

How to cite this chapter:

Tornaghi C. and Dehaene M. (2021), "Introduction. Embracing political agroecology, transforming sustainable food planning", in TORNAGHI C., DEHAENE M. (eds.) (2021), *Resourcing an agroecological urbanism. Political, transformational and territorial dimensions*, London: Routledge; pp. 1-11

INTRODUCTION. Embracing political agroecology, transforming sustainable food planning

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This book foregrounds innovative and radical approaches on sustainable food planning, built from the perspective of agroecology, and makes the case for an 'agroecological urbanism'.

Building on state-of-the-art and participatory research on farming, urbanism, food policy and advocacy in the field of food system transformation, this book aims to change the way food planning has been conceptualised to date, and to enable the reader to fully embrace the transformative potential of an agroecological perspective.

With the progressive co-optation of debates and practices dedicated to rethinking the link between planning and food systems to the services of a new wave of capitalism restructuring and expansion (see, for example, the realms of 'sustainable' development, nature-based 'solutions', green 'growth', green gentrification, and the new wave of high-tech and soil-less urban agriculture, etc.), we feel that a book that makes a radical stance and reorients the debate is needed.

In keeping in dialogue the rural/urban and the producer/consumers realms, the book also challenges conventional approaches that see them as separate spheres whose problems can be solved by a reconnection. The book rather makes the case for moving away from a 'food-in-the-city' approach, typical of food planning as a discipline, towards an 'urbanism' perspective, in which the economic and spatial processes that currently drive urbanisation will be unpacked and dissected, and new strategies for changing those economic and spatial processes into more equal and just ones put forward. In doing so, and therefore in moving from food planning to exploring new models of urbanisation and livelihoods with social reproduction and ecological considerations at their core, the book makes the case for a resourceful, agroecological urbanism.

1. How political agroecology intersects and challenges sustainable food planning

Encountering political agroecology has been a transformative experience that has inspired and steered the journey that led to this book. For a number of years, both of us (editors) have been interested in the emergence of food growing and food planning in urban contexts. We embarked upon this journey with two distinct, yet partially overlapping interests. We were looking to explore how urban food production (and the urban handling of nutrients) could become a tool to challenge and reverse planning processes that have dispossessed people from the possibility of controlling the processes and resources that shaped fundamental aspects of

their lives, such as the quality of shared urban space and food allocation. We looked into how bottom-up knowledge production and knowledge sharing in relation to food growing, and the direct reclaiming of resources (land, nutrients, water) that were emerging in relation to urban agriculture, could change the politics of urban and peri-urban land (Tornaghi, 2012a, 2012b, 2014a, 2014b, 2017; Tornaghi and Certomà 2018).

We also looked into how the expanding horizontal metropolis, which more and more looks like the destiny of ever-expanding processes of planetary urbanisation, could be amended and rendered less extractive and parasitic towards the environment, and more resourceful for its inhabitants (Dehaene, 2012, 2015). We felt the need to challenge some of the common wisdom of urban planners regarding sustainable urbanism as manifest in the compact city debate (Neuman, 2005), the urban age discourse (Burdett and Sudjic, 2007), and the persistent ‘methodological cityism’ within urban theory (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2014). We looked at the emerging academic interest for urban food production and food planning more in general as a promising arena where to find insights and a fertile ground for these endeavours.

Some of the works that have sparked our imagination include the early publications that shaped the debate on sustainable food planning (such as Viljoen, 2005; Sonnino, 2009; Viljoen and Wiskerke, 2012; Steel, 2008), or that highlighted the new solidarities that were emerging through urban gardening (Lyson, 2004; Nordhal, 2009), the critical work that looked at the potential of urban agriculture as a form of agency vis-à-vis debate on autonomy (Hodgkinson, 2005; Saed, 2012), and food injustice (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011; Heynen et al., 2006, 2012; Dixon, 2014), and the debates on urban metabolism and nutrients sovereignty (Castan-Broto et al., 2012; McClintock, 2010; Schneider and McMichael, 2010).

Alongside our academic engagement with these debates, we were also practically involved in, respectively, urban food growing and urban planning, in our different capacities as micro-farmer/community food grower, activist, educator and consultant. These experiences contributed a critical understanding of the deep contradictions that these literatures were only partially able to address.

