

Practices of Urban Agroecology in the Municipality of São Paulo: Income generation and community activism

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Photo by Pops Lopes

This article considers two practices of urban agriculture related to agroecology in São Paulo: the first is related to income generation and the second derives from community activism. The first practice is present in the far southern region of the municipality of São Paulo, which is made up of the districts of Parelheiros and Marsilac, where many family farmers live. While income-generating urban agriculture is not new to the *paulistano* urban space as such, its productive and political dimensions are. The second practice, the community garden, is to be found in different areas of the municipality. ‘Hortelões Urbanos’ (Urban Gardeners) is the founding network and voice of the activist movement in public spaces in São Paulo.

The Producers from Parelheiros

The family-based agricultural production to be found in Parelheiros characterises the green belt of the metropolis, supplying its fruit, vegetable and poultry supply. It has undergone transformations, adapting itself to organic production and agroecology. Most of the family farmers in this region are still producing in a conventional way. However, due to policies that have begun especially in the last decade, there is an increasing number of family farmers starting to produce agroecologically. Furthermore, these producers have been calling for municipal public policies to recognise them to a greater extent. The São Paulo Masterplan, which

was approved in June 2014, recognised the region as a rural zone. With this recognition, agricultural practices developed there become visible and are empowered to aim for projects which would have previously been unreachable due to their lack of recognition.

There are many rural producers in the district of Parelheiros due to how this region was established. In 1829, a group of immigrants made up of 94 German families settled in the region to establish a colony. Then, in 1940, Japanese immigrants began to arrive and focused on agriculture. The producers’ properties range from 5 to 20 hectares and include both conventional and organic producers. These producers are based in the most preserved areas of the municipality of São Paulo with Atlantic rainforest and many natural springs. There are two environmentally-protected areas in the region: Capivari-Monos and Bororé-Colônia.

The authors followed a group of organic producers living and producing on family farms of two to eight hectares. Despite the small area, their produce is diverse. Root vegetables are the main produce during the hotter months and leafy vegetables during the colder months. They mostly sell their produce at organic markets around São Paulo, normally in higher-income neighbourhoods in the western and southern parts of the city, where customers have greater purchasing power. One of these producers claimed that his earnings from sales per market could go up to 3000 reais (the equivalent of 791 US Dollars in November 2015). Demand for organic vegetables has only gone up in recent years and a lack of produce is therefore their main problem. Production capacity is limited by the small area on which they plant and by family being the main workforce. Nowadays, it is hard for producers to get temporary helpers, ‘no one wants to work

the land anymore' as it is hard work and usually does not offer fixed working hours. One of the producers complained at a meeting of the difficulty in contracting someone to work on a tractor; she had been in contact with someone who demanded an hourly pay of 100 reais (the equivalent of 26 US Dollars in November 2015).

The producers also face other problems. Being a long way from the central zones where trade and services are concentrated, Parelheiros is often overlooked by the public authorities. Dirt tracks in poor conditions, poor cell-phone signal, lack of public transport and electricity are just some of the difficulties that farmers face in their day-to-day life. Despite this, the producers of the region receive support from the technicians of the *Casa de Agricultura Ecológica Umberto Macedo Siqueira*, better known as the *Casa de Agricultura de Parelheiros, CAE* (House of Ecological Agriculture), founded in 2006. They keep track of producers in the southern region of São Paulo, carry out farm inspections, and give advice. Technical support is directed towards the agroecological model of production, due to the environmental characteristics of the region. Therefore, their aim is to persuade conventional family farmers to become agroecological ones.

To defend their interests, the producers act as councillors in the managing councils of the environmentally-protected areas, and the *Conselho Municipal de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional de São Paulo, Comusan* (Municipal Council on Food and Nutrition Safety). Furthermore, they frequently come together to participate in events in which organic farming, family farming, sustainability and other fields of interest are discussed; an example to supply to a school feeding programme in São Paulo city. They search for modes of organisation and coordination to strengthen their production, organic certification and marketing, through participating in the *Cooperativa Agroecológica dos Produtores Rurais e de Água Limpa, Cooperapas* (Agroecology Cooperative of Rural Producers and Clean Water) and the *Organização de Controle Social, OCS* (Social Control Organisation) of São Paulo.



Cooperative members meet to discuss and learn about the standardisation packaging. Photo by the author

Learning from Sao Paulo

- *The city is bolstering agriculture on its urban fringes in hopes of stopping the outward sprawl of development and raising the living standards of rural people*
- *A Master Plan changed the designation of more than a quarter of the city's land from 'urban' to 'rural', which for farmers opened access to low-interest loans to buy machinery and seeds*
- *The city is also boosting demand for local organic agriculture – for example, by increasing purchases for use in school meals.*

Read the blog: [How São Paulo is tackling poverty and urban sprawl by bolstering farming](#) by Ignacio Amigo, Citiscope. Citiscope is a nonprofit news outlet that covers innovations in cities around the world. More at [citiscope.org](#).

