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Brooklyn's agrarian questions

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Research Paper for Themed Content: Urban Agriculture

Abstract

Throughout the USA, urban agriculture is expanding as a manifestation of an emerging American food politics. Through a case study of Brooklyn, New York, I used mixed qualitative research methods to investigate the political possibilities of urban agriculture for fostering food justice. My findings build on the existing alternative food network (AFN) literature by indicating that problematic contradictions rooted in the neoliberalization of urban agriculture limit the transformative possibilities of farming the city as currently practiced in Brooklyn. I suggest that longstanding agrarian questions—concerns over the relationship between agriculture and capitalism and the politics of small-scale producers—are informative for critical interrogation of urban agriculture as a politicization of food.

Key words: agro-food, alternative food network, food politics, neoliberalization, urban agriculture

Introduction

> It's a pretty critical point right now for [food and agriculture] in the US . . . I think there are a lot of promising trends that are going to help people have access to better food . . . programs like this [urban farming project] are hopefully changing people's attitudes, but it's not going to be enough if people buy some of their produce at their farmers' market or they support a few local farmers. It's going to take a lot more to really make a big impact (Personal interview, June 15, 2010. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality by the author).

The manager of a well-known urban agriculture project in Brooklyn, New York offered his first-hand views on emerging food politics in the USA during an interview. This urban farm participates in the growing efforts to confront the many problems associated with the global agro-food juggernaut. At the same time, this statement highlights an awareness that American interest in food politics has yet to catalyze systemic change. On the one hand, this assessment clearly identifies the shortcomings of current efforts that are largely focused on developing alternative (mostly 'local') food systems. On the other hand, the comments follow previous discussions of the many beneficial outcomes of the specific urban farm project for the immediate community, including the expansion of access to fresh produce, the creation of jobs and other economic opportunities, and neighborhood development.

At first glance urban agriculture appears to be one of the more radical edges of the many manifestations of agro-food efforts and its supporters view the practice of farming the city as inherently politically progressive. Most accounts of urban agriculture, including scholarly analyses, are celebratory. There is, however, a tradition of critical scholarship that examines alternative food networks (AFNs) within their neoliberal context, the current period of capitalism uniquely committed to free enterprise as central to individual freedoms and social welfare[1–3].

Using contemporary urban agriculture expansion in Brooklyn, New York as a case study, I investigate the engendered contradictions that arise in the tensions between the goals of urban agriculture and its practice in Brooklyn. Thus, the relationship between neoliberalization and agro-food efforts serves as the entry into my research. Building on existing scholarship that examines the tensions between AFNs and neoliberalization I aim to delineate the political possibilities of urban agriculture in Brooklyn; I ask: how does neoliberalization shape Brooklyn's growing urban agriculture?

After a brief review of the critical AFN literature, I detail the current expansion of urban agriculture in Brooklyn. I examine both not-for-profit and commercial farms, and highlight how both forms, despite different rhetorics, are confined by capitalist realities that undermine the political possibilities of AFNs. I conclude by suggesting longstanding agrarian questions that explore the relationship between agricultural production and

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capitalism are informative for critical interrogation of urban agriculture as a politicization of food.

AFNs and Neoliberalization

Recognizing the proliferation of various agro-food efforts, activists and researchers maintain that the contemporary agro-food system is currently undergoing a qualitative shift. As the problems associated with industrialized agro-food come into focus, particularly concerns about health and safety, consumers in the global North have turned toward 'quality' food[4,5]. As a result, heterogeneous AFNs work to build alternatives to conventional agro-food. The emergence of 'civic agriculture,' as coined by Thomas Lyson, creates new organizational forms through the development of community-based food systems that can restore linkages between producers and consumers en route to a 'more socially and environmentally integrated food system' (p. 7)[6]. Examples of AFNs include farmers' markets, fair trade producer cooperatives, community supported agriculture (CSA) and urban agriculture[4–7]. Broadly defined as 'networks of producers, consumers, and other actors that embody alternatives to the more standardized industrial mode of food supply' (p. 394), AFNs emerge in response to the exposed contradictions of conventional agro-food[8].

Agro-food alternatives broadly share a political agenda: 'to create food systems that are environmentally sustainable, economically viable, and socially just' (p. 61)[9]. But the material work of these efforts does not necessarily align with their desires to create food system change. In particular, Patricia Allen and her colleagues explain, 'trying to working within the system to change the system poses a real Gordian knot,' creating a vast gulf between the political engagements advocated by agro-food alternatives and enacted material programs. AFNs, the authors contend, 'accept the structures and parameters of the current food system' (p. 71) and although AFN leaders recognize the need for political economic change to address food-system problems, there is 'greater enthusiasm for the personal, relational, and entrepreneurial' (p. 72)[9]. This focus results in efforts to increase consumer choice, and a deepening of social embeddedness, but leaves commodity relations intact[10].

Lyson agrees that civic agriculture neither serves as an economic challenge to the conventional agro-food system nor is likely to pose a real problem in the near future[6]. Allen et al. explain that many agro-food efforts are primarily *alternative*, that is, focused on incremental efforts that do not fundamentally disrupt the broader political economy of the agro-food landscape, rather than *oppositional*, working to create new agro-food structures. The outcome, the authors conclude, are agro-food efforts reluctant to engage questions of social justice[9]. This distinction, as I show below, is a useful starting point for understanding the efforts of urban agriculture in Brooklyn and highlights the tensions between the goals of urban cultivation and its material work.

