

From community gardening to environmental volunteering in green space maintenance: Following the trajectories of neoliberal devolution through gardening.

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This presentation aims to critically assess the uses made of community gardening by municipal authorities in the framework of the neoliberalisation of the urban. It investigates the uses made of urban agriculture in the context of changing modes of regulation of green public spaces and specifies the place of urban agriculture among various forms of devolution to the third sector in green space maintenance. Indeed, whereas a growing body of work focusing on the deployment of community gardening in the framework of neoliberal policies has started to emerge (Perkins 2009; Pudup 2007; Rosol 2010), the specificities of the various forms of third-sector devolution in green space management and the place of urban agriculture among them have tended to be overlooked – with the exception of Rosol (2012).

This conference paper is based upon extensive ethnographic fieldwork among policy-makers, municipal green space officers, and professional as well as community gardeners in the State of Geneva, Switzerland. Building upon a political-economic and Foucauldian theoretical framework, the presentation provides a critical analysis of the discursive framing and pragmatic use of community gardens by municipal green space departments. I first show that the recent emergence of community gardening policies in Geneva is tied to the need to tend temporary public spaces in a low-cost manner in the face of austerity budget cuts in green space maintenance. I then expand to show that heads of green space departments consider them to be a first, preliminary step towards other planned forms of volunteer maintenance of urban green spaces – namely state-led volunteer maintenance of urban parks and trees. Community gardens are thus viewed as one specific, historically-situated, form of public involvement in what department leaders consider to be a broader, desirable tendency towards public devolution on volunteer action in the field of urban landscaping and horticulture. I finally critically analyze the expected change in subjectivities and in the nature of public services that each form of public involvement is respectively expected to help bring about, as each is associated with a specific model of citizenship and of state-non state actors relationships.

References:

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