

WS 35
The end of the polis?
Urban anthropological explorations in the “post-political city”
AG Stadtethnologie

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Many anthropologists perceive the city as a dense social arena in which residents constantly negotiate their affiliations and identities as well as access to public space and resources. It is in particular the diversity of urban discourses, the daily compromises and the (dis) agreements that create the social fabric and shape the specificity of the city – they “make the city” (Michel Agier, 2015). Hence, the social and cultural form of the city is never static but always dynamic. Whether planning strategies, political participation, religiosity or public performances – mediation regarding the urban scenario and the question of the “right to city” are always present alongside non-negotiable ideas. While this perspective is dealing with processes related to social demarcation and identity formation, critical urban research has also paid attention to neoliberal forms of governmentality, which tend to de-politicize urban development. Present-day municipal politics celebrate creativity, innovation and entrepreneurial freedom. Real negotiations of and within the “post-political city” (Suburban, No. 2/2013) no longer take place: actual dissent and conflict seem to have disappeared. Erik Swyngedouw (2013) even envisions the end of the ideal of the city: The self-governing Greek polis is doomed. The place of public debate and democratic action has turned into a site of “de-politicising gestures.” For this reason, he calls to draw attention to “the spaces where the post-political condition is questioned and practices of radical democratization experimented with.”

Taking up these debates, this workshop aims to discuss contemporary urban ethnographic research. We welcome contributions guided by anthropological thinking that empirically, methodologically and theoretically refer to the conference theme: How are processes of social negotiation and non-negotiable concerns and their interrelations articulated on the margins, in the center or within niches of ‘glocal’ urban spaces?

Vortragende / Speakers:

Felix Girke (Universität Konstanz)

Pre-empting negotiations? The naturalization of architectural heritage in Yangon, Myanmar

The colonial buildings in Yangon (Myanmar) mark a globalized urban brand built on exo-nostalgia. Vacated when Myanmar shifted its capital to newly erected Naypyitaw, some spectacular buildings are dilapidated and closed to the public; others have been turned into luxury hotels, banks, or art spaces. The global interest in these relics is met by long-standing local apathy: linked to painful memories of colonialism, few Burmese hold positive views of the cityscape that so enchants western tourists. Cultural elites seek to change this by making the residents of the city appreciate “their urban heritage” as well. Western and local experts, politicians, investors, and journalists have joined forces to transform the imaginary of the city, to elevate the indifferent

residents to engaged stakeholders in their own city. This talk focuses on attempts to inculcate such an appreciation of the value of the buildings in Yangonites, especially in children, who are ideally to grow up with the naturalized and non-negotiable sense that the buildings are to be cherished and conserved for their antiquity and generic historicity, even as specific memories are downplayed.

Raúl Acosta (LMU München)

Entrepreneurial activism: post-political bids to re-shape Mexico City for inclusive mobility?

Over the last couple of decades, activists have been decisive in placing mobility as a key topic in policy-making agendas in Mexico City. In their advocacy for urban cycling, improved public transport, universal-access pedestrian crossings and public spaces, activists have resorted to an entrepreneurial form of collective action. A few activists have set up consultancies to produce reports, projects, and plans for governments and businesses. Some have started cycling schools that work alongside the city administration to train children and adults in the skills and regulations of urban cycling. Others have decided to attend specialization or graduate courses in urbanism or transport studies, in order to further their career while focusing on a topic they have learned to love. Nevertheless, a number of the most visible activists claim to work not only for inclusive and just mobility in the city, but also crucially to improve the quality of democracy. The type of negotiation they engage in, however, appears to be focused on bidding for specific solutions, instead than on promoting political negotiations. This paper examines if their actions have post-political implications.

Sabine Mohamed (Heidelberg University)

“From shabby to chic” – Desiring a proper Ethiopian capital and citizen

This paper examines the inscriptions of ethnic difference, semiotics of revolution and erasure in the capital city within a state project to constitute a pluralist vision of the nation in the aftermath of a violent political transition. Within only the past 60 years citizenship in Ethiopia has been mediated through the reigns of feudalism, communism and since 1995 through ethnic affiliation, the capital hereby occupying a site of rehearsals for the state and a paradigmatic imaginary of what shall be. I investigate how ethnic difference becomes in/visible through processes of rapid urban renewal in Addis Ababa. I explore the everyday life of young men in an eviction site in the city center, navigating between erasures, ruins of their former demolished houses and creating new jobs in between emerging infrastructures. It explores the mayors attempt to reify a multi-ethnic city for all, while arguing it belongs to none. How then does the city become simultaneously a space of negotiation and non-negotiation as well as an urge for a new kind of citizenship, shaped by new modes of habitation in the “uninhabitable” (AbdouMaliq Simone 2016), where the post-political has been named progress?

Ursula Probst (FU Berlin)

Kurfürstenstraße: negotiating frictions in urban transformation

(In-)famous for street based sex work, the area around Kurfürstenstraße in Berlin has long been a concern for various actors in the urban political landscape, as solutions for the problems associated with this area – violence, pollution, precarity – appear to be hard to find. Some residents and politicians argue for a complete ban of sex work in the area, while others consider sex work(ers) a part of the Kiez and strongly oppose such ban. Ultimately, nobody seems to be satisfied with the compromises negotiated between those positions.

Although rarely included in those debates, the perspectives of sex workers on their work environment highlight different problems and hint at larger dimensions of these debates: Having experienced a repositioning from the fringes of a divided city to a central location, the area underwent rapid changes in the last decades that exacerbated frictions between different groups differentiated by income and migration status. This paper therefore aims to illustrate how the debates about sex work at Kurfürstenstraße are not simply a question of public order, but also constitute a complex space of negotiating directions and priorities in urban development.