In a recently published assessment of AFNs and survey of existing AFN scholarship, David Goodman, E. Melanie DuPuis and Michael Goodman argue that academic analyses of AFNs are either celebratory *or* critical[7]. On the one hand are scholars who explore the 'pre-figurative' politics of AFNs as both producing feasible changes given on-the-ground realities and providing opportunities to address the recognized limitations of AFNs by prefiguring more radical possibilities[7]. On the other hand, Goodman, DuPuis and Goodman note, are critical scholars who highlight the mainstreaming of agro-food alternatives and the highly racialized and classed characteristics of AFNs and the 'ideological influence of neoliberalism on movement ambition' (p. 3)[7].

Although prioritization of the market is characteristic of all capitalist market systems, neoliberalism—as a distinct phase of capitalism—is uniquely committed to the free market as central to individual freedoms and social welfare. Neoliberalism, David Harvey explains, is a 'theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by *liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms* and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade' (p. 2, emphasis added)[11]. Whereas classic liberalism prioritizes individual liberties, neoliberalism prioritizes free enterprise.

The many ways in which the ideology of neoliberalism is mobilized by capital has pushed critical scholars to understand neoliberalization as a *process*, not neoliberalism as a 'thing'[12,13]. Scholars explore the various ways in which neoliberal theory has been actuated through various processes such as: state restructuring, privatization, enclosure, deregulation, monetization, commodification, etc. Importantly, neoliberalization is historicized through the distinction between an earlier 'roll-back' period of 'deregulation and dismantlement'—the eroding of the state—and a later period of 'roll-out' neoliberalization, marked by 'active state-building and regulatory reform' (p. 384)[12], including an unwavering commitment to entrepreneurship and public–private partnerships to fill the gaps left by roll-back processes. This distinction becomes useful for understanding urban agriculture as (re)producing neoliberalization. The roll-out of new disciplining institutions that adhere to capitalist structures quietly creates the confining political possibilities of neoliberalism's alternatives.

Approaching neoliberalization as a process better reflects the contingency, complexity and challenges of the various modalities of actually existing neoliberalisms. Moreover, understanding neoliberalization as a process highlights the ways in which many characteristics of neoliberalization pre-date the contemporary neoliberal

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era, but are made coherent by neoliberal ideology. For example, neoliberalizations of agro-food include vertical integration and corporate consolidation, the increasing privatization of land access, the patenting of life in the form of seeds and genetically modified organisms (GMOs), free trade agreements that destroy national agricultural economies, and efforts to dismantle entitlements that produce the visceral contradictions of hunger and obesity in the USA. Although these processes are neither new nor unique to the neoliberal era, they are deployed today in specific ways to discipline subjects and the state, reorganize capital and restore class power[14–16].

As my observational data and interviews indicate, it is specifically the neoliberalization of agro-food that is problematized by the emerging urban agriculture movement (Personal interviews, May 10, 2010; June 3, 2010; June 24, 2010; June 26, 2010; June 29, 2010). Indeed, this is widely recognized in the literature. Doug Constance suggests that agro-food movements exemplify, 'the most coherent challenge to neoliberal restructuring' (p. 9)[17]. Jason Moore exclaims, 'agriculture is one of the decisive battlegrounds of neoliberal globalization—I would say *the* decisive battleground (p. 54)[18]. And Julie Guthman notes: 'it is precisely the neoliberalization of food and agriculture that many activists are opposing' (p. 1172)[19].

Although much agro-food activism presents as a struggle against neoliberalization, Guthman maintains that the efforts are limited by the 'politics that the neoliberal political economic project has rendered possible' (p. 1172)[19]. That is, agro-food efforts articulate a critique of neoliberalization but embody roll-back characteristics. Examples of neoliberal food politics cited by Guthman include voluntary food labeling schemes that rest on quasi-private forms of governance and eschew regulation in favor of consumer choice; the growth of a emergency food system that relies on volunteers and donations in the face of cuts to state entitlements; and the emphasis on local food that adheres to confines of the market and 'value-added' solutions[19]. The anomaly that agro-food politics and the scholarship that supports it (re)produce neoliberalization rests in large part on the (often inadvertent) acquiescence to market logics[19].

Brooklyn's urban agriculture initiatives are motivated by food justice and are deliberately established as agro-food alternatives. Yet these spaces, like all AFNs, arise within, are thus embedded in, a broader political economy. The relationships between neoliberalization and urban cultivation in Brooklyn matter precisely because they shape the political possibilities for transforming the agro-food system in the capitalist heartland. In Brooklyn, then, understanding the political potentials of urban agriculture is predicated on considering the relationship between urban cultivation and neoliberalization.

Research Design and Methods

The relationship between agro-food alternatives and contemporary capitalism serves as the entry into my research: how does contemporary capitalism shape the political possibilities of urban agriculture as a struggle to address inequalities produced by conventional agro-food? To address this question I used participatory observation and in-depth interviews to explore the relationship between urban agriculture and neoliberalization.

