



Why We Need Urban Agroecology

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Fostering reflexivity for food system action research participants, Brussels, June 2017. Photo by Marie Maloux

Since early 2016, the Brussels Agency for Research and Innovation finances 7 participatory action research projects for sustainable food systems. These projects bring together scientists and practitioners that closely cooperate to promote access to healthy food for all; to develop a logistical platform for alternative food systems; to explore and overcome barriers to urban farming; and to support transdisciplinary food system knowledge production in Brussels (see www.cocreate.brussels). We are part of an action research project that aims to enrich urban agriculture with agroecology and of a cross-cutting project that seeks to encourage reflexivity and foster mutual learning among all project participants. From that position, we explore the role of urban agroecology in food system research.

In their proposal for an agroecological urbanism, Deh-Tor (p.8) suggests that building alternative food systems includes dealing with challenges as vast as urbanisation processes, land management, life rhythms, financial drivers and collective arrangements for food provision, education or austerity politics. We believe that urban (political) agroecology proposes clues to make such connections and see food systems as part of a bigger picture. Moreover, a complex and contextualised understanding, may help to set research priorities in a democratic and socially meaningful way and to adopt research methods that open up space for multiple voices and perspectives. Especially for those that often go unheard or get marginalised.

Food system research is in fact far from univocal in the definition of the challenges to address, the socio-technical trajectories to promote or the nature of the relations with industry, politicians, activists, farmers and food practitioners to cultivate. Research approaches not only depend on disciplinary backgrounds, but are equally inspired by different, often conflicting, narratives of progress. Food system researchers should thus position themselves. What are various accounts and pathways of food system

innovation? How do they diagnose problems to favour specific pathways? And, what narratives of progress does their research contribute to?

Urban political ecology in food system research

With our research, we seek to contribute to food systems that are led by principles of social justice and autonomy from corporate capture. Such goals require unravelling the political conditions and consequences of knowledge production and use. For example, how do we reinforce or counter uneven spatial developments through knowledge production? Or, in what ways does food system research reproduce social and environmental injustices?

Hence, we believe food system knowledge production needs to be situated in its context, and needs to incorporate questions of 'who benefits' to the core of its analysis. Critical geographers can help here; urban political ecologists in particular. Urban political ecology provides a framework that links political debate with the science of ecology to urban settings. In addition, it offers an understanding of cities that challenges traditional distinctions between urban/rural and society/nature.

Adopting an urban political ecology lens keeps food system research away from the temptation of translating complex issues into seemingly straightforward technical questions, devoid of socio-political meaning. Instead it makes visible how social geometries of power shape access to food, its production and consumption. At the same time, urban political ecology has the potential to explore alternatives to urban development, food provisioning and feeding, as it invites us to question what organisational forms need to be developed and to identify the spaces of struggle.

Agroecology for food sovereignty

However, with the strong focus on environmental justice and on the intertwined-ness of nature and society, urban political ecology risks losing track of the realities of ecology itself. The broad field of political ecology, in fact, has been criticised for reducing the study of agriculture and environment to questions of power. The challenge is to bring questions such as food as nourishing bodies, soils as living organisms, urban gardens as life-sustaining infrastructure into food system research, while taking issues as money, location, skin colour, gender and social status seriously. In other words, food issues cannot be treated as purely socio-political, neither as mere ecological or agronomic but are always inherently socio-technical. They are co-constructions of water, people (including their forms of knowledge, their labour), investment flows, soil organisms, and more.

Agroecology captures this co-construction. La Via Campesina, the world's largest peasant organisation, understands agroecology as a way of farming that is highly political and promotes food sovereignty; i.e. developing farming systems that challenge power structures by seeking to put the control of seeds, biodiversity, land and territories, water, knowledge, culture and the commons in the hands of the people who

feed the world. Hence, the political nature of knowledge production is a given for the social movement. Knowledge dialogue or the "collective construction of emergent meaning based on dialogue between people with different historically specific experiences, knowledges, and ways of knowing" is a basic principle of agroecology.

Urban (political) agroecology

Drawing on the discussions in 'urban political ecology' and 'agroecology for food sovereignty', urban (political) agroecology could become a conceptual pillar to facilitate conversations between different knowledges, to build a common ground between disciplines and practices. This entails to move away from expert positions to research fora where scientists become practitioners practicing science. Consequently, and thinking with Isabelle Stengers, we do not need "neutral" scientists, instead we need scientific practitioners that develop the ability to add their "divergence to other diverging voices" and are aware of the need to "enter into alliance against those who will refer to their knowledge in order to conclude". In that regard, Line Louah et al. propose that agronomists put their scientific knowledge and methodologies at the service of the practitioner through collaborative research.

We propose urban agroecology as a stepping stone to collectively think and act upon food system knowledge production, access to healthy and culturally appropriate food, decent living conditions for food producers and the cultivation of living soils and biodiversity, all at once. Urban agroecology is not a goal, yet an entry point into, and part of, much wider discussions of desirable presents and futures.

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