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Truly Local vs. Universally Local: Recognizing the Goals of Urban Agriculture in Cleveland, OH

Abstract: In this essay, I aim to discuss the ways in which urban agriculture affects social dynamics within a city, particularly Cleveland, Ohio. The essay presents the idea that truly local farming is part of an essential movement which counters the negative effects of a global economy, and that a larger-scale, “universal” localist movement exists among urban farming in Cleveland which endangers and distracts from the true goal. To avoid this distraction, a renewed focus on the true goals of urban agriculture is necessary. I attempt to find out what makes the difference between these truly locally oriented initiatives and the more universally focused ones. Through this, I ultimately want to give citizens ways to distinguish between the two and reason to support localism in its true form.

Introduction

The urban agriculture movement has taken root throughout the United States and gained popularity in the past decade or so. In particular, cities throughout the Rust Belt have recently become known for a blooming urban agriculture movement. This region, which stretches from Pittsburgh to the Great Lakes and includes many areas in the Northeast and Midwest, is characterized by deterioration and urban decay. Following industrial booms and influxes in migration, these cities experienced rapid economic collapse and fell into disrepair. In recent years, the urban agriculture movement has grown out of a desire to re-claim the city and create prosperity again, as well as to recover an independence that has been lost in an increasingly global economy. Cleveland, OH is a city typical of the Rust Belt’s description, and has been one of the leaders in urban agriculture over the last several decades. (Fiskio, Scott, Shammin 18) Many local urban gardens and farms have been successful in bringing a new

sustainability and unity to their communities. However, individual operations within Cleveland's urban farming movement vary greatly in their intents. In addition to its core goals, the idea of local agriculture in urban settings has become chic and stylish, as well as evangelistic in many cases. The ability of urban places to network and gain wide-scale attention has led to a fetishizing of local farming within these spheres. This discovery led me to another, much broader question: can local *movements* truly be local? Does the universal nature of a movement negate its ability to focus on small-scale issues? In particular, I've found that the national attention gained by the urban farming movement tends to obscure and hinder one of its true goals – that of creating strong, sustainable and independent communities in an increasingly dependent world. To re-focus on the core intentions of local agriculture and localism in general, we must learn to distinguish between wide-scale “local” movements and truly community-driven and oriented “local” movements. So what constitutes the difference between these two initiatives? How can citizens tell if an organization truly serves the local community? This question is what I attempt to answer in my following research.

Methods

In most places throughout the world, societal relationships in the 21st century have changed and are still changing vastly as an effect of globalization. The term “globalization” refers to the increased interaction and inter-dependency of communities around the globe. This dependency is chiefly economic, but has affected massive political, social, and environmental changes. Economically, globalization mainly involves the increasing complexity of global supply chains and the concentration of wealth among large-scale corporations. On a world-wide scale, this means that nations are becoming more reliant on each other and on the global sphere. However, globalization exists on many scales. Its political implications involve the weakening of local power centers, which become replaced by larger-scale power structures. (Hess 3)

International corporations control national spending, federal authority trumps state government,

and city-wide regulations dominate local policies. This means that power shifts *up* the ladder of scale, and groups that have a larger audience have more influence. In effect, local communities have less power, even over their own affairs. As a consequence of economic globalization and the outsourcing of labor, these communities are also far less self-sufficient, and rely on consumption of goods produced by large corporations.

Additionally, globalization has led to the increased communication and sharing of information between people throughout the world, which profoundly effects personal identity. People begin to see themselves in comparison to the world, and their communities as smaller tiles in the mosaic of the global community. There is much less importance tied to local community in general. Because of this and the shifting power structures caused by globalization, people are trading their financial, social, and political independence for a part in the larger picture, which means a dependency on the new global matrix. (Hess 4)

