

MSG Moderne Stadtgeschichte, Bd. 51/2 (2020), 164-168

DOI: 10.60684/msg.v51i2.2020217

Martin Knoll
Universität Salzburg

The city and the countryside. Histories of blurred boundaries

MSG Moderne Stadtgeschichte
ISSN: 2941-6159 online
<https://moderne-stadtgeschichte.de>

Dieses Werk steht unter der Lizenz Creative Commons Namensnennung 4.0 International.

Bei den Abbildungen sind eingeschränkte Lizenzformen möglich, Weiternutzungsrechte sind gesondert abzuklären.

© Martin Knoll 2020



The city and the countryside. Histories of blurred boundaries

With this short and rather essayistic contribution, I would like to make the point that the blurring boundaries between city and countryside, or city and hinterland – a vague but more comprehensive term – are a topic of major relevance for urban history and still offer a lot of desiderata for research. To this end, I would like to pick out a few examples from the contexts of tourism and energy – linked to the historiographical perspectives of tourism history and environmental history.

Travelers reading a guidebook about Salzburg and its environs in the 1930s found the following description of the alpine spa Bad Gastein in Austria: „Since five centuries many emperors and kings have recovered their health here. Today Bad Gastein is an international, up-to-date health-resort and the list of visitors prove[s] more than sufficiently that sufferers and sounds from all parts of the world crowd the hotels. Bad Gastein is built in the form of an amphitheatre. Owing to want of space one was obliged to build high-storied houses, and thus arouse those sky-scrapers, which have often twice as many stories at the back as in the front. A lofty bridge spans the foaming waterfalls of the Ache which turbulently rushes in two gigantic cataracts down the woody slopes from a height of 500 ft. The fashionable life of the health-resort on the one hand, and the grandeur of untamed nature on the other: the waterfalls, the dark green forests, gigantic mountains with their glittering snow-fields altogether form a picture of indescribable charm, especially in the evening, when everything is lighted by electricity and the waterfalls are illuminated.”¹ The wording, which emphasizes the urban character of a small alpine settlement, is by no means accidental. Visiting the historic center of Bad Gastein today, it is still visible to what extent Belle-Époque-architecture around 1900 transformed a small village into a mundane destination providing all standards required by well-to-do international urbanites.

¹ F. B., Salzburg – Town and province. A brief guide to the principal places of interest in Salzburg, Gastein, Zell am See, Salzkammergut, Reichenhall, Berchtesgaden and environs, Salzburg 1930, p. 59; cf. Martin Knoll, Grandhotels und ihre Räume in Salzburg, in: Ferdinand Opll/Martin Scheutz (Eds.), Kulturelle Funktionen von städtischem Raum im Wandel der Zeit/Cultural Functions of Urban Spaces through the Ages, Innsbruck 2019, p. 203-222, here p. 214-217.

A second example, more or less from the same time period, also illuminates the way rural settlements and actors accommodated urban travelers in the early 20th century. However, it is a completely different story: The summer retreat (Sommerfrische) was a form of tourism open to urban middle-class families from Central Europe who spent their leisure time in rural destinations which at first sight were not adapted to tourism. Adam T. Rosenbaum underlines the difference between “summer retreat” and “summer resort”. There was no mundane hostelry in those places. The visitors usually rented rooms in private houses. In fact, as Rosenbaum puts it, “a relative lack of tourism infrastructure was a defining feature of these summer retreats ..., the destination’s principal attraction was the lack of attractions.”² This variety of tourism “also provided an agreeable proximity to the natural environment, which was now understood as a panacea for the ills of urban civilization.”³ It radiated the promise of a “grounded modernity”, which Rosenbaum identifies as the prevalent image produced by 19th and 20th century Bavarian tourism.⁴

It is undisputed that tourism has been a powerful urbanizing agent for countless rural areas worldwide.⁵ It has done so in complex ways of which not all have yet been examined in detail.⁶ For scholars, therefore, tourism is one very decisive field where the boundaries between city and hinterland boundaries are blurred, which suggests to transgress the focus on suburbia – or rather to recognize tourism’s part in the rise of the suburbs.

With the next example, we leave tourism behind and reflect on the historical transformations in urban energy supply. Also, this story might be told as a story of spatial extension into global dimensions. What Eunhyie Kim and Sabine Barles have reconstructed for the French capital Paris has its analogies in thousands of cities and urban agglomerations worldwide. Kim and Barles traced the development of energy consumption from the 18th century to the present and calculated total consumption, per capita consumption and average supply distances. Their analysis of the average supply distances over which Paris has been supplied with energy since the 18th century shows the ever increasing expansion of the energy supply hinterland of this agglomeration.⁷

² Adam T. Rosenbaum, *Bavarian Tourism and the Modern World, 1800-1950*, New York 2016, p. 34.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Cf. Ibid., p. 2-3.

⁵ For pioneering historiographical works in this field cf. e.g.: Hal K. Rothman/*Devil’s Bargains, Tourism in the Twentieth Centuries American West*, Kansas 1998; John K. Walton, *The English seaside resort. A social history 1750-1914*, Leicester 1983.

⁶ Cf. e.g. *Zeitschrift für Tourismuswissenschaft* 9:1, 2017, Theme Issue Tourism History and Regional Change.

