



Think regionally, act locally?

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**Think Regionally, Act Locally?:
Gardening, Cycling, and the Horizon of Urban Spatial Politics**

John G Stehlin¹

Lecturer

Department of Geography
University of California, Berkeley
505 McCone Hall #4740
Berkeley, CA 94720-4740
Mobile: (215) 680-9827
Fax: (510) 642-3370
johnstehlin@berkeley.edu

Alexander R Tarr²

Assistant Professor of Geography
Department of Earth, Environment and Physics
Worcester State University
310R Ghosh Building of Science & Technology
486 Chandler Street
Worcester, MA 01602
(508) 929 -8474
atarr@worcester.edu

Abstract

In the contemporary American urban renaissance, formerly fringe efforts to produce place, conducted by longtime residents and “urban pioneers” alike, now shape mainstream urbanism. Gardening and bicycling are constitutive of contemporary excitement about the city, representing the reinvigoration of the urban neighborhood following the depredations of suburbanization. This paper draws on research in California cities to offer a sympathetic critique of these leading edges of progressive urbanism, arguing that advocates’ overwhelming focus on the local creates a scalar mismatch between the horizon of political action and the problems they hope to address. Even as supporters of gardening and cycling understand themselves as implicitly allied with struggles for the right to the city, their work to produce local space is often blind to, and even complicit in, racialized dynamics of accumulation and exclusion that organize metropolises. The result is a progressive urbanism largely disconnected from broader left struggles for spatial justice.

Keywords: scale, gentrification, livability, mobilities, bicycling, urban agriculture

Introduction

American cities are in the midst of a renaissance. Formerly disinvested spaces have become hubs of new activity, job growth has revived downtown economies, and heated property markets have spurred gentrification and racialized dispossession. In this “return of the city,” the formerly fringe practices of longtime residents and “urban pioneers” alike have become mainstream dimensions of city life. Two of these practices stand out in the current moment: gardening and bicycling. The garden and the bicycle have become symbols of the cultural explosion that has revalorized the city, making the urban “food desert” bloom again and humanizing the car-dominated street, respectively. The garden and the bicycle, to commentators and activists alike, are emblematic of the return of the livable city and the egalitarian *polis*, and the work of repairing what appeared to have been destroyed by postwar suburbanization. We see urban gardening and utility cycling³ as more than just emblems, however. By uniting in daily practice sustainability concerns with an orientation towards the quality of urban life, rather than the requirements of capital, they are in part *constitutive* of contemporary progressive urbanism.

Upon further analysis, however, these widely celebrated practices reveal problematic realities about the contemporary metropolis. Specifically, garden and bicycle activists’ overwhelming focus on the value of the local is symptomatic of a mismatch between the scales of progressive urbanist practice and those produced by the problems they hope to address (cf. N. Smith, 1984). In the postwar era, the valorization of the local was justified to counter federally funded and downtown-administered plans that effectively hollowed out cities through highway development and demolition. But urban poverty, precarity, and poor health emerged in cities as a result of regional and global restructuring as well, against which local actions can only ever offer partial redresses. Moreover, through the practices of urban gardening and bicycle activism,

urbanists perform an idealized form of local life, in the tradition of Jane Jacobs, that produces a scale of action in many ways coterminous with the neighborhood scale produced by the political economy of gentrification. These practices, which once represented challenges to capitalist urban processes, in many places now signal the competitiveness of city centers against the exurban fringe (Katz & Wagner, 2014; Markham, 2014; Tironi, 2014; Voicu & Been, 2008).

In the process, the connective tissues between progressive urbanism—specifically the politics of changing the built environment to improve quality of life—and the broader urban left organized around economic and racial justice in housing, wages, transportation, and public services—loosely affiliated in the Right to the City framework (Iveson, 2011; Marcuse, 2009; Mitchell, 2003)—have weakened and in many cases broken. In this essay, we offer a sympathetic critique of the tactics of progressive urbanism, with a view toward how “nowtopian” practices (Carlsson, 2008) such as urban gardening and cycling could be part of a renewed movement for urban spatial justice (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010; Soja, 2010).⁴ In our critique of the local we do not argue that activists have made the mistake of selecting the wrong pre-given container of action. Rather, we follow Lefebvre (2004), Massey (1994), and Brenner (2001) in foregrounding how the local scale is produced in practice and in relationship to processes occurring at other scales. The local scale, in other words, does not pre-exist the politics of localism.

We begin by outlining some of the key points of intersection between the two cases, and the stakes for thinking differently about their political significance. We then detail in turn the histories, practices, imaginaries, institutions, and perhaps most importantly scales of action in each case. We draw on extensive fieldwork to situate our critique of urban politics within concrete places and dynamics, in particular our field sites in the San Francisco Bay Area and Los

Angeles regions. We conclude with an assessment of the prospects for “progressive urbanism” rejoining the broader left, and the political realignments this might require.

A city of bicycles & gardens?

As generations of young people have re-introduced themselves to urban life, they have become intensely focused on bicycle and urban agriculture activism as part of what they understand as progressive politics. According to recent estimates by the National Gardening Association, the number of Americans aged 18-34 participating in food gardening increased by 63% between 2008 and 2013, with overall urban participation up 25% during the same period (2014, p.8). Between 2001 and 2009 (the most recent year of the National Household Travel Survey), the percentage of trips by bicycle for the same age group increased 51%, though bicycle trips still made up less than 1% of the total for all transportation modes (United States Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration, 2009). We argue that the confluence of advocacy around these two sets of practices is not merely coincidence or a passing fad, but constitutive of a strain of urban politics concerned primarily with making place and community at a local scale, or what Castells called “urban quality” (1983).