I study urban agriculture in Brooklyn as a case study, teasing out the complexities of the case through the triangulation of data[20–22]. Data were primarily collected through participatory observation, a method that provides opportunity to systematically observe and document behaviors and activities through active participation at research sites[23]. I conducted 2 months of preliminary research to establish contacts and set up research sites (June–July 2008) and then conducted eight continuous months of qualitative fieldwork (January–August 2010).

Data for this paper were collected at six distinct research sites of production, including three commercial farms and three not-for-profit farms. All six urban farms have paid staff, ranging from 1 to 4 regular, full-time employees. The farms varied in size, from a 6000 ft^2 rooftop commercial venture to almost three acres of a former asphalt lot. One of the farm projects is actually multiple farm sites, including a 60 hen egg CSA, a 1 acre farm, and multiple backyard CSA sites.

Participant observation helped me to fully appreciate the lived spaces of urban farmers and the political positioning of their work. Participation also provided opportunity for me to develop reciprocal relationships in the field. While collecting data I was engaged fully in every aspect of food production and marketing activities, including composting, caring for hens and harvesting eggs, working the soil, harvesting, weeding, gathering resources throughout the city, retail marketing and delivering produce to restaurants. I participated in the regular daily activities of urban agriculture at two of my research sites, including one commercial operation and one not-for-profit project. At these two sites I completed weekly assigned chores. Additionally, I participated in workshops, trainings, meetings, conferences, and public hearings on urban agriculture and community gardening policy. At all six urban farm sites I attended regular volunteer workdays, whereby the farms were open to the public in exchange for voluntary labor. Through all of these experiences I engaged in discussions with countless individuals, including on-going conversations with urban farmers, regular exchanges with long-term farm volunteers and brief encounters with market customers.

This participation provided access to Brooklyn's urban agriculture in ways not possible through other methods and provided me with first-hand experience to draw on for data. Through participatory research I was well positioned to gather data that would not have been available

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through other qualitative methods. This approach provided me with unique access opportunities and I was able to gain a full understanding of urban cultivation, including motivations for urban farming, views on the expansion of agro-food alternatives, and the politics of this work.

I kept detailed fieldnotes during my time in the field and transcribed them immediately after collection, including verbatim recordings of conversations when and where possible. Data collection and analysis were cyclical, whereby preliminary analysis informed ongoing research. I analyzed my fieldnotes through open coding and the identification of patterns, themes and variations[24].

During the entire research process, and after exiting the field, I collected a wide variety of documentary materials, including information from websites, newsletters, emails, listservs, brochures, leaflets, and workshop and conference programs. These materials helped to contextualize the urban farm projects, indicating, for example, the political orientation of projects through mission statements and highlighting the specific material work of the different farms through program descriptions.

Interviews augmented data collected through participant observation[25,26]. I conducted face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with 28 key informants in Brooklyn's growing urban agriculture movement, including urban farmers ($n=5$), activists ($n=9$), political leaders ($n=5$) and project participants, such as farm volunteers ($n=9$). Interviews were conducted at various points during fieldwork, but most occurred after data were collected through participant observation and preliminary analysis was underway. Interviewees were identified through snowball sampling based on initial contact information provided by two key organizations. This was a particularly useful approach in identifying potential interviewees within the tight social network of Brooklyn's urban agriculture movement[27].

My goal in the interviews was to substantiate data collected through participant observation and to better understand the politics of urban agriculture through in-depth conversations. I used an interview guide to gather perspectives and insights from leaders and other actors in Brooklyn's urban agriculture. I collected information on the rationales and outcomes of urban farming, including project motivations, program specifics, impacts of urban agriculture, barriers to both individual projects and the movement overall, and thoughts on the future of urban farming in Brooklyn. I used a conversational approach to my interviews, providing interviewees opportunity to focus on topics most relevant to the person and/or urban agriculture project[27]. Thus, each interview was co-constructed, whereby data were co-produced through conversation and through the interviewing process[26]. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were closely read multiple times to gain a broad overview of the interviews and to develop an understanding of the key themes in relation to existing literature. Transcripts were then open coded and analyzed using HyperRESEARCH 2.8 software (www.researchware.com) to develop a detailed understanding of interviewee perspectives[22,23]. Direct quotes used in this paper highlight particularly salient points or are otherwise illustrative of collected data.

Farming Brooklyn

Notwithstanding the multitude of problems produced by the capitalist agro-food system[17,28], one stands out as particularly troubling within American cities: disparities in food access. In poor and working-class urban communities, disparities in food access are linked to a variety of social and health problems, manifesting in the apparent paradox of hunger and obesity. Because hunger and obesity are dialectically linked through their co-production by capitalist agriculture, what would literally *appear* to be a paradox is indeed all too commonplace: people can be both hungry and fat[29].

The dialectic of hunger and obesity does not fully account for the multiple and overlapping human health impacts produced by the capitalist agro-food system in general, and through the American diet in particular. Analytically, then, it is more useful to simply understand that deep disparities define access to food, particularly within urban areas throughout the USA. These disparities produce a whole host of attendant health problems ranging from diabetes and heart disease to cognitive damage and impaired neonatal development, and the vast potential health outcomes that follow[30–32].

