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URBAN AGRICULTURE
AND ENVIRONMENTAL
IMAGINATION*Samantha Noll***State of the field**

While we are currently experiencing a renaissance in philosophical work on agriculture and food (Barnhill, Budolfson, & Doggett 2016; Thompson 2015; Kaplan 2012), these topics were common sources of discussion throughout the three-thousand-year history of Western thought. For example, the Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (2014) explored connections between fulfilling human promise and systems of agriculture (Thompson & Noll 2015) and Hippocrates (1923) stressed the importance of cultivating agricultural products provided by nature (Zwart 2000). In order to live a truly human life, Hippocrates argued, one must not passively consume crude food products, as such brutish living leads to terrible suffering. Later, both the Hebrew Bible and Christian Gospels provided clear ethical mandates concerning agricultural practices and the consumption of food. These mandates or ethics needed to be observed regardless of context (Zwart 2000). More recently, Thomas Jefferson added to this literature, as he engaged in agricultural production at his Monticello plantation and wrote extensively on how farming is intimately connected to the political system of democracy (Thompson & Noll 2015). This reflection on food and agriculture continued into the 20th century, albeit not in the discipline of philosophy. Scientists and agricultural leaders, such as Henry Wallace and Liberty Hyde Bailey, provided important critiques of agricultural practices contemporary to their time.

Interestingly, 19th- and 20th-century philosophers largely placed food practices and agricultural production outside of the philosophical sphere. According to Thompson and Noll, “the last generation of philosophers to discuss agriculture as a philosophical topic is the one that included John Stuart Mill, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Karl Marx. Each of these three wrote extensively on agriculture” (2015: 36). Some food scholars have argued that this topic was neglected because food is too physical or transient to warrant consideration (Kaplan 2012; Telfer 1996). Others have postulated that, as food preparation and production was historically regarded as “women’s work,” it was seen as an unworthy topic in the largely male-dominated field of philosophy (Heldke 1992). A third explanation focuses on how activities associated with food (especially eating and drinking) were typically associated with base instincts and desires, and thus were too primal to be philosophically analyzed (Kaplan 2012; Korsmeyer 2002). However, with the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962, the ethical evaluation of food systems once again surged into prominence in the field. While Carson was not a philosopher, per se, her

work was an important early addition in the fields of agriculture ethics and philosophy of food. Other critical works published prior to 1980 included Jim Hightower's (1972) *Hard Tomatoes, Hard Times*, Frances Moore Lappé's (1971) *Diet for a Small Planet*, Wendell Berry's (1978) *The Unsettling of America*, and the republication of Walter Goldschmidt's 1947 study *As You Sow*.

Since the 1980s, written work exploring ethical issues in agricultural and food systems has proliferated, with dozens of books and articles published yearly. As of 2018, analyses can roughly be divided into two subfields: (a) agricultural philosophy or philosophy of agriculture (see Thompson 2010; Thompson & Noll 2015), and (b) philosophy of food (see Barnhill, Budolfson, & Doggett 2016; Kaplan 2012). While these disciplines are often placed under the umbrella of philosophy of food (Barnhill, Budolfson, & Doggett 2016), I argue that they are distinct, as each field primarily focuses on a different aspect of the food system.

In particular, agricultural philosophy primarily consists of philosophical work that analyzes and critiques agriculture. As Thompson and Noll argue, "agricultural ethics is the criticism, analysis, and justification of systematic moral codes and the acceptability of social norms that exist or are applied to practices of food and fiber production, distribution, and consumption" (2015: 35). Here, agriculture should be understood to encompass the production, processing, and distribution of foodstuffs and other agricultural products, such as fuel and fiber production. As this subfield focuses on specifically agricultural production, agricultural philosophers pay special attention to the following areas: (a) unintended environmental, safety, and health impacts of agricultural practices and technology, (b) the impacts of diverse structures of agriculture, including but not limited to the distribution of benefits and harms, (c) professional ethics concerning agricultural research, as this research informs agricultural production methods, (d) animal welfare concerns, and (e) the ethical, metaphysical, and epistemological concerns associated with agricultural biotechnology (Thompson & Noll 2015). While the food products can be a part of the overall philosophical analyses coming out of agricultural philosophy, this field pays special attention to the research, practices, and values that inform agricultural systems of production.

