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EL FUTURO DE LA ALIMENTACIÓN Y RETOS DE LA AGRICULTURA PARA EL SIGLO XXI:

Debates sobre quién, cómo y con qué implicaciones sociales, económicas y ecológicas alimentará el mundo.

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Urban Gardening as Food Sovereignty: Istanbul's Historic Market Gardens and Contemporary Community Gardens

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In this paper, I respond to urban greening and right to the city debates by thinking through the traditional practices and contemporary potentials of urban gardening in Istanbul. Urban greening permeates realms of contemporary state policy, real estate design concepts, and environmental and social movement discourses. As a planning method, “greening” intends to reorganize urban spaces to mitigate the undesirable effects of urbanization, to increase the quality of living for humans, and to improve the environmental integrity of the city. The debates on urban nature and value of green spaces in terms of public health and quality of life, sustainability, productive landscapes and design, and public recreation have been around since the emergence of urban planning as a professional discipline. These debates have branded several, though not always congruent, planning visions, such as “garden city,” “radiant city,” “green city,” and “sustainable city.” Appearing in initiatives of diverse social actors like NGOs, state policy makers, and urban planning and landscape architecture professionals, urban greening programs claim to serve the commonwealth by reorganizing urban space and increasing surface area, and functions of public parks and gardens. These initiatives are expected to prevent unplanned urban expansion, and promote long-term environmental stewardship, climate change adaptation, urban biodiversity and wild life habitats, community collaboration, and aesthetic quality of urban spaces. Often, these policy initiatives and programs produce results that contradict the original rationale of benefiting urban communities by facilitating the commodification of nature, which serves the interests of a political and economic elite, and legitimizing dispossession and displacement of the urban poor. In Istanbul, urban greening in new planning initiatives focus solely on reorganizing urban spaces for aesthetical effect and capitalizing on opportunities for consistent and reliable proceeds in park cafes and entertainment centers. The profit based model for urban greening does not prioritize equity in access to green spaces. Rather, they promote, as right to the city paradigm cautions us, “green gentrification” by commodifying urban nature and using natural elements as tools to legitimate new project development, often masking reproduction of socio-economic inequalities, and enclosures of public spaces and green commons. In addition, they undermine the efforts of civil society to create accessible, and sustainable urban futures. Keeping these issues in mind, in this paper, I think through the socio-ecological struggles in the last remaining historic *bostans*¹ (market gardens), and contemporary community garden initiatives and collectives

¹ Small-scale, family-run vegetable gardens, an agricultural tradition that date back to the Byzantine era.

in Istanbul as productive landscapes that contain grassroots urban greening strategies and rich potentials for urban food sovereignty mobilizations in Turkey.

Istanbul, which is a city-region that continues to concentrate and grow at unprecedented rates, exploiting tremendous social, economic and ecological resources, is both a symbol and a stage upon which ascends the hegemonic power of the state. Upon first sight, it seems like an unlikely geography to think about urban green spaces and potentials for food sovereignty. Green landscapes of Istanbul have diminished considerably as a result of decades long urban expansion. The patterns of urban transformation in the past decade and the recent mega-infrastructure projects have intensified the irreversible devastation of ecological integrity and sustainability of urban forests, parks, vegetable gardens, forests, groves, and peripheral farmland. The state portrays the large infrastructure projects such as the third Bosphorus bridge, the access roads leading to this bridge, an underwater highway tunnel, new metro lines, third airport construction, Kabataş transportation hub, and urban revitalization, which has taken over every district of the city, in some cases encompassing entire neighborhoods and significantly changing the topography of the city, as necessary for modernization, to recoup Istanbul's past as an imperial center, and catapult Turkey into the future as a leader in construction, infrastructure, and energy technologies. In fact, in public broadcasts and advertisements of these large projects (in particular, Yavuz Sultan Selim bridge, also known as the third bosphorus bridge, is quite striking²) the state tries to convey a message that gives the sense that Turkey is no longer playing catch up with the Western world. It is now a nation that invokes envy from the world. Moreover, the officials from the metropolitan municipality and the district municipalities have implemented new park projects and open green space reorganization, and express the number of trees planted and money spent on landscape beautification every chance they get to resituate themselves as the environmental stewards of the city. These urban greening initiatives are geared towards reorganizing space to increase its aesthetic quality and by extension to attract wealthy residents to neighborhoods in central city that are quickly being cleansed of their predominantly urban poor populations. In addition, in a city with a population of over 15 million people, and active elimination of peri-urban agricultural land, people who live in Istanbul are heavily dependent on the agricultural production elsewhere to feed themselves. The sheer size of the market demand from the city is a fertile ground for unfair speculative food pricing perpetrated by intermediary actors in transportation, storage and distribution.

