



# Urban Agriculture and the Neoliberalisation of What?

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## Abstract

Community gardens in the canton of Geneva (Switzerland) are predominantly organised through municipal programmes. Because of their highly regulated character, they are at odds with dominant depictions of community gardens as contestatory, grassroots spaces. They, however, do not map perfectly either onto the accounts of institutional “organised garden projects” deemed to accompany municipal entrepreneurial strategies and/or the implementation of neoliberal governmentality. Critically engaging with municipal involvement in community garden and urban agriculture development, this paper draws attention to the contradictory ways in which municipal actors frame and govern these issues. Drawing upon a case study in the municipality of Vernier, it argues that the municipality’s integrated urban agriculture programme serves different and contradictory functions and is simultaneously progressive *and* neoliberal. Indeed, while Vernier’s programme clearly attempts at reversing processes of space privatisation and nature commodification, its focus on individualised action and choice contributes to reinforcing neoliberal modes of subjectification. This analysis, I hope, will encourage urban agriculture scholars to question their reliance upon a dichotomy between benevolent civil organisations and profit-oriented public institutions, and to account more precisely for the singular processes of neoliberalisation at play within the boundaries of their case studies.

## Keywords

Urban agriculture; community gardening; neoliberalism; privatisation; commodification; neoliberal governmentality.

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## Introduction

The creation of Geneva's first community garden in 2004 paved the way for the spread throughout the canton<sup>1</sup> of what was soon to become a new model for urban gardens. Since 2011, cantonal planning documents favour them over traditional "family gardens", deemed to be too space-consuming for such a booming urban region. The cantonal "Nature in the City" programme, launched in 2013, also encourages their development through a grant competition for citizen projects<sup>2</sup>. Most community garden programmes, though, are organised by municipalities. They are highly regulated, and barely share any character with the contestatory, grassroots experiences of community gardens often reported (see Schmelzkopf, 1995; Smith and Kurtz, 2003). However, they do not map perfectly either onto the accounts of institutional "organised garden projects" deemed to accompany municipal entrepreneurial strategies and/or the implementation of neoliberal governmentality (Eizenberg and Fenster, 2015; Pudup, 2008).

Critically engaging with municipal involvement in community garden development, this paper draws attention to the contradictory ways in which municipal actors frame and govern community gardening and urban agriculture. It calls for a serious engagement with the internal contradictions that characterise contemporary municipal action, as urban municipalities have simultaneously become willing actors in the implementation of neoliberal policies and victims of the "local squeeze" (Peck, 2012) of fiscal revenues and expenditures. Municipal involvement in community gardening and urban agriculture, I argue, reflects this tension. Drawing upon ethnographic research in the town of Vernier (Geneva, Switzerland), I argue that municipal urban agriculture locally both contributes to *contesting* past and existing processes of neoliberalisation of *space* and *nature*, and to *implementing* neoliberal *governmentality*. Following calls for the development of an integrative framework capable of accounting simultaneously for the radical, reformist and neoliberal characters of urban agriculture, this paper has two main purposes.

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<sup>1</sup> The Swiss Confederation is made of 26 states called "cantons".

<sup>2</sup> See: <http://ge.ch/nature/information-nature/nature-en-ville/concours-nature-en-ville> (Accessed 19<sup>th</sup> October 2016).

The first purpose is to bring McClintock's (2014) call for an engagement with urban agriculture's multiple meanings further. While McClintock argues that "urban agriculture serves different, sometimes contradictory, functions for different actors and institutions" (McClintock, 2014, 15), I insist that it may very well serve "different" and definitely "contradictory" functions for *a single* actor, too. Municipalities, I argue, should not be considered as coherent entities; they should be less quickly associated with the love of growth than has been the case so far in urban agriculture scholarship. The second objective is to provide empirical grounding to Barron's call for more attention to the specificities of the various neoliberal processes that intersect with urban agriculture (Barron, 2016). The paper emphasises the singular contribution of the municipal urban agriculture programme in Vernier as regards the (reinforcement or contestation of) neoliberalisation of *space, nature* and *governmental practice*. It singularises the processes of neoliberalisation at play and identifies the ways in which the municipal urban agriculture programme variously contradicts and/or supports each. In sum, the paper both sheds light on the various singular processes of neoliberalisation that the municipal urban agriculture programme intersects with, and accounts for the contradictions of institutional actors' actions and objectives as regards each of them.

The paper starts with a critical review of the urban gardening and agriculture literature, with an emphasis on the intersection between urban agriculture and neoliberalism. It continues with the presentation of the research design and methods, and with an introduction to the context. Section three then analyses the collected empirical data. The main results are discussed in a fourth session.

### **Community gardening: radical, controlled, neoliberal?**

Because it is both a means of cultivating food and of producing green spaces, community gardening sits at the intersection between the broader themes of urban agriculture – broadly defined as any practice of food cultivation within and around cities – and community greening/forestry. Literatures on urban agriculture, community gardening and community forestry share an interest for environmental justice, social movements and the right to the city, and the tensions between community action and neoliberal co-optation. I review them, placing emphasis on the dialectical tension between grassroots activism and institutional/neoliberal co-optation.