In the early 18th century, the total annual energy consumption of Paris was about 19 GJ per capita, based on biomass. The supply area was located within an average supply distance of 200 km. This remained largely unchanged during 18th century; around 1800, per capita consumption was about 30 GJ. From the 19th century onwards, urban energy consumption changed dramatically. The population grew fivefold, the energy base shifted to coal and later to other fossil fuels. With the shift to coal mining regions, the average distance of energy supplies had increased to 270 km by 1870. While per capita consumption stabilized over the 19th century around 25 to 30 GJ/cap/year, it later increased drastically from 26 GJ/cap/year in 1910, to 47 GJ/cap/year in 1946 and 126 GJ/cap/year in 2006. Fossil and fissile fuels gave Paris' energy supply an increasingly global character: The average supply distance in 2006 was about 3850 km.⁸ Similar developments could be traced for other components of the urban metabolism – be it on the supply side with for example water or agricultural products or on the discharge side with faeces, solid waste or air pollutants. Today, supply zones for urban agglomerations cannot be clearly delineated; they are complex and of global scale, thus constituting another example of the blurring boundaries between city and hinterland.

To put it clearly, not everything is new in the 20th century. Even in medieval and early modern times, the boundaries between cities and their hinterlands were far less clear and far more complex than contemporary topographers and artists of these epochs tended to present them. However, it is a more and more demanding task for historical research to trace these boundaries during the major transformation processes which took place between the 19th and the early 21st centuries. In their 2015 edited volume, Franz-Werner Kersting and Clemens Zimmermann provide an overview of the state of research on urban-rural relations in the 20th century, and show that much has been done, particularly with respect to the understanding of suburbanization.⁹

⁷ Cf. Eunhyie Kim/Sabine Barles, The energy consumption of Paris and its supply areas from the eighteenth century to the present, in: *Regional Environmental Change* 12:2, 2012, p. 295-310.

⁸ All figures: *Ibid.*, p. 295, p. 300.

⁹ Cf. Franz-Werner Kersting/Clemens Zimmermann, Stadt-Land-Beziehungen im 20. Jahrhundert. Geschichts- und kulturwissenschaftliche Perspektiven, in: Franz-Werner Kersting/Clemens Zimmermann (Eds.), *Stadt-Land-Beziehungen im 20. Jahrhundert. Geschichts- und kulturwissenschaftliche Perspektiven*, Paderborn 2015, p. 9-31; cf. also Friedrich Lenger, Urbanisierung als Suburbanisierung. Grundzüge der nordamerikanischen Entwicklung im 20. Jahrhundert, in: Friedrich Lenger/Klaus Tenfelde (Eds.), *Die europäische Stadt im 20. Jahrhundert. Wahrnehmung – Entwicklung – Erosion*, Cologne 2006, p. 437-475; for a survey on research on suburbanization cf. also Meik Woyke, *Einfamilienhausidyllen, Shopping-Center, Golfplätze. Grundzüge der interdisziplinären Sub-*

Reflecting on Thomas Sievert's "Zwischenstadt" concept¹⁰, Kersting und Zimmermann wrote that during the 20th century an "in-between-zone" appeared in which distinct characteristics of the urban and the rural merged and thus created a new hybrid quality – be it in terms of structures, lifestyles or identities.¹¹ These zones of hybridity can be traced on a global, regional and local level, and they are also products of the politics of nation state. These zones must be researched in a way that pays much more attention to the sheer complexity of the problem.

Kersting and Zimmermann point out the decisive role that mobilities and social science-based mobility studies play in this context. And – indeed – regardless of whether I look at it from the perspective of urban transport, commuting, long-distance travel, tourism or migration: Mobilities matter! To name just one example from recent environmental history studies: Christopher W. Wells' *Car Country* is an environmental history of automobilism in the United States, but foremost it is a book of high explanatory power for the tight interlinkages between technology, consumers and politics in the making of a – as Wells calls it – "Suburban Nation".¹²

Browsing current research, my impression is that formerly rather disjointed scientific communities such as urban history and social geography – with their focus on categories like centrality and political power – meanwhile have established reliable links with rural history and sociology of rural areas, as they started to investigate the mutual relations between cities and various non-urban or semi-urban areas. However, important historical phenomena – such as tourism – have still not received the attention they deserve in this context. And finally, many approaches imbued by social and cultural history do not consider the dimension of social ecology for a more comprehensive understanding of this complex topic.

It might not be the most original way to conclude my reflections by addressing the recent pandemic crisis. But metropolises going into lockdown, ordered restrictions in the mobility of urbanites or – the opposite – rural communities, even tourism destinations that resist being overrun by too many urban excur-

urbanisierungsforschung und erfahrungsgeschichtliche Perspektiven, in: H-Soz-Kult, 12.09.2006, www.hsozkult.de/debate/id/diskussionen-776 (28.10.2020); for the conceptual debate Clemens Zimmermann, Die „Suburbanisierung“ als Konzept der Stadt-Land-Beziehungen, in: Franz-Werner Kersting/Clemens Zimmermann (Eds.), Stadt-Land-Beziehungen im 20. Jahrhundert. Geschichts- und kulturwissenschaftliche Perspektiven, Paderborn 2015, p. 55-68.

¹⁰ Thomas Sieverts, Zwischenstadt. Zwischen Ort und Welt, Raum und Zeit, Stadt und Land, Braunschweig, 1997.

¹¹ Cf. Kersting/Zimmermann, Stadt-Land-Beziehungen im 20. Jahrhundert, p. 9-31, here p. 20.

¹² Christopher W. Wells, *Car Country*. An Environmental History, Seattle 2014.

sionists, are a striking indicator for the complexity of city-hinterland relations as laboratories, playgrounds, even battlefields of social dynamics and material change. A sound understanding of these sites in their long-term development is urgently needed.