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Abstract

The urban food question is forcing itself up the political agenda in the Global North because of a new food equation that spells the end of the 'cheap food' era, fuelling nutritional poverty in the cities of Europe and North America. This article explores the rise of the urban food question in the Global North through the multiple prisms of theory, policy and political practice. First, it explores the theoretical ways in which the food system is being framed in urban planning, urban political ecology and community food security. Second, it charts the rise of new urban foodscapes associated with urban agriculture and public health. Finally, it identifies a new urban food politics and asks if this constitutes a new social movement.

Keywords

food, political ecology, security, sustainability, urbanisation

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Introduction

Cities in the Global North are increasingly confronting the problem of urban food security, a problem normally associated with their poorer counterparts in the Global South. Although food security has been defined in various ways since the concept was first introduced in the 1970s, the original definition is now deemed to be inadequate in two respects. First, it was originally framed in productivist terms, as a supply-side problem, whereas today the accent is on *access to* food rather than the supply of food. Second, food security was initially conceived as a rural problem, whereas the *urban* dimension of food security commands most political attention today because of the

confluence of rapid urbanisation and the new food equation.

The new food equation signals high level political acceptance, by national and international bodies, of the *multifunctional* character of the agri-food system, a system that is beginning to be viewed and valued anew because of its role in burgeoning public health costs, dwindling natural resources and escalating national security threats. Food security has segued into a national security issue largely because the food price

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surge in 2007–2008 triggered a wave of political protests in more than 60 countries, one-third of which were middle-/high-income countries, highlighting the fact that food security is no longer an issue confined to the poorest countries. As these food-centred protests were overwhelmingly *urban* protests, cities now find themselves on the front line of the new food equation (Morgan and Sonnino, 2010).

While the Global North is the spatial focus of this article, it needs to be said at the outset that the most damaging effects of the new food equation are being wrought in the cities of the Global South, where the noxious interplay of poverty, hunger and climate change is most apparent (Joubert, 2012). Although the relief of hunger has the greatest claims on our ethical responsibilities, the urban food question cannot be reduced to a single issue because food, by its very nature, has a multifunctional character. In other words, we need to resist the temptation to reduce the urban food question to a narrow nutritional agenda because a purely needs-based conception cannot possibly do justice to the kaleidoscopic character of the food system and the multiple prisms – social, economic, ecological, cultural, political, psychological, sexual – through which food is viewed, valued and used in society. How to feed cities in a just, sustainable and culturally appropriate manner in the face of looming climate change, widening inequality and burgeoning world hunger is how I define the urban food question, a non-reductionist definition that does justice to the multifunctional character of the food system (Morgan, 2009).

‘Eating may be a humble subject’, said Leon Kass, ‘but it is the first and most urgent activity of all animal and human life’ (Kass, 1999: 2). Despite the existential significance of eating, the food system has been strangely neglected in urban studies until quite recently and therefore the main aim of this article is to chart the rise of the urban

food question in theory, policy and practice in the context of the Global North.

Ways of seeing: Framing food in urban studies

Cities cannot function without the basic essentials of human life, especially air, water and food. One might have thought that urban studies would be replete with studies of these basic essentials, but this is not the case. Urban scholars are now beginning to redress this intellectual lacuna and here I explore some recent contributions to food system planning, beginning with the urban planning literature.

Urban planning: Re-discovering the food system

If the urban food question has been somewhat marginal to mainstream politics in the Global North, it has fared no better in the urban planning field until recently. That the food system should be described as ‘a stranger’ to the planning system is little short of extraordinary given the manifold ways in which food shapes the materiality of the city (Pothukuchi and Kaufman, 2000). The criticism levelled at the planning community, theorists and practitioners alike, is that it had addressed all the basic essentials of human life – air, water, shelter and the like – with the conspicuous exception of food. This has been described as a ‘puzzling omission’ by the American planning community (American Planning Association (APA), 2007).

If planning practitioners failed to engage with the food system, much the same can be said of their theoretical peers. This ‘puzzling omission’ may be symptomatic of a deep shift in the nature of planning theory, where leading exponents have become more exercised by the principles and procedures of planning as a deliberative *process* and less concerned with the substantive *content* of

urban plans. Ash Amin offers an illuminating perspective on this shift, arguing that planning theory has shifted from a 'knowing' to a 'deliberative' tradition in recent years. The former, he argues, sought to observe the city from a privileged vantage point and aspired to re-engineer the urban fabric to meet the goals of modernity. The latter, by contrast, seeks to avoid the hubris of the knowing tradition and implores planners to act as enlightened intermediaries who can harness lay knowledge, broker agreements, speak for the disempowered and address issues of common concern and so forth (Amin, 2011). Though clearly sympathetic to the deliberative tradition, Amin pointedly asks if its commitment to decision-making procedures has compromised 'the necessity to know about substantive matters of urban change and wellbeing?' (Amin, 2011: 638).