### ***Urban gardening and socioenvironmental struggles***

Urban agriculture and gardening are dominantly described as positive social phenomena that not only provide *individuals* with fresh food (Pourias et al., 2012), a healthy activity (Wakefield et al., 2007), and a reconnection to natural processes, but also act towards greater *social* inclusion, the right to the city, and environmental and food justice. The case of New York is, in this sense, particularly

evocative, and it has attracted an important scholarly attention. During the fiscal crisis and recession of the 1970s, many properties in New York were abandoned and/or set on fire, and abandoned plots soon became overgrown with bushes and shrubs, if not with crack houses and prostitution. Grassroots responses emerged in the form of guerrilla and community gardening, which enabled neglected spaces to be re-appropriated by local groups of citizens. These originally illegal, squatting activities made possible for invisible publics and silenced cultures to be celebrated in public space (Eizenberg 2012; Schmelzkopf, 1999; Staeheli et al., 2002). When, in the late 1990s, the gardens were threatened by the Giuliani administration, those who used to simply recognize themselves as gardeners turned into activists. Through the leverage of various coalitions, they managed to save hundreds of gardens from private development (Schmelzkopf, 2002; Smith and Kurtz, 2003). Gardening was no more only a question of flowers and vegetables. Instead, it was turned into a means for people to claim their right to the city, and to become active in a wider city politics, where they could oppose to mainstream discourses on exchange-value their focus on the use-value of a concrete, lived space (Eizenberg, 2012; Purcell and Tyman, 2014; Schmelzkopf, 2002).

Research suggests that people involved in the development of contemporary gardening projects are now from the start “aware of the opportunities that community gardens provide as a new form of intervening in urban politics” (Follmann and Viehoff, 2015, 5). Gardens offer experimental sites for the development of alternative political. They interrogate the public/private divide of land (Blomley, 2004; Eizenberg, 2012), and focus on cooperation and solidarity as core values – as opposed to individualism and competition (Eizenberg, 2012; Follmann and Viehoff, 2015; Rosol and Schweizer, 2012). Within the movement of environmental justice, community gardens serve the claim for a more just repartition of environmental amenities. They provide accessible and alternative green spaces to marginalised people in highly segregated urban landscapes (Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014). Food justice movements also mobilise such places in the fight against food deserts (Paddeu, 2012) and in the struggle for the decommodification of food and the re-embedding of agricultural production within local social relations (McClintock, 2014).

A recurring theme in these literatures is the class- and racial dimension of such a practice. Several publications emphasise the reliance of immigrant and/or poor people on urban gardens, be they *casitas* in New York (Eizenberg, 2012; Schmelzkopf, 1999), vegetable gardens in Barcelona (Domene and Saurí, 2007), or family gardens in Geneva (Frauenfelder et al., 2011). Another commonality among most papers is their advocacy stance towards what is dominantly framed as a grassroots and benevolent practice (Tornaghi, 2014). A look at the institutional side of urban agriculture however suggests that it might be less contestatory or “heroic” (Adams and Hardman, 2014) than presented so far.

### ***Community gardening institutionalized***

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, numerous national and local states in so-called “developed” countries have developed urban gardening policies (see Guyon, 2004; Lawson, 2004; McKay, 2011; Pudup, 2008). Periods of economic crisis and social unrest were accompanied with the development of large-scale gardening programmes that were mainly aimed at complementing the national food production.<sup>3</sup> Periods of economic prosperity fostered new priorities and gardens tended to be reframed as non-desirable relics of the past. Recent years have witnessed the upsurge of municipal interest towards them.

Indeed, agriculture and urban development have recently been reconnected in the framework of urban food policies. These include the planning of food production and distribution at the metropolitan scale (Pothokuchi and Kaufman, 1999), as well as reflections on the potential for agriculture to become a tool for the development of cities (Ernwein and Salomon Cavin, 2014). Beside metropolitan food policies, municipal community gardening policies can now be found in places as diverse as New York (Baudry, 2011), Lisbon and Montpellier (Scheromm and Mousselin, 2015), Rennes (Nahmias and Hellier, 2012), Paris (Demailly, 2014), and Barcelona (Domene and Saurí, 2007). They provide community gardening with recognition and technical and/or monetary support. However, as Domene and Saurí (2007) argue, there is a class politics to their development. Using Barcelona as an example, they show the tendency of municipal programmes to relegate working-class, self-administered gardens to the past, and to valorise highly regulated forms of gardens adapted to middle- to upper-class aesthetic norms instead. The degree of autonomy of local groups of people in the development of their gardening projects also remains subject to negotiation and contestation, with suspicions from municipal actors that too much community autonomy might turn gardens into uncontrollable spaces (Eizenberg and Fenster 2015; Ernwein, 2014). Several examples show that municipal involvement can also trigger the reproduction of socio-spatial inequalities, either through the unequal spatial distribution of community gardens that reinforces already attractive, upper middle-class neighbourhoods (Eizenberg and Fenster, 2015), or through the implementation of complex procedures, that render only people with the highest social capital able to navigate the administrative and fundraising activities (Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014). Municipal interest towards community gardening was also most recently interpreted as co-optation of grassroots motives within the framework of neoliberalisation.

### ***A neoliberal practice?***

Analysing urban gardening in Berlin, Rosol identifies a “turn from community gardens as part of urban social movements towards community gardens

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<sup>3</sup> Examples include Victory Gardens and Relief Gardens in the US, and programs of urban land cultivation such as the Plan Wahlen in Switzerland.

as a form of voluntarism” (Rosol, 2010, 557). Whereas the municipality of Berlin used to welcome grassroots community garden projects with reluctance, it started its own community gardening programme in the 2000s. As soon became apparent, this was done in the purpose of interim maintenance of public space, and community gardeners were reframed by municipal actors as unpaid workers (Rosol, 2012). According to Rosol, this shift in the meaning associated with community gardens mirrors a profound change in the conception of state/civil society relationships, towards less reliance on the state and more individualised citizen “activation” (see Wohlfahrt, 2003). Attempts at transforming a practice associated with the right to the city and reclamation of the commons into a practice that puts individuals in charge of public services raise questions and are better understood with a larger focus. Indeed, the resort to volunteers in green space management is also part of a wider development of outsourcing of public service delivery to the so-called third sector (see Dean, 2015; Fyfe, 2005; Fyfe and Milligan, 2003). One of the problematic aspects of such a transformation is the usage of a rhetoric of *community* for the purpose of actually producing new *individual* subjectivities, since “by using a narrative of community, policy makers seemingly convince people that it is more effective and egalitarian to provide their own services” (Drake, 2014, 178; see also Pudup, 2008). Further adding to this critique, Perkins (2011) shows how residents in Milwaukee are invited to get involved in community forestry for their own individual benefit through discourses emphasizing the idea of saving *individual* costs through community action. Analysing school garden projects in California, Pudup (2008) also interprets their insistence on *individual* consumer choice as a purposeful erasure of the question of wider agrifood injustice, calling future citizens to vote with their fork, or, as coined by Barron (2016), with their wallet, instead of standing against the unjust system.

