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THE POWER OF THE MANY – THE FIGHT FOR ALLOTMENT GARDENS IN BASEL, SWITZERLAND

**NICOLA THOMAS, PATRICK OEHLER AND
MATTHIAS DRILLING**

Abstract

Allotment gardens in the Swiss city Basel are currently undergoing significant transformations: new, younger and more affluent users are discovering the gardens and changing the culture and community from within, while at the same time, the public administration is recognizing the profit potential of using the garden sites as land for new housing constructions and public parks.

Plans published in 2009 by the local authority to close down three garden sites to make way for housing constructions were fiercely opposed by a coalition of heterogeneous actors, with key drivers in the protest movement being the local allotment garden associations.

This paper analyses the role the allotment garden associations in Basel played in the protest movement and describes how the organization structure of the associations enabled the interests of threatened allotment gardeners to be powerfully represented.

Keywords:
allotment garden transforma-
tion, social movements, urban
green planning

Introduction: Allotment gardens in Basel

Allotment gardens¹ in Basel have a long history: Introduced in 1909 as a support means for the working classes (Zentralverband der Familiengärtnervereine Basel, 1996), they have been popular ever since. In fact, in 2012, approximately half of all 5800 plots located in the municipality of Basel city had been rented out for 50 years or more.² However, in recent years the allotment gardens in Basel have been undergoing significant social transformations. Increasing numbers of persons with a migration background – most notably Italian and Turkish former Guestworkers (ibid.) – have started renting plots, as well as so called “new urban pioneers” (BMfVBS, 2010) discovering and renting garden plots as small self-organised collectives of friends, bringing alternative practices into the garden sites. In addition to these internal changes, allotment gardens are increasingly facing pressure from the local urban development policy: Despite various national as well as international studies³ stressing the social, economic and physical benefits allotment gardens have for their users, the local planning department in recent years has viewed allotment gardens as potential construction land for housing projects. In 2009, the local planning department in Basel published plans to close down three allotment garden sites and redevelop the land for new housing projects. These plans were met with strong opposition from the affected allotment garden tenants and other interest groups solidarizing themselves with the tenants, who collectively fought against the re-development plans.

This paper will describe the protest movement, look into which stakeholders were involved and analyse the arguments that were brought forward by protesters as well as project supporters. Underlying the paper is the following research question: How did the involved stakeholders influence the allotment garden re-development plans and which role did the organisation structure of allotment gardens play in this process? After describing the research methodology, the theoretical framework describing the transformation from Fordist to Post-Fordist society that has taken place since the 1970s will be outlined, followed by the chronology of the protest movement and analysis of the positions of the actors involved. In the final part of the article, the future outlook for allotment gardens in Basel after the protest movement will be discussed and analysed in the wider context of societal transformations.

Methodology

As part of a larger qualitative study⁴ that looked into contested large scale urban development projects in three Swiss cities (Basel, Zürich, Winterthur), one case study explored the transformation of allotment gardens in the city of Basel. For this, first official documents available from the city’s parliamentary archive as well as newspaper articles covering the conflict were gathered in order to get an overview of the

1 In this paper, the term “allotment garden” refers to gardens rented out by the municipality of Basel city. Currently there are 33 allotment garden sites in Basel, with individual plots ranging between 200 to 300 m² in size and the yearly rent being from 300 to 450 CHF, this being approximately 280–450 Euros. See <http://www.stadtgaertneri.bs.ch/ueber-uns/faq-freizeitgaerten.html> [Accessed 3 December 2012].

Until 2013, allotment gardens were officially defined as being spaces used primarily for growing vegetables for personal uses and only secondly as leisure spaces, however this definition has since changed.

2 See <http://www.statistik-bs.ch/thema/gesellschaft/familiengaerten> [Accessed 3 December 2012].

3 The positive effects of allotment gardens on individuals, communities and eco-systems in Switzerland have been well documented by Kretzschmar and Schulin (2004), Waner and Martens (2009) and Weiss, et al. (2010). Various research conducted in European countries have furthermore shown that gardens help build social cohesion and vitality in the neighbourhood and help facilitate social contact (Firth, Maye and Pearson, 2011; Rosol, 2004; Rubino, 2007; Appel, Grebe and Spithöver, 2011).