In America, this trend of globalization involves the food market's domination by large corporations and the outsourcing of goods and labor. Factory farming produces 99% of the meat Americans consume each year. (McWilliams) The term *industrial agriculture* refers to a "modern type of agriculture which 1) requires high inputs of money, fertilizers, and... 2) for animal production is characterized by a dense population of animals raised on limited land." ("Industrial Livestock Production") This essentially means that large corporations own huge farms which emphasize massive input/output and the maximization of profit above all else. These companies, businesses like Monsanto and DuPont, sell to fast food chains and other large food production companies, which in turn sell to the consumer. This mass-production chain leads to decreased quality, less healthy food, and less control over the products that people buy. It also eliminates jobs by replacing human labor with technology, such as large machinery and pesticides. The state of the global economy has made it nearly impossible for small communities to support themselves without the consumption of goods from large-scale

corporations. Again, this compromises individual independence and plays into the increasing dependency of the citizen on the global economy.

The urban agriculture movement, in many ways, is a direct response to the condition of this globalized economy. Urban farming essentially involves bringing *local agriculture* into a city – a locale which could otherwise be cut off from any means of food production, as urban space is often far from farmland and fertile soil. Local agriculture can be defined as the simple idea of producing food in the same community in which it is consumed. When people grow their own food, and perhaps when people cook their own food, they reclaim some essential processes which contribute to their independence as living beings. If one can supply their own food, they are one step closer to being self-sufficient. In a global economy, specialization of labor makes it so that no one person has to actually do the work to keep themselves alive. Citizens must buy goods, meaning that other people have farmed their food, sewn their clothes, and built their homes. This is liberating in that people can now focus on any number of other things – hobbies, jobs, invention, etc. However, it is also terribly confining, because people also now depend on other people and companies to keep them alive. Growing one's own food in today's society can be seen as an attempt to mediate the effects of a consumer society in which "the only legitimate form of leisure is consumption." (Pollan) This enables the people in that community to re-gain some sense of independence, sustainability, and community that has been lost.

In urban settings, people are the most cut off from such essential processes. They may live miles from any fertile farmland, and may be surrounded by a metropolis of consumption. Urban agriculture has emerged as a way to bring a sense of community and independence back to populations which have been deprived of these things. Urban farming is often seen as a way to bring healthy food back to areas that have become "food deserts", in which access to fresh food is limited or nonexistent. (Ott) However, it's been proven to provide more than just nutrition and health benefits. In fact, research has shown that the benefits most important to citizens are the cultural values and coherence that they create within communities. (Ott 20) What these

centers of urban agriculture create is a sense of self-sufficiency and coherence within communities, and ultimately a sense of strength and dignity. When people can feed themselves, they suddenly depend less on the permission of the world around them, and suddenly feel a bit more deserving of their own lives.

However, a larger-scale, more universal urban farming movement also exists in Cleveland. In the city, urban agriculture has become a chic and innovative trend among restaurants and online businesses. This wide-scale attention on local husbandry has been positive in that it has spread the movement among local initiatives, but it has also created an urban farming movement more geared towards cutting-edge technology, upscale dining, and engineering experiments than actually localizing the production of food. The problem with this movement is that it has the wrong reasons; its ultimate intentions involve bringing urban agriculture into the global economy. This itself is not negative, but it is not local agriculture, and it is important to distinguish the two in order to give truly local initiatives the recognition they need. Within Cleveland, both this “universal localism” and what I’m calling “truly local” agriculture exist. This true localism is one of the most essential tools we have in maintaining community identity in the face of an increasingly global culture and market. Moving forward, it’s become vital that we learn to separate universal localism from true localism. In the results section of this essay, I focus on what makes an organization *truly* local.

Results

One main difference between certain urban farming groups within Cleveland seems to be how the spheres of production relate to the spheres of consumption. In other words, is the food grown in the same community in which it is consumed? The Urban Farmer Steakhouse, located on East 6th Street in downtown Cleveland, aims to “redefine the modern Cleveland steakhouse.” It is an upscale restaurant with an emphasis on local sourcing and authenticity of

ingredients. Its website displays claims of building close relationships with the farms, ranches, and fisheries that they partner with. However, none of the head staff are from the area, and its modern atmosphere caters to a broad audience. In an August 2016 blog post from the Urban Farmer Steakhouse website titled “paying homage to local farms,” executive chef Vishnu Nath describes his experience volunteering at an urban farm that provides food for the steakhouse. “It is a privileged opportunity for us to pay homage to the local farms and how hard they work,” he says, continuing, “I thought farming would be easy, trust me it is not!” (“Urban Farmer Steakhouse”) The fact that Nath seems to have known so little beforehand about these farms shows that there is a disconnect between the production and consumption of these goods. It’s evident through these exchanges and descriptions that the restaurant operates on a vastly different level than the farms which support it.

