without the state and capitalism. Yet in both cases, inhabitants *did* become active and they did achieve a considerable measure of spatial *autogestion*. We highlight this element of these stories in order to gain practice doing what Lefebvre's method would have us do: seek out and learn to recognise the fledgling struggle for spatial *autogestion* that is already taking place in the contemporary city.

In both cases, inhabitants actively produced and managed urban space for themselves. They cleared and planted the gardens, they managed the subsequent cultivation and distribution of food, and they undertook the task of governing the everyday affairs of the gardens as well. This activity required them to understand and act effectively in many areas: the dynamics of soil, water, and nutrients; the particular needs and strengths of different plants; the complex process of community governance; the equally complex process of city permits and regulations; strategies of collective political action; how to write successful grant applications; and so on. Gardeners drew on their existing abilities in these areas and they often also had to develop new abilities very quickly.

The state tended to be more of a hindrance than a help in this process. But from Lefebvre's perspective, the state's action is not what matters. For Lefebvre, the right to the city is not a struggle to build better government institutions, institutions that in this case would create and manage spaces for urban agriculture. In the short term, the state can assist urban farmers in their work (e.g. more secure leases, zoning changes, and public grants) or it can hinder them (e.g. selling the land and bulldozing the garden), but in the long term it should not produce and manage the gardens on behalf of inhabitants. Inhabitants should. The right to the city is, for Lefebvre, a struggle by inhabitants to become such capable managers of urban space that the state becomes obsolete.

In addition to inhabitants becoming active as cultivators of land, they also became active as agents in a wider city politics. They were especially engaged in issues of land use, zoning, and economic development. Their struggles to defend and cultivate their

gardens produced mobilised groups of inhabitants with high levels of solidarity. The struggle for the farms intensified the degree to which inhabitants considered themselves capable and legitimate participants in urban politics. As they gained experience, they became increasingly aware of their power and of what they were capable of – as farmers, as community members, and as political activists. For some, and at times, it was the kind of political awakening Lefebvre envisions.

Through the act of producing and managing space for themselves, inhabitants developed their own understanding of urban space and their own way of valuing it. Against the dominant idea that reduces urban space to private property and thinks of it as a commodity whose exchange value must be maximised, inhabitants developed a much more complex idea. In addition to the exchange value it might hold, inhabitants added a whole range of use values as well. For them, urban space is an ecosystem where soil, water, sun, plants, insects, animals, and people interact in a dynamic system. It is a green space where human and non-human organisms intermingle. It is a space for culture and for preserving and exchanging seeds, crops, cultivation practices, and recipes. It is an open space that provides inhabitants relief from the densely built city. It is a site and a stake of struggle between owners and inhabitants. And it is a shared space where community members encounter each other.

This last element of urban space, as a site of encounter, bears particular attention. For Lefebvre, the capitalist city segregates inhabitants and separates them from each other in an effort to produce passive consumers instead of active citizens. So it is essential for inhabitants to overcome segregation by creating spaces of encounter, spaces in which they can come together to interact, to play, to share experiences, and to work out how they want to live together in the city. Lefebvre refers to such spaces rather vaguely, as “the street” (2003b [1970], p. 18ff). Urban gardeners offer a much more vibrant understanding of what such spaces might be like. In addition to all the other functions they serve, urban gardens are a centre, a gathering space, and a hub around which inhabitants’ common project is constructed. It is a place they can gather to make decisions about the production and management of space. In his research on New York’s community gardens, Shepard observes that

without such spaces where citizens can meet, share a moment, where citizens can act together, democratic publics dwindle. Without a space where people share conversations, differences, and pleasures, it is difficult to imagine citizens linking their needs to political participation. (2009, p. 293)

In both New York and Los Angeles, community gardens serve as key spaces of encounter. They are places that encourage (and force) people not only to gather, but also to become aware of and negotiate differences and govern their shared space. Collectively, the gardens represent significant space in the city where decisions are made cooperatively about what work needs to be done and then this space is itself a result of that work.

