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Getting farming on the agenda: Planning, policymaking, and governance practices of urban agriculture in New York City

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ABSTRACT

How and why is urban agriculture taken up into local food policies and sustainability plans? This paper uses a case study of urban agriculture policymaking in New York City from 2007 to 2011 to examine the power-laden operation of urban environmental governance. It explores several 'faces of power,' including overt authority, institutionalized 'rules of the game,' and hegemony. It also investigates how multiple actors interact in policymaking processes, including through the construction and use of broad discursive concepts. Findings draw upon analysis of policy documents and semi-structured interviews with 43 subjects engaged in food systems policymaking. Some municipal decision-makers questioned the significance of urban agriculture, due to the challenges of quantifying its benefits and the relative scarcity of open space in the developed city. Yet, these challenges proved insufficient to prevent a coalition of civic activists working in collaboration with public officials to envision plans on food policy that included urban agriculture. Actors created the 'local/regional food system' as a narrative concept in order to build broad coalitions and gain entry to the municipal policy sphere. Tracing the roll-out of plans reveals the way in which both the food systems concept and specific policy proposals were repeated and legitimized. Unpacking the dynamics of this iterative policymaking contributes to an understanding of how urban environmental governance happens in this case.

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1. Introduction

Whether due to the pressures of urbanization, growth, and climate change, a "mainstreaming of environmental values" (Keil and Boudreau, 2006: 49), or trends in policymaking among competitive cities—local sustainability planning efforts are on the rise (Jonas and While, 2007; Finn and McCormick, 2011). Occurring in parallel to—and sometimes entwined with—urban sustainability planning is a recent increase in attention toward local food systems. At the federal level and in rural areas, food production and sale are regulated and incentivized as an agricultural commodity and market good; however, at the local level and in urban areas, food historically has not been a major aspect of the policy agenda (Pothukuchi and Kaufman, 2000; Clancy, 2004). In some instances, this blind spot toward food and agriculture as objects of urban policymaking is shifting. There has been a recent articulation of a 'local/regional food system' as a concept that spans production, processing, consumption and post-consumption of food in a specific geographic region—which can be defined using a range of boundaries from the

municipality, to a 100 mile radius, to a 200 mile radius, to statewide, to several states in a food-producing region (Allen, 2010; Donald et al., 2010; Kneafsey, 2010; Conrad et al., 2011). There has also been a development of Alternative Food Networks (Holloway et al., 2007) and a range of local policy innovations, such as local Food Policy Councils, comprehensive food plans, and urban agricultural zoning districts (Hodgson et al., 2011; Hodgson, 2012).

Some scholars question the efficacy of local sustainability efforts, noting that focusing on processes within city boundaries does not remove the impacts of urban lifestyles that are borne elsewhere (see, e.g., Swyngedouw and Heynen, 2003). Local food policies and interventions have similarly been critiqued on scalar grounds as a "local trap" (Born and Purcell, 2006). Many geographers criticize sustainability planning as supporting hegemonic, capitalist social relations, or serving as a 'flanking mechanism' to neoliberalism (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Jonas and Gibbs, 2003). McClintock (2013) provides a more nuanced examination of a theorized double movement around urban agriculture in Oakland, wherein it acts as both subversive alternative to corporate agri-food industries, while also serving as a subsidy to capital accumulation due to neoliberal roll-backs in the social safety net. While these critiques are important, less attention has been paid to the politics behind *how* these policies develop (but see Hinrichs, 2003;

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Werkerle, 2004). Krueger and Agyeman's (2005) perspective on 'actually existing sustainabilities' encourages researchers to conduct "a finer grained analysis into those policies that, in the US, reflect sustainable initiatives. Though requiring us to respect scale, it forces us away from macro-concepts to look at policies, practices and their implications for local places and their differences across space and between places" (p. 416). In this vein, this paper explores how local sustainability planning and food policymaking actually unfolds politically and discursively in New York City from 2007 to 2011.

Theories of urban politics engage with timeless questions of who sets the policy agenda and how power operates in the urban sphere. Early work in the pluralist tradition used the decision record to find that influential local actors in different constituencies varied based on issue area, thereby refuting the assertion of elite theory that power remains in stable, hierarchical structures (Dahl, 1961). In response, Bachrach and Baratz (1962) called this *exercise of decision-making power* identified by pluralists the 'first face of power' and identified the 'second face of power' as the *power to decide what issues are on table* for discussion. In so doing, they drew attention to the 'rules of the game,' or the institutional structures that shape agenda-setting. Lukes (2005) extended this view further, proposing a three-dimensional concept of power. While the two-dimensional view can take conflict into account, Lukes identified the *power to prevent conflict from arising* by shaping wants and values, drawing upon Gramsci's notion that hegemony is being exercised when views are taken for granted as 'common sense' (Crehan, 2002). Finally, building upon urban regime theory (Elkin, 1987), Stone (1989) theorized the "social production mode of power" as the *power to act*—rather than *power over others*, which is built through cooperation, with the mayor as a key convener. Taken together, these concepts are helpful for examining overt, covert, and seemingly invisible ways in which power operates.