4 The data gathered and analysed for this case study was part of the research project “Urban development between entrepreneurial city policy and community governance: the development of a planning oriented approach of Social Work”. The project was funded by the Swiss National fund.

involved stakeholders. Based on this, a sample of eight actors was selected, who according to the studied documents, were involved in the conflict and publicly claimed an interest in the use of the allotment garden land, e.g. by being tenants and fighting for the gardens to remain, or public officials pushing for the redevelopment of the land into housing projects. The selected sample consisted of 1) stakeholders from the allotment garden association, 2) public officials (including local green planners), 3) political green activists, and 4) community-based stakeholders (see table 1).

For the research project, the grounded theory paradigm following Glaser and Strauss (1967) was applied, which allows for a theory embedded in data to be developed. The grounded theory approach was chosen because the research design was kept open and process-oriented. Thus, the research interests and themes to begin with were relatively broad. Based on this process-oriented principle, after the first cycle of interviews with the sample of eight actors had been conducted and analysed, six more stakeholders from the same four groups were selected and interviewed (see table 1). The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured approach, which included a list of themes and broad questions formulated beforehand and used in the interview situation to roughly guide the conversation, but giving each interviewee enough space and time to allow for own interesting topics and points to be brought up. Each interview lasted from 45 to 90 minutes, with most taking place at the interviewee's offices or homes and all being recorded.

Table 1
Sample of 14 interviewees

Group Sample -- Research Cycle	Allotment Garden Association (AGA)	Public Official (PO)	Political Activist (PA)	Community Stakeholder (CS)
RC1	1	4	2	1
RC2	1	2	-	3

This two-step process allowed a detailed picture of the involved interests, positions and values of the interviewed stakeholders to be constructed. Additionally, the accompanying document for the new city wide allotment garden law was used as an information source, to examine the potential future development of allotment gardens in Basel. The chapter describing the future outlook of the gardens is mainly based on the analysis of this new law and accompanying paper.

Theoretical framework: Transformations in society

Since the 1970s, fundamental changes have taken place in society, especially in the economic realm: the post-war industrial society that was based on mass-production and mass-consumption and referred to

as a Fordist accumulation regime, has moved toward a post-industrial, service-sector based on flexible production economy (Tallon, 2010). Fundamental changes have also taken place in the political realm, with Richard Sennett (1997, p. 161) arguing that:

(M)ammoth government and corporate bureaucracies are becoming both more flexible and less secure institutions. The social guarantees of the welfare states of an earlier era are breaking down, capitalism itself has become economically flexible, highly mobile, its corporate structures ever less determinate in form and in time.

Sennett (1997) studied the effects of reorganized institutional settings according to the Post-Fordist and neoliberal dogma of flexibilisation. He wrote that this institutional de-structuration is leading to ever more flexible and short-term work. The former stable Fordist hierarchical institutions and organisation, he argued, are increasingly being taken apart and re-structured, and the “social, civic dimensions of durable time” is being undone (Sennett, 1997, p. 170). In the labour market, durable contracts and stable careers are increasingly becoming exceptions and individuals are finding themselves under increasing pressure to adapt to the flexible and competitive working environments. The hierarchical political system of the Ford-era is being replaced with more “complex polycentric systems” (Ostrom, 2012) that, according to Foster (2011), allow for faster adaptations to changes in society and is leading to new distribution of roles between citizens and governments, with citizens taking on a more effective role in the governance of democratic bodies.

Changes are visible within social formations also, where an increasing diversification of relationship forms, family models and social communities is taking place. Communities, formerly based on shared social class and stable formations (Hitzler, Honer and Pfadenhauer, 2008), are today frequently limited in time, often based rather on shared lifestyles, and have become more flexible and heterogeneous, as different authors (see e.g. Ziemer, 2013; Alkemeyer, 2010; Willson, 2006) have stressed.

