



VISIONING A SUSTAINABLE ENERGY FUTURE - THE CASE OF URBAN FOOD GROWING

earlier title: BACKCASTING FOR A SUSTAINABLE ENERGY FUTURE – THE CASE OF URBAN FOOD-GROWING

Journal:	<i>Theory Culture & Society</i>
Manuscript ID:	13-129-SIESoc.R1
Manuscript Type:	SI - Special Issue Energising Society
Key Words:	food, future, contemporary activism, utopia, city, space, ecology
Abstract:	<p>We outline a future where society re-energises itself, in the sense both of recapturing creative dynamism, and of applying creativity to meeting physical energy needs. Both require us to embrace self-organising properties, whether in nature or society. We critically appraise backcasting as a methodology for visioning, arguing that backcasting's potential for radical, outside-the-box thinking is restricted unless it contemplates a break with class society, connects with existing grassroots struggles (notably over land) and dialogues with utopian socialist tradition. We develop a case study of food, starting from the physical parameters of combatting the entropy expressed in the loss of soil structure, and apply this to urban food-growing. Drawing upon 'real utopias' of existing practice, the paper proposes a threefold categorisation: subsistence plots, an urban forest, and an ultra-high productivity sector. We emphasise the emergent properties of such a complex system characterised by the 'free energy' of societal self-organisation.</p>

BACKCASTING FOR A SUSTAINABLE ENERGY FUTURE – THE CASE OF URBAN FOOD-GROWING

I: BACKCASTING, A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Widely-used definitions of backcasting emphasise its distinction from forecasting or scenario-building (Wearerising, 2009). Whereas conventional policy agendas, notably on food, typically look forward from the present (for example, Barling et al, 2008), backcasting, in contrast, begins from a desired outcome and then assesses the steps by which it may be reached. The methodology has particular relevance to the theme of this special issue because backcasting has, since its origins, had a special focus on energy. Any visioned future must make clear where its energy will come from, and backcasting arose as a response to Lovins' emphasis on the centrality of 'soft' energies, which include not just renewables but the advantages of small scale (Lovins, 1976); the essential point is that, since such a future will be radically different from what we have now, it cannot adequately be *forecast* from the present (Robinson, 1982). Compared to other methodologies, backcasting thus opens up a stronger understanding of sustainability (Mulder and Biesiot, 1998).

I will argue that, underlying energy inputs is a deeper issue of flows and the management of entropy. Energy is conserved, and what flows into any system is what flows out. But, following the Second Law of thermodynamics, it is *degraded* in the sense that it loses the order which makes it useful (De Rosnay, 1979). At the most basic level, even the solar transition can be seen in this way: since the earth is not a closed system, its own entropy is offset by importing low entropy in the form of solar energy (Georgescu-Roegen, 1975); although conventionally we think we absorb energy from the sun, in reality the energy dissipated by the earth is equivalent to that entering it, the point being that the incoming energy has lower entropy (Penrose, 2010: 78-9). If we moreover remove the artificial distinction between energy and matter, the useable (ordered) input can be termed exergy (negative entropy) (Dincer, 2002). In a future solar economy entropy will be dissipated safely, in contrast to today's flows, where scarce exergy sources (whose extraction moreover degrades local ecosystems) are transformed into pollution and greenhouse gas emission and degrade the wider earth system. In this sense, the management of entropy is the fundamental condition of futures visioning.

How far, then, is this perspective compatible with backcasting? In principle, it should be, and existing backcasting approaches do indeed speak of 'funds' and 'flows' (Holmberg, 1998: 34). However, this literature is heavily influenced by its origins as a business planning tool. The strong point is that a business model premised on funds and flows could, in a technical sense, lead to an industrial ecology where the output of one process becomes an input to another. But green business is only one among several agents of change: social movements are arguably more important. The next task in the development of backcasting was therefore to adapt it for use by communities (James and Lahti, 2004). And then, this in turn directly inspired the Transition Towns movement (Hopkins, 2008) which has been largely responsible for the wider popularisation of the methodology. Here, the practice of collective visioning *itself* helps build the conditions for its own success, namely community participation; and again, it is intrinsically linked to energy, notably in the key focus of Transition Towns visioning, the Energy Descent Action Plan (EDAP).

