

An Urban Vegetable Garden: A Blooming for the Food Memory of the Future

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Abstract

This work concerns an urban vegetable garden beyond 200 plots in Famalicão (northern Portugal) and aims to check out mnemonic narratives circulating there linked to gastronomy and technical agricultural resources that have been used in the past. This research has been developed since last December/2022 and will check this environment for four seasons of the year. Its methodology is based on an ethnographic exercise, using flanerie dynamics and the application of interviews with open-ended questions. This analysis is supported by the Anthropology of Food, the concept of Collective Memory, by Halbwachs, and the Semiotics of Culture, by Iuri Lotman, approaching with specificity the concept of food semiosphere. Some data has already been noticed about this place mostly frequented by retirees, like their nostalgic speeches, that are materialized now on their meters of earth, through a recovered process of agriculture, that had been disabled by a society that has abandoned the countryside. Their ancestors' knowledge is also shared with younger people there, and the group improves their practices to keep the rules of this place, that do not allow the use of synthetic resources. They treat each other like “colleagues,” and there is a constant exchange of knowledge, products, recipes and seeds each other. The younger ones absorb new pieces of past knowledge to improve their future memories. Besides these “new-old” practices contributing to saving money, they declare how those improve health and especially the value given to the taste of food..

Keywords

Food semiosphere; narratives; agriculture; Famalicão; Portugal; communication

In the north of Portugal, the archaeological remains of Vila Nova de Famalicão indicate that this area was already inhabited before Christ. However, it was not until in 1205 that the cultivation and sale of the region's agricultural produce was permitted at a fortnightly fair (Novais 2022). In the 20th century, with industrial development in the textile sector and population growth, the urban aspect became predominant, but a weekly market was maintained in the town, offering a wide range of products. Among the many products are plant seedlings that attract various consumers, such as the city's citizens integrated into the Famalicão Urban Gardens (HUFA), located in the next block to the market. The HUFA is part of the city's

environmental project and was created next to the city park in 2013 but will be moved to this other area next to the market in 2021 (Fama Rádio e Televisão 2021; Notícias de Famalicão 2021).

As López (2015) has explained, “urban vegetable gardens have become fashionable” in different parts of the world, but these initiatives have existed in other times. Urías Borbón and Torre (2020) speak of the countless experiences and verifiable results outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda (United Nations 2015). However, it is well-known how difficult it is to reconcile this oxymoron of development and sustainability (Redclift 2006). Nevertheless, the functionalities of urban vegetable gardens are surprising and help to reconcile this parameter (Alcántara Nieves and Larroa Torres 2022).

Urban vegetable gardens are in line with various SDGs of the 2030 Agenda (United Nations 2015), such as: 2 - Zero hunger; 3 - Good health and well-being; 11 - Sustainable cities and communities; 12 - Responsible consumption and production; 13 - Climate action, among others. In addition, projects related to urban gardens have a special and positive impact, because, according to Tieppo (2021), they promote people's connection with nature, one of the foundations of life itself.

Looking at the human and non-human life that circulates in HUFA and the SDGs of the 2030 Agenda (United Nations 2015), we ask ourselves: how are memories linked to gastronomy and agricultural techniques installed in this environment and reconciled with the desire for a sustainable future for our planet? This question aims to explore the mnemonic messages related to the future that circulate in HUFA. To this end, we seek to capture and review the narratives related to gastronomy and agricultural techniques that circulate there and analyse them in light of the goals set out in the 2030 Agenda.

Faced with this challenge, we make a proposal: we want to break out of a mnemonic repertoire that is stuck in the past and look for the codes and traces of memories that converge between the past and the projections of the future, oriented towards a present that is eroding at every moment. The maxims established by Lotman (1996) contribute to this, since the semiotics of culture emphasizes the oscillating system of language and the panchronic system of memory. With regard to cultural memory, this parameter opens up possibilities of overlapping connections that arise between a younger culture and an older parent culture (Lotman 1996, 36).

In line with the understanding that memory is collective (Halbwachs 1990), mnemonic repertoires contribute to the perception of the singularities of a group. Their memories build on the experiences, relationships and reflections of the community to which the individual belongs. In this sense, Assmann (2008) adds important features to collective memory by emphasizing traditions, transmissions and transfers of memories. These points coincide with and complement the cultural memory discussed by Lotman (1996).