Clearly not all planning theorists fall neatly into these two traditions; indeed some of them have explicitly called for a more integrated approach, arguing that 'planners need to combine both their procedural and their substantive skills and thus become central players in the battle over growth, the environment and social justice' (Campbell, 1996: 297). This integrated approach has been the inspiration for what we might loosely call the new food system planning movement, a capacious movement that seeks to overcome the debilitating divide between 'expert' and 'lay' knowledge by embracing urban designers, landscape architects, public health officials, environmental planners for example, as well as a wide array of civil society groups and NGOs that are committed to reforming the urban food system (Cohen, 2012; Morgan, 2009; Pothukuchi, 2012; Raja, 2013; Viljoen and Wiskerke, 2012). Food system planning theory is now evolving rapidly, thanks to new conceptual developments in urban design and the healthy urban planning discourse.

A good example of the urban design approach to food system planning is the concept of the *Continuous Productive Urban Landscape* (CPUL), conceived by Katrin Bohn and Andre Viljoen. CPUL is a physical and environmental design strategy that proposes that urban agriculture can contribute to more sustainable and resilient food systems while also improving the quality and conviviality of the urban realm. The CPUL City concept provides a strategic framework for the theoretical and practical exploration of productive landscapes and, far from being a utopian spatial form, it is being adopted in cities in Europe and Africa (Bohn and Viljoen, 2012; Viljoen, 2005). In other words, the CPUL City concept puts the food system back into the centre of planning theory and practice, exactly where it was more than a century ago, when Ebenezer Howard proposed the concept of the Garden City, a concept that is resonating once more in urban planning circles in the Global North (Howard, 1902; Steel, 2008). Like the Garden City, the CPUL concept aims to overcome the binary divisions – between urban and rural, society and nature – that defined a modernity project in which food was rendered invisible in the political arena and a 'stranger' to the planning system.

The healthy urban planning discourse also straddles theory and practice because it is both a theoretical strand within planning theory and a social movement associated with the World Health Organisation's *Healthy City* network. The theoretical strand has been enhanced by the recent work of Jason Corburn, for whom healthy urban planning is both a means and an end in the sense that it is a democratic and deliberative *process* that aims to promote positive health *outcomes* for all, especially for poor and marginalised groups in the city (Corburn, 2013). Corburn's conception of healthy urban planning (or healthy *city* planning as he calls it) is an intensely political conception

that foregrounds a pro-poor planning agenda and the emphasis on social justice constitutes a powerful antidote to the idea that physical design changes are enough to secure access to healthy food in cities. However, the real significance of Corburn's work is twofold: it helps planning theory to re-integrate the 'knowing' and 'deliberative' traditions and it helps re-unite planning practice with public health, professional domains that evolved separately despite their common heritage.

Urban political ecology: Re-naturing the city, exposing unjust landscapes

No strand of urban studies has done more to transcend the binary division between nature and society than urban political ecology (UPE), an emerging body of theory that is committed to re-naturing the city and securing social justice (Heynen et al, 2006; Kaika and Swyngedouw, 2011; Keil, 2003; Swyngedouw and Kaika, 2000). UPE draws its inspiration from a wide array of intellectual influences, including Marx, Lefebvre and Harvey, as well as critical social theory, eco-Marxism and eco-feminism (Keil, 2003). One of these inspirational texts is *Nature's Metropolis*, William Cronon's majestic study of Chicago and the Great West (Cronon, 1991). Here Cronon sought to overcome the bifurcated histories of urban and rural regions by writing a history of the *relationship* between Chicago and the Great West. Conventional wisdom, he argued, conceived the city and the country as separate places, seeing the differences rather than the connections, and therefore he wanted 'to tell the city-country story as a unified narrative'. Cronon was influenced here by Raymond Williams, the Marxian cultural critic, who had shown that the 'town and country' fiction of capitalist modernity served 'to promote superficial comparisons and to prevent real ones' (Williams, 1993:

54). To this end, Cronon challenged the spatial and ecological dichotomies that defined capitalist modernity:

The urban-rural, human-natural dichotomy blinds us to the deeper unity beneath our own divided perceptions. If we concentrate our attention solely upon the city, seeing in it the ultimate symbol of 'man's' conquest of 'nature', we miss the extent to which the city's inhabitants continue to rely as much on the nonhuman world as they do on each other. (Cronon, 1991: 18)

