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## **CONCLUSIONS. The programmatic dimension of an agroecological urbanism**

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### **Introduction**

After having taken the reader on a journey along different methodologies, concepts, and political stances, in these conclusions we want to come back to our original aim of foregrounding an agroecological urbanism as a paradigmatic change for thinking sustainable urban food environments and collective solidarities. To this goal, we proceed here with a discussion of what we see as the key dimensions of its programmatic nature.

In Sections 1-4 we begin with reinstating that an agroecological urbanism, i) speaks across the urban rural divide; ii) defines a post-capitalist imaginary for urbanism; iii) depends on politicised pedagogies to move it forward; and iv) is action-oriented and seeks to engage in concrete places.

In Section 5 we then illustrate some of the progress we have made in our current research work, searching for concrete tools to build an agroecological urbanism with different communities of practice. A fuller illustration of this work will be at the centre of our next book.

We then conclude in Section 6 with a reflection on how the COVID-19 pandemic that is unfolding while we are writing these conclusions has strengthened and rendered even more urgent the transformative ambition of an agroecological urbanism.

### **1. Speaking across the urban-rural divide**

While the notion of an agroecological urbanism that we have illustrated (cf. Chapter 1 in this book, as well as Deh-Tor 2017) is intended as an expansive and inclusive concept, in this book it has, first and foremost, been projected as a conversation between two emerging communities: the political agroecology community on the one hand, and the sustainable food planning community on the other. Political agroecology moves from a strong and coherent agenda rooted in agrarian struggles and in the value positions of agroecology; however, it looks at the city and dynamics of urbanisation as a direct threat (Tornaghi and Dehaene, 2020). Sustainable food planning has convincingly demonstrated how the focus on food can act as a catalyst to think about the sustainable transformation of cities, but to date it largely

remains an heterogeneous and weakly politicised movement mostly confined within a selective understanding of the (urban) food question centred on food consumption. It has no tradition nor specific language to speak to farmers. Given the long history of separation, not only between specific geographical settings, but also between different worlds, with different constituencies, different interests, and different subjectivities, such a conversation between agroecology and food planning is, in fact, hard to hold. The proposition of an agroecological urbanism is not just a matter of putting these worlds together. It is an adventure that seeks the transformation of both. With this book we have begun, from an agroecological point of view, a systematic interrogation of the way cities have been organised. Agroecology gives food planning a normative point of reference to define the urban transformations to which it aspires. However, we also ask agroecology to imagine its future on a highly urbanised planet, within an urbanised society. With the latter we do not mean ‘within the city’, but rather within a context of irreducible social differences, within a context of exacerbated interdependence. An agroecological urbanism then seeks to imagine forms of place-based solidarity and collective arrangements within the diverse and interconnected demographics of the planetary urban.

The effort to speak across the urban-rural divide is first and foremost an attempt to question a history of capitalist urbanisation that has normalised the territorial separation of the urban and the agrarian question. While this history has precedents in the emergence of the mercantile city, it really took its systemic and systematic form under dynamics of industrialisation. This led to an urbanism that installed the needed food processing and transport logistics that would structure the rural-urban interface in terms of the exchange of food in commodified forms (Cronon, 1992). It also enabled the logics that made it possible, for the time being, to squander fertile soils for urban expansion.

Against this historical background, more is needed than the reconnection of urban consumers and rural producers. More also than the promotion of urban agriculture that has the merit of reintroducing forms of food production within urban contexts from which food production has been systematically removed. Urban agriculture insufficiently questioned the intimate relationship between urbanisation and the excessive commodification of food in the urban context. In the worst case, the promotion of soilless forms of food production under the urban agriculture label, while presented as a way of saving land, in fact provides the perfect excuse for the destruction of resources (soil to begin with) that are fundamental to agroecological food production.

The ethical principles of agroecology, rooted in environmental justice, interspecies solidarity, principles of environmental care and stewardship, provide all the cues to reconnect urban lives to models of food production that regenerate the ecological basis on which these urban lives depend. These principles, however, have not historically been directed at the construction of subjectivities and social movements that embrace the urban. Taking forward an agroecological urbanism will require solidarities and, ultimately, the construction of new collective subjectivities between urban and agrarian movements (Tornaghi and Halder, forthcoming).