To demonstrate our argument, we draw on two multi-year studies in California. The first comes from research amongst bicycle advocates in the San Francisco Bay Area, where activists have been integral in promoting corridor-level street changes as the driving force of bicycle infrastructure investment (League of American Bicyclists, 2013; People For Bikes, 2013). The second looks to urban gardening advocates in Los Angeles, where gardeners have been adamant that the spaces of their front yards, parking medians, and community schoolyards are ground zero of the battle for a livable city (W. Allen, Balmori, & Haeg, 2010; Bonacich & Alimahomed-

Wilson, 2011; Broad, 2013; Longcore, Seymour, & Bokde, 2011; Mares & Peña, 2010). While there are certainly peculiarities to our particular studies, we are confident that they represent similar trends in cities across the United States based on the growing body of literature on the significance of urban gardening to remaking the city (for recent examples see Birky & Strom, 2013; Colasanti, Hamm, & Litjens, 2012; Lang, 2014; McClintock, 2013) and a parallel critical literature on sustainable mobility (Cresswell, 2010; Henderson, 2009, 2013; Hoffmann & Lugo, 2014; Lugo, 2013a, 2013b; Spinney, 2009; Stehlin, 2014). Indeed, one of our central concerns with the overvaluation of the local is the extent to which it obfuscates the historical-geographic conditions in specific regions that created the conditions that activists hope to address through gardening and bicycling. We see this issue emerge in three interlinked dimensions, outlined below.

First, the progressive politics of place-based quality of life are strangely disassociated from the place-based politics that have been the mainstay of Left and progressive movements in cities. Regional racial and class restructuring produces networks of placemaking politics (Pierce, Martin, & Murphy, 2011) that overlap in space but are often disconnected. Higher-income new in-migrants, especially from other parts of the US, do not articulate their concerns through longer-term narratives of disinvestment, segregation, and discrimination the way working class residents traditionally have, but through a framework of spatial improvement achievable through enlightened governance. While the future city both groups hope for might look quite similar, the reasons for and mechanisms of making place are substantially different, leading to divergent local and regional politics. We see this clearly in LA based social networks of gardeners, where campaigns for food worker justice are rarely included amongst regular requests for support for community gardens. Similarly, public discourse in mainstream bicycle advocacy circles has been

pushed to defend against charges of complicity in gentrification, but largely lacks strong political connections beyond the middle class professional world.⁵

In his analysis of the housing crisis in the San Francisco Bay Area, Schafran (2013) cautions us to remember that contemporary inequalities are the product of both historical and ongoing restructuring throughout the urban region. Here, the region is understood as a processually delineated entity, not a fixed container. For instance, as Walker and Schafran (2015) note, the vast Bay Area challenges description, encompassing anywhere from nine to 22 counties, depending on which processes are used to define it. Likewise, Los Angeles can denote a city, county, or parts of a seven county region stretching from the Pacific Ocean to the Arizona Border (cf. Ethington, 2000). However, progressive urbanism encounters the effects of these processes locally as an *alienating*—rather than exclusionary or oppressive—city. The “good sense” of progressive urbanism then dictates that the proper redress is to birth a new city, yard-by-yard, block-by-block, and street-by-street from below. This epistemological shift elides questions of power, particularly the power to control wealth, and makes the kinds of politics we discuss here distinct from the types of grassroots politics that build broad based collective power (Milkman, Bloom, & Narro, 2013), or even the kinds of cross-sector, bottom-up regional coalition-building examined by Pastor *et al* (2009). Where the new progressive urbanists aim to create bikeable corridors and edible lawns as spaces from which urban justice will emerge, we argue that these practices must align with political projects actively seeking equitable distribution of wealth and resources to communities *across* a region (c.f. Pastor *et al*, 2004), rather than depending on the leadership of new “favored quarters” (Orfield, 1999) *within* the region.

Second, by focusing so intensely on remaking certain parts of the built environment of the city, advocates risk creating merely *performative* spaces for themselves rather than

transformative actions (Lydon & Garcia, 2015; Mould, 2014). When advocates manage to tear out a front lawn or concrete to replace it with edible landscaping, or when parklets and bike lanes calm a car-dominated street, the quality of life for the people who inhabit those spaces may improve significantly. At the same time, the “complete street” and the community garden form highly visible stages for the performance of individual responsibility for a more “livable” city. The relationship between this performative quality and the Jacobsian notion of the urban street as the stage for a theater of conviviality is strong, as is interest on the part of property owners and developers in converting this lively urban drama into higher profits. In this sense, Jacobs’ foundational *Death and Life of Great American Cities* is in fundamental ways the handbook of today’s progressive urbanism, and her storied distaste for large-scale distributional planning its ethos; even large-scale planning operates through a place-making rather than distributive vernacular (Larson, 2013).

A corollary to these performative dimensions is the way that progressive urbanists understand themselves as agents of change struggling for a better city against powerful interests. In contrast to the traditional Left, however, the task for gardeners and cycling advocates is not necessarily to check the power of capital, but to position their proposals as promoting a depoliticized consensus goal of creating better urban places. The value of the local, they work to show, matters to everyone—it can increase property values, consumption, and investment, as well as overall quality of life. Advocates have achieved success in *demonstrating* and facilitating the effectiveness of these strategies, such as through the planning of bike infrastructure or the allotment of undeveloped land to various urban agricultural projects. Unlike redistributive policies like living-wage ordinances, the positive effects that bikes and gardens have on urban life need not interfere with the circulation and accumulation of capital.⁶