Growth-oriented municipal policies have also discovered the potential of community gardening – and more broadly community greening – for the production of exchange-value (Perkins, 2010). This marks a clear departure from times when, in Giuliani’s words, community gardens were negatively considered “archaic” and “communist” places (see Schmelzkopf, 2002; Smith and Kurtz, 2003). As Quastel (2009) shows, even private developers are now interested in community gardens, which serve them both as a tool to improve the visual qualities (and therefore exchange-value) of a neighbourhood and as a green-washing argument that makes them look green-friendly. Gardening policies are furthermore now a “must” for cities worldwide, and numerous municipalities mobilise them to position themselves within a global trend (Eizenberg and Fenster, 2015). Community gardening, in sum, is now part and parcel of the entrepreneurial city.

This critical literature starkly contrasts with the afore-presented arguments emphasising the radical potential of grassroots community gardening. It reflects several of the “many controversial and potentially unjust” aspects of urban agriculture and community greening (Tornaghi, 2014, 552) and illustrates the co-optation of community greening initiatives for the implementation of market-based

and entrepreneurial approach to public space production. In the wake of this analytical dichotomy, several researchers have called for the abandonment of “either/or” frameworks, where gardens are described as being either the product of alternative grassroots politics or of neoliberal municipal policies. Rosol (2012) has, for instance, demonstrated the limited success of the neoliberal approach to community gardening in Berlin by emphasising community gardeners’ negative response to such a reframing of their activity. As for Barron, she urges critical scholars to move beyond “assertions that community gardens are either inherently resistant to, or reproductive of, neoliberalism” (Barron, 2016, 1). Such assertions, she and others contend, risk leading scholars either to naively advocating community agriculture, or to “throwing the baby with the bathwater while failing to address the pressing needs on the ground” (McClintock, 2014, 19). McClintock argues that urban agriculture is necessarily entangled with multiple processes of neoliberalisation: it arises *within* the margins and interstices of the capitalist food system, attempts to *subvert* it, but also creates *opportunities* for it to further develop (McClintock, 2014). As a consequence, the actors at play should be more clearly differentiated. Indeed, urban agriculture holds different meanings for different actors who agree on its development for very different reasons: some in order to fight neoliberal order, some in order to further implement it. Barron (2016) furthermore calls for a specification of the processes of neoliberalisation at play, as community gardens can variously contribute to and/or contest the production of neoliberal subjectivities, the privatisation of space, or the spread of market mechanisms.

The arguments presented by McClintock and Barron are crucial but I consider both to be limited. In the absence of any case study, Barron’s argument remains too general: one can only agree with her that gardens in general do not produce any single kind of subjectivity, but I feel that this does not do enough for the understanding of actually-existing forms of neoliberalism or counter-neoliberalism. I therefore feel more inclined to the invitations by Tornaghi (2014), Eizenberg (2012), and on a more general level by Brenner and Theodore (2002a), to re-embed analyses in their local contexts, instead of making very general claims about urban agriculture being neoliberal or not. The various processes of neoliberalisation identified in this paper, as opposed to those identified by Barron, emerged from empirical research and reflect the place-specific character of urban agriculture’s intersections with neoliberalism. As for McClintock’s argument that “urban agriculture serves different, sometimes contradictory, functions for different actors” (McClintock, 2014, 15), I fear that it might lead to considering the categories of actors in a much too monolithic way. As I demonstrate in the empirical part of the paper, the neoliberal character of urban agriculture might very well be contested within the viewpoint of a single actor, and even institutional actors may be torn between individual beliefs, imposed budgets, and global circulations of ideas. This calls for a more complex understanding of the role(s) played by each actor, where institutional actors might not *only* be neoliberal players.

Through a detailed case study, this paper therefore brings two main arguments. First, municipal involvement in community gardening programmes may be, and is, simultaneously progressive *and* neoliberal. This calls for taking seriously the points of view of local institutional actors and the ways they negotiate the various demands and expectations that fall onto them. Second, navigating the struggles and tensions of municipal actors requires differentiating the various intersections of urban agriculture and neoliberalism. A single urban agriculture programme may simultaneously contribute to struggling against the privatisation of space and the commodification of nature, and to implementing an individualised model of self-responsible neoliberal subjects. As such, the paper both specifies the various intersections between urban agriculture and neoliberalism that are to be found in Vernier, and the contradictory positions of institutional actors with regard to them.

### ***An urban political ecology of neoliberalism***

While neoliberalism ought not to be understood as a homogenous framework but as a spatially (Brenner and Theodore, 2002a; Ong, 2007) and historically (Peck, 2012; Peck and Tickell, 2002) uneven phenomenon, the actions of various think tanks and international organisations (Harvey, 2007), as well as the circulation of “experts” (Larner, 2007; Larner and Laurie, 2010), have made this political economic ideology dominant in most regions of the world. Its key character is the attribution of a regulatory role to market mechanisms, which, instead of being subjected to government, become governing tools. Neoliberalism rearticulates the respective roles of states, civil society and private sector around new governing scales and instruments of government. As neoliberal State-phobia (Anderson 2015; Foucault 2004) led to the rescaling of government to cities and city-regions, the latter appropriated the mottos of marketisation and entrepreneurialism; civil society was called to “activate” itself, and the private sector was mandated more and more duties.