A 2008 study conducted by the New York City Department of City Planning found that almost 3 million New Yorkers lived in neighborhoods classified as 'high need,' meaning food access was an acute problem[33]. In discussing the report's findings, Planning Director Amanda Burden explained to *The New York Times*: 'A significant percentage [of poor and working-class respondents] reported that in the day before our survey, they had not eaten fresh fruits or vegetables—not one[34].' In many neighborhoods throughout New York City, residents lack access to fresh produce and are relegated to wholesale reliance on bodegas or fast-food joints to meet their caloric needs. The expected results produce an unjust foodscape. It is against this backdrop that urban agriculture emerges as a potential tool to address agro-food system contradictions such as disparities in food access.

The contemporary period of expanding urban cultivation is motivated by growing interest in agro-food issues that give rise to AFNs. Although Brooklyn's food production occurs mostly in community gardens, the urban agriculture renaissance in Brooklyn today is driven by the development of market-oriented urban farms that produce fruits, vegetables, eggs, honey and other

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products for sale. Urban farms differ from community gardens in that they operate on private property (often donated), are not cultivated communally but are managed by paid farmers or professionals, and produce food for sale, not solely for personal consumption.

In Brooklyn, urban farms assume two particular forms. There are both not-for-profit farm projects and commercial entrepreneurial endeavors. Established in the early 2000s, the first self-identified urban farms were not-for-profit projects motivated by the desire to address disparities in healthy food access through community development. With few exceptions, the newest urban farms are all rooftop entrepreneurial market projects, none of which explicitly seek to address disparities in food access but instead hope to provide 'hyper-local' produce to Brooklyn consumers.

Urban farms represent the material expression of the need to 'scale-up' urban cultivation, an effort to move beyond gardening in the deliberate effort to produce greater quantities of food for wider distribution. Despite the fact that Brooklyn's community gardens have 'always focused on food production,' as one long-time activist explained (Personal interview, September 17, 2010), it is widely assumed that community gardens offer little in terms of food production. Observational data indicate that community gardens have always prioritized food production and thus there are many reasons to question this widely held assumption (Fieldnotes February 6, 2010; February 28, 2010; March 20, 2010).

When asked to articulate the agro-food problems addressed through urban agriculture, interviewees listed a wide range of concerns. One activist was clear in her description of the key problems with our current system:

> Broadly speaking … there's lots of problems … but I think [the main problem is] corporate control and corporate consolidation of the food system, or corporate concentration. And, you know, the fact that our global food system is profit driven, that's a fundamental problem. When food is treated as any other commodity and … when you don't take a right approach … when food isn't looked at as a basic right, as sustaining life, I think that the fundamental problem starts there (Personal interview, June 26, 2008).

In another interview, a prominent food writer connects the increasing visibility of agro-food contradictions with the rise of agro-food alternatives, including urban agriculture:

> Americans were able to ignore so many things for 50 years because of our hegemonic position in the world. We grew up in this time when there was plenty … but things are changing. You know, masses of people are recognizing you can't raise a billion cows a year [clearly exaggerating] to feed people, or whatever the crazy numbers are (Personal interview, June 20, 2008).

Most data gathered do not indicate a direct condemnation of the political economic structures of the conventional agro-food system and no interviewee directly problematized 'capitalism.' A leader of a prominent international organization, for example, defined the agro-food problem simply as a 'disconnect between growing and eating food' that could be addressed through 'nurturing both local and regional, and the beautiful, artisanal products from around the world' (Personal interview, June 26, 2008). Overall, however, my data indicate that key features identified in the literature as agro-food neoliberalizations, such as corporate consolidation, expanding land grabs, seed patents, GMOs, free trade agreements (specifically NAFTA) and cuts to food entitlement programs, are the most pressing issues to address through AFNs[11,14–16].

Equally informative are the specific organizational foci of the various urban agriculture projects, which provide clues to the agro-food problems viewed as most urgent. As one urban farmer explains:

> I think the answers [to what's wrong with conventional agro-food], the nuanced answers, are going to reflect what people are doing. Somebody who might be growing on a rooftop and selling to high-end restaurants and customers is going to be different than somebody who is in an area where they're saying there's no access to food and they're providing food to people who need it, and there are large obesity rates … they're definitely gonna address two *massively-different* system views. So … I think there are *so many* things wrong that [laughs] … I think it's been written about enough that we all understand (Personal interview, August 6, 2010).

Not-for-profit urban agriculture

The prevalence of food disparities in Brooklyn is *the* central concern of not-for-profit urban market gardens. Brooklyn's not-for-profit urban market gardens purposefully work to address food disparities through 'food justice' that, quite simply, improves access to healthful, affordable food. Three of the most prominent not-for-profit urban farms in Brooklyn, and the ones examined for this research, note their respective missions to:

> [A]ddress *food justice* in our community by promoting local sustainable agriculture and community-led economic development.
>
> Help grow a *just food* system.
>
> [P]rovide locally-grown healthy and affordable food to Brooklyn residents.

'Food justice' is a term growing in popularity within many alternative food movements. Eric Holt-Giménez defines food justice as addressing hunger by confronting underlying social inequalities, especially racial and class disparities[35]. For Robert Gottlieb and Anupama Joshi, food justice is much broader and focuses on the entire agro-food system, not just hunger: food justice is 'ensuring that the benefits and risks or where, what, and how food is grown and produced, transported and distributed, and accessed and eaten are shared fairly' (p. 6)[36]. In both

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definitions, food justice addresses *structural* inequalities and food disparities produced by the conventional agro-food system. In Brooklyn, the not-for-profit urban farms focus on confronting inequality in terms of production, distribution and access. That is, Brooklyn's not-for-profit urban farm projects position themselves as *oppositional*[9], challenging the structures of inequality that define the conventional agro-food system.

