

Urban Social Movements between Protest and Participation

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I Introduction

Since the Fall of the Wall in 1989, Berlin has experienced a dynamic process of neoliberalization (Bernt, et al. 2013; Lebuhn 2008). Over the course of the 1990s and 2000s, over 50 percent of the city's public housing stock has been sold to private investors, and the city has become a highly desirable destination for international property investment (Holm 2007). State owned properties and buildings have been sold to private parties through a special property trust (Liegenschaftsfonds). Important parts of the city's infrastructure, like water and electricity, have been (partly) privatized. Overall, public expenditures have been cut significantly leading to understaffed district administrations, the closure of neighborhood libraries, and prolonged emergency response times of firefighters and ambulances (due to lack of staff and equipment), to name just a few examples.¹

In response to this process, protest groups increasingly frame their actions and campaigns around questions of gentrification, privatization, and the city government's accountability for public space and resources (Lebuhn forthcoming). Interestingly, activists not only rely on classical movement strategies like rallies and occupations, but increasingly also make use of the city's participatory instruments to pursue their goals (Kemp, et al. forthcoming). Especially the city-wide referendum has become a vehicle for demands like the remunicipalization of electricity and the democratization of the public utility agency (in 2013), the prevention of residential and commercial development on the closed inner-city airport Tempelhof (in 2014), and most recently for the strengthening of Berlin's public housing program (2015/16)). Similar dynamics can also be observed in other cities like, for example, Hamburg, where in recent years the Right to the City movement has developed strategies - and a language - that closely resembles, but radicalizes urban planning practices (Rinn forthcoming).

¹ For the period of 2001 to 2011, Berlin ranked last by far among all 16 German states concerning the growth of public expenditure: it grew only by 2,4 percent. By comparison, the second last state's expenditure grew by 8,9 percent (Bremen); the state of Hessen ranked first with 28,9 percent (see the annual report of the Berlin Senate for Finances: Senatsverwaltung 2013).

These observations stand somewhat in contrast to much of the literature and the debate(s) on participatory politics and urban protests - at least in Germany. Among urban scholars, both thematical areas – protest and participation – are usually discussed separately; similarly, activists often draw a clear line between the two and think of participatory instruments as something that either coopts movement politics or can be coopted. Rarely, attention is paid to the intersection between protest and participation.

On one hand, I think there are good reasons to keep protest and participation conceptually separate. Most importantly, it would be a bad advise to critical urban researchers to ignore the antagonistic character and transformative potentials of radical protests and simply incorporate them into the realm of urban neoliberalism with its armor of participatory and activating social technologies (Rose 1996; Rose/Osborne 2000). On the other hand, the development of participatory channels and instruments that allow residents to influence planning and policymaking processes clearly changes the ground for social movements and lead to new forms and unexpected dynamics of urban activism.

Against this background, I will (II) start with a remark on the literature and debate on urban protest and participation; I will (III) briefly point at the historic relationship between the two; and (IV) explore various types of dynamics that (can) unfold at the intersection between protest and participation. Empirically, I draw from research on several recent cases in Berlin, in which activists tried to advance Right to the City claims through participatory channels, but also from research in Hamburg and Tel Aviv. In the concluding section (V), I will discuss some of the implications for further research as well as for urban activism.

II Some Remarks on the Literature and Debate

Critical urban scholars noted early on that the process of ‘rolling out neoliberalism’ (Peck/Tickell 2002) has blurred the line between political protests

‘on the street’ and institutionalized political participation. Margit Mayer, for example, states that the opening up of the urban political system to social movement organizations as legitimate stakeholders in post-Fordist urban politics yields ambivalent results (Mayer 2000). On the one hand, new opportunity structures emerge that allow grassroots groups to successfully channel their claims into the political arena and to participate in the development, design and execution of urban policies and projects. On the other hand, this trend leads to the transfer of social services and responsibilities formerly provided by the local state to private or semi-private entities, and it puts the pressure of ‘Realpolitik’ on social movement organizations, which increasingly share the ‘burden of political responsibility’.

