Towards a Future Urban Policy? Germany's New "National Urban Development Agenda"

Frank Eckardt

Introduction

Cities in Germany have a longer history than the ever-changing national borders or states had. As early as Max Weber found, in his economic analysis, cities play a crucial role in forming societal relationships. Similarly, cities today play a complex role in a world where the nation state is the predominant form of organizing political, social and economic activities. In Germany and elsewhere, diverse processes have challenged the position of cities in the European/global urban order established after World War II. Today these far-reaching changes and their accompanying challenges have called for new reflections on urban policy. In contrast to France, the Netherlands and Great Britain, where national urban policies have been implemented, Germany has been reluctant to acknowledge the necessity for any kind of urban policy. In fact, Germany refused to introduce a special political agenda mandated by the European Union, which takes account of specific political needs of cities over longer periods of time. Furthermore the German nation state refused to take a position on the political autonomy of cities guaranteed in the constitutional law (art. 28). Only in 2007, when Germany held the EU presidency and with the installation of the former mayor of Leipzig, Wolfgang Tiefensee, as the new minister for infrastructure in the Merkel Government, did Germany begin to change its outlook.

In this essay, Germany's political transitions in the past years will be described. First, a historic look will be taken at Germany's urban policies and Germany's reluctance to implement a national urban agenda will be explained. Secondly, in the absence of a German urban policy, the decentralized and corporative manner in which German cities are organized will be discussed. In the final part of this essay, Germany's new "National Urban Development Policy" will be outlined and discussed in light of Germany's existing political structure. Finally, the difficulties cities are experiencing in efforts to cope with the emerging knowledge society will be also examined.

Germany and its cities

The introduction of an urban culture to Germanic territories might be traced back to the birth of Trier, Germany's oldest city. Founded by Roman legions, Trier's impressive traditional Mediterranean infrastructure, including market places and squares, served as crucial public spaces in which the city's political and economic developments unfolded. Similarly in some cities founded in the late Middle ages, urban life was based on a critical density of a social and politically active population. Since then, a variety of urban processes and disturbances have made this basic principle of practicing political activities in urban public spaces less and less visible. Though conflicts and the struggle for survival were decisive factors in the daily life of the citizen, the normative perception of the European city as a place of freedom has nonetheless been kept alive. Until 1871 when it became a Nation State, the territory that is now Germany consisted of a fragmented structure of autonomous nations and cities. Many cities celebrated not only self governance, but also citizen pride and self esteem by placing a statue of Roland, an emblematic character, in their market places. As in the case of Quedlinburg Roland's statue was symbolically destroyed every time an outside conqueror wanted to oppress the autonomy of the local elite. The collective strength of the independent cities and states had been preventing Germany in becoming a unified and centralized state, leading to the well-known problem of Germany as a "late coming nation" (Plessner, 1959). The significance of this urban autonomy can thus only be regarded with ambivalence. Nonetheless, the long lasting autonomy of urban areas led to the development of an urban culture in which traditions such as conflict resolution and negotiation have grown to become the backbone of the later German nation *in nuce*. It was, so to say, the field of pre-national experience; a kind of playground to develop special attitudes and build up the social bonds necessary forecasting a more abstract idea of the national *bonum commune*. On the other hand, the long lasting autonomy and self-governance of many cities have fostered a utilitarian cooperation with the "others", the state or national government. This development has led to a greater economic and less politically oriented cooperation with other cities. Most impressive is the three hundred year old Hansiatic League, a "club of cities" which ensured safeguarded trading practices amongst participating cities (Hammel-Kiesow, 2000). In this way, Germany, as Hegel described, has followed an unusual path to modernity (Rosanvallon, 2004).

When industrialisation and its accompanying new class divisions between the bourgeoisie and working class began to shape the urban fabric, Germany, conceived as a national power, was ready to play an adequate role. The nineteenth century is, therefore, characterized by the controversial development of a modernity rationalized by urban planning. This new form of rationalization led to reshaping of Germany's urban landscape by constructing entirely new cities designed primarily for industrial production, especially in the Rhine-Ruhr area. The character of other old German cities was re-defined by the industrial revolution which left little traditional morphological, social and political patterns behind.