In contrast, philosophy of food, as the name implies, primarily focuses on the products of agricultural production systems. While this field includes critiques of agricultural systems, it expands the scope of philosophical inquiry more broadly than agricultural philosophy. Thus, it provides expanded analyses of a wide range of food-related topics, such as dietetics, consumer ethics, gustatory aesthetics, and how foodways and marketing reproduce systems of oppression (Barnhill, Budolfson, & Doggett 2016). As Kaplan argues, "in the twenty-first century, philosophers continue to address these issues and new ones concerning the globalization of food, the role of technology, and the rights and responsibilities of consumers and producers" (2012: 1). While he labels this type of inquiry "food ethics," the scope of these projects clearly extends beyond the field of ethics to include a multiplicity of philosophical fields, such as epistemology, hermeneutics, social and political philosophy, and philosophy of science. Indeed, Kaplan (2012) continues his analysis, dividing philosophy of food into the following basic categories: (a) food metaphysics, (b) food epistemology, (c) gustatory aesthetics, (d) food ethics, (e) food technology, (f) food politics, and (g) food identity (The Philosophy of Food Project n.d.). In contrast to agricultural philosophy, while agricultural systems can be a part of the analyses coming out of philosophy of food, the field pays special attention to the ethical, epistemological, metaphysical, and social components of food products.

While each of these fields overlap, yet are distinct, both actively engage with urban agricultural projects. Indeed, it is difficult to grasp the current state of work in agricultural philosophy and philosophy of food without discussing the recent rise in urban agriculture and food justice movements. Critical analyses of agricultural production systems and broader food-related topics, from cultural foodways to food justice and just distribution, are increasingly concerned with

activities performed in urban areas. This resurgence of agricultural production in cities could be the product of several factors. For example, popular writers, such as Michael Pollan (2006, 2009) and Barbara Kingsolver (2009), have written a wide range of books and articles designed to convince city dwellers to plant apartment gardens, join community-supported agricultural initiatives, or support those who do. Similarly, agrarian writers, such as Wendell Berry, have also written popular works in an attempt to convince readers to return to an agrarian lifestyle. One can only wonder if this agrarian literature also contributed to the rise of urban agriculture projects, as populations move from rural to urban areas and yet long for a romanticized farming past. Regardless of the reason why we're seeing such a rise, the fact remains that both philosophy of agriculture and philosophy of food increasingly engage with urban agriculture, as community-supported agriculture, food justice movements, and consumer ethics gain prominence in the wider social sphere.

Urban agriculture

Urban agriculture is generally defined as food production in cities or built environments, in contrast to food processing and distribution, which are typical activities in urban environments (Noll 2017). An important part of this definition is the city. As such, this chapter defines "cities" or "urban areas" in such a way that the definition includes built areas in contrast to natural areas, the country, or the wilderness (Light 2003). In the context of the city, then, agricultural initiatives are often a manifestation of the locavore, or local food, movement and were designed to pursue a diverse array of ends, from providing fresh foodstuffs in food deserts (Angotti 2015) to supporting sustainability and/or limiting the city's ecological footprint (Huang & Drescher 2015). Thus, a wide range of urban agricultural projects (such as farmers markets, school gardens, and community-supported agriculture initiatives) can all be placed under the umbrella of urban agriculture (DeLind 2011; Werkheiser & Noll 2014). For instance, "international organizations, such as the FAO [UN Food and Agriculture Organization], conceptualize urban food initiatives as a way of increasing food and nutrition security around the world, as urban populations are increasingly facing global food price inflation" (Noll 2017: 97). In contrast, local communities often see agricultural projects as novel ways to provide "local populations with biodynamic, organic, and/or sustainably produced fruits, vegetables, and animal products, supporting the local economy, and training future farmers" (Noll 2017: 97). Community gardens, such as the Spring Gardens Community Garden in Philadelphia and The Farm to School Project in Washington State, are guided by the goals of strengthening community, bettering local population's health and access to food, and providing food-based education. The next section of this chapter outlines current work on urban agriculture coming out of philosophy of agriculture and philosophy of food.

