

Aspects to the Understanding of the Social Dynamics of Organic Food through the Example of a Community Garden in Budapest

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Abstract: Due to the results of my recent anthropological analysis conducted in a community garden in Budapest my aim is to highlight the keypoints, dynamics, and community demand on the organic food production. In this paper I present the main discourse topics, acts and behaviours that surrounds crop cultivation and defines what the community members consider as organic. Organic is a social construct, and as such, thinking about this issue is multifarious. While contributing to this issue with specific considerations, at the same time I try to measure the importance of organic food in urban context.

Keywords: organic food, community gardening, community research, participant observation, urban anthropology, social dynamics

THE ISSUE OF GLOBAL FOOD

The food that we eat is an essential component of our lives and cultural identity. Social science turns its attention towards this fundamental resource of our everyday lives in the early 1990s. In this time period, processes and new contexts of global transformation made it necessary to reconsider the philosophical basis of the issue of provisions. Questions of food appear in the cross-section of numerous global challenges that are most markedly present around the millenium, such as the negative effects of climate change, the reduction of Earth's biodiversity, or the monocultural, extensive exploitation of natural resources (BRUCKMEIER 2015:6–8). Meanwhile, the production, distribution and function of food itself is becoming increasingly subordinated to the profit-driven laws of motion of the capitalist market economy, and consequently, the commodity profile of foodstuff becomes more emergent. The means and methods of production, logistics of food, and market pricing are predominately determined by external actors and companies, thus in terms of access it means a hegemonic authority position (BIEL 2009:3, 75). David Hess argues that food production has been subjected to the trends of global markets, therefore the place of production and consumption of food does not necessarily denote the same geographic space, and the access and distribution of food

is an unequal and doubtfully verifiable process which drastically increases the potential risk of social inequalities (*ibid.* 34–50). This extensive monocultural production driven by a profit-oriented approach causes excessive dependency relations between production regions and global markets (HESS 2009:34–38, 137). Food itself is not a self-evident entity anymore, but more like a service characterized by global features that is the interest of monopolies; on the other hand, it is an endpoint of non-transparent operations of global food chains. Furthermore, food is an important factor of consumer society which has been surrounded by the questions of places of origin, ways of consumption, control exercised over production, food forgery and treatment. Because from the point of view of individuals these above-mentioned global food chains form a kind of invisible network, global risk as a factor appears in discourses of food (BECK 1992:36–42, 69).

SOCIAL SCIENCE INTERESTS IN NUTRITION

Research interest in food-related social studies are excessively varied and fragmented. Generally these topics may be interpreted along the questions of quantity, quality (FARKAS 2016:86), different ways of access and pursuits of conscious consumption, risks of food production, community practices of control, and alternative food-related practices. Thinking about food and many patterns of consumption are also political in nature. Responses to global trends are not only created by individuals but also appearing in different levels of society: the demand of re-interpretation of our relationship with food is present amongst consumer groups and alternative networks, subcultures, different kinds of communities, even at the level of settlements and regions. One such alternative way is the discourse about organic, healthy food and short food supply chains (CSURGÓ – MEGYESI 2016:167), the history of which, according to Sólyom, is only one or two decades long (SÓLYOM 2016:6). An essential element of these initiatives is that wider control over victuals is placed in the hands of individuals and communities (FARKAS 2016:86), so that issues of responsibility and risk encoded in food chains can be eliminated to some extent. Reconsidering the access and affording adequate amounts and qualities of food would also bring a decrease in phenomena such as malnutrition, lack of healthy food, and starvation (ROSEGRANT – CLINE 2003:1917). Sociological research focused mainly on Eastern European countries and rural areas and consumer groups has shown that organic farming and food production is a little-known, novel phenomenon that takes local economic structures into account in different ways and measures (BILEWITZ – SPIEWAK 2016:147; KÓNYA 2016:3–5; LAKI 2016:8; NISTOR 2015). Organic farming in Hungary has lost some of its significance since 2004 as it does not get any significant consideration in state aid policies. Hungary exports approximately two-thirds of its organically produced but unprocessed food. The major purchasing market within the country is the population of Budapest; nevertheless, its significance is negligible in total. According to the results of a focus group-based sociological research in the Carpathian Basin, the reason for this lack of interest is mainly due to higher consumer prices of organic products compared to the food in the chain stores (BAKÓ 2016:94; LAKI 2016:26), i.e., organic goods are mainly the privilege of the wealthy social layer. Laki also mentions that in the Hungarian language *öko*- and *bio*- are synonymously used prefixes, which are equivalent to the English word “organic” (LAKI 2016:2).