Fundamental changes have also taken place on the level of governance. Government and public administrations that in Fordist society took on a paternalistic role and focused on redistributive policies (Tallon, 2010), have moved towards network-based-policies focusing on growth and development. Included in this shift of public administration is the new important role financial and economic stakeholders play as co-producers of urban development through public-private partnership schemes such as Housing Market Partnerships (HID), Business Improvement Districts (BID) and Neighbourhood Improvement Districts (NID). A shift away from government and towards governance (Blumenthal and Bröchler, 2006) is being observed, meaning a style of governing that no longer is characterised by hierarchy and centralism, but rather is defined by pluralistic,

horizontal and network based forms (Sack and Gissendanner, 2007). This shift includes not only an institutional opening towards non-state and non-elected stakeholders, but also an increasing diffusion and fragmentation of decision-making actors and processes (Heeg and Rosol, 2007). The result of these changes is a dynamic and wide-reaching spectrum of governance that includes not only new participatory forms for civil society, but also classic as well as “normal” sovereign government forms. Included in this process is a new understanding of the role of the state, shifting away from hierarchical power position, towards a more initiating and moderating role.

These changes are accompanied by cities increasingly aiming to create the appropriate climate to attract further investment to the city, making wealth redistribution and other social responsibilities increasingly secondary concerns (Tallon, 2010; Hackworth, 2007; MacLeod, 2002). This entrepreneurial form of urban management places emphasis on attracting highly mobile and flexible production, financial and consumption flows to the city (Harvey, 1989) – a management form that influenced how the city of Basel viewed the role of allotment gardens, as the next chapter will look into.

City context Basel

With approximately 197.000 inhabitants⁵, the city of Basel is the third largest city after Zurich and Geneva in Switzerland, located on the border to France and Germany. Unlike other Swiss cities, the core city of Basel and its agglomeration do not form a political entity, but are separated into the municipality of Basel city and the municipality of Basel agglomeration. Because the city of Basel facing is these three political borders – towards its Swiss agglomeration, to France and Germany – available construction land is limited. In recent years an urban development policy has been implemented that aimed to decrease trans-regional urban sprawl and instead encourage growth within the city limits, referred to as “inner densification” by planners and public officials. Since 2001, the main urban development agenda has been to increase the inhabitant numbers of Basel city by building 5000 high standard new dwellings until 2011 that would help attract the desired new taxpayers. This goal was based on the policy strategy called “Logis Bâle”, which fuelled the entrepreneurial argument of Basel needing attractive new housing for middle class residents to compete with other cities for taxpayers and companies (Cabane, 2005). In addition to requesting new housing, an intensification of uses in public spaces was also called for, requiring a future co-existence of ecological, social and leisure uses on the city’s public spaces.⁶

5 See <http://www.statistik-bs.ch/> [Accessed 10 May 2015].

6 <http://www.logisbale.ch/d/Zielsetzungen.html#ziele> [Accessed 21 May 2013].

Due to its bordering situation and therefore limited availability of green fields, two types of potential construction land was identified: vacant brownfield land located in or in close proximity to former working class neighbourhoods in Basel (this included a freight yard, parts of the harbour and a small train station for regional trains) and green spaces that were not being used as official public parks. The latter included the former public football ground called “Landhof” as well as three allotment garden sites (of the 33 sites in Basel), which however were legally protected by a 15 year long rental contract that had been signed between the allotment gardens associations and the land owner, this being the municipality of Basel City. In December 2010, this rental contract expired and city planners and local authorities were intent on using parts of the green land as construction land, which led to the formation of the protest movement calling itself “Save the allotment gardens in Basel city”.

Chronology: “Save the allotment gardens in Basel city”

In 2009, one year before the rental contract ensuring the allotment garden use terminated, the local planning department held a media conference to inform the public about the planned changes to its zoning plan.⁷ During this conference, the announcement of the rezoning of approximately 1100 gardening plots – 21 ha in total – located on three different allotment garden sites within the city borders was made. These plans meant that 40 percent of all gardens lying within the municipality of Basel city were to be closed down, and instead new housing projects and public parks were to be created on the land. Numbers were given to support the cause: 1800 new dwellings for 4500 inhabitants were to be created there, according to official plans (Regierungsrat des Kantons Basel-Stadt, 2010).

