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Social Resilience and Path Dependency: The Weakness of Strong Identities in the Context of Socio-Spatial Innovation[1]

Introduction

Located next to harbour and docklands on an island within the river Elbe, the city district of Hamburg-Wilhelmsburg (Germany) is facing multiple threats for decades. This includes, for instance, natural hazards such as possible flood disasters, ecological threats such as toxic emissions from local industry but also economic deprivation. In addition, the district and its residents are affected by stigmatizing public discourses and appear marginalized within the city as a whole. To build resilience against such threats, an International Building Exhibition (*Internationale Bauausstellung Hamburg-Wilhelmsbug – IBA*) was established by the city of Hamburg. This IBA has endeavoured to develop solution strategies for dealing with the multifarious threats. In many projects there were collaborations between local residents and planning, business, administration and experts. The IBA can thus be interpreted as a governance arrangement (see Keim 2003; Bogumil/Holtkamp 2004; Benz 2004; Mayntz 2004; Mayntz 2005; Blatter 2005; Benz/Lütz/Schimank et al. 2007; Walk 2008; Schnur/Drilling 2009; Kilper 2010).

In the following, I use socio-spatial identity building processes on the local ground as an empirical example to demonstrate that counterproductive effects for such a governance arrangement can arise from the interactive relation between the actors differing perceptions of vulnerability and resilience building.

This is due to the fact that perceptions of threats as well as adequate action strategies in order to set up resilience are both based on processes of social construction. Therefore, what at first sight seems to offer proper strategies of building resilience for all actors can conversely be considered as causing new threats and vulnerabilities by several actors according to their different ways of perception. Within a governance structure as the IBA, which intended to increase resilience for all actors, this can cause counter-productive effects.

In my case, a strong locally specific socio-spatial identity proved to serve as a structure of social resilience on the one hand, but, on the other hand, it causes practical problems when it

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[1] In parts, this paper is based on my article "Vulnerability through Resilience? An example of the counterproductive effects of spatially related governance in Hamburg-Wilhelmsburg" (Schmidt 2012).

comes to creating new paths for social and spatial development in collaboration with external actors such as planners or city officials.

Before I will present You some of my findings[2] and some empirical evidence, let me first very briefly outline some essentials of my perspective on vulnerability and resilience as well as a short note on socio-spatial identity. Since both will be elementary in the following analysis.

Vulnerability and resilience as analytical concepts

To analyse my empirical data, I used vulnerability and resilience as analytical concepts just as it is suggested by Christmann et.al. 2011. This perspective, which I co-developed as part of a research group, is based on social constructivism. Essential is the fact that potentially hazardous situations – no matter whether they are physical, social, economic or ecological – undergo social processing before leading to subjective perceptions of threat. Only through social processing do actors perceive events as being (potentially) endangering or threatening and develop action strategies to build up resilience. This makes the perceptions of actors a focus of attention. Accordingly, vulnerability as well as resilience cannot be accepted as objective givens. They are to be seen in relation to patterns of perception and calculations of risk in relation to the social, physical and temporal conditions in which they are embedded instead.

The notion that actors' constructions of vulnerability and resilience are linked to individual interpretations of reality and collective knowledge systems is of particular relevance when actors relate their actions to a shared problem area in the form of governance. Communicative processes of negotiation and agreement become continually necessary in most governance processes. They may be the starting point of contention between governance actors in so far as specific constructions of vulnerability already include specific interpretations of problems which then already suggest certain ways of building resilience while excluding other possible solutions.

And, as I will demonstrate in my case below, it can cause unwanted consequences that can be perceived anew as endangerments by actors and can be made the object of new constructions of vulnerability.

Socio-spatial identity and discourses

As a social-constructivist viewpoint suggests, construction processes in the present are connected with acquired social-cultural knowledge from the past, not least in the form of socio-spatial identities. Socio-spatial identity constructions develop through communications over time. They provide actors with feelings of belonging and spatial attachment. As a form of social knowledge they offer a shared frame of orientation, so individuals can base their actions and judgements on shared viewpoints and assessments.

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[2] These findings are based on the analysis of ethografic data from interviews, participatory observations and discourse analyses out of the project „Spatial Pioneers in Urban Quarters", which was conducted from 2009 until 2011 by the Leibniz-Institute for Regional Development and Structural Planning.