Third, we hope to problematize the ways that these practices have been made visible in a white and bourgeois form through gentrification (Badger, 2016; Blue, 2014; Guthman, 2008; McClintock, 2013; Mirk, 2009; Schwartzman & Jenkins, 2010; Stein, 2015). Whether by unintentional exclusion on the part of mainstream advocates or polemical critique by their adversaries, the labor of communities of color in these struggles tends to be hidden and even undermined (Henson & Munsey, 2014; Lugo & Mannos, 2012; Schmidt, 2011). On one hand, the narrative of the white gentrifier “rediscovering” these practices obfuscates the long histories of people who never left urban centers and have long used cycling and gardening as both ways of “making do” and strategies to address the racialized underdevelopment of their communities within the region (Bonacich & Alimahomed-Wilson, 2011; Epperson, 1995; Heynen, Kurtz, & Trauger, 2012; Stehlin, 2014; White, 2011). In Los Angeles, the legacies of the South Central Farm, which emerged to nourish Latina/o communities in the wake of the 1992 uprising, or the Black Panther Party-styled Community Services Unlimited gardens in South LA, demonstrate a genealogy of urban resurgence (Barraclough, 2009; Broad, 2013; Irazábal & Punja, 2009; Mares & Peña, 2010). Likewise, Detroit’s Back Alley Bikes community bike shop began as part of Detroit Summer, a youth empowerment program in the early 1990s that long predated the city’s contemporary “rediscovery,” itself often represented by the media through images of the dramatic growth of cycling (Howell, 2011).⁷

On the other hand, advocates have adeptly positioned their obstructed efforts at place making as part of a much grander fight for the future fortunes of the city (Schmitt, 2011; Snyder, 2013). The effect is that groups who have rarely been marginalized by their racial, ethnic, or class subject positions see and present themselves as underdogs by championing cycling and gardening. Through such a framing, marginalized practices have attained cultural and political

cachet. In short, while communities of color have advocated—and *continue* to advocate—for more livable cities by and for themselves, the contemporary focus on new practices of the local amongst white activists and scholars often overlooks this longer history.

One way of understanding these three dimensions together as a unified problem is through the concept of militant particularism (Harvey, 1995). As formulated by Harvey, after Williams (1989), militant particularism presupposes a local, lived entry point that opens out onto a broader terrain of struggle against the capitalist social order. However, in what we might call “particularist militancy,” the opposite is true. In particularist militancy, the broader field of struggle is presumed to operate equally at every scale and in all places, resulting in a politics that seeks to augment the number of local spaces within which a critique of the larger scale can be lived out. To paraphrase de Certeau (1984), victories at this scale do not extend—into a broader strategic attack on the various dimensions by which everyday life is alienated. In part through their successes, these “particularist militancies” become single-issue initiatives manifesting where practical as spatial “low-hanging fruit,” disconnected from a more broadly mobilized social struggle. This additive, rather than transformative, politics of place substitutes a politics of scalar—as well as spatial—form for one of social process (cf. Harvey 2000), making it open to alliances with progressive fractions of the capitalist class.

The cases

We approach the following analysis from the standpoint of situated critique. We have come to understand the political limitations of bicycle activism and urban gardening, as well as their unmet promises, on the basis of long-term commitments that did not start from critical stances. Instead, we began as (and in complicated ways remain) believers in the power of these

practices to remake urban space for the better. The strategies of embedded ethnography, which we use to examine the political, economic, and cultural entanglements of urban cycling and gardening, come from a "feel for the game" (Bourdieu 1984) developed from also being participants in these movements. We have not searched for an Archimedean point of accusation, but instead offer situated critiques of practices that we in many ways hold dear. Nevertheless, we write with concern about the direction that the politics of progressive urbanism have taken, and while we share common goals with many participants in these movements, we see in some cases the positions of our interlocutors diverging from what we see as a just politics of the city. In this respect, our goal is, following Gramsci, to take the forms of "common sense" animating each of these political projects, as well as the wealth of expertise that participants and "organic intellectuals" possess, and work toward rendering them *critical*, aware of their contradictions, silences, and exclusions (Gramsci, 1971).

History

Through the uneven growth of cities into agrarian landscapes, the necessity for resilient local food supplies, or the simple pleasure of gardening, different forms of urban agriculture are global phenomena as old as cities themselves (Steel, 2013). In the United States over the last century, waves of enthusiasm for urban agriculture swept over cities for myriad reasons—though often in the context of crises that garnered wide political and popular support (Lawson 2005). From the so called "victory gardens" of the first half of the 20th century to the urban community gardens of the 1960s and '70s, urban agriculture was primarily understood as spatially and temporarily exceptional. The place of urban agriculture in the city, especially community gardens, became a significantly more contentious political issue in the early 1990s as American

cities began to see the first full-blown battles between activists who had worked for decades to turn abandoned property into community space and developers set on bringing capital back into the “revitalized” areas (Eizenberg, 2012; Mele, 2000; Reynolds, 2015). Indeed, the literature on gentrification refers to fights over greening of cities as a key site of struggle in the right to the city (c.f. Quastel, 2009; Schmelzkopf, 1995; C. M. Smith & Kurtz, 2003). Only recently has urban agriculture been embraced, in part from those struggles in combination with sustainability discourse, as an important part of the urban landscape by everyone from city boosters to politicians to community organizers (Holt, 2015; Shenoy, 2015).

The history of the contemporary bicycle movement is shorter by comparison, but since its widespread adoption in the late 19th century, the bicycle has been periodically proposed as a revolutionary technology (Furness, 2005; Illich, 1973). However, aside from some experiments in college towns like Davis, California or Madison, Wisconsin, the “bike boom” of the 1970s had few ambitions to change urban life itself. Visions of cycling celebrated bicycling's inherently democratic qualities (Illich, 1973), the machine's elegance itself (Furness, 2010), or its environmental benefits (Carlsson, Elliott, & Camarena, 2012), but less often its capacity to durably alter space. Bicycle advocacy organizations cropped up throughout the US in the early 1970s, but withered during the 1980s as the boom faded, while advocates worked for bicycle access to existing road and transit infrastructure, not changes to cities themselves.

