

Under the Paving Stones, a Vegetable Garden

Article by Joëlle Zask

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Today's concrete jungles are becoming increasingly interlaced with green as urban space transforms around us. But simply 'greening' the city is not enough to repair the gross imbalances in the relationship between humans and the natural world. Joëlle Zask explores how greening citizenship – through cultivation practices – offers an opportunity for self-government which may just restore this relationship to one of perpetual regeneration rather than mutually destructive exploitation.

In April 2016, during protests against labour law reforms in Place de la République, Paris, the slogan “*Sous les pavés le potager*” (“Under the paving stones, a vegetable garden”) appeared on paving slabs that a protestor had pulled up to create a tiny garden. Although echoed since, this slogan has not stuck in the French collective memory like the phrase it parodies: “*Sous les pavés la plage*” (“Under the paving stones, the beach”). Coined by a worker during the civil unrest of May 1968, “Under the paving stones, the beach” was a phrase which spread when protestors noticed that the paving stones they were ripping up for projectiles and barricades were laid on sand. And yet another slogan had preceded this one: “*Il y a de l’herbe sous les pavés*” (“There’s grass under the paving stones”). This wasn’t adopted, however, partly because the word ‘grass’ was associated with marijuana, but above all because unlike sand, a construction material, grass sounded like a slightly surreal oddity in the context of the city.

Greener city, greener citizens?

“Under the paving stones, a vegetable garden” is much more in keeping with the times in which we find ourselves today. Gardens have acquired a right to belong in the city that they didn’t enjoy in 1968. All sorts of planting – from vegetable gardens to wild grasses – have sprung up in streets, parks and courtyards, below trees, atop roofs and on the outskirts of cities. But this transformation of the city does not seem to have been accompanied by a parallel transformation in conceptions of citizenship. While our urban environment is ever greener, the same cannot be said for the citizen, who is, etymologically speaking, an inhabitant of the city. Yet ‘greening’ citizenship is vital: it is, on the one hand, a prerequisite for the emergence of a complete ecosystem that offers an alternative to the inorganic urban system that is colonising the natural world on which it materially depends. On the other hand, greening citizenship is also necessary for encouraging action on climate and against activities that create imbalances in the relationships between humans and nature.

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“Under the paving stones, a vegetable garden” is certainly not a statement of fact. Rather, the slogan is a manifesto. It promotes the idea that social relations which respect nature and natural beings are of superior quality to the classical ideal of people assembled in an agora (a public gathering place or market square) making “public use of their reason.”^[1] According to this classical definition, the citizen is the central element of a logocentric and

disembodied conception of political practices. This could be countered with a citizen-environmentalist whose relations with others are both situated in and produce – or protect – a tangible shared world that includes a territory, a habitat, a landscape, an economy and a resource: food.

Living well in the city

“The vegetable garden under the paving stones” expresses the necessary link between the city and nature, in all senses of the term. In the ancient tradition, with which we would do well to reacquaint ourselves, cultivation of the land, aesthetic pleasure and subsistence agriculture were not separate ideas. The city, in the sense Aristotle gave this term, was (despite the known limitations imposed by slavery’s economic and social ubiquity) a community deemed to be happy because it was self-sufficient, or rather independent. The freedom and equality of citizens would not have been achieved if the city, that is to say the community and its inhabitants, had not been able to forge a connection with nature to obtain shareable knowledge and sustenance from it.[2] Demeter was the Greek goddess of agriculture and civilisations, which are ultimately inseparable.

In fact, the ancient Greek city, including the agora, was not the inorganic universe that we usually imagine. The agora was open to all, shaded by huge plane trees that were naturally irrigated and connected to surrounding nature.[3] It can even be argued that the city conceived as a free and independent community had characteristics that were the exact opposite of those later depicted in the famous painting *The Ideal City* of Urbino.[4] Since the Renaissance, in the minds of thinkers from Thomas More to Claude Nicolas Ledoux, from Charles Fourier to Jean-Baptiste André Godin, from Henri Ford (with his *Fordlandia in the heart of the Amazon rainforest*) to Le Corbusier, ideal cities have been planned and laid out according to principles that supposedly express fundamental human needs but without ever consulting, involving or empowering citizens when it comes to their living conditions. They bring to mind the ideal cities built in the sky that Greek playwright Aristophanes mocked in his comedy *The Birds*.