## **2. Defining a post-capitalist imaginary**

Perhaps even harder than imagining a world that is not sorted along urban and rural lines, is to envision urbanisms that are not the formal translations of the political economy of capitalist

urbanisation. To a large extent, not only has the critical interpretation of the history of urbanisation been designed to debunk the recent history of urbanisation as the expression of capital accumulation and as the spatial fix of its internal contradictions (Harvey, 1985), the long history of urbanisation in the West runs historically parallel with the history of capital. It is, however, to that same tradition that we owe the call for an alternative urbanism: “a genuinely humanising urbanism [...] yet to be brought into being” (Harvey, 1973). The effort to imagine an agroecological urbanism is an attempt to answer that call and to render concrete what a post-capitalist urbanism could look like.

Arguing that urbanism and capitalism are not two sides of the same coin, may seem superfluous and removed from all empirical evidence. And yet, through an agroecological urbanism, we wish to join the ranks of those that try to think of a future beyond capitalism. An agroecological urbanism seeks to break with the extractive and colonial logics upon which the history of urbanisation has been built, and to incorporate the ethics of the regeneration of resources within the urban. The focus on food and food production implies a humble position of planning and needs to go hand-in-hand with the acknowledgement of its historical complicity with a structural neglect of the urban food question, and with the progressive marginalisation of local food provisioning practices that historically maintained a connection between the city and its *terroir*.

The pervasive presence of food in our capitalist daily lives makes it a rich subject to engage in the methodologies of Gibson-Graham, namely to (re)learn to see the diversity that is out there and is not accounted for by the logics of capitalism (Gibson-Graham, 2006). An agroecological urbanism may build on all the food provisioning practices that have been residualised by capitalist urbanisation. Documenting the many practices that still exist, and are still reproduced by local communities or indigenous cultures, not only breaks the totalising spell of capitalism, but it also provides direct evidence that other ways of organising exist and may be outscaled and empowered. Moreover, such attention to diverse economies and alternative sets of values is equally critical to devise solidarity strategies to live with the irreparable damage of the legacy of capital.

Taking stock of the ways in which communities have been forced to live within difficult and resource deprived situations, we may find concrete cues for thinking more systematically about what it entails to live on a damaged planet (Tsing, 2017). We are thinking, for example, of the efforts of cities in the global south to reclaim damaged soils for food production through the rebuilding of topsoils with food and green waste.

### **3. The Role of Politicised Pedagogies**

Politicised pedagogies are essentials to the project of an agroecological urbanism in all its transformative ambitions. As the agroecological movement and scholarship has highlighted, the development of agroecology has been consistent with the strengthening of communities of practices, the building of new subjectivities and the articulation of political movements. The marriage of agroecology and food sovereignty movements has marked an even more consistent pathway of politicisation for agroecology and more direct attempts to address food system transformation. Practice and scholarship on agroecological pedagogies, however, has focussed mostly on farmer to farmer (peasant to peasant) learning and farmer training schools inspired by Freirian pedagogical models; they have also focussed on rural contexts and actors (McCune and Sánchez, 2019). This focus on the rural and the active disengagement with the

urban realm has been detrimental to the capacity to see the urban as a frontier of struggle, a source of alliances, and an arena to be reclaimed by the movement (Tornaghi and Dehaene, 2020). The focus also acknowledges that transforming the food system requires politics apt for transforming processes of urbanisation and urbanised ways of life at the same time.

The way ahead, and the programmatic point for an agroecological urbanism, is therefore to rethink the political pedagogies of the agroecological movement in a way that is fit to address the challenge posed by current processes of urbanisation and the residualisation of agroecological farming in the urban and periurban context. It requires questioning whether existing pedagogies in urban contexts are sufficiently specific to equip the farmers with the knowledge to navigate urban challenges of setting up viable businesses (i.e., to address the specific land access, nutrient sourcing, economic models, intersectional solidarities, and consumer engagement needed to thrive within a specific geography or marginalisation). It requires fostering an ecology of learning and an ethic of care, able to trigger deep value-shifts across different urban communities and to build intersectional solidarities. It also requires turning solidarities into new political collective subjectivities across constituencies in the locality, able to articulate a transformative agenda, and to organise and lobby for its implementation.