An important aspect of understanding the memories that circulate in the HUFA is to understand this spatiality as a semiosphere (Lotman, 1996): a nomenclature derived from the biosphere, understood as a delimited abstract in which certain codes and specific cultural texts circulate, evoking different semioses from those that circulate in spaces outside its boundaries.

As a semiosphere, HUFA has particular codes that help to identify and distinguish it. The limited space embedded in the urban universe of the city and destined for a collective centered on agricultural practices, in turn, exposes this semiosphere to a condition that allows it to be understood as a heterotopic reference. This conclusion can be drawn if we consider the characteristics of gardens, which Foucault (2013) refers to as heterotopic, i.e. they are understood as part of a totality located in a space that is, in principle, an incompatible condition for being inserted there.

As far as agricultural production is concerned, this semiosphere follows a set of norms that correspond to cultural codes that have been lost in recent decades. It breaks with the hegemonic system of contemporary agriculture promoted by the Green Revolution and maintained over the last six decades. HUFA proclaims organic production and promotes a dynamic that is consistent with agroecology, a science that promotes a process of collective construction of agricultural systems. According to the ethno-ecologist Victor Toledo:

It is important to emphasize that Agroecology does not reject modernity, it merely postulates an alternative modernity. Agroecology proposes a modernity that does not destroy tradition but builds on it; a modernity that respects traditional knowledge and traditional cultures and strives for the confluence of knowledge and experience. Nor can we cling to the romantic notion that we only need to save tradition. Tradition also has its weaknesses and limitations (Quiroz 2019).

Agroecology seeks alternative strategies for agricultural practices based on ecological management and the resources offered by the regions themselves, favoring the heterogeneity of crops, restoring and enhancing them, and supporting a dynamic that accommodates social and collective action (Rosset and Altieri 2022; FAO 2017). This is in line with the 2030 Agenda (United Nations 2015), which postulates diversity under the banner of sustainability.

This state of war around agriculture leads to conflicts between texts in culture. According to Lotman (1996, 160), conflicts between texts are adjusted according to semiotic movements and texts remain in cultural memory or not, as they can be transferred to other spheres and lose their ability to generate new codes. These considerations are relevant when it comes to food because, as Montanari (2008, 15-16) points out, food is culture, in other words, all processes related to food are cultural prescriptions, from the selection of the harvest to the choice of what is put on the table, passing through the various social classes and political, religious and geographical spheres, among others.

Methodological process

The mnemonic codes are announced in the semiotic continuum of the HUFA and an ethnographic exercise based on the Anthropology of Food (Hernández and Arnáiz 2005) helped to inspect the models and alternatives of social actors in this semiosphere around food. Given the interest in getting closer to the citizen gardeners, it was necessary to develop communication strategies with the actors, linked to the environment sector of the Municipality of Vila Nova de Famalicão, responsible for the HUFA. This interaction was helped to keep the chronogram for the fieldwork in order. In this respect, the lack of a rigid timetable for managing the project was a contribution.

The first step was to contact the agronomist engineer responsible for the urban vegetable garden, followed by the planning of a technical visit to the HUFA, at the end of November 2022. The professional was now responsible for making the necessary requests to her superiors for the official visits. This fieldwork dynamic began on January 25, 2023 and was to take place over the course of a year, following the space through the four seasons.

In the first phase of fieldwork, a *flânerie* dynamic (McLaren 1998) was conducted and was a useful strategy to perceive the routine of HUFA's. Unlike the *flânerie*, which is based on the observation of goods on display on urban streets, the logic of this exercise focused on the food grown. Just as a *flâneur* acts as a detective on the street (McLaren 1998), this task consists of observing the actors circulating between the plots and observing the relationship between humans and non-humans in their daily lives. This pedagogical dynamic provoked several questions that led to the exercise of approaching the agents in order to interrogate them. In this way, their practices were valorised and the walls that are usually erected by part of the stigma of the academic world were broken down.

The routine of these walks was sporadic, as it was tied to the confirmation and presence of the engineer in charge of the space. Weekly or fortnightly, in the mornings or afternoons, the visits, which lasted between two and three hours, revealed the contours of this semiosphere and its codes, which were repetitive. Observation and the consistent recording of images were combined with listening, and the cell phone became the ideal tool for registration.