THE RISK FACTOR

The global dependency relation mentioned above is also one of the speech topics and reference points of lifestyle movements related to urban agriculture and neighborhood initiatives that enhance locality. Although Hungary was the first country in Europe that rejected the use of Genetically Modified Organisms in agricultural production in 2006, some major incidents related to food issues gained public interest and a wide range of press coverage that reflect the risk encoded in dependence relations. For example, one of the major food panics was the aflatoxin scandal that erupted around the Kalocsai Fűszerpaprika Zrt. in 2004. A Year earlier when it came out that a year earlier the company supplemented its lacking average yield of Hungarian seasoning paprika with South-American imported paprika. The shipload was damaged and the imported peppers were delivered in wet, fungal environment. Later, the Laboratory Center of Veterinary and Food Control of Bács-Kiskun County revealed that, as a result, the imported food was contaminated with aflatoxin (NÉBIH 2013:8). A similar situation was triggered by the Asian dioxin-contaminated guar gum scandal (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2015), or in local aspects, another major case: a company in Ócsa. For years, the company has been re-labeling and redistributing expired foodstuffs that were received from hypermarkets for the original purpose of liquidation (PEST MEGYEI FŐÜGYÉSZSÉG 2015). While this study was underway, a routine inspection of NÉBIH [National Office of Food Security] in a food chain store in Hungary stumbled upon spring onions from Italy in which the chlorpyrifos (used for soil disinfection and as an insecticide) levels exceeded the health limit by nine times. A few hours later a community garden in Budapest posted a short announcement on its Facebook timeline with the related article and the following message: “This is also the reason why your own [vegetable] is better, because you know where the seeds and seedlings are coming from!” In what extent does community gardening provide reasonable alternatives to eliminating such global risks? This question can be answered by examining the community’s thinking about organic food. According to Nistor, community gardening can be categorized from a certain point of view, as an endeavor to decrease, or at least to balance the importance of food chains in purveyance (NISTOR 2015:132).

GLOBAL CHALLENGES, OLD-NEW RESPONSES: THE URBAN AGRICULTURE

Although there is a significant amount of scientific literature on the subject of organic food, relatively few studies deal with the community dynamics of this phenomenon, namely, how the community’s ideas of organic food emerge in motivations, speech situations, practices, and value preferences. My aim is to contribute to the discourse on the issue of aliment in order to enrich our knowledge of the meaning of organic food through a study of a specific community garden in Budapest where I conducted my research for more than a year and a half. I examine what self-produced food means and symbolizes to community members, and what are the topics surrounding the idea of organic food in a community garden. Furthermore, I am interested in how community gardening practices reflect the challenges of food security and global food production. Laki summarizes her own sociological research on the topic by stating that a proper definition of organic food is

rather cumbersome. The groups interviewed in her research circumscribed organic mainly through reference points and sortable features (LAKI 2016). Organic food has been defined as such preservative-free and chemical-free vegetables, fruits and cereals in which the natural resources and the soil have been utilized in a sustainable manner in the processes of production. One of the basic principles of the community gardening movement is to enable urban dwellers to grow fresh and healthy food within urban conditions, and through the pretext of horticulture, to develop strategies of cooperation and deepen their social relations as well. According to András Lányi, contemporary communities are not only replacing interchangeable automatisms of the capitalist world order, but they also offer frames to understand our global world by creating the scenes of different discourses (LÁNYI 2015). Lawson argues that the purpose of community gardening is not horticulture itself, but a kind of stimulating milieu for the circulation of various practices and related theories that go beyond gardening (LAWSON 2005:11). Taking care of edible crops has an inherently different importance amongst community members, and in many cases newcomers have no previous experience in crop cultivation (LEVKOE 2013:594), therefore the analysis of motivations and attitudes towards community values can also tell us a lot about the dynamics of organic food discourse. A key segment of thinking about organic food is consciousness, i.e., the deliberation concerning re-localization, production, and usage of food. As I mentioned earlier, organic food cultivation is a political act as well. I will discuss its symbolic significance in the last chapter.

Urban agriculture is a heterogeneous concept: a variety of horticultural activities and a wide range of interests, as well as a common denominator of visible and invisible patterned activities, such as guerrilla horticulture, suburban gardening, organic farming, vertical and roof garden cultivation, balcony gardening, community gardening, and the main type of green projects of various organizations or municipalities as well. Summarizing different definition experiments, these practices can be characterized by being a special part of the urban fabric, goals, economic activity, products, ways and conceptions of intervention (MOUGEOT 2000:6–9). Urban agriculture looks back on centuries of history, and its significance grows during and after different crisis periods, in order to reduce food shortage among urban populations, reorganize neighborhood relations and build reciprocal networks (HALWEIL – NIERENBERG 2007:49–50; NOVO – MURPHY 2005:330–334; PUDUP 2008:1229). Urban agriculture appeared in the forefront of academic interest around the 1990s as a form of activity that can contribute novel solutions to the dilemma surrounding food safety among populations of urbanized areas (BRYANT 2012:5–6).

If we take a more generic overview of active community gardens, despite their similar objectives, a wide variety of differences appears in terms of geographic location, participants, social composition, individual interests, power positions and operating principles (top-down or bottom-up projects), community rules and horticultural profiles. The community gardening movement in Hungary appeared foremost in Budapest. This phenomenon emerged between 2011 and 2012 under the auspices of the Kortárs Építészeti Központ [Contemporary Architecture Center] and the Városi Kertek Közhasznú Egyesület [Urban Gardens Non-profit Association], that are practically independent from each other (ROSTA 2013:8, 175–176). Since then dozens of formal and informal community gardens have been built in downtown districts and suburban zones, as well as in agglomeration areas.