For example, despite the growing proliferation of urban food growing and the great satisfaction that practitioners felt from this engagement (i.e., in feeling more connected to the local community, caring for their neighbourhood or being more physically active), it was evident that from a food perspective, such as the ability to produce, share and consume food, these were more often than not highly frustrating experiences, constrained by what has been defined as the food-disabling city (Tornaghi, 2017). Urban agriculture was more distinctively a community building experience, a health promotion strategy, or a form of leisurely reconnection with nature, rather than a way to produce substantial amounts of ecologically sustainable, and socially just, food capable of breaking the dependency from the ‘food regime’ (Friedmann and McMichael, 1989). It also became clear that despite a growing number of food policy councils, some interesting evolutions on the front of municipal food strategies and food procurement, and the emergence of a food-concerned planning system, processes of urbanisation and collective ways to handle food were still subjected to the same extractive, disempowering and money-driven processes that have shaped urbanisation since the rise of capitalism: think of land speculation and the destruction of use values, and the ongoing loss of small farmers. The new “urban food” did not substantially change the mechanism for food production (still largely using ordinary artificial fertilisers and pesticides), food commercialisation (still offering farmers extortionately low prices) food allocation (with the most vulnerable populations in full employment yet still in food poverty), or the liberal approach to the (mis)management of urban land and nutrients (with individuals

still allowed to use pesticides, and soil nutrients being taken away as waste). The profit driven ways in which food is extracted from farmers, allocated according to wealth or disposed of as waste, remained largely mainstream. The discovering of food as a new topic for urban planning, and the surging of urban agriculture as a new economic realm, did not seem to lead, unequivocally and systematically, to more equitable forms of land management and just food systems. Innovations seemed to work around constituted interests, residual opportunities opened up by deindustrialisation and the largely shared approach to food as a commodity. Despite interesting emerging forms of political gardening that were challenging the agency of city making (Certomà and Tornaghi, 2015), the neoliberal urbanism we knew was distinctively a food-disabling one.

While urban agriculture remained rich in its potential to become an empowering field of practice (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011, Heynen et al., 2012), we also saw dangers in its ongoing co-optation. This was in the form of green gentrification, new market expansions under the remit of circular economies, the attempts to monetise ecosystem services, nature-based solutions, and purely technical/industrial translations of the issues at stake (vertical farming, aquaponics, etc.) functional to ongoing speculative approaches to urban land.

While a number of critical scholars started to point out these dangers (Atkinson, 2013; McClintock, 2014; Tornaghi, 2014a), as our sense of frustration within the ‘urban agriculture’ debate grew, our joint journey started with the aim of searching for a food-empowering urbanism (Deh-Tor, 2017). We did not want to give up the chance to imagine alternative urban solidarities. We felt the need to keep imagining what a radically different urbanism would look like, remaining attached to a shared commitment to the urban as a potentially emancipatory condition. Not only is the urban the condition under which, in all its varieties, half the world’s population is living, we believe that the history of urbanism is not simply exhausted by the logics of capitalist oppression that have shaped its dominant face. In the same way that the diverse economies literature (Gibson-Graham, 1996) has tried to break the spell of a totalising critique of capitalism, we feel the need to break the spell of a totalising critique of urbanism, opening our eyes to the existing diversity that contains the germ of radical alternatives.

The discovery of *political agroecology* gave us important tools to begin to question the sustainable food planning that we knew.

The term ‘political agroecology’ includes a group of practices and approaches, reclaimed and reproduced by a wide group of farmers, scholars and activists across the world. These include agricultural practices respectful of soil ecology and soil health, promoting biodiversity, recognising multi-species solidarities, cherishing horizontal knowledge reproduction, and valuing people’s knowledge and place-/culturally- sensitive practices (de Molina, 2012; Van Dyck et al., 2017; Deh-Tor, 2017). Examples of these include companion planting, care for living soils and the regenerative treatment of soil organic matter and nutrient levels, biological management of pests, skills-sharing and solidarity economies.

The attribute ‘political’ relates to the coalitions, networks, statements and movement-building through which these practices reflect on their condition and reclaim their legitimacy, vis-a-vis the aggressive neoliberal and profit-oriented approaches that have attacked, disabled and delegitimised these knowledges, and dispossessed, displaced and marginalised the people who practice them, and who find their livelihood residualised. Political agroecology strongly aligns to the food sovereignty stance against the food regime (the international trade

agreements, the oligarchy controlling seeds and agrochemical inputs, and the range of policies that favour large agro-industry players over smallholders) that shapes the food system.