Events in the 1990s eroded this apolitical frame. 1992 saw the emergence of Critical Mass, an anarchic carnival of specifically urban cyclists that demanded changes to the capitalist city itself and the automobile infrastructure that degrades urban places. While mainstream bicycle advocates have largely kept their distance from Critical Mass, it forms the current bicycle boom's cultural and *specifically urban* foundations (Furness, 2010; Dave Snyder, 2002). Non-

profit community spaces—Oakland’s Cycles of Change and Colectivelo, San Francisco’s Bike Kitchen, Portland’s Community Cycling Center, Los Angeles’ BiciCocina, and Detroit’s Back Alley Bikes, for instance—form the more durable components of the same social milieu, typically sited in disinvested but centrally located neighborhoods where rising rents tend to jeopardize their community mission.

Institutional changes in the 1990s also helped spur the place-based politics of cycling. The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) of 1991, and its successors, allocated unprecedented amounts of federal funding, rising from several million dollars in the early 1990s to over \$800 million in 2014, for bicycle and pedestrian projects to be administered by metropolitan planning organizations (Federal Highway Administration n.d.). This spurred the creation of bicycle-pedestrian advisory committees (BPACs) to aid local jurisdictions in generating the bicycle plans needed to access these funds (Payne, 2002). Infrastructural planning became a point of articulation between the local state, growing bicycle advocacy organizations, and a new cultural explosion of urban cycling. This process channeled grassroots, localized efforts into political will, but often betrays the uneven distribution of progressive urbanism’s social base.

Practices

With the rising importance of infrastructure, bicycle advocacy practices have become progressively entangled with the place-making projects of neoliberal urbanism’s “livable” turn. Since the early 2000s, advocates have pursued increasingly sophisticated economic narratives to justify investment in bicycle infrastructure. These claims emerged from very specific, corridor-level efforts, and as such articulate the benefits of bicycle infrastructure in the *lingua franca* of

the localized urban space-economy: increased property values, a larger customer base, a more attractive consumer environment, and a happier and more productive workforce (Flusche, 2009, 2012; Jaffe, 2013; People For Bikes, 2013). Often made for strategic reasons to counter small business concerns about parking (Stehlin, 2015), these arguments are now the common sense of national-level bicycle advocacy and progressive urbanism more generally (Andersen, 2014; Tanya Snyder, 2013). An array of design and consulting firms like Alta Planning + Design, new media outlets like Streetsblog, and institutional networks like the National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO) have sprung up around this consensus.

Correspondingly, the repertoire of advocacy practices skews toward the local. While bicycle network planning is nominally citywide, the politics of implementation lead to increased efforts in areas where bicycle infrastructure already has mobilized political support, overwhelmingly densely settled gentrified or gentrifying neighborhoods. For example, in 1999 a strategic planner Oakland's Community and Economic Development Agency noted in a memo to Oakland's BPAC that the draft bicycle plan's prioritization schedule covered only North Oakland (Burgett, 1999), the area with both the most cyclists and the most advanced gentrification at the time. To curry favor in business districts, advocates often draw up lists of supportive businesses and encourage their members to shop there. As one Oakland advocate put it in an interview, "We want to see Broadway get bike lanes, and then for merchants on Telegraph to see it improve and then want bike lanes on Telegraph." "Tactical urbanist" (Mould, 2014) practices like "pop-up" protected bikeways on Bike to Work Day build support for changes to specific corridors; in some cases, they become permanent. Particularly successful infrastructure projects like San Francisco's Valencia Street and 9th Avenue in Manhattan have become demonstration areas, examples of the economic value of (certain) cyclists (Drennen,

2003; Simon, 2012). Thus, while the thickening of bicycle advocacy networks over the past two decades has facilitated greater knowledge sharing, the knowledge shared often reinforces the primacy of the local, networked into a decontextualized “community of consciousness” (Turner, 2008) of urban cycling advocates and enthusiasts.

Urban agricultural activists have equally found themselves framing their projects in economic terms since the 1990s, swimming in a neoliberal tide against demands for the “highest and best use” of increasingly valuable urban land (DeLind, 2015; Samuel Walker, 2015). While some scholars are beginning to theorize gardens as a urban commons (Eizenberg, 2012; Federici, 2012, pp. 141–144; Lang, 2014b) the language of entrepreneurship and neoliberal logic has clearly been the dominant mode in urban agriculture over the last 30 years (P. Allen, 2010; Ghose & Pettygrove, 2014; Guthman, 2008; McClintock, 2013). This is evident in the very conflation of urban community gardens, even large ones, with other forms of commercial agriculture. Every home and community garden becomes potentially profitable in the nascent local economy, every school garden a place to instruct young people on the merits of local investment and “innovative” business acumen.

In Los Angeles, recent struggles between advocates and city agencies over their right to use private home spaces to grow, process and/or sell agricultural products has laid bare the expectation that urban agriculture be included as part the city’s commercial interests. In these disagreements, activists constructed a narrative that pitted the hyper-local spaces of their yards against unreasonable city ordinances that were stifling neighborhood level efforts to build a better food system and local economy. As with the bicycle advocates, the gardeners hailed a (inter)national common sense on the universal benefits of their practices, but reinforced the local as the meaningful construct against the inconveniences of a more urban or regional set of

commitments. Perhaps more insidiously, these struggles explicitly condone the further rolling back of state powers, while implicitly accepting the dissolving of social investments in favor of “entrepreneurial” solutions.