The exclusion of nature from the fully inorganic city fossilises citizenship. The “right to the city” is not part of it. The private city may well be functional, useful, specialised and purpose built, but it isn’t conducive to living well.

The politics of the shared garden

“Under the paving stones, a vegetable garden” also highlights, metaphorically, that what the city is made from, its raw materials, is not just the sand used to make mortar and concrete but land divided into lots in which fruit and vegetables may grow. The citizen defined by their critical reasoning or their position away from the land is replaced by an idea in which producing food is part of everyday life. As traditional farmers or city dwellers with a garden will tell you, access to a patch of land, far from being at odds with the human condition, is in fact a fundamental aspect of it. It is this access, also known as the ‘right to cultivate’, that is the firmest guarantee of equality and liberty, understood as independence.

With the shared garden, we move from the essentialised – even sacralised – idea of ‘the politician’ to an open and dynamic notion called ‘politics’.

From the German Peasants’ War between 1524 and 1526 to today’s landless peasant movements, the importance that activists place on the union between discursive activities and productive activities is clear. Without such a union, it is inevitable that slavery, mercenary work, exploitation and dependence will develop, along with ever more profitable monocultures, diabolical production rates, all manner of inputs, soil degradation and more. With

the demand for access to land, including in the ecological sense of ‘greening the city’, the social union ceases to be ideally formed by citizens of nowhere, equal because the same, neutral and objective. Rather, it concerns citizens who do things together and believe that producing their livelihood is necessary for a democratically organised social life.

With the shared garden, which is also a place where people who like to chat and socialise gather, we move from the essentialised – even sacralised – idea of ‘the politician’ to an open and dynamic notion called ‘politics’. Instead of being confined and separated from the rest of the world, like the traditional city behind its wall, policy can, without risk of corruption, be associated with each activity in which one form of self-government or another is played out.

The vegetable patch as a school for self-government

“The vegetable garden under the paving stones” is a school for self-government. Gardening means taking your experience and adapting it to the land and, at the same time, your needs. Knowing the land means knowing the surrounding environment, geography, weather, water regime and history. As the Scottish biologist and sociologist Patrick Geddes believed, a good city and authentically human life require observation from viewpoints that range from the panoramic to the microscopic.[5] That’s how *genius loci*, the precursor to the notion of an ecosystem, was born.

The farmer, both a grower who produces his livelihood and a gardener who maintains nature, practices a form of self-government that can be extrapolated to many other situations.

Farmers will often remind you that mother nature is their mistress. They can’t just do whatever they want. As Turner wrote about the American wilderness, the environment is not something with which you can sign a contract.[6] But while the farmer, as admirably depicted by the American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, for example, may serve the land, he does not obey it.[7] On the contrary, he enters into dialogue with it and transforms the landscape, working for the benefit of future generations.

Yet, in the pragmatist sense, experience is constitutive of individuality. It is real if the subject of the experience learns from the changes that they cause in the situation of their action. This implies that they actively transform this situation and observe the effects that they have, then situates themselves in relation to these effects to reject, confirm or transform them into a means for further experience. The grammar of land cultivation is that of experience. The farmer, both a grower who produces his livelihood and a gardener who maintains nature, practices a form of self-government that can be extrapolated to many other situations.

A down-to-earth solution

Lastly, “Under the paving stones, a vegetable garden” implies a dimension of care, stewardship and cultivation. When it comes to forests and nature, it has never been clearer that landscapes are partly shaped by human beings who, since time immemorial, have organised and managed these to preserve them. Thus, aboriginal Australians, whose philosophy of country ‘cleaning’ guides the practice in which forest burning is used for religious and spiritual as well as for land management reasons, understand that they are stakeholders in nature and guarantors of its perpetual regeneration.[8] As with Adam in the Garden of Eden, working and taking care of a garden are two aspects of the same activity.