It calls for the urgent need to address the ecological crisis of nutrient loss, soil depletion, and climate change *at the same time* as addressing the astonishing growth of food and water insecure global (and particularly urban and peri-urban) populations, issues that most food policies address very selectively and in ways largely compliant with the capitalist interests and economies at the root of the problem. This book embraces this challenge.

The specificity of this book is not limited to adopting a political agroecology perspective when thinking sustainable food planning: it goes further and it unfolds by bringing it into the urban realm, and in doing so, contributes to shape an *urban* political agroecology (cit: van Dyck et al., 2018; Tornaghi and Halder, forthcoming; Tornaghi and Dehaene, 2020).

Given the systemic and global focus of political agroecology, the international nature of the politics and institutions that shape the food regime, the historical metabolic and epistemological rift generated and consolidated through processes of urbanisation, has also meant that translating its heuristic value for considerations on sustainable food systems has brought to light the necessity to move beyond a food-in-the-city approach or a food policy lens. It focuses on questions of urbanism and urbanisation more generally and how they shape our relationship to food.

In order to clarify the focus on urbanism it is necessary to provide a definition. In the context of the multiplication of ‘new urbanisms’, the term has increasingly been used in a variety of ways, swinging from meanings close to its French roots (the term ‘urbanisme’ and its reference to the disciplines of urban planning and design) to meanings closer to classical sociological traditions as exemplified by the classical text of Louis Wirth ‘Urbanism as a way of life’ (1937). In this book we use the term ‘urbanism’ as it emerged in critical Marxist studies in the 1970s (Lefebvre, 1974; Harvey, 1973), where it bears a sum of the two: urbanism is the (always contested) ensemble of social arrangements, lifestyles, divisions of labour, cultural practices and social solidarities that materialise and shape the urban environment through processes of urbanisation. By stressing the link between urbanism and urbanisation we wish to stress the fact that the urban context is more than just a physical space, but always the manifestation of socionatural, sociocultural and socioeconomic processes and ideas that the disciplines of urban planning and design ‘serve’.

Our first message to the community of scholars and practitioners interested in food system transformation, and the departing point of this book, is that radical transformations of the food system that seriously aim to tackle the ecological and social justice challenges at once have to consider the way in which urbanism and urbanisation are entangled with the reproduction of capitalist structures and value systems. Current urbanism tends to serve the *status quo*, alternative urbanism may contribute to food systems’ transformation.

A political agroecology informed look at the dynamics of urbanisation therefore intersects and challenges sustainable food planning in a number of ways. For example, it looks at land not as a neutral canvas on which various land use patterns can be interchangeably inscribed but views urban soils as valuable common goods. It looks at the geography of food systems as metabolically interrelated socio-ecological patterns that act across the rural-urban divide. It seeks to understand the multiple relationships of interdependence and solidarity between humans and non-humans, living ‘critters’ and inanimate things. It looks at the livelihood and

the collective valuing of smallholders, and seeks to break the anthropocentric and charity charge of food.

2. Political agroecology approaches resourcing an agroecological urbanism

The contributions in this book can be seen as examples of research themes in the emerging field of political agroecology. They have been selected for their strength in thinking about transformation and political trajectories, and in this sense resourcing what we call an “agroecological urbanism” (cfr. Chapter 1).

Many of the chapters address more than one of the following themes simultaneously:

- theoretical re-conceptualisations of urbanism, food and food systems’ transformation;
- pedagogies of transformative learning and resistance;
- advocacy perspectives for merging urban and rural food justice movements;
- experiences of resourceful land management, including urban land use and land tenure change;
- landscape agroecology and urban agroforestry;
- experimental policies and practices for land access and urban soil care;
- theoretical and practical exploration of post-capitalist economics;
- heterodox economies of resistance.

We see these diverse reflections and experiences as ways of *resourcing* an agroecological urbanism from a multitude of communities and perspectives. By ‘resourcing’ we mean providing tools and ideas that can help imagining new transformative politics, building political subjectivities or strengthening activism around underestimated but crucial policy areas (i.e., soil protection). The diversity of approaches is necessary precisely because urbanisms entails the coordination of interdependency in different spheres of life, and moving beyond a capitalist urbanism requires the building of solidarity and coordination across intersectional, transdisciplinary and decolonial activist practices and knowledges.