THE RESEARCH SITE: GRUNDKERT COMMUNITY GARDEN



Figure 1. The west side of Grundkert with parcels and raised beds. Budapest, Hungary, 2016. (Photo by Gergő Hajba)

My results are mainly derived from following the everyday life and events of a community garden by the fantasy name of *Grundkert*, a garden situated in the VIII. district of Budapest (officially named “Józsefváros”) where I conducted anthropological research since late November 2015. The bottom-up nature, seemingly diverse social composition and prominent online representation of the community were essential aspects in my choice of the research site. My primary method was participant observation, so that I could map the dynamics of community discourses and small momentums of social life. I have been cultivating a raised bed of about 2 m² in the garden since the spring of 2016.

The garden area is approximately 700 m² and it is located on a vacant lot enclosed by two building blocks. The southern side from Apáthy István Street is bordered by a wall made of chipboards with a small green gate in the middle. On the north side the garden is adjacent to a large empty plot that functioned as a parking lot until March 2017. There are 28 ground parcels (up to 7–9 m² each) and 12 raised beds (up to 2–2.5 m²) in the garden (Figure 1). There is no electricity or water on the plot. A small quantity of water for irrigation comes from a rainwater-collecting system behind the composting toilet. A larger amount of water comes from a fire hydrant on Szigony street, which is then stored in plastic barrels placed along the northern border of the plot, according to an agreement with the Metropolitan Waterworks. Before the beginning my community research, I had barely any experience in horticulture or plant cultivation, therefore I had the opportunity to observe the methods by which the community offers patterns of knowledge to newcomers. The community’s most important food-related gatherings



Figure 2. The researcher captured on photograph with community members. Budapest, Hungary, 2016. (Photo by Zsolt Nagy)

are seed and seedling exchanges and Wednesday's „kifliparty” (crescent roll party). At crescent roll parties, besides informal conversations, a shared meal plays the main role, wherein vegetables needed for sandwiches are collected from the garden and shared by members of the community. Besides horticultural activities, garden parties and spontaneous gatherings, I also followed the community's activities beyond the “fences”, by participating in (club) events targeting a broader audience, debate nights, film screenings, and I followed the discourses in the group's private digital platform (Grundkert closed Facebook group). Most importantly, I analyzed the “virtually cultivated” plot of the community, the Grundkert Blog, which promotes urban gardening, and which can be interpreted as a special self-representation of the community. This online site provides useful readings about plant cultivation, short interviews with community members, scientific educational articles, and mostly photographs of community life, events, garden works, and common practices. The community thus not only constructs its own remembrance and identity but also expresses its cultural convictions to the public, making horticultural activity and community life attractive. According to Horst, such permanent documentation of events makes community practices visible, which is not only a practical dimension of sustainability or green thinking but also highlights the co-operative nature of urban agricultural practices. In her interpretation, the descriptive activity of the researcher present in the field and the self-reflective practices of community members are operating in a quite similar range, thus the sharp borders between researchers and community members fade (HORST 2015:55–56). This seems to be an appropriate ascertainment particularly when digital assets such as photos and video recordings are made by community members – if the researcher is involved in the community work,

he or she will inevitably become a part of the representation (Figure 2). In the beginning, my data consisted of informal and unconventional individual and group conversations, written communications, unstructured interviews, e-mails with community members, online group discussions, which were then followed by recorded semi-structured conversations, and topic-focused personal and online interviews. Although I emphasized my research intent and, therefore, to some degree, my outsidership, I initially found it preferable to discuss topics that community members found important themselves, so that I could measure the scopes of discourse horizon (HARDMAN – LARKHAM 2014:7). In my opinion, considerations of food safety and community perception of organic food can be captured by the encountering of different knowledge registers, such as motivations and personal goals about gardening, viewpoints about the importance of plants cultivated in urban contexts, and plant cultivation methods (usage methods of soil and chemicals).

*“NO, I WILL NOT MAKE A LIVING FROM IT...
I JUST WANT TO WATCH IT GROW.”*
MOTIVATIONS AND VALUE PREFERENCES

Inquiring about the motivations of gardening, I was curious about what initial concepts can be registered amongst the gardeners, and if the importance of demand for healthy food is demonstrable. In my opinion, the first of the three most striking tendencies is when the individuals intend to change their own environment within a framework of a certain group, tailoring the image of the city to fit their imagination. Through this intention, the need of community and, less frequently, healthy food have been expressed.

“I started community gardening because here in the VIII. district, where the largest coherent green area is the top of the pool table, well, I felt like, how good it would be to have a plot of land where I can relax, and I can get busy with vegetables and other people as well... I can look inward. At home, my plants already outgrew the balcony, so there is now a place to cultivate them... it is so good that here they can be planted in open air” (Hajba notes, 2016).

“Originally I was interested in community issues, but it is good to be able to brush up on the horticultural things. I try to cultivate my own tomatoes, strawberries and herbs” (Hajba notes, 2016) (Figure 3).