While authors like Mayer (Mayer 1994; 2000) and Swyngedouw (Swyngedouw 2005) provide a pointed analysis of the changing role of the so-called ‘third sector’, the debate on urban neoliberalization has paid less attention to participatory procedures and politics as such. In-depth discussions of participatory politics and community planning are more frequently found in the planning literature and often focus on the quality and development of the instruments themselves (for a critical introduction to urban planning see Marcuse 2011). Sherry Arnstein’s classical piece ‘A Ladder of Participation’, published in 1969, probably remains the single most important essay written on this subject (Arnstein 1969). It pointedly reveals the pitfalls of participatory politics, but – like much of the literature to date - doesn’t explicitly address the role of grassroots groups and urban protests in participatory processes.

This may also be a result of how participatory instruments are actually designed: Stakeholders are usually conceptualized as individual residents, and local interests are mapped and mediated (sociologically speaking:) by ‘categories’ like race, age, and gender. Despite the fact that grassroots and advocate groups, lobby organizations, and local governments usually play an important role in participatory processes, especially when it comes to direct democracy (e.g. local or state referenda) ‘groups’ are usually not directly

addressed. In fact, local politicians often express their blatant rejection of activists participating in participatory processes or referenda: they are considered trouble makers who disrupt the participatory procedure or even hijack it for their – supposedly - particularistic goals.

III On the Historic Entanglement between Protest and Participation

Although protest movements and participatory procedures are usually discussed separately, both dynamics are in fact historically closely entangled: In Berlin, for example, many of the participatory instruments we can identify today have been developed over the course of the 1990s and 2000s. But their roots go back to the urban struggles of the New Left during the 1960s and 1970s (Mayer 2010).

In West Berlin, the 1968 movement, and the local grassroots movements that nurtured and evolved from it, created political dynamics that were characterized by militant urban protests, bottom-up demands for the participation in local politics, and top-down strategies to incorporate grassroots groups into urban planning and policy-making procedures. The squatter movement of the early 1980s played a particularly important role for Berlin's shift from top-down to careful urban renewal policies and for the development of participatory instruments that mediate conflicts between urban social movements and the local state (for an extensive discussion see Kemp, et al. forthcoming; see also Holm/Kuhn 2011).

Similarly, the first developments of (slightly more) democratic and (slightly more) inclusive forms of city planning and urban renewal in Hamburg (Rinn forthcoming) and in Tel Aviv (Kemp, et al. forthcoming; Alexander 2008) took place in the context of neighborhood protests against top-down modernist planning, large scale demolition and the displacement of local communities in the 1960s and 1970s. However, it was usually not until the 1990s and 2000s that participatory practices were formalized by local administrations and city planners and routinely applied. Berlin, for example, published an official

'Handbook of Participation' in 2011 (Senatsverwaltung 2011); a 340-page strong 'hands-on' guide for the city's administrative staff that provides 'step-by-step' information on how to get local residents and actors involved in urban planning and on methods how to respond to claims and conflicts on site.

Hence, a first and preliminary conclusion from a historic perspective would be that participatory instruments have developed in a closely entangled relationship with grassroots claims. Participatory instruments are not simply a top-down strategy to coopt movements, but rather ambivalent victories of movements themselves. This also implies that urban movements should not be conceptualized as something completely autonomous and independent of the participatory process they enter. They are not simply being coopted - and they do not simply coopt. Instead, participatory structures and political agency mutually constitute and shape each other.

