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Urban development in Freiburg, Germany – sustainable and neoliberal?

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Abstract

In recent years, sustainable urban development has emerged as a relevant but contested field in urban studies. A broad and diverse literature has discussed sustainable development from various perspectives. Some authors have researched urban sustainability from a technocratic perspective, looking for technical and managerial solutions. Others have shed light on the political dimension of urban sustainable development in our times of urban neoliberalization. This branch of literature focuses on the problematic relationship between market-oriented growth on the one hand and aspects of equality and justice on the other hand, which come along with the idea of sustainability. This article argues that the professionalization and new forms of urban management, as well as a shift towards urban governance and citizens' participation have intensified consensual practices of urban regulation. Sustainable politics that have occurred in many cities around the world place emphasis on justice, tolerance and participation as the principal drivers for urban development. Empirical evidence shows, however, that these goals are subjugated to economic growth. Drawing on empirical work carried out in Freiburg, Germany – a city long hailed as a forerunner of urban sustainable development – this article promotes the opinion that the idea of 'sustainable development' in its current form is nothing more than an oxymoron, aimed and invented as a fuzzy concept in order to disguise the fundamentalist believe in growth that lies beyond such development.

Zusammenfassung

In den vergangenen Jahren haben sich wieder vermehrt Studien mit dem Thema nachhaltiger Stadtentwicklung befasst und dieses als relevantes und zugleich umstrittenes Feld der Stadtforschung etabliert. Während einige Studien urbane Nachhaltigkeit als Problemfeld begreifen, dessen Lösung durch technokratische Ansätze zu erreichen sei, beschäftigen sich andere Autor_innen mit den politischen Bedingungen städtischer Neoliberalisierung. Dieser Literaturstrang fokussierte vor allem auf das problematische Verhältnis zwischen Marktorientierung und ökonomischem Wachstum einerseits und sozialer Gleichheit und Gerechtigkeit andererseits, die gleichermaßen tief im Ansatz der Nachhaltigkeit verankert sind. Der vorliegende Beitrag argumentiert, dass die Professionalisierung von Stadtpolitik, neue Formen von Public Management, Urban Governance und Partizipation zu einer politischen Praxis beitragen, die augenscheinlich Ergebnis eines gesellschaftlichen Konsens ist. Untermuert wird dieser vermeintliche Konsens dadurch, dass nachhaltige Politiken für die Umsetzung von Prinzipien wie Gerechtigkeit, Toleranz und politischer Teilhabe stehen. Auf der Basis empirischer Erhebungen zeigt der Beitrag jedoch, dass diese Prinzipien längst der ökonomischen Wachstumsorientierung untergeordnet wurden. Konkret wird hier auf aktuelle Entwicklungen in Freiburg i. Br. Bezug genommen, einer Stadt, die immer wieder als herausragendes Beispiel für eine nachhaltige Stadtentwicklung genannt wird. Es wird die Meinung vertreten, dass nachhaltige Stadtentwicklung einen Widerspruch in sich selbst darstellt. Nachhaltigkeit und Entwicklung sind zwei sich gegenseitig ausschließende Konzepte. Das Konzept der nachhaltigen Stadtentwicklung dient der Verschleierung eines in der Gesellschaft immer noch tief verankerten, fundamentalistischen ökonomischen Wachstumsglaubens.

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1. Introduction:

Impossible sustainable development

Freiburg i. Br., Germany, has garnered worldwide attention for its multi-faceted initiatives and achievements in the realms of green low-carbon economy, mobility, energy, land-use planning and citizen participation. However, when looking at Freiburg's pathway towards sustainability – starting from the early environmental movements and grassroots environmentalisms in the 1970s to its more recent urban developments – the city of Freiburg has transformed into a platform for the “revanchist city” (MacLeod 2002; Smith 2002): supporting and privileging inner-city upper-middle classes, subordinating sustainability to economic growth, de-politicizing decisions made in this realm, and justifying the displacement and exclusion of poorer populations by juxtaposing the social with technical and expensive sustainabilities. It is a “fundamentalist faith in market-generated growth” (MacLeod 2011: 2646) that dominates Freiburg's recent urban development. This has created severe social difficulties for those citizens, who already were in a vulnerable position. Surprisingly, this has caused few protests and resistances in the city (Mössner forthcoming).