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4 So far, so good. The advantage of taking the future, rather than the present, as point of reference is
5 to think more creatively: this is after all the point of science fiction, which doesn't have to be only
6 dystopian (Miéville, 2002). And since, in complexity thinking, the future is open-ended (Prigogine,
7 2003), it suddenly becomes clear that we have choices. This is potentially liberatory, in that newly-
8 freed creative energies (expressed as linkages, networks and collaborative experimentation) could
9 increase reciprocally alongside (and in a way substitute themselves for) shrinking fossil fuel
10 dependence and the reduction of entropy manifested as emissions. The context of backcasting's rise
11 as a community visioning tool in the second half of the 2000s is very interesting, in that the threat of
12 climate *disaster* was becoming real, but were this to be expressed in paralysing Malthusian visions of
13 ecological meltdown, the effect could be disempowering. Therefore – in contrast to the scenarios
14 approach which requires describing the bad lines of development as well as the good ones – it was
15 useful to have a methodology which focussed on the positive, showing how a low-carbon future can
16 be fun, and bring a better quality of life.
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21 But despite these strengths, the hangover of backcasting's business origins has proved hard to shed.
22 While the literature recognises the advantage of being less in thrall to dominant paradigms (Quist
23 and Vergragt, 2006: 1030), and academic futurology conceptually acknowledges the need to break
24 path-dependencies (Tiberius, 2011), this is mostly in the limited sense of facilitating a more realistic
25 business planning: overcoming conservatism and adjusting to radical regime shifts (Quist, 2007: 55).
26 From the business standpoint, this of course make sense: the horizons of mainstream economics are
27 too narrow, and what is needed is take account of large-scale structures and long-term structural
28 shifts, such as those between the accumulation regimes described by regulation theory (Aglietta,
29 1976). And in particular, since each such regime has its characteristic energy sources, a far-sighted
30 entrepreneur would look forward to a future regime of clean energies. This is well and good within
31 its limits, since green enterprise is a way of experimenting solutions in the immediate term. The
32 problem is, however, that – given the embedded path-dependencies of speculative finance capital
33 and militarism (Biel, 2012) – a green future may need to free itself from the capitalist mode of
34 production as a whole, and even class society as a whole, not just one structural phase of it; a
35 futurology which truly steps outside dominant paradigms must at least entertain this possibility, and
36 ask whether a true unleashing of societal energies will, at some point in the transition, overthrow
37 the ruling order. It is therefore not enough merely to add a participatory or community-driven
38 plugin to a corporate approach. In this respect, the attempted translation of backcasting from
39 business to communities has proved wanting. As an example, if we turn to the visioning of 2030 in
40 the first Transition Town EDAP conducted in Totnes, Devon (which has served as a model for the
41 whole Transition movement), we find a “forest model of society” (Hodgson, 2010) which looks very
42 like an idealised and stagnant version of class hierarchy, perhaps a mixture of feudalism and
43 capitalism. We must at the very least remain vigilant, bearing in mind how ‘natural’ and ‘organic’
44 imagery has long been used in authoritarian and fascistic ways to justify oppression (McKay, 2011).
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52 The downside of abandoning scenarios is that it becomes too easy to neglect the struggles whereby
53 the ‘bad’ lines of development are resisted, and this in turn would leave a stunted understanding of
54 the bloody process of ‘transition’ in the real world. The daily reality in the global South is already
55 one where people have no choice but to struggle for land and food in order to survive, and this has
56 given rise to the notion of food sovereignty: a concept bringing together many issues around
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3 autonomy, freedom from global food chains, community resilience, the safeguarding of diversity and
4 heritage, place, self-reliant networks etc. (Pimbert, 2009; Mares and Peña, 2010). These struggles
5 are in effect agents of futures visioning. And there is a long tradition in this respect, whereby
6 insurgent movements have always visioned their desired future (Guha, 1983). It is about bringing
7 society into harmony with natural principles, but in a way which is qualitatively distinct from the
8 manipulative distortion of 'organic' society by authoritarianism. The key difference is firstly the
9 sense – evident in radical movements from the Diggers of 1649 through the Enlightenment to the
10 utopian socialists – that a precondition for unleashing societal free energies was the overthrow of
11 the dead hand of class society; and secondly that these energies are embodied in the associative
12 principle, the restructuring of society around co-operative institutions. Gerard Winstanley, the
13 Diggers' founder, found a mythology to describe this: the need to put an end to the epoch of history
14 during which the selfish and exploitative Esau or Cain has persistently slain his brother (Winstanley,
15 1983 [1649]: 125 ff.). And it has been recognised that a condition for restoring the social fabric in
16 this way is access to the land, and therefore autonomy with respect to food.
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22 We can see these connections in the work of the early 19th-century utopian socialists. Even their
23 fascination with industry reflects industry as a symbol of co-operative labour, which could equally be
24 applied to food production. Thus, the harvest is taken as paradigm in a dual sense: humanity itself is
25 ripening (towards a stage where it can finally realise co-operative principles), and the physical
26 harvest can only be maximised if we ourselves co-operate (Weitling, 1979 [1838]: 72 ff.); one of the
27 first communist gatherings was a collective feast (Pillot et al, 1979 [1840]). And this in turn forms a
28 bridge with the work of Marx, which builds on that of the utopians (Engels, 1999 [1880]; Geoghan,
29 2008), while seeking to take it further. One of the ways Marx did take things further was his deep
30 sense of cycles, structures and transformations. He explained the flows and loops in the natural
31 metabolism of nutrients and energies, how these flows have come to be dominated by circuits which
32 serve only the expanded reproduction of capital; and the potential if only they can be freed from
33 such dominance (Perelman, 1987; Bellamy Foster, 2009).
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38 Only on a basis of recognising what needs to be overthrown can we therefore understand transition
39 in its deepest sense. Given that power, as a capacity to produce effects, is both a social and a
40 thermodynamic category (Gale, 1998), and that a positive feedback operates between the two, the
41 existing pattern of energy flows convey simultaneously on the one hand a thermodynamic
42 degradation of energy/matter (its transformation from exergy to entropy) and on the other an
43 exploitation and degradation of societal structure, a process which depletes both poor communities
44 and, in an international dimension (through the act of unequal exchange), the global South
45 (Caldwell, ND; Hornborg, 2001). But establishment futurology seems to retreat further from a
46 recognition of this fact. The original *Limits to Growth* (Meadows, 1972) did at least sharply highlight
47 the destructive impact of the positive feedback loop of capital accumulation, whereas more recent
48 debates (for example Raskin, 2002), while moving beyond the *Limits* in encompassing the theory of
49 complexity, too often take complexity as an excuse to abandon any clarity on issues of exploitation.
50 If backcasting is itself to have a future, it will need to overcome this limitation and recognise what
51 radical movements have to struggle for and against.
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56 II: FOOD FUTURES: SOME FUNDAMENTAL PARAMETERS
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3 Having suggested some pointers for a critical perspective on backcasting, let us apply these to the
4 case of food-growing. Before focusing on the urban sector, let us consider the general parameters,
5 in terms of energy flows, for a meaningful vision of sustainable agriculture. The dimension in which
6 backcasting operates is that of time, and time is the dimension in which entropy tends to increase.
7 Therefore, any favourable future must assume we will have 'managed' entropy. The possibility of a
8 solar transition offers us optimism for a favourable outcome. But I will argue that there are three
9 specific, and closely interrelated, strategies which must be realised, and in these the solar transition
10 is both a *condition* for sustainable food growing, and an *outcome* of it. They are: firstly the
11 minimisation of physical work and its replacement by knowledge; secondly, reconstituting the
12 structure of the soil; and thirdly carbon sequestration.
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17 On the first of these points, viewing energy as work, physical labour and fossil fuels become
18 equivalent, and we can then make a calorific count unifying both. In traditional food systems, when
19 most work was manual, the calorific output must by definition be greater than the input, otherwise
20 you would die. In modern systems, fossil fuels are substituted for human work, with the result that
21 at least 10 calories of energy go to produce one of food (Glaeser and Phillips-Howard, 1987). In our
22 visioned future, although we can to some extent replace fossil fuels by renewables, the issue
23 remains that we must seek a system where the physical labour of cultivation is minimised. There
24 seems to be a contradiction, since if we do less work we might expect to obtain less yield. But a
25 farming system with a low input of work requires a high input of knowledge, which increases
26 reciprocally as work declines; the knowledge element in traditional systems was immense (Fre,
27 1990). Moving onto the second requirement, we must now begin to think of entropy not so much in
28 terms of energy-flows but, perhaps more profoundly, as loss of structure. Underlying what is today
29 perceived as a food crisis is actually the loss of the soil itself. Soil conservation is "central to the
30 longevity of any civilization," (Montgomery, 2007: 6), and Alfred Howard, the founder of organics,
31 already graphically remarked that in his day, "the land is going on strike" (Howard, 1940). This
32 structure-loss has rapidly accelerated since. Soil, which takes 200-1,000 years per inch to form
33 (Arriaga et al, 2012) is now being lost at a rate of up to 50 tonnes per hectare per year, 100 times
34 faster than its formation rate (Banwart, 2011).
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41 Why is this happening? Organic thinking tends to see the soil as somehow 'living', and a self-
42 organising complex system is one which maintains low entropy. In defining life itself, a key
43 determinant for the individual organism is the boundaries within which low entropy is maintained
44 (Ho, 1998), and at a higher level the soil achieves this by binding together both mineral and organic
45 elements through very subtle – and fragile – bonds (Bourguignon and Bourguignon, 2009). "Soil
46 ecosystems are probably the least understood of nature's panoply of ecosystems and increasingly
47 among the most degraded." (McNeill and Winiwarter, 2004). But complex systems cannot by
48 definition be understood through a reductionist approach to science, and this is precisely the
49 problem underlying what is perceived on the surface as a food crisis: the 'scientific' agriculture of
50 late capitalism, which is in fact *reductionist*-scientific, sought to override the complexity, thus
51 sacrificing the emergent properties of the ensemble, an issue already foreseen by Marx (Marx, 1954
52 [1867]). From this standpoint, we can understand in a deeper way the purpose of the knowledge
53 input: it replaces the kind of work – notably ploughing – which is not only a waste of calories but
54 more importantly actively undermines soil structure. We can then permit the emergent self-
55 organisation of the soil's complex system to re-establish itself. This is the underlying rationale of the
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3 notion of 'do-nothing farming' (Fukuoka, 1978) which is in reality not 'non-action', but rather a form
4 of intervention which respects and works *with* natural properties, not against them. The knowledge
5 input is often seen as a rediscovery of *traditional* knowledge, a starting point for which is recovering
6 the essence of, for example, African and Native American approaches (Richards, 1985). But this
7 should not be counterposed to science, it is simply a complexity-respecting form of science within
8 which traditional and modern elements can easily be integrated. Terms such as agroecology,
9 permaculture, biodynamics, Low-External Input Sustainable Agriculture, the Fukuoka method etc.
10 express this aspiration, which comes about through systematising the experience of small farmers
11 themselves (van Walsum, ND). This can in a sense be considered the knowledge base for food
12 sovereignty as a social movement.
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17 This takes us to the third task, the fixation of carbon. In a similar way to how soil is regarded in
18 organic thinking, the earth-system (Gaia) is often seen as alive: it sets boundaries within which low
19 entropy is maintained, managing the import of solar low entropy through its mechanism for
20 temperature regulation, within which living organisms play an integral part (Lovelock, 2000). The
21 soil plays a crucial, intermediary role in this, and in this sense agricultural reform is central to any
22 strategy to redress anthropogenic disturbance in temperature regulation. Plants are effectively solar
23 power stations, and while the method they use has the quirks one could expect from spontaneous
24 evolution, it works, and the challenge of artificially replicating it proves elusive (Jones, 2012). Since
25 plants themselves process solar energy and at the same time feed us, logically we could integrate
26 food and solar transition as a single whole. In this, the key point is the link between carbon
27 sequestration and fertility: a benign positive feedback loop, since high carbon-content soil,
28 promoting a lush growth and thus more sequestration (Brown, ND), would counteract the 'bad'
29 positive feedback between global warming and decreased albedo. Soil holds nearly three times as
30 much carbon as vegetation and twice that of the atmosphere (Yi et al, 2011), so by incorporating
31 carbon in degraded soil we not only significantly increase crop yields but can "offset fossil fuel
32 emissions by 0.4 to 1.2 gigatons of carbon per year, or 5 to 15% of the global fossil-fuel emissions"
33 (Lal, 2004: 1623). And significantly, by following no-till farming methods – whereby we conserve the
34 of soil's structure (its negative entropy) *by not working it* – we maximise sequestration potential (Yi
35 et al, 2011). It is thus not surprising that planetary sciences specialist David Schwartzman sees
36 getting carbon into the soil as the sole effective – and essential – form of geoengineering
37 (Schwartzman, 2013). In this sense, by reducing energy as work we move towards a benign
38 relationship with energy as *flows*. For example, today's debates include models where large-scale
39 ranges where animal-grazing acts as a carbon pump (Savory, 1983; Norman, 2001); or a charcoal-
40 based method replicating the 'terra preta de indio' of the ancient Americas (Taylor, 2010), in its
41 contemporary form often called 'biochar', whereby smouldered agricultural residues simultaneously
42 sequester carbon and improve the soil.
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50 Transition to the technical solutions outlined above can only occur alongside a social transition,
51 involving an unleashing of societal free energies to mirror those of physical systems, and
52 reconnecting with the radical tradition which seeks to shift the dead weight of class society and
53 restore co-operation. As in physical systems, transition may mean radical rupture. Traditional
54 farming systems – for example in their use of fire – embraced disturbance because it builds
55 resilience, and in this way, one can "avoid the accumulation of disturbance that moves across scales
56 and further up the panarchy ..." (Berkes and Folke, 2002: 131). The contemporary mainstream food
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3 system has lost the ability to embrace disturbance, with the result that cumulative disturbance has
4 built up, leading to crisis at a larger scale. But even this can be a harbinger of progressive change,
5 both technically and institutionally. Historically, as Thirsk argues, there has been an intrinsic link
6 between land tenure and innovation: “mainstream” farming features a narrow range of crops and
7 concentrated landholding which renders it vulnerable. In times of crisis, agriculture regenerates
8 itself through “alternative” approaches – on the one hand more diverse and experimental, on the
9 other redistributory in terms of landholding – which then “furnish ideas for new strategies in the
10 following age.” (Thirsk, 1997: 19). The timeline of our future vision will thus include a major
11 revolution both of farming technique and of landholding, hence of property relations in general.
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14 15 III: URBAN FOOD PRODUCTION 16