Moving beyond project mission statements (which are themselves important political frames), my observational data indicate that urban agriculture plays a role in the social reproduction of poor and working-class communities of color in Brooklyn by confronting disparities in fresh produce access. The farms prioritize on-site produce sales at farm stands and markets. They make an explicit point of keeping prices affordable and below average market prices, and accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) benefits and New York State farmers' market coupons. Moreover, the not-for-profit farms also run community supported agriculture programs (CSAs) that include not only standard CSA paid shares, but also limit share availability to the immediate neighborhood, make available shares on a sliding scale based on income, and offer work shares that allow individuals to pay through their labor power.

In terms of increasing access to fresh produce, two of the three not-for-profit urban agriculture projects supplement onsite production by bringing rural farmers to market. The urban farm projects are used as community organizing tools to develop markets for fresh produce. Rural farmers then help supply farmers' markets that distribute fresh produce far in excess of what is produced on the urban farm site alone. In some instances, neighborhood residents also sell extra produce from nearby community gardens and/or value-added products, such as jams, pickled foods and baked goods. These types of arrangements, one interviewee explains, highlight the material importance of urban agriculture as transcending immediate productive capacity:

> It is really a mutually beneficial relationship for the urban and rural growers. Because they [rural farmers] grow things in a lot greater volume and they grow things, you know, you don't want to grow corn in the city because it attracts rodents. Melons and squash take up a lot of space. And so they provide a lot of the volume but we do a lot of the outreach and build up the community and trust around the market and specialize in the niche crops, the West Indian crops (Fieldnotes, May 1, 2010).

And the impacts, he notes, are clear:

> I think there are a lot of specific impacts that we can measure. We know that 60–70% of the market income comes in the form of farmers' market nutrition program coupons. So that means mothers who receive WIC and senior citizens are buying a lot of the produce at our market and those are traditionally two groups who struggle to find access to high quality, fresh produce. So we know our produce is getting into good hands every year, people who really want it and need it (Personal interview, June 15, 2010).

These not-for-profit urban farm projects, then, play an important role in the social reproduction of the neighborhoods in which they are embedded by improving healthy food access. One of the urban farms, for example, produces over US$20,000 of fresh produce annually on site. An additional US$105,000 worth of produce is sold annually at the urban farm's weekly farmers' market. Of this US$125,000 in annual market sales, approximately US$87,500 comes in the form of the entitlement benefit programs, highlighting the farm's efforts to address food disparities. Moreover, this urban farm project recently convinced four neighborhood bodegas to carry the farm's produce, providing yet another route for fresh food access.

Commercial urban farms

Commercial farms in Brooklyn are all very new experimental entrepreneurial projects mostly occupying rooftops in gentrifying neighborhoods. These farms, the first of which was started in the summer of 2009, are clearly intent on exploiting consumer demands for 'local' food and the profit produced using the cachet of commodified Brooklyn as production site. As Adam Davidson argues in *The New York Times Magazine*:

> Huge numbers of middle-class people are now able to make a living specializing in something they enjoy, including creating niche products for other middle-class people who have enough money to indulge in buying things like high-end beef jerky . . . Instead of rolling our eyes at self-conscious Brooklyn hipsters pickling everything in sight, we might look to them as guides to the future of the American economy. Just don't tell them that. It would break their hearts to be called model 21st-century capitalists (p. 14)[37].

Brooklyn's commercial farms were started to provide 'hyper-local' produce to gentrified neighborhoods through on-site markets, CSAs, and through distribution of 'bicycle-fresh produce' to upscale restaurants. The goal of this urban agriculture, one farmer explains, is simply to bring city folk closer to their food and to illustrate urban farming as a viable business endeavor (Fieldnotes, February 28, 2010). This farmer has a deep commitment to 'improve access to very good food, to connect city people more closely to farms and food production, and to make urban farming a viable enterprise and livelihood' (Fieldnotes, February 28, 2010). His farm started as an entrepreneurial rooftop project with approximately US$200,000 in capital, including investments, loans and donations. Given the extensive investments, making the urban farm a viable enterprise is paramount. Investors are looking for a return and loans must be repaid (Fieldnotes, June 23, 2010), neither of which allows for concerns with food justice to take center stage.

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In contrast to the highlighting of disparities and frame of food justice, commercial urban farms clearly position themselves as *alternative* entrepreneurial efforts that prioritize the personal and relational[9]. These three for-profit farms proclaim, respectively:

> We are farmers that live in apartments.
>
> We see green fields where others see rooftops.
>
> We fuel blooming communities where others fear urban decay.
>
> And we purvey the freshest produce grown on earth.
>
> We are obsessed with the delicate qualities of a lettuce leaf that was grown with care and harvested by hand before breakfast in order to reach your plate by lunch.
>
> Most of all, we know that the crunch of fresh, local sustainably grown food, sets off a chain reaction of good things in the world.
>
> When we set out to grow food on the rooftops and unused spaces of New York City, our mission was to create a fiscally sustainable model for urban agriculture and to produce healthy, delicious vegetables for our local community while doing the ecosystem a few favors as well.
>
> [Our farm] realizes the benefits of green roofing while bringing hyper-local produce to the North Brooklyn community.

