

BOOK REVIEW

Community Gardening as Social Action

Claire Nettle

Farnham, Hampshire: Ashgate. 2014. 258 pages, £65.00 (Hb)

ISBN 978 1 40945 586 8

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A decade long upsurge in community gardening across the western world has not yet been fully digested by academics, making Claire Nettle's book a welcome account of this movement. Focusing on examples in Australia she gives an insider perspective gained through ethnographic research and her experience as gardener-activist. The book is more than a description of community gardening's recent history as the author uses a social movement lens to consider its practices, arguing that this is a very particular form of activism. As such she attempts to convey broader messages to social movement theorists, and challenges some of the received wisdoms around what constitutes collective political action.

After setting out her approach, Nettle begins by characterising Australian community gardens and how they are distinct from their American and European counterparts. Although stressing these differences, she inevitably draws on literature from the USA as the main source of previous scholarship on the topic. Through a brief overview of these writings she demonstrates the dominance of narratives which portray them as responses to crises such as poverty and food shortages. Nettle argues that this focus on how they support state goals means their more radical aspects have been neglected. Her goal is to reverse this through greater attention to the agency of individual gardeners, and by recognising their practices as political. Such a summary can only provide a brief outline of community garden discourses, which is perhaps why Nettle over-emphasises the novelty of her focus on collective social action and neglects some parallel work. For example, George McKay (2011) has emphasised the radical history of gardens and gardening more generally, whilst geographers focused on land-use battles in the USA have drawn on Lefebvre's work to treat community gardens as forms of spatial politics.

Chapter three provides an introduction to social movement theory as context to the book's key question: can community gardens be considered a form of collective social action? To answer this, the author draws on examples from ethnographic fieldwork on

several Australian gardens, which included interviews with a number of community garden leaders. Their perceptions of community gardening initiatives and their role within them are combined with descriptions of visits to gardens, of special events and activity by national organisations to paint a picture of what community gardeners do and why. Having become close to the insider perspective, Nettle is convinced that community gardening should be considered as a social movement. She presents the movement's key activities as tactics for collective action which seek to achieve social change, particularly in relation to food systems and by putting environmental principles into action. The book demonstrates that community gardening exhibits the characteristics of protest identified by social movement theorists: contestation, intentional political claims and a collective identity.

Nettle suggests continuities between community gardening in Australia and other political movements, particularly those focused on the environment and alternative food systems (chapter 5). She examines how gardeners develop a shared identity and work to form communities, and argues that as public spaces the gardens are both political message and its medium. The crux of Nettle's argument for these practices to be considered political is that they seek social change through a particular set of tactics, ones typically neglected by social movement scholars who focus on grand oppositional actions. In contrast community gardens involve what has been termed 'prefigurative direct action', as attempts to directly create new social worlds rather than efforts to urge those in power to deliver them. This 'DIY activism' is applied in the realm of the small and everyday, but Nettle agrees with those who argue that, despite having limited or no ambition to seize power and overturn the state, this is political. Community gardeners are enacting a more creative form of activism, imagining and constructing alternatives to the dominant system. As the gardeners' stories emphasise, these actions are fun and do something tangible with readily apparent impacts, which, Nettle suggests, deliberately contrasts the doom-laden approach of oppositional politics.

Nettle's greatest success is in portraying versions of community gardens largely absent from previous accounts. As she notes, scholarship on this topic has emphasised the benefits of community gardening, hence her ambition to take a more critical view and other perspectives. Hers is a reflexive account of what gardeners achieve which readily acknowledges the limits to their success; despite her insider perspective she gives a balanced portrayal which notes negative aspects such as racism and conflict within garden communities. Nor does her interest in collective action lead Nettle to portray community gardening as inherently and always political, for she notes that not all gardeners seek to achieve social change, and most do not self-identify as activists. To allow more informed reflection on this it would have been useful to hear from community gardeners other than the leaders who are perhaps most likely to be activists. It is difficult to get a sense of how typical interviewees' motivations and opinions are, or to judge the scale of the political movement she describes. The book is also largely silent on reasons for the emergence of pre-figurative direct action in the form of community gardening. To shed light on this the author could have looked in more detail at other contemporary movements with parallel characteristics such as self-build communities. Nettle could also have connected with the rapidly expanding academic interest in crafting and other forms of creativity which seem to share some drivers with the 'grow your own' movement.

The book has a deliberately narrow focus both in geographical scope, and through applying a tighter definition of community garden than is adopted in most academic literature. This makes it difficult to judge whether community gardening in other forms and locations is also a form of social movement. There is sufficient reference to cases outside Australia to suggest continuities with activity elsewhere, but it is disappointing

that Nettle does not pursue lessons applicable beyond Australia. Experience of community gardening in the UK suggests that there are similarities with the movement she describes, and some gardeners here would probably express very similar views. But Nettle suggests a key discontinuity is Australia's low level of state support in comparison with community gardens in the UK and USA; the reasons for this would be interesting to interrogate. There is a fair amount of work on European cases which the book overlooks; this is a shame as it would have highlighted contrasts with American practice and introduced broader perspectives on the politics of community gardening. More deliberate international comparison would allow reflection on the wider implications of her argument for movements in other countries.

Nettle's account of Australian community gardening makes a convincing case for acknowledging broader repertoires of political activism, and for more inclusive social movement theory. The book does not make explicit what difference it makes to society that activists are working with a diversity of methods, and it is not clear whether Nettle sees particular benefits of pursuing change through community gardening rather than through other tactics. Beyond the theoretical implications she does not suggest what prefigurative direct action points towards in future: what might be the outcome of such a politics? How might this kind of activism evolve? Although convinced by this book that community gardening can be conceived as a social movement, I was not sure why I should believe that this is important.

This book will be of interest to those seeking a fresh perspective on the topic of community gardens; it is a welcome and critical contribution to literature on this subject that contains much of international relevance. Those approaching the book from a social movement perspective will find that community gardens provide a useful case study, but might find that the theoretical material offers only an introduction to key debates. The emphasis on community gardening as practice over the nature of the gardens as space and place might frustrate the geographically inclined reader. Students of other forms of creative practice and alternative communities should find interesting parallels in the discussion of community gardening as direct action which will hopefully stimulate dialogue between such movements. Perhaps together these specialists could identify what it means for wider society that for many the nature of politics has changed and become more creative.

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