Philosophical work on urban agriculture

Philosophers of agriculture largely focus on teasing out the philosophical underpinnings of local food production in the context of the city. As these initiatives are generally understood to be a manifestation of the locavore or local food movement (Noll 2017), this analysis includes identifying the ethical, metaphysical, and social commitments that guide such initiatives. In fact, local food is often conceived as an alternative and/or challenge to industrial, corporate controlled, global food systems (DeLind 2011). This is because local food initiatives prioritize a wide range of values beyond the mere production and distribution of foodstuffs (Thompson & Noll 2015), such as sustainability, environmental/ecological health, social justice, and the importance of

supporting local customs and foodways (DeLind 2011; Noll & Werkheiser 2017; Levkoe 2011). Agricultural philosophers in this context have performed a great deal of work identifying these values and clarifying the claims at the heart of urban agricultural projects.

For example, in contrast to industrial agricultural systems, which produce foodstuffs on a large scale for global consumption while using an ever-shrinking labor force (Lyson 2004), a key goal of small-scale urban agricultural projects is to help local communities regain a portion of control or agency over how food is produced, processed, and distributed in their areas (DeLind & Bingen 2008; Werkheiser & Noll 2014).¹ While industrial food systems often reduce the wide range of food choices available to individuals to shallow choices between supermarket brands, urban agriculture projects expand the food choices available to urban residents (DeLind 2011). Many see this as an important strategy for helping individuals and communities to regain control over the food they eat and the systems that produce it.

In this vein, there is a contingent of urban agricultural supporters who argue that supporting local food initiatives is an important step toward cultivating larger “regenerative food systems” both within and beyond the city. These alternative food systems help cultivate and support connections between local communities, global communities, and the environment (Dahlberg 1993; Noll & Werkheiser 2017). Such reenvisioned systems are often conceptualized as intergenerational strategies necessary for bringing about political, economic, cultural, and social transformation (Harper et al. 2009). Finally, another group of urban agriculturalists see local food projects as a way to reform food systems along the lines of social justice, helping disenfranchised groups gain greater control over food production to ensure that culturally appropriate types of food are available, and that important cultural foodways are cultivated, along with the crops (Flora 2011; Pimbert 2008).

Food sovereignty

Food justice or food sovereignty movements are urban food projects devoted to the goal of increasing local community control over how food is produced, processed, and distributed in their neighborhoods. These initiatives are unique in that they are guided by key justice commitments and a robust conception of “food” (Werkheiser & Noll 2014). The Declaration of Nyéléni’s (2007: 1) definition of food sovereignty illustrates this point:

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. . . . It ensures that the rights to use and manage our lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food. Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social classes and generations.

The above passage highlights how food sovereignty’s conception of “food” encompasses a broader range of social concerns, beyond the economic realities of production and distribution. Such matters include but are not limited to ecological preservation, the health of future generations, policy issues, and racial and gender equality. Additionally, it is inextricably bound up with social, cultural, and personal identity (Werkheiser & Noll 2014; Pimbert 2008; Desmarais 2008). If one accepts this widened understanding of food, it is difficult, if not impossible, to

remove wider social considerations from the table, when discussing food systems. Indeed, food sovereignty movements also recognize the promise of food systems to make wider changes in communities and beyond, as they have the power to address a plethora of justice and human rights issues, beyond just distribution.