Among other things, such socio-spatial identities feed on handed-down knowledge of collective experiences of the past through processes of collective remembering (on collective remembering see Assmann 1988; Knoblauch 1999 and Assmann 2006). Collective remembering, the collective story-telling, the shared narratives about themselves as a city or a neighborhood inform individuals as well as collectives such as local communities about themselves as well as about the space they live in and also about their social and spatial environment. Such Narratives – or discourses, You might say – bear images of the self and the others. Discourses are to be seen as an important part of the collective production of knowledge in the form of local identities. They represent communicatively already more or less established orders of social knowledge (Keller 2011), and their 'stories" can be deeply woven into identity constructs (in the urban context see Christmann 2003: 3, 13 and 2004).

Wilhelmsburg – a social history of constant threats

What has this got to do with Hamburg-Wilhelmsburg and the IBA? – In case of this district, the locally specific identity constructs – the local discourses – refer to a social history of negative events, as our research on local discourses revealed.

Besides other themes like unemployment or problems with education, the neighbourhood discourse includes the perspective of feeling vulnerable by heteronomy through external actors. Local actors ascribe endangerments to the citys policy of being a "growing city" and the "expansion drive of the powerful neighbour to the north" (Humburg 2009: 3). In the face of local history, there is a strong perception of being constantly downgraded to a useable space – to a "space for the rest" (Interview H-ER 17), as some locals say. Accordingly, a feeling of being socially marginalised and stigmatised has occurred.

Ecological problems also form a socio-historical constant. A most drastic experience was the dioxin-scandal back in 1984, when dioxin was seeping out of a rubbish heap. As consequence, strong public protests against the building of a refuse incineration plant developed during the 1980s.

But the most influential event to date was, however, the storm surge of 1962. This natural disaster cost the lives of over 200 people in Wilhelmsburg and made 20,000 residents homeless. Not least as a consequence of this storm surge experiences of vulnerability became a memorable entity and were integrated in local discourses and the collective self-image. For instance, in the form of flood marks on many houses the flood experience continues to be present in public urban space as a core element of the collective memory.

Through engagement with such recurring and always latent threats local actors share a "feeling of the community with a shared destiny behind the dyke. So this feeling of threat and endangerment" (Interview H-ER 17; see also Zukunftskonferenz Wilhelmsburg 2002: Vorwort). This forms a stable topos in the discourse of the district. It represents a perspective that is particularly sensitised to possible endangerments and today serves as a common reference point

for perceptions of possible endangerments – even for those who didn't experience the disaster themselves.

Self-portrayals of local actors are often dominated by topoi of exclusion and marginalisation, of disenfranchisement and also of being forgotten. In their view, "for the last 100 years this space had the function of a space for the rest […], as backyard, dumping ground, land reserve" (Interview H-ER 17). The presented self-image is determined by the "fate [of being] the colonial backyard for the rich metropolis" (Interview H-ER 17) with "the experience of hundreds of years of having others make the decisions" (Interview H-ER 17). Written into the local self-images is a "feeling of endangerment, neglect or disadvantage, where there is always […] something rebellious in there: them up there as colonial authorities in the Hamburg Town Hall and [us] here" (Interview H-ER 17).

Against this background, a culmination point in the chain of negative events was in 2001, when a six-year-old boy died after being attacked by a dangerous dog. Local actors made this event, among others, the springboard for a Future Search Conference[3]:

> *"When this SPD-led Senate just didn't want to understand what's going on here, we organised a press conference with the title: "Cry for help from the Bronx". [T]here was suddenly all of the Hamburg press around the table. And that built up so much pressure that the Senate gave permission for the Future Search Conference" (Interview H-ER 17).*

Topoi of vulnerability – a shared frame of reference for IBA and local actors

This "Future Search Conference" was held in 2001/2002. It involved actors from the city and the local area in a process of discussion and consultation about hazardous situations in Wilhelmsburg. It can be seen as a starting point of the IBA as a governance arrangement between residents and experts. Many of the residents' perspectives that were gathered on this conference have been integrated in the thematic agenda of the IBA in 2006.

Concerning its political background, the IBA is funded by the city of Hamburg. In combination with an international garden exhibition (*Internationale Gartenschau – IGS*) the IBA's overall goal is to use urban planning issues to tackle locally specific problems. By 2013 the district of Wilhelmsburg should be known to offer liveable residential space and an attractive location for investment, but should also provide new paths for the future management of social problems in neighbourhood development. Moreover, the overall policy goal that Hamburg links to the IBA is an "increase in the international attraction" of the entire city (Freie und Hansestadt Hamburg 2003: 74). For Hamburg as a "growing city" Wilhelmsburg represents space for expansion in the realm of residential development. Thus the guiding principle of a "leap to the south across the Elbe" ("Metropolis Hamburg – Growing City"; Freie und

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[3] On Future Search Conference as a method see Weisbord et.al. 1992 and Weisbord and Janoff 2000.