The commercial urban farms, then, situate themselves as a form of civic agriculture. Similar to their not-for-profit counterparts, these urban farms run CSAs and have on-site weekly markets. Yet there are no real attempts to address disparities in food access through either price mechanisms or limited geographies of distribution. Indeed, all three of these farms are located in highly gentrified neighborhoods characterized by demographic shifts and a growing middle to upper-middle class. There is also a reliance on income generated through both restaurant sales, geared toward high-end consumers, and bourgeois grocers.

Not only is there a lack of an oppositional frame embedded within these commercial urban farms, but there is also no articulated critique of political economic structures of inequality. There is thus a clear distinction between the political situating of the two forms of urban agriculture in Brooklyn: oppositional and alternative[9].

Roll-Out Neoliberalization and Brooklyn's Urban Agriculture

The not-for-profit initiatives are more condemning of the current structure of conventional agro-food while entrepreneurial efforts look to exploit food in its commodity form. Speaking of the newer market gardens starting up in Brooklyn, one urban farmer notes that the commercial projects are 'radically different entities [than the not-for-profit farms] . . . I don't see a social change model at all in any of them' (Personal interview, June 29, 2010). Thus drawing a distinction between commercial market gardens and the urban agriculture projects motivated by broader concerns with inequalities are characteristic of the conventional agro-food system. As another urban farmer explains: 'Somebody who might be growing on a rooftop and selling to high-end restaurants and customers is going to be different than somebody who is in an area where they're saying there's no access to food and they're providing food to people who need it' (Personal interview, August 6, 2010).

Despite having different motivations, both commercial urban farming and the altruistic not-for-profit initiatives exemplify AFNs. And although I do not want to gloss over the real and important distinctions between the not-for-profit and the commercial urban agriculture, I do want to understand both types of projects as they relate to neoliberalization and provide insights into the politics of AFNs. Understanding how neoliberalization shapes the material possibilities of AFNs emerges from appreciating urban agriculture's relationship to private capital and the hegemony of entrepreneurship and romanticized agrarian dreams.

Funding Brooklyn's urban agriculture

Funding issues and access to adequate resources are reported to be a major obstacle to both types of urban agriculture. For example, one long-time director of a program supporting all forms of urban agriculture explains that the growing interest in food issues means 'more interviews and less funding [laughs] . . . because there's such a huge demand for starting new sites or transforming almost every available site into some sort of public, green, food-production, whatever space, we need more funding to be able to do that' (Personal interview, September 17, 2010). As food issues grow in popularity there are more AFN projects fighting over the same—if not smaller—pots of money. As one New York City official supporting urban agriculture noted:

> The biggest obstacle [to urban agriculture] is resources . . . it costs a fair amount for people to access all of [the things needed for urban cultivation]. And to ask government to justify those expenses when their budget is a disaster is really challenging. And so, if there are ways to look beyond government and to public–private partnerships, there may be solutions there (Personal interview, September 17, 2010).

This statement succinctly sums up the neoliberal argument: in the wake of the destruction of state institutions, new roll-out forms of public–private partnerships are created, funded almost entirely by private capital.

One of the most notable not-for-profit farm projects is now working actively to attract more private capital through a new project aimed at documenting the measurable outcomes—including profit opportunities—of urban agriculture:

> [Our new project is] a unique opportunity. The goal, and this was everybody's goal it turned out . . . there are no *metrics*.

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> The metrics that exist for urban agriculture are so paltry that it's really hard to leverage significant resources. I mean, people at Slow Money . . . scoffed at urban agriculture. They need *something*, they need something to hold on to that would get them to only want one percent profit. It's not exactly . . . they're *social* investors, they're not looking to make *major* profit. If we can't give them some basic numbers that are scalable, then so far . . . we haven't done the work that's necessary to do systems change *within* a capitalist structure. I mean, we're *all* trying to figure out how to leverage the middle and upper capital investments that it would require to do this and some of that requires new thinking around urban agriculture (Personal interview, June 29, 2010).

This statement highlights how funding issues are a major concern of urban farmers and the main sources of funding are fickle and have a great deal of power in shaping the actual projects themselves. Another not-for-profit urban farmer indicated that funding really directs the initiatives. There was open disdain for the rooftop farming 'fad' and the subsequent access to money for rooftop farms (Personal interview, May 28, 2010).

One not-for-profit urban farmer noted the need to chase money by attracting media attention: 'This year I've really stayed out of the media because we've been hard at work. But at the same time if we get more media attention we would definitely do better in our fundraisers. This year our fundraisers have suffered' (Personal interview, August 6, 2010). Although this farm project was more productive in 2010 in terms of quantity of food harvested and active participation (consumers, interns, volunteers and staff), financial support was down due to a lack of publicity. This highlights a tension between producing food and chasing dollars, which is also evident in the never-ending efforts at fundraising and grant making.

Fundraising is a clear concern for not-for-profit farm projects. But, as another urban farmer notes, even these not-for-profit urban farms *sell* produce:

> These [urban farms] are not-for-profits and a quasi-blend of for-profit and not-for-profit that are exploring a terrain . . . Neither [of which] are necessarily geared toward social change . . . So the structures that exist are the structures that have been utilized in New York City as vehicles for promulgating urban agriculture and are not necessarily anti-capitalist nor are they radical agents (Personal interview, June 29, 2010).