“My dream has come true by joining the community. My husband asked me if we could join the company, I was eager to own a small garden. In a season, we produce up to twice as many vegetables as the two of us can consume ... of course not every kind... but basic things, such as tomatoes, peppers... and those are quite healthy, too” (Hajba notes, 2016).

“You know, for me it’s also important that what I eat should be healthy... not just things like, yeah, it should be cheap or easy to access in shops. (...) Sometimes I go to Spar or Lidl at the corner, and there are those vegetables on the shelf. For example, I buy the raddish there. But I wouldn’t buy tomatoes because I have my own here. These are quite different, I devoted my time to take care of these” (Hajba notes, 2016).

In addition, gardeners who belong to the older generation and mostly have rural roots are adapting to urban life but retain previously learned patterns from their earlier forms of life, they also express the naturalness of plant cultivation. From this perspective, the



Figure 3. Cherry tomatoes growing in raised beds. Budapest, Hungary, 2016. (Photo by Zsolt Nagy)

issue of food is interpreted more through this condition and less by the pretense of change and the politics of participation. Last year, the youngest member of Grundkert community was eleven years old, while the oldest was 85 (Hajba notes, 2016), and the majority of gardeners were between the ages of 25–45. During conversations with the gardeners of the elderly generation, it was common to find that they maintain a kind of relationship with farming since their childhood, thus crop cultivation is not interpreted in the light of different theories, but rather in terms of gratifying this natural need of planting.

“I’m getting older, my age is over 80, but it’s still so good to get out a little bit for some fresh air, to work with plants... so beautiful! (...) I was a village girl, gardening and plant cultivation was a regular thing for us. I live here in the block of flats at the opposite side [Tömő street, which is the northern border of the garden], the balcony is already so full with plants, so I was happy because of young people coming and doing a garden there, it is very good that they are so interested in gardening. (...) The vegetables are very healthy (...) I hear so many times on TV and radio about what kinds of bad things are happening, unbelievable... maybe that’s why it is very good that a small group is up to doing something here, isn’t it?” (senior community member, Hajba interview, 2016).

“I’ve lived in Dunaharaszti for almost 50 years... I like to deal with plants, for me it’s quite natural... sometimes I also water the common parts and flowerbeds” (senior community member, Hajba notes, 2016).

Most of the new members do not have any knowledge about horticulture or lack the in-depth knowledge of the guidelines displayed in the community’s representation:

“I don’t care about horticulture as much because it is not really my interest, it’s the community instead. Of course I take part in common tasks with pleasure, but to dig, to pull out weeds and to bend all day... nah, I do not like to do that. But being together, thinking together, learning to cooperate is a great experience and much more important.” (Hajba notes, 2017)

“Although I already consulted with some of you guys a couple of weeks ago and I was able to join this closed Facebook group, I still owe you a brief introduction that I would like to make now. I wasn’t born here but I’ve lived in the capital city for a few years now, and I couldn’t spend a season without planting at least a couple of tomatoes/peppers/beans on my balcony as a hobby. I would like to elevate this hobby to a higher level by getting my own parcel and assisting in common tasks.) For this reason I would like to ask for your help or support (and, of course, the main question is whether there will be any free parcels). I am a happy owner of half a vineyard in Mohács, so I have a basic knowledge of horticulture, but of course I would like to learn (for example, this chemical-free plant protection is almost brand new to me)” (from the closed Facebook group forum, 2016).

THE SOURCE OF ALL ROOTS: ELEMENTS OF RISK-TAKING AND THE IMAGE OF ORGANIC FOOD

From new members just joining the community to former members and people who are not yet members, motivations and basic interests vary, but most of them lack a “green” concept and simply desire to reconsider a relationship with their environment within the demand for fresh food and vegetables grown by them. Whatever the underlying motivation, the essential part of plant cultivation is to obtain appropriate seeds or seedlings. Therefore, my primary aim is to highlight the mechanisms of trust and dynamics of knowledge about healthy, organic food, that is: what are the community’s risk-mitigating strategies for gardening, ranging from the local risk to the urban environment, and what kinds of trusted seed procurements and plant care procedures are considered to be desirable?

The proprietor of building sites in this area (VIII. district) is the implementer of the Corvin Project (a local urban rehabilitation program), Futureal Development Holding Ltd., a real estate developer and investor company, so it was essential to have an agreement about the long-term use of the vacant lot for community gardening. The grounds had been filled with good quality soil by the company, free of charge. An important issue that corresponds with food safety considerations, namely, whether vegetables (and fruits) grown in urban community gardens can even be considered healthy, is one of the first questions always asked by visitors and “outsiders” (Figure 4). During the past year, several people expressed their doubts about soil contamination and the flue dust content of the air. An outstanding entry was published in 2012 on Grundkert Blog, because horticulturists expressed the need to give uniform answers for such questions:

“One of the most basic qualms about urban gardening is that emitted exhaust fumes and smog are poisoning the crops. Of course it is always possible to have qualms about everything. We are extremely good at explaining why we are not doing something or why such things don’t work. This is particularly true of (re-)innovative and, in some respects, taboo-breaking activities, such as the cultivation of urban gardens. Such arguments do not take into account the amount of toxins in vegetables grown in traditional agriculture transported here from far away to be on the



Figure 4. Guiding visitors at the Night of Community Gardens. Budapest, Hungary, 2016. (Photo by Margit Szakács)

shelves of stores. Actually, trees with consumable fruits should not be planted in broad lanes along main roads, nonetheless in practice we often see fruit trees at arm's length from our cars" (Grundkert Blog, 2012).

