



Farming the urban fringes of Barcelona: Competing visions of nature and the contestation of a partial sustainability fix



Chiara Pirro^a, Isabelle Anguelovski^{b,*}

^a *Universitat Internacional de Catalunya, Spain*

^b *Institut Català de Recerca i Estudis Avançats (ICREA) Research Professor, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Institute for Environmental Science and Technology (ICTA) and Hospital del Mar Medical Research Institute (IMIM), Spain*

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ABSTRACT

While the concept of urban agriculture investigates the way in which disused land within the consolidated city is returned to its citizens through a variety of farming practices, many pockets of rural land in peri-urban areas continue to be contested by institutions and communities – including informal farmers, formal farmers, municipal planners, metropolitan agencies, and investors – with contrasting interests. To date however, little scholarly attention has been paid to informal practices within the degraded areas of urban fringes and, more specifically, to the link between the expansion of peri-urban agriculture and the civic appropriation and negotiation of space in neglected peripheral areas. In this paper, we ask how a metropolitan sustainability fix is produced and contested both materially and discursively. We also explore how local residents involved in peri-urban agriculture claim the use of land for agricultural practices and in turn attempt to influence the urban agenda of the neoliberal city. Inquiring how competing visions of nature act as obstacles in this negotiation process, our analysis of the peri-urban Baix Llobregat Agricultural Park in Barcelona reveals that the imposition of official visions about how needs for food and agriculture should be fulfilled, which landscapes are esthetically acceptable, what nature is, and how land should be controlled and developed indicate why apparently “marginal” and informal urban agriculture in the periphery has come to be subordinated to the planning of the neoliberal city and of a metropolitan sustainability fix – a partial sustainability fix that is however progressively being questioned and renegotiated.

1. Introduction

Moving away from the gothic tourist-filled center of Barcelona towards the primary suburbs and the contemporary urban sprawl surrounding the city, visitors notice the co-existence of overlapping segments of intertwined industrial and historical fabrics, suburban housing, shopping centers, landfills, new planned neighborhoods, highway systems, and regional parks. Yet, these peripheral landscapes also include a variety of agricultural activities that offer a certain structural cohesion to the space and protect the land from further accelerated urbanization. Southwest of the metropolitan area of Barcelona, farmers are indeed growing food within informal gardens in abandoned and neglected land between different types of infrastructures, rivers, and urban interstices and within agricultural parks.

As the expansion of a city like Barcelona illustrates, urban fringes are a form of stand-by land between town and country, the metropolitan area and the region, and diverse policies and actions (Whitehand and Morton, 2004), with an overlapping mosaic of races, ethnic groups,

urban fabrics, local and regional stakeholders, administrative boundaries, institutions, and citizens (Allen, 2003). They suffer from a constant dichotomy between the loss of rural aspects (*ruralness*) and the lack of urban attributes (*urbaness*) (Scott, 2012; Allen, 2003; Rojas-Caldelas et al., 2008; Iaquina and Drescher, 2000). This dichotomy reflects two different approaches in land use and development at the fringe level: On the one hand, many residents of these peripheral landscapes appropriate unused land to create self-managed spaces of informal vegetable gardens far away from the sometimes trendy urban gardens of the center city (Purcell, 2002; Conzen, 2009). Such a practice is perceived by some as current manifestations of sustainability at the local scale (Kruger and Agyeman, 2005; Fainstein, 2011). Farming in the fringes is becoming a new tool for producing and (re) claiming environmental goods in out-of-order landscapes, while, at the same time, providing creative opportunities for building a new sense of community (Zasada, 2011; Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). On the other hand, the formal city looks at this stand-by land as an opportunity to achieve its sustainability goals. Vacant lands become key strategies –

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: Isabelle.Anguelovski@uab.cat (I. Anguelovski).

sustainability fixes – to control urban growth and attract green capitalism through ecological planning (While et al., 2004).

Today, despite the wealth of scholarship on the role of urban agriculture and gardens in addressing uneven urban development, blight, and vacant space and in enhancing health, nutrition, community empowerment, and environmental justice (Bellows et al., 2003; Alaimo et al., 2008; Kremer and DeLiberty, 2011; McClintock, 2011; Anguelovski, 2013, 2015; Myers and Sbicca, 2015), little scholarly attention has been paid to informal practices within the urbanized and degraded areas of urban fringes and, more specifically, to the link between the expansion of peri-urban agriculture and the civic appropriation and negotiation of space in neglected peripheral areas. Yet, their value is increasingly important in the context of a neoliberal city agenda—that is of a city rooted in entrepreneurial urbanism and in perpetual competition with other cities for fostering development and managed growth and for attracting private investments, innovation, and “creative classes” (Leitner, 1990; Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Florida, 2002; Leitner and Sheppard, 2002; While et al., 2004; Harvey, 2005).

In this paper, through the examination of informal peri-urban agriculture in the Parc Agrari del Baix de Llobregat, we inquire how a metropolitan sustainability fix (in this case the park itself) is produced and at the same times contested, exploring the on-going process of nature construction, contestation, negotiation and conflict between collectives of informal gardeners, public authorities, planners, and official land managers in the periphery of the city. Our analysis reveals that, despite occupying apparently undesirable unused residual land, urban agriculture in the fringes is still subordinated to the needs (for food), to the development priorities (i.e., infrastructure, large development projects) and to the vision (of what is nature and what is esthetically acceptable) of a neoliberal city in search of a metropolitan sustainability fix (While et al., 2004). This case illustrates the creation of a partial and contested sustainability fix embodied in the formalization of peri-urban agriculture practices within the BLAP limits, in the traditional rejection of informal gardens by the BLAP authorities and surrounding municipalities (which also indirectly benefits corporations that own the land), and in the silent resistance of informal farmers. This research reveals that, even within urban fringes, the neoliberal city displays contradictions between sustainable city goals, agricultural preservation, and the elimination of informal – yet much rooted – civic practices of urban farming and gardening.