Contradicting this meta-narrative of the city, Istanbul contains a unique intra-urban agricultural heritage that is not only carved in the memory of the city's landscape, but continues to inspire new communities that intend to reverse the alienation of urban dwellers to the processes of food production, to reclaim urban spaces, and to defend urban commons against new construction. In this paper, I argue that Istanbul's historic *bostans* and contemporary community gardens can

² Yavuz Sultan Selim bridge introduction advertisement:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cXnw05Y7njo>

inform our thinking about the role of urban productive landscapes and green commons in mobilization for food sovereignty. Moreover, aligning historical heritage and new capacities of the rare but committed and transformative urban gardening practices in the city with food sovereignty as a framework politically grounds these commitments towards maximization of local knowledges and resources to set concrete goals for economic and ecological sustainability for producers and consumers, and just distribution systems and access to food.

Agricultural Heritage

In a cab on our way to Piyalepasa *bostan*, which is the garden plot of Piyalepasa mosque built in 1565 and was documented to have been used to cover the expenses of the mosque, our cab driver, who was in his 50s, overheard us talking about the garden, and interrupted us. Pointing to both sides of Piyalepasa boulevard, he said: “these were all *bostans*, all of it.” I asked him if he lived in the neighborhood for a long time. He was born in the neighborhood and currently lives just above the Piyalepasa Mosque. He proceeded to show us the historical landmarks he knows before dropping us off at the mosque. This was not the first time I heard the phrase “these were all *bostans*.” It is somewhat of a mythical story people like to tell about the city’s landscape. I have heard “these were all *bostans*, gardens, orchards...” since I was a child. Looking at the current state of the landscape, these statements seem so far off from the truth that I always thought even if they were all gardens, people who remember those days would not be alive right now. For my field research, I walked the Piyalepasa and the nearby Hacıhusrev neighborhoods to get an understanding of the landscape and the social life that surrounds the garden plot, and had conversations with the residents, including those who were shopping for their fresh vegetables during my several visits to the garden. Upon hearing my interest in the garden, many of the people I talked to also said that there were several *bostans* in the area until very recently. One middle aged woman, who had been living in the neighborhood for over three decades, told me that where the Piyalepasa Istanbul real-estate project has dug a crater size hole (Figure 1) in the ground once stood *bostans* that fed the Hacıhusrev neighborhood right up the hill, right across the Piyalepasa mosque.



Figure 1

Curious about this story, I examined satellite images of the area on the municipality digital maps. These maps show archived satellite images from 1946, 1966, 1970, 1982, 2006, 2011, 2013, and 2014. In figure 2, 3, and 4 are the screenshots of the Piyalepasa mosque, the bostan, and the agricultural fields in the neighborhood from 1970, 1982 and 2006 respective. 1970 image shows the area before the construction of the Piyalepasa boulevard which pierced through the agricultural fields at the time. The construction in Figure 1 is to the right of the boulevard which is visible in Figures 3 and 4.



Figure 2: Satellite image from 1970



Figure 3: Satellite image from 1982



Figure 4: Satellite image from 2006

As these images show, even in 2006 you can see some garden plots still being cultivated where the construction for an enormous gated residential complex is taking place.