This raises an important problem as directly addressed in an interview. The conflict between not-for-profit status and market sales has created a growing concern for the not-for-profit urban farms: 'Some of the not-for-profit farms are in tax trouble with the IRS . . . Because they sell produce and compete with other farms . . . the argument is that they have an unfair advantage' (Personal interview, August 6, 2010).

One urban farmer (with both commercial and not-for-profit projects under cultivation) explains the finances behind her project and sheds light onto the difficulties produced through financial constraints. In 2010, the urban farm project (which consists of multiple sites of cultivation) was estimated to bring in about US$16,200 from sales, or roughly US$1/ft^2 under cultivation. But, the farmer explains: 'to be viable [I estimate] you need to pull in US$5/ft^2.' The project stays afloat through fundraising and grant making, and from unremunerated labor (volunteers and interns) and self-exploitation (Personal interview, August 6, 2010).

Notably, while the not-for-profit projects sell produce, the commercial farm projects also engage in fundraising. And this does not sit well with the not-for-profit wing of the urban agriculture movement. I asked a not-for-profit urban farm director about the fact that for-profit projects also fundraise. She noted that one commercial project had already raised over US$100,000 for their market rooftop farm (they would eventually raise in excess of US$200,000 in 2010 alone). The concern articulated is that projects operate under different legal standings and thus divergent sets of ground rules, especially related to fiscal transparency. Both forms of urban agriculture seem to operate in a gray area, neither commercial nor strictly not-for-profit, but adopting from both models as needed.

These examples illustrate that the relationship between urban agriculture and capitalism is fraught with contradictions. The not-for-profit projects engage in petty commodity production and circulation. Commercial efforts rely on extra-market resources to stay afloat. The persistence of small-scale (urban) agriculture plays an important function in the era of neoliberalization by supporting social reproduction and is predicated on external capital and the super-exploitation of labor-power, whereby labor-power is not adequately compensated. As always, it is the political significance of urban agriculture that matters, especially given the explicit goals of addressing contradictions produced by the conventional agro-food system. When asked about why people would donate to a for-profit endeavor one respondent replied: 'The people know it's a for-profit [urban farm] and *choose* to buy into it,' the interviewee responded, 'they believe it's a *political* act . . . they *believe* they're supporting a change in the food system' (Personal interview, August 6, 2010).

The hegemony of agrarian bootstrap and entrepreneurial efforts

Urban agriculture can serve as an important source of food, especially in poor and working class neighborhoods. But it does this through focus on agrarian self-help approaches insisted upon by much neoliberal ideology. Although the not-for-profit urban farm projects recognize the need for systemic change, solutions also focus on creating small, individual alternatives. After discussing problems associated with conventional agro-food, one urban agriculture activist noted: 'I realized I need to actually *work* the land' in order to bring about change (Personal interview, June 21, 2010). Or one project

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director notes: 'its hard to find a good store or market [in our community] so we have to do it ourselves' (Personal interview, June 8, 2010). And while this is inspiring in many ways, the sentiment also shifts focus from the need for systemic improvement to individualized efforts, from oppositional to alternative[9].

The production of specific kinds of knowledge, especially around food consumption habits, is important to urban farmers and their supporters. The general idea, as evidenced by a discussion concerning the role of food production in the city, is that people need to 'know where their food comes from' (Fieldnotes, June 21, 2010). A few minutes later the same individual argued that addressing the human health impacts produced by conventional agro-food is simply: 'eat more produce . . . But people don't know or can't afford [to].' And then concluded: 'I want people to be empowered . . . you can grow your own food in New York City!' (Fieldnotes, June 21, 2010). These statements illustrate the belief that the solution to agro-food problems lies with the individual, specifically individual agrarian effort and improved consumption practices. The goal is individual—rather than systemic—change, illustrating the neoliberal confines of AFNs, urban agriculture included.

Antonio Gramsci employed the term 'hegemony' to distinguished coercive forms of power from 'direct domination,' the overt power exercised through the state[38]. Hegemony is consent of the masses to the dominant group through historical development of class position vis-à-vis production and state coercive power legally disciplines those who do not fall in line and consent. Or, as Alex Callinicos more succinctly explains, 'The thought here essentially is that classes rule by securing consent as well as by coercively imposing their will' (p. 213)[39].

Neoliberal capitalism is now the only game in town and 'there is no alternative' as the clichéd words of Margaret Thatcher remind us. The 'capital triumphalism,' Callinicos explains, 'has become deeply entrenched in public discourse, most notably in the USA' (p. 314). Callinicos continues:

> [T]he belief that we have nothing better to hope for than liberal capitalism has become one of the reigning dogmas . . . One consequence is that public policy increasingly redefines social problems as the outcome of defective individual behavior . . . Contemporary social policy has effectively reinvented, beneath a language of 'empowerment', the Victorian concept of the undeserving poor, whose plight is caused by their own failure to acquire the skills and modes of conduct required of those who wish to enter the world of wage-labour (p. 315)[39].

Although urban agriculture represents agro-food resistance, this resistance is still confined by established political possibilities, which are produced through urban agriculture's relationship with capitalism and capital. In the case of urban agriculture, there is widespread adoption of an uncritical belief in agrarian idealism, the mantra of self-help/self-improvement, and—most troubling of all—the truisms of market-based solutions and entrepreneurialism caged as 'empowerment.'