While we discuss in more detail how the different contributions in this book contribute to an agroecological urbanism, we offer below a synopsis for each chapter.

Synopsis of the book

In this introduction we have so far given an overview of how political agroecology intersects and challenges sustainable food planning as we know it to date, which questions an agroecological perspective raises, and what innovative dimensions it entails when thinking about food system transformation. In this concluding section we now offer a detailed synopsis of each chapter in order to explain the rationale for the book and highlight the intellectual trajectory that underpins the quest for an agroecological urbanism.

In the first chapter, **C.M. Deh-Tor** make the case for an agroecological urbanism, a concept through which they seek to detach the way urbanisation is structured from the extractive, resources destroying, food disabling logics of capitalism and neoliberal urbanism, and try to imagine an urbanism rooted in the core values of political agroecology: solidarity, mutual learning, multi-species (more than human) exchanges, environmental stewardship and people’s resourcefulness. Starting from a critical review of the urban agenda of sustainable food planning and its limits, and building on feminist social reproduction theory and its decolonial, non-extractive and post-patriarchal perspective, the author discusses how urban political agroecology presents food planning with a food inclusive urban geography, an

expanded urban food agenda, and a heterodox self-description of the field formerly called planning, that enables the reimagination of an alternative urbanism.

Bringing forward transformative ideas means fostering transformative learning, research and communication. In Chapter 2, **Ella von der Haide, Anna Maria Orrù, Barbara Van Dyck, Debra Solomon, Mama D. Ujuaje, Deirdre Woods, Severin Halder and Robin Gray** give us the opportunity to reflect on how ideas of agroecology and food sovereignty are being debated and researched with the aid of experimental practices. Their contribution offers a starting point to reflect on scholar-activist positionalities, and the potential and limitations of new emerging experimental methodologies using performative techniques to promote reflexivity and public dialogue in food sovereignty research.

Rather than being static and politically neutral, food systems are socio-ecological networks that are in continuous transformation and where interactions are defined by the activities of people and the planet as much as by the ideas that legitimise certain behaviours. In Chapter 3, five research activists, **Tomaso Ferrando, Priscilla Claeys, Dagmar Diesner, Jose Luis Vivero-Pol, and Deirdre Woods**, join together to discuss concrete examples that show that the agroecological transition could be strengthened by the adoption of a political understanding of commons and commoning as intersectional antidotes for a just agroecological transition, one that rejects the colonial, patriarchal, unjust and anti-ecological premises of the mainstream food systems. Through a combination of theory and practice, history and imagination, empowerment and de-commodification, the chapter brings to the forefront those dimensions of food that cannot be monetised and valued in market terms, showing that political, imaginative and organisational power of commons and commoning can bridge the urban-rural divide and contribute to the convergence of various movements, including agroecological urbanism and food sovereignty.

In Chapter 4, **Luca Colombo, Stefano Grandi and Giacomo Lepri** reflect on the politics of peri-urban land reclamation and redistribution as a tool for resourcefulness. Peri-urban agriculture is receiving growing attention in Italy, as elsewhere in Europe. The quest for land is not just an individual endeavour. New farming initiatives proliferate, combining economic returns with socio-environmental ambitions, giving rise to an increasing demand for land by both farmers and 'neo-rural' people. The paper reviews a mobilisation exercise advocating access to land in Rome including the 2013 response of the city and regional administration to make public farmland available. The case study showed that food sovereignty and agroecological farming were seen by both activists and local administrations as a way to gain citizens' consensus and represented criteria for land lease tenders.

Drawing on a background in landscape planning, landscape ecology and regional food systems, in Chapter 5 **Sarah Lovell and John Taylor** review the ongoing discussion on the relevance of agroforestry within an urban context. Urban agroforestry offers a transformative solution that supports production functions through the provision of healthy fruit and nuts, but within a perennial system that closely mimics a multi-strata forest ecosystem. When approached from an agroecological perspective, urban agroforestry could contribute to resilience planning initiatives by improving food security, climate change adaptation, and microclimate conditions. Chicago, IL, USA serves as a case study for considering urban agroforestry applications through both retrofitting existing green spaces and planning future multifunctional landscapes.