The field of urban sustainability appears highly controversial, often producing contradicting and conflicting outcomes. Positivist approaches have investigated technical improvements to create sustainable cities, others have focused on learning from best-practices (Hall 2013). A critically informed research emerged more recently that investigates power relations, hierarchies and hegemonies (Rosol 2013), aspects of social and environmental justice (Pearsall et al. 2012; Agyeman and Evans 2004), and the role of markets and entrepreneurial politics, uncovering how “the neoliberal project of ‘growth first’ seems to conflict ideologically and materially with the principles and practices of urban sustainability” (While et al. 2004: 550). I agree with Mike Raco's statement that urban development around the world places less “emphasis [...] on democratic empowerment, environmental conservation, and social justice” (Raco 2005: 324), i.e. the principles of social sustainability. In contrast, “development agendas are [...] increasingly dominated by the principles of market-driven reforms, social inequality, and a drive towards enhancing the economic competitiveness of the supply side of the economy” (Raco 2005:

324). More than a decade after these remarkable findings, I believe that there is enough evidence to paint a more pessimistic picture of so-called sustainable urban development. Based on empirical findings from Freiburg, a city often hailed and awarded as a prototype or model for sustainable urban development, I argue that under current conditions of urban neoliberalism no sustainable development is possible – neither in Freiburg nor elsewhere. I agree with Latouche (2009) that sustainable development is just an oxymoron, an antithetical set of ideas subjugated to the overarching economic growth paradigm.

The opinion discussed here is first and foremost based on empirical insights from Freiburg, but has theoretical implications. With urban sustainability and neoliberal practices being only “ostensibly part of very different interpretations of contemporary development” (Raco 2005: 324) this article shows that forms of urban politics occur that have their roots in neoliberalism but are often confused and mistaken for sustainable development. I further argue that it is important to unmask the political mechanisms and processes that contribute to this confusion.

The following paper is structured into three parts. I first revisit the story of Freiburg's pathway towards sustainable urban development by critically discussing aspects, which are often overseen if not consciously ignored. After this empirical part, I will discuss the relationship of neoliberalism and sustainability in urban development. I conclude with short remarks and reflections on urban sustainability in times of neoliberalism.

2. Freiburg's pathways towards sustainable development, revisited

Interviews, pamphlets and publications reveal that Freiburg's ‘sustainable urban development’, which culminated in the sustainable neighborhood Vauban, has its roots in environmental protests and early environmental movements in the 1970s (Rohracher and Späth 2014). Back then, citizens of Freiburg protested together with wine-makers and farmers from the nearby countryside against the construction of a nuclear power plant at the German-French border close to the village Wyhl (Nössler and de Witt 1976). The protest itself was less directed against economic growth

per se, but against a top-down regime by a coalition of the French national government and the German state government of Baden-Württemberg that chose economic values over people. The Wyhl protesters were claiming a variety of things, amongst which ecological responsibility in development politics. This included more radical forms of participation at the regional level and a transparent way of decision-making. The motivations to protest were grounded in a strong regional identity against the state government of Baden-Württemberg. The Wyhl protests became a key moment for both the German environmental movement and the formation of the Green Party in Germany.

