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Participation at any price? : the ambivalence of the renaissance of direct democracy in German municipalities

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Participation at any price?
The ambivalence of the renaissance of direct democracy
in German municipalities

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Abstract

One of the main assumptions on how democracy can be achieved puts faith on the positive effects of the direct engagement of the citizens themselves. Urban planning has adapted to this idea in many countries. With the acceptance of the principal of subsidiarity, political participation of the citizens in decision processes has become a key idea for the further development for the European Union. The support for participatory forms of politics and planning were underpinned by a large desire in the European societies. The example of Germany shows that forms of direct democracy had major impacts on urban planning. The analysis of the overall trend of the last two decades and of some selected examples however rises important questions. Framed by a sociological look on the new social and political conditions of German cities, it shows that the basic argument that more participation leads to more democratic grounding of planning can be questioned. In result, the review of the German cases shows that in a 'post-democracy' (Crouch 2004), urban planning is confronted with a different meaning of participation.

Key words: direct democracy, participation, planning, post-democracy, Germany, social cohesion

1. Introduction

Observations of the political development in Germany need to be based on the acceptance of contradictory developments. The national elections in 2009 showed the stunning success of a political leader (Guido Westerwelle) as a key promoter of neo-liberal politics, amidst the most severe economic crisis since the Weimar Republic. At the same time, local majorities have prevented impressively the realisation of neo-liberal projects all over the country. In Hamburg people have used a new form

of plebiscite to prevent the privatisation of public good twice. First, the initiative 'We are the City' has successfully worked against the selling of the water lines to a private investor and secondly, another initiative had found acceptance in the city hall with a proposal that claims the de-privatisation of the local energy supply system. In other cities, referendums have been successfully preventing the further selling of public housing estates to the global market. While more than 700,000 apartments already have been privatised (Voigtländer 2010) since 1997, in the last years both public opinion and political actors have been rather cautious to follow up with new privatisation projects. Especially the examples of Freiburg, Düsseldorf, Erlangen, Mühlheim, and Leipzig where a larger part of the local citizenry has been rejecting the plans for privatisation are often quoted as a start of the 'crisis of privatisation' (Candeias 2009). Other cities, e.g. Gelsenkirchen, Ahrensburg, and Uetersen have started to buy the once privatised public goods back, so that the recent trend is described as *Rekommunalisierung* (Hachfeld 2009). Other examples show that especially subjects of urban planning and of symbolic meaning are becoming increasingly issues for local referendums and requests for participation. The motives of these initiatives vary significantly and the actors and larger discourses in the media behind it are often hard to generalise. The initiatives against the planned Munich skyline and the reform of the school system in Hamburg are striking examples. In Munich, a plan for the building of some office high rise buildings have been begged by all political parties of the city hall but has been successfully blocked by a small group of citizens which had been mobilising the population to 'protect' the view on Munich without skyscrapers like in Frankfurt. In Hamburg, a reform for a more socially inclusive school system was boycotted by an initiative which clearly wanted to prevent middle class children to be taught together with inhabitants of segregated areas. Like in the case of Dresden where a bottom up initiative has forced the planning authorities to build a bridge despite its negative effect on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) enlisted heritage side, the discussion on the transformation of the political culture by forms of direct democracy has been intensive. The main concern is that these forms of intervention and participation in local politics and planning are mainly based on the interest of some groups in the city

and thus an expression of a particular view on the subject. In their rhetoric, these local actors often are claiming to represent the majority of the inhabitants and thereby illegitimizing the elected representative bodies.

2. Reconsidering participation

A broader perspective on participation and other forms of direct involvement of citizens needs to include a view on the changing framework of local politics in the light of the emergence of a 'post-democratic society' (Crouch 2004), which is suffering from a fatigue with the established forms of politics and where the risk for democracy does not lie in the appearances of extremism but in the undermining of its institutional and societal embedding. As the prominent examples of Rotterdam (Fortuyn) and Hamburg (Schill) have shown, the out-of-a-sudden rising of populist movements derives from a general erosion of the political system (Perger 2009). This kind of new pattern of political reaction are understandable against the background of a more profound change in society where security and cultural values are no longer guaranteed by a societal consensus and a certain coherence between the political culture and the political system (Berezin 2009). Sociological profiles of the supporters of populist movements and initiatives suggest that the average populist is somebody who is or feels threatened by social decline, the economic crisis and the sudden changes in his near neighbourhood (Flecker 2008). This analysis, however, does not reflect that populist positions are only taken up when there are no alternative political offers and when a sort of anti-establishment self-stigmatisation is given room in the public debate (Mello 2008).

As a closer look on the motives and actor constellations shows, the renaissance of direct democracy cannot be characterised as a simple broadening of democratic rights. Despite the mentioned cases of a critical position of citizens against neo-liberal local politics, evidence has been given that in some cases political attitudes are expressed, which touches the foundations of the societal consensus of minority rights (Vatter, Danaci, 2010). This concern seems to be relevant, as experiences in the United States suggest, a rather critical view on direct democracy (Gamble 1997). The argument not looked at so far is that these processes are taking part in urban societies,

which are undergoing substantial social transformation. As processes of gentrification, NIMBY ('not in my back yard') politics and socio-spatial fragmentation are shaping a new social geography, the question needs to be discussed what these kinds of direct democratic instruments have as an impact on the further development of the cities in terms of their social coherence, that is: the remaining idea of a city where all interests have an equal say.

