

Building alliances in the field of food production and consumption: Urban Gardening and Community Based Agriculture

narrative step: building alliances

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A degrowth society heading towards sufficiency will shorten systems of provision and strengthen local, self-organized food-production. We examine Urban Gardening and Community Based agriculture, as they are steps into this direction, linking sustainable production and consumption, gently using resources, being crisis-proof and promoting local quality of life. We understand *systems of provision* in the context of food systems – following Brand – as long chains, based on the division of labor, of production, preserving, packaging, selling and consumption (Brand 2009). They limit the direct influence of “sustainable consumption”, as the latter means choosing between products at the end of the chain, but not directly influencing the other steps, thus shielding their ecological and social impacts from the view of consumers.

In contrast, projects of Urban Gardening and of Community Based Agriculture (CSA) are aimed at re-claiming the systems of provision, i.e. to decouple food production from global economic cycles, to take the steps between fields and plates into their own hands and to shorten the chain. Those projects – at least theoretically – don't divide between producers, distributors and consumers, getting production and consumption from the long-distanced edges of the chain closer together.

Urban Gardening and CSA projects link agriculture and city – in different ways. They experiment with collectively supported practices and test new forms of sharing economy and work. Reproductive activities (cf. Biesecker/Hofmeister 2006) are revalued and/or equally valued as productive activities, when people take food production into their own hands. The frontiers between production and reproduction begin to melt when people collectively grow vegetables and fruits, harvest and preserve, when they cook, enjoy and relax together, when they plan and network (cf. Müller 2011).

The new Urban Gardens bring agriculture into the cities and turn the spotlight to local and seasonal cultivation of vegetables. Urban Gardening projects, e.g. community and campus gardens, intercultural and mobile gardens as well as edible cities, have a low threshold for participation, are fun and inspire, so that new milieus come to put their hands on vegetable patches: young people, artists, families with a migratory background and pensioners (cf. Müller 2011). Applying a practice theory based approach (cf. Shove 2002), contrasts can be recognized on the level of images, skills and stuff when comparing Urban Gardening ideal-typically to allotments or “Schrebergärten”. Allotments are fenced in plots of gardens historically created for charity. They were supposed to offer fresh, high quality food to working-class families, lifting them from poverty to sufficiency. Urban Gardening swaps shortage and charity for a subversive image. The new gardens don't want to be marginal, they see themselves as open spaces in which urban quality of life can be shaped differently (cf. Müller 2011). They don't claim to offer permanent resistance against existing structures and systems of provision but to show by means of sustainable, passionate designs how local transformation can happen: „*Their motto: they get started already. They reproduce seeds and share them among themselves, instead of buying hybrid sorts from superstores ... they grow local vegetables, they ideally prepare them directly in place and consume them – in climate-neutral, best quality – together with other garden users.*“ (Müller 2011: 25, translation by author).

Urban Gardens prefer urban wasteland (e.g. “Prinzessingarten” in Berlin, “Annalinde” in Leipzig, “o’pflanzt is!” in Munich), but they can also be placed in public spaces (like campus gardens) or allotments (e.g. community garden “Wonnhalde” in Freiburg). Skills and activities seem to be similar in Urban Gardens and allotments, but a closer look shows that images are inseparably included in skills: Someone who grows vegetables after work, aiming to feed his/her family, will work with different intensity and different methods than someone who does a bit of gardening in a community garden, experimenting with traditional vegetable sorts or edible flowers because it contributes to her/his quality of life. Subsistence farming all year round for all gardeners is excluded due to limited space and work intensity: Urban Gardening cannot completely replace food systems of provision, its power is based on positive media coverage, low participation thresholds and fun.

CSA projects, such as „Luzernenhof“ and „Garten-Coop“ near Freiburg/Germany do aim at taking over the entire chains of (some) food systems of provisions (www.gartencoop.org/tunsel, www.luzernenhof.de). Depending on the project, it supplies vegetables, dairy products and meat, honey and bread. CSAs build alliances among city and country, more precisely: among a group of townspeople and a nearby farm, communally sharing the whole operational costs as well as the harvest. A certain degree of professionalism and reliability is necessary to maintain a CSA, so members commit themselves for an entire year. The townspeople take part in tilling the soil, in addition several professional farmers are employed. The products get packed and are brought to distribution points in town where the members fetch their part.

Although limited to covering a tiny amount of food production today, the alliance of Urban Gardens and CSAs might become “pioneers of change” in the field of food production. They do not only have the potential to take over parts of the systems of provision, but also contribute to building a social and ecological society insofar as they link productivity and reproductivity and orientate themselves towards sufficiency and sharing communally, experimenting with new forms of economy and work. By hands-on work, the activists do not only learn skills necessary for the steps between sowing and consuming, but also skills and experiences for a sharing economy and for living conviviality.

This contrasts with the service-oriented approach of organic groceries or supermarkets, where choosing locally produced food is left up to consumers' choices. For those who can afford borderless consumption, logics of growth and consumption hardly have to be questioned. E.g. to shop in an organic supermarket it isn't necessary to question which kinds of organic cultivation, farming and infrastructure are hidden behind different labels. For the sustainable consumer, it seems neither to be important to know how and when vegetables grow nor which structures of decision-making and which forms of working together were applied. The systems of provision of organic companies and shops only aim within strong limits towards a degrowth society. Because systems of provision shield their impacts to the consumers, it is difficult to estimate – and to differentiate among labels, companies and providers of organic food – how high their contribution to building a social and ecological society is. Whereas sustainable consumption is limited by the role of the passive consumer, gardening and farming activists experience that their commitment has the potential to shape the local food production and the systems of provision that go with them. Experiencing self-efficacy, the world seems to be open for change and redesign: “Let's overgrow – not overthrow – the system(s)!”

Literature:

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