While the rational and industrial predominance in urban planning had been powerful and effective, the emotional and cultural modernisation of German cities, lagged behind in the late 19th century. Without the political right of self-governance, the disregard shown towards new social groups of workers and employers by the nation state and the emerging feelings of nationalism led to a form of anti-urbanism which other European countries did not experience at this time. Intellectually, many influential bourgeoisie thinkers identified cities in Germany with the loss of civilisation. A nostalgic notion of the pure countryside, which Nazi ideology also used as political tool in their claim for more space, countered efforts to introduce a rational and humanistic form of urban planning in Germany.

"Hour Zero" for German Cities

The destruction caused by World War II left many German cities with little infrastructure and few recourses. These extreme conditions forced politicians and urban planners in East and West Germany first and foremost to provide the most urgently needed supplies for the local population. With little room for innovative or even experimental approaches to urban planning, many decisions made in the post-war period were based on existing pre-World War II urban planning concepts. Nonetheless, housing policies became a crucial factor in Germany's post-war urban planning agenda. Choices between a communalistic approach (in the East) or a preference for home ownership (in the West), were already ideologically motivated in the imminent climate of the Cold War (Eckardt, 2006). As a result, political and economic energies focused on the unsolved housing problem, while other political and (participatory) dimensions of urban culture were neglected. It was not until the sixties, that citizens became actively engaged in urban planning and other civil issues. With the emerging social movements, issues of urban renewal and the "feeling of not being at home in our cities" (Heinrich Böll) were addressed in vivid criticism. At the same time, the reorganization of fiscal burden sharing led to an additional loss of power on the federal level for German cities.

Since the seventies, the renaissance of urban culture must be viewed in light of the "local" in the context of the national state. In 1968, for the first time in Germany, workers earned more money than ever before. Education, now accessible to children of the working class, brought about substantial democratization. Furthermore, Willy Brandt's famous slogan "More Democracy" led to his election as the first social-democratic chancellor, paving the way for a long decade of social democratic governance that followed.

During the same period, however, the ongoing success story of post-war Germany was questioned, especially in cities. Conflicts arising from the difficulty in finding definitions for social and political rights became increasingly difficult to handle. As the "housing fighters", women and migrant organisations, gay and handicapped movements, no longer felt represented within the existing political framework, new

political urban movements emerged in Frankfurt, Berlin, and Hamburg in the 1980s. The authoritarian response from police and state to the actions undertaken by these movements, in addition to harsh political interventions and exclusive policies designed to suppress these movements, led to a public decline in interest in participation in local politics. Instead, the formation of new political parties primarily on the left, such as the Greens, but also on the right, emerged as a new political solution.

The post-industrialisation of West German cities and the rapid decline of socialist industries in East German cities in the eighties led to fear of political unrest and social instability by many observers and decision-makers. In response to and in order to prevent the "French experiences", three States (Länder) in West Germany implemented the first Social City (Soziale Stadt) project, designed to reduce increasing social inequalities in cities. Drawing from the positive results the Länder experienced with the Social City project and in order to underline its increased sensibility for social inequalities, the Schröder government implemented the Social City policy on a national level with government funding in 1998. The intention of the Social City program was to introduce a synergetic effect with the existing neighbourhood improvement welfare programmes, enabling new forms of cooperative governance. The most regarded innovation was the so-called "Quarter Management" (Quatiersmanagment) which facilitated an intensive dialog between the city and neighbourhood communities.

Although the Social City programme didn't change the federal structure of the existing political system, it was integrated into existing political framework, acknowledging urban problems as being important for the whole society. Participation by cities was voluntary, but required a formal contract supported by the national and Land-government. With its thematically open programme, a plethora of economic, physical and social improvement projects, as well social institutions could receive extra funding. This flexible nature of the funding for the Social City programme not only increased its acceptance, but also its attractiveness to many cities.

Towards a Holistic Approach?

The Social City programme is supported by a wide range of academic expertise and a lobby for urban issues that perceives Social City as a tool which can support and empower society's weakest citizens and neighbourhoods. While the 2003 interim assessment of the programme by an independent organization, the German Institute for Urban Affairs, states that the programme helped to "prevent the worst," the realisation of the programme follows its own logic. By implementing a holistic approach that aims at placing social, political, cultural and economic problems in the realm of spatial relationships, it has gained legitimacy. The programme, therefore, relies heavily on "place effects" in societal relationships. Little, if no attention is paid to the fact that a neighbourhood quarter may not be of great value to those who are

bound there and for whom leaving a depressed neighbourhood might be a much better perspective than remaining there, waiting for improvements.

