

Book Review

Community Gardening as Social Action

Claire Nettle

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A community garden can hold diverse meanings for both those who may or may not visit it, and for those who tend to it, with associations of recreation, procuring food and opportunities to connect with people and place. Instrumental benefits, significant in and of themselves, can at times obscure other important political meanings those engaged in community gardening may attribute to their activities. Thoughtfully, Claire Nettle provides a space for those involved in organising community gardening to have the attribution of activism they apply to their involvement, highlighted and contextualised within the scholarship of social movements. Social movement scholarship, Nettle argues, has been predominantly focused upon what can be characterised as oppositional engagement such as protests. While an important area, this focus has overshadowed social action conceived of as 'constructive' such as community gardening, resulting in the neglect and exclusion of constructive social action from this field of scholarship.

The importance of *Community Gardening as Social Action* lies in its contribution to growing a greater appreciation for the significant role community gardening currently does and can further play in creating alternative social and place based experiences in response to a range of issues, concerning for example food security and social isolation, in turn challenging current social movement scholarship so that it encompasses constructive as well as oppositional social action in order to be able to explore what Nettle argues must be identified: 'new ways of conceptualising and doing politics.'

Community gardens are recognised by Nettle as being engaged in prefigurative direct action, also bridging a divide between immediate instrumental benefits and being part of long-term social change. Engaging with the conceptualisation of repertoires of collective action put forward by Charles Tilly, referring to the tools used to generate change, Nettle seeks to challenge the dualistic separation between culture and politics. Supported by the work of Warren Magnusson, who puts forward an understanding of politics that encompasses 'social action' directed towards 'social existence', the basis for challenging the cultural/political distinction is consolidated by drawing on the work of Verta Taylor and Leila J. Rupp which provides criteria for identifying political objectives within cultural expression. These three required factors include contestation, intentionality and collective identity.

From this theoretical basis, the research undertaken primarily with community garden organisers within 60 community gardens across Australia and reflecting local, city based and nationally based organisations, seeks to explore the repertoires, or ways in which social change is effected. Nettle explores four such 'sets of tactics'. The first of these is the use of community gardening as a form of activism. It is highlighted that many of those participating in community gardening choose to do so as they understand their involvement as a means to engage with environmental and social justice issues. The second of these tactics can be seen within the act of growing food, particularly within urban locations, in terms of reclaiming urban places and addressing issues of food security. The

third tactic relates to the creation and sustenance of community, which is closely related to the notion of a 'home place', bringing people and place together. Finally, it is observed that community gardens can be producers of culture, evident through festivals, engagement with ecological values and rituals, simultaneously nurturing new cultural forms and preserving traditional cultures.

By providing this space for those involved in community gardens to share their accounts of their engagement, I have gained an insight into the diverse and rich meanings and significance of community gardening in Australia as diverse and rich expressions of social action for many of those involved, sharing in the desire to creatively shape alternative social experiences for the future, in a manner that can be experienced as innately and immediately beneficial. Through this work, Nettle has provided an important contribution to the scholarship of social movements, challenging the focus of this field which has for so long listened predominantly to the voices of opposition. In doing so, this work represents an important and timely new path in social movement scholarship. It draws attention to the importance of recognising and exploring the capacity of existent and newly developing social action.

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