Hansestadt Hamburg 2003: 72) is seen as a "chance to grow on centrally situated areas in the middle of the city" (http://www.hamburg.de/contentblob/135220/data/sprung-elbe-burgerbroschuere.pdf (last accessed 20.01.2012). Thus, Hamburg's political goals also point beyond Wilhelmsburg.

In this context, the overcoming of stigmatising images seems to be particularly important. A positive image should be created in order to attract investors, to solve local social problems. The reframing of the stigmatising discourses was identified as a precondition for increasing the attraction of the Elbe island.

But as an external actor, the IBA entered a field of tension. On part of local actors, there are not only perceptions of being vulnerable to ecological threats. But external actors from politics or planning are seen as potentially endangering their rights of self-determination and involvement in the affairs of their own city district. Local actors see their chances of political participation as well as sovereignty over their self-images as being repeatedly threatened.

The background is this: Mainly, after the flooding disaster, Wilhelmsburg's residents were confronted with planning uncertainty over decades. Instead of an overall spatial planning concept, there were plans to abandon residential quarters entirely due to a *Port Extension Act*. Furthermore, later actions by the Senate tended to be fragmented against the social and spatial complexity of the local problems (e.g. redevelopment programmes during the 1980s and 1990s). As a consequence, local actors were facing the constant need to act and develop measures themselves as to integrate the many immigrants or to prevent right-wing populism, for instance. And perceptions of being a mere testing ground for planners deepened even more in the course of Hamburg's Olympic bid and an international urban design workshop in 2003.

Against this background, the IBA orientated itself on the perceptions of threat and endangerment of the residents. During the Future Search Conference in 2001/02, residents had identified the most urgent topics together with public authorities and planning offices. The subjects included (a) an overall spatial concept, (b) employment and economy, (c) schools and education and (d) free-time and culture (see Zukunftskonferenz Wilhelmsburg 2002).

The result was a "White Book" ("*Weißbuch: Insel im Fluss – Brücken in die Zukunft*"). It bundled the local residents' perceptions of problems and was intended as a starting point for joint action. Together a guiding principle was sketched out. It contrasted the threats with potentials of the district (e.g. it's relative proximity to the city centre or the social innovative strength of multicultural living; see Zukunftskonferenz Wilhelmsburg 2002: 5ff). Above all, this guiding principle was a joint attempt to find "a new identity ... for this space" (Interview H-ER 17). And from this White Book, the IBA also sourced its key themes (urban planning problems of the "inner urban fringes", e.g. marginalisation through spatial barriers; social problems, e.g. in the context of intercultural living; ecological problems as caused by climate change; growth and urban development; see http://www.iba-hamburg.de/de/01_entwerfe/4_leitthemen/leitthemen_start.php; last accessed 13.06.2011).

So there have been far-reaching commonalities between the problem perceptions of the IBA and those of local actors. Both experts of the later IBA and local actors aimed to positively reframe the stigmatised spatial images. Regarding the influencing of identity forming discourses, however, their action strategies drifted apart. – How did that come about?

Exclusion and heteronomy in the context of discourses

Against the discursive background of constant threats and heteronomy, residents see themselves as passive recipients of the IBA's measures, not as their co-designers. This again is construed as disenfranchising. It is seen as taking advantage of local projects and actors without truly cooperating with them (Interviews H-ER 06; H-ER 03). Thus, measures of the IBA in order to actually enable resilience are experienced as creating vulnerabilities anew, insofar as it is assumed that they could repeat those historical experiences of disenfranchisement. Also the participation council of the IBA is perceived as a mere fig leave (Interview H-ER 10).

In particular, it is the media supremacy of the IBA that generated perceptions of exclusion anew. In contrast to the hitherto stigmatising media reports, the IBA offers positive spatial images. Its dedicated financial resources and qualified employees allow high-quality PR and media work. But from the point of view of local actors, their own identity appears again being determined by others through supralocal discourses. Residents see their power of self-interpretation threatened again. And they see themselves not integrated into the IBA' governance arrangement in term of the management of supralocal media discourses. So in the end they again call on the interpretive logic of exclusion and heteronomy, in order to use it for their own identity management in dissociation to the IBA's resilience strategy of establishing a positive image of Wilhelmsburg.