In the context of the city, this power is often employed to help address the unique concerns faced by marginalized communities in urban contexts, such as mitigating the realities of living in food deserts, the historical undermining of culturally specific foodways (Desmarais, Nettie, & Wittman 2010), biases in food policy (Taylor & Ard 2015), and the lack of land suitable for urban food production (Angotti 2015). As Noll argues, “while food sovereignty-based programs frequently work toward many of the goals guiding other urban agricultural programs, a key impetus for food justice is addressing human rights and justice concerns in urban contexts by increasing community control of food systems” (2017: 98). Food sovereignty or food justice projects play an important role in helping to shape current urban foodscapes. For example, the Detroit Food Justice Taskforce has worked tirelessly to build connections between local partners and neighborhoods to, not only change the makeup of the local food system, but also to bring about policy that places Detroit on the path to achieve food security, food sovereignty, and food justice for its residents (see Detroit Food Policy Council n.d.). Today Detroit is a leader in community-supported agricultural projects.

Critiques of urban agriculture

Other scholars are more critical of local food projects, both in urban and rural areas, as they may be unable to seriously challenge current industrial agricultural systems (Agyeman & Mcintee 2014; McClintock 2014). For example, DeLind (2011) argues that local food movements have been co-opted by consumerist and corporate powers. Rather than offering solutions to key issues in the current food system, food hubs and community gardens are becoming complicit in the gentrification of fresh produce in urban context, the erosion of local safety-nets, and the social contract. “As corporations like Walmart embrace ‘local’ as a desirable label, and one that is significantly easier to achieve than ‘organic,’ the local food movement ends up supporting the industrial, capitalist status quo” (Noll & Werkheiser 2017: 114). Similarly, scholars such as Singer and Mason (2007) argue that local food projects are not successful in helping cities to become more sustainable and, according to Navin (2014), may be harming global communities. According to Noll and Werkheiser,

if local food activists are trying to reform the food system to be more environmentally sustainable, there are significant questions about whether “food miles” are the best measure of environmental impact, either because food production can be more ecologically sustainable in a global system, or because the money saved from efficiencies of scale and comparative production advantage would free up more money that could be better spent in addressing environmental problems.

(2017: 114)²

These critics see local food and urban agriculture supporters as well-meaning, yet misguided, consumers who purchase ethical elitism and/or a social identity along with their vegetables. This disagreement about the potential of local food movements, and by extension urban agricultural projects, illustrates key tensions between the values guiding various projects. As DeLind asks, “are local food and the local food movement taking us where we want to go? Or are we hitching our wagons to the wrong stars?” (2011: 128).

Due to these various visions of what urban local food projects can do, local food movements – both in and outside of urban contexts – can be broken down into three distinct sub-movements, each with their own conceptions of people and food and distinct goals (Werkheiser & Noll 2014). They label these sub-movements as the individual-focused sub-movement, the systems-focused sub-movement, and the food community-focused sub-movement. Various goals guiding these movements include but are not limited to supporting local farmers; increasing urban sustainability; helping communities regain control over local food systems; providing local neighborhoods with farm-fresh vegetables, especially in food deserts; and providing food-based education. Additionally, people who support local food projects in the city often hold differing ideas or conceptions of what food is and how food is connected to personal and community identity. Depending on who you talk with, food can be understood in dietary terms, as an economic commodity, as an important part of cultural identity, as a social movement, or as a fashionable choice (Werkheiser & Noll 2014). This analysis holds for local food projects in the city and beyond.

Philosophy of food in the city

Philosophers of food have also done a great deal of work on food-related topics in urban contexts. In fact, the preceding work is a strong example of philosophy of agriculture, yet can also be placed under the umbrella of philosophy of food. As discussed prior, philosophy of food casts a broad philosophical net, in that it discusses a wide range of food-related topics, from dietetics to the use of biotechnology and gustatory aesthetics (Barnhill, Budolfson, & Doggett 2016; Kaplan 2012). This is because “food,” which is one of the key products of agriculture, is often understood in multidimensional ways. As Kaplan argues:

Food is vexing. . . . It belongs simultaneously to the worlds of economics, ecology, and culture. It involves vegetables, chemists, and wholesalers; livestock, refrigerators, and cooks; fertilizer, fish, and grocers. . . . It is very difficult to disentangle food from its web of production, distribution, and consumption.