The archival documents reveal that in Istanbul *bostans* have provided fresh produce needs of the city for centuries and significantly contributed to the city's labor economy. Just to give a scale of the volume of the agricultural activity, Shopov and Han (2013) write that in an Ottoman tax ledger from 1735, inside the land walls of Istanbul there were 344 *bostans* which were cared for by a total of 1381 gardeners (Shopov and Han 2013). A recent publication of 1927 census data which contains a ledger of what kind of houses and plots exist on each street of Istanbul shows that there were a total of 694 *bostan*, 937 *bağçe* (which translates as 'gardens,' however in this case they are probably not vegetable gardens and market gardens but orchards, flower gardens, or small private gardens) (Ölçer 2015). Istanbul's *bostans* have largely disappeared under new roads, buildings for apartments and offices, shopping malls, and city parks. The last two historic *bostans*, the gardens on which we can trace long term agricultural activity, are Piyalepaşa Bostan and Yedikule Bostans, the common name we give to the *bostans* near the land walls, between the Yedikule and Topkapi gates on the land walls (Theodosian Walls) of Istanbul, which have been on the UNESCO World Heritage sites list since 1985 as part of the historic areas of Istanbul.

It was five years ago that Istanbul's *bostans* came to the spotlight. In 2012, the metropolitan municipality drew up a park project in place of the *bostans* with elaborate decorative fountains, flower gardens, a children's park and a cafe. It was publicized as a plan to make this space 'public' rather than an agricultural production site. The project was challenged in the courts on the basis of unlawful planning calling attention to the their archaeological and historical value, and legal status as a 'protected zone'. Despite the legal challenges and protests, the district municipality poured debris over the vegetable gardens just inside the land walls, destroying the *bostans* and the harvest, to begin the construction. The growing public response to the demolition of the gardens inside the walls and continued petitions and legal challenges halted the construction of the project. In November 2014, the director of the metropolitan municipality vetoed the project and sent it

back to the metropolitan municipality council to develop a new plan that will protect the gardens' essential character in order to carry it into the future. In December 2014 the council also rejected the existing project and returned it to the district municipality. Currently, the garden plots inside the walls are empty and arid. However, there is still vibrant and fertile cultivation on the outside of the walls (Figure 5). In Yedikule *bostans*, there remains a total of 26 gardening families, most of which have only gone to elementary school. The gardeners association have received promise from the municipality that they will continue their agricultural work here, while the municipality continues to improve the conditions of the land walls and gates, and display them according to UNESCO standards. This has involved the removal of many fruit trees from the gardens for either being too close to the walls or blocking the view of the walls from the sidewalk.



Figure 5: A photograph of one plot in 2015.

A similar threat was imminent for Piyalepasa *bostan* in 2015, before the plot was registered as a cultural wealth, a collaborative effort of two historians, Istanbul Archeological Association and a right to the city group called Beyoglu Urban Defense. The metropolitan municipality commissioned an underground parking lot project with a city park on the surface. The project initially included the garden plot, but before it broke the ground the cultural wealth registration application was confirmed and the garden was removed from the project area (Figure 6). The registration stipulates that any project that is planned for this site has to be approved by the Council for the Protection of Cultural and Natural Wealth. This protection also stipulates that this area is continued to be used as a *bostan* for its unique land use status. This is a significant development for it is the first instance of a living, breathing garden is registered as a cultural wealth. Moreover, the struggle at the Yedikule *bostans* and the mobilization to get Piyalepasa *bostan* registered as a protected site have fostered a public

consciousness about the importance of the historic *bostans* in particular and urban agriculture in general. At the same time, this registration does not protect the gardeners and their family, nor does it guarantee that *bostancılık* as a significant economic activity continues here.



Figure 6: A photo from an overpass on Piyalepasa boulevard, November 2016.