On the other hand, groups like the Rid-All Green Partnership offer work directly to their community, so that the produce is grown by the same people it’s consumed by. There is no shipping away of produce to feed people in different communities. It is a primarily locally-serving organization. The Rid-All Green Partnership is an urban farming initiative in the Kinsman neighborhood which “offers opportunities for individuals and groups to get in touch with the land.” (RidAll Green Partnership) It’s run by three childhood friends who grew up in a nearby Cleveland neighborhood. Its goal is simple. Stated by founder Keymah Durden III, they ultimately aim to create “access to holistic, nutritional food for the development of the communities around the world”. (RidAll Green Partnership) They’ve started with their own community in Cleveland, OH and while their vision is larger in scale, it still involves each locality maintaining individual purpose. There is no complicated goal – only the desire to provide better access to good food and to strengthen communities. The farm serves its community first, not actively attempting to branch out or gain popularity among other neighborhoods. Crucially, the spaces and communities in which the food is produced and consumed are the same or at least overlap. The connection between the communities in which this food is grown and where it is

consumed is an essential difference between certain farms in Cleveland, and ultimately helps distinguish between different intentions within “local” organizations. Going back to the true goal of localism, this brings back some power to the local community and away from the large-scale consumer market.

Another trend I noticed among some farms and not in others was the focus on building values like dignity and community within neighborhoods, rather than simply feeding people healthy foods. For example, the Chateau Hough vineyard and BioCellar on Hough Avenue employs formerly incarcerated adults and youth in the community to provide empowerment and reclaim conceptual dignity. It uses old, out-of-use buildings as spaces for an urban vineyard which grows grapes and makes wine. (Fiskio 26) Fiskio mentions that it is a “strategic risk to grow wine grapes with formerly incarcerated community members,” but that doing so proves something about farming’s ability to transform communities. The vision of this project concerns empowerment, and the “vineyard is a symbol, demonstrating that [their] land is just as valuable to [them].” (26)

There has been scholarly discussion about the fact that “access to produce does not necessarily lead to its consumption.” (Ott 19) In fact, as demonstrated by the failure of an urban farming initiative in St. Louis called Garden of Eden, often times the people don’t really want to buy the produce even when it is available. Garden of Eden was an organization that brought locally farmed produce to markets in underserved neighborhoods, but found little interest and didn’t see many sales even after giving out vouchers to community members. The problem, it appeared after interviews were conducted with various community members, was that the people didn’t really see the fresh food as a priority. Rather, the reasons that people enjoyed the associated local gardens included the sense of community and the values (like sense of character and independence) that they promoted within their neighborhoods. (20) The idea that people value food for cultural reasons like unity and empowerment is supported by the founder of Chateau Hough, Mansfield Frazier, who says that many local food organizations have the

wrong attitude. “They come in like with a great white father complex – ‘we’re going to come in and save you guys.’ Well, we don’t need saving!” (Fiskio 26) While many organizations, that attempt to “fix” food problems in underprivileged or minority communities, they can end up simply “delineating social norms and imposing the values of the middle class.” (20) Instead, Mansfield explains, communities need to have control of their own urban farming projects. The farming needs to start and end with them, and in this way many of these projects can instill values that are important to that certain neighborhood or community. They can grow into stronger versions of what they are, rather than being forced into a norm. Organizations that achieve this, like Chateau Hough and the RidAll Partnership, are generally focused on changing the community and creating empowerment rather than simply feeding people.