After a presentation of our theoretical framework, we introduce our case study and present our analysis on land reclamation and conflicting land use in the Parc Agrari del Baix de Llobregat. We then discuss the originality of our findings and conclude with final remarks.

2. From urban fringes as landscapes of disorder and unused space to key strategies for the sustainability of the neoliberal city

2.1. Urban fringes: spaces of re-appropriation and self-sustainability at the local scale

Urban fringes have been described using a plethora of attributions and meanings, from landscapes at the edge (Gallent et al., 2006), places of transition (Whitehand and Morton, 2004), heterogeneous mosaics (Allen, 2003), landscapes of disorder or chaos (Qvistrom, 2010; Gant et al., 2011), new geography of urban sprawl (Micarelli and Pizzoli, 2008), last frontiers (Griffiths, 1994), ephemeral landscapes (Qvistrom and Saltzman, 2006), edge lands (Shoard, 2002; Farley and Roberts, 2012), and forgotten landscapes (Scott, 2012). Definitions share a common view that the fringe is often a forgotten space “waiting for something better” or a space in some kind of “limbo” (Scott et al., 2013).

These edge lands are often seen as subaltern residual spaces tamed by the city (Simon, 2008; Burnett, 2013). Previous studies have indeed examined them in reference to the services, products, and functions

they are able to provide to the urban core of the growing city, including urban food security, local agricultural production, water treatment, shopping centers, warehouse and other storage facilities (Selfa and Qazi, 2005; Douglas, 2006; Simon, 2008; Cabannes and Raposo, 2013). In a neoliberal perspective, through which nature is a product and resource to be transformed and tamed within a dominant free market ideology and an ideology of deregulation and re-regulation (Harvey, 2005; Castree, 2008), fringe interfaces and citizens are both faces of the same coin, serving the interests and needs of an urban elite, but also depending on them. For instance, peri-urban commercial food producers are simultaneously dependent on urban consumers and threatened by a dynamic and expanding urban economy. In other words, market logics present in neoliberal municipal agendas hierarchize places and people to the detriment of the residents of urban fringes and their practices (Hilgers, 2012; Wacquant, 2012).

This interdependence between peri-urban peripheries and urban centers eventually creates a climate of competition and antagonism between the public services and environmental needs of many peri-urban residents and the needs of urban residents and firms in regard to industry relocation or intensive agriculture systems and production (Dupont, 2005). In this exploitative perspective on the fringes, if contaminating industries or development projects are sited in fragile peripheral environmental areas or take over peri-urban agricultural land, residents of such areas might lose community rights and a tight relationship to place while witnessing an acute degradation of their physical environment (Harvey, 2005; Heynen et al., 2007).

Yet, these edge landscapes also often accommodate residents who protect these territories from a total dependence on inner-city needs (Gallent et al., 2006). They manage themselves and transform neglected areas through the appropriation of land, producing self-managed spaces meeting unsatisfied needs (Purcell, 2002; Conzen, 2009). While urban governments or planners tend to restrict the ability of urban dwellers to shape and rewrite the city (Chatterton, 2010), their decreased influence on urban fringes and their inability to be present at all times over a wide metropolitan or regional territory seem to leave fringe residents with a greater capacity to engage in transgressive practices of self-government (Crane et al., 2012) and community building (Bellows et al., 2003; Alaimo et al., 2008).

In other words, urban fringes are a fertile ground for the emergence of informal actions and for the fulfillment of individual or group aspirations for improved living standards outside the realm of the State (Eizenberg, 2012; Shillington, 2012) or the market. Such a trend is frequently embodied in agriculture and gardening activities, including guerrilla gardening (Reynolds, 2008; Hardman, 2009). In many cities, this tool for the self-expression of insurgent gardeners has produced a new geography of self-determined spaces and provided a platform for change (Crane et al., 2012). Urban agriculture engages people interested in gardening for necessity, self-sufficiency, self-expression, and creative needs while beautifying landscapes and neighborhoods, increasing local biodiversity, providing food at the local scale, and reducing food miles in the market chain (Kaufman and Bailkey, 2000; Flores, 2006; McClintock, 2010).

Accordingly, peri-urban agriculture through vegetable gardens has become in many cases a valuable tool for re-claiming environmental goods in the fringes and for reclaiming space more generally. This re-appropriation of peri-urban space often illustrates the sense of survival and adaptation from rural migrants who move into the fringe as the first step in a progressive migration towards the urban center (Memon and Lee-Smith, 1993; Aberra, 2006) and as a practice of survival and adaptation to a space that they transform and manipulate (Goleman, 2009; Loftus, 2012). The result of this new spontaneous peripheral city and do-it-yourself city is a production of self-determined, critical, and creative space (Gallent, 2006) in which residents project their desires and imaginations for more engaging and open communities (Ehrenfeld, 2008).

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