Currently, the municipality is developing a new, what they call a “social responsibility” project for this site. The project involves reorganizing the garden area, with new, more fertile soil and installing a drip irrigation system. The director of the department developing the project insists that they want to support the current gardener and involve him in this new project by hiring him as a worker of the municipality, giving him social benefits and insurance. This new project threatens the continuation of the traditional agricultural practices and creates a risk of turning this plot into hobby gardens rather than an economically viable practice. It also relieves the gardener from the complete economic and physical control of the land, proletarianizing the current gardener under the auspices of giving him more secure and safe employment. While there will not be a shopping mall or a parking lot ascending on top of this fertile plot, the transfer of control to the state which advances a profit based model of urban greening is alarming.

The growing literature on *bostans* treat this practice and the remaining sites as cultural and historical heritage. Both Yedikule and Piyalepasa *bostans* contain immeasurable comprehensive information on Ottoman urban agriculture technologies and organization of labor (Shopov and Han 2013). Scholars have shown recently that as an economic activity, agricultural production in Istanbul can be traced back to Byzantine era in the archives. The most detailed descriptions of the gardens, the production activity and the sales of fresh produce from these gardens at the food markets, the revenues, the number of workers can be found in foundation archives, Ottoman tax ledgers, different city maps and travel diaries of Ottoman and European travelers throughout 17th and 18th

Centuries. These vegetable gardens which were often located near creek basins on both the Anatolian and European peninsulas. In both Shopov and Han (2013) and Akdal (2016), we learn that the topography of the *bostans* shed a light on the history of urban expansion in Istanbul as the Ottoman Empire enters a period of modernization. Shopov and Han (2013) argue that a project like the park that was planned near the land walls will irreversibly transform the topography of the area, impeding opportunities for empirical research on Istanbul on a variety of different topics. The socio-economic and ecological relations they motivated present a counter narrative to the established narrative about Istanbul as a consumption center. Instead, these *bostans* and the give us an account of the potentials Istanbul's topography, climate and cultural heritage (for more comprehensive discussion of the history of these gardens and details of the archives, see: Kaldijan 2005; Koder 1995; Shopov and Han 2013; Ricci 2008, 2014).

Beyond historical heritage and an object of great value for empirical research, the historic *bostans*, preserve the memory of a city where not that long ago its neighborhoods were mentioned in relation to vegetables grown in the area, like cucumbers and lettuce. Often overlooked, these sites currently provide subsistence for, currently, a total of 27 gardening families, who are mostly from the same city in Turkey's northern region (Cide, Kastamonu). They carry out gardening as a profession, with skills passed down from one generation to the next. The people who cultivate the urban historic market gardens refer to themselves as *bahçıvan* (gardener) or *bostancı* (vegetable gardener). When I asked Ozkan and Dursun why they call themselves "gardeners" and not farmers, they boasted with pride. They explained that a gardener is someone who knows how to grow everything; they know the relationship between different plants, they know the seasonal effects well, they know the conditions under which every vegetable and fruit has a better yield. A farmer, they said, only grows one crop. While this view assumes monoculture as a default farming practice, it also displays a deep seated pride in not only the work they do but also the knowledge they produce, and share. In addition, the gardeners, who are very concerned about the recent legislations on agricultural seed management, which threaten the future of local seeds in Turkey, grow and use their own seeds, which performs a very important seed protection practice. The gardeners also practice mutual aid and sharing economy between the families, by exchanging seeds and seedlings when necessary and supporting each other in their everyday, including tight knit neighbor relationships.