Urban studies emphasise the neoliberal rescaling of government to cities (Le Galès, 1995), the emergence of governance beyond the state (Swyngedouw, 2005), the financialisation of urban space (Renard, 2008), and the subsequent rise of the power of local private actors over democratically elected representatives. Urban political ecology (Heynen et al., 2006) adds to this framework an interest for the articulation of such political economies with specific ecologies: is nature in the neoliberal city to any extent specific? How are neoliberal discourses and practices at the local scale articulated with specific practices of governance of urban nature? This framework allows the articulation of research on neoliberal governmentality, neoliberal urbanism, and the neoliberalisation of nature.

### **Research design and context**

This paper builds on the results of a research project that analysed the evolution of urban green space governance in Switzerland. In Switzerland, a



federal republic, most prerogatives outside monetary policies, national defence, and foreign affairs are in the hands of local states called “cantons”. The 26 cantons are autonomous regarding the collection of taxes used to organise most public services, including schooling and higher education systems, hospitals, police, and support to agriculture. As for municipalities, they have local prerogatives as diverse as public safety, road construction, culture, and green spaces – including parks, squares, gardens, and trees.

Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, municipal green spaces in the canton of Geneva are complemented with autonomously organised allotment gardens, called “family gardens”. Originally designed to provide working-class labourers with a decent, healthy occupation and to keep them out of pubs – thus making them more likely to be productive in their day’s work – these gardens are today still popular, especially among lower-class segments of the population (Frauenfelder et al., 2011).<sup>4</sup> The Fédération Genevoise des Jardins Familiaux (Geneva Family Garden Federation) claims not less than 2 000 individual plots – each with a surface area of about 150 to 200 m<sup>2</sup> – assembled in 25 garden collectives distributed over 16 municipalities.<sup>5</sup> Each plot is attributed to a family. They tend to be fenced and are equipped with a garden shed where the family stores gardening tools, seeds, and other materials. In spite of a cantonal regulation passed in 1960 that forbids their destruction without replacement, recent state policies plan their progressive dismantling and replacement with smaller gardens renamed *plantages* or *potagers urbains* (Frauenfelder et al. 2014; République et Canton de Genève 2011). Indeed, because of their location – generally at the fringe of urbanised land – and of their surface, these pieces of land are a tempting target for urban development (see for instance Armanios 2010).

Interestingly, the French translation for “community gardens” – i.e. *jardin partagé* (Demailly, 2014) – was not adopted in Geneva. Instead, such gardens bear the name *plantation* or *potager urbain*, both of which can be translated into “vegetable garden”. The names are instructive, insofar as – in contrast to other contexts (e.g. Rosol, 2010) – these gardens are mainly designed for food-growing purposes. Indeed, almost all *plantages* in the canton of Geneva are institutionally led and strictly regulated through charters, most of which forbid participants to build a garden shed or grow any tree or lawn, and invite them instead to focus on food production. Institutional actors are at pains to distinguish them from family gardens and constantly present *plantages* as equivalents of American community gardens.<sup>6</sup> As opposed to family gardens, they are predominantly located within urbanised centres; they are also much smaller, with individual, unfenced plots of

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<sup>4</sup> Before the 1960s, these gardens were – quite tellingly – named *jardins ouvriers* – literally “workers’ gardens”. They were renamed “family gardens” in order to accompany the development of a middle-class and a leisure society in the 1960s.

<sup>5</sup> <http://fgjf.ch/qui-sommes-nous/> (Accessed 17<sup>th</sup> October 2016).

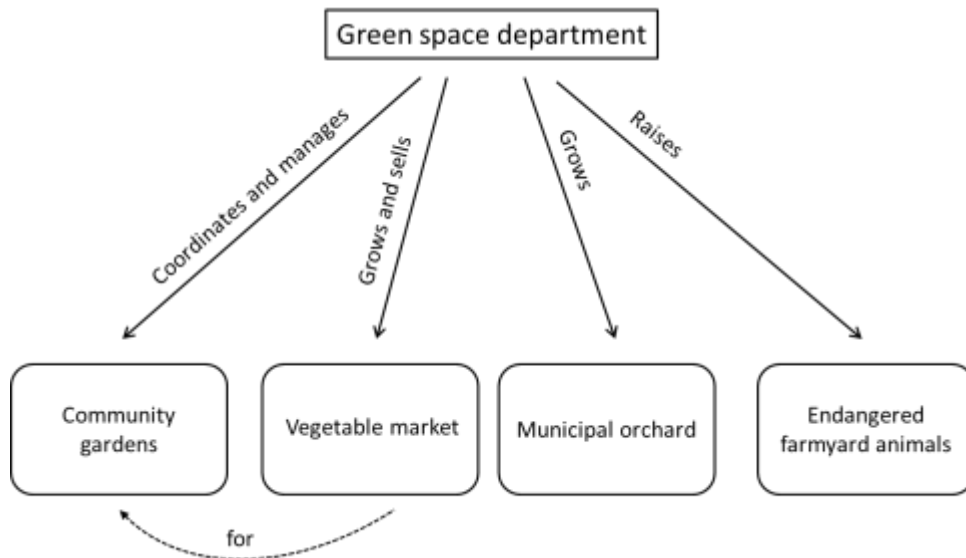
<sup>6</sup> For this reason, *plantages* are referred to as “community gardens” in the rest of the paper.

around 6 to 20 m<sup>2</sup> and some communal areas around water inlets and barbecue equipment. As such, *plantages* are well-identified, historically circumscribed and normatively standardised spaces distinct from previous forms of urban gardens. However, the influence of the family garden model over their design clearly appears in their division into individual plots – a character deemed by some of my interviewees to be better suited than communal parcels to the Swiss habitus.