#### **4. An Action-Oriented and Territorially Ground Practice**

Agroecology as a practice, movement and science (Wezel et al., 2009), is embedded in concrete communities and places, and strongly values indigenous and local knowledge. It comes with an acknowledgement of contextual geographical, social, historical, and cultural difference. An agroecological urbanism appeals to this ethos to transform the field of urbanism, to decolonise a discipline permeated with the dialectics of enlightenment and rational domination, in favour of a distributed and transdisciplinary knowledge ecology. It believes in the role of farmers and food growers as stewards of local resources, as key players in the reproduction of knowledge and skills, and leading agents of a food system change. It looks at the urbanised landscapes as “peopled landscapes” (Ward, 1999), inhabited by bodily subjects who owe their livelihoods to the context of which they are a part.

An agroecological urbanism is a concrete and action-oriented agenda. It is about local action in particular places. Where a concrete agenda for urban agroecology could be shaped as part of a radical commitment to the urban, i.e., a radical commitment to shaping place-based solidarities and to a social contract shaped around the acknowledgement of the interdependence of people living their lives within the same territorial basin. These can be the community-driven relationships of a neighbourhood or urban district, but can also include the wider solidarities and collective infrastructures to be built at the level of the agglomeration. An agroecological urbanism challenges planners to expand their horizon beyond the limits of an urban project that thinks such arrangements mostly around housing, transport and energy infrastructure, and begin to see community kitchens, a shared composting infrastructure, green blue networks, water harvesting infrastructure, etc., as essential parts of the way that an ecology-caring urbanisation takes form.

#### **5. Eight Steps Forward: Advocacy Planning for an Agroecological Urbanism**

An agroecological urbanism model is not ready to be implemented; rather it is an agenda for the systematic reskilling and retraining of communities to transform the food-disabling city into a food-enabling one. We imagine that the needed learning in which people will have to engage could take the form of advocacy planning through which concrete communities of practice begin to define ways to systematically embed agroecological food growing into an urban environment. We imagine, for example, how the emerging community working around questions of soil care (cf. Soil Care Network) would engage in the translation of concrete engagement with the soil into a new narrative for spatial planning. We imagine how existing groups engaged in the use of urban waste in composting could lead to the identification of specific nutrient sources within an urban environment and ways in which they could be collected, processed and applied in the remediation of damaged urban lands. We imagine how community kitchen initiatives would team up and systematically build the needed environments to self-produce local food and share it within the communities that support and host them. We imagine how local farmers already mobilised around the issue of land access would question public land policies and imagine a new generation of land readjustment programmes that valorise the residualised soils of the peri-urban fringe and rebuild relationships of nutrient exchange between farmland, pasture land and the wooded parts of the urbanised landscape.

As part of the *Urbanising in Place* project, we have been working with communities in Brussels, London, Rosario and Riga, identifying concrete opportunities for the development of an agroecological urbanism (Tornaghi and Dehaene, 2020). In an effort to bring the lessons learned to an international forum, the consortium behind this programme started to identify eight building blocks of a transformative agenda to refashion the way we organise cities on an agroecological basis. These blocks identify concrete points of articulation that, today, are missing from the urban landscape, or exist only in marginalised forms. The blocks are intended as descriptors of concrete matters of concern, transformational practices and political landscapes around which local and international conversations between agroecologists and sustainable food planners are being set up. We are working to give an actual account of these conversations and the lessons learnt in a second book. The eight building blocks focus on different and complementary territorial scales, but all seek to define a specific relational setting and fruitful combinations between the capabilities of concrete actors and the urban conditions in which they are operating. We see these blocks as steps ahead in the imagination of a form of advocacy planning to be developed together with the agroecological community, systematising and conceptualising the contours of an agroecological urbanism. We discuss them in turn below.

The **productive housing estate** looks at forms of urban development that incorporate food productive spaces within housing schemes and thereby make a direct connection between the right to grow (Tornaghi, 2017) and the right to shelter. This block makes a direct connection between food and housing, two dimensions central to the ways in which social reproduction is structured in an urban environment.

The **territorial food hub** mobilises the place-based solidarities that may exist at the district or neighbourhood scale, combining food production with educational activities, social entrepreneurship and community work, in light of multiplying people's resourcefulness and the collective care of resources in a food-democracy perspective.

The **agroecological park** makes a dent in the consumption of fertile soils by urban expansion and reserves a territorially demarcated area for agroecological food production at the interlink between urban and periurban fringes. This building block projects dedicated areas for

agroecological food production equipped with the collective infrastructure (shared composting facilities, shared marketing infrastructure, technical assistance, common pasture land, ...) on which individual growers could rely.