IV On the Dynamics at the Crossroads between Protest and Participation

In what follows, I will use examples from participatory processes in Berlin in order to describe three (selected) dynamics highly relevant for movement politics: the bundling and focusing of (fragmented) discourses; the development of new activist- and cross-actor networks; and the strategic adoption of grassroots claims to administrative and political logics. To avoid misunderstandings: The argument is not that these dynamics – necessary to channel grassroots claims successfully into the formal political arena – couldn't be achieved (by activists) in other ways. Rather, it seems that participatory processes (when they develop a political momentum beyond the pragmatic aspect of 'good planning') provide specific mechanisms, which can create favorable conditions for these dynamics to happen!

Over the course of 2013, Berlin experienced an extensive grassroots campaign for a referendum on the recommonalization of the city's electricity grid. While most politicians actually agreed that the city should consider buying the electricity grid back from the Swedish company Vattenfall, the activists argued

that this alone would be ‘recommunalization without democratization’. Instead, the public utility agency that administers the grid should also be brought under popular control. What activists claimed was that not only should the grid be public, but that members of the agency’s board should be elected directly by residents rather than being para-shooted into their management positions by the city’s political class. The latter demand did not find any support by the political parties – except from the Socialists and the Pirate Party. Opponents argued that “that there are dangers in putting complex management and construction jobs in the hands of local authorities with little experience”.² The grassroots campaign then made use of the city-wide referendum, which is at its core a two-step procedure: In the first phase, activists need to collect 175.000 signatures (seven percent of the registered voters) in order to initiate the actual referendum. If the city government does not respond to the successful first step by considering the proposal, the second phase kicks in, which consists of a public referendum, which – if successful - forces the city parliament to pass the proposed bill. The referendum was held in November 2013, but fell slightly short of the required 25 percent. However, two important dynamics unfolded and should not go unnoted: First, the campaign for the referendum brought activists across the political spectrum together, ranging from anarchist groups to dissident Social Democrats; activists and citizens with various political affiliations worked together over several months creating new networks. Secondly, the campaign triggered a highly visible public counter-discourse about the democratic control of the city’s resources: newspapers, radio- and t.v. stations reported on the proposed reform to democratize the city’s public utility agency and invited politicians, journalists and experts to discuss the subject. Even though the political class tried to discredit the proposed reform, the referendum was an important step in the process of advancing and shaping the anti-privatization protests and focusing them onto the question of democratic control rather than on a simple and binary private-public dichotomy.

² Der Spiegel Online: *Energy Referendum: Public Buy-Back of Berlin Grid Fails*, November 4, 2013; URL: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/berlin-referendum-on-buying-electricity-grid-from-vattenfall-fails-a-931609.html> (accessed August 18, 2015).

In Spring 2013/2014, activists working within the organizational framework ‚Tempelhof 100 Percent‘ initiated a campaign for a referendum to prevent the city of Berlin from developing the airfield of the closed inner-city airport Tempelhof.³ Against a massive countercampaign run by private interest groups, much of the media, and the Berlin government itself, a network of grassroots groups, neighbors and activists managed to collect more than 185.000 valid signatures to launch the referendum. Eventually, 46,1 percent of Berlin’s voters went to the polls, and 65 percent of them voted in favor of the bill proposed by the Tempelhof activists. For several month, the referendum and the discussions around it – namely: issues of public space, affordable housing, and democratic accountability of Berlin’s government – dominated Berlin’s public debate. In the future, the successful referendum will prevent the city from developing the 953 acres airfield and ensure that the entire area will be kept open as one huge park for the public. Similarly to the referendum on the electricity grid, activists’ efforts to organize the collection of approx. 185.000 signatures created a huge amount of grassroots activity. The procedure also requires that activists reduce their demand to a clear proposal, which can be turned into legislation, if the referendum is successful. As a result, activists from diverse backgrounds as well as numerous individual residents entered a complex dialog/negotiation to agree on a simple claim (‘no permanent constructions on the former airfield’), which constitutes a compromise among the various interests at stake, meets the formal criteria of the referendum, and has the potential to mobilize tens of thousands of voters.

In sum: It seems almost ironic that among all participatory instruments it is the referendum – the most formalized and pre-formatted channel – that triggers an incredible amount of grassroots activity and forces activists to find common grounds and define shared goals.