Identity through dissociation – a resilience strategy for local actors

As a "counterstrategy" to such perceived exclusions and heteronymous tendencies local actors reclaim a socio-historical "underdog" status. They present themselves in a marginalised role within the city as a whole and they claim: "Basically it's about overcoming the divide in the city and a dignified life with equal opportunities for the people in this district stricken by exclusion and devaluation" (Verein Zukunft Elbinsel 2011). They wish to actively proceed "against the widespread resignation and our own impotence"(Verein Zukunft Elbinsel 2011). But by stylising a socio-historical victim role, they derive a positive self-image from seeing themselves as constantly being victims of external circumstances. Accordingly, in demonstrations and campaigns of local groups, subjects get scandalised through reference to past experiences of disenfranchisement. And at the same time the successes of the past are highlighted. Such a shared, active engagement with their own identity lends local actors their self-confidence.

This particular coping strategy is, however, not an object of the governance arrangement with the IBA. It has developed in dissociation from it. Although the local actors proceeded from similar perceptions of vulnerability as the IBA, they follow their own action strategies which lend them a conviction of their own action capacities beyond heteronomy and marginalisation through others.

Again, this goes back to the flooding disaster in 1962. Back then, the Senate resolved to bring large parts of Wilhelmsburg under the planning regulations pertaining to the docks area, abandoning their residential functions.

> *"Wilhelmsburg has still not completely recovered from this trauma and the years of planning insecurity that followed it. But behind the new, stable dykes there also emerged a 'community with a shared destiny' that has repeatedly defended Wilhelmsburg as a place to live." (Zukunftskonferenz Wilhelmsburg 2002: II)*

However, "[t]he Wilhelmsburg population […] successfully resisted. The residents demanded participation in the development of the district for the first time" (Zukunftskonferenz Wilhelmsburg 2002: 101). Since then, a vivid "protest culture" established itself. Today, it forms a "self-confident structure" that developed also through cases like twenty years ago, when residents successfully prevented the building of a refuse incineration plant in Moorwerder (Interview H-ER 10). Also when dealing with actual themes such as transport planning, it is conspicuous that active residents use symbols and metaphors that are connected with a collective memory of the flooding event. For instance, the series of a self-developed discussion event is named "Water Level Elbe Island" ("*Pegelstand Elbinseln*"). A water measuring rod serves as it's key visual – even though the topic here is not flood protection, but rather all sorts of themes are to be discussed there. Also in current campaigns that aim to prevent a new motorway extension reference is made to these successful experiences of protest in the past. "If they do that, then we'll just close the Elbe bridges again", one elderly man confident of victory said at the IBA/IGS Participation Council (Interview H-ER 10).

Thanks to such past and present examples of successfully dealing with perceived threats, today local actors are convinced of the efficacy of their actions. Today, in many cases they are able to attract public attention with their own campaigns. They manage to mobilise fellow campaigners by drawing on the shared interpretive logic of being affected by acute endangerments. Moreover, such linking of constructions of vulnerability with action in order to adapt to them opens up a joint space of action which transforms them into a social community (see Bohnsack 1998).

The development of solidarity and the joint taking of action can thus be interpreted as enabling social resilience. In this way a chance for self-determination is seized by local actors. Perceived exclusions are in turn used for active dissociation and self-confirmation. Conditions of social vulnerability, such as the perceived heteronomy caused by external identity management, are given a positive slant now by being made part of local actors' own, active iden-

tity management. This represents a resilience structure as it enables local actors to build up convictions of the autonomy of their own actions, despite the assumption of being vulnerable to heteronomy. Perceived threats through marginalisation, stigmatisation or heteronomy of self-images can thus be overcome.

Discussion

All in all, part of the collective self-image is a trust in the own power of action. Today, Wilhelmsburg's local civil society self-confidently claims a critical role within the realm of socio-spatial development and urban planning as. But, being deeply incorporated in the local socio-spatial identity constructions, such a resilience strategy proves to be a strength and a weakness at the same time.

It's a strength, because through actively and constructively coping with perceived vulnerabilities it provides local communities with social resilience in the form of a strong convictions of their action capacities, self-efficacy (Bandura 1997) and social cohesion.

Mainly the inherited mistrust against external actors, whose interests and actions are perceived as threats, however, seems to restrict external efforts to create new, innovate ways of socio-spatial development. Instead of enhancing the range of options for the future development the disociation strategy of local actors is likely to limit the range of paths of socio-spatial innovations and transformation due to a constant struggle in order to maintain their identity. Or, more theoretically spoken, they defend their discoursive path of emancipation.

