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issn 2175-974x | ano 2019 year
semestre 01 semester



mutirão como ferramenta política: agricultura urbana e cidadania

joint work as a political tool: urban agriculture and citizenship

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PT | EN

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How to quote this text: Biazoti, A. R., 2019. Joint work as a political tool: urban agriculture and citizenship. *V!rus*, Sao Carlos, 18. [e-journal] [online] Available at: <<http://www.nomads.usp.br/virus/virus18/?sec=4&item=7&lang=en>>. [Accessed: 08 July 2019].

ARTICLE SUBMITTED ON AUGUST 28, 2018

Abstract

São Paulo is experiencing a rich moment of creation and discovery of community vegetable gardens spread throughout the city, maintained by people, collectives and social groups interested in the urban production of food. These vegetable gardens are structured through periodic collective work that not only foster food production for one's own consumption, but community practices of shared management of public spaces, encouraging the production of the commons as a political principle of self-government. In this article, will be analyzed the practices of mutirão¹ as political tool for local development, established in some community vegetable gardens in the city of São Paulo, members of the newly created Union of Community Vegetable Gardens of São Paulo. The mutirão is observed as a practice that has in itself a political and insurgent character that builds bonds of trust and reciprocity, enabling the dialogue and the construction of utopias of a city in which one wishes to live and allowing the local articulation of resources and strategies in order to face the private and public appropriation of the city's territories. In this way, the present article dialogues directly with the theme of urban interventions, public management and community participation aiming, mainly, the insurgent creation of decision-making processes of participatory management.

Keywords: urban agriculture; citizenship; community participation

1 Introduction: agriculture in the city as a practice of resistance

Agriculture, in São Paulo, has always been an act of resistance and subversiveness against the accelerated urban development, making itself present in vacant lots, abandoned squares and ravines near precarious housing, since the beginning of the intense urbanization process (Morse, 1954). From a rural settlement to the largest metropolis in Latin America, agriculture lost its importance throughout the development of the

industrial city, and was continually relegated to invisibility, something that did not match the modernity propagated by urbanization enthusiasts, a primitive remnant heading towards extinction in the city. Agriculture would serve to supply the city, in a process of exploitation of the countryside by the city, de-structuring the existing non-capitalist peasant relations, and inserting them within the capitalist approach of production. The Brazilian agrarian structure, based in monocultural production and land concentration, remained the same throughout urbanization and, to some extent, was intensified, while the peasant population was integrated into the industrial market, either by emigrating to the city or by remaining in the countryside in a marginalized way (Singer, 2017).

From a food surplus from the field production, the city begins to concentrate much of the commercialization, processing and redistribution of food. Urbanization thus advances on rural areas, imposing a capitalist mode of production and urban labor relations, in a way that in certain places it is able to blur the distinctions between what is urban and what is rural (Singer, 2017). As a result of industrialization, the city began to offer products to the rural population, stressing the exploitation of the countryside that had existed since the colonial period (Singer, 2017).

Agriculture has always been present throughout the history of the city, either for food supply purposes, or for the citizens seeking their livelihood in the city own consumption. Immigration has played an important role in the establishment of agricultural communities, especially by the Japanese (in Itaquera neighborhood and in the municipalities of the present Metropolitan Region of São Paulo), the Germans (in the district of Santo Amaro and Parelheiros), and the Portuguese (in East and North regions of the city, mainly). The municipality of São Paulo became a strong commercial center of peach and potato production until mid-1945, when it received a new wave of migration, mainly from the northeast region of Brazil, to develop the industry and the service sector, establishing itself as an industrial army in reserve, expanding the city towards the periphery and consolidating the transition from a rural to an urban economy.

São Paulo structured a green belt around it, which aimed to guarantee the production of food for the city and supply the growing population attracted by industrialization and migratory flows throughout the twentieth century. Many of these agricultural colonies, such as the region of Itaquera, were incorporated to the city during its horizontal growth, expelling farmers by the advance of real estate speculation and soaring land prices, by the restriction of the areas destined to agriculture, by the industrial pollution that contaminated the production and by the disruption of agricultural communities with the arrival of new inhabitants in the region (Lemos and France, 1999). Only the southern region of the municipality has maintained a certain isolation from the urban expansion, due to the environmental conservation areas created in the territory that aimed precisely at the preservation of the recharge areas of the existing water springs and at the contention of urban expansion, assuming rural characteristics until the present day.