Animated by this socio-ecological conception, UPE is committed to nothing less than 're-naturing urban theory' by challenging both the basis and the direction of mainstream urban studies, much of which is said to be 'symptomatically silent about the physical-environmental foundations on which the urbanization process rests' (Heynen et al., 2006: 2). To illustrate their own approach to urban studies, UPE theorists have conducted a series of compelling case studies, most notably of water, to demonstrate how a socio-ecological focus can shed new light on the intimate interplay of power, politics and place (Kaika, 2005; Swyngedouw, 2004). In other words, the re-naturing of urban theory is a means to an end because the central concern of UPE, especially of Marxist-inspired UPE, is to expose the roots of unjust urban landscapes and effect a more equitable distribution of social power (Swyngedouw and Heynen, 2003). From a UPE perspective then, inequitable urban food systems reflect asymmetrical power relations in the city, so much so that hunger and other forms of food insecurity are the result of the interplay of power and politics in urban space.

On the face of it, UPE would appear to be an ideal medium through which urban theory could learn to re-connect to something that is just as essential as water, namely food. What is surprising about the early

evolution of UPE is that, with notable exceptions (Heynen, 2006), it has done little to address itself to the political ecology of urban food provisioning. Perhaps this shortcoming will be redressed at some point in the future because, in charting a new research agenda for UPE, one of its leading theorists has suggested that 'food may be the next big thing' (Keil, 2005: 647). Given its emphasis on re-naturing the city and securing a socially just urban landscape, UPE is well equipped to bring out the socio-ecological as well as the political economic dimensions of the urban food question.¹

Community food security: Re-affirming the right to food (justice)

The food security literature may be more than 50 years old, but *urban* food security is a relatively new theme. Originally addressed to the plight of low-income countries in the Global South, food security has become a mainstream political issue in the countries of the Global North because unprecedented levels of hunger have been spawned by the austerity policies introduced since the 2008 financial crisis. However, the framing of food security has changed quite considerably since the concept was first introduced in the 1970s as a welfare measure. Thanks to the community food security movement, the concept is now used to affirm the right to food as a mark of food justice rather than charity or welfare. This is not to say that basic hunger relief is no longer a concern, merely that hunger and malnutrition are now framed in a broader, more empowering conception of *community food security*.

In conceptual terms the most important change in food security thinking was the shift to a demand-side perspective that stressed *access* to food rather than the supply of food. This shift was largely attributable to the pioneering work of Amartya Sen, who demonstrated with analytical and

empirical rigour that a productivist perspective could have disastrous human consequences because hunger often co-existed with adequate food supply. Famine exists, he argued, where people do not have enough food to eat, it is not the condition where there is not enough food. Sen's other great insight was to say that there has never been a famine in a functioning democracy, a political framing of food security that underlined the critical role played by *voice* in forestalling famine conditions (Sen, 1981). Sen's work helped to overhaul the official definition of food security, so that it is now defined as a condition which exists 'when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic *access* to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life' (FAO, 2006: 1).

Although the concept of food security is still something of a novelty in Europe, it has a long pedigree in the USA, where the paradox of 'want-amidst-plenty' was always more pronounced (Poppendieck, 1986). US food security policy, which originated in the anti-hunger programmes of the 1930s, is now embodied in a wide array of food assistance programmes, the cornerstone of which is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the former Food Stamp Program. These are *de facto* income support programmes and it is instructive that the minimalist American welfare system should assume the form of *domestic food aid*, a term normally associated with international food assistance programmes for low-income countries in the Global South. But food insecurity has reached alarming proportions in the USA according to the Food Research and Action Center, which revealed that 46.6 million people were in receipt of SNAP aid in 2012 and more than 60 million – one in five of the total population – were actually eligible for it.

While urban food security has been a neglected topic in Europe, much can be

learned from the theory and practice of community food security (CFS), a concept that was developed in the USA to help the American food movement to advocate for food justice and sustainable agriculture (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011; Allen, 2004; Gottlieb and Fisher, 1996). Under the CFS banner the American food movement has sought to shift the terms of the political debate from a debate about hunger as a problem of individuals to a debate about *food justice* for poor communities that suffer multiple deprivations, food insecurity being one of them. Framed in these broader, more inclusive terms, food justice becomes 'the governing metaphor for the transformation of the food system that links disparate movements and ideas' (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010: 224).