The research material analysed in this paper mainly comprises interviews with the elected political representative in charge of green space planning and development (n=1) and administrative staff working in Vernier's green space department's board (n=3). These are the four persons who are the most involved in the urban gardening and agriculture programme –two of them designed it, the others play a major role in its daily implementation. The paper focuses on their points of view with regard to their role in the implementation of the urban agriculture and gardening programme and the objectives they attribute to it. These interviews were part of a wider research that took place in three municipalities in the canton of Geneva. In this framework, ethnographic fieldwork was carried within three green space departments and three community gardens (for a total of over 60 interviews and dozens of hours of audio-visual material). While for clarity the paper focuses only on a small part of this data, some mentions are made to observations conducted in one of Vernier's community gardens over the gardening season of 2013, as well as during community garden parties and general assemblies in 2012 and 2013. All data used in this paper were analysed using critical discourse analysis (van Dijk, 1993). Results were presented and discussed with research participants during workshops and group discussions, and critical feedback was given to them as part of a reflexive and iterative process. All interviews were conducted in French. Citations are my personal translation.

### **Municipal urban agriculture: spaces of non-contestation?**

Since 2009, the municipal green space department in the suburban town of Vernier (34 500 inhabitants) has been designing and implementing an integrated urban agriculture programme that includes three community gardens, the introduction of edible/agricultural landscapes notably in the form of an orchard, the production of vegetables for an annual market aimed at community gardeners, and the safeguard of endangered farmyard species. It can be schematically summarised as follows:



**Figure 1: Vernier's integrated urban agriculture programme**

The remainder of the paper analyses this integrated programme, starting with the community gardens and moving then to the transformations of green space production as green space workers switch from *horti-* to *agricultural* production.

### ***Including or controlling the (individual) poor?***

Vernier was a pioneering municipality when it created its first community garden in 2009 in the working-class *Libellules* neighbourhood. According to the magistrate<sup>7</sup> – a social worker by profession – the project followed two main objectives:

The first [objective] was to get residents to meet. And nature provides good opportunities for that. The second was for them to grow some vegetables. That's something important, for the precarious residents of this neighbourhood. (T., magistrate, 2013)

The insistence on the social dimension is also articulated by the green space managers, who not only consider their role to be that of caring for the environment, but also of fostering the wellbeing of their population (E., green space department, 2012). A common feature in all collected discourses is the emphasis on the creation of neighbourhood conviviality through community gardens. In order to develop such social dynamics, the design of the three existing gardens includes – beside the individual plots – collective areas with a table, benches and a shared water supply. Insisting on the vitalisation of neighbourhood dynamics, the project leaders have decided to restrict participation to people living within a five-minute walk from a

<sup>7</sup> “Magistrates” are elected municipal representatives.

garden. This way, they assume, a sense of solidarity will emerge at the neighbourhood scale. Within this perimeter, working with the social department, they make sure that the most excluded residents get a priority access (T., magistrate, 2013).

Out of the three existing community gardens, two were conceived and designed by the green space department, and one was designed by a private agency with a mandate from the municipality (D., green space department, 2012). As a result of their top-down character, gardens are visually much alike, with individual, unfenced, rectangular 20 m<sup>2</sup> plots organized along pedestrian paths. Just like other parks and green spaces, the design of the gardens remains in the hands of the municipality. As opposed to other municipal gardening programmes that leave it up to residents to conceive gardens to their own taste (Eizenberg and Fenster, 2015; Rosol, 2012), the development of gardens in Vernier is not accompanied with the attribution of power to the community to conceive it to its own liking. Participants furthermore must conform to visual and organisational norms, enforced through the mandatory signature of a list of regulations. Once the contract is signed, individual participants are handed a plot for a renewable one-year lease. The contract includes twelve rules that make it mandatory to live within a five-minute walk, to pay a small annual fee, and to take part in the annual general assembly. It forbids leaving the plot “unattended” (without precision as to the criteria used to define “unattendedness”), growing trees or a lawn, fencing the plot, and building any fixed construction (such as a garden shed).<sup>8</sup> Even though the gardens are not formally closed, a notice on the entrance door informs all passers-by that access is officially limited to people holding a contract and their acquaintances.<sup>9</sup> Community gardens are therefore not meant to become a community space for the neighbourhood.<sup>10</sup>

For the purpose of enforcing the rules, a municipal green space worker makes a weekly visit to each garden. Individual plots are attributed numbers, thanks to which he “know[s] whom each parcel belongs to, so in case of trouble [he] can quickly get to the right person” (D, green space department, 2012). Through individual contracting and the individualised follow-up by the municipality, the programme appears to be more focused on individuals than on the sustainment of any collective. The gardeners are not organised into an association, nor do they have a representative who can bring problems, questions or propositions to the municipality; each person is directly liable for their own activity and for following the rules.

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<sup>8</sup> Community gardeners take some liberties though. For instance, several gardeners in the *Libellules* community garden make use of construction barriers to fence their plots (see figure 2).

<sup>9</sup> In other municipalities in the canton, the rules are less strict and entrance is authorised to anyone as long as at least one member of the community garden is present.

<sup>10</sup> The *plantage* in the *Libellules* neighbours a community centre, which is supposed to play that kind of role.