During another conversation, the afforested nature of the garden and the surrounding streets has been mentioned as a security option to prevent air pollution:

"The good thing is that such high trees shade the street from the side of SOTE [the buildings of Semmelweis University of Medicine], I am sure it improves the quality of air. This [points to the tree in the middle of the garden] was also a good idea to leave untouched, even though I remember some people complained that it shades some of those parcels next to it" (Hajba notes, 2016).

Another gardener simply summed up the topic of our conversation about air pollution: "Well, actually we are not that close to the main road" (Hajba notes, 2016).

In some cases, the results of laboratory measurements at the former site of Grundkert (initially along Práter Street, and then next to Corvin walkway) are mentioned, where the heavy metal content of the tested spinach and other vegetables was well under the health limit. When the results came out, the community made the following statement in a blog post:

"Last fall we tested our harvested goods to dispel common doubts about urban gardening – or to crumble in sorrow and despair over the weight of poisoning ourselves and our friends if such results came out. Well, they didn't. Compared to the limit values specified by the European

Commission Regulation No. 629/2008/EK, the heavy metal content was not even gaining on the health limits in our plants. Tomatoes, potatoes and spinach were sent in to be examined, by the way. We would like to say thank you to Wessling Ltd., who, appreciating the social impact of the issue, performed the analysis free of charge. So... next time, if someone offers you spinach from GrundKert, it will be no use referring to the disease ‚Itai-itai’ :)” (Grundkert Blog, 2013).

During another conversation, a gardener concluded the possibly emerging sources of danger with the following: “I rather trust smallholder’s merchandise in the market, which is not taken under so many examinations, and I prefer to eat vegetables grown here in our garden compared to the vegetables you can buy in shops. The hell knows where it came from, and what kinds of chemical treatments happened to those...” (Hajba notes, 2017).

At the time of the garden’s establishment, members of the community were supposed to set up horticultural guidelines and community rules. Among them, a permanently recurring debate, are the idea of garden composting, the desirability of chemical-free crop production, and a “*my parcel, my horticultural imagination*” concept. This short online debate that happened before my community membership is a good example of the appearance of these demands:

- “Has the question of chemicals been discussed, by the way? I saw it was an issue in previous mails, but has the decision been made? Are organic substances allowed or nothing at all?”
- I think organic ingredients can be used.
- Great. I hope that nothing will be needed, but better to be afraid than...
- In my opinion, yes, they can, but it would be good to make a consensus about this issue” (from closed group forum discussion, 2012).

A general mistrust about chemical treatment procedures can be detected, mentioned by several gardeners. At the launch of the garden, the community brought up the need for chemical-free crops, or using only certain chemicals and unpelleted seeds from reliable sources. Once, during a garden inspection, the coordinators made a list of neglected or abandoned pieces of land. Passing by one of the parcels, they saw several presumably pelleted seed bags from a store placed on sticks to indicate the types of seedlings. At the next community meeting, though not mentioning names, the coordinators warned the plot owner to avoid planting such seeds. At the same time, I witness several joking comments about chemically treated plants, especially when fruit crops have unrealistically increased or the plants were too aesthetically pleasing in light of the actual season:

“Wow, she already has such huge strawberries?! (...) They are beautiful. I am sure she was cheating with some stuff. [Turns to the owner of the plot.] Your strawberries are beautiful. I just said to Gergő, you must be cheating with some chemical stuff? [laughs]” (Hajba notes, 2016).

“I don’t use any chemicals or such stuff, I would like to experiment what results I get without those. The taste of tomatoes purchased in store are not even close to these that grow here. (...) For example, I was really surprised that the parsnip has such an intense, pungent taste, that’s even a bit much for me” (Hajba interview, 2016).

Last year an elderly lady that lives on the nearby street joined the community. She comments regularly in the closed gardener Facebook forum. Sometimes she shares

web content that is related to gardening practices, such as propagatory readings, and alternative plant cultivation procedures. According to the members of the community, sometimes these articles refer to “*dubious*” resources. Last summer, a popular issue was what kind of practice should the community choose of the many options, what is the most environmentally friendly intervention to protect the plants from Southern green stink bugs [*nezava viridula*], aphids, snails, other kinds of bugs, and weeds. The above-mentioned elderly community member shared an article about the alternative use of vinegar: “Vinegar used as an acid functions perfectly as an herbicide. Acetic acid dries the parts of the weeds which grow above the soil. In most cases it was faster and more useful than other herbicides. Be careful not to spray it on living plants because it may harm them” (TUDÁS FÁJA MAGAZIN, 2016).