Imaginaries

At a 2014 event at a bookstore in Los Angeles to promote “urban homesteading,” one speaker told the audience that, with regards to food policy, they could not affect what happens in Washington or the state legislature, or even really the city, but that they could change what happens with their own yard. A widely held and not entirely unreasonable belief amongst advocates holds that the collusion between the industrial agro-food system and the state is so entrenched that the only alternative is to build a new food system from the ground up. Here, again, we see the call to “change life” (Gottdiener, 1985) winnowed to the individual or family unit alone. When asked why they gardened at home or in community gardens, many informants responded with comments such as “to provide fresh, organic food for my family,” often emphasizing the desire to *show* others how “easy it is to grown your own food.” These goals are not in themselves problematic (by most measures they are laudable), but when these spaces and practices become the ends unto themselves in the context of “you can only change your own yard,” they further foreclose the ability to even imagine different scales of political engagement. In the context of “vote with your fork” politics that frame individual consumer choices as the key lever to transforming the global food system (for a critique Guthman, 2007; Pollan, 2007; for example Schlosser, 2009), edible yards and farmers markets mutate from logical and convenient spaces of resistance to acting as the only imaginable spaces of change. Because of this subtle but

significant transition, quality of life at the neighborhood scale and below is, we argue, misconstrued as the necessary target of progressive urban politics.

This shift is reinforced in contemporary bicycle advocacy, which is animated both by strong localist visions for urban life and a systemic view of the ills of “automobility” (Urry, 2004). As Furness notes, radical discourses of cycling wed the personal with the political, framing cycling as resistance to oil wars, suburban sprawl, obesity, and social atomization (2010). Normative visions of cycling as the foundation for a more gracious form of urban life draw inspiration from the urban form of northern European cities like Amsterdam and the neighborhood-scale vision of Jane Jacobs. For Philadelphia bicycle advocate John Dowlin, “the bicycle could be for the world’s cities what the spinning wheel was for Gandhi” (in Mapes 2009, p. 37). Because many activists see cars as the cause of urban contradictions rather than their symptom, they have promoted cycling as key to a more smoothly operating, human-scale capitalist city (People For Bikes, 2013).

Regional visions for cycling often remain somewhat abstract. Because the power to reshape streets ultimately resides with the locality, regionalism becomes in practice the uneven accretion of localized successes.⁸ This is not necessarily a failure of vision on the part of advocates. The city-by-city approach appears narrow because the fragmented everyday political terrain of the American metropolis is *already ideological* (cf. Eagleton 1991). To the extent that advocates celebrate local victories, however, especially the contribution of bicycle infrastructure to localized accumulation, they exacerbate this ideological fragmentation.

Institutions

Making urban bicycle space enrolls an ever-widening network of institutions in the production of space. Federal funding through transportation spending bills is channeled through states to metropolitan planning organizations under various programs, Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) key among them. These funds are allocated to projects via local planning departments according to comprehensive bicycle plans. Thus, while bicycle plans are comprehensive, their implementation occurs on a project-by-project basis, subject to fiscal discipline, local priorities, and institutional politics. For example, in San Francisco, Valencia Street's storied success in 1998 occurred through concerted action, while Cesar Chavez Street in the less rapidly gentrifying Outer Mission District was identified in the 1997 bicycle plan but took more than 15 years to receive infrastructure (Stehlin, 2015).⁹ The development of bicycle plans involves transportation planners, elected officials, bicycle advocacy organizations, bicycle-pedestrian advisory committees, consulting firms, professional schools, foundations, online media outlets, community organizations, bike shops, and bicycle-friendly businesses, but their implementation rests on the spatialization of these networked powers. The result, in many places, has been what Henderson (2015) calls "progressive-neoliberal hybridization," in which the institutionalization of bicycle advocacy aligns with broader urban development goals.

Two examples of emerging institutional networks are worth noting. The first is the National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO), formed in the late 1990s to challenge the grip of highway planners on road design. NACTO brings together mayors, planners, advocates, consultants, and corporations into an alternative network of planning practices, making a specifically urbanist claim for a different framework for street planning in the 21st century city. A second example is the institutional change spurred by California's Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act of 2008 (SB 375), which created a

competitive framework for allocating federal funding through regional plans to steer transportation investment toward denser, less car-dependent housing development, within which active transportation plays a key role. Ostensibly in the interest of more coherent regional mobility networks, plans in this framework, such as Plan Bay Area, do not challenge the primacy of the municipality in land use governance. Even some neighborhoods have the power to shape where Priority Development Areas are created, and thus to promote or deter accumulation projects around existing transit and commercial corridors (Palm & Reimer, 2015). While regional plans under SB 375 are not typical of other US regions (Chapple 2014, pp. 46-8), their inability to compel local land use changes is. Thus, as extra-local institutions facilitating bicycle planning, neither NACTO nor California's new regional plans show a clear route out of the local fetish.

In spite of politics that often skirt the fine line between libertarian and anarchistic suspicions of the state and large institutions (Hayes-Conroy, 2010; McClintock, 2013), urban agricultural advocates have long relied on the financial and organizational support of both (Lawson, 2005). As Carlsson (2008) notes, throughout the 1970s, federal workforce development programs provided direct subsidies for employing gardeners. While those programs dissolved under Reagan, older relics of State funding remain, such as the University of California's land grant institution-required Master Gardener Program, which provides information and training to individual gardeners and gardens across the county. But the development and maintenance of gardening projects primarily falls on local communities, resulting in a block-by-block strategy for increasing the number, and subsequent access to the benefits of, agricultural spaces in the region, without planning or financial support for state entities.