In order for their annual lease to be renewed, it is mandatory for gardeners to take part in a general assembly, organised and moderated by the green space department. In spite of what could be expected from such an event, it does actually not make more space for collectivity. Its purpose, beyond generating encounters, is to: “take stock of the past year, of what went right or wrong, and to remind people of the rules and call them to order” (D., green space department, 2012). I attended two such assemblies, organised in an auditorium in a secondary school in November 2012 and 2013. Both started with a welcome address by the green space manager, followed by a municipal agent reminding community gardeners of the rules and asking for any question or problem. The two assemblies I attended were fairly tense, with lively discussions around people getting drunk in one of the gardens and leaving empty bottles and caps on the ground. Both were entirely chaired by municipal officers who had also set the agenda in advance. The spatial organisation of the room – with officials and green space workers sitting on stage and community gardeners in the audience – reflected the organisation of the programme and its lack of devolution of power to community gardeners. Even garden parties are centrally organised, with one each summer set by the municipality at the same date for all community gardens. There is a strong reliance of the gardeners on this vertical organisation. Community gardeners indeed report initiatives beyond having a beer with one’s plot neighbour to be very rare. Gardens are expected to stick to their objectives of conviviality and food-growing, but are not meant as political places where to experiment with the collaborative production of space, the creation of commons, or any kind of other alternative political organisations often to be found in community gardens (see Eizenberg, 2012; Purcell and Tyman, 2015; Rosol and Schweizer, 2012).

However, with only one-third of residents in Vernier having access to a garden at their private residence, individualised access to a personal plot in a community garden still contributes to rebalance the repartition of such amenities.<sup>11</sup> This might not sound quite radical, but it does create an ersatz of private property for people denied of access to it (see also Frauenfelder et al., 2011). The reverse side is that private property continues to be erected as a model, even for community gardens.

### ***Making space public or privately making space?***

The creation of gardens being not the result of citizen requests but of municipal choices, one can wonder how the garden locations are decided upon. Indeed, existing research has identified the highly unequal and uneven character of municipal community gardening and greening programmes. Both Heynen (2003)

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<sup>11</sup> Here it must be stated that Vernier has no less than 800 parcels of family gardens. However, as membership is not linked to residence in the town, it is not directly aimed at offering access to a garden to Vernier’s residents in particular. In contrast, there are about 120 community garden plots in the municipality, all provided to residents.

and Eizenberg and Fenster (2015) account for cases where municipal gardening/greening programmes are targeted at middle- if not upper-class neighbourhoods, rather than at the poorest and most segregated neighbourhoods. The first logic articulated by my interviewees is that of an opportunism forced onto them by the lack of available public land:

To be honest, we don't have any criteria. Unfortunately, we only have very few available pieces of land, so the question is not "we should make a community garden in this neighbourhood because it needs it," but rather "there's some unused land here, why not turn it into a community garden?" (J., green space department, 2012)



**Figure 2: Community garden in *Les Libellules* (2016)**

While this may look like a reactive rather than proactive policy, the municipality deploys efforts to acquire land from the private realm – at counter-current to the current neoliberal doxa: “We have very little room to work because of property problems. When a piece of land is released, we try to buy it in order for municipal projects to get started” (T., magistrate, 2013). All three existing gardens result of such a process – two are located on former industrial sites bought by the municipality when production activities ceased, one results from a donation from a private landowner.

Two of the *plantages* are located in low-income neighbourhoods – *Balexert* and *Les Libellules* – and one in the better-off centre – *Montfleury*. A new community garden is planned in the town centre, as well as one in each of the two densest and segregated neighbourhoods – Le Lignon and Les Avanchets. These densely-built neighbourhoods lack publicly owned space; most private spaces are furthermore already built, so there are fewer chances for the municipality to be able to buy any piece of land for public projects (T, magistrate, 2013). The magistrate and green space manager are therefore designing a programme of raised-bed gardens – a format that should allow more flexibility in terms of location, and for the gardens to be removable quickly enough for private owners not to oppose them on the ground of damaging intrusion. There is, in sum, a real effort to make community gardens accessible to the neediest residents; however, the inherited high level of private property makes it difficult for the municipality to manoeuvre according to its own projects.

As a setback of its land acquisition policy, the municipality faces a budget shortage for the maintenance of its public spaces. As elsewhere (Perkins, 2009, 2010, 2011; Rosol, 2010, 2011), maintenance is therefore increasingly privatised, most notably to private landscaping and horticulture companies, but also to residents who step in as free workers. Collected discourses reveal the thinness of the line between generously handing over gardens to residents and using them as an interim form of green space maintenance:

Two out of three community gardens are located on sites where there are projects of construction ... They are pending. When we plan development projects, we get a planning permission, then we have to wait for funding, and a certain number of years can pass by. So instead of leaving the site untended, with weeds, why not hand it over to our residents for three or four years, maybe more? There is no certainty over the duration. (J., green space department, 2012)

What initially looked like an *ad-hoc* gap-filler was soon included in the municipal maintenance plan – granting this new division of labour an official status:

Community gardens are one of the spatial categories in the maintenance plan ... Instead of being tended by the green spaces workers, they are offered to the population, who, in a certain way, maintains them. (J., green space department, 2012)





**Figure 3: The community garden in Les Libellules is located on a former parking lot awaiting redevelopment.**

In spite of its inscription in the maintenance plan, this usage of community gardens remains publicly unavowed. Indeed, community gardeners are never overtly addressed as “volunteers”, but always as “gardeners”, “participants” or even “beneficiaries”. In other words, official discourses refer to them as the ones benefitting, not the ones providing the benefit. This lack of transparency makes individual citizens assume some of the role of the local state without even noticing it. With two out of three community gardens located in lower-income neighbourhoods, it furthermore extracts work from the people who already have the least resources (see also Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014, 13).

Giving residents the opportunity to get involved in community gardening is thus not only a charitable act; it is also meant to make residents step in for the provision of a formerly public service. Just like in the Berlin case analysed by Rosol (2010), community gardens are not conceived as an end *per se*, but as one of



the solutions to budget shortage – others including outsourcing maintenance to private companies and transforming parts of parks into extensive meadows.