Around the time of the publication of the plans, the yearly allotment garden central association⁸ meeting was held, that was visited by the association presidents and interested allotment gardeners. At this meeting it was discussed how the associations should react to the planned displacement of the 1100 gardening plots and which steps it could take to prevent the displacement. It was decided that a formal political process should be started, which in basis democratic Switzerland can be launched by civil society. In the municipality of Basel city, 3000 signatures by eligible voters are needed to request a change or abolition of laws or parliamentary decisions, which the city government can react to by suggesting a counterproposal. The civil society actors who introduced the initiate can then accept the suggested counterproposal and withdraw the initiate. However, if the counterproposal is not accepted and no compromise is found between city government and the initiate stakeholders, a citywide election takes place, where the eligible voters are asked to give their vote on the matter. Deciding to launch a formal political

7 The Zoneplan is the communal urban planning tool in Basel, which determines the use of land as well as the degree of building allowed to take place on a plot of land. It must be approved by the local parliament. For more information, see http://www.planungsamt.bs.ch/projekte/zonenplanrevision_der_stadt_basel.html [Accessed 10 May 2015].

8 Each of the 33 allotment garden sites in Basel are organized as an association, who all belong to the central allotment garden association.

process, the allotment garden associations collected the required 3000 signatures⁹ and launched an initiative against the planned rezoning of the gardens. A formal initiative committee was founded to coordinate the process, which consisted of seven members, four of which were also members of the central association of the allotment gardens in Basel, and was led by a local conservative politician. In August 2009, the initiative with 4644 signatures was handed over to the city government, requesting that all endangered allotment gardens on the ground of Basel city municipality would remain. The initiative furthermore requested a new allotment garden zone to be introduced in the zoning plan to ensure a protection of the gardens also in the future (Regierungsrat des Kantons Basel-Stadt, 2009, p. 2).

As in the same year, a local protest movement¹⁰ to save a former-football-stadium-turned-public sport-ground from being built over with new dwellings, had succeeded in mobilizing the majority of eligible voters in Basel to down-vote the project, public stakeholders were keen to avoid a similar outcome. For this reason, the head of the local planning department invited the two protest leaders – the head of the initiative committee and the central allotment garden president – for a series of negotiation talks behind closed doors. Over the course of several weeks, the negotiation talks were held with four people present: the head of the planning department, the planner responsible for the zoning plan, the head of the central allotment garden associations in Basel, and the political actor heading the initiative. Despite the positions being clear – while the planning stakeholders wanted to redevelop a large part of the gardens, the latter two wanted to prevent this – the negotiation talks resulted in a compromising counterproposal being formulated: the allotment garden areas that were to be rezoned and redeveloped was to be halved, from 20 ha to 10 ha. This meant that instead of 40 percent, now 20 percent of all gardens in the municipality of Basel city were to be displaced for new uses.

The protest movement splits

Even though a compromise had been found between the stakeholders at the negotiation meetings, after the negotiations had finished the initiative leader demanded that none of the affected garden sites would be completely destroyed and succeeded in getting the initiative committee to back this request. This led to an internal split in the protest movement between the central allotment garden president who demanded that the compromise should be accepted and the remaining committee who decided to push for their initiative of saving all gardens and refused to withdraw the initiative.

For this reason, a citywide election took place in May 2011, where the eligible voters in Basel¹¹ could choose between three different stances:

9 For more information on the requirements of initiatives in the municipality of Basel city, see <http://www.staatskanzlei.bs.ch/politische-rechte/initiativen.html> [Accessed 10 May 2015].

10 This protest movement called “der Landhofbleibtgrün” (“the Landhof remains green”) was made up of a heterogeneous coalition of different groups: the green party, the leftwing opposition party, the conservative people’s party and different nature groups, and requested that the area should stay unbuilt. For more information on this initiative, see: <http://www.landhof-initiative.ch> [Accessed 10 May 2015].