Even so, agricultural practices have been and remained constantly distanced from the center of the city, pushed towards the peripheries or invisibly entangled in the midst of the urban concrete, comprising a double movement of intensification of practices (to feed a growing population) and of their de-structuring (with the horizontal expansion of the city and with new dynamics of land use). Starting in the 2000s, vegetable gardens were created by the population in the most central regions of the city, establishing social and political articulation processes that dialogue with community participation and collaboration, promoting urban interventions that directly impact public management.

2 Community gardens in São Paulo: a review cut

Agriculture, in São Paulo, is characterized by several types, such as family farming, small agricultural enterprises, farms and urban vegetable gardens, community vegetable gardens, institutional vegetable gardens, productive yards and livestock production. This diversity represents, to a certain extent, the different forms of relation with nature and of appropriation and production of the urban territory by the citizens. It demonstrates disputed city projects that are sometimes aligned and sometimes confronted directly with the urban power, what the urban planner Raquel Rolnik understands as "a set of economic, ideological and political mechanisms that work in the daily life of the city to repress or transform everything which differs from social 'order' (Rolnik, 1994, p.98, our translation), a model created by the ruling classes to guarantee social homogeneity. Urban agriculture in São Paulo involves an increasing number of subjects from different social classes and it is either carried out to guarantee survival, to generate work and income and guarantee food and nutritional security or to build urban sustainability, where the occupation of public spaces, food activism, transformation of the food system, agroecology and pedagogical work of bringing consumers and farmers closer assume more central roles.

Without deepening the discussion about these differentiations, a superficial distinction is necessary to critically address such experiences and give clarity to the focus proposed in this work. Community vegetable gardens can be characterized by the social class that maintain the garden, its struggle for the expansion of citizenship

and the spatial location of the garden in the city. These vegetable gardens in areas of greater social vulnerability tend to have motivations directly related to the reproduction of life, such as income generation, food budget discount, subsistence, and even resistance to urban dynamics in the territory. Their forms of organization are based on the struggle for a full citizenship that contemplates their forms of life, guarantees access to basic services, allows political participation in the management of the territory and guarantees human dignity. These groups engage in subsistence agriculture that enables the cost reduction of maintaining the workforce by their employer, reinforcing, in many cases, the exploitation that these groups already suffer (Oliveira, 2003). Even so, such practices are intimately interwoven with the identity of these populations and with their resistance to marginalization and abandonment by the State.

On the other hand, the most central experiences, related to the Union of Community Vegetable Gardens of São Paulo, are organized by middle-class individuals, motivated by the desire for a healthier diet, by a qualified occupation of public spaces and by community building in the midst of the individualistic abandonment in the city. For these groups, food production is secondary, and other motivations are more expressive, such as the creation of social bonds, environmental education and political articulation. The forms of organization no longer emanate from the struggle for an unequal citizenship, but from the fight for an active citizenship related to participatory democracy, the recognition of agriculture as a social practice existing in the city and as a promoter of urban sustainability, and the construction of public policies from the experiences.

In spite of being socially and spatially diverse, both social groups connect and interact in meetings and mutirões, in the construction of the city in which they want to live not from a project, but from a praxis that constitutes itself in act (Machini, 2018). The different social groups are recognized in their practices as socially diverse, but oriented under the same perspective of urban agriculture development. This makes possible the mutual help and solidarity among them in diverse moments of encounter, encompassing the exchange of inputs and experiences, the creation of food arrangements based on the solidarity economy, or the discussion of public policies that are necessary for the development of the practices.

Of particular interest, we will analyze here the experiences of community vegetable gardens in the area of the expanded Center of São Paulo, especially those related to the Hortelões Urbanos Facebook group and linked to the Union of Community Vegetable Gardens of São Paulo, considering its feature of social innovation and the direct involvement of the subjects of these practices in the construction of public policies (Nemoto and Biazoti, 2017). We will consider here the vegetable gardens with community characteristics, whose organization is collectivized, through associations, cooperatives or self-managed by a specific group of people of a community, where the production is motivated by self-sufficiency, activism, occupation of public spaces, food security, community building, and may include an occasional sale of products. According to the very conceptualization of the Union of Community Vegetable Gardens of São Paulo, where the researcher himself develops fieldwork and observation, community vegetable gardens are those that do not use chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and cultivate on the basis of agroecological and permaculture principles. They also carry out collective and collaborative work and inclusive use of space, besides promoting free environmental education activities open to the public and sharing the harvest freely among volunteers and the surrounding community .