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18 We will now develop this argument in relation to the case study of urban food growing. In the spirit
19 of Eric Olin Wright’s ‘real utopias’ (Wright, 2010), we extrapolate from trends which exist at present,
20 while remembering that they will flourish under different conditions, both because of the new
21 emergent properties of the ensemble, and because of the challenges which they will have had to
22 face, and overcome.
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26 What is the rationale for growing food in cities? Today’s mainstream agriculture is caught in a ‘bad’
27 path-dependency where diminishing returns from chemical-based farming are met with still higher
28 inputs of the chemicals which cause the problem. A radical change is needed, but how can it be
29 effected? The key point is that, in this case, ‘transition’ must concretely be understood in relation to
30 the *conversion* period of changeover to organics, which in the case of Britain’s Soil Association would
31 be two years, aiming to provide “time to start establishing organic management techniques, build
32 soil fertility and biological activity, as well as to develop a viable and sustainable agro-ecosystem.”
33 (Soil Association, ND). But the city must still be fed during this conversion period, while attempts to
34 colonise any further ‘wild’ space for food growing could only worsen local ecosystem collapses
35 (Foley et al, 2011). By default, this only leaves the option of the city growing its own food. But
36 actually, this is not a mere default option: it has several positive advantages. Being relatively
37 insulated from pesticides, monocropping and risky GM experiments, the city is favourably placed as a
38 laboratory and jumping-off point for new approaches, based both in organics and the reconstitution
39 of ecosystems; it has, moreover, an ‘urban metabolism’ wherein entropy can be diminished by using
40 what appears as waste from the standpoint of one process as an input (resource) for another; and
41 finally, it has much scope for diversity in institutional experiment, grassroots innovation, and
42 community linkages. I will now develop these points. I will propose a threefold analytical division:
43 the subsistence sector, the urban forest and the ultra-high productivity sector. This emphasises the
44 fact that there are several distinct reasons for urban farming; and that these can mutually interact as
45 part of a complex system whose emergent properties outstrip the sum of its parts.
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52 Firstly, the subsistence sector. In the European context, the paradigm is allotments and community
53 gardens, but in developing countries it would include many types of squatted, informally-occupied
54 land (and also *space*, for example balconies). This sector answers immediate food security needs,
55 combined with more strategic food sovereignty objectives: maximising the democratisation of
56 knowledge and experimentation, as well as local linkages, both social (distributing the product
57 through food chains, knowledge-sharing) and physical. A seeming paradox is that, while we want a
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3 lot of *social* linkages, from an ecological standpoint we should minimise throughput (inputs of
4 physical work, resources, water; outputs of entropy expressed as water runoff, leaching, methane
5 and CO₂ emission etc.), in which case it seems desirable to view the plot as a closed system. But if
6 we can calculate the limits within which it *can* function as a closed system, we can quantify the
7 extent to which needs to be plugged into external loops. Let us briefly concretise this in relation to
8 composting, the centrality of which to organic farming was established by Howard (Howard, 1940).
9 In this respect, there is a huge area of traditional knowledge which can be reclaimed (Dailliez, 1981).
10 The key to soil management is organic mulches (Dowding, 2007), and much of this is supplied by
11 composting the plot's own residues (weeds, the parts of vegetables we don't eat). Russian Comfrey
12 Bocking 14 further helps us overcome the entropy of a given area of land since its roots draw
13 nutrients from lower regions thus turning the topsoil into an open system. But we must understand
14 the limits within which this is possible, in order to quantify, the extent to which the plot's internal
15 resources must be supplemented by an external input. Taking the traditional British allotment (250
16 m²), converted to a no-dig method with paths between beds, our cultivable surface is about 150 m².
17 Organic agriculture literature typically requires a 40mm mulch for the combined purpose of
18 restoring fertility, shielding soil from erosion, preventing water loss, and suppressing weeds
19 (Corbalan, 2005). Spread over 150 m² this gives 6 m³ required in a given year. In the author's
20 practical research, it can be estimated that about *half* is internally generated from the plot. This
21 gives a figure of 3 m³ per 250 m² of cultivable surface required from outside the plot's closed system.
22 Here, urban food-growing has an advantage over rural, because of the availability of compostable
23 waste. Where today's industrial ecology or industrial symbiosis models tend to view agriculture
24 peripherally as an outlet or sink for industrial/domestic by-products, the visioned future will make it
25 central, with the rest of the metabolism revolving round it.
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33 Secondly, the urban forest. Several considerations underly our identification of this category: the
34 need to break down dualism between the natural and the built; the need to maximise the 'creative
35 chaos' of self organisation, both in physical systems and in society (and in relations between the
36 two); and finally the 'wildness' which is required for biodiversity.
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39 In conventional plots we can mimic self-formed natural systems up to a point by employing
40 agroecology principles such as intercropping (for example, of maize, squash and legumes); but in the
41 urban forest we are doing this at a qualitatively higher level. Farming and built environment cease
42 being sharply separate (Wilson, 2009), with buildings becoming a bit *like* forests. Advanced
43 architectural thinkers have long raised the issue that the built should (at least) give back to nature
44 what it subtracts from it. Where Corbusier sought to achieve this with roof terraces, Hundertwasser
45 strongly critiqued this modernist approach, looking to a built environment which *itself* followed
46 natural forms (Hundertwasser, 1964). Recent understanding of the city's responsibilities towards
47 climate mitigation, coupled with local climatic effects *within* cities (the heat island) incite us to revisit
48 these debates (an innovative project in Milan, now under construction, being one example:
49 Architizer News, 2013). Partly, the urban forest aims to make green space productive in food terms:
50 for example, the trees we plant should yield fruit and nuts (Pinkerton and Hopkins, 2009), a process
51 already underway in London (London Orchard Project, ND). And in a more developed form, trees
52 cohere as an edible urban forest which, once established, acquires its own emergent self-
53 maintaining ecology (Ettinger, 2012). In a social sense too, the process of *creating* these spaces is
54 itself emergent, a spontaneous encroachment of growing spaces, as already foreshadowed by the
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3 squatted community of Bonnington Square, Vauxhall (Self-Help Housing, ND). The concept of forest
4 is explicit in the Los Angeles community project L.A. Green Grounds (L.A. Green Grounds, ND), while
5 the 'new ruralism' aspires to bring together smart growth, new urbanism and sustainable food and
6 agriculture systems (SAGE, ND). All the above could be considered pathways into the category we
7 have named urban forest. At the same time, we should not be obsessed with producing food
8 everywhere. If the food-growing sector is to be truly sustainable, it requires biodiversity, and in this
9 respect, a given area of wildness should not be viewed as negatively related to (subtracted from) the
10 food-growing area, but on the contrary as a positive addition to it by supplying natural predators and
11 pollinating insects. This in turn requires native plant species, counterbalancing the reality that many
12 food crops are inevitably non-native (in the UK context, solanum or cucurbits, for example).
13 Interestingly, given that in a rural context biodiversity is heavily depleted by factory farming,
14 monocropping and pesticides, this is another area where the city can make an outstanding
15 contribution to the wider cause of sustainable transition: in an urban context, if we provide the right
16 substrate, native plant species will spontaneously appear astonishingly quickly, soon followed by
17 rare birds, insects and arachnids (Kadas, 2006). Green roofs are a key aspect, and there will be many
18 forms of symbiosis in the wider sustainability transition: for example, green roofs help solar PV
19 operate more efficiently by lowering ambient temperatures (Gedge, 2013).
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25 Finally, under this heading, there is a connection between the chaotic self-organisation of nature,
26 and of society. Guerrilla gardening, referencing guerrilla as a diffuse, self-organising form (Reynolds,
27 2008), has an evolutionary capability to throw up new forms (one example being 'Guerrilla Grafters'
28 who in San Francisco graft fruit-bearing branches onto ornamental trees – Zimet, 2012); it is a
29 societal struggle conducted *through* the self-organising capacity of nature, as in guerrilla gardening's
30 adaptation of Masanobu Fukuoka's seed-balls (whereby plants themselves choose where to grow) as
31 'seed-bombs'. The notion of "islands of unpredictability" (Carlsson, 2008) emphasises the fact that,
32 by allowing space for unplanned and unstructured initiatives, we actually create the terrain for
33 structure as an *emergent* property both of society and of nature.
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38 Thirdly, there is the case for an ultra-high productivity sector. The categories addressed so far make
39 outstanding contributions to food sovereignty, empowerment, disalienation, social networks and
40 the re-constitution of biodiversity, but the question remains whether the city can make a really
41 significant contribution to its own food needs. Whilst there is untapped potential in small plots –
42 which research in London suggests may be considerable (Tomkins, 2009: 37-38) – it remains limited.
43 If we are to take it further still, the solution could be to escape from space constraints, either by
44 raising productivity beyond what is 'normal' for a given area or by multiplying the growing area itself
45 beyond its footprint through vertical stacking, or both. Part of this can happen on rooftops: in New
46 York, a huge rooftop hydroponic farm on a single building, irrigated by captured stormwater, is
47 planned to yield 1 million pounds (450,000 kg) of vegetables per year (Foderaro, 2012). But even
48 more importantly, the low-energy revolution heralded by LED in principle permits food-growing
49 inside buildings. Some futuristic visions see this as the paradigm for the urban agriculture to come
50 (Despommier, 2010). As we write, 'plantscraper' models have just reached the point of realisation,
51 with the first commercial vertical farm opening in Singapore (Zimmer, 2012) and a 17-story urban
52 farm in Linköping, Sweden, due to begin construction in 2013 (Ma, 2012). In experiments by the
53 author and others, a mixture of red and blue LEDs produce good plants even without any natural
54 light, and given that LED efficiency is currently rising exponentially, the notion of 'Zero-Acreage'
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3 Farming' – proposed in relation to several current projects in Berlin and with aspirations as an
4 international model (Zfarm News, 2012; ZFarm, ND) – seems closer to becoming reality: if space
5 limitations can be escaped, the potential seems limitless.
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8 We must again be careful not to focus excessively on sustainable energy *input* at the expense of the
9 bigger picture of minimising entropy by resisting loss of structure. There is an issue of how far we
10 can aspire to 'free' food from soil as a substrate, bearing in mind that plants' natural mechanisms
11 need it to exchange information: thus, they communicate through fungal and mycorrhizal filaments
12 to trigger pre-emptive responses to disease (Song et al, 2010). Even more importantly, we must
13 highlight the risk that the high-tech part of the solar transition could sever itself from the issues of
14 democratisation addressed by food sovereignty, and make things even more elitist. But current
15 developments suggest this is not inevitable: in the remarkable project of Will Allen in Milwaukee,
16 USA (Allen, 2012), an aquaponic system with its own self-regulating physical properties combines a
17 very high productivity, high interaction with the urban metabolism and strong stimulus to social
18 linkages. Similarly, a community-based vertical farm is planned in Wyoming (Popovitch, 2013). The
19 key, then, is to treat cutting-edge technical experiment as *part* of a wider energising of society.
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24 CONCLUSION