The comments under the article show an ambivalent attitude towards the usefulness of vinegar:

“- Well, I think it’s not so useful and we can burn our plants with it. At least we will have fewer weeds with fewer pests, but fewer live breeds as well. The weeds must be stubbed, then plants must be sprayed against pests.

- There are also many practices other than chemicals against pests that we don’t use on the site, but they are still protected against insects. (...) an interesting thing is when the moles suddenly appeared in our village, everything was eradicated, but nothing here. Of course, it was not accidental they left only the stems of the plants untouched” (from closed forum conversation, 2016).

Sometimes the Grundkert community organizes seed and seedling exchange events, because most community members believe that the best quality seeds come from their own plants, mainly from the previous one or two seasons, but plant exchange is also desirable if they do not have the opportunity to grow several crops simultaneously. I believe that, in the case of external seed sources, the most trusted entities are organic farms, small producers, but seeds from the Plant Diversity Center (NÖDIK, also known as Gene Bank, in Tápiószéle) seem to be reliable as well:

“I already ordered from NÖDIK once, but this time I missed the deadline. I got some seeds already from last year... NÖDIK represents a very good quality, many people recommend them” (Hajba interview, 2016).

“Back when Grundkert first opened, we had seeds from Krishna Valley of Somogyvámos and from NÖDIK, since then I have seeds from seed exchanges and got some (...) here, this is flax from Kishantos (a closed organic farm surrounded by political conflicts), a symbolic one still living here in Grundkert” (Hajba notes, 2016).

“Everyone else has his/her own resource references, I know good places and companies to get some. We plan to invite Valeyrac Exotics to the Grundkert seed exchange, they have chemical-free, local-variety types of seeds and they also offer specialites in their catalog” (Hajba notes from group conversation, 2015).

It seems that healthy food, environmentally friendly cultivation and chemical-free production are collective preferences of the community, such qualities having a normative function but appearing in varying degrees at the level of individual knowledge. However, these guidelines and values can be acquired through community dialogues, social events,

and exchanges (of experiences). The sources of knowledge and the experiences gained in horticulture or gardening activities are also various, but members of the older generation are considered by most of the gardeners reliable sources of knowledge.

Last May, community members opened a discussion about ways of using an empty parcel, and three possible outcomes emerged: the parcel would be given to a newcomer on the waiting list; following the example of another garden, a common parcel with herbs would be created; or making it into a children's parcel for strawberries, because, as one of the members who initiated the voting said: "considering the chemical treatments of the strawberries sold in shops, it seems to be a very good idea". The voting resulted in equal votes for the first two options, while the idea of children's parcel was discarded; nevertheless, none of the options were realized until the spring of 2017, when a new candidate was able to start cultivating the plot.

Although gardening guidelines are similar, plant management has raised a number of practical problems in the garden, such as the presence of Southern green stink bugs that have caused significant damage to tomato production, or the use of fluid fertilizers for plants that are not growing fast enough. My questions brought to light the fact that community members were involved on different levels in this issue; however, there was consensus on the desirability of intervention, at least in terms of pests:

"Well, I didn't think about it as much lately. Because community members don't use fluid fertilizers, neither do I. Furthermore, I don't buy soil in the supermarket, there is a huge amount of good quality soil as well, you just have to shovel it here. (...) but at least it would be necessary to spray plants to defend them against Southern green stink bugs, because I heard those have no natural enemy, maybe the winter freeze will eliminate them. Or not" (Hajba interview, 2016).

Eventually the community voted at a garden event to use eco-friendly sprays. The precondition of using the chosen material was to remove as many stink bugs manually as the plot owners are able to, because, as the coordinators said: "This is the only way it is considered to be effective."

Whether soil renewal and recycling of green waste should be parts of organic plant cultivation is a subject of agreement as well. Accordingly, composting has been taking place at the current site of the garden for two years now; there are 5 open-top pallet boxes, one for composting human excrement, and the other 4 for green garden and kitchen waste for community members. However, the question of how and what to compost emerges frequently, as there are regularly kinds of materials that should not be in compost boxes. Concerning proper composting practices, gardeners held a self-organized conversation event with experienced gardeners. The list of compostable and non-compostable materials printed on A/4-sized pages had been attached to the wall behind the compost crates as a reminder. A few people who live in the neighborhoods but do not cultivate plots in the garden take part in composting as well, since there is no possibility of placing communal organic waste bins near the blocks of flats. This role of the Grundkert community in composting can be explored in the following explanation of a member:

"I think an open compost lift built from the side of the street would be a good idea: a hole with a tube through which you can throw your compost in to the garden even if you are not a community member. (...) Outside, it would be displayed how to compost and what kinds of

materials you should or shouldn't throw in. (...) The thing is, this would fill up our compost boxes within a short period of time" (Hajba notes, 2016).