Most of the community vegetable gardens are less than 0.5 ha and have a diverse production, with a preponderance of temporary crops such as vegetables, unconventional food plants, medicinal herbs, as well as fruits and ornamental plants. Its management takes place collectively and, in most cases, in a community arrangement, based on self-management of the group in the decisions about planting, maintenance and harvesting. Many community vegetable gardens base their production on self-sufficiency and the promotion of benefits that go beyond food itself, such as strengthening community ties, bringing together consumers and producers, developing pedagogical activities, producing green and healthy environments and cooperation.

The very category of community vegetable gardens is vast and comprises a series of initiatives that differ from one another. Such differences take place according to social, environmental, economic and cultural variables, which define different forms of space management and appropriation. The motivations of the participants also differ according to several factors, such as location of the garden, social class, ways of access to the garden, access to basic public services and political and social interests.

In 2011, a public Facebook group was created, called Hortelões Urbanos, to gather people interested in exchanging personal experiences with organic farming, and also with the goal of inspiring the creation of community vegetable gardens. Although Hortelões Urbanos is not characterized as a political movement or association, members of the group actively work in community vegetable gardens and related initiatives, becoming, in a few years, a wide network of knowledge exchange. Therefore, from the virtual discussions, some members of the Hortelões Urbanos took the initiative to promote actions of public space occupation to start community vegetable gardens (Nagib, 2016).

Most of these vegetable gardens share common elements, which give them a different profile from other gardens in the city. The activities are organized through specific Facebook and WhatsApp groups, where the days of *mutirão*, the activities, the division of tasks and the resolution of problems are decided. It is also in these social networks where the *mutirão* and actions carried out in the garden are publicized, the exchange of knowledge on urban agriculture occurs and the interaction among volunteers happens. Decisions are not only restricted to virtual communication, but are also agreed upon in dialogues that occur in the garden gatherings. There are no assemblies for decision, but the consensus among the volunteers is exercised, having the presence of leaders with greater weight of decision in the core of volunteers. There is a specific task of coordinating the activities that is not performed by a specific person, but it is done in a self organized way by the volunteers or in a natural way that enables the actions to be held in a shared perspective.

All the vegetable gardens carry out a periodical *mutirão* for maintenance of the vegetable beds, which include removal of weeds, planting, maintenance, fertilization, pruning, treatment with natural products and harvesting. The *mutirão* is, in many cases, the only time where most of the volunteers meet each other and, in fact, it is the main space where exchanges, affections, political exercise and community work take place. It is the gateway to other actions promoted in the vegetable garden, and it is through *mutirão* that the deepest engagement of the volunteers takes place, both among them and of them with the garden. All the work done is voluntary, with rare exceptions for specialized work, such as pruning on large trees, activities with specific machinery, activities to build structures, among others. As far as possible, specific volunteer partnerships are made to assist in what is needed. The vegetable gardens do not have funding and the expenses are covered by the volunteers themselves according to the needs.

Through participant observation and informal conversations with the main groups of volunteers of *Horta das Corujas*, *Horta do CCSP* (São Paulo Cultural Center), *Horta das Flores*, *Horta da Saúde*, *Horta da City Lapa*, *Horta do Ciclista* and *Horta da FMUSP* (Faculty of Medicine, University of São Paulo), we can perceive three different levels of volunteer engagement and estimate the number of participants in each garden. The first, the core, is formed by approximately 10 participants, who organize the activities and take care of the vegetable garden more intensely, coordinating and producing actions, effectively managing the group, solving problems, making strategic and political decisions, buying tools and inputs, and performing the daily maintenance of the garden. The second, the group of participants, is dynamic and encompasses approximately 40 people, who frequently participate in *mutirão* and engage with specific actions, being able to participate with greater intensity according to the type of activity and the demand of time required. The third, the support network, is the most dynamic group, involving about 100 or more people who support the vegetable garden and occasionally participate. Many of these people in the support network participate in more than one vegetable garden, and some volunteers from the core or from the group of participants from one garden are members of the support network of another.

The cultivation of vegetables, fruits and medicinal herbs is aimed at self-sufficiency, with rare or no commercialization of production. In addition, anyone has the right to harvest and eat the produce, since the vegetable garden is located in public, open or institutional, spaces, after a certain ethical behavior is established among the participants. The group of volunteers understands that the entire community around the garden has the right to benefit from it, being able to participate in the activities and plant and harvest freely. The amount of food produced is not large enough to fully feed all participants, due to the small size of the vegetable gardens, the challenges of self-organization, and the lack of technical support to improve production, serving as a supplement food and pedagogical, experimental and recreational activity. All the cultivation is carried out through agroecological practices, using production techniques that do not use poisons, pesticides or chemical fertilizers and that are based on farmer's traditional knowledge of production. The vegetable garden is structured as an open space of knowledge sharing among the participants, who share techniques that help structure the food production and consolidate new forms of management.