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26 Let us finally sum up the case study in a holistic and critical perspective. In terms of physical
27 systems, the promise of a sustainable future is real. Nevertheless, the circuits of capital
28 accumulation are still dominant and if this continues they will tend to subsume particular
29 experiments. For example, carbon sequestration through the re-constitution of dark earths,
30 potentially wonderful at a technical level, tends under the current mode of production to be
31 subsumed as a means of accumulation, with the effect of disempowering communities (Leach et al,
32 2012). The condition for resisting this is that the technical solutions be part of a wider movement of
33 unleashing society's energies in the shape of contestatory movements from below. The principle of
34 self-organisation never disappears (to use Winstanley's image, the brother whom the ruling system
35 tries to slay keeps being reborn). To give one example from the subsistence sector, the allotment
36 movement is a paradigm of self-organisation which is at present circumscribed by the legislative
37 framework (the Allotment Acts: c.f. Acton, 2011), deriving from 'food security' which can be
38 considered an offshoot of military security, in contrast to food sovereignty which is about autonomy.
39 But urban farming could break through its institutional containment, and develop a radicalised
40 institutional framework, drawing perhaps upon Community land trusts (Davis, 2010), which would
41 be more appropriate to food sovereignty. And in a more general sense, such an unleashing is in fact
42 *required* by the complexity of solar revolution: significantly, Colin Ward, the historian of the
43 allotment movement (Crouch and Ward, 1997) argued on explicitly cybernetic grounds that the need
44 for a society to self-organise is a function of its complexity (Ward, 1988).
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51 For the new agriculture to come into being in a physical sense (low entropy, linkages to food chains
52 and metabolism loops) there must be an unleashing of societal energies, and this at some point
53 implies a change in the control of land. It has long been argued that there are three inseparable
54 tasks: protection of land, production of food, and distribution of land (Kumar, 1976: 7), and in terms
55 of the argument of this paper, we interpret these as follows: protection of land means resisting the
56 entropy of soil structure and restoring biodiversity; an adequate volume of food production is the
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3 inescapable basis for any social organisation; and distribution highlights the changes in production
4 relations required for this to happen. These principles retain their relevance as a charter for re-
5 energising society, and are implicitly embodied in today's social movements. A turning point may
6 have occurred in the late 1990s, when the Mexican Zapatistas and Indian farmers' movements
7 proved a catalyst for shaking the dead equilibrium: in the author's experience, solidarity practices
8 and networks built at that time in Europe in support of these two struggles helped lay the
9 groundwork for more recent developments. A Land and Freedom camp (October 2011) on London's
10 Clapham Common (Heggs, 2011), which predated Occupy Wall Street, referenced not just the
11 Diggers' 1649 occupation, but also global struggles. In today's London, OrganicLea provides maybe
12 the best example of what could be achieved (OrganicLea, ND): here, the permaculture principle of
13 bringing society and nature into harmony receives an interpretation of radical self-organisation, and
14 conditions for replicating this approach (perhaps as a kind of constitutive cell of alternative society)
15 are already under debate (Litherland, ND). Many of urban farming's 'real utopias' are in fact the
16 fruits of such struggle. New York's community gardens in the 1980s were the object of a fearsome
17 battle because they were liberated spaces, consciously seeking to embody here and now the kind of
18 future which *could* be built, and hence viewed as threatening by the establishment (Carlsson, 2008:
19 93). In Argentina during the 2000s, in response to economic collapse there occurred a wave of
20 contestatory social self-organisation from below, including barricading roads and factory
21 occupations (Palomino, 2003), and as part of this current, a significant movement of urban food
22 growing, all of it forming part of a historic trend to redress the loss of (societal) structure and re-
23 constitute it on a co-operative basis. In Turkey in 2013 a struggle to protect a green space from
24 encroachment triggered a movement of mass protests and popular assemblies raising fundamental
25 issues about society as a whole.

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33 In conclusion, societal restructuring co-evolves with the systems by which it is fed. Food both in a
34 literal sense provides the energy for people to function, and at the same time acts as catalyst for the
35 development of human society's energies of creativity and self-organisation.