### ***Struggling against the market... through a market?***

The green space department does not only face a shortage of public space and budget. It also faces pressures from the horticultural industry, on which, just like other municipal green space departments in Western Europe, it has become increasingly dependent. Urban agriculture, again, was envisaged as a means through which to tackle this reliance.

As garden historians have shown, parks conceived prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century were largely devoid of flowers. When at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century flowers were incorporated as one of their main features, horticulture started to flourish as a new economic sector (Cueille, 2003). This was even more so from the 1960s on, when, following functionalist principles (see Le Corbusier, 1971), towns throughout Western Europe were equipped with generic “green spaces”, consisting of vast areas of grass punctuated with decorative-only flowerbeds (for a critique of the generic character of green space landscapes see Auricoste, 2003; Sansot 2003). Vernier is now moving away from this decorative-only approach to green spaces, incorporating instead edible vegetables and fruits in the landscape. It is growing a community orchard, producing vegetables and herbs for a market organised each year in May, and raising and displaying ancient breeds of barnyard animals. It does so hand in hand with ProSpecieRara, a Swiss foundation for the protection of agrobiodiversity.<sup>12</sup> This move toward *agri*- instead of *horti*-cultural production is part of the wider urban agricultural programme described in this paper. Indeed, the annual market – during which the green space department sells the tomatoes, peppers, aubergines, herbs, etc. that it has produced – is mainly aimed at changing community gardeners’ production and consumption practices toward less reliance on hybrid, standardised and calibrated plants:

Giving people the opportunity to cultivate their own food is great, but then what do they cultivate? It’s crucial to think about that. And I believe we have a role to play here. Is the goal really to grow the same vegetables that can be bought in supermarkets? ... The criteria that a gardener looks for are almost opposed to these followed by the industry. So people should take the occasion to grow species that are threatened. That’s why we got in touch with ProSpecieRara, and

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<sup>12</sup> Plants and animals concerned by ProSpecieRara’s actions are those reported to have been of cultural importance to Switzerland’s traditional farming activities and to currently be at risk of extinction. Working along a process common to most peasant seed movements (see Demeulenare and Bonneuil, 2012), ProSpecieRara works with volunteer farmers, who cultivate plants and then harvest them and distribute the seeds. The organisation also tries to directly reach urbanites – notably through an “UrbanTomatoes” program – and looks for municipalities to become a relay for their action (D., ProSpecieRara, 2013)

that's why we developed our market. (J., green space department, 2012)

There is a second rationale for this incorporation of agricultural practices into the department's activities. Indeed, with the European horticultural industry growing into an oligopoly (Widehem and Cahic, 2006), horticultural products are now sold from the Netherlands throughout the continent. The green space department in Vernier makes no exception, and relies extensively on imported flowers and seedlings. As E., a municipal agent responsible for the production of flowers in Vernier articulates, horticultural firms are in such a dominant position that they can impose strict quotas to their clients:

The quantities [we have to buy] are huge! Firms won't let me buy 1 000 begonia in three colours; they will impose a minimum of 1 000 of each colour, and a minimum of 2 000 flowers for a single command. (E., green space department, 2012)

This to a large extent influences the urban landscape by imposing a certain degree of standardisation. These firms furthermore realise such economies of scale that they make flower production at the municipal level economically non-viable. Certain municipalities have stopped producing plants altogether, and buy the totality of their flowers and trees to large horticultural firms (J., green space department, Chêne-Bougeries). As a consequence, public money is directly injected into the internationalised horticultural industry. This, E. fears, could lead to a loss of local skills:

This economic aspect is incredible. The price of the products coming from Holland is simply scary! Should we buy all our plants from them, we would get such competitive prices! But then we lose our skills and stop educating our youth... So it's a choice to make! ... But really, besides beautifying the town, our red thread is also education. We want to keep educating apprentices (E., green space department, 2012)

In 2010, E. informed ProSpecieRara of his interest to introduce non-commodified plants in his production. Together with the cantonal project manager of the organisation, they decided to make Vernier a cantonal pole for species labelled ProSpecieRara. The diversification induced (caring for endangered breeds of barnyard animals, growing fruit trees and making juice, growing and selling vegetables) forced municipal workers to develop new agricultural skills beyond their horticultural specialisation:

Producing these tomatoes requires a lot of work! Plus, we had to re-open our books, because that's the kind of things that we weren't used to doing, that some of us didn't even know how to do. I wasn't educated as a market gardener! (E., green space department, 2012)

The incorporation of these breeding and agricultural practices provides the department workers with an increased sense of freedom from the dominant industry. It is furthermore based on demonetarised relationships of trust with an NGO instead of commodified relationships with horticultural firms.

These agricultural practices, however, complement rather than oppose usual commodified relationships. They are far from reversing the dependency of the municipal green space department toward the horticultural industry. At some point, E. considered using some of the flowers available in ProSpecieRara's catalogue. These, however, are only perennial plants, and he fears that they would not easily be accepted by the residents, whose eyes are more used to the pelargonium, begonias, and other annual horticultural flowers – those very flowers whose usage makes public money flow to transnational horticultural companies. The usage of a market to transform community gardeners' food growing and eating habits furthermore contributes to locating initiatives and power in the wallet of individual consumers – much in line with the neoliberal idea that change arises through consumption (see Pudup 2008).

## Discussion

Analysing the urban agriculture programme set up in Vernier by the green space department has allowed identifying the manifold tensions inherent to the institutionalisation of a practice originally associated with strong political claims against neoliberal urbanism and for the right to a just urban environment. Vernier's municipal agents are deeply committed to disembedding the municipality from inherited structures of privatisation, commodification, and social fragmentation. In this sense, they do justice to urban agriculture's fundamentals. They do, however, also problematically contribute to focusing citizen participation on an individual scale, and potential for change in individual consumption practices.