(2012: 2)

If this is the case, philosophical work on food must utilize a multiplicity of philosophical branches and take several forms. Work on urban agriculture and how these initiatives shape and reshape the city, then, needs to engage simultaneously with the worlds of “economics, ecology, and culture,” as well as current policy, the tumultuous history of food production in the city, and the ever-shifting built environment, or nature of urban place. This wider view forms the foundation of work by philosophers of food on urban agriculture.

With this scope in mind, philosophy of food, as a field, carries with a wide array of topics that are important for urban residents. For example, philosophers such as Singer and Mason (2007), McPherson (2016), and Budolfson (2016) have discussed in detail the intricacies of consumer ethics, as they relate to food choices. Sen (1987), Singer (1972), and Vandermeer and Perfecto (2005) have analyzed and explored the ethical dimensions of hunger at the individual, state, international, and ecological levels. Heldke (2001), Adams (2010), Vantrease (2013), Inness (2001), and others have written about how food and identity are inextricably connected in multifaceted and historical ways. Scientists and philosophers of technology, such as Borlaug (2002), Thompson (2014), and Noll (2013) have discussed, in great detail, the benefits and potential risks of genetically modifying food products distributed to the populace. Additional work has been done on workers’ rights, overconsumption and obesity, public health, and food and religion, as well as various other food-related topics.

Consumer ethics: voting with your dollars

The previously mentioned work is often used by urban residents to inform their food choices and their future goals and visions of food systems. While some theorists in philosophy of agriculture (DeLind 2011) see this individualist turn as detrimental to the goal of providing an alternative food system, providing analyses to the populace in order to shift their behavior is a bedrock goal of philosophy of food. For example, Singer and Mason (2007), Foer (2009), Thompson (2015), Polan (2006), and others, have all written works with the express aim of shifting “eaters” behavior. A social manifestation of this work is the rise of the Farm to Table (or Farm to Fork) phenomenon, which focuses on bringing about change by “voting with your fork.” Farm to Table refers to a trend often found in urban areas, whereby consumers concerned about where their food comes from and the ethical impacts of their meals can enjoy meals prepared with locally sourced ingredients (Noll & Werkheiser 2017). Supporters utilize work coming out of philosophy of food to argue that local food is better for the environment, healthier, and more sustainable than industrially produced food. According to Noll and Werkheiser, this movement usually

manifests itself on the ground in the form of restaurants catering to the demand for local food by purchasing, processing, and delivering local food products to consumers. Such restaurants will often have seasonal menus that showcase crops currently being harvested in the area. They also may be attached to an individual farm or provide customers with a list of the farms they purchase food products from, and/or host dinners on the farm itself.

Taylor & Francis (2017: 117)

In addition to the Farm to Table movement, and the philosophical work that sparked this trend, consumer ethics continues to play an important role in philosophy of food and the manifestation of agriculture in urban spaces.

However, larger social critiques are also an important part of philosophy of food. For example, in her book *Black, White, and Green: Farmers Markets, Race, and the Green Economy*, Alkon (2012) explores the racial dynamics of food policy in the context of the farmers market. According to the USDA, the number of farmers markets in urban areas has been rising steadily for the last ten years. In addition to places where urban residents purchase produce, these environments also provide city dwellers with the chance to “vote with their forks” for vibrant local economies, shorter supply-chains, greater food sustainability, better animal welfare standards, and so forth. However, they are also places where larger conceptions of race, gender, and class are inscribed and reinforced in ways that “the meanings that farmer’s market managers, vendors, and consumers attribute to the buying and selling of local organic food” (2017: 1). Thus, urban farmers markets can be understood to fall along a spectrum of empowerment and marginalization. This “give and take” between consumer ethics and more in-depth analyses of food systems can also be seen in food justice movements, as activists simultaneously provide ethnic, racial, and gendered critiques of the larger food system. More importantly, they work toward sheltering local communities from these impacts, as they increase community control over how food is produced, processed, and distributed in their neighborhoods (Lyson 2004; Schanbacher 2010).