From a theoretical perspective, the great merit of using a food justice frame is that it 'opens up linkages to a wider range of conceptual frameworks drawn from the literature on democracy, citizenship, social movements, and social and environmental justice' (Wekerle, 2004: 379). From a political standpoint, food justice helps the CFS movement to re-assert the right to food in the strongest and most capacious possible terms. Although it was first proclaimed in 1948, as part of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the right to food is often misunderstood. Far from conveying a right to be fed, which is how it is often (mis)construed, the right to food actually means 'the right to feed oneself in dignity' (UNHCR, 2010).

The re-assertion of the right to food is part of a wider *rights-based* approach to food system reform, an approach that helps to ensure that social justice does not get marginalised in the political agenda for food system reform. Food system reform is often framed in terms of 'sustainability' and 'localisation', implying that such terms are synonymous and necessarily progressive, when

this is clearly not the case (Born and Purcell, 2008). As Patricia Allen says, local food systems serve many purposes, but 'they do not automatically move us in the direction of greater social justice' (Allen, 2010: 306). The rights-based approach is being deployed in part to remind self-referential environmentalists that class, race and gender need to be factored into the framing of food system reform alongside ecological considerations because, as feminist theorists have convincingly argued, 'positionality' shapes the way we view and value the world (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011).²

Significantly, urban geographers are beginning to utilise the food justice frame to speak of 'just urban food systems', a prism through which they are exploring the availability of and access to nutritious food in the city, especially for the urban poor who live in so-called 'food deserts', areas that have been abandoned by mainline grocery stores (Bedore, 2010). Framing the urban food question in terms of a 'just urban food system' has two advantages: it helps to render food *visible* in the urban political realm and it *connects* the community food security lens with the other 'ways of seeing' that we examined in this section, namely healthy urban planning and urban political ecology. The CPUL concept helps the urban planning community to make good its neglect of the *productive* food landscape and encourages urban planners to use their substantive 'space shaping' knowledge to fashion just and sustainable urban foodscapes. Urban political ecology also makes a major contribution to the understanding and realisation of community food security because it highlights the existential significance of urban nature and the extent to which cityscapes are shaped by asymmetrical power relations. The fact that urban planning theory and urban political ecology are beginning to address food system reform suggests that the urban food question can help us to

overcome the debilitating dualisms – such as nature/society, town/country, urban/rural – that have bedevilled urban studies in the past.

Emergent foodscapes: Re-connecting food with nature and health

Food looms large across large swaths of human and non-human life, shaping human health and wellbeing, the treatment of animals and the use of land, water and other natural resources. This *multifunctionality* carries threats as well as opportunities from a political standpoint. On the positive side, it helps to explain why food has a capacity to bring people together from different walks of life, its *convening power* so to speak, which is why food is the focus of so many social movements in the world today (Morgan, 2009). On the negative side, this multifunctional character poses threats because, straddling so many diverse domains, food politics can become locked into single issue political frames – local food, organic food, fair trade, food banks etc. – creating food issues rather than a food movement. Because the urban food question cannot be reduced to a single issue, the aim of this section is to highlight some of the *multifunctional* values associated with these new foodscapes. I discuss these foodscapes with reference to urban agriculture and public health because these resonate most with the theoretical themes addressed earlier.

The rise of urban agriculture

Urban planners in the Global North find themselves increasingly embroiled in the urban food question because they have to adjudicate on practices that used to be considered the domain of rural planners. In North America and Europe they are facing a whole series of novel zoning challenges triggered by a bewildering array of activities,

including the keeping of chickens in urban and suburban areas, urban bee hives, front yard planting, community gardens, farmers' markets, green roofs, wild flower meadows, guerrilla gardening and the like, all of which signals the rapid growth of urban agriculture in the Global North (Cohen, 2012; Nasr and Komisar, 2012).

Once considered to be 'the ultimate oxymoron', urban agriculture is now part of a burgeoning movement that aims to 'farm the city' for a whole series of reasons, including growing food for personal or commercial purposes, nurturing social capital and fashioning alternative food networks. For some radical geographers, urban agriculture can even help redress social and ecological alienation in capitalist societies by helping to 're-establish a conscious metabolic relationship between humans and our biophysical environment by reintegrating intellectual and manual labour' (McClintock, 2010: 202).