11 Only citizens with a Swiss nationality are entitled to vote in the municipality of Basel city.

- The original plan that would rezone 40 % of the gardens on Basel city municipality to use it as construction and development land
- The initiative, which requested all gardens to remain and be saved by a new allotment garden zone
- The compromise that would rezone 20 % of the gardens on Basel city municipality for re-development

In the campaigning process that preceded the election, the protest group split in two positions: The non-compromisers, who backed the initiative and had political support from two contrasting political parties, namely the left wing opposition party *Basta!* (Basel's strong Alternative) and the conservative right wing *SVP* (Swiss People's Party) and the compromisers, who were being supported by the green party, the central association of allotment gardens and nature groups. Yet, despite campaigning for different voting positions, both rejected the original plans based on the following arguments:

- The argument that the re-development of allotment gardens – which are all located at the city border – would increase urban sprawl. Instead, other ways of densification needed to be found.
- The importance of the allotment gardens as valuable social, ecological and production spaces for the plot holders was stressed. The counterargument used by the project supporters that public parks had similar values and effects was rejected by arguing that in gardens, people could be active and creative while in public parks, this was not the case.
- The importance of allotment gardens for the larger urban environment was stressed.

Actors and positions

Analysing the data from planning documents and interviews with stakeholder involved in the allotment garden conflict revealed that the two contrasting groups (project supporters and project opposers) did not follow usual political divisions but instead cut across parties. The supporters included such diverging stakeholders as the social democratic party, the conservative and liberal party as well as the business association, the association for engineers and architects, the association of homeowners and cultural organizations. This heterogeneous group used two ambivalent lines of argumentation why the original project should be supported:

1. The first argument put forward was that the allotment garden land had a high financial value as building land that needed to be realized through housing projects. This argument suggested that the current use as allotment gardens was of little value and needed to be replaced with the financially more attractive use as construction land.

2. The second line of argumentation stressed the value of the allotment gardens and argued that the original plan would ensure the protection of the gardens lying outside the ground of Basel city municipality, which outnumbered the gardens lying on Basel city municipality. For the sake of the gardens, the argument went; the original plan was therefore to be preferred.

Having described the arguments put forward by the project supporters as well as the project protesters, the positions can be summed up in three groups: those in favour of the original project, those in favour of the counterproposal, and those standing against both the original project and the counterproposal. These positions can be divided into two different argumentation lines. First, those stressing the high use and ecological value of the allotment gardens. From this perspective, a redevelopment of the land would de-value the space and not even the promised compensation measures¹² could make up for this loss in social, cultural and ecological value. This position stresses the diverse qualities of allotment gardens and argues that allotment tenants, often from low-income backgrounds, would be hit hard by a loss of garden. In contrast, the opposing view focuses on the exchange value of the land, and sees the possibility of redeveloping the land into new housing projects and public parks as having higher priority than the interests of what is perceived as a group of exclusive minorities. This position uses economic arguments such as the housing projects being able to attract much-needed new taxpayers and sees the compensation measures as sufficient to counterbalance possible negative effects for the gardeners.

¹² The compensation measures are described in more detail in the chapter on the future outlook of Allotment Gardens.

However, these two contrasting positions do not follow a simple macro versus micro approach – the interests of the city in general versus the interests of the affected users, as the table below, illustrating the position of the interviewed stakeholders, shows. Political Activists (PA) coming from nature groups would argue mainly with a macro view by stressing the ecological importance of the gardens for the entire city and its population. Allotment Garden Associations (AGA) stressed the multiple values of the gardens for its plot holders, while Public Officials (PO) would argue that allotment garden land should be used for housing instead. However, each of the stakeholder groups would also recognise and acknowledge the values brought forward by stakeholders representing a different position, with e.g. the interviewed public officials speaking of the social and ecological values of the gardens, but arguing that the housing value should be given higher priority. Only one of the interviewed groups, community stakeholders (CS), would not take a definite position and argue for the validity of both pro and contra positions. In table 2, the primary pros and cons for micro and macro level arguments are listed.