This represents the weak point of such a strong local identity. From an analytical point of view, it bears the danger of a discoursive path dependency[4]. Local actors appear to be trapped in a *cognitive lock-in* (Grabher 1993, see also Martin and Sunley 2006). They tend to got stuck in a routinely reflex of defense, reproducing their roleplay of being rebells against intruders of the colonialist city. In this regard, also a constantly contentious relation to the city as a whole appears to be necessary as a basis of their socio-spatial identity. But, what over decades served as their insurance against being politically and socially neglected and marginalised, proves to be the critical point at all attempts of participation in socio-spatial planning. It arouses contention in governance arrangements with external actors, city officials, politicians and other actors of the top-down level in order to create new paths for socio-spatial development.

Reflexive Governance? (Conclusion)

In the end, such an example of disputed processes of socio-spatial identity formation reveals an ambivalent dynamic between social vulnerability constructions and resilience constructions. Despite shared perceptions of vulnerability, resilience building activities of the IBA – such as establishing positive spatial images – are experienced by local actors as creating new endangerments. In a somewhat paradoxical contrast they become the object of renewed vul-

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[4] On path dependency in the particular context of governance see Werle 2007.

nerability perceptions. The actions of the IBA are read by local actors using patterns of inter-pretation that lead to a mistrust in powerful external actors. This is incorporated in the discur-sive order of Wilhelmsburgs locally specific knowledge systems, with their topoi of constant threats.

Now, is there a way out of such a dilemma? How could such an obstacle for governance building be avoided?

First and foremost, building participatory governance arrangements ought to be seen as crea-ting arenas of joint production of new social knowledge (e.g. risk perceptions). This is of par-ticular importance when, at least from the viewpoint of local communities, historically rooted stocks of social knowledge such as socio-spatial identities are at stake, too.

If rather ‚soft' issues' such as identities have become contentious already, as in the case of Hamburg-Wilhelmsburg, they are most likely to interfere with the negotiations over ‚hard facts' and objective goals whatsoever. The modes, conditions and dynamics of local know-ledge production are most crucial aspects which can interfere with participatory approaches of governance building in particular. They are linked to local social milieux and the spedific so-cio-cultural conditions on the local ground. They lay beyond the matter-of-fact objectives and are often neglected in the practice of governance building.

Most often, there is still neither time nor space on the agenda officially dedicated for building up social relationships or an exchange over differing perspectives and basic frames of orienta-tion among actors of local governance.

According to that, governance building in stigmatised city districts such as Wilhelmsburg demands long term efforts and ought to have a reflexive design. This means, firstly, negotiati-on and exchange over different social framings should be made possible. Secondly, a reflexi-ve governance structure would include to establish social relations based on mutual trust and also the constant management of these social relations and trust building. On the first view this might seem to be at odds with the very problem of mistrust against external actors itself. But it is the hitherto short term and ad-hoc character of many of the past participation proces-ses which constantly hindered the building of trust between local and external actors.

Thirdly, a reflexive, participatory governance that is not designed as a short term participation integrates other key figures than spokesmen of particular interests in terms of interest-bound stakeholders. As also my currently conducted PhD-research on participatory governance sug-gests, instead there are intermediary key figures to be integrated who
   a) have no particular own interests but rather act in a sense of public welfare
   b) are socially recognised across the local milieux;
   c) are willing to take part in and to co-design long-term collaboration processes;
   d) own capacities to gain informal leadership and to constructively communicate and in-teract also with actors from the top-down level (politicians, planers ...)

While providing the important connection to locally specific social knowledge and its frames of orientation, such key figures are not bound by a defensive identity construction. Naturally, finding those is not an easy task. And, once a process of collaboration is to be set up, the question of shared power to co-design and co-decide will be always appear as a decisive one.

A participatory goverance that integrates such elements in its design, however, is more likely to produce outcomes and processes that can be seen as a success also by local actors.

Three problems still remain:

a) Firstly, the problem of missing political legitimacy of informal key figures and local leaders as partners in collaborative decision making; in that regard, the composition of a governance arrangement is highly selective, which represents a problem in the context of the established formal democratic standards of the political system.

b) According to that, secondly, in most cases the output of such govenance is also selective and cannot claim to be representative. What makes it all the more difficult for political decision makers to accept and to integrate such results.

c) And most practical, thirdly, regarding long-term governance structures there remain problems of feasability in terms of time and money.

Nevertheless, I would at last even suggest to connect such a reflexive governance with in-depth knowledge from ethnographic research according to the idea of participatory research together with the goverance actors.

In that regard, I am looking forward to Your critique and comments.

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