

Incorporating "nature": dealing with continuity and disruption between rural and urban contexts through food production

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ABSTRACT

Since the second half of the 20th century, the spread of urban areas has delegated the function of food production to the rural world. Nowadays, we are witnessing the multiplication of initiatives that aim to create spaces for food production within urban areas. Our survey is carried out in France, where gardens have historically played an important role for households' food security. These sites, which have for a long time offered concrete support during economic and social crisis, have gradually lost in recent decades their role of food subsistence to give way to educational, social inclusion and recreational functions.

This paper is based on a monographic survey of urban family gardens located in a working-class district on the outskirts of Bordeaux, France. The district, named Les Aubiers, was built in the 1960s. The original idea was to build a modern residential complex, including a social housing area. Nevertheless, only the social housing was built, creating an isolated district about 5 km away from the city centre. At that time, the district was mainly inhabited by first generation migrant families. The family gardens project was set up in the 1990s and the site has been for a long time one of the few green areas in the district. Gardens were created at the same time of food support initiatives for families in social and economic precarious situations. In contrast to the idea of assistantship fed by such devices, Les Aubiers gardens initiators intended to give families the chance to produce part of their food need. Besides this project, it lies the will of increasing the families' food security, avoiding them a passive relationship with food distribution devices. Gardens rules are relatively simple: a family can obtain a garden for free following economic criteria and, in turn, families have to pay water consumes and have the contractual duty to cultivate food in those gardens.

Our ethnography takes place about 20 years after the gardens creation. A new moderators team replaced the initial one and a large part of the animation activities are based on agro-ecological practices to the gardens users. The practical implications of our work are related to the apparent gap, stressed by moderators group, on agricultural cultivation techniques. Through semi-structured interviews, we have tried to observe symmetrically the discourse of the two groups – moderators and users - related to food production and consumption practices and how it has changed during their life course. In addition to this, we conduct participant observations in gardens in order to explore the relationship that gardeners hold with non-human elements during the time they spend in the site. Several authors focused on urban gardens highlighting the social and food self-sufficiency function (Domingos, Sobral, and West 2014). However, few works have explored the relationships between urban food production and the forms of "environment" that gardeners produce and consume. In addition, food issues offer excellent entries to explore continuity and disruption between a departure context and an arrival one

during life courses marked by transnational circulations (Abbots 2016; Crenn, Hassoun, and Medina 2010).

Indeed, sixty-five of the seventy gardens are exploited by families which have undertaken transnational circulation during their life-course. The gardeners interviewed were most of the time born in different rural areas of their departing country, and that was one of the major reason that encouraged them to have a garden. Furthermore, in their experience, food production was often practiced not only for family consumption, but also as an economic income. As a result of these previous experiences, when these people had the opportunity to have a garden in France, they naturally reproduced the practical knowledge they held about how to plant, grow and produce vegetables. This continuity with a starting context is not only translated into production practices but also into the choice of vegetal species to cultivate. In fact, many strategies for importing the seeds of the vegetables for consumption up to their garden in France are designed by gardeners. From pepper seeds hidden in a suitcase during the visit of a Turkish aunt to France, to artichoke seeds sent by a Moroccan cousin by post. These seeds became food which is often cooked and consumed within the gardens themselves during the weekend family meals.

Our survey highlights that the relationship to the garden, as well as the value they attach to the production of plants and their consumption, is closely linked to a different sense that the two groups - animators and gardeners - accord to this activity. From the analysis of the collected material, it emerges that the different perception of the two groups is linked to the way in which the notion of "food quality" is constructed. This notion, in turn, seems to be linked to an unequal political socialization among individuals of the two groups and to a distinct experience of the rural and urban context. For gardeners, these spaces seem not only to be an extension of the living space but also to participate in the reproduction of a previously known foodscape offering at the same time a pathway for rootedness to an arrival context through a non-human relationship.

References

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