What distinguishes urban agriculture is its visceral materiality, the fact that it is palpable, tangible and above all *visible* – in contrast to the industrial food system, where food of doubtful provenance flows into cities from placeless foodscapes (Morgan et al., 2006). Until recently, the political visibility of urban agriculture depended almost exclusively on inspiring municipal experiments in the Global South, especially in Havana (Cuba), Rosario (Argentina) and Belo Horizonte (Brazil), all of which were crisis-induced developments. In the Global North today, however, urban agriculture is beginning to assume a political visibility that would have been unthinkable a decade ago, and nowhere more so than in Detroit, the industrial city that is more famous for its cars than its gardens (Cohen, 2012; Giorda, 2012).

As an icon of post-industrial urban decay, Detroit is second to none in the USA, a process that has been underway for half a

century in many rustbelt cities. What distinguishes Detroit from other northern cities, however, is the phenomenal scale of its *emptiness* – the fact that it has some 20 square miles of vacant land within its city limits, an empty space the size of Manhattan (Detroit Works Project (DWP), 2012). The interplay of food and race is another distinctive feature. Food insecurity in Detroit is twice the national level and the city is chronically under-served by full-service supermarkets, a sector in which there is only one black-owned grocery supermarket in a city where four out of five residents are African-Americans (Pothukuchi, 2011). To redress these problems the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network has been largely responsible for creating the Detroit Food Policy Council, whose mission is ‘to nurture the development and maintenance of a sustainable, localised food system and food secure City of Detroit in which all of its residents are hunger-free, healthy and benefit economically from the food system that impacts their lives’ (Pothukuchi, 2011: 6).

Urban agriculture has been identified as the first priority of the food strategy, a priority that triggered deep divisions in the city as to what kind of urban agriculture should be prioritised. Although there are many competing schemes for urban agriculture, the most divergent visions are the *community* vision and the *corporate* vision: the former is being championed by the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, which has a vision of community gardens and neighbourhood-based urban farms; while the latter is sponsored by Hantz Farms, a company that proposes to build a large-scale commercial farm in Detroit (Gallagher, 2010). Detroit’s urban food strategy also raises important questions about the role of civic universities in helping post-industrial cities to re-invent themselves in more socially just and sustainable ways. The work of SEED Wayne, a programme in Wayne State

University, has sought to promote community development through the medium of a sustainable food action research project. Despite its pioneering work, however, the programme has been stymied by a university bureaucracy that remains in thrall to a single bottom line accounting metric (Pothukuchi, 2012).

As cities throughout the world struggle to deal with the competing claims of climate change, economic renewal and social justice, it is now being suggested that ‘Detroit may emerge as the city that figured it out first – how to use its open lands to foster a local food economy’ (Gallagher, 2010: 151). While this is hugely optimistic, it does at least underline the new political visibility of urban agriculture in the post-industrial cities of the Global North, where ‘farming in Motown’ has become a mainstream narrative of urban development in what was once the quintessential industrial city (Giorda, 2012).

The new urban health discourse

Re-connecting food with human and ecological health is the central aim of food system reformers, clearly reflected in the Soil Association motto ‘healthy soil, healthy people, healthy planet’. City governments are beginning to address the noxious legacy of lax planning policies that squeezed out urban and peri-urban food producers in the past and enabled the fast-food industry to colonise the urban environment, contributing to the rapid increase in diet-related diseases such as obesity. Although city governments have limited powers to reform the food system, they are invoking their public health mandate to fashion healthier urban foodscapes, provoking charges from the fast-food industry that city governments are the new ‘nanny states’, the sexist response of the corporate food lobby to any restrictions on its freedom of action. This new food policy battle is most pronounced in New York City,

where the city government has been a pioneer of public health reform in the USA with its ban on trans-fats, portion caps on soda drinks, and the calorie posting requirement on food service establishments on the grounds that New Yorkers get one-third or more of their calories eating outside the home and they need help to make informed choices (New York City (NYC), 2011).

Some of New York's food policy interventions are proving more politically contentious than anyone anticipated. By far the most contentious intervention to date was former Mayor Bloomberg's proposed *Portion Cap Rule* to ban the sale of soda drinks above 16 ounces, designed to help reduce the escalating costs of obesity in the city. Although this was the Mayor's signature public health intervention, widely perceived by friends and foes alike as a global bellwether for a city's right to regulate the powerful fast-food industry, the Cap was overturned by a state supreme court on two grounds: it was found to be arbitrary and capricious in its effects and it was therefore deemed to be unconstitutional.³ More troubling for the Mayor was the fact that the Cap was unpopular with 60% of New York residents, especially in the poorer boroughs of Queens and the Bronx (Grynbaum, 2013).