In terms of political practices, the Wyhl protests have successfully broadened the borders of political participation. Practices of a political order that considered economic decisions as state affairs and consequently excluded local residents and farmers from decision-making processes, were successfully challenged by people who fought for their political subjectivation. I agree with the mainstream literature to interpret the Wyhl events as a very political moment triumphing over 'police'-order in the sense of *Rancière's* (2004) use of the notion. Remarkably, during several interviews and meetings with architects and planners, practitioners and academics as well as active citizens, it became clear that many people started to link their own acting and personal biography to the Wyhl protests and, by doing so, defined Freiburg's sustainable urban development as the ideological heritage of Wyhl. Even academic publications refer to the Wyhl events as of Freiburg's "beginnings of its dynamic development" (*Rohracher and Späth* 2014: 1423). Here, I disagree. While there is no evidence for a direct connection of the Wyhl protests and today's urban development, the Wyhl protests are rather instrumentalized as the predominant narrative of Freiburg's sustainability story and spread as an urban legend, by which *DiFonzo* and *Bordia* understand an "interesting tale that usually contain[s] a moral lesson" (*DiFonzo and Bordia* 2007: 23). In a story-telling manner the Wyhl events are constantly repeated and linked to contemporary urban politics. I consider the construction of urban legends a first key-mechanism for covering actual existing neoliberalism in urban development. Today, Wyhl is emotionally charged, morally justified and considered as an integer political action.

After decades of urban struggles and squatting that resulted from a shortage of the local housing market in the mid-1990s, the City of Freiburg started

the planning process for new neighborhoods. As the French army had decided to withdraw their troops from Freiburg, which had been stationed here since the end of the Second World War, the vacant barracks in the southern part of the city became the corner stone for the new sustainable urban development of the neighborhood Vauban, today's flagship of the Green City Freiburg. The former French barracks were first squatted by subcultural groups and people with alternative lifestyles, transforming the area into a dynamic and vivid place. During the planning process of Vauban, many people, who got inspired by the atmosphere and the particular melting pot of ideas and creativity, participated in the planning process. Vauban started as a participatory, bottom-up project and consequently many ideas of the citizens were included in the planning for Vauban since its beginnings.

In recent times, the rents in Vauban witnessed a significant increase. With an increase of over 10%, Vauban is amongst the most expensive living areas of Freiburg (*Amt für Liegenschaften und Wohnungswesen der Stadt Freiburg* 2013). The increase of rents goes along with a strong marketing strategy by the city of Freiburg, in which Vauban plays a crucial role. In 2010, the city of Freiburg participated in the EXPO in Shanghai and merchandised Vauban globally as the symbol of the Green City Freiburg. At the same time, together with the London-based Academy of Urbanism, the city of Freiburg developed a "Freiburg Charter of Sustainable Urbanism" (*Daseking et al.* 2010), in which Freiburg's example of sustainable urban development – despite manifold contradictions and flaws – was molded into twelve abstract principles or guidelines, ready to be exported around the world. New actors emerged professionalizing these objectives set under grassroots environmentalism (*Béal* 2012). Environmental issues and economic prosperity were pressed into competitive relationships and managed by experts. This goes along with a process of mainstreaming environmental issues, with the consequence, as *Béal* (2012) explains, to weaken the original objectives due to "their integration in various urban policies" (*Béal* 2012: 409). Principles, ideas and ideologies that helped creating and building Vauban were finally superimposed by principles of economic growth (*Freytag et al.* 2014). The sustainable city of Freiburg has been transformed into expert knowledge approved by international commissions and growth orientation has become a dominant factor. By doing so, any concern, debate or discussion about the goals and objectives of the sustainable city have been silenced.