Community Gardens

Community gardening in Istanbul has received a lot of attention in the past five years, and a number of interesting initiatives took place across the city: Roma Bostanı in Cihangir (Figure 7), Imrahor in Uskudar, Tarlataban at Bogazici University (Figure 8), Vefa Bostani near Istanbul Technical University, Fenerbahce Community Garden (Figure 9) and Moda Gezi Bostan. There is also the urban gardens project (in its sixth year) organized by Yeryuzu Dernegi which facilitates seed and seedling exchanges for people who are interested in growing vegetables either in their small private gardens or balconies. Kuzguncuk Bostanı in Uskudar is

also a part of the urban gardens shortlist of Istanbul. Kuzguncuk Bostanı is a municipality managed hobby gardening site. After a long and contentious struggle for about three decades to protect this old *bostan*, which belonged to a Greek family before it was confiscated by the state, against its redevelopment into a building, the district municipality was convinced to keep this as an open public space for the people who lived in the neighborhood. The residents rent small plots for their hobby gardens from the municipality and continue to experiment with raised bed gardening in this site. While this is a significant space for urban gardening, and used to exhibit community gardening practices before the municipality started to manage the grounds, the current individualized format is a cautionary tale for those of us interested in collective spaces.



Figure 7: Roma Bostanı winter planting, November 2016



Figure 8: Tarlataban, April 2017



Figure 9: Fenerbahce Topluluk Bahcesi, August 2016

Some of the earlier community gardens, like Imrahor and Moda Gezi Bostanı became inactive. The remaining gardens and the communities who cultivate them have very different purposes, functions and motivations. For instance, Tarlataban, one of the oldest examples of a community garden, is located inside Bogazici University and as a result it is somewhat protected against outside intervention and receives some structural support and space for continued educational events for the student gardeners. Fenerbahce Community Garden is an example of a project supported by the state. A permaculture group in a local high school petitioned Kadikoy municipality for a space to grow a permaculture inspired community garden. The municipality allotted a small section of a district park, provided the material resources the gardeners needed for the raised beds, a barrack, chicken coup and fences. The students continue the organizing and planting at the garden but the municipality provides a groundskeeper for the continuation of the garden. Roma Bostanı is a guerrilla garden that aims to prevent the municipality of Beyoglu from constructing a social center in this prime spot for its view. During the legal struggle against a set of redevelopment plans for Beyoglu, the *bostan* participants were able to intervene in the expert report for the court case by convincing the expert committee that this garden is a prime example of public benefit initiative, as opposed to the municipality's planned construction for a social center.

The differences in struggle for these spaces are vast and important, and require a lengthy space for discussion. However, in this paper, I am interested in their convergences and the ways in which they can be thought of as sites where a fertile mobilization for food sovereignty is possible. There are two significant themes that run across these gardens: community and self-determination. The community gardens organize around the principle of "doing work, together." There is a sense of comfort, purpose and joy in the physical activity of building something, planting something and watching something grow together. This spatial practice is the foundation of the communities that are forged in these gardens. Each of the community garden groups are more concerned about community building than they are about the yield in the gardens. Often these

gardens are referred to as “breathing spots,” providing spaces for relaxation for people who are overwhelmed by the rhythm of the city and the current volatile political climate. The kinship relationships in these gardens are based on mutual aid, and solidarity, and travel beyond the boundaries of the gardens. In addition, the gardens become sites for sharing new knowledges and for conversations and debates that enrich the political culture of the participants. The second function of the community gardens is fostering a deeper connection to the city people inhabit and the food they eat, reclaiming what constantly feels like slipping, and transforming the use and function of urban spaces. The gardening practice becomes a tool for reverting alienation from land, from labor, from production, and from people and collective activities.

There are a number of significant critiques about community gardening (and alternative food networks) that we have to consider. Rosol (2012) writes that community gardening is not necessarily a case of community resilience. Especially in the cases where the initiatives are supported by the state apparatus, it “can be understood as a form of outsourcing of former local state responsibilities for public services and urban infrastructure” (p. 239). Another concern with community gardening is about participation. While more optimistic reviews of community gardening, among participants and academic writing, talk about participation as community self-determination and in the urban context a form of right to the city activism, Rosol (ibid.) points out that civic engagement through volunteering, which requires time and resources working class people do not have, is a form of social reproduction. These initiatives become platforms for the demands and needs of the middle class. This can have structural consequences for communities and neighborhoods which do not have a volunteer class to participate in community gardening. Because local governments have the tendency to allocate resources to the areas where community engagement is active, which may lead to the withdrawal of resources from places where voluntary work is not available. Community gardening as part of a range of urban greening initiatives run the risk of becoming an “engine of gentrification” (Rosol 2012: 251).