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VISIONING A SUSTAINABLE ENERGY FUTURE – THE CASE OF URBAN FOOD-GROWING

I. INTRODUCTION: THE PLACE OF FOOD SYSTEMS WITHIN AN ENERGISING OF SOCIETY

Food is a basic condition for energising society even before we think of energy for manufactures, transport etc., because if society cannot be fed sustainably it cannot function at all. This includes – given that the brain consumes more than 20% of the body's energy (Swaminathan 2008) – crucially, its culture. But while food systems provide energy, they also themselves make great energy demands. As it stands, the mainstream system is in heavy deficit: studies consistently show that each calorie of food requires at least 10 calories of energy input (Glaeser and Phillips-Howard 1987; Lott 2011). Nor, in assessing sustainability, must we think only of *inputs*, but also of the pollution expelled: nitrogen runoff, CO₂ and methane.

In systems thinking, such outputs are a degraded form of the inputs, in other words the system is moving towards entropy. Entropy always threatens to overwhelm any system, but the existence of the earth-system keeps this at bay: "The entire fabric of life on Earth requires the maintaining of a profound and subtle organization, which undoubtedly involves entropy being kept at a low level." (Penrose 2010: 77). How life, in its naturally-evolved form, achieves this is by avoiding 'loose' outputs and treating the output from one process as an input for another (de Rosnay 1979) – for example in food chains. Traditional farming systems, while they profoundly modified nature, generally employed biomimicry to pattern themselves on natural processes (Richards 1985): composting, intercropping, green manures and catch crops formed their basic principles.

With capitalism a 'metabolic rift' occurred, pinpointed by Marx (Marx, 1954 [1867]), and analysed importantly by Bellamy Foster (Bellamy Foster 2009). We could say that the rift has both cultural and physical expressions: there is a sense of alienation in urban/industrial society, and at the same time, in a physical way, the chains become 'untucked' leading to a huge dissipation of degraded resources, now no longer absorbed as inputs into another cycle.

Because entropy is an arrow of time, the time dimension will be central to our enquiry. The rift itself was in a fundamental sense cyclical: in place of the approach whereby traditional farming systems had worked alongside cycles of natural regeneration (e.g. agroforestry), capitalism replaced them with accumulation circuits. Among Marx's key contributions was his deep sense of cycles, structures and transformations (Kluge, 2008): initially the flows and loops in the natural metabolism of nutrients and energies, and then how these have become dominated by circuits serving expanded reproduction (Perelman, 1987). Increasingly, accumulation circuits have become global, and it is through these that the energy deficit, and its degradation into harmful waste became entrenched (Caldwell [1971]; 1977). At the same time, through the repetition of these circuits, a *cumulative* entropy built up: the climatic payback for decades of depletion which had been 'exported to the future'. This future has now become our present, where we grapple with climate change (extreme weather events), food insecurity resulting from diminishing returns from chemical inputs, and most importantly loss of the soil itself.

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3 The normative part of our enquiry, *healing* the rift, must therefore also address the time dimension,
4 and in this respect we need a methodology to vision futures. Futurology has always been a key
5 component of the normative side of culture, interrogating what exists, as the utopian tradition
6 shows. And today, given the perilous ecological context, continuing with the status quo should not
7 really be an option anyway.
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10 But the energy/entropy factor, while on the one hand *demanding* such radical visioning, on the
11 other restricts it: the forces holding social power also control physical power, and the two are
12 interlocked (Gale 1998), reinforcing each other in a positive feedback loop: in a bizarre way, wealth
13 flows to those who cause the most entropy (Hornborg 2001). For this reason, we will argue that any
14 meaningful futures visioning must be political.
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18 At the same time, it must be realistic at a very concrete level. In this paper, we will attempt a
19 concrete visioning of food futures, taking as our focus the city.
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22 The urban dimension has historically been key to the problem of sustainable food futures: whereas
23 pre-capitalist societies had a fundamental basis in subsistence, it was in the urban/industrial era that
24 large proportions of the population came to represent only a cost in food terms, not a productive
25 factor – hence the energy deficit.
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28 But at the same time, cities are potentially well placed to heal the rift, for two reasons. Firstly, they
29 would throw a new element into the mix. The reason *rural* agriculture is so difficult to convert to
30 sustainability is that we can't just suspend production and re-start from a tabula rasa, whereas in
31 cities, experimentation could occur without subtracting from existing cultivable surfaces; and
32 because cities *are* largely a 'blank slate' (in terms of potential for food production), the scope for
33 experimentation is vast. Secondly – and this is what supplies the context for such experimentation –
34 cities are particularly well-placed to heal the alienation because of the scope for tucking the loops
35 back in, by converting entropy in the form of compostable waste, grey water or surplus heat into
36 useful inputs. In effect, we could transform metabolic rift into 'urban metabolism'. To assess these
37 possibilities will be our task in this paper.
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41 This is both a technical and a social task. The common principle bridging the two is that, in any
42 system, we cultivate the point where it is far removed from the 'dead' equilibrium of either too
43 much order or too much chaos (Prigogine and Stengers, 1985); here, we maximise the role of
44 emergent properties of self-organisation, and in this case the future is not constrained (Prigogine,
45 2003). The physical emergence of the urban metabolism on the one hand, and open-ended
46 experiments in societal self-organisation on the other, are thus necessarily linked. It is the interplay
47 between them which emphasises the importance of energy-focussed futures visioning.
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51 II. BACKCASTING, A CRITICAL ANALYSIS 52