In the early hours of the morning of 3 August 2011, massive police forces concentrated at the entrance of the sustainable neighborhood Vauban. What followed in the next couple of hours is quite different from the usual image one can find in numerous presentations and publications illustrating Freiburg as a green city (*Daseking and Medearis 2012*): Barricades along the main road Merzhauser Straße stood in flames and policemen forcefully evacuated squatters from the central site of Vauban called M1 (own observations). The reason for this started already in 2009, when the squatter collective Kommando Rhino occupied the area M1 in order to live there in trucks and trailers, peacefully co-existing with the local population of Vauban and the surroundings for the next couple of years (*Lutz 2011*). For more than two years, the city government had tolerated Kommando Rhino and the collective actively contributed to the public image of Vauban as a vivid and culturally heterogeneous, diverse neighbourhood of lived and practiced social tolerance (see *Frey 2011*). With more than 30 trucks and trailers, colourful banners and signs, Kommando Rhino had become a symbol for the social heterogeneity of Vauban. This use of the area M1 seemed to fit perfectly into the sustainable city image and brought Vauban in line with eco-city models that highlight social diversity next to technical improvement and economic growth (*Daseking et al. 2010; Roseland 1997*). Paradoxically, by feeding the promotion of Vauban as a model for (social) sustainability that was sold and advertised globally, Kommando Rhino had contributed to pave the path to its own displacement. In 2010, the Freiburger Stadtbau bought the area from the city of Freiburg and initiated an architectural competition for the development of the area. This process again has faced severe criticisms for its lack of citizens' participation. The city's planners and the Freiburger Stadtbau ignored ideas and concrete plans put forward by an active group of residents from Vauban. In late 2010, the city of Freiburg finally communicated their ideas of developing and realizing a hotel complex as a 'socially inclusive' project employing handicapped people. This was the year, in which the city participated in the EXPO "Better City, Better Life" in Shanghai with the neighborhood Vauban as the city's flagship project. The neighborhood was presented as a model for sustainable urban development, participatory approaches during the planning and construction were emphasized (*Stadt Freiburg i. Br. 2010*). Today, Kommando Rhino is gone and the hotel complex has been built.

3. Neoliberal and/or sustainable?

This alternative reading of Freiburg's sustainable development story unveils three important mechanisms of maintaining the image of real sustainable development in the city. First, the selective recourse on a narrative of the Wyhl protests entails strategic power to legitimate both actors and politics and helps to defend political decisions against their potential critics. Second, the professionalization of urban development and selective forms of participation that favour the German middle-class lead to a de-politicized urban development. Third, controversial decisions like the displacement of Kommando Rhino are disguised through measures of social inclusion.

In Freiburg one can identify contradictions that occur around two different conceptualizations of urban development that apparently compete for sovereignty: The demand for social justice, tolerance and heterogeneity on the one hand is contrasted by growth orientation on the other hand. In the centre of neoliberal political strategies stands the idea of "open, competitive, and unregulated markets, liberated from all forms of state interference" (*Brenner and Theodore 2002: 350*) that has been broadly criticized for its perception of market rules as a "state of nature" (*Peck and Tickell 2002: 382*). Nowadays forms of urban neoliberalism have growth orientation in the centre of the goals of the "new urban politics" (*Cox 1993; Boyle 2011*). The idea of sustainable urban development expresses a desire "to secure the means to survival, improve the quality of community life, protect the environment and make inclusive and participatory decisions" (*Roseland 2012: 3*). With these highly normative standards of creating "good cities [for] better lives" (*Hall 2013*) sustainable urban development is often linked to the normative affirmation that there is no substantial alternative to it and a possible failure would undoubtedly end up in the environmental apocalypse (*Swyngedouw 2010*). With sustainability being apparently good for people and not for profit, sustainable urban development has been researched and perceived as a counter-movement to recent neoliberalism, yet it is not. Empirical evidence from Freiburg shows that the principles of the sustainable city are superimposed by neoliberal logics. Neoliberalism hijacking the principles of sustainability leads to "actually existing sustainabilities" (*Krueger and Agyeman 2005*) that some authors call paradoxical (*Krueger and Gibbs 2007*) or even schizophrenic (*Krueger and Agyeman 2005*). In my opinion, it is simply impossible to reconcile the principles of neoliberalism and sustainability towards a coherent form of urban development. There

are no empirical evidences for this. What we often end up with is a form of pseudo-sustainable development. I consider this neoliberalism in disguise far more threatening to social justice and equity than a clear and transparent position for growth-oriented policies.

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