In addition to public health regulations, New York has launched new urban food strategies, the most celebrated of which is *FoodWorks*, a comprehensive programme to promote a healthier and more sustainable urban food system covering production, processing, distribution, consumption and post-consumption activities. On the production side, the programme has boosted the number of Farmer's Markets, which totalled 123 markets in 2011, and helped support more than 100 Community Supported Agriculture schemes, which build direct links between farmers and residents. On the consumption side, *FoodWorks* has sought to address the

twin public health challenges of obesity and food insecurity. The city has used legislative and zoning changes to launch its Food Retail Expansion for Health (FRESH) programme, which provides incentives for grocery stores to offer fresh produce in under-served communities. It is also sponsoring alternative retail options, such as food coops, while its *Healthy Bodegas* Initiative has encouraged over 1000 vendors across the city to begin stocking healthier options (New York City, 2011).

Public health interventions and urban food programmes are designed to complement the city's school meal and childhood nutrition provisions, which are federally supported but locally delivered programmes. Here, too, NYC has played an innovative role by designing a creative procurement policy that seeks to purchase as much fresh regionally produced food as possible, especially through the *Farm-to-School* programme. It is seldom realised that the purchasing power of NYC is second only to the US military and this procurement budget can shape where food is sourced and how it is produced and consumed, a power of purchase that the city government has deployed to promote healthier school food and combat nutritional poverty in the city's public schools (Morgan and Sonnino, 2010). Through all these means – health regulations, food programmes and the power of purchase – NYC is becoming a testbed for healthy urban food planning.

The rise of urban food politics: A social movement in the making?

In most countries agri-food policy has been fashioned by a combination of national governments and international bodies (such as the World Trade Organization) working in concert with a narrow and self-serving agri-business sector. But in recent years this corporatist producer-driven alliance has been

forced to adapt to a rapidly changing food policy agenda in which radically different voices, representing health, poverty and environmental lobbies, have demanded a say in shaping agri-food policy (Lang et al., 2009). Conspicuous by their absence until recently, city governments are now beginning to see themselves as food system players on the national and international stage (FAO, 2012; Morgan, 2009).

The most dramatic change in food policy governance in recent years has been the advent of Food Policy Councils. Although they are relatively new in Europe, Food Policy Councils (FPCs) have been growing rapidly in North America – at city, county and state levels – and these provide an institutional vehicle for local governments to collaborate with civil society groups to raise the profile of the food system and advocate for community food security in and beyond their local jurisdictions (APA, 2011). Following the creation of the first FPC in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1980, there are now 193 such councils in North America. The proliferation of urban food strategies in Europe suggests that European cities could also become important players in food system reform, especially if they can collectively advocate for just and sustainable urban foodscapes.

The aim of this final section is to chart the rise of the city as a food policy actor and assess the significance of the new urban food politics. Here the spatial focus shifts from American to British cities because the latter appear to be ahead of the game in the Global North in trying to fashion an urban food coalition that seeks to overcome the problems of *fragmented localism*, which threatens the solidarity between cities, and *ecological exclusivity*, where urban food quarters become the unwitting agents of green gentrification.

During the past decade a number of city governments in the UK have begun to design urban food strategies, a totally novel

experience for all of them. While each strategy has its own local nuances, the common thread is the *political* desire to address the socio-ecological problems associated with or generated by the industrial food system, including some or all of the following: planning barriers to urban agriculture, diet-related diseases, carbon footprints, land conservation, food poverty, junk food clusters, urban–rural linkages and supermarket power. City governments have a love/hate relationship with the supermarkets, the dominant players who collectively control more than 80% of the UK grocery market. While supermarkets claim to perform quasi-public duties – such as job creation, urban regeneration and food price control for example – they are also charged with abusing their power, by squeezing suppliers, reducing retail diversity and fostering unsustainable consumption (Morgan et al., 2006).

The greatest weakness of these emerging food strategies is that they have yet to explicitly address the issue of supermarket power, preferring to raise awareness of the links between food, health and ecology like their counterparts in Detroit and NYC. For example, the *Spade to Spoon* strategy in Brighton and Hove, which was launched in 2006, aims to forge better links between food policy and local policies for public health and education, environmental planning, local economic development and culture and tourism (Brighton and Hove Food Partnership (BHFP), 2012). The former London Mayor, Ken Livingstone, also launched a strategy (London Food Strategy) in 2006 to secure a healthier and more sustainable urban food system. In 2010 Bristol created the first Food Policy Council in the country and produced the most comprehensive urban food system assessment ever conducted for a city in the UK in which the issues of public health, ecological integrity and social justice figured prominently (Carey, 2010).