³ See the website of ‚Tempelhof 100 Percent‘ at <http://www.thf100.de/start.html> (accessed on June 4, 2015); see also Deutsche Welle: *Berlin Voters Claim Tempelhof*, May 27 2014, URL: <http://www.dw.de/berlin-voters-claim-tempelhof/a-17663944> (accessed on June 3, 2015).

However, less spectacular participatory procedures can also help to advance grassroots claims and have important effects on movement politics. In 2012, artists and activists supported by various cultural institutions initiated a round table that invites city officials to re-negotiate Berlin's current policy to privatize public real estate assets through a special real estate funds (Liegenschaftsfonds).⁴ Although the bi-monthly round table has been criticized for its strong bias on space for arts and culture, it clearly addresses Berlin's policy framework of austerity and privatization. Besides its presence in the public debate, two other dynamics seem remarkable: First, the round table helps to 'translate' activists demands for public space and for an end to austerity into formats that local politicians and administrative staff can 'work with'.⁵ Second, while representatives of various parties, and administrative branches of the city are participating in the talks, one actor, who has high stakes in this issue, has been missing in many meetings: The senator for finances. As a result, it seems that the round table has actually taken an unexpected turn. Especially in its early phase, it seemed to facilitate a process of alliance building between progressive city officials and activists against the senator of finance and his strict fiscal policy of privatization. This is obviously an unintended effect, but it shows that participatory procedures not only put activists in touch with each other, but can also facilitate the development of cross-actor networks, maybe even alliance building between progressive city officials and activists; and produce 'realistic' policy proposals (read critically: de-radicalized claims) that can be 'fed to' left leaning politicians and city administrations.

V Conclusions

The differences between urban activism on one hand, and stakeholders participation in round tables, community planning procedures and referenda on

⁴ See <http://stadt-neudenken.tumblr.com/Runder%20Tisch> (accessed August 18, 2015).

⁵ This can obviously also be interpreted as a process of cooptation and of re-working radical claims into 'manageable' social reforms.

the other, should not be simply leveled. And as Adriana Kemp, Galia Rattner and I have argued elsewhere, participatory instruments present a particular challenge for grassroots movements. They are designed to solve specific problems and mediate residents' particularistic interests in pre-formatted ways (Kemp, et al. forthcoming). By doing so, participatory instruments can actually obstruct exactly those elements that Castells (Castells 1983) identified as crucial for the successful development of broader urban social movements: The ability to make the connection between a particular issue and the underlying political and economic roots and dynamics; the formation of broad alliances with groups and organizations beyond the immediate particular issue; and the connection of various fundamental problems (poverty, ecology, nationalism) with each other and with universal claims on recognition and re-distribution." (Kemp et al cit op)

However, under the conditions of neoliberal urban governance, where government-initiated participatory politics aim to reduce the distance between politics and citizens, activists increasingly make use of round tables, referenda and other instruments in order to pursue their goals. And under certain conditions, participatory procedures seem to unfold dynamics that can be favorable to movement politics. Historically speaking, this shouldn't surprise us as participatory dynamics developed in close relationship to urban protests – but so far, only few scholars take on the invitation to study the intersection between protest and participation.

Future research should therefore focus more on the question how participatory structures and political agency mutually constitute and shape each other. Obviously, there will not be one answer for all. Instead, we need a historically informed perspective as well as a comparative one in order to explore the impact of different urban settings (different political coalitions/different instruments/different institutions, etc.) on participatory processes (for example concerning the weakening versus strengthening of radical claims), but also to understand the different dynamics that unfold around partnership-oriented

participatory instruments, such as the round table or participatory planning, versus antagonistic forms of participation such as the referendum. Eventually, a better theoretical understanding of the dynamics at work will also help activists to maneuver the shifting terrain of participatory politics and strengthen the struggle for urban justice.

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