One comment on an article about urban farms in Cleveland seems to distill this. A user mentions that “It’s great to have community gardens but these are not farms...This is a disgrace for them to say that they are farmers they do not know the struggles and hardships of being a farmer...What about the true family farms?????” (Paulp992) People involved in Cleveland’s urban agriculture movement are realizing that these spaces of growth are not the same as true farms. With today’s technology, urban farms simply can’t match the output of acres of open land. The truth is that cities are not built to accommodate farmland to feed their dense populations. However, successful urban farms have a different goal in mind than feeding people. They strive to recreate something that has been lost through the globalization of the food industry, the economy, and society at large.

Discussion

Successful “truly local” urban farming initiatives in Cleveland are aiming to create independence for local communities by keeping the production and consumption within the same sphere, and by putting the values gained from local farming before the raw output of

goods. These movements ultimately serve the people that they involve – and they do this by involving the people they serve. The communities that these organizations serve may as of yet be far from really self-sufficient, but they are focused on the idea of independence, and that seems to be the main component of their success.

Although in many ways the wider-scale urban agriculture movements have provided meaningful ways for communities to come together and become more sustainable and self-sufficient, the universalized facet of local/urban farming is becoming a distracting fad. A renewed focus on the true goals of local agriculture within urban settings is necessary to recognize the benefits possible from these movements when applied on local scales by each community. The possibility of creating renewed self-sustainability and independence in an increasingly dependent world is crucial for the wellbeing of these communities and, really, of everyone.

One of the reasons that this idea of gaining back independence is so important is that so many groups in Cleveland have faced oppression and abandonment within society over the past centuries. Many black and minority-populated neighborhoods in the city have been neglected and allowed to deteriorate in infrastructure since its economic collapse. (Fiskio 27) Fires in the '60s and '70s cleared many districts and allowed for the formation of an “urban palimpsest”, a term from Andreas Huyssen’s *Present Pasts*. It describes the idea of a landscape characterized by new buildings and infrastructures built over old ones. The term stems from a word that describes a page on which the original script has been wiped clean or erased and written over. In an urban context, this palimpsest involves the erasure of the history of certain areas. (24) Neighborhoods and communities who have had their history “written over” by new development or by destruction of important historical landmarks have created urban farms and gardens to reclaim the landscape and create something that can, in essence, grow from the ashes. There is potential for this to happen all over the country, and this reclamation through urban agriculture is an example of a way that local agriculture can serve its community directly. This neglect that

these communities faced is directly relatable to the way many citizens feel in the face of an increasingly global world. They are suddenly less important, and they must rely on a complex outside world of businesses and figureheads for their own wellbeing. This global system of consumption requires everyone involved to pay into the pot for their own survival, obscuring the fact that people can in reality support themselves and think for themselves and do what they believe is right. Local agriculture and local movements in general are crucial because they contradict the notion that we the people need a big global economy to survive. With truly local intentions, these movements can create a change in the way we think that could be essential to the maintenance of individual ideas and personal freedom as the world becomes more universal.

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Reflection

In writing this research essay, what was most new to me was the idea of gathering a large number of sources from which to synthesize an idea. I am used to writing argumentative essays, so simply answering a research question and taking less of a biased approach was difficult at first for me. For a while, I was still arguing a thesis, but I managed to evolve my ideas past this and actually create and answer a research question. Some techniques that really helped me were applying the IMRD structure to the ideas I already had, and organizing them accordingly.

I also gained a great amount from the idea of constantly tying my newly introduced ideas back to my main point or main idea. At the end of every paragraph, I started to incorporate something that related that idea to my point. The re-stating of ideas was something I originally found redundant, but I now see how important it is to clearly communicating ideas. I also have found myself, even now, writing in more active voice and with clearer syntax and vocabulary, which I learned from Williams and Bizup. Overall, the most helpful part of the writing process to me was the thorough planning of organization. I spent a lot of time just writing out an outline of my essay and arranging my ideas in an intuitive order before I even wrote the content, and this hugely influenced my final product.