The institutional entity that most visibly attempts to coordinate urban agriculture activities at a regional level is the Los Angeles Food Policy Council (LAFPC). Founded in 2010, the LAFPC hovers between an official government agency and an independent council with no power to set policy. Housed in City Hall and convened at the behest of the mayor, but not officially part of the city government, the council advises the city and county on issues related to food and agriculture in the region (Delwiche & Fox, 2010; Fox, 2010). Its mandate is to coordinate the more than 605 food organizations in the region in their efforts (LA Food Policy Council, 2013). The LAFPC has overseen some major “wins,” in terms of pushing large city institutions to source food from socially/economically responsible local producers, but urban agriculture and gardening advocates frequently express frustration that the Council does not do more to support their efforts to promote gardening at the lawn and vacant lot scale. They find the regional, policy-focused mandates of the council overlook what they see as more immediate work of setting up and maintaining local-scale gardens.

Towards a critique of practicing the local

In each of our cases, there are strong obstacles to a more durable articulation of the local with the regional. While bicycle advocates are not mystified about the extent of automobile dominance regionally, their efforts are justifiably concentrated where they can achieve visible impact—at the level of the corridor and the municipality. The scale actively *produced* by bicycle activism constitutes a partial spatial solution to a social crisis of automobility (Rose 1984; Harvey 2000; cf. Urry 2004), largely by facilitating individual withdrawal from car-dependent residential and commercial development. Even within cities, as noted above, bicycle infrastructure networks are unevenly developed, and based on the patterns of the normative

office commuter. The ability to bicycle for daily needs is now part of the attractiveness, and thus differential rents, of urban cores (Katz & Wagner, 2014). The competitive success of newly bicycle-friendly neighborhoods of cities like Oakland and San Francisco, when seen in this light, actually betrays the absence of a territorial agency capable of disciplining growth (cf. Harvey 2003). The result is an archipelago of bicycle-scale urban spaces, reinforced by individual locational choices and nestled within car-dominated regions. This renders the progressive politics of place convergent with, rather than disruptive of, the *scale* produced by the gentrification processes that are remaking cities across the country.

If, for progressive urbanists, the automobile symbolizes the urbicidal twentieth century's transportation system (Mohl, 2002), the front yard represents the triumph of suburban spaces in the built environment. For practical, ethical, and economic reasons, very few people suggest that the suburbs be razed and returned to the agricultural lands they once were—though the regional preservation of small farms is regularly proposed as an alternative to urban sprawl (Paül & McKenzie, 2013; Vallianatos, Gottlieb, & Haase, 2004). But in California cities, and many others in America, where all but the densest areas are dominated by single family homes, the front yard presents a compelling symbolic target for urban gardening advocates (Allen, Balmori, & Haeg, 2010).

Echoing both the political sentiment that change begins with the individual home and body, and the general trickle-up approach to regional change expressed in bicycle advocacy, home gardens and plots in community gardens further work to reify the smallest scales possible as the sites of significant change. This is not to deny that better bike infrastructure or front yard gardens should be celebrated as victories in the struggle for a less alienated everyday life, but, as we have argued throughout, to caution that if the *localness* of the achievements becomes an end

unto itself, “progressive urbanism” will increasingly foreclose the possibilities of more radical, inclusive—and most importantly—long lasting changes in the urban environment. Championing the corridor and the community garden is not enough. Nor is attempting to reverse the destructiveness of suburbanization by promoting places that are formally more “urban.” To address the kinds of urban inequalities and injustices that progressives espouse concern with, at the very least a regional sense of place (cf. Massey 1994) is necessary to have a relational sense of scale (Hart, 2001; Howitt, 1998) that situates hyper-local struggles over the built environment in the greater historical-geographical context they must address. The core political terrain of progressive urbanism is the realm of everyday life, and the practices that compose it. This is an eminently rational entry point for the critique of the capitalist city, and for prefigurative action in the interest of a more survivable present. But it leads to pitfalls. In *Critique of Everyday Life*, Henri Lefebvre writes:

“[A]ny criticism of life which fails to take the clear and distinct notion of human alienation as its starting point will be a criticism not of life, but of [alienated] pseudo-reality. Blinkered by alienation, confined to its perspective, such a critique will take as its object the ‘reality’ of the existing social structure, rejecting it wholesale as it yearns for ‘something else’: a spiritual life, the surreal, the superhuman, an ideal or metaphysical world” (Lefebvre 1991, p. 168).

For us, this statement points us toward the following insights: 1) many critiques of automobility and the industrial food system frame the alienation of the street and the daily meal as *primary* contradictions, respectively, of contemporary urban life; and 2) many activists have pursued the “something else” Lefebvre indicates at a scale at which it is achievable in the present (cf. Rose 1984; Harvey 2000).¹⁰ Moreover, the history of progressive opposition to urban renewal,

environmental racism, and gentrification, coupled with the legacy of Jacobs-inspired neighborhood preservation and community-building, has led to a common sense that the local is *prima facie* virtuous in the political realm (Gramsci 1971; Hall and Shea 2015; cf. Sharzer 2012).

Returning to Michel de Certeau's distinction between strategies and tactics is useful here. The contemporary celebration of "tactical urbanism" and "urban acupuncture," small-scale practices that change urban spaces in ways neither planned nor authorized, displays the strength of de Certeau's influence (Lerner, 2014; Lydon & Garcia, 2015). De Certeau valorizes the subversive tendencies of tactics that fly under the radar of official strategies, evinced by practices such as Park(ing) Day, Critical Mass, and "guerilla gardening." Such methods are not available to all, or practical in all spaces, however; some enjoy tacit approval from "official" powers, particularly depending on the race-class position of their protagonists. We see the difficulty of the "tactical" approach to transforming the city in the following way. The tactical/strategic and temporary/permanent do not neatly map onto one another in the way implied by de Certeau. Rather, in many places, the gains that bicycle and urban gardening advocates have achieved are the result of tactical moves becoming permanent because of their convergence with other strategic interests, rather than the unfolding of a strategy to transform life by using automobility or the food system as an entry point. In other words, successful pilot projects gain momentum without necessarily "scaling up"; they become poles of attraction for a voluntaristic progressive urbanism, rather than victories en route to transforming structural conditions (Shapiro, 2013).