Future directions: reenvisioning cityscapes

This overview of work on urban agriculture illustrates both the power and promise of food production in the city, be that projects on the ground or critiques coming from neighborhood

associations and community groups. Since the 19th century, the modern city has largely been conceived as an area in opposition to the country, agricultural zones, and the wilderness (Light 2003). As such, agricultural production was increasingly done outside of city zones. As Noll argues,

shifting understandings of 1) civilization and domestication and 2) disease and filth combined with class-based discrimination to culminate in the removal of all but a handful of nonhuman animals from the city streets. This, in turn, impacted the ability of various communities to produce food [and] . . . resulted in the “extinction of experience” and an increasing reliance on global food systems.

(2017: 104)

In contrast to the modern city, urban contexts were historically areas of intense agricultural production, with all aspects of agriculture occurring in cityscapes and pre-urban surrounding areas. This urban agrarian past was largely forgotten, but city residents are now rediscovering and revitalizing this past, while making it their own.

Indeed, one need look no further than Detroit, Michigan, to see the promise of revitalizing this agrarian past and using it to shape the future of cityscapes. After the automotive crisis of 2008–2010, Detroit went into major economic decline (Pavlinek 2015). The result of which was a sharp rise of poverty, food deserts, and the abandonment of large swaths of the city. However, as of 2018, Detroit neighborhoods are being reimagined and redesigned by urban agriculture initiatives, with once vacant lots now bursting with fresh produce and office rooftop operations housing beehives and raised bed gardens (see visitdetroit.com). As a result, local community groups are increasing their autonomy over their food system and changing policies to help make urban agriculture a permanent fixture of the city. Future areas of research on urban agriculture, then, should aim to support these projects by continuing to provide the theoretical tools necessary for further redesigning cityscapes and help address issues as they arise. The designs of cities are not value neutral and detailed archaeologies of the values embedded in these lived environments could help local communities better achieve the goal of food sovereignty.

In fact, urban and rural communities around the globe are working hard to gain greater control of agricultural production both inside and outside city limits. This trend, encapsulated by Via Campesina’s (a global farmers’ rights group) call for greater food sovereignty, includes an important critique of food security and calls for the recognition of a community’s right over all aspects of food production (Patel 2009). According to Patel,

inequality in power is one that food sovereignty, sometimes explicitly, seeks to address. . . . There is, at the heart of food sovereignty, a radical egalitarianism in the call for a multi-faceted series of “democratic attachments.” Claims around food sovereignty address the need for social change such that the capacity to shape food policy can be exercised at all appropriate levels.

(2009: 663)

Food sovereignty movements come at this goal from different starting points but have made great strides in transforming communities in both the “First World” and “Two-Thirds World,” from Detroit to rural Africa. In this way, these grassroots movements are simultaneously connected and yet distinct, as they translate the justice-related goals guiding food sovereignty into practical solutions to problems. However, current research outlining the practical strategies employed by global food sovereignty movements (and whether these strategies were successful)

is currently scarce. An important future direction in the literature, then, should involve greatly increasing the literature on such movements. This research would be important for the grassroots movements, themselves, as they often struggle with parlaying the right to have control over food systems into successful solutions.

Conclusion

Food production historically played an important role in cities and this role is increasingly being rediscovered by local food advocates in contemporary urban areas. Philosophical literature on urban agriculture provides an important analysis of the values guiding urban farming projects and the environments where these projects take place. In broad strokes, this chapter painted an overview of the current state of urban agriculture and related philosophical literature, paying particular attention to philosophy of agriculture and philosophy of food. Specifically, the chapter provided a brief historical analysis of philosophical work on agriculture and food, before moving on to discuss the state of urban agricultural initiatives today. It then discussed the current state of philosophical work on this topic and future directions. Simply put, urban agricultural projects have the power to change cityscapes into vibrant areas of food production, empower local communities, and provide a safety-net for neighborhoods as global food prices fluctuate. What we are experiencing in the city is just the beginning of an urban farming renaissance. The role of philosophical work on this topic, then, is to provide the theoretical tools necessary for helping to make this vision a reality.

Notes

- 1 For more on this, see DeLind and Bingen (2008); Guthman (2004, 2008); Vandermeer and Perfecto (2005).
- 2 See Glaeser (2011).

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