In the theories of human ecology, a "zone of transition" might be the natural place for the integration process of urban newcomers and therefore less problematic per se. However, the Social City programme relies on the assumption that a social mix of poor and rich people is the best solution in all circumstances. From the perspective of the poorer residents, this is a critical issue; poor inhabitants may suffer from higher rents in a mixed neighbourhood, frustrated by their inability to reach the higher living conditions of their immediate middle class neighbours.

These critical considerations remain unheard in the overwhelmingly positive attitude towards the Social City programme cast by the academic and political debate. More critical is the observation that the Social City programme is not seen in the context of the wider German political and societal changes that have occurred since the '90s. While the Social City programme was introduced by the Schröder government as a national policy, the total rearrangement of Germany's economic and welfare state policies remains unaccounted for. By declaring the "activating state", the recent economic and welfare reforms can be seen as an attempt to increase the pressure on people who rely on state support to solve their economic problems. These economic reforms are a double-edged sword, as they shift the attention for social justice from a redistributive approach to one of recognition. This shift emphasizes a state acknowledgement that the non-financial needs of unstable neighbourhoods also need to be addressed in contemporary urban environments. In this context, rights for minorities have been fostered, strengthening their voice in local politics, while simultaneously budget cuts for the unemployed had been substantially supported by the government. As a consequence, the inequalities between different social groups have been addressed with cultural differences in mind and are seen less as a result of economic misbalance. In this regard, the dynamics of social exclusion has been creating controversial phenomena. In an illustrative case, the improvement of the cultural and legislative integration of minority groups, especially ethnic minorities, gays, and the handicapped has been publicly promoted, particularly by Berlin's homosexual mayor, while the number of children living under poor conditions in Berlin rose above 30 percent in his time of governance and similarly, according to the Second National Poverty Report in Germany, the percentage of people living in poverty during the Schröder government rose by one percent.

Germany's New Urban Policy

In the run of the German EU presidency in 2007, Germany initiated the "Leipzig Charta" in which Member States declared that cities would receive more attention in future urban EU policies. It is evident that this Charta is primarily the work of Wolfgang Tiefensee, the former charismatic social-democratic mayor of Leipzig, and

current Minister for Transportation in Merkel's new government. Tiefensee's weak public image may have been a motivating factor for his production of the Charta. Confronted by the claim that the Charta should place greater emphasis on economic dimensions of cities, its text primarily addresses social and sustainable aspects of the so-called "Urban Renaissance".

Ironically, the attempt for a European-wide introduction of a holistic approach to managing urban areas emerged in Germany. As France with its "Politique de la Ville", Great Britain with its urban policies, or the Netherlands with the "Grotestedenbeleid" have more experience with holistic approach, Germany has been critical of attempts by the European Commission to introduce an "urban agenda" under its urban programmes.

However, when the emphatically announced shift in political orientation towards a "National Urban Development Policy" is examined in more detail, good will and analysis are present in its policies, but little financial room to manoeuvre and almost no change in the overall political embedding of cities in Germany are present in the policy. In July 2007 850 representatives and experts accepted an invitation from Minister Tiefensee to attend the national conference. The agenda was predetermined by a memorandum completed by the Ministry, the German Cities Council (*Deutscher Städtetag*), the German Association of Communities and Cites (*Deutscher Städte- und Gemeindebund*) and, the representatives of the ministries of the Länder (*ARGEBAU*). It was clear from the envisioned urban planning goals that this national conference wanted to stimulate cooperation between different political levels, while economy and citizenry were to be further cultivated in future urban planning policies. Small working groups examined anticipated future urban challenges, suggesting methods to mitigate these problems, but did not write mandates or policy recommendations. As a follow-up to the National Conference, a second phase of the "National Urban Development Policy" has been planned. This second phase should give local initiatives from different actors of civil society the opportunity to apply for funding, but in a very competitive way. "...New ideas and new projects..." emerge from competitions, with proposals for urban improvement projects. In practice, only a short time (4 weeks) is allowed for applicants to develop and submit proposals. It is, therefore, questionable if collaboration and consensus finding between new actors and projects can be useful.