These theories of how power operates in urban politics can be enhanced and informed by governance approaches that take into account a wider array of actors and the networks through which they interact. Jordan (2008), notes "governance is not the same as government: while government centres on the institutions and actions of the state, the term governance allows nonstate actors such as businesses and nongovernmental organisations to be brought into any analysis of societal steering" (21). Indeed, numerous scholars have pointed out that urban regime approaches gives insufficient attention to the role of civil society (Martin, 2004) and the bureaucracy (Kjaer, 2009) in governance. Pincetl (2003)—drawing upon a broad historical literature review—illustrates the role of civic actors in urban park and open space planning processes. In looking at the expanded set of actors involved in governance, scholarship examines state-led or top-down efforts (Skocpol, 1985); civil society-led, or bottom-up efforts (Piven and Cloward, 1979), as well as networks that "can blur, even dissolve, the distinction between state and society" (Rhodes, 1996, p. 666).

Environmental governance is also imbued with discursive practices. From a constructivist perspective, we can examine "environmental claims making—how social and political understandings of nature and environmental problems are crafted, contested, and legitimated" (Davidson and Frickel, 2004; 477). Further, Harvey (1996) asserts, "all ecological projects (and arguments) are simultaneously political-economic projects (and arguments) and vice versa. Ecological arguments are never socially neutral any more than socio-political arguments are ecologically neutral" (182). Hajer (1995) says that we must examine the interaction between discursive formations and institutional contexts to reveal how storylines generate political effects. Indeed, discourses about 'nature' and the city are actively used and contested in the urban planning and policymaking (See, for example, Fischer and Hajer, 1999; Lake,

2003; Keil and Boudreau, 2006). Coming from the social movements literature, scholars have theorized and described the process of constructing frames as an ongoing political act of negotiation, with initial frame alignment being one crucial step in a process of developing shared understanding of an issue and moving toward collective action (Snow et al., 1986; Benford and Snow, 2000).

This paper explores how urban agriculture and food systems entered the municipal sustainability agenda in New York City through interactions among diverse actors involved in discursive and political practices of urban environmental governance, including elected officials, bureaucrats, civic advocates, and the public. Examining how power operates in a range of ways, I explain why food and agriculture were initially left out of New York City's sustainability plan and how the agenda changed over time. *PlaNYC2030* was New York City's long term sustainability plan, created in 2007 and updated in 2011 as a set of strategic policy initiatives by Mayor Michael Bloomberg's administration. *PlaNYC*'s first edition set environmental goals for land, water, transportation, energy, air, and climate change and committed substantial capital to develop green infrastructure—including the urban forest, but neither urban farms nor community gardens were mentioned in the plan (City of New York, 2007; Campbell, 2014). This case shows the way in which activists and decision-makers deployed the concept of a local/regional food system in order to both build broad coalitions and to enable food to enter the municipal policy sphere in new ways. Tracing the roll-out of visions and plans reveals the way in which narrative concepts and specific proposals were reiterated and legitimized as food and agriculture became embedded in municipal policymaking arenas—however nominally, provisionally, or temporarily. I conclude with a discussion about the power dynamics of urban environmental governance in this case.

2. Methods and approach

In conducting case study research, Flyvbjerg's (2001) critiques of the challenges and limitations of creating generalizable theory in social science must be borne in mind. Instead of seeking to predict social phenomenon, I concur with Mitchell (2002) that "theory lies in the complexity of the cases" (8). Moreover, in contrast to a hypothetical-deductive approach, this is a work of qualitative social research that acknowledge the situatedness and subjectivity of the researcher as crucial to shaping the findings (Haraway, 1991; Rose, 1997; Dowling, 2005). I have been working as a researcher of urban natural resource stewardship in New York City for over a decade and am embedded in the networks that I reflect upon here; indeed, the very question of the absence of urban agriculture from the policy agenda was identified by my research subjects and interlocutors—both municipal decision-makers and civic activists alike. Thus, I build upon traditions of embedded, reflexive research in human geography (Mansvelt and Berg, 2005) and follow Flyvbjerg's (2001) charge to "take up problems that matter to the local, national, and global communities in which we live" in creating context-specific and practical knowledge (166).

The case draws upon multiple sources of data. As a primary method, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 43 subjects engaged in planning, urban agriculture, and community gardening: 24 (56%) respondents worked at civic groups; 14 (33%) were public sector employees; and five (12%) worked in private sector businesses. I used snowball sampling until reaching saturation in interview content (Patton, 2002). All participants gave consent to participate as confidential subjects and to be audio recorded (IRB # 11-714M). As a secondary method, I conducted discourse analysis of plans and policies related to food systems from 2007 to 2011, including *PlaNYC*, *PlaNYC 2.0* (the April 2011 update), *FoodNYC*, *Food in the Public Interest*, and *FoodWorks*. These documents

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