This raises an important question regarding the role of urban production: when is it an individualization of the many problems produced by capitalist agro-food and when does it become a political act? Urban agriculture is regularly viewed as *inherently* political, yet this is not necessarily the case. Indeed, even the projects that explicitly articulate a politics of food justice find the confines of neoliberalization hard to escape.

Brooklyn's Agrarian Question(s)

Karl Kautsky's *The Agrarian Question* first identified the difficulty in reconciling Marxist theories of capitalist development with the material history of agricultural development[40]. As Kautsky explains in the book's introduction: 'Our main concern here is with the role of pre-capitalist and non-capitalist forms of agriculture within capitalist society' (p. 3)[40]. Contemporary society is decidedly capitalist, Kautsky explains, but the capitalist mode of production is not the only form of production characteristic of that society, which retains the remains of pre-capitalist modes, especially in the agrarian sector.

Under capitalism, the self-sufficiency of the peasant family slowly disappeared as the peasantry was forced to earn money through the sale of commodities for basic survival. 'And so the peasant' Kautsky explains, 'was forced to become what we now customarily think of as a peasant—*a mere farmer*' (p. 16)[40]. Thus, the peasant became dependent on the market, 'which proved to be even more moody and unpredictable than the weather' (p. 16)[40]. Yet despite the many pressures of market expansion, the peasantry persists under capitalism. To be sure, processes of depeasantization characterize many parts of the world, but capitalism has yet to fully penetrate small-scale agricultural production. This contradiction underlies the agrarian question.

For Kautsky the agrarian question centered on the position of the peasantry vis-à-vis class revolution. At its heart, then, the agrarian question is a political question. What made the class position—and thus the politics—of the peasantry such a mystery was the fact that the peasantry controlled access to the means of production. Although urban farmers in Brooklyn are clearly not peasants, they retain direct access to the means of production in a manner similar to the peasantry. They produce food outside of normal wage relations. They serve a function for capitalism by reproducing labor power and turn attention away from the need for structural reform. The material conditions of production in Brooklyn's agriculture make for uncertain political positions predicated in part on the relationship between this new urban agriculture and contemporary neoliberal capitalism. In this way, the agrarian question is useful

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for intervening in the literature celebrating agro-food alternatives.

Kautsky reminds us that contrary to arguments put forward by the alternative agro-food literature, non-capitalist forms of agriculture have always existed within capitalist societies[40]. This is, of course, a matter of definition. For George Henderson builds on Kautsky to argue that it does not necessarily matter if farm production itself is defined by the capitalist division of labor, which no urban farm in Brooklyn is, but rather what matters is whether farming can be a site for capital accumulation and how capitalism shapes these forms of production[41].

Brooklyn's not-for-profit urban agriculture initiatives are motivated by food justice and are deliberately established as non-capitalist spaces. Yet Henderson reminds us to think critically about the relationship between capitalism and agricultural production, which is not always marked clearly by labor relations on the farm[41]. In Brooklyn, then, it is important to consider the ways in which urban cultivation broadly relates to capitalism.

Despite their differences, both for-profit and not-for-profit urban farms emerge within a dialectical relationship with a capitalist political economy in ways that shape their political possibilities. Many of these efforts articulate a politics of food justice but are limited by the neoliberal prioritization of the market. In turn, this fraught relationship insists we question the political work assumed inherent in urban cultivation. Commercial urban agriculture is searching for new opportunities for capital and not-for-profit farm projects are content, at this point, to work within the margins.

The growing body of critical AFN literature is said to lack empirical evidence, that arguments identifying agro-food alternatives as (re)producing neoliberalization are 'inadequately supported by data' (p. 417)[42]. This research thus contributes to the AFN literature in part because it provides empirical data to support emerging understandings of agro-food alternatives connected to processes of neoliberalization.

The data indicate that the materialization of urban farm projects in Brooklyn do not always align with intended goals and, in practice, urban agriculture often reproduces and/or exacerbates contemporary agro-food problems borne out of commodity fetishism and market ideology. In so doing, contemporary trends in the cultivation of Brooklyn indicate that the efforts may indeed undercut the articulated goals of food justice. That is, despite its oppositional framing, not-for-profit urban agriculture assumes an alternative form[9]. Notably, many working within an oppositional framework recognize the limitations of failing to wage political struggle. As the farmer quoted at the beginning of this paper aptly notes:

> I think there are a lot of promising trends that are going to help people have access to better food . . . but it's not going to be enough if people buy some of their produce at their farmers' market or they support a few local farmers. It's going to take a lot more to really make a big impact (Personal interview, June 15, 2010).

To be clear, I am not arguing that the neoliberalization of urban agriculture is complete. This is because neoliberalization is a process and thus is never complete and because there are political possibilities produced through urban cultivation. These possibilities rest on employing urban agriculture as a tool to assert rights to the city and using food as an organizing tool across scales that fundamentally calls into question structures of injustice.

The promise of urban agriculture in Brooklyn, at this point, is not based on its building of alterative food networks within a broader capitalist agro-food but in its *potential* for supporting and building a broader social movement whereby the universality of food can become a catalyst for building justice. The agrarian question, then, is as relevant today as ever.

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