Given its limited financial funding, the addresses of the well known experts and elites in the "application business", far from transparent selection criteria for the proposals, the discussion about Germany turns one focus from the National Urban Development strategy, requiring critical review. It is apparent, firstly, that it is a sort of "policy plus" which is added to existing policies and is most important for the cities and their citizens. That means that few impacts are to be expected on the existing welfare state reforms, housing policies, economic and family policies. Furthermore, the new

"National Urban Development Policy" is not designed to discuss or reflect on programmes which are explicitly directed to the urban level.

Urban Futures in Germany

In favour of the new "National Urban Development Policy" it can be argued that its policies might help struggling local initiatives stay alive. Other actors, however, may be neglected and left with little support. While many academics and actors follow this line of argumentation, a critical position is expressed in the context of economic changes in Germany. Analysis began by examining challenges that lie ahead in Germany, a society which is undergoing a fundamental change of its economic structure. The terms "globalisation", "post-industrialisation", "service industries", and "knowledge society" indicate not only that new labour markets are emerging, but that these new markets will also have profound impacts on life styles, competences and skills of its accompanying new work force. Post-war social structures, maintaining a traditional nexus between neighbourhoods, social classes, and their political representatives, have grown weak and to some extent have lost their significance. New educational, cultural and social disparities between different groups in society are becoming particularly prominent in cities. Accompanying social segregation is becoming more complex as its new spatial formations develop. Altogether, German cities are increasingly mirroring a fragmented society in which social security is no longer guaranteed by welfare state programmes, but instead is becoming a competitive resource (Hamann and Nullmeier, 2006).

Fragmentation means foremost that solidarity is reduced and does not "flow" automatically as the political tool of "belonging" to the state, city or neighbourhood. In the last years, neighbourhood oriented planning approaches have therefore been making more use of empowerment strategies derived from North American experiences. However, it is difficult to see how a neighbourhood should rescue itself from decline using US models based on resistance and activism. As the famous German tale of Baron Münchhausen depicts, the Baron could not save himself from sinking into a bog by pulling himself out by pulling at his own hair. In other words, empowerment is not a realistic option, unless there is already some silent or sleepy power to be awoken. This policy will only produce new social divisions, as participatory approaches reach only those who are able to speak for themselves and have something to offer to other actors. Immigrants who don't speak German, single parents who have little time to commit to community engagement, unemployed men with little social competence, and many stressed families are not a part of this game of community empowerment. As their advocates try to empower these underrepresented communities by offering them material and immaterial recourses, their urban future will be characterized by a burdensome lifestyle, in which accumulated disadvantages make a neighbourhood a precarious place to live.

Germany's "National Urban Development Policy" mirrors the already reshaped state welfare system and the "activated citizen" state philosophy (Schröder). The new policy also multiplies new uncertainties the recent restructuring of the welfare state has caused as these fiscal and social instability become omnipresent in the every-day life of those who seek more protection and care from the state. By making social benefits, network presentation, and application skills competitive, inhabitants of disadvantaged neighbourhoods are forced into another arena of challenges.

The National Urban Development Policy is based on the key principle that policies are realized as projects. When it comes to the question of distributive justice, the new short term neighbourhood projects, promoted by the Urban Development, have become a new taboo subject. Although working toward a sustainable form of urban development, these short term projects are assumed to be an appropriate means to achieve social sustainability. Limited support for ideas and projects under this new policy leave concerned citizens with an image of an unplanned and unstable future.

References

Eckardt, F., 2006. Neighbourhood centres in Germany. In: Built Environment, 32/1, S. 53-72.

Hamann, F., Nullmeier, F., 2006. Die Konkurrenzgesellschaft. In: Vorgänge. No 4, S. 5-12.

Hammel-Kiesow, R., 2000. Die Hanse. München: Beck.

Plessner, H., 1959. Die verspätete Nation. Über die politische Verführbarkeit bürgerlichen Geistes. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.

Rosannvallon, P., 2004. Le modèle politique français. Paris. Seuil.

www.bmvbs.de
www.sozialestadt.de