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54 To explore a critical perspective on visioning methodology, let us consider the methodology of
55 'backcasting'.
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3 Definitions emphasise its distinction from forecasting or scenario-building (Wearerising, 2009).
4 Where conventional policy agendas, notably on food, typically look forward from the present (for
5 example, Barling et al, 2008), backcasting begins from a desired outcome and then considers the
6 steps by which it may be reached. The methodology has, since its origins, been associated with
7 energy, responding in particular to Lovins' call for 'soft' energies, both renewable and small-scale
8 (Lovins, 1976). It was logical that such a future, necessarily radically different from what we have
9 now, could not adequately be *forecast* from the present (Robinson, 1982). Compared to other
10 methodologies, backcasting thus offers a stronger definition of sustainability (Mulder and Biesiot,
11 1998), an interesting aspect of which has been to frame problems in terms of 'funds' and 'flows'
12 (Holmberg, 1998: 34).
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17 The 'flow' perspective gives the approach a metabolic feel, in comparison to mainstream economics.
18 The significance of this is clear if we see the 'energisation' problem as one of correcting the flow
19 towards entropy associated with the loss of natural regeneration cycles. In practice, such an
20 approach would tend to favour industrial ecology, which typically includes some element of urban
21 agriculture.
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24 But the methodology's background as a business planning tool could also prove a limitation.
25 Because the capitalist accumulation cycles, which replace those of nature, act to reward the
26 degradation of energy/material inputs (Hornborg, 2001), solutions to the 'flow' problem can never
27 merely be physical; and if societal systems need to transform themselves as radically as physical
28 ones (and as part of the same process), then social movements would become the most important
29 agents of change. Could the backcasting methodology rise to this challenge?
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33 A response was to re-cast the methodology as a tool for communities (James and Lahti, 2004), and
34 this in turn directly inspired the Transition Towns movement (Hopkins, 2008) which has been largely
35 responsible for the wider popularisation of the approach; here, futures visioning becomes a
36 collective and participatory process, one intrinsically linked to energy, notably in the focus of
37 Transition Towns visioning around an Energy Descent Action Plan (EDAP).
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40 The context of backcasting's rise as a community visioning tool in the second half of the 2000s is
41 interesting. With the threat of climate disaster now real, conventional futurology – and notably the
42 scenarios approach which asks you to picture bad lines of development as well as good ones – might
43 generate paralysing and disempowering visions of meltdown. Hence the attraction of an approach
44 which focussed on the positive, emphasising how a low-carbon future can be fun and bring better
45 quality of life. The Transition movement showed an optimistic sense that a newly-freed societal
46 energy (expressed as linkages, networks and collaborative experimentation) could in a way
47 substitute itself for fossil energy.
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51 But the crucial political shift remained limited. While academic futurology conceptually
52 acknowledges the need to break path-dependencies (Tiberius, 2011), this stops short of questioning
53 capitalism, and the backcasting literature did not fundamentally improve on this. Although there is a
54 recognition of the need to be less in thrall to dominant paradigms (Quist and Vergragt, 2006: 1030),
55 this remains circumscribed by the imperative of expanding business planning horizons to encompass
56 major regime shifts (Quist, 2007: 55). Now, from a business standpoint, this would indeed make
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3 perfect sense: the horizons of mainstream economics truly neglect large-scale structures such as the
4 accumulation regimes described by regulation theory (Aglietta, 1976), long-term shifts between
5 them, and crucially, *the specific energy profile each regime tends to have*. But the problem remains
6 that – given the embedded path-dependencies of speculative finance capital and militarism (Biel,
7 2012) – a green future may need to free itself from the capitalist mode of production, and even class
8 society as a whole, not just one structural phase of it; a futurology which truly steps outside
9 dominant paradigms must at least pose this question.
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13 In this respect, it is not enough just to add a participatory or community plugin to a corporate model,
14 and here, the attempted translation of backcasting to communities has proved questionable. For
15 example, if we turn to the visioning of 2030 in the first Transition Town EDAP conducted in Totnes,
16 Devon (which has served as a model for the whole Transition movement), we find a “forest model of
17 society” (Hodgson, 2010) which looks quite like an idealised class hierarchy, with a nostalgic dose of
18 feudalism, where corporations supply the canopy and community initiatives creep in the
19 undergrowth. We must at the very least be vigilant, bearing in mind how ‘natural’ and ‘organic’
20 imagery has long been employed to justify oppressive systems (McKay, 2011). The abandonment of
21 the scenarios approach could even have a downside, if it becomes too easy to ignore the struggles
22 whereby the ‘bad’ lines of development would (in a realistic futurology) be resisted, and this in turn
23 would leave a stunted understanding of the inevitably bloody features of ‘transition’ under actual
24 conditions.
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29 In a more realistic sense, taking account of such struggles and conflicts, there is a long tradition,
30 whereby insurgent movements have visioned their desired future (Guha, 1983). In the English
31 revolution, the Diggers of 1649 already showed a consciousness, both that a precondition for
32 unleashing societal free energies must be the overthrow of class division, and that the institutional
33 embodiment of such energies must be the associative principle, the restructuring of society around
34 commons and co-operatives. Gerard Winstanley, the Diggers’ founder, seeking a mythology to
35 express this, challenged the narrative through which the selfish and exploitative Esau or Cain
36 persistently slays his brother (Winstanley, 1983 [1649]: 125 ff.). These traditions were carried
37 forward, in the works of early 19th-century utopian socialism, where again the condition for restoring
38 the social fabric is closely related to food autonomy. Thus, the harvest is paradigmatic in a dual
39 sense: humanity itself is ripening (towards a stage where it can finally realise co-operative
40 principles), and the physical harvest can only be maximised if we ourselves co-operate (Weitling,
41 1979 [1838]: 72 ff.); one of the first communistic gatherings was a collective feast (Pillot et al, 1979
42 [1840]). And this in turn forms a bridge to the work of Marx, which builds on that of the utopians
43 (Engels, 1999 [1880]; Geoghan, 2008), while seeking to take it to the next level. Today’s reality,
44 particularly in the global South, is already one where people have no choice but to struggle for land
45 and food if they are to survive. This finds expression in a new consciousness, often referencing the
46 term ‘food sovereignty’, which assembles many issues around autonomy, freedom from global food
47 chains, community resilience, the safeguarding of diversity and heritage, place, self-reliant networks
48 etc. (Pimbert, 2009; Mares and Peña, 2010). Such struggles are in effect agents for visioning a
49 future which brings society into harmony with natural principles, in a sense qualitatively different
50 from the manipulative distortion of ‘organic’ images by oppressive systems.
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3 Only on a basis of recognising what needs to be overthrown can we therefore truly understand
4 transition. And while radical social movements have pushed futures visioning in this direction,
5 establishment futurology has if anything retreated further away from it. Where the original *Limits to*
6 *Growth* (Meadows et al, 1972) did at least sharply highlight the destructive impact of the feedback
7 loop of capital accumulation, more recent debates (for example Raskin, 2002), under the excuse of
8 moving beyond the *Limits* to encompass complexity theory, too often take complexity as an excuse
9 to shirk any clarity on issues of exploitation. If backcasting is itself to have a future and be relevant
10 at all, it would need to decide which side it is on and recognise what social movements have to
11 struggle for and against.
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14 15 III: FOOD FUTURES: SOME FUNDAMENTAL PARAMETERS 16

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18 Having suggested some pointers for a critical use of backcasting, let us address our case. Before
19 focusing on the urban sector, it will be useful to consider certain general parameters, in terms of
20 energy flows, for a sustainable agriculture. I will suggest three specific, and closely interrelated,
21 strategies: the minimisation of physical work and its replacement by knowledge; reconstituting the
22 structure of the soil; and carbon sequestration.
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26 In traditional food systems when most work was manual, the calorific output must by definition be
27 greater than the input, or you would die. Fossil fuel inputs offered a temporary illusion of escaping
28 this constraint, but are no longer sustainable, so how can we cut them without prohibitively
29 increasing manual work? An important part of the answer is that, in line with traditional approaches
30 where knowledge was immense (Fre, 1990), knowledge input must rise reciprocally as work
31 declines. The condition for this is a complexity-respecting approach to science within which
32 traditional and modern elements can, in principle, seamlessly be integrated.
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36 This in turn takes us to the task of rebuilding soil. If we think of entropy as flow towards *loss of*
37 *structure*, then what underlies perceived food crisis is actually the loss of soil itself. Soil takes 200-
38 1,000 years per inch to form (Arriaga et al, 2012), its conservation being “central to the longevity of
39 any civilization” (Montgomery, 2007: 6). Alfred Howard, the founder of organics, already graphically
40 remarked that “the land is going on strike” (Howard, 1940) and this has accelerated to the point of
41 soil-loss at a rate of up to 50 tonnes per hectare per year, 100 times faster than its formation
42 (Banwart, 2011). Why is this happening? Organic thinking tends to see the soil as ‘living’, and a self-
43 organising complex system is one which maintains low entropy. A key determinant for the individual
44 organism is the boundaries within which low entropy is maintained (Ho, 1998), and at a higher level
45 the soil achieves this by binding together both mineral and organic elements through very subtle –
46 and fragile – bonds (Bourguignon and Bourguignon, 2009). “Soil ecosystems are probably the least
47 understood of nature’s panoply of ecosystems and increasingly among the most degraded.” (McNeill
48 and Winiwarter, 2004).
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53 But complex systems cannot by definition be understood through reductionism, such as the
54 ‘scientific’ agriculture of late capitalism which seeks to override complexity, thus sacrificing the
55 emergent properties of the ensemble. From this standpoint, we can understand in a deeper way the
56 role of knowledge input: it replaces the kind of work – notably ploughing – which is not only a waste
57 of calories but more importantly undermines soil structure; we can then permit the emergent self-
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3 organisation of the soil's complex system to re-establish itself. This is the underlying rationale for
4 'do-nothing farming' (Fukuoka, 1978) which is in reality not 'non-action', but rather a form of
5 intervention working *with* natural properties, not against them. Terms such as agroecology,
6 permaculture, biodynamics, Low-External Input Sustainable Agriculture, the Fukuoka method etc.
7 characterise an approach, systematising the experience of small farmers themselves (van Walsum,
8 ND), which serves as a knowledge base for radical social movements, such as those identifying with
9 'food sovereignty'.
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13 Moving on to the third task, the fixation of carbon, we can now see the solar transition not just as an
14 external condition (replacing fossil fuels) for farming, but as an intrinsic part of it. As with an
15 organism, the earth-system sets boundaries within which low entropy is maintained, managing the
16 import of solar energy through temperature regulation, and within this mechanism, living organisms
17 are integral (Lovelock, 2000). The soil here plays a crucial, intermediary role, and in this sense
18 agricultural reform is central to any strategy to redress anthropogenic disturbance in temperature
19 regulation. Plants are effectively solar power stations, and while the method they use has the quirks
20 one could expect from spontaneous evolution, it works, and the challenge of artificially replicating it
21 proves elusive (Jones, 2012). Since plants process solar energy and at the same time feed us,
22 logically we could integrate food and solar transition as a single whole, and in this, the key lies in the
23 link between carbon sequestration and fertility: a benign positive feedback loop, since high carbon-
24 content soil, promoting a lush growth and thus more sequestration (Brown, ND), would counteract
25 the 'bad' positive feedback between global warming and decreased albedo. Since soil holds nearly
26 three times as much carbon as vegetation and twice that of the atmosphere (Yi et al, 2011), by
27 incorporating carbon in degraded soil we not only increase crop yields but can "offset fossil fuel
28 emissions by 0.4 to 1.2 gigatons of carbon per year, or 5 to 15% of the global fossil-fuel emissions"
29 (Lal, 2004: 1623). And significantly, by following no-till farming methods – whereby we conserve the
30 of soil's structure (its negative entropy) *by not working it* – we maximise sequestration potential (Yi
31 et al, 2011); planetary science specialist David Schwartzman sees getting carbon into the soil as the
32 sole effective – and essential – form of geoengineering (Schwartzman, 2013). In this sense, by
33 reducing energy as work we attain a benign relationship with energy as *flows*. For example, today's
34 debates include models where large-scale ranges where animal-grazing acts as a carbon pump
35 (Savory, 1983; Norman, 2001); or a charcoal-based method replicating the 'dark earths' of the
36 ancient Americas (Taylor, 2010), in its contemporary form often called biochar, whereby smouldered
37 agricultural residues simultaneously sequester carbon and improve the soil.
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45 Transition to such technical solutions can only occur alongside a social transition, an unleashing of
46 societal free energies to mirror those of physical systems, and reconnecting with the radical tradition
47 which seeks to shift the dead weight of class society and restore co-operation. As in physical
48 systems, transition may mean radical rupture. Traditional farming systems – for example in their use
49 of fire – embraced disturbance because it builds resilience, and in this way, one can "avoid the
50 accumulation of disturbance that moves across scales and further up the panarchy ..." (Berkes and
51 Folke, 2002: 131). The contemporary mainstream food system has lost the ability to embrace
52 disturbance, with the result that cumulative disturbance has built up, leading to crisis at a larger
53 scale. But even this can be a harbinger of progressive change, both technically and institutionally.
54 Historically, as Thirk argues, there has been an intrinsic link between land tenure and innovation:
55 "mainstream" farming features a narrow range of crops and concentrated landholding which
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renders it vulnerable. In times of crisis, agriculture regenerates itself through “alternative” approaches – on the one hand more diverse and experimental, on the other redistributory in terms of landholding – which then “furnish ideas for new strategies in the following age.” (Thirsk, 1997: 19). The timeline of our future vision should thus include a major revolution both of farming technique and of landholding, hence of property relations in general.