If the spatial scale of the neighborhood or corridor predominates in the world of progressive urbanism, the corresponding social bloc is the community of choice-directed responsible individuals (Barnett, Cloke, Clarke, & Malpass, 2005; Foucault, 2010; Maniates, 2002). At its more voluntaristic ends, progressive urbanism frames the industrial food system

and the complex of automobility as entities from which individuals can subtract themselves, provided that they are given the option. This leads actors working for healthier food and mobility to intervene in the “marketplace” of places, to create more responsible choice scenarios (Shamir, 2008), such as more local food options and spaces to practice urban agriculture or more bike-friendly housing and safer streets.

Responsibilization takes two key forms. First, livability advocates, in arguing for better choices in urban space, valorize the ecologically and socially responsible individual as an imagined class- and race-neutral agent of urban improvement, and encourage cities to do the same and support local place-making efforts. Second, and perhaps more ominously, they accept and even celebrate the conditions of austerity that give rise to the diverse forms of “making do” of which bicycle use and small-scale urban gardening are a part. Here the economic (Hackworth, 2007; Harvey, 2007) and political (Brown, 2015; Foucault, Burchell, Gordon, & Miller, 1991) strands of neoliberalism meet. The result, in a certain tautological way, is acceptance of the terms of scarcity that limit the capacity of local states to undertake more redistributive spatial transformations. For instance, in the context of paltry federal and state funding for transit, former San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency director Ed Rieskin called bicycle infrastructure “the most cost-effective investment we can make in moving people” (Simons, 2012), a common perspective that overlooks how genuinely redistributive investments in mobility *should lose money* (Grengs, 2005).¹¹ Food politics fares little better in the urban region, where the ubiquitous “food desert” narrative has been rhetorically constructed by policy wonks, activists and politicians as a primarily spatial problem to be solved through a neoliberal combination of (largely failed) tax-incentives for non-union grocery stores to relocate to low-income neighborhoods and, perhaps more importantly, encouraging urban agriculture as a palliative for

retrenched federal food programs (Bedore, 2013; Guthman, 2008; Shannon, 2013). Only recently have campaigns like the “Fight for 15” minimum wage battles begun to draw serious attention to the low wages that underpin poor food access. Meanwhile, “tactical urbanism” often celebrates the actions taken in these conditions as grassroots, “authentic” expressions of urban vitality, often to the exclusion of considerations of the relative social power of their practitioners.

Conclusion

The abstract imperative of sustainability as an emerging dimension of urban governance (Jonas, Gibbs, & While, 2011; Whitehead, 2003) means that utility cycling and urban gardening, practices that emerged over the course of the 20th century as ways to make the urban present more survivable, have been endowed with a sense of historic mission to *expand* for the sake of the urban future. In other words, urban cycling and agriculture advocates no longer promote changes to urban space just to make the practices of existing cyclists and gardeners easier, but to create *new* cyclists and urban gardeners. Their efforts make a name for certain neighborhoods in cities like Los Angeles, Oakland, Detroit, and New York as pioneers in these practices, and their practitioners as entrepreneurs of their places. Each of these pioneering neighborhoods acts as a synecdoche that obscures the uneven development of its respective city and regions.

Reflecting on the surge of enthusiasm for urban gardening, author and activist Rebecca Solnit asked, “if gardens are the answer, what is the question?” (2009). We could ask the same of the enthusiasm for cycling amongst the recently re-urbanized class of progressive activists. The bicycle and the garden—and all of the assumptions of mutual benefit that surrounds them—work to create stages on which a somewhat narrowly defined notion of progressive urban politics are performed. Though they are by no means exclusively the only people involved, we find that

these movements are frequently driven by the good intentions of young, middle-class activists who have been disconnected from, if not on the outright opposite side of, longer histories of struggles for urban space, and their contemporary contexts. The bicycle and the garden thus become the answer to *all* urban problems, irrespective of the scale and social structures that underlie them.

It should be clear that we are not arguing that struggles for a more livable city (in the fullest sense) are distractions from “real” left politics.¹² In our field sites, we’ve engaged with remarkably diverse communities coming together across lines of race, class, age, and gender to work for more inclusive and sustainable cities. But a politics of quality of life separated from questions of racism, patriarchy, and class power tends to blunt its critique, limit its possible alliances, and make it available to capture by the very interests that profit from uneven geographical development (see Figure 1). Even in ideal conditions, we contend that the primary progressive urbanist focus on remaking corridors and yards has at least two negative effects. First, the hyper-localism of the activism reinforces uneven geography at the regional scale, leaving many neighborhoods to “get on board,” while never really challenging the regional and global forces that over the last half-century have forced cities and neighborhoods to become increasingly entrepreneurial or wither. Second, and relatedly, they tend to push advocacy towards economistic justifications for supporting bicycles and gardens over more radical agendas, ironically dovetailing with the drivers of gentrification. In other words, creating spaces that are *unusually* livable can be completely congruent with property-based accumulation, which depends on qualitative differences between spaces that prompt flows of capital between them. The task of a more critical politics of place is to pursue real improvements to urban life without their translation into increased rents through the cash nexus.