Table 2
Line of arguments brought forward by interviewed stakeholders. PO = Public Officials; CS = Community Stakeholders; AGA = Allotment Garden Associations; PA = Political Activists

Positions	Micro Level Arguments	Macro Level Arguments
Pro (in favour of the original redevelopment plan)	--	Economic Value for the city as construction land Housing Value (building new housing) for the city <i>Stakeholders: PO, CS</i>
Contra (against the original redevelopment plan)	High Use Value for individual plot holders (social, health benefits) <i>Stakeholders: AGA, PA, CS</i>	Ecological Value for the city (ecological diversity, climate benefits) <i>Stakeholders: PA, CS</i>

Before the election, the project opponents as well as project supporters engaged in polarising campaigns. The project supporters portrayed the allotment gardeners as being an exclusive minority, that for personal reasons wanted to prevent urban development from happening, while the opponents stressed it was not only the interests of a few, but of the entire city it had in mind. The election finally took place on the 15.5.2011 and resulted in the majority voting for the counter proposal, which received 55 % of all votes. The result can therefore be described neither as a victory nor loss for the protest movement – the middle way had been chosen by a slight majority.

The role of the allotment garden association in the protest movement

Research by Buhtz, Lindner and Gerth (2008) on allotment gardens have stressed the important role of the garden associations as administrators, controllers and organizers of communal activities that bring together a heterogeneous group of people. The case study of Basel illustrates that the purpose of the associations can go beyond that and that they in fact can be successful in protesting and mobilizing against official development plans. Interviews with representatives from the allotment garden associations, as well as interviews with public officials who were involved in negotiation talks, gave insights into the governing and organisation structures of the association. The analysis of the interview data formed the basis for this chapter.

Allotment garden associations in Basel are fundamental to the running and management of the gardening sites. In total, 33 associations exist – each site, consisting of 11 to 685 individual plots (Stadtgärtnerei Basel, 2011), must form its own association with its own association president,

and each plot holder must become a member of the association. This results in approximately 6000 association members, who are all under the umbrella of the central allotment garden association and its president.

This centralised hierarchy, with democratically elected representatives, in which the plot holders and associations are organized in and which are typical for organisations from the Ford-era (Gartman, 1998), was fundamental for the success of the protest movement. Based on the analysis of interviews with stakeholders from allotment garden associations, the following dimensions were revealed to have played an important part in this process:

Homogeneity and solidarity amongst the gardeners and their representatives

The social composition of the allotment gardens in Basel is increasingly diversifying (Zentralverband der Familiengärtnervereine, 1996). However, the majority of the plot holders still have a similar working class background (ibid.). Apart from the shared socio-economic situation, the plot holders share other aspects: the size of the individual plots is similar, the gardening rules apply for all members, and each plot holder has the same vote, rights and obligations as other plot holders in the association. The same applies for the presidents of the associations, who all rent their own garden plot, thereby being “one of the people” and knowing about the worries and needs of the other members. The representatives feel a strong responsibility for the allotment gardeners and see their role as fighting for their needs and interests, especially when confronted with displacement plans. This paternalistic approach (see Harvey, 2000) is based on a high degree of solidarity and trust amongst the traditional allotment gardeners and their representatives.

Formal organization structures and established communication channels

The 33 associations and the central association are based on a hierarchical system, which involves yearly meetings with set agenda items and established bottom-up communication channels with clear roles and distribution of responsibilities. Problems are discussed in the local association first, and if necessary carried to the central association by the representative. These set communication channels mirror the paternalistic relationship between allotment gardeners and their representatives: the plot holders carry their worries to the president, who takes them on and carries it to the contact person on the next level. This formalized way of communicating through contact persons and representatives functions from not only bottom to top, but also the reverse, which means that the decision of starting an initiative can be communicated quickly down to the individual allotment gardeners to mobilize for their support.

Strong representation and the power of the many

According to the interviewed allotment garden representatives, the structure of the associations is heavily based on trust, dialogue, agreement, representation and democratic decision-making. The interviewed president of the central allotment garden association stressed how during the negotiation meetings he was aware of having to represent the 6000 plot holders below him, which gave him a high degree of responsibility, but also a significant amount of power, as he could potentially mobilize this large group of people. His negotiation counterpart, the head of the planning department, held the formalised power of an official political stakeholder but was aware of the power the president represented.