As we have seen, societies organised in such a way that diligently ensures the coupling between cultivation and preservation of nature by guaranteeing its perpetual regeneration enjoy specific spiritual and material qualities. In contrast to those societies that exploit nature to dominate and distance it in the name of a supposedly superior spirituality, they possess qualities that are indispensable to developing the individuality of all while also maintaining the commons. As sensed by Thomas Jefferson – the great advocate of agrarian democracy and enemy of *latifundia* (large estates specialising in agriculture destined for export), cotton and tobacco planters, and a physiocracy that was already fully extractivist – the exploitation of nature and of human beings are two sides of the same coin.[9]

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So, greening citizenship – by incorporating philosophies of perpetual regeneration; creating and caring for common spaces; practising custodianship of the shared environment that preserves conditions and opportunities for all to experience and, therefore, sharing with every member of the community the possibilities for individuation, contribution and exploration that give meaning to life – is an ‘ecosystemic’ solution which, far from being utopian, is within reach of everyone. This has been clearly shown by the many actions of the Occupy and Reclaim the Streets movements, such as the establishment of villages at the heart of occupied urban spaces, as well as by residents’ creation of shared gardens, sociable street furniture or neighbourhood-level urban renewal plans. Ultimately, what the slogan “Under the paving stones, a vegetable garden” teaches us is that the opportunity for self-government, rather than being an unachievable dream or a distant utopia, lies right under our feet. It’s up to us to seize it.

A first draft of this article was prepared for the Brussels Ecosystems conference organised by Metrolab in October 2019.

Footnotes

[1] This expression can be found in Kant’s *Answering the Question: What Is Enlightenment?* (Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?. 1784). It is reprised by Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962, trans. 1989). The “public use of reason” is inherent to the “bourgeois public sphere”, which develops to scrutinise and criticise the government. It comprises a thinking and “enlightened” public.

[2] Aristotle, *Politics*, Book III.

[3] For more on this and the question of the shared garden, see Joëlle Zask. *La démocratie aux champs*. Paris : La Découverte (“Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond” series). 2016. On the geometric and inorganic conception of the public square, see J. Zask. *Quand la place devient publique*. Lormont : Le Bord de l’Eau Éditions (“Les Voies du politique” series). 2018.

[4] *The Ideal City of Urbino*, also known as the Urbino panel, is a wooden panel painted between 1480 and 1510. It is one of three very similar unattributed Italian Renaissance paintings which are referred to by the location where they are now stored, the other two being *The Ideal City of Baltimore* and *The Ideal City of Berlin*.

[5] Alessia de Biase, Albert Levy, and María A. Castrillo Romón. “Éditorial. Patrick Geddes en héritage”. *Espaces et sociétés*. Vol. 167, no. 4. 2016. pp. 7-25. This issue is entirely dedicated to Sir Patrick Geddes.

[6] Frederick Jackson Turner. “The Significance of the Frontier in American History”. A paper read at the meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago, 12 July 1893, during the World Columbian Exposition.

[7] Ralph Waldo Emerson. *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, in 12 vols. Fireside Edition* Boston and New York. 1909. Vol. 7, Chap. 4. “Farming”. [Available online] <<http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/86/104482>> .

[8] Marcia Langton. “*Burning questions: emerging environmental issues for indigenous peoples in northern Australia* Darwin : Northern Territory University, Centre for Indigenous Natural and Cultural Resource Management. 1998

[9] For more on the different branches of American agrarianism and Jefferson’s position, see Thomas P. Govan. “Agrarian and Agrarianism: A Study in the Use and Abuse of Words”. *The Journal of Southern History*. Vol. 30, No. 1, 1964.



Joëlle Zask is a philosopher and professor of political philosophy at Aix-Marseille University, France.

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