We do not see the bicycle and garden simply as examples of a new urban progressive politics, but actively constitutive of it. The progressive bent to these politics emerges from their promise to equally benefit all urban lives, regardless of race, class, gender and age. We contend that they do so not by attacking structural racism or upward wealth redistribution, but by proposing ways to partially avoid these fights. So even as gardening and cycling advocates understand themselves to be allied with the explicitly raced and classed struggles over the city (environmental justice, living wage, and anti-gentrification battles for example) the spaces they propose to create are largely consonant with the racial and class dynamics taking place at the regional metropolitan scale.

This does not mean a regional imagination is totally absent, however. Bike East Bay, for instance, is a de facto regional organization, covering 33 municipalities from large, diverse Oakland to smaller, whiter suburban cities like Lafayette. It formed in 1972 with the explicit purpose of fighting for bicycle access to the new Bay Area Rapid Transit system. Despite its center of gravity in the inner East Bay, Bike East Bay trumpets successes across its segment of the region. Nevertheless, this spirit is limited by a fragmented metropolitan structure, leading to time-consuming corridor-level struggles. In this context, the clearest successes beyond local corridors have been over connections to existing transit networks like BART and CalTrain, which themselves reflect and reinforce regionally uneven development. Similarly, as the above discussion of the Los Angeles Food Policy Council suggests, there is formidable organizing happening to remake the urban food system from the regional scale. Though the LAFPC must necessarily contend with hyper-local disputes over specific gardening projects, as well as state and federal level structures, its very existence keeps the necessity of a regional framing in focus.

On this last point of the unevenness of the regional scale, urban geographers have a solid understanding of how the cycles of abandonment and reinvestment by capital have created cities with patches of dense extreme wealth and poverty, as well as vast sprawl of both, almost always along racialized lines (Hammel, 1999; Harvey, 2000; Wyly, Moos, Hammel, & Kabahizi, 2009). But local debates over investment often succumb to the neoliberal false dichotomy that neighborhoods must either be left disinvested to remain affordable and livable places or accept the inevitable, naturalized forces of gentrification (Slater, 2006).¹³ Bicycle and garden advocacy can easily fall prey to both sides of the dichotomy: reifying low-cost food and transit as resilient forms of poverty, and/or promising that they can attract capital back to the neighborhood. This is where and why advocates for cycling and gardening (and the scholars who support them) need to be particularly attentive to taking a critical position. For these reasons, we argue that both advocates and scholars should work to make connections between their genuine desires to improve everyday urban life and regional plans and struggles to make a just city-region for everyone. Bicycles and gardens can certainly form part of the plan, but placing them—and the scales of action their supporters have promoted—at its center is likely to disable a more militant politics of place.

1000+ EVICTIONS!

A MONTH IN OAKLAND



Figure 1. Anti-gentrification flyer from Causa Justa/Just Cause, one of the Bay Area left's main housing organizations. Note the "BIKE LIFE" tattoos on the "hipster's" knuckles. Artwork by Causa Justa/Just Cause, used by permission.

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¹ Corresponding author

² Change of affiliation, effective August 2016.

³ As opposed to cycling for sport, though for obvious reasons many bicycle users practice both. Hereafter, “cycling” refers to bicycle use for transportation.

⁴ In doing so, we will conceptually distinguish between the urban left and “progressive urbanism.” If the former most closely identified with the Right to the City framework, the latter is the inheritor of Jane Jacobs, Donald Appleyard, and other progressive planners from the 1960s onward. Despite the fact that the two overlap in practice, we feel that in many cities a turning point has arrived, in which livability has become a key basis for urban economic competitiveness, leading to conflict with a more redistributive urban agenda. See Henderson for the concept of “progressive-neoliberal hybridization” (2013) and a suggestive paper by Atkinson and Jorgensen (2014) on the fragmentation of progressive planning.

⁵ In 2015, for instance, serious political fissures emerged within the San Francisco Bicycle Coalition, with an ultimately unsuccessful reform slate linked to social and economic justice organizations like Causa Justa/Just Cause and People Organizing to Demand Economic and Environmental Rights (PODER) urging a shift toward a more community-engaged political strategy.

⁶ This is also a scale problem. An urban community garden or bicycle facility may appear to trouble the hegemony of “Big Ag” or “Big Auto,” respectively—whose interests shape state and national politics—while potentially reinforcing the arguably more decisive dominance of real estate capital for urban politics. See Logan and Molotch (2007).

⁷ See Furness (2010) for a broader history of such community bike spaces.

⁸ In cases where bicycle infrastructure is somewhat functionally regional, it tends to extend the “last mile” of access to transit networks. The new Bay Area Bikesystem is an extreme example, connecting a handful of wealthy Silicon Valley cities to downtown San Francisco forty miles to the north via the high-priced Caltrain commuter rail. In such last mile solutions, improved access is likely to be capitalized locally as rent.

⁹ Infrastructure development is by definition processual, and cannot occur all at once—we appreciate the reminder from one of our anonymous reviewers to address this point. Nevertheless, there exists a definite bias in bicycle infrastructure provision (particularly bicycle sharing systems) toward areas that will show immediate success, which tend also to serve wealthier and whiter constituencies.

¹⁰ This dynamic has long been recognized as key to the more marginal practices of gentrification, and the contradictory liberatory spaces they produce (Rose, 1984).

¹¹ Celebrations of the economic savings of bike lanes over highways and bus rapid transit (BRT) over light rail systems are common, for instance.

¹² On the contrary, quality of life has been historically a working class issue, and in the United States especially the history of racism in apportioning livable existence in space makes quality of life absolutely critical to an anti-racist urban politics.

¹³ It should be recalled, for instance, that in Logan and Molotch's classic theory of the political economy of place, the structural contradiction is not between use-value and exchange-value *per se*, but between place-based use-values that can be capitalized and place-based use-values that are destroyed by capitalization (2007).