Both parties held a different form of power they could use to their advantage. The political stakeholder, who wanted to get access to the sites located in attractive development areas, threatened to let all allotment gardens deteriorate if no concession was made. The president of the allotment garden central association and member of the initiative committee wanted to keep the number of displaced gardens to a minimum and threatened to go ahead with the initiative and let the voters decide. Despite the contrasting interests, and because both parties could initiate processes detrimental to the other party, they both agreed to make concessions, which finally led to the counterproposal being developed and finally accepted in the citywide election.

Future outlook of allotment gardens

After the election outcome, the original rezoning and redevelopment plans were changed, and rather than 40 percent of all gardens, only 20 percent were rezoned into construction land. Furthermore, an allotment garden law was developed and put into practice to provide a legal framework for the planned future transformations¹³ of allotment gardens. How will these transformations look like? The analysis of the new law and the descriptive paper accompanying it reveals four different dimensions of potential future transformations planned by the local authorities:

Spatial restructuring

Allotment garden sites are characterized by the spatial logic of the parcel, meaning the land is divided into multiple pieces of approximately the same size, which are rented out to individual gardeners. With its many homogenous plots, the parcels represent the homogenous mass principle of the Fordist society and are increasingly mismatched with the more heterogeneous and individualistic Post-Fordist society of today. Local planners and policy makers therefore request more heterogeneous plot sizes matching the increasingly pluralistic lifestyles. The drafted idea is to enlarge plots by putting individual plots together, but also to divide plots into smaller sizes.

13 These transformations are not yet implemented, but the legal framework has been set with the new law and the transformations are expected to take place in the coming years – even though no figure can be given on how many sites will be affected by the socio-spatial restructuring efforts.

The second fundamental spatial restructuring draft is the planned opening of the allotment sites for non-users. Currently most sites in Basel are protected by approximately one meter high fences and gates, to which only the gardeners themselves hold the key and can enter. In the future, public footpaths leading through the sites should be allowed to be built, so that also non-users can enter and pass the sites.

Use and social restructuring

In addition to making the plot sizes more diverse, the existing garden infrastructure is to be renewed, and new uses are potentially to be located on the newly created larger plots, such as pocket parks, playing grounds, gastronomic facilities, and ateliers. The connected goal is to establish more leisure uses in the allotment garden sites, often on the same parcels, to attract new user groups to come to the allotment gardens and use them as spaces of leisure and relaxation.

Organizational restructuring

Currently, the state commission for allotment gardens, which is led by the head of the planning department, is an important stakeholder. They set the gardening rules, level of the rent, decide which infrastructural investment is needed, as well as being able to overthrow the decision if a plot holder is thrown out by his/her association. The association in contrast is responsible for the management of the site and ensuring the individual gardeners keep to the official rules.

This distribution of responsibilities between the commission and the local associations will likely be changed in the coming years. With new public paths potentially leading through the sites, the city authorities will be responsible for the management of the paths. This means that while until now the association was the sole body responsible for the management of the site, in the future it will potentially have to share this role with local authorities. How this will influence the every-day governance of allotment gardens, however, remains to be seen.

Cultural restructuring

As a forth strategy, the cultural meaning of the gardens is being transformed. Until recently, allotment gardens have been primarily associated with food-production, and only secondly were the gardens recognized as being places of leisure and relaxation. However, the strategy of introducing new leisure uses points in a new direction, with the meaning of gardens increasingly being associated with leisure and recreation.¹⁴ To stress this change in meaning, after the election the official term used in Basel for allotment gardens was changed from the established term “family gardens” to “leisure gardens”. Despite not reflecting the current use motives, which the supporting paper in fact points out (see Regierungsrat des Kantons Basel-Stadt, 2012), the decision to rename the gardens was still made. This is a powerful signal for the attempted cultural transformation and shift towards new user groups, who are attracted to the gardens primarily as leisure spaces.

¹⁴ It even says in the accompanying paper (Regierungsrat des Kantons Basel-Stadt, 2012, p.5) that the purpose of the garden is to provide residents living in dense urban areas spaces of relaxation and recreation.

