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Environment and urban politics in Berlin in 1920 and 2020: themes and actors of civil society and urban administration

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Résumé

Berlin, tout comme Paris, doit faire face à d'importantes préoccupations environnementales concernant les espaces verts urbains. Cette présentation retracera les principales préoccupations environnementales telles qu'elles existaient vers 1920 et les mettra en contraste avec les programmes actuels. Quels sont les thèmes communs qui ont persisté au cours du siècle dernier et quelles différences sont apparues au cours de cette période ? Qui étaient les principaux acteurs engagés dans les débats sur les espaces verts urbains et qu'ont-ils exigé ? La présentation mettra également en lumière certains des projets clés des années 1920 et d'aujourd'hui tels que la « Charte pour un Berlin vert ». Le but de la présentation est d'encourager notre discussion sur l'importance de l'environnement dans le développement des régions métropolitaines d'un point de vue historique et à la lumière de nos préoccupations actuelles concernant les changements climatiques.

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Two periods in environmental history

The present

Berlin is getting a new charter about “Green in the city”, whose campaign started in 2018 under the guidance of the Senate Administration for Environment Traffic and Climate Protection. Along the name of this administration shows the combinative topics put together in city development : environment, traffic and climate change. This environmental policy under development is part of a much larger ambition to engage citizens actively. It's meant to formulate a standards for green space management aiming to balance gardening arts, traffic safety and ecological concerns, taking into account the historical urban fabric, cars and pedestrians current practices, and environmental qualities regarding particularly climate change, looking at parks, at air — not just pollution —, at water, at biological lives and animals. The context is one of limited resources : in terms of finances, of available employees to realize the projects, and also in terms of environmental conditions being faced today. It implies a new approach of city government incorporating citizens and much larger group of actors supported by civil servants of good will.

Let's ponder this approach with looking backward and setting perhaps comparisons with Paris

The 1920s

In Berlin, environmental protection has a very strong history throughout the 20th century and oftentimes it's referred back to the early century. World War one was a tremendous interruption in planning but also a catalyst for revolutionary change with regard to cultural, social development but also to environmental values. The 1920s saw the beginning of Greater Berlin, a period of much of actions towards the expansion of green spaces. I propose to examine underlying ideologies both of the 1920s and of the current period comparing the way of dealing topics and their differences.

From the mid 19th century in Berlin to its end, industrialization was the grand paradigm under which city development took place. This already led to some territorial expansion in the 1860s. Industrialization had consequences for expanding urbanization and building industries, owed to a population growth. People from the countryside moving to the city created additional pressure with regard to housing and to all sorts of amenities including green spaces. The agricultural outer ring of Berlin was increasingly being built. In spite the Hobrecht plan the following decades underwent a continuous and hazardous growth and a tremendous densification of the city. The *Mietskasernen-Stadt* that developed particularly on the turn of the twentieth century led to debates on the conditions of housing and reform trends that culminate with the 1910 planning competition and the creation of the *Zweckverband Groß-Berlin* in 1912.

Green space was one of the main legacies of the *Zweckverband* with the purchase and protection of urban forests and riversides, creating a kind of green belt around the city. In the 1920s the area of forests covered 21,5 thousand hectares (today it's about 29 hectares). Greater Berlin spread over about 90 thousand hectares, this means that about a quarter of the city was wooded areas. Planning was not just considering buildings but creating green spaces. The reasons invoked in order to gain forest mostly concerned public hygiene and progressively recreations outdoor areas. At the turn of the 19th century wood and forests were regarded as producing areas of wood for the construction of cities. Their social valorization shifted from wood production to human recreation.

There were already some comprehensive ecological views, even as early as 1930, that gave somewhat of a different notion of what the forest was all about. *Der Grosse Berliner Kalendar* of the year 1930, abool of annual statistic, went beyond the interest of public health and human recreation by calling for “a forest belt around the city to safeguard the temperature of the ground and the air, to aid the spread of rain and participation for water retention, stability of the ground, to protect against wind, sand, storms but also to improve the health and mental stability of humans”. Among others voices pleading for green belt to fight land speculation it could be considered as one of the first citizen initiative to generate environmental protection.

A shifting environmental paradigm

What is the environmental paradigm underlying?

Public hygiene was one of the first main issues, that means prevention of human disease for individuals and populations. The government was improving health pushing forward the society and the national modernization. Public hygiene, in that sense, was particularly focused on working populations, on their living conditions and on their recreation time, ensuring that this labor power could be reproduced. At that time the industrial growth was the promise of a better future for national economies and the wealth of nations but it was also considered as a threat to human health particularly for the most exposed working population.

Green spaces carried out also a promise of democratization. They were not longer reserved either to the aristocracy or to the bourgeoisie but designed for the leisure of the working masses. Regeneration became a second paradigm related to the so-called *Volksparks*. This value of regeneration was not without any ulterior motive. New outdoor public spaces were a mean to soften tensions between social classes. Young people were supposed to exercise making good soldiers by the conscription (Martin Wagner, Stadtgrün, 1915). Landscape design shifted from picturesque to functional aesthetics.

Today the city is still considered through the paradigm of growth and greenspace are still emphasized for human use. Some opposite views but emerge ranking behind the oxymoron of a negative growth in regard to climate change and the scarcity of resources. The paradigm of green space designed primarily for human is shifting towards a comprehensive consideration of nature and biology. So key aspects are radically different today. Hygiene has given way to ecology. The anthropocentrism is losing ground against biological arguments. Hopefully the coming years will really lead to a different understanding of what urban green spaces are about. The sustainable paradigm is also about the dynamics over time, applied to plants, animals, air and water and not just to green resources for human consumption.