IV: URBAN FOOD PRODUCTION

We will now develop this argument in relation to the case study of urban food growing. In the spirit of Eric Olin Wright’s ‘real utopias’ (Wright, 2010), we extrapolate from trends which exist now, while remembering that, in a future vision, they will flourish under new conditions, both because of the emergent properties of the ensemble which can’t be predicted from its parts, and because of the challenges which they will have needed to face and overcome.

What is the rationale for growing food in cities? Today’s mainstream agriculture is caught in a ‘bad’ path-dependency where diminishing returns from chemicals are met with still higher inputs of what is causing the problem. A radical change is needed, but how can it be effected? In this case, ‘transition’ must concretely be understood in relation to the *conversion* period of changeover to organics, which in the example of Britain’s Soil Association would be two years, the “time to start establishing organic management techniques, build soil fertility and biological activity, as well as to develop a viable and sustainable agro-ecosystem.” (Soil Association, ND). But the city must still be fed during this conversion, and attempts to colonise any further ‘wild’ space for food growing could only worsen local ecosystem collapses (Foley et al, 2011). By default, this only leaves the option of the city growing its own food. But actually, this is not a mere default option, it has positive advantages. Besides its potential for an urban metabolism, and for grassroots innovation and community linkages, the city – being relatively insulated from pesticides, monocropping and risky GM experiments – is favourably placed as a laboratory and jumping-off point for new approaches.

I will now develop these points. I will propose a threefold analytical division: the subsistence sector, the urban forest and the ultra-high productivity sector. This reflects the fact that there are several distinct reasons for urban farming, which can interact as part of a system whose emergent properties outstrip the sum of its parts.

Firstly, the subsistence sector. In the European context, the paradigm is allotments and community gardens, but in developing countries it would include many types of squatted, informally-occupied land (and also *space*, for example balconies). This sector answers immediate food security needs, combined with more strategic food sovereignty objectives: maximising the democratisation of knowledge and experimentation, as well as local linkages, both social (distributing the product through food chains, knowledge-sharing) and physical.

A seeming paradox is that, while we want a lot of *social* linkages, from an ecological standpoint we should minimise throughput (inputs of physical work, resources, water; outputs of entropy expressed as water runoff, leaching, methane and CO₂ emission etc.), in which case it seems desirable to view the plot as a closed system. But if we calculate the limits within which it *can* function as a closed system, we can quantify the extent to which needs to be plugged into external

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3 loops. Let us briefly concretise this in relation to composting, the centrality of which to organic
4 farming was established by Howard (Howard, 1940). In this respect, there is a huge area of
5 traditional knowledge which can be reclaimed (Dailliez, 1981). The key to soil management is
6 organic mulches (Dowding, 2007), and much of this is supplied by composting the plot's own
7 residues (weeds, the parts of vegetables we don't eat). Russian Comfrey Bocking 14 further helps us
8 overcome the entropy of a given area of land since its roots draw nutrients from lower regions thus
9 turning the topsoil into an open system. But we must understand the limits within which this is
10 possible, in order to quantify the extent to which the plot's internal resources must be
11 supplemented by external inputs. Taking the traditional British allotment (250 m²), converted to a
12 no-dig method with paths between beds, our cultivable surface is about 150 m². Organic agriculture
13 literature typically requires a 40mm mulch for the combined purpose of restoring fertility, shielding
14 soil from erosion, preventing water loss, and suppressing weeds (Corbalan, 2005). Spread over 150
15 m² this gives 6 m³ required in a given year. In the author's practical research, it can be estimated
16 that about *half* is internally generated from the plot. This gives a figure of 3 m³ per 250 m² of
17 cultivable surface required from outside the plot's closed system. Here, urban food-growing has an
18 advantage over rural, because of the ready availability of compostable waste. Where today's
19 industrial ecology or industrial symbiosis models tend to view agriculture peripherally as an outlet or
20 sink for industrial/domestic by-products, in future it may become central, with the rest of the
21 metabolism revolving round it.
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28 Secondly, the urban forest. Several considerations underly our identification of this category: to
29 break down dualism between the natural and the built; to maximise the 'creative chaos' of self
30 organisation, both in physical systems and in society (and in relations between the two); and finally
31 the 'wildness' which is required for biodiversity.
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34 In conventional plots we mimic self-formed natural systems up to a point by employing agroecology
35 principles such as intercropping (for example, of maize, squash and legumes); however, in the urban
36 forest we are doing this at a qualitatively higher level. Farming and built environment cease being
37 sharply separate (Wilson, 2009), with buildings becoming a bit *like* forests. Advanced architectural
38 thinkers have long raised the issue that the built should (at least) give back to nature what it
39 subtracts. Where Corbusier sought to achieve this with roof terraces, Hundertwasser critiqued this
40 modernist approach, looking to a built environment which *itself* followed natural forms
41 (Hundertwasser, 1964). Recent understanding of the city's responsibilities towards climate
42 mitigation, coupled with local climatic effects *within* cities (the heat island) incite us to revisit these
43 debates (an innovative project in Milan, now under construction, being one example: Architizer
44 News, 2013). Partly, the urban forest makes green space productive in food terms: for example, the
45 trees we plant should yield fruit and nuts (Pinkerton and Hopkins, 2009), a process already
46 underway in London (London Orchard Project, ND). And in a more developed form, trees cohere as
47 an edible urban forest which, once established, acquires its own emergent self-maintaining ecology
48 (Ettinger, 2012). In a social sense too, the process of *creating* these spaces is itself emergent, a
49 spontaneous encroachment of growing spaces, as already foreshadowed by the squatted
50 community of Bonnington Square, Vauxhall (Self-Help Housing, ND). The concept of forest is explicit
51 in the Los Angeles community project L.A. Green Grounds (L.A. Green Grounds, ND), while the 'new
52 ruralism' aspires to bring together smart growth, new urbanism and sustainable food and agriculture
53 systems (SAGE, ND).
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4 All the above could be considered pathways into the category we have named urban forest. At the
5 same time, we should not be obsessed with producing food everywhere. If the food-growing sector
6 is to be truly sustainable, it requires biodiversity, and in this respect, a given area of wildness should
7 not be viewed, negatively, as subtracted from the food-growing area, but rather as a positive
8 addition to it, supplying natural predators and pollinating insects. This in turn requires native plant
9 species, counterbalancing the reality that many food crops are inevitably non-native (in the UK
10 context, solanum or cucurbits, for example). Interestingly, given that in a rural context biodiversity
11 is heavily depleted by factory farming, monocropping and pesticides, this is another area where the
12 city can make outstanding contributions to the wider cause of sustainable transition: in an urban
13 context, if we provide the right substrate, native plant species spontaneously appear astonishingly
14 quickly, soon followed by rare birds, insects and arachnids (Kadas, 2006). Green roofs are a key
15 aspect, and will give rise to many forms of symbiosis in the wider sustainability transition: for
16 example, green roofs help solar PV operate more efficiently by lowering ambient temperatures
17 (Gedge, 2013).
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23 Finally, under this heading, there is a connection between the chaotic self-organisation of nature,
24 and of society. Guerrilla gardening, referencing guerrilla as a diffuse, self-organising form (Reynolds,
25 2008), has an evolutionary capability to throw up new forms (one example being 'Guerrilla Grafters'
26 who in San Francisco graft fruit-bearing branches onto ornamental trees – Zimet, 2012); it is a
27 societal struggle conducted *through* the self-organising capacity of nature, as in guerrilla gardening's
28 adaptation of Masanobu Fukuoka's seed-balls (whereby plants themselves choose where to grow) as
29 'seed-bombs'. The notion of "islands of unpredictability" (Carlsson, 2008) suggests that, by allowing
30 space for unplanned and unstructured initiatives, we create the terrain for structure as an *emergent*
31 property both of society and of nature.
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35 Thirdly, there is an ultra-high productivity sector. The categories addressed so far make outstanding
36 contributions to food sovereignty, empowerment, disalienation, social networks and the re-
37 constitution of biodiversity, but do not fully explain how far the city can feed itself. Whilst there is
38 currently an untapped area of land/space theoretically available for conventional urban agriculture –
39 which research in London suggests may be sizeable (Tomkins, 2009: 37-38) – the question is, could
40 we move beyond these limits into a different conception of food growing, escaping space
41 constraints, either by raising productivity beyond what is 'normal' for a given area or by multiplying
42 the growing area itself beyond its footprint through vertical stacking. Part of this can happen on
43 rooftops: in New York, a huge rooftop hydroponic farm on a single building, irrigated by captured
44 stormwater, is planned to yield 1 million pounds (450,000 kg) of vegetables per year (Foderaro,
45 2012). But even more importantly, the low-energy revolution heralded by LED in principle permits
46 food-growing inside buildings. Some would vision this as the paradigm for the urban agriculture to
47 come (Despommier, 2010). As we write, 'plantscraper' models have just reached the point of
48 realisation, with the first commercial vertical farm opening in Singapore (Zimmer, 2012) and a 17-
49 story urban farm planned in Linköping, Sweden (Ma, 2012). In experiments by the author and
50 others, a mixture of red and blue LEDs produce good plants even without natural light, and given
51 that LED efficiency is currently rising exponentially, the notion of 'Zero-Acreage Farming' – proposed
52 in relation to current projects in Berlin and with aspirations as an international model (Zfarm News,
53 2012; ZFarm, ND) – seems closer to reality.
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4 We must however be careful not to focus excessively on energy *input* at the expense of the bigger
5 picture of minimising entropy by resisting loss of structure. There is an issue of how far we can
6 aspire to 'free' food from soil as a substrate, bearing in mind that plants' natural mechanisms need it
7 to exchange information: thus, they communicate through fungal and mycorrhizal filaments to
8 trigger pre-emptive responses to disease (Song et al, 2010). There is also the risk that the high-tech
9 part of the solar transition sever itself from the issues of democratisation addressed by food
10 sovereignty, and make things even more elitist. But current developments suggest this is not
11 inevitable: in the remarkable project of Will Allen in Milwaukee, USA (Allen, 2012), an aquaponic
12 system with its own self-regulating physical properties combines a very high productivity, high
13 interaction with the urban metabolism and strong stimulus to social linkages. Similarly, a
14 community-based vertical farm is planned in Wyoming (Popovitch, 2013). The key, then, is to treat
15 cutting-edge technical experiment as *part* of a wider societal energising.
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20 V. IMPLICATIONS OF THE CASE STUDY FOR THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF FOOD SYSTEMS