These characteristics do not apply equally to all the community vegetable gardens in São Paulo, because, as already mentioned, they differ according to the economic, social and cultural conditions in which they are inserted. Even so, the individuals working in various vegetable gardens, especially those more central, are characterized by their articulation with innumerable other initiatives of urban agriculture and activism that exist in the city, making connections, developing collective projects and fostering exchanges between these practices. As Machini (2018) writes, these subjects are multi-militants, acting in several different initiatives. This connection between the different groups of gardeners has made it possible to consolidate an urban agriculture movement in the city, based on collectively building of a common goal focused on promoting food security and sovereignty, on paradigmatic changes in the food systems, and on promoting urban sustainability with a focus on regeneration and conservation of urban ecosystems. Through their practices in the territories, the subjects have sought to assume active citizenship in search for the human right to adequate food and in the strengthening of democracy at a local level.

There is little discussion about how urban agriculture, through meetings, community work, affections and building trust, empowers citizens to a shared, institutive and participatory management of productive spaces. Research on the political and public policy dimensions of urban and peri-urban agriculture tends to be prescriptive as to how government action to support initiatives should be (Gore, 2008), but they do not examine what has actually been done *in situ*, which political institutions emanate from this common practice, and how the actions of civil society have been related to the governmental dynamics.

In the São Paulo experience examined here, community vegetable gardens have been presented as places for citizen involvement in the participative management of public spaces, in the sharing and exchange of information on food cultivation, and in civic and activist engagement with urban problems, especially with regard to issues of trust and community identity, which are characteristic of the modernity described by Bauman (2003, 2009). Vegetable gardens change the relationship of users with space and with each other, creating personal subjectivities and relationships that empower common action and contribute directly to the individual's self-realization, building autonomy and developing individuality. Aligned with the construction of the commons, the subjects become collective in a multitude, affecting and being affected with the joy of the encounters in the vegetable gardens, in direct opposition to individualism, typical of the capitalist model that develop citizens as egocentric consumers.

The production of food through mutual help in an unified collective work not only partially meets the basic needs of the subjects, but instigates them to the production of a city in which they want to live, starting from their freedom and their desire to self-govern autonomously. The practical change promoted by individuals with the transformation of idle spaces abandoned by the Public Power into vibrant vegetable gardens, fed by their communities with a common objective, makes the practical experience of territory management by the collectivity possible. This power increase in the subjects' acting, once immersed in their dynamics of work and reproduction of their lives without being involved with a collective production of the city, sets in motion a circuit of powerful effects that opens them to new forms of action and thought. There are many subjects who had their lives transformed by experiencing community gardening, leading them to find jobs related to urban agriculture and broaden their understanding of what the city is, what politics is and the what is the role of civil society to ensure inclusive and permanent public policies.

It is recognized here that politics emerges from affections between bodies searching for the self-government of their lives, which extend their power of realization and perseverance from the encounters and the practical experience in the world, as presented by the philosopher Spinoza and his interpreters (Negri, 2016; Chauí, 1995, 2011; Spinoza, 2015). It is through the affections of joy, of affirmative and potent practical action, and of good encounters that, little by little, a network of trust, support and solidarity is formed among garden volunteers, which strengthens the subjects for a broader action on the political decision-making spaces. This is the incessant and dynamic process of constitution of the multitude, the amplification of the acting power of the collective subject that desires and resists against the opposing forces that try to destroy it. This conjunction of singularities that takes place in community vegetable gardens strengthens bonds of trust based on love and consensus building, in a way that practical action fosters the connection of the subjects with reality and with the social understanding of what it means to actually produce the city. The utopia of a better place to live becomes a practical, everyday and political construction. It is in the joyful and active affections that we observe the amplification of the political doing, recognizing the existence of innumerable singularities that produce the commons through the self-organized collective action. The multitude institutes in its practices new subjectivities and new ways of living. That is why we recognize that each vegetable garden is unique, has its own path of development and institution of ways of doing, which are at the same time shared and diverse among themselves.