These cautions are relevant for the context I am examining in Istanbul as well, which is

why food sovereignty becomes a useful political framework for the burgeoning possibility of interrupting the profit schemes for community gardens, and the state co-opting the transformative possibilities of community actions. Food sovereignty, which was coined by La Vía Campesina in 1996 as a campaign paradigm to globally defend the right to equitable and sustainable food production and distribution system, was developed further in 2007 as a global declaration. The six pillars outlined in this declaration³ emphasizes concrete local strategies to defend the right to equitable food system, and self-determination of

³ Food sovereignty 1) focuses on food for people, 2) values food providers, 3) localizes food systems, 4) puts control locally, 5) builds knowledge and skills, and 6) works with nature. For a detailed discussion of these pillars and commitments of food sovereignty, see the proceedings of the 2007 Nyéléni convergence: https://nyeleni.org/DOWNLOADS/Nyeleni_EN.pdf

small farmers and peasants against the global corporate agriculture and distribution systems:

“Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. It defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation. It offers a strategy to resist and dismantle the current corporate trade and food regime, and directions for food, farming, pastoral and fisheries systems determined by local producers and users. Food sovereignty prioritises local and national economies and markets and empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal - fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability. Food sovereignty promotes transparent trade that guarantees just incomes to all peoples as well as the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition. It ensures that the rights to use and manage lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food. Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social and economic classes and generations.”⁴

Here, I suggest that a paradigm shift from urban greening to food sovereignty can also defend our urban commons against profit based policy schemes that repurpose well-intentioned citizen commitments to serve the interests of propertied class, and construct a model for collective action and a defense of the already existing principles of mutual aid and solidarity. This paradigm shift is similar to what Peter Rossett suggests in his article titled “Food Sovereignty and Alternative Paradigms to Confront Land Grabbing and the Food and Climate Crisis.” Rossett (2011) suggests that a redistributive framework to think about responding to the food crisis that perils our world. The historic *bostans* and the community gardens of Istanbul are interdependent sites that make visible the everyday processes of food production from seed to the table to the urban consumers who are several degrees alienated from not only the food and soil, but also the labor and living conditions of gardeners, farmers and peasants. In order

⁴ Declaration of Nyéléni: <https://nyeleni.org/IMG/pdf/DeclNyeleni-en.pdf>

for those of us living in such a dense and fast moving city like Istanbul to develop an equitable and sustainable food system, this is a foundational step, one that builds upon the existing cultural heritage of the city.

Conclusion:

The purpose of this paper is to place urban productive landscapes and diverse peoples' relationships to these landscapes at the heart of food justice mobilizations. While the particular cases I look at, with their size and impact area, are not useful in responding to urban food crisis alone, the mobilization to protect the historic *bostans* and the various struggles in community gardens forge what I call *territories of solidarity* which impact the local provisions for managing urban green landscapes, and build the foundation for a strong mobilization of a food sovereignty network. Food sovereignty as a political framework provides a grounding that curbs the assailing of conscious capitalism that is prevalent in sustainable and green development discourses. It gives us a method to evaluate capacities of urban productive landscapes and to refocus the debates on urban ecology towards economic and ecological justice. In addition, it gives us a foundation for a collaborative network between intra-urban small scale agriculture, community gardening, and peri-urban agriculture, which are targeted for redevelopment, and open up possibilities for education and training across communities. Rather than thinking of Istanbul as a lost cause, I argue we must examine its geographical and cultural possibilities to maximize their radical potentials, and insist that its resilient green landscapes give us this opportunity.

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