One axis of the differences, of course, is race. Communities of colour are often marginalised by a city’s dominant land use regime and so the struggle of inhabitants for greater control over land use can intermesh with the struggle of those communities against their marginalisation. But as we saw, race can also be an axis of difference *within* a community of inhabitants. In Lefebvre’s idea of the right to the city, the community of inhabitants tends to get reduced to the proletariat. These cases demonstrate that inhabitants are far more than just their class identity. So it is crucial to be attentive to how communities of inhabitants, as they become active and advocate for their interests, become aware of racial and other

differences, how they narrate them, and what kinds of practices they use to engage with those differences.

Certainly, community gardens are not the only urban spaces where spatial *autogestion* is occurring. Even if they are a particularly compelling example, Lefebvre would caution us to look not only for the obvious cases like SCF where people are struggling to preserve a space they have produced. He would tell us to also seek out the more mundane, less visible spaces where inhabitants are producing spaces for themselves. Such spaces exist, both spectacular and mundane, even in the contemporary capitalist city. They are there in US cities wading through the flotsam of the crash of 2008. They are there in Southern Europe in cities where harsh austerity policies intensify the burden on inhabitants. And they are there in the mega-cities of the global South, where urbanisation and proletarianisation is taking place at an almost unimaginable speed. The right to the city, *Lefebvre's* right to the city, calls us to seek out these spaces, narrate them, learn their contours, discover what inhabitants are doing, what they are capable of, and what spaces they are producing. The project must be to help these acts of spatial *autogestion* to grow and spread, to proliferate so that they become the norm, so that they might constitute, one day, the world's primary motor of urbanisation.

Notes

1. This would include Harvey (2008, 2012), Attoh (2011) and even, to a lesser extent, Mitchell (2003) and Merrifield (2011). The more rare exceptions, works that do investigate Lefebvre's idea in depth, include Schmid (2012), Butler (2012), and Purcell (2013).
2. Like other French intellectuals on the left in the late 1960s and 1970s (e.g. Cornelius Castoriadis, Guy Debord, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, and Michel Foucault), Lefebvre was deeply critical of both the totalitarian state socialism that came to exist in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and China and the state-managed capitalism that reigned in France at the time. As a result of this experience, the work of all these thinkers (we would argue) is just as much a reaction against the *state* and bureaucratic domination as it is against capitalism.
3. Lefebvre's eager return to "On the Jewish Question" is most pronounced in his 1964 work "The Withering Away of the State" (see Lefebvre 2009) and was no doubt spurred by his years-long struggle against Stalinism and, more generally, state socialism. But Marx's text continued to strongly influence his thought and politics and it is still very much a presence even in the 1990 piece.
4. Lefebvre (2009, pp. 194–195) writes: But how can we limit and suppress the ownership of space? Perhaps by remembering the writings of Marx and Engels: one day, which will indeed come, the private ownership of land, nature and its resources, will seem as absurd, as odious, as ridiculous as the possession of one human by another.
5. Marx's term *Entfremdung* literally means "a making strange (or foreign or alien)". We typically translate this as "alienation".
6. This is the literal meaning of the word *reappropriate*. The Latin means *re* = again, *a* = to, and *proprio* = one's own.
7. On this point cf. Gibson-Graham (1996) who make a compelling argument that resonates quite strongly with Lefebvre's.
8. It is worth noting, though, that growing food provides unique opportunities in the context of urban space. Unlike growing non-food plants, urban food cultivation can increase food security and sovereignty and it can support community health by providing fresh and healthy food and mitigating malnutrition and hunger. This is particularly important in low-income neighbourhoods termed as "food deserts" that lack sufficient access to a grocery store (Grow NYC 2010, USDA 2013). In many communities, the fruits, vegetables, herbs, and roots cultivated on urban land are used as medicine in addition to food (Barracough 2009, Shillington 2012). Such medicinal plants play an especially important role for community members without access to affordable healthcare. The role urban agriculture can play in securing bodily health is thus a reminder of the literal truth of Lefebvre's insistence that inhabitants rely on urban space for their daily survival.

9. According to a 2010 report by Grow NYC, approximately 80% of community gardens in New York City grow food. A citizen science survey revealed that 67 gardens inventoried in 2010 grew around (87,690 pounds) of food, worth approximately \$214,060USD (Gittleman *et al.* 2012, p. 6).

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