Trust in the relationships was strengthened when the reason for the visits was explained, with the link to an academic organization helping to make the relationship effective. Some agents relied on this motto to clarify different aspects of their biography, and these narratives revealed different points associated with the academy, between pride and resentment. There were several layers of memory associated with this topic, but since the interest of this interaction centred on food, the dialogues were bypassed to achieve this purpose. Considering that food goes

beyond nourishment and presents itself as a unique form of communication (Amon and Menasche 2008; Barthes 1961), this process went smoothly.

Beyond the *flânerie*

The agronomist engineer is responsible for the 12-hour course on organic farming, offered free of charge by the municipality as part of the requirements for a citizen applying for a plot at HUFA. As I attended the April 2023 edition, I was able to follow the training of a class of two dozen candidates.

This dynamic validated the ethnographic exercise associated with the visits to HUFA and the data set showed the potential for a book. The proposal was taken up and approved by the Municipal Department for Environmental. An email from a team member acknowledged the initiative: "I fully share your idea of creating a book on HUFA. I think we need to keep our culture alive, our memories, the know-how, the sense of belonging, the emotional side that can come with everything."

This plan, which is still in progress, is anchored in the printing of a field diary offered to the gardeners. The illustrations, made by a professional, are taken from the daily work of HUFA during the four seasons of the year. A text with some specific memories of the gardeners will take over part of it and a new methodology has been developed for this. In November 2023, two dozen in-depth interviews began with a few selected gardeners linked to the months of the year. These interviews are based on a 12-question script and select the actors in such a way that they form a group that represents the characteristics of the HUFA collective. In addition to retirees- a significant proportion of the gardeners are retired – other people are also invited according to age, nationality and gender.

The oral history supports this process in which we try to align some life stories. According to Pollak (1992, 211), this medium is "a privileged instrument for evaluating moments of change, moments of transformation." Some information recorded in the *flânerie* is repeated in this new phase of research, such as the themes of dictatorship, emigration and hunger. This strategy not only helps to support the mnemonic game around past and future, but also serves to capture specific information about memorable dishes of the interviewees.

For Pollak (1992, 212), the methodological approach to oral tradition is subject to the sensitivity of the researcher's manipulations with regard to the material that is to be written down. From this, it can be deduced that the researcher's own memory is also part of this selection and translation process. Having said this, it is clear that the methodological tools used are an impetus to ensure a reduction of possible noise in the transcription and translation process. By increasing the number of codes recorded, it is also possible to better manage and understand the most frequently occurring and recurring codes.

Between past and future

The Standards

The general rules of the HUFA (Famalicão 2012) are an important reference for understanding the dynamics of the semiosphere and its agencies treated here:

The main objectives of Famalicão's Urban Gardens are to promote sustainable agriculture, support healthy nutrition, contribute to the family economy, raise awareness of nature conservation, strengthen community spirit and sharing, and improve the well-being of users (Famalicão 2012, Rule 2).

These values, which express environmental, social and economic issues, correspond to the fundamental tripod of sustainability and are therefore in line with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda (United Nations 2015). There are common guidelines in these two documents, especially in SDG 2, which deals with hunger, food security, improving nutrition and promoting sustainable agriculture. However, the HUFA management system emphasizes its link with the 12th SDG, which states "Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns" (United Nations 2015).

This link is relevant when considering the temporal matrices of the memories listed in this study, as the 2030 Agenda is focused on the future. However, the past is also anchored in it. Target 2.5 of SDG 2, for example, refers to the importance of traditional knowledge and the diversity of seeds and plants. These points are close to the concepts of agroecology, which values traditions and condemns agricultural models that have existed for six decades and have their origins in the Green Revolution (Rosset and Altieri 2022). The HUFA manual points out that it is linked to these foundations, because when it speaks of organic farming, it states that it is: "a farming system that respects the systems and cycles of nature and maintains and promotes the health of soils, water, plants and animals and the balance between them, and that does not use chemically synthesized products such as synthetic fertilizers and pesticides (...)" (Famalicão 2012, Rule 3.1)

In addition, the list of duties and practices to be followed by users contains some important points that show that the cultivation strategies to be followed correspond to an agricultural model of past times, such as: the preservation of diversity on each plot, the renunciation of monocultures, the use of synthetic chemical and the cultivation of genetically modified species.

Sown Memory

At the end of the organic farming course, candidates are taken on an official visit to HUFA. While following this trip, it was appropriate to hear the mnemonic reflections of the future gardeners. It can be inferred that these were nostalgic stories

because, according to Leal and Ribeiro (2018), these are narratives that express a desire return to the past in face of tensions about the future that modern life brings.