Community gardens simultaneously provide a pretext for the return of municipal land into the public domain, a solution to budget shortage for public space maintenance, and a localised response to the socio-spatial fragmentation that results from private urban development. The active policy of land acquisition contradicts many analyses that equate municipal action with an obsessive quest for growth and the production of conditions favourable to the market (see Brenner and Theodore, 2002b) and shows that the belief in values located outside of exchange is not the privilege of grassroots activists. Indeed, the projects for the sites currently occupied by community gardens include the construction of a new community centre (*Les Libellules*) and a new sports hall (*Montfleury*), both meant to be public buildings benefitting Vernier's residents. The development of agricultural practices is also meant to address the commodification of nature (Castree, 2003) and to disembed the municipality from the transnational horticultural industry and its pressures. It does, in this sense, contest the neoliberalisation of nature (Bakker, 2005; Castree, 2008), by refusing to let private actors hold exclusive power over its production.

However, urban agriculture in Vernier is problematic with regards to its insistence on individualised and highly controlled forms of civic engagement and the non-spoken character of the transfer of public responsibilities onto individual citizens. These characters are illustrative of the usage of the environment within neoliberal governmentality. Governmentality, for Foucault, refers to the “conduct of conduct” (Foucault, 2004). As opposed to discipline, which imposes coercion over bodies (see Foucault, 1975) governmentality refers to making subjects behave according to norms that they think are their own. The environment is known to be a tool of government (Brand, 2007; Rutherford, 1999). The findings here very much mirror Gabriel’s claim that the construction of urban parks at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Philadelphia contributed to the incorporation by workers of capitalistic behavioural norms (Gabriel, 2011). By replacing fruit trees with ornamental trees, it turned workers’ attention away from using nature for foraging, towards contemplating it. It made them incorporate the very capitalistic norm that makes reliance on the market for the satisfaction of such basic human needs as water and food look normal. Gardening programmes in Vernier are meant to direct participants’ attention to their own individual embodied practice of growing food, while transforming their relationship to the local state. Bodies are worked upon to produce corporeal habits and naturalise a new division of urban environmental labour, and to make citizens individually endorse formerly public responsibilities.

## Conclusion

With this paper, my purpose has been twofold. First, to push further the idea that urban agriculture can and actually does present both neoliberal and counter-neoliberal characters (McClintock 2014). To do so, I explored the context-specific intersections between an urban agriculture programme and singular processes of neoliberalisation – namely the privatisation of space, the commodification of nature, and neoliberal governmentality – thus grounding Barron’s call for more attention to the specific processes of urban agriculture’s neoliberalisation (see Barron 2016) in a situated case. Second, to nuance recent critical accounts of urban agriculture that monolithically equate municipal involvement in its development with neoliberal entrepreneurialism (Perkins, 2009, 2010, 2011; Rosol, 2010), privatisation (Eizenberg and Fenster, 2015), and neoliberal governmentality (Drake, 2014; Pudup, 2008). To do so, I explored the tensions and contradictions that characterise the involvement of municipal actors, especially regarding the three above-mentioned intersections of urban agriculture and neoliberalism.

Through the case of Vernier, Switzerland, I have demonstrated how full of tensions a municipal programme of urban agriculture can be. Far from an obsessive focus on economic growth, municipal actors involved in the development of urban gardening in Vernier display what I believe to be real empathetic concerns for social equity, the quality of public space, and autonomy *vis-à-vis* highly concentrated horticultural and agricultural industrial markets. The municipal

programme, however, is problematic in its reliance on an individualised and highly controlled model of community garden. Without doing so explicitly, the programme limits the possibilities for participants to express their own values, inculcates them with aesthetic and behavioural norms decided upon in a top-down manner, and makes them individually endorse formerly public responsibilities. Vernier's programme, in sum, simultaneously strives to counteract inherited privatisation and commodification structures, and reinforces neoliberal focus on individual action and choice. There is no unique essence to the municipal programme analysed, and characterizing it *either* as neoliberal *or* as progressive would necessarily lead to an impasse.

The role of individual persons must be underlined here. Indeed, the two main persons involved in the design and implementation of the urban agriculture programme – i.e., the magistrate and the main manager of the green space department – are, respectively, a trained social worker member of the socialist party and an active member of a local parish involved in charity work who wants his department to achieve not only environmental but also social goals. In other terms, both of their life trajectories have contributed to shape their interest in the construction of tools for community building, neighbourhood improvement, and public space. Both, however, face several constraints. First, inherited structures of land privatisation make it extremely difficult to develop new plans that require public space. In much the same way, the power held by horticultural companies makes any attempts at circumventing them extremely difficult. Ideas and references also circulate through professional networks that green space managers are part of. For instance, the Union Suisse des Parcs et Promenades (Swiss Organisation of Parks Departments) holds working groups on topics such as the adaptation of green space to low budgeting, where solutions such as internal restructuring and outsourcing are discussed and circulate. All these factors make it difficult for actors working within the institutional structures of a neoliberal country to contest neoliberalism itself.

The identification of these paradoxes and contradictions will, I hope, encourage urban agriculture scholars to question their reliance upon a romanticised dichotomy between “benevolent” civil organisations and “profit-oriented” public institutions, as well as to care for the singular processes of neoliberalisation at play. This calls for two directions in urban agriculture research. First, institutional ethnography and participation observation in policy-making, notably absent from the urban-agriculture-and-neoliberalism literature, would allow for the identification of how contradictions are negotiated and how personal trajectories intersect with the construction of stances. Second, this paper also suggests that paying attention to such second-range, suburban localities such as Vernier can help to identify the limits of certain theoretical assumptions, which, given urban studies' focus on metropolises, may lack relevance for other (sub)urban realities. I do hope, with this paper, to have demonstrated the fertility of accounting for

medium/suburban towns, and do call for more urban agriculture scholarship on these kind of municipalities.

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