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23 In terms of physical systems, many elements for a sustainable future are in place. Nevertheless,
24 while the circuits of capital accumulation are still dominant, these tend to subsume particular
25 experiments. To take one example, carbon sequestration through the re-constitution of dark earths,
26 potentially marvellous at a technical level, is currently subsumed as a means of accumulation, with
27 the effect of disempowering communities (Leach et al, 2012). Thus, if the technical response is
28 disconnected from the social one, and begin to act against it, nothing will be achieved, even
29 technically.
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33 The unleashing of societal energies therefore still remains, and is in fact *required* by the complexity
34 of the solar revolution: Colin Ward, the historian of the allotment movement (Crouch and Ward,
35 1997) argued on explicitly cybernetic grounds that the need for a society to self-organise is a
36 function of its complexity (Ward, 1988). It has long been felt that there are three inseparable tasks:
37 protection of land, production of food, and distribution of land (Kumar, 1976: 7), and in terms of the
38 argument of this paper, we can interpret these as follows: protection of land means resisting the
39 entropy of soil structure and restoring biodiversity; an adequate volume of food production is the
40 inescapable basis for any social organisation; and distribution highlights the changes in production
41 relations required for this to happen.
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45 These principles retain their relevance as a charter for re-energising society, and are implicitly
46 embodied in today's social movements. A turning point may have occurred in the late 1990s, when
47 the Mexican Zapatistas and Indian farmers' movements proved a catalyst for shaking the dead
48 equilibrium: in the author's experience, solidarity practices and networks built at that time in Europe
49 in support of these two struggles helped lay the groundwork for more recent developments. A Land
50 and Freedom camp (October 2011) on London's Clapham Common (Heggs, 2011), which predated
51 Occupy Wall Street, referenced not just the Diggers' 1649 occupation, but also global struggles. In
52 today's London, OrganicLea provides maybe the best example of what could be achieved
53 (OrganicLea, ND): here, the permaculture principle of bringing society and nature into harmony
54 receives an interpretation of radical self-organisation, and conditions for replicating this approach
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(perhaps as a kind of constitutive cell of alternative society) are already under debate (Litherland, ND).

Many of urban farming's 'real utopias' are in fact the fruits of such struggle. New York's community gardens in the 1980s were the object of a fearsome battle because they were liberated spaces, consciously seeking to embody here and now the kind of future which *could* be built, and hence viewed as threatening by the establishment (Carlsson, 2008: 93). In Argentina during the 2000s, in response to economic collapse there occurred a wave of contestatory social self-organisation from below, including barricading roads and factory occupations (Palomino, 2003), and as part of this current, a significant movement of urban food growing, all of it forming part of a historic trend to redress the loss of (societal) structure and re-constitute it on a co-operative basis. In Turkey in 2013 a struggle to protect a green space from encroachment triggered a movement of mass protests and popular assemblies raising fundamental issues about society as a whole.

CONCLUSION

We have proposed a model for society's energy needs in terms of *flow*, interpreted in two senses: firstly we must limit the flow towards entropy, central to the definition of time itself, which in the context of the earth-system can be achieved because this is what the earth-system intrinsically exists to do ... but in this case we must take nature on our side. Secondly, a cyclical definition of flow, which is in fact the medium through nature operates to resist entropy, by acting to 'tuck' whatever is expelled by one process back as an input to another. But in the current mode of production, the accumulation circuits take ownership of the cyclical motion, distorting it so as to magnify and reward entropy, leaving us to confront the stored-up effects of expelled wastes, notably extreme climate events.

Considering how society can re-order its relationship with energy, we raised the problem of a methodology of futures visioning. We took the example of backcasting, whose strength lies in freeing us from the limitations of that form of 'realism' which would consist in taking where we are now as its point of departure. Nevertheless, given the pervasive dominance of today's ruling interests and ideologies – fuelled by the socio-political influence conferred by their control of physical power and resources – our supposedly 'free' creative visioning may merely be subsumed into existing norms. As an antidote to this, we proposed situating ourselves consciously within the tradition of radical social movements, more specifically those linked to our case study of food systems.

In their broader sense, we argued, food systems illustrate a dual expression of principles of self-organisation in complex systems: at a physical level, arresting the loss of soil and beginning to rebuild it, through understanding and working alongside its complexity; at a social level, the change to sustainability becoming realised as part of a societal shift towards structures where power and initiative are widely distributed.

We then considered the case study of urban agriculture. It is revealed as an example of a plural and multi-faceted development, in which physical and social dimensions of self-organisation interlock and feed off each other. From this, we deduce that societal restructuring co-evolves with the

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3 systems by which it is fed. Food system development both in a literal sense provides the energy for
4 people to function, and also acts as catalyst for an exploration of human society's energies of
5 creativity and self-organisation.
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