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Research Paper

Urban Agriculture: Models-in-Circulation from a Critical Transnational Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Urban Agriculture (UA) is practiced around the globe (Biel, 2016), supported and advocated by a diversity of actors ranging from local neighbourhood groups to supra-national bodies (e.g. FAO, 2014; Mougeot, 2006; UN Habitat, 2014). As such, UA must be understood as one of planning's current "models-in-circulation" (Roy and Ong, 2011), characterised by the traveling of ideas and policies in a globalised world (Healey, 2013). UA operates at a diversity of scales and engages a variety of actors. Yet, as a model-in-circulation, only some of the ways in which UA is practiced are promoted globally and influence the way UA is perceived, thus disregarding UA's highly specific manifestations in different social/economic/political contexts around the world. We use a critical transnational perspective for a qualitative analysis of collective (rather than individual) UA practices happening in small-scale, left-over public spaces in three very different locations in Latin America and Europe (Bogotá and Medellin in Colombia, and Vienna in Austria) to gain insights into how policies and initiatives inspired by typical models-in-circulation affect the situation on ground. The analysis shows that the reliance on such models can act like a filter impeding the acknowledgment that actors, objectives and barriers for UA practices are more complex, nuanced and multifaceted than those that a simple model can contain. As a result the benefits UA can yield are only partially attained. The conceptual device of *translocal* is subsequently formulated as one conveying the traveling of ideas locally, which can enrich and root models-in-circulation.

1. Introduction

Urban Agriculture (UA) is practiced around the globe (Biel, 2016; Drescher, Holmer, & Laquinta, 2006), supported and advocated by a diversity of actors ranging from local neighbourhood groups to supra-national bodies. Even though UA is described as a global phenomenon, its manifestations in different social/economic/political contexts of the world are highly specific, driven by diverging values, locations, scales and historic trajectories. These differences partly manifest in a highly specified nomenclature, describing urban gardening, urban allotments, guerrilla gardening and many more as types of UA, a term that comprises all forms of food growing in cities (McClintock, 2014). The benefits attributed to UA practices, such as sustainable livelihoods, food security, re-claiming and self-management of the city, development of local identity and community empowerment (Barriga Valencia and Leal Celis, 2011; Biel, 2016; Cantor, 2010; Certomà, 2011; Drescher et al., 2006; Ernwein, 2014; Gómez Rodríguez, 2014; Purcell and Tyman, 2015; Turner, Henryks, & Pearson, 2011), have led to widespread endorsement within a multitude of policy recommendations and urban planning frameworks promoting them (FAO, 2014; Mougeot, 2006; UN Habitat, 2014). As such, the several manifestations of UA must be understood as some of urban planning's current "models-in-circulation" (Roy and Ong 2011). These models are vehicles for ideas and policies that travel globally, in which differences of spaces and practices as well as their cultural/social/economic/political contexts seem to be disregarded, despite the recognition that even in a globalised world ideas need specific adaptation to the local context (Thrift, 2000). Much has been written on urban planning models and the way these have become globalised tools to understand and develop cities (e.g. Edensor and Jayne, 2012; Parnreiter, 2011). Within this perspective, Roy (2011) critically analyses issues such as power imbalances and ethics, which should be one of the points of departure for establishing urban policies but are hardly satisfactorily addressed in these models-in-circulations. In her studies, she promotes a critical transnational perspective, which pays attention to the values and power differentials along which ideas are traveling, as "some ideas are more likely to travel than others, some

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translations are more often made than others, and some agents are more prone to be senders than others" (Parnreiter, 2011: 419).

The very different circumstances within which UA is practiced around the world raise serious questions, which are not sufficiently addressed in the current research and policy environment, regarding the local applicability of such models-in-circulation. In particular, a wealth of literature promotes UA as a global solution to many problems (i.e. for food provision and poverty alleviation as well as for empowerment and community cohesion), but a lack of critical analysis (Badami and Ramankutty, 2015; Ernwein, 2014) prevents a more in-depth investigation based on questions such as: to what extent are current models-in-circulation relevant locally? Which power relations are embedded in their adoption? Do these power relations influence the fruition of UA's full benefits? Capitalising on three studies based on extensive field investigation in Bogotá and Medellín, Colombia, and Vienna, Austria, the article analyses collective UA practices in very different contexts, focusing in particular on governance connected to urban planning and how the situation on ground is addressed by policies and initiatives that typical models-in-circulation encourage. We do so by drawing on the notion of critical transnationalism, an analytical approach that uses one place to interrogate the other (Roy, 2004). In order to frame the analysis, following the methodology section, two models of UA promoted globally, particularly within the aspects that relate to planning and governance, are outlined. This outline is based on literature review. Medellín, Bogotá and Vienna are then presented as case studies where these models were applied. Finally, an analysis based on transnational critique is developed in the discussion section. The analysis suggests that an approach termed herein *translocal* should be adopted to mitigate problems that may arise when models-in-circulation are used uncritically.