One of the candidates, who was about to retire, pointed to the strawberries in one of the plots and said that she would relax there; another woman, seeing some discarded plants pointed out that they would be edible in Africa, where she comes from; a young man, the father of a two-year-old, had the illusion that he could offer his son experiences with farming practices like he had had as a child before he moved to the city; a small group was happy to recognize some species, pick them, smell them and taste them.

In the HUFA routine, taste memories are also highlighted the soup, a dish emblematic of Portuguese culture (Araújo 2021), which is emphasised and repeated several times in the repertoires of the gardeners. This dish is highlighted for its distinctive flavour when prepared with fresh HUFA products, which increases the value of the absence of synthetic pesticides in the production process of the ingredients and creates value for health discourses. In addition to these positive comments, the other benefit is related to savings, as less frequent trips to the supermarket are required, which reduces the burden on the family budget.

These values are in line with the practises developed at HUFA, the model of organic farming, this is repeated like a mantra in this semiosphere. These mottos are in line with the principles of ecology, the improvement of health and the pleasure of fresh, tasty food. These values are an incentive for the gardeners who diligently look after their plots.

According to the HUFA engineer, the candidates raise many expectations about the activities and the results, and the studies have shown this to be true. The communicative codes of the bodies surrounding the texts in this semiosphere indicate this mood, even in times of excessive rainfall between fall and winter. The possible discouragement one might expected in this seasonal phase is eclipsed by the expectation of becoming, which drives the digging up of heavy, moist soil that will produce seedlings and future harvests in the spring.

Mother Earth

HUFA users are aware that well-treated, healthy soil is key to the life of future plants and the resulting flavour of food. Therefore, they are guided by the numerous tales that circulate in this semiosphere to achieve the best results. One of the plots stands out in the eyes of the neighbours and the engineer herself, as the rock pile and worm farm have shown excellent results. Some are wary of the innovative practices and remember the practices they learned from their ancestors and followed by many, such as fertilizing the soil with horse manure, carefully ploughing the soil with a hoe when planting potatoes, tipping the onion seedlings as they are put into the holes, and using the compost on each plot. The proverbs of the past support certain practices and a plural environment is created, oriented towards the common good,

between the exchange of cultural knowledge and plots that circulate between the future and the past.

In spring and summer, the senses explode around the land that has already borne fruit and the exchange of seedlings and cultivated food is part of the game of relationships. In addition to soups, it is mainly salads that are found in the gastronomic plots related to the harvests, with lettuces, tomatoes, peppers and onions, valued for their particular flavour and freshness, playing a greater role.

For Benjamin (1987), experiences are supported by narratives. From this it can be deduced that the taste experience of salads is supported by the narratives constructed in the HUFA collective. In this sense, it should also be pointed out that the oral memories circulating in this semiosphere favour the resilience of “communicative memory,” which according to Assmann (2011, 17), “connects three successive generations” and when “a certain stock of shared knowledge is interrupted, [it] is lost.” However, HUFA have helped to prevent this loss by keeping the agricultural memories of their citizens alive. To return to Benjamin (1987): these memories that will enrich the flavour of the soups and salads we taste.

Considerations

This study deals with a Portuguese semiosphere, the urban vegetable gardens of Famalicão, which is a composition of repertoires developed by human and non-human actors. This work represents the first part of a project that deals with this semiosphere and shows the possibilities of *flânerie* as part of the methodological strategies of an ethnographic exercise, aimed at verifying the different temporal memories that food and agriculture can evoke. In addition to collecting data to achieve this goal, this dynamic contributed to broadening contact between different social circles, building relationships and breaking down the barriers between the worlds of science, the public sector and citizens. In this sense, it can be said that this approach added value to the proposed work. With this methodological support, it was possible to capture the mnemonic narratives expressed by the gardeners in their daily routines. The data sought emerged naturally among the actors, imbued with individual and collective baggage, representing unmistakable compositions between the past, the present and the future, sometimes on the verge of materializing in the next season. The mnemonic game in which this collective is involved offers rich potential to explore gastronomic narratives, which will be explored in more detail in the second phase of the investigation. However, it can already be seen that food for this group is based on their genes: in caring for the earth. In addition, it should be emphasized that the dynamics of this semiosphere are based on the common good, in communion with the horizons of the SDGs of the 2030 Agenda, which aim to take care of the future of the planet.

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