The role of food-focused NGOs has been critical in inspiring these urban food strategies and orchestrating the political partnerships on which they depend. What is not sufficiently appreciated is that these urban food strategies signal a new era in local food politics in the UK: where community groups and NGOs were once content to advocate for 'alternative food systems' from the margins of the political system, they are now actively collaborating with the local state to design and deliver strategies that address the shortcomings of the conventional food system whilst advocating for more sustainable food systems. This political change can be interpreted as a shift from a politics of *protest* to a politics of *co-governance* in the sense that NGOs are now members of the official partnerships that oversee urban food policy, symptomatic of a broader trend towards 'collaborative planning'. Although an important change is clearly underway in the political tactics of NGOs, it would be premature to think that these civil actors are equal partners in the new governance arrangements. Even more problematical, the politics of co-governance can very easily degenerate into the politics of *co-optation*, where NGOs sacrifice their radical voice for the semblance of political influence.

On the other hand, it is undeniably the case that NGOs are beginning to influence two local state policies that have a strong bearing on the urban food system, namely *planning* policy and *procurement* policy. On the planning front, Sustain has helped urban planners to re-imagine their roles and responsibilities by offering practical guidance as to how planning policy can create new opportunities for urban food projects to flourish (Sustain, 2011). As regards public procurement, the Soil Association has helped the public sector to design and deliver a school food service in which local authority food purchasing is part of an integrated education and training programme to

teach children and caterers the merits of a whole school approach to sustainable food provisioning (Soil Association, 2012a).

City governments are beginning to realise that, while their powers over the food system are circumscribed, the concerted use of planning and procurement powers can make a significant difference to the quality of the urban foodscape, especially in public canteens and public spaces. By working alone, however, they can achieve little on the national or international stage. To overcome the limitations of cities working in isolation, the silo city syndrome, a new urban food coalition has emerged in the UK. Together with Sustain and Food Matters, the Soil Association has launched the *Sustainable Food Cities Network*, the most ambitious urban food programme ever created in the UK, the aim of which is to inspire and enable 50 towns and cities to develop sustainable food programmes. A condition of membership is that each member subscribes to the following principles of a sustainable food charter: health and wellbeing for all, environmental sustainability, local economic prosperity, resilient communities and fairness in the food chain (Soil Association, 2012b). Although clearly aspirational at present, these principles provide a vision of an alternative food system and such re-imagining is acknowledged to be an important pre-condition for political change (Blay-Palmer, 2010).

Creative procurement and food-friendly planning policies require a more iterative governance relationship between planners and purchasers on one side and civil society interlocutors on the other, providing new opportunities for genuine co-governance. Although a new urban food politics is beginning to emerge in the UK, to what extent can we say that it constitutes a new social movement? The sobering conclusion would seem to be that it is too early to interpret the urban food coalition as a new social

movement. This is not to say that a food-based social movement could not emerge at some point in the near future, but this would require a soundly based organisational vehicle. While the *Sustainable Food Cities Network* aims to be more than the sum of its parts, it is too soon to know whether this promising initiative will survive the neoliberal 'age of austerity' that is gutting city governments throughout the country, which is why the new food coalition is perilously dependent on funding from a progressive foundation called the *Esmée Fairbairn Foundation*.

Even so, the fact that such trans-local initiatives are emerging suggests that urban food politics could be evolving from a purely localised and marginalised alternative food politics, where it was content to contest rather than engage the local state, into something more ambitious and potentially transformative. If civil society groups such as Sustain and the Soil Association can engage city governments as partners in new food alliances without forfeiting their radical voice, and to the extent that these alliances assume a trans-local form, then it becomes possible to harness the power of the urban public realm to fashion more sustainable urban foodscapes – foodscapes that are fashioned by design rather than default, where the food system is subject to democratic deliberation and where it is no longer seen as a 'stranger' to the planning system.

Conclusions

How to feed cities in a just, sustainable and culturally appropriate manner in the face of looming climate change, widening inequality and burgeoning hunger is one of the quintessential challenges of the 21st century. Although it may seem too capacious, this definition of the urban food question has the merit of doing justice to the *multifunctionality* of food, an attribute that gets lost

when the urban food question is reduced to a purely needs-based nutritional agenda. This is not to deny the significance of the nutritional agenda. On the contrary, the nutritional agenda will continue to dwarf all other urban food issues because the double burden of malnutrition – hunger and obesity – is increasingly assuming an urban form and these are pre-eminently social justice issues because mortality and morbidity are the ultimate inequalities in capitalist society. All the more surprising, then, that the urban studies literature in the Global North has been slow to address itself to the multifunctionality of urban food systems. This article has sought to open a new debate by focusing on key aspects of the urban food question, namely: the need for a new theoretical synthesis in urban food studies; the advent of new urban foodscapes that seek to re-connect food, health and nature; and the politics of the urban food movement.