It is by building in practice a better city that the subject suffers a decisive affection, a qualitative leap, which is experienced as the strongest of desires and the strongest of joys, in which the subject discovers oneself as the cause of one's own desires in the act of wishing, actually taking control of his life (Chauí, 1995). This expanded affection enables an understanding of reality and an amplification of its capacity to think and its power to act in the world. From there, there is another recognition that causes a rupture, passing from the fear of the Other to the desire not to harm the Other, hoping for the benefits that mutual help can offer to guarantee the freedom of all (Chauí, 2011). The recognition of the convenience between people for the exercise of their singular power leads to the constitution of a multitude, as it allows each individual to bring to the collective the values of freedom for the development of oneself (Negri, 2016). It is in this continuous abundance and overflow of being, in the expansion of its power, that the bond between the individual and the totality, the singularity and the absolute, the movement of desire to the political institution occurs. The institutional process arises from within the social struggle, as a necessary mediation of the power of the multitude in its affirmation: the construction of the commons.

The *mutirão*, a time and space of meeting and political articulation among gardeners, is based on mutual aid and allows the social construction of new production and consumption arrangements, starting with the

constitution of the multitude. The process of the multitude, as an open concept in permanent movement, is formed in two ways: it occurs from the relation between the singularities (being multitude), and from the material and collective practice directed by the common passion (making multitude), from which the institutional power emanates (Negri, 2016). The meetings held in the *mutirão* place the singularities in movement, starting from the common practice oriented by the desire of a better city. This constitutes the multitude in an open and continuous process throughout the successive meetings between the volunteers of a certain vegetable garden, the volunteers of other vegetable gardens and other urban farmers. Thus, a collective body with a common objective of promoting agricultural practice in the city is formed, modifying the existing relations of production and consumption.

In addition, experiencing the *mutirão* creates informal decision-making spaces on the overall management of the vegetable gardens regarding the maintenance of food production itself and the construction of a space that is enjoyed by the whole community. It is through the collective decisions made during the "working together" that co-responsibility for the space is built without a notion of ownership of the space, but rather with the notion of social usage by the extended collective of subjects who live or work in the territory. The collective group that works directly in the vegetable garden is a sphere of self-government that constantly confronts local authorities, either public or private, building the commons from social practice. Rather than an assembly space or a deliberative meeting, it is the *mutirão*, in its characteristic of a good meeting, that empowers the subjects to expand their power of action beyond the vegetable garden, through joyful affections and practical experience, establishing the self-government through mutual help and horizontal decision-making.

4 Conclusion: urban agriculture and citizenship building

The history of urban agriculture in São Paulo is marked by resistance against the advance of urbanization over the agricultural spaces in the formation of the modern metropolis. Small vegetable gardens, imbued with social meaning, were gradually replaced by housing estates, great avenues or just abandoned to their own fate, giving space to the development of a modern city. Even so, several groups perpetuated this practice in the territories not only as a means to guarantee their survival, but to enable their access to the city and their right to its production.

The development of community gardens over the last 10 years has allowed the emergence of new territorial management practices and the recognition of urban agriculture initiatives existing in the municipality, made invisible by the urban growth. As a place for interaction between consumers and farmers, the gardens enabled the development of mutually supportive practices that stimulate the constitution of vibrant communities engaged in the occupation of the city's public spaces. In general, in addition to guaranteeing the human right to adequate food, vegetable gardens also enable the development of the food sovereignty of communities, building democratic spaces for decision over a more just and supportive food system.

In this sense, the practice of *mutirão* in urban vegetable gardens is directly related to the theme proposed by the journal about social and political participation, derived from urban interventions promoted through collaboration. The *mutirão* is a political tool where territorial management is discussed from the practical exercise of food production through mutual aid. It is in good encounters, with a common objective of improving a public space or producing food, that the subjects are empowered for a broader, instituting and democratic political action. The constitutive transformation of the subjects through their practice makes it possible to make multitude and to build the commons that confront directly the established powers, opening possibilities for a democratic management of the city.

Acknowledgements

The author of this paper thanks the Foundation for Research Support of the State of São Paulo (FAPESP) and the University of São Paulo (USP), for the support and funding received through the process 2017 / 14301-3 (FAPESP).

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1 *Mutirão* is a Portuguese word derived from the indigenous Tupinambá word "muxirão", or "putirom" which roughly means cooperative joint work to achieve an economic gain through solidarity among people from a certain region. The practice consists in a gathering of people to develop a certain activity in either a private or a communal property, based on mutual aid and solidarity and involving certain aspects of celebration. Because it lacks an adequate translation to English, it will be referred in the article by its Portuguese word.