In Chapter 6, **Salvatore Engel di Mauro** offers an overview of some of the major challenges urban soils can present to food producers in industrialised cities. Following an overview on

soil formation, on agroecological approaches to soil, and on the specific nature of urban soils, the author discusses the major ecological challenges of urban food production with a particular emphasis on trace element contamination. Technical measures to deal with pollutants are described and shown to be insufficient without a grasp of the political ramifications of contamination. It is argued that this latter aspect is what agroecological urbanism can help confront more effectively, provided the perspective is firmly grounded in both social and biophysical analytical frameworks and just as firmly committed to overcome capitalist relationships for an ecologically constructive egalitarian alternative.

In Chapter 7, **Noemi Maughan, Nathalie Pipart, Barbara Van Dyck and Marjolein Visser** look at neo-farmers in peri-urban market gardens and how they deal with the challenges of putting agroecological ideas into practice. The chapter offers insights into contradictory pressures and forces that need to be overcome to make radical ideas work.

Chapter 7 presents the results of a reflexive process aiming to critically disentangle the dynamics behind what the farmers' construct as an 'ideal urban agriculture activity', and the compromises they have to make while putting the ideal into practice. The study was carried out with urban farmers as co-researchers in a broader participatory action research project in Brussels. Their case study reveals a paradox between the regional institutions' high expectations of urban agriculture's contributions to a sustainable city, and a financial support system, still shaped in a 'pro-growth' mould, pressing neo-farmers towards short-term economic independence at the cost of a long-term agroecological perspective.

In Chapter 8, **Elise Wach and Santiago Ripoll**, take a closer look at the role of rural farmers (in both the Global North and South) in food system transformation. Their work starts from acknowledging the overwhelming evidence that our food systems are not currently working to nourish our populations, ecosystems, economies, or social connections. Agroecological approaches have been shown as having the potential to address many of these problems in the mainstream food system, particularly when combined with concepts of food sovereignty. The approaches localise control, and place producers and consumers at the centre of decision-making. Yet there have been questions about whether producers of varying positionalities would develop strategies that are sufficiently radical to transform existing food systems. The chapter reflects the outcomes of a participatory farmer-led research initiative in which producers from the Global South (Nicaragua) and the Global North (England) developed strategies for transforming their food systems. It shows that farmers' framings of food system problems and proposed solutions became more radical over the course of the participatory process. This confirms that participatory processes with farmers have the potential to transform food systems to become more socially and ecologically regenerative.

In Chapter 9 **Emilio Travieso** bring us to Chiapas, Mexico, to delve into the strategy of one specific group of farmers across the urban-rural divide. After regaining their ancestral lands in Chiapas from plantation owners in the 1990s, the Mayan Tseltal people, accompanied by Jesuits and other collaborators in the Misión de Bachajón, have continued to build their full sovereignty. The chapter explains how the Misión de Bachajón withdraws certain parts of its economy such as land, food and natural resources from market commodification while engaging the market through the coffee value chain. Agroecology articulates the two realms of the economy, market and solidarity economy, and holds them together. The economic system of the Misión de Bachajón contributes to the wider common good, both through its rural-urban linkages and through its conservation of biodiversity. However, it must seek out strategic alliances in order to survive in the midst of an adverse system.

In Chapter 10 **Mark Tilzey** discusses how urban agroecology, as an expression of food sovereignty, constitutes an important ‘beachhead’ against capitalism by addressing precarity through counter-hegemonic modes of local food provisioning. Tilzey, however, also makes clear that if this ‘beachhead’ is to be secured and widened, the ‘right to the city’ needs to go hand-in-hand with calls for the ‘right to the countryside’ as part of a broader counter-hegemonic movement that seeks to ‘visibilise’ the ‘imperial mode of living’ and to institute ecological sustainability and food equity as key components. In the global North this will not be easy, as it requires nothing less than breaking away from ‘resource imperialism’. The Southern precariat, Tilzey argues, has a pivotal role in fomenting transitions to post-capitalism, not merely in the South but, by ‘closing down’ resource imperialism, and thereby disabling the capacity of the Northern state-capital nexus to co-opt counter-hegemony through the ‘imperial mode of living’.

The book **concludes** with a section where the editors project the book forward by reinstating the key pillars upon which the programmatic dimension of an agroecological urbanism is built, and by reflecting on the progress that this agenda has made since they started the journey, both in research and action.

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