

MSG Moderne Stadtgeschichte, Bd. 51/1 (2020), 170-172

DOI: 10.60684/msg.v51i1.2020113

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Tagungsbericht: Governing Urban Natures – Infrastructures, Citizenship and Municipal Ecologies

MSG Moderne Stadtgeschichte

ISSN: 2941-6159 online

<https://moderne-stadtgeschichte.de>

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Tagungsbericht: Governing Urban Natures. Infrastructures, Citizenship and Municipal Ecologies

vom 4. bis 5. Dezember 2019 in Aarhus, Dänemark

In recent years, scholars from within both the humanities and social sciences have increasingly turned their attention towards the intrinsic relations between cities and nature. Exploring the multiple processes of this entanglement, scholars have shown that not only are the “urban” and “natural” entwined to such a degree that the analytical point of dividing the two becomes debatable, but urban-nature relations are also fundamentally political. The new biotopes, ecologies, and socio-natural phenomena that emerge from the deep entanglement of cities and nature give rise to new patterns of capital accumulation, political subjectivity, and collective claim-making.

Such themes constituted the starting point of the two-day conference entitled *Governing Urban Natures: Infrastructures, Citizenship and Municipal Ecologies* which took place at Aarhus University from December 4 to 5 2019. Acknowledging the inherent interdisciplinarity of this research field, the conference comprised participants from a broad range of academic disciplines, including history, anthropology, sociology, geography, and architecture.

The conference opened with a keynote by professor DOROTHEE BRANTZ from the Centre for Metropolitan Studies in Berlin. Under the title “Governing the non-human in Berlin”, Brantz examined the multiple urban natures and human-animal relations which historically have shaped Berlin as a site of governance, contestation and liveability – from the history of slaughterhouses to the urban wilderness of the Natur-Park Schöneberger Südgelände. In order to adequately understand the ways in which we live with, govern, and are shaped by urban natures, Brantz called for the necessity of rethinking basic analytical categories such as agency, scale, temporality, and citizenship along the lines of a multi-species city. But what holds us together then? Encouraging us to connect our scholarship to our position as urban citizens, Brantz suggested ‘kinship’ as a possible answer to this question. However, this presupposes that we approach kinship not in terms of blood but as assemblages driven by affect. The question then remains – how do we create solidarity out of affect? By ad-

addressing the inherent complexity of urban natures and our social responsibility as scholars, Brantz pointed to several key questions and issues that continued to underpin discussions throughout the entire conference.

The second keynote of the conference was given by associate professor ANNE RADEMACHER (New York), and carried the title “Cities on the move: aspirations, resilience and refuge in the urban age”. Tracing the training and professional experiences of environmental architects in India’s first graduate degree program in Environmental Architecture, Rademacher showed how environmental architects forged sustainability concepts and practices and sought to make them meaningful through engaged architectural practice. Rademacher’s focus on practitioners opened a window into the many roles that converge to produce this emergent form of urban expertise as well as how this expertise can prove critical in the shaping of a global urban future.

Over the course of the two days of the conference, scholars addressed multiple aspects of the past and present of urban-nature relations. This included everything from the planning and administration of welfare landscapes in Sweden and the metabolic flows of the European eel in the 18th and 19th centuries, to the politics of urban air in contemporary Chinese mega-cities. Although the papers differed in terms of their empirical and temporal focus, two interrelated perspectives in particular – governance and scale – ran through the papers and underpinned the discussions both days.

The papers of the conference reminded us of the extent to which urban natures are always entangled with prevailing political rationalities and regimes. Questions of governance and power relations thus informed many discussions both days. Scholars addressed both the material politics informing how authorities on all scales plan and administer urban natures and ecologies as well as how urban nature-entanglements themselves work actively in the formation and normalization of political rationalities. From one perspective, the papers by AMALIA ENGSTRÖM and MATTIAS QVISTRÖM (both UPPSALA) opened a window into changing ideological patterns driving the planning of Swedish welfare landscapes from the 1970s until today. From another perspective, MEGAN MAURER (New York) convincingly demonstrated the entwinement between neoliberal logics and contested ecologies informing how trees work as infrastructure in New York today.

The scales, units, and heuristics through which urban-natures are planned and managed constituted another key theme. Emphasizing the production of urban natures as multi-scalar – from the microbiological to the planetary – is well acknowledged in contemporary research. Perhaps lesser studied, however, is the role of ‘the municipal’ as a category of everyday experience and scholarly analysis, and this despite the fact that municipal authorities often hold a

central position in the planning, maintenance, and gentrification of urban green spaces, ecologies and natural resources. As such, one aim for the conference was to explore how scholars might conduct urban analyses that emphasize the metabolic interrelation of the city and its hinterlands, while also taking seriously the ways in which municipal boundaries give shape to social and political life. This discussion especially found expression in the panel “Administering Urban Environments: Scales, Units and Heuristics”. From this perspective, NINA TOUDAL JESSEN (Copenhagen), showed how municipal authorities in 1970s Denmark increasingly took charge of and professionalized waste management, resulting in the emergence of new types of welfare landscape. From another perspective, MARION ERNWEIN (Oxford) demonstrated how municipal authorities in contemporary Newcastle gradually introduced third sector-actors in the reshaping and maintenance of local green spaces and ecologies. Thus, the perspective of the session provided insights into both the central role of the municipal as a locus of governance as well as its variation across space and time.

With this conference, we aimed to explore the multiple intersections, exchanges, and interdependencies in urban-nature relations, the material politics of scale and municipal governance. The papers of the conference testified not only of the excellent scholarly work currently being conducted on urban-nature relations, but also of the huge potential that still characterize this research field. Above all, the conference reminded us that quite similar scholarly discussions are currently taking place across disciplines. This points to the importance of engaging in further interdisciplinary collaborations if we want to move forward in our efforts to understand the intricate connections between cities and nature.

The conference was organized as a collaborative and interdisciplinary project between the Centre for Environmental Humanities, the Danish Centre for Urban History, Urban Orders Research Centre, and the Ecological Globalisations research group – all based at Aarhus University.

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