Compensation strategies

These restructuring efforts will, if implemented, lead to significant changes in the allotment gardens. In order to avoid further protest from emerging, interviews with public officials revealed that the changes are to be implemented slowly, and, according to the new law, spatial and financial compensations must be offered to those gardeners affected by the restructuring measures and who have lost their garden. Every individual must be offered a replacement garden of similar size, infrastructure, location and accessibility elsewhere (in close proximity to the place of living), as well as financial compensation for the made past investments in the gardens. Though these measurements demonstrate that the values gardeners attach to their gardens are recognized and the attempt of monetarising this value is made, the question remains whether financial compensations can sufficiently compensate for the social values the gardens hold and which are lost with the displacement.

Concluding remarks

“Social movements may be progressive or reactionary or just alternative without adjectives. But in all cases they are purposive collective actions aimed at changing the values and interests institutionalized in society, what is tantamount to modify the power relations” (Castells, 2007, p. 249). Social movements, as the quote by Castells illustrates, can take on different forms and motives, but what they have in common is to challenge institutionalized values and interests. Castells further goes on to describe social movements as “a permanent feature of society” which “adopt values and take up organizational forms that are specific to the kind of society where they take place” (ibid.).

The case study of the allotment garden protest movement illustrates the existing dialectic relationship between the form of social movements and the society in which it takes place. Based in the context of the basis democratic political system in Basel, political decisions can be challenged and overturned if an initiative receives 3000 signatures from eligible voters and a citywide election takes place. This basis-democratic system therefore provided the basis for the movement, but the well-functioning associations provided the movement with the necessary form and structure. The fact that the plot holders were already well organised in tight-knit associations and could quickly mobilise its members, was of fundamental importance for the movement. It was the combination of the Swiss basis democratic system and the large number of well organized and solidary allotment gardeners willing to combine their power as a kind of political countervailing power that led to the success of the movement in this conflict. In this process, the associations and its stable and continuous organisation structure, which allowed for the fast mobilization of its members, played a fundamental role.

The drafted allotment garden transformation ideas described in the previous chapter will lead to the restructuring of the gardens and enable flexible, temporary uses of the land, with different plot sizes addressing heterogeneous users. These transformation ideas, which have yet to be put into practice, will most likely lead to a shift, from homogenous gardening plots reserved mainly for food growth, towards heterogeneous plots for leisure and relaxation. The interviews with policy stakeholders revealed that the aim is to create a more flexible network of different temporary land uses on the allotment garden land and (partly) exchange the rigid parcel order with different sized plots. Included in these transformation ideas is the aim to replace the present hierarchical and homogenous user system with more complex polycentric systems of governance (Ostrom, 2011), which according to Foster (2011) prevent user groups from becoming too powerful. This is in line with Sennett (1998, p. 60) stressing that in network-based systems, a node can much easier be removed without the system collapsing, thereby being much more open to fundamental restructurings than hierarchical systems.

However, the allotment garden associations in Basel stands for a different model: close solidary nodes that were not willing to have a part of its system removed and instead formed a powerful collective protest voice. It was precisely the hierarchical organisation that, by starting a political process embedded in traditional government structure, enabled this to happen. Foster (2011, p. 132) writes that with hierarchical systems there is the danger that “incumbent institutions” develop, who work to the advantage of particular commons users and political power brokers. This is in fact what happened in the allotment garden protest movement. The incumbent institution of the allotment garden association represented their interest groups and became a political power broker. Thus, the case of the allotment garden movement in Basel is a good example of well-organised associations taking on a politically effective role through the political involvement of the representatives, becoming powerful stakeholders of the future of the allotment gardens. It is unlikely this would have also been the case in a more polycentric system, which does not follow the same paternalistic democratic system of representation. Summing up, this paper argues that the hierarchical, but at the same time democratic system of associations enabled the interests of marginalised groups to become visible in the political arena. With the gardens and its organisations in the future likely to be restructured, the question remains whether it was the last time the power of the many succeeded in getting their voice heard.

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