Today we also see a shift in scales. The city is not more considered in terms of administrative boundaries – air pollution f.i. doesn't stop on the city borders –, one needs to look to the resources in terms of continental and planetary dimensions. Environmental politics is no longer a problem of individual cities but needs a global agenda. Sources of environmental modifications might come from faraway areas. It is about what's transported out but also what's coming in, concerning global streams of goods, resources, trash and migration – that is migration of people but also migration of plants, of animals coming from outside into the city and moving inside the city. We really need to shift our vision to a much broader scale but not neglecting the local relation between city, countryside and farming industries. Some issues are being

addressed more and more to the administrations of big cities : the urbanization of animals, for instance. Many wild animals are moving to the city as refuge, finding more protection or food in there than in the surrounding agricultural fields.

Of course, climate change is one of a big overarching issue that has to be addressed particularly by cities. They need to think about their role as single municipality and inside cooperative networks, to reflect about what needs to be changed. Private and public green spaces play a very key role by smoothing heat islands, reducing CO2 emissions but also for a new understanding our living environment.

Some examples

The *Volksparks* are an important innovation in landscape architecture shifting from the picturesque towards the recreational parks. In the 1910s-1920s, Berlin received a number of new parks, among them Jungfernheide which was a former hunting ground from the 18th century, located in the outskirts of the city in a district incorporated in 1920. After World War I, unemployed workers were hired to build the park. Reducing unemployment through public works led much of landscape programs to be realized. In each borough there was an overall plan designed by landscape architects pushing towards more green spaces for the urban populations. Jungfernheide was a hundred and forty six hectares public park, including walkways and wooded areas, playgrounds and ponds for swimming. Even if it was smaller, it was in some ways similar to the Bois de Boulogne. The playgrounds incorporated places for picnic and for all sorts of recreation for the people. The park was easily accessible to the working neighborhood and to the north-west Berliners thanks public transports. These original outdoor practices are very much continued into the present.

To return to our current charter of “Green Berlin” : one of the main ideas focused on is green roof development. A competition has been opened supported by an investment of 1,5 million euros. A call has been made for 1000 green roofs in the city taking into account the consequences of climate change in the city, that is heat waves and heavy rains that will be more common in the future. Green roofs are supposed to reduce the temperature in summer and to tempered the heating expenses in winter. It is also a mean to absorb rainwater and facilitate its evaporation.

Another initiative is the “urban tree campaign”. The hope is that upraising number of trees on public spaces will have a positive ecological effect on the city. The cost of 1350€ for each planted tree is financed by an original public-private partnership : 500 euros are supposed to come as a donation and once a group of people or a company or whoever donates 500 euros more, the city will add the additional 850 euros. This appears to be effective and a number of trees has already been planted. it's also an opportunity for local politicians by picking up a shovel, promoting themselves to the voters.

Committing citizen was no part of the welfare programs developed in the turn-of-the-century. Citizens and environmental agencies are now encouraged to act together in a collaborative effort to create living spaces for people. This could be seen as a positive frame but also criticized as a way for the municipality to push away its financial responsibility, calling for people to do the job that actually it should do. It's also enhancing citizen expertise and observation. There was a large project last summer asking people to identify the many insects in their garden for scientific and didactical purposes, each one gaining an understanding of what's going on.

The last example is the Grüneband of Berlin. We have a green band replicating the former wall from the northern part of the city all the way to the south, about 15 kilometers long, passing through the center at Potsdamer Platz. This Grüneband is the result of individual parks, railways open spaces, as being showed on the cadaster plan of the beginning of the 20th century, that have been connected as a link creating green corridors and enabling people to walk long distances across the city but also making the traveling of animals possible. We know that pocket parks have a less ecological impact than green corridors —their effect to cool the temperature is limited to the surrounding areas. Green bands acted more efficiently on the overall reducing of CO2 emissions. This green band is also interesting because it connects to the nature park of Barnim to the North which is the only one on the area of Berlin (Landschaftspark Barnim) resulting from a collaboration between the city of Berlin and the surrounding Land of Brandenburg. It contains 55% of wooded areas out of which 2% are used in agricultural ways and 3% are used for water supply. It deserves attention by operating a collaboration between a city and the territories out of its boundaries.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a couple of points. It is relevant to refer to the Berlin example for Greater Paris to broaden historical perspectives. It is not just about green parks but about a complex environmental system. We should tackle dealing of spatial and temporal scales to broaden up a vision. In that respect, the 1920s are essential in city planning history because there had a vision of to be developed that is quite missing in our time. Today vision is often seen as impossible or negative but we might dare looking to the future devising what is needed to create a positive one. Lastly, the urban should not be thought only in terms of spatiality but also in terms of temporal configurations. History must be taken into account by evaluating what happened in the past and looking forward what is able to be adapted today and how, in order to set what differences and what continuities might be taken on.

A propos de l'auteur

Dorothee Brantz est historienne de l'environnement (*Umweltgeschichte*), un champ de l'histoire urbaine qui s'est aussi développé en France notamment sur la question du métabolisme urbain. Elle est depuis une dizaine d'année directrice du Center for Metropolitan Studies, un cycle de master, doctorat et post-doctorat, qui dépend de l'université technique de Berlin et s'adresse à diverses formations initiales dans le but de former des experts en urbanisme.

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