On the theoretical front the article draws on a key insight of Heynen et al. (2006), who argued that urban studies has been rather silent on 'the physical-environmental' foundations of the urbanisation process. I suggested that this neglect can be redressed, at least with respect to the food system, through a theoretical synthesis of recent thinking in urban planning theory, urban political ecology and the community food security literature. For example, the concepts of the continuous productive urban landscape and healthy urban planning resonate with the concerns of urban political ecology, which is bent on 're-naturing the city' and contesting 'unjust urban landscapes'. They also help the planning community to engage with the social justice concerns of the community food security movement, which aims to subject urban food provisioning to more democratic forms of urban planning. Taken together, these theoretical developments help us to re-imagine the city as a socio-ecological space in which the traditional

dualisms – such as nature/society and urban/rural – are no longer allowed to obfuscate the real connections that Raymond Williams and William Cronon were keen to capture in their seminal studies of the country and the city. Framed in these socio-ecological terms, the urban food system becomes an ideal prism through which to understand the materiality and relationality of *urban nature*, a process of re-engagement that is spawning a new ‘politics of conviviality’ according to some ecological geographers (Hincliffe and Whatmore, 2006).

Far from being a purely theoretical development, new urban foodscapes were shown to be emerging in the cities of the Global North in response to growing concerns about the conventional food system and its noxious effects on public health, ecological integrity and social justice. In their different ways the new urban foodscapes aspire to be ‘sustainable’ in the sense that they explicitly seek to address one or more of the values of sustainability, be it health, ecology or justice (Morgan, 2009). The article sought to capture this multifunctional character by highlighting two themes that are commonly associated with these new foodscapes, namely urban agriculture and the new urban health discourse.

One of the hallmarks of the new foodscapes is the rapid growth of urban agriculture, a broad definition which includes bee hives, urban chickens, front yard planting, community gardens, farmers’ markets, green roofs and wild flower meadows among many other things, all of which are a stark contrast to the invisible and anonymous factory-based foodscapes of the conventional food system. Urban agriculture is nowhere more visible in the Global North than in Detroit, where it has been propelled into the forefront of the political debate about re-imagining Motown by bringing the ‘country’ into the ‘city’ and challenging urban zoning laws in the process.

The new urban health discourse was illustrated with reference to New York City, which has been a pioneer of healthy food planning. However, the significance of NYC’s initiatives are fiercely debated in the city and in the wider academy: while supporters claim that the *FoodWorks* strategy makes a difference because healthier food options are now more readily available in poor neighbourhoods, critics allege that it does nothing to challenge the mainstream food industry or address the underlying causes of food poverty in the city. Although the contentious soda cap policy was defeated, this was primarily a defeat for an imperious Mayor who sought to flaunt his power rather than engage his people in a conversation about urban food policy.

Finally, the article addressed the rise of a new urban food politics, drawing on the municipal experience in the UK, where food policies are the result of a novel political alliance between local governments and civil society groups. The latter have shifted their tactics from contesting the local state to collaborating with it in the hope of exercising some influence over planning and procurement, two municipal policies that have the greatest purchase on the local food system. While some progress has been made in certain cities, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that such local efforts will remain partial and symbolic unless these cities can form a *trans-local* urban food movement to leverage the power of the public realm to deliver more ambitious reform of the food system. The new urban food coalition is a progressive step in this respect, but it is under-resourced and its municipal partners are being eviscerated by a Conservative-led government in thrall to a pre-Keynesian creed. While local food campaigns in the UK are a dynamic urban force, nourishing the city in more ways than one, they do not (as yet) possess the trans-local reach and organisational coherence to constitute a new social movement.

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Notes

1. A good example of this is Galt (2013).
2. On the subject of race and class, Julie Guthman has spoken of 'the unbearable whiteness of the alternative food movement' (Guthman, 2011) and Thomas Forster concedes that the American organic movement was not only 'a mostly white movement' but was also 'largely blind to hunger, race, and class issues' (quoted in Winne, 2008: 133).
3. Overturning Bloomberg's public health intervention, the judge said the Portion Cap Rule would 'violate the separation of powers doctrine' (Tingling, 2013: 35). This was aimed at Mayor Bloomberg, who had introduced the Cap in a high-handed fashion through the Board of Health, which he controlled, rather than the City Council, the legislative branch.

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