DEBATES AND OPINIONS: DIFFERENT THEORIES AND DIVERSE PRACTICES

A conflicting area of many convictions and opinions is the handling of compost. Some community members think it needs processing (like rotation, watering, or colonization of earthworms), while others find it unnecessary: "Why would you water compost? You would only influence a process that nature does anyway. Watering it is completely unnecessary. (...) Come in instead and eat something" (Hajba's notes, 2016).

It seems that the elements of knowledge corpora oscillate around various themes (e.g., soil treatment or composting), and in some cases, they differ. Community gardens can be seen as alternative economic models, environmental politics, and as laboratories of the rethinking of the relationship between man and city. In some cases, community gardens see their objective as being the foundation of alternative concepts (permaculture, sustainability, de-growth thinking). The effects of these thought circuits, however, are far from being unified; some concepts are used synonymously, depending on the context (e.g., sustainability, blue economy, environmental awareness, green thinking), as they accumulate in the discourses of the community, and as mentioned before, they hold a different significance for every individual. The gardeners are either involved at different depths in the theoretical backgrounds of the initiations, or they do not find it a primary consideration. For example, a few weeks ago an exchange of thoughts unfolded during which a parcel that had been idle since last year was being dug up by the members of the community. Not having anything else to do, I also took part in the activity. In one corner of the parcel grew spinach, and in the opposite border some marjoram had survived the winter. The primary reason for digging it up was weeding, another was to make the borders of parcels more distinguishable. A member of the community who just joined the workflow said the following: "But why are you digging it up? In permaculture cultivating, they don't dig up the soil because it would, um, it brings the fertile soil to the surface and the dry layer falls to the bottom and the plants don't grow that fast and it drains the soil, too."

Another member of the community, who is experienced in gardening activities, added the following lines to the momentary uncertainty: "I think here, in the Eighth district, on an, I don't know, 9 m² parcel, we won't argue whether it is permaculture or not, whether we should dig or not, because it doesn't matter. If it was a long-term issue and of a bigger area, that's something else" (Hajba notes, 2017).

However, another community member gave voice to the importance of sustainability while sharing his experiences:

"If sustainability begins with food, then I would obviously like to know more about the production and processing of sustainable and healthy food. To follow the process from the seed to the plate. And if others already own this knowledge, then the formula is quite simple, one just needs to visit them and learn from them! So far, I thought this kind of knowledge is something new and you have to travel to find it. I visited projects in Western Europe because of that. A project located in Innsbruck [Austria] (Waldhüttl Mentlberg), which combined the idea

of community gardening with the housing of Romany people working in the city, had a great impact on me” (Grundkert blog, 2015).

Hence the desirable patterns of caring for plants and food grown in the garden, such as not using chemicals, purchasing seeds or seedlings from small-holder networks or communities who consider themselves ecologically conscious, and the need for soil renewal. Although elements of knowledge and practices do not always go hand in hand, and the consensus is not absolute, what is more important is to evolve the strategies that lead to it.

THE SYMBOLIC IMPORTANCE OF ORGANIC FOOD

Conversations often reveal that horticultural activities are not, or only to a certain extent, viewed as economically viable activities by most gardeners, in the light of the resources used and the time devoted to cultivation. However, the framework of community horticulture, i.e., the issue of healthy food and environmentally-friendly gardening, can create the perceptual space for such topics of conversation, wherein behavioral patterns, consumer habits, opinions, and individual differences can be expressed. Therefore, the values and attitudes represented by the community should be understood more as a guideline rather than a general narrative that all members share. Nevertheless, the role of sampling as a result of this endeavor is very significant for the members, especially when it is about transferring knowledge of crop cultivation culture to underage people.

“Gardening is also important because, you know, they come here and see it all. Local people who are totally out of the green: youngsters, the elderly generation... I personally think young people are extremely important, because at least it can be shown to them how tomatoes or whatever is growing: this way and this way, and not on the shelves of supermarkets” (Hajba interview, 2016).

“We’re completely separated from reality, from material dimensions... If it’s about a smartphone, we’re amazingly inventive, there’s a compact everything in our pocket, but I think it’s also important to know where the chow comes from and what’s going on until it reaches our fridge at home” (Hajba notes, 2016).

The Grundkert community is currently working to establish an association, in order to create a legal self-representation, tendering resources, and to be a facilitator of community organizers. There were several long discussions about whether the community should expand its activity beyond the garden gates or not. With a different emphasis but the same goal, members expressed their intentions. Tutoring young people as an achievable goal emerged once again:

“My personal goal is to... to infest children with the pleasure of gardening. Primarily families with children can be addressed through all these kinds of creative things, like what we did last year on IKEA’s Family Day. We would make small pots from coir and a plant inside them. Children were able to bring home their small gardens created there (...). Of course, the coconut fiber is imported so it’s not such an eco-friendly thing, but that’s not the point now...” (Hajba notes, 2017).

Thus, community horticulture is an activity that points beyond simply acts of cultivation and measurable harvest (LEVKOE 2013:588), for example, to the importance of civil group activity/engagement, and the opportunity to learn and practice democratic values, which unfolds in community discourses.