2. Materials and methods

The article brings together data from three pre-existent qualitative research projects; one analysing emerging collective forms of UA (as opposed to existing, strongly regulated allotments in which UA is practiced individually or at an household level) in Vienna (Schwab and Rode, 2015), the others investigating open spaces in informal settlements in the Colombian cities of Medellín (Schwab, 2015) and Bogotá (Hernandez-Garcia, 2016). This material is summarised in Table 1 and underpins the discussion section, providing the evidence base upon which we demonstrate that a transnational approach to UA is a "double-sided sword" (Eizenberg, Tappert, Thomas, & Zilans, 2016: 101) with side-effects for the disadvantaged. Table 1 gives an overview of the three research projects, their aims, main findings and methodology. It also shows their different urban scales: In Vienna, the whole city was investigated, whereas in Medellín and Bogotá only one low income settlement, i.e. Comuna 13 and Potosi respectively, formed the spatial backdrop for the research projects. Each case study was undertaken independently and with distinct objectives, hence the differences in number of interviews, sampling, questions asked and approaches generally. Their individual outcomes show common themes, which are the basis for the analysis presented here. In spite of their differences, case studies can be analysed through the critical transnational lens (Roy, 2004, 2011), which differs from comparative analysis in as much as it does not require congruence in parameters but focuses on dynamics of social relations and governance systems that can be studied at different scales.

A critical transnational perspective (Roy, 2004, 2011) enables the investigation and analysis of one place through experiences gathered in another setting, thus allowing for further analysis on the power imbalances integrated in the processes of adopting the idea of collective UA; power imbalances such as those that surface whenever models are presented as solutions from the top down, to actors who have limited power for negotiation. In this way, although comparability of the study parameters is low, we understand our cases to offer "transferability" (Groat and Wang, 2002: 38) instead of generalisability, and posit that findings can be transferable and cases explanatory for other cities with similar contexts. Each of the three cities in our studies is integrated in the circuit of policy tourism and is in itself a model. Outcomes of the different studies allow for the identification of common themes manifesting across the study areas. We are therefore using the cases from the three different cities as "instrumental" cases (Silverman, 2010: 139), i.e. with the expectation that insights from our cases provide transferability and help the building of theory. We understand this as a way to acknowledge UA sites as "real places within society and space, [which] are not exempt from power relations and issues within and beyond their own boundaries" (Ernwein, 2014: 79).

We focus on civil society actors involved in UA practices and highlight values and meanings attached to these practices to address the questions of power imbalances in a transnational context. We see transnational dynamics not limited to the institutional domain (i.e. policy tourism), but also present in the way people engaging in UA are inspired by examples and discourses in other places. Semi-structured interviews (with 12 people in Potosi and 46 in Comuna 13, 10 of these touched upon the topic of UA), lasting between 30 and 60 min were conducted. In Potosi, observations and semi-structured interviews were conducted with community leaders of the *Junta de Accion Comunal* (JAC) (Community Action Group), staff members of the community school called "*Instituto Cerros del Sur*" and residents. Members of the JAC (two) as well as school staff (two) were adult males between 30 and 50 years of age, most of whom were also long-time residents of the neighbourhood. Additionally, eight residents were interviewed, all of whom were women aged between 30 and 50 years all with children. Questions tackled UA practices in the *barrio* and their impact in social and spatial terms, social and community life as well as the residents' opinion of and role in it. In Comuna 13, walkthroughs and semi-structured interviews were conducted with community leaders, residents and planning experts. Interviewees were adults and senior citizens, the overall sample consisted of 29 men and 17 women, the gender ratio being influenced by the dominance of males in two of the groups of respondents (i.e. community leaders, planning experts). Groups of interviewees were selected purposefully, but sampling of individual followed snowballing. Questions revolved around socio-spatial practices and the effect of an ongoing governmental upgrading initiative (PUI). Five of the ten people touching upon the topic of UA were female, five male. In the case of Vienna, interviews with gardeners appearing in newspapers or social media as well as the associations' bylaws and mission statements were used as primary data. In all cases, qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000), both with an inductive and deductive approach, has been employed to the resulting transcripts or field notes to identify common topics and concerns.

3. Urban agriculture models-in-circulation

Planning is increasingly characterised by a global attitude and the traveling of ideas (Healey, 2013), often in a "one-size-fits-all" manner. UA practices and spaces of production are particularly suitable to test Roy's claim (2011) that transnational planning models lack sensitivity to local contexts. UA practices have been portrayed – and understood globally – as multi-functional, addressing issues such as political activism (Certomà and Tornaghi, 2015), community making (Holland, 2004), environmental awareness (Travaline and Hunold, 2010), the preservation of lost ecological memories (Barthel and Isendahl, 2013) as well as biodiversity, resilience and food security.

Many urban planning frameworks, policies and programmes globally integrate UA, referring to such models in terms of stated objectives (e.g. healthy food, subsistence and community building) and modalities for implementation. According to the context, there is, both in literature and in practice, a tendency to emphasise specific aims. UA for subsistence, and related policies, is a model predominately sought for Latin America, whereas the 'right to the city' is another model which is much

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