The building block **farming the fragmented land** looks at practices that valorise residual patches of agricultural land within the complex land mosaic of the periurban fringe. It looks at specific business models, strategies to combine land, specific cultivation choices, etc., that build on the potential use value of fragmented landscapes, and in particular their role in building multifunctional and ecologically interdependent agroecological farming initiatives, which current market and land access conditions have rendered monofunctional.

Through the land-based **community kitchen**, we try to imagine a city in which neighbourhoods would be equipped with a food infrastructure in the same way as they now have elementary schools or a health centres. We imagine land-based neighbourhood kitchens that host community composting schemes and food re-skilling sessions, that would be linked-up with growing spaces in the fringe and provide the social infrastructure for a neighbourhood-driven transformation and rescaling of the urban food system.

**Politicised pedagogies**, as discussed above, are an essential component of an agroecological urbanism. This building block structures the positioning work, the alliance building, and the personal transformation necessary to install a new relational geography within the hearts and minds of new agroecology-minded urbanites.

The **land and market access incubator** combines the training of a new generation of professional farmers with the provision of testing spaces and the facilitation of land access within a competitive urban land market.

The **healthy soil scape** relates the practices of soil care to a landscape geography in which nutrient streams can be circulated and combined within a balanced ecology of permanent grassland, woodland and arable land. It provides the necessary collective infrastructure and knowledge support to regenerate soil fertility beyond the boundaries of the farm.

These blocks are not intended as an end point or as an attempt to box the project of an agroecological urbanism in a set of formulas. They are intended as a starting point for further experimentation and collective learning. They define a provisional attempt to describe a set of points of 'articulations' at the intersection of agroecology and urbanism. They require political work to turn them into the tools of a transformative process.

## 6. COVID-19 as a catalyst

The writing of the conclusions of this book took place under COVID-19 lockdown. The challenges of working and caring for ourselves and others during the unfolding of the pandemic and the constraints of lockdown work made us despair as far as the disruption of our writing schedules was concerned. It made us hopeful, however, with respect to the agenda of this book, which only seems to have gained in relevance. Three points in particular make us believe that the pandemic not only makes the current global food crisis tangible, but also creates more room to get a discussion on urban agroecology off the ground.

First, COVID-19 offers us an x-ray of how questions of care and social reproduction are structured in societies. They show what there is and what there is not to fall back on. It presents us with the downside of all the things that have been outsourced within the neo-

colonial globalised world order. It places the groups that have traditionally benefited from such asymmetrical, extractive relationships at risk, showing the vulnerability of the global cheap food regime. However, it also creates new opportunities to rebuild diverse economies, to reinvest in residualised arrangements of care, to rebuild skills locally, and to shape novel collective solidarities around the transformation of food into meals.

Second, COVID-19 gives new sharpness to the debate on reterritorialisation. While the main drive of this discussion in food planning has been centred around climate change goals and the need to reduce food miles and related carbon emissions, COVID-19 literally disrupted the global supply chains. COVID-19 makes living within boundaries concrete. The discussion on local food production is suddenly not just a tool for something else, an instrument to deliver ecosystem services, but a legitimate subject in its own right. Resource sovereignty under COVID-19 is not an abstract concept, or the sole aim of rural movements, but a concrete reality felt by millions of people who never thought about the link between food and resources before. Within the local food systems, the difference between the high tech rooftop greenhouse that went out of business as it was only delivering herbs and microgreens to the local catering industry, and the agroecological farm of the CSAs (Community supported agriculture) that has been honouring principles of farmers' autonomy all along and proved to be extremely resilient in times of crisis became striking.

Lastly, COVID-19 made clear how much the biodiversity crisis is an exponent of the deep connection between agriculture and urbanisation. The pandemic of the past year originated in ecologies of disruption and extraction that bring humans in an invasive manner into wildlife habitats that they render unstable while creating unprecedented and unpredictable exchanges between their respective ecologies (Wallace et al., 2020). These aggressive forms of extraction are not only there to serve the land needs of rapidly expanding processes of urbanisation: they are also connected to resource and migration flows towards these urban habitats. While attention first goes to investing in ways of containing the disastrous effects of ecological disruption, it is time to deeply question the way in which we continue to think urban-nature relationships in utilitarian terms. Urban political agroecology presents an interesting trajectory to begin to reimagine and redefine agroecology-centred ways of life in a highly urbanised world.

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