“Obviously, being chemical-free is just one element of the pursuit of consciousness... every forint spent is a vote for something, therefore I always try to be informed about things I buy, where it comes from, and who I am supporting by buying it” (Hajba interview, 2016).

“People have ridiculous needs and they just cannot give up on things... And if we don’t have a need for something, then ads simply create it. (...) One of the chimeras of consumer society is that all vegetables and fruits are always available. Always, everything and immediately, totally ignoring the fact that these things have seasons! No wonder it tastes grotty, is overpriced, and needs to be treated with chemicals. This is a chimera. No better word to describe it” (Hajba notes, 2016).

“I didn’t get into the spirit of these things so much, it just feels good what we do, essentially I think this is what community gardening should be about. (...) Maybe there are things that cannot be considered sustainable all that much. For example, we use tap water for irrigation. Mostly. Is that even sustainable?” (Hajba notes, 2016).

“In my opinion, we are ‘low level players’ in the cultivation game to decide whether it sustainable or not, but it is still a good thing that we are here together instead of sitting home in front of the TV or the computer” (group conversation notes, 2016).

On the whole, organic food production in the community garden is not only a more or less functional risk-mitigating strategy, but it raises awareness of and reflects on the aforementioned dependency relations, while at the same time it brings the criticisms of consumer society forward.

“BEYOND THE PARADISE” – A BRIEF SUMMARY

From the potential health risks arising in the community garden, through various plant cultivation methods and the convictions attached to them, I lead back the examination to the level of abstractions, namely, the underlying meanings of horticultural activity. These activities can be viewed as precedent actions set against contemporary consumption patterns. Many community members commented on the gaps in the garden’s food production, as well as the economically unprofitable aspect of the activity. Although the majority of food produced in the garden is used individually, and smaller amounts are used as exchange material or for charitable purposes (for example, all the crops for the Shelter Association), my research data is somewhat incomplete for lack of quantifying the crops in terms of individual nutrition. Most epidemiological studies or health science researches typically ascribe the most importance to the quantity of food produced in community gardens, where the essence of the initiative is to improve social conditions, most of which are top-down projects materialized in larger areas. These initiatives cooperate with local governments and qualified gardeners (who are also coordinators of the projects), with a stable financial background. These results may vary in different gardens, or considering advantageous or disadvantageous seasons; nevertheless, these researches



Figure 5. One fifth of my personal tomato harvest in September. Budapest, Hungary, 2016. (Photo by Gergő Hajba)

point out the drawback of local and healthy food production: the local trap. The concept of local trap, *inter alia*, implies that urbanization, neighborhood revitalization, and locality studies anticipate that local, autonomous initiatives which strengthen democratic values are able to solve global challenges and social problems while actually ignoring the context of individual needs (CUMMINS 2007:356). For example, the dynamics and proxemics of the needs of a city-dwelling family of 5 do not necessarily coincide with geographical locality. From the practical aspects of everyday life, it is possible that the primary location of acquiring food is closer to the workplace than to the place of residence. According to Lawson (though she states this as an American

sociologist, where fast food meals are a nutritional option for the social layer with scarce resources), if (community) horticulture is only about the food grown locally, then in many cases it would be cheaper and easier to go to the store or fast food restaurant (LAWSON 2007:15). In the community garden I presented, the food produced is in fact an *appurtenant* benefit rather than a priority objective of community action. It comes into being in the framework of cooperation strategies and dialogues towards the previously stated norms. By examining motivations, my study pointed out that for the majority of the gardeners, the intention of environmental transformation and the establishment of social relationships play a decisive role, in which organic food has less significance, yet it definitely provides the framework of actions. Although the food produced is suitable for avoiding a number of global risks, they are replaced by local risks arising from the urban environment (CUCCO – FONTE 2015:23), of which I have identified several types of action models: on the one hand, the use of preventive practices (presentation of laboratory test results, chemical-free cultivation, soil melioration); on the other hand, risk taking, that is, gardeners prefer to take responsibility for their own crops rather than for global goods from food chains with barely any transparency. The sources of reliable seeds and seedlings needed for organic food are usually derived from small-scale initiatives and communities considered to be green, and the elements of image of organic food are outlined in plant cultivation procedures: chemical protection, soil renewal, environmentally friendly behaviors. Although there are numerous external and internal factors that affect garden crops, the demand for organic food is indisputable, regardless

of the social status of the participants. In this case, the demand is also political by nature: the criticism of consumer society, with which most members raise their consciousness of the dangers of the above-mentioned dependency relations, and draw attention to the desirability for some kind of reflection.

There is certainly a need to pursue this line of inquiry further, investigating such topics as describing other dimensions of gaining consciousness, or expounding individual consumer patterns; nevertheless, a tendency is emerging in small communities: people with different social backgrounds and interests, with the exception of economic or utilitarian considerations but with a considerable “additional benefit” (Figure 5), are engaging in dialogues about their material world and their attitude towards their food, within the discourse of community gardening. Organic food is a social construct with flexible boundaries, and as such, thinking about it is not unified. Nevertheless, I think taking these considerations might widen the horizon of dialogues about organic food.

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