Cooperapas was founded on 9 June 2011 with 30 members. Today, it has about 25 cooperatives and is looking to strengthen integration so that they can sell in more locations (organic markets, grocery stores, supermarkets and restaurants) in the municipality of São Paulo. The *OCS* is a group created by some producers who are part of *Cooperapas* to create a certification that recognises their products as organic. This enables them to get access to organic markets in the city. Every month, producers, consumers and *CAE* technicians visit one of the farms and carry out an inspection. Together they assess the situation and share ideas of what can be done to improve. This type of survey is called social certification and is recognised by the Ministry of Agriculture of Brazil.

In this way, producers are looking for ways to continue to farm and defend their interests, despite the difficulties they face. This farming continuity is of utmost importance to avoid the occupation of the farms by informal settlements, as this has very serious consequences for the environment, endangering water sources and atlantic rainforest vegetation.

Urban agriculture as an expression of activism

In São Paulo, urban agriculture is not new. In the mid-20th century, the working class population, who in search of cheaper land had already occupied the most peripheral areas of the city, would build their houses on unoccupied land surrounded by a vegetable patch or garden. The horticulture 'backyard' tradition persisted following the arrival of large numbers of people from the 1950s onwards due to the rural exodus. This residential agricultural model served to complement the basic family diet, to save income and to maintain a tie to their rural background.

It is only from the start of the 21st century that urban agriculture also spread as a form of activism. The emergence of a network called '*Hortelões Urbanos*' in 2011 was a key step in bringing together a group of urban agriculture



Cyclist Community Garden on Paulista Avenue; one of the busiest central tourist spots. Photo by the author

enthusiasts. Their initial interest was to discuss food production in the city, but they were also committed to taking practical initiatives in public spaces. *Hortelões Urbanos* was developed by two journalists, Claudia Visoni and Tatiana Achcar. They created a public group on Facebook in 2011 to share experiences and information related to urban agriculture at household or community level. Immediately, some of its members organised themselves on-line and suggested having face-to-face meetings to discuss possibilities and strategies for the occupation of public space to create a community garden. In 2012, after a few such meetings, which usually took place in restaurants in the Vila Madalena neighborhood in the western region of São Paulo, some *Hortelões* members decided to take action. This form of green guerrilla-inspired activism came to life in Plaza Dolores Ibarruri in the neighborhood of Vila Beatriz (close to Vila Madalena), in the western region of expanded downtown São Paulo. Better known as *Praça das Corujas* in reference to the stream of the same name on its eastern limit, the community garden established there became known as the 'Corujas Community Garden'. Currently, *Hortelões Urbanos* has more than 70,000 members on its [Facebook page](#).

The *Movimento Urbano de Agroecologia, MUDA-SP* (Urban Movement of Agroecology, see article page 63), is a collective of significant political presence in matters relating to urban agriculture and agroecology in São Paulo. As an actor in a number of branches of activism and practical support, it has produced a basic map with the location of community gardens in São Paulo. On this map, Corujas Community Garden is recognised as the first garden of its kind in São Paulo and has been authorised informally by public authorities. The Cyclist Community Garden, in the middle of Paulista Avenue, was set up soon after (also in 2012) without prior authorisation of the public authorities, confirming the practice of green guerrilla activism inspired by the pioneering project of Corujas Community Garden.

Corujas Community Garden presents itself as a space which questions the contemporary urban order. It does not promote the food self-sufficiency of its volunteers nor does it intend to do so. It does, however, aim to increase collective reflection

regarding the possibility of urban space also being a genuine space of permanent food production, through cooperation and social integration.

Conclusion

Urban agriculture related to agroecology is a very significant activity in the social, political, economic and spatial relations of the metropolis of São Paulo. Its dynamics and function, though sometimes converging and sometimes conflicting with pressures of the public authorities, are not isolated.

Even while tending to be historically characterised as a structural part of the urban landscape crucial to the food supply of São Paulo's population, agricultural production in São Paulo stands out as a revitalising agent of metropolitan space and even as a creator of new patterns of cultural and consumer consumption.

Urban agriculture for generating income, like that developed in Parelheiros, has received government incentives to move towards agroecological principles and techniques, show-casing itself as an alternative with great potential to expand alongside the diverse consumer market of São Paulo. The agroecological agriculture they develop helps to preserve areas of great importance in São Paulo, which are home to springs and the remains of atlantic rainforest.

At the same time, urban agriculture originating from activism is an important mechanism for questioning and modifying the model of a city that prioritises individualism and socio-spatial segregation. The community gardens therefore support the transformation and upgrading of public space to promote solidarity and social integration.

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