3. Germany's participation boom

Urban planning in West Germany has been confronted by wide spread disappointment about the 'inhospitality of our cities', as a famous book by psychoanalyst Alexander Mitscherlich was entitled, in the sixties of the 20th century. The rebuilt cities of the post-war democracy have been supporting the new republic by its impressive output, the solving of the housing problem. However, the modernist approach to all parts of urban life had estranged many people from their environment and heavy protest against more of destruction of the old cities in the name of progress has been expressed. Protest was politicised by the movements of '68 and worked for a larger political agenda, which was encompassed by Willy Brandt's famous slogan 'Dare more democracy'. The so called *Häuserkampf* in Frankfurt where leftist groups fought against the takeover of the West end quarter, a workers and immigrants quarter up to then, and the struggle in West Berlin for a more careful and integrative urban planning resulted into a higher public criticism on the authoritarian style of planning.

In legal terms, the incorporation of citizens was provided for by the Building Laws (*Baugesetzbuch*) and in practice planning procedures informed the citizenry automatically. With the upcoming 'New Social Movements' in the seventies and at their high time in the eighties, a new interest was formulated by local inhabitants to take care of your own physical and social environment. Their main concern has been ecological subjects but at the same time planning authorities were confronted with the claim for more playgrounds and discussion about the life quality of the neighbourhood. As these social movements turned into professionalised and widely accepted social actor in society, the lobby for more possibilities to have a say in politics

on a local or regional level became increasingly successful. Due to the federal structure of Germany, regional (*Länder*) initiatives claimed a change of the constitutions of the *Land* to allow local and *Länder* referendums. Starting from Bavaria, now seven other *Länder* have included forms of direct democracy when local affairs are concerned.

4. The Post-Planning Society

Although these changes of law are the result of a long lasting fight of local and regional initiatives, they need to be seen against a changing German society and a different attitude towards urban planning. After 1989, the limits of the 'planned society' have become visible everywhere and beyond ideological debates on the failures of socialism and the freedom of the market, the local authorities were confronted with the limitations of their steering capacities in the light of international investments, industrial decline and restructuring, flows of migration and the diversification of life styles. As M. Greven (1997) described the situation in the 1990s, the gap between the political and institutional society and the individual became a crucial factor of change. Under new headings like *Bürgergesellschaft* and with a political shift of the conservative party, the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU), enacted at its 2003 Leipzig convention, individualisation no longer was seen as a threat but as solution for the patronising state who can no longer offer crucial security with regard to the risks of the globalised and fragmented society. It is therefore no contradiction that Bavaria as the most conservative *Land* of Germany was ahead in introducing forms of direct democracy where in the last years nearly half of all procedures in Germany have been organised.

There are more factors to be mentioned that have been preparing the shift towards a participatory kind of planning and local politics. The boom of participatory initiatives has taken many different forms. Beyond the legislative opening up, a wide spread dispersion of various techniques, methods, interventions and actors can be found in many German cities (Klages 2009). The debate on the role of planning has been implicitly always part of the larger picture but often only little been discussed. Klaus Selle (2007), as one of the main protagonists of the planning debates in Ger-

many, observed a remaining reluctant and rather defensive attitude of planners. While analytic approaches point to the growing relevance of governance approaches to local politics and thus the importance of a broader societal anchorage of planning into the local community, in other words: with more participation (Heinelt 2010), it seems that urban planning is adopting only slowly to these changes. The reasons for the 'time lag' are remaining still speculative and are not systematically researched upon. Evidence can be found in the research on the well documented activities of the citizens' activities regarding local concerns.

In the 'First Report on Citizens Petitions' the University of Marburg has recaptured the situation in Germany from 1965 to 2007 (Rehmet, Mittendorf, 2008). The study looked at those activities where citizens have sent in a form of petition to be heard in the city hall (*Bürgerbegehren*) which is mainly the precondition for the elected representatives to start a procedure for a citizens decision (*Bürgerentscheid*). The law of the different *Länder* requires more or less signatures for both parts of the procedures and allows a smaller or wider range of subjects to be addressed. Also, the federal differences are expressed in a stronger or weaker implication of the *Bürgerentscheid* for the decision in the local parliament. These preconditions have been changed during the last decade significantly and in general the possibility to start a *Bürgerbegehren* and to achieve a *Bürgerentscheid* has been increased, as in general the importance of the outcome of the citizens' decision has become more significant. Even when local parliaments still theoretically could reject the outcome referring to the law, politicians are well aware of the fear to be regarded as arrogant if doing so. In the case of Hamburg, the mayor stepped down after a referendum against his school policy.

5. Localising participation

According to this study, there have been 4,587 procedures of direct democracy which resulted in 2,226 *Bürgerentscheid*, in the last 50 years. The overwhelming majority of the cases have taken place in the last ten years. Only one out of seven *Bürgerentscheide* has been initiated by the local authorities what indicates that the instruments of direct democracy are mainly used when citizens do not feel represented or

rejected. Due to the prerogatives prescribed in the *Länder* laws, one out of five petitions was not acceptable for formal reasons. Those in line with the particular juridical frames have been rather successful. More than 40% have been accepted as proposal for a discussion in the local parliament. Every eighth petition was accepted by the politicians there without holding a referendum. In total, more than half of all the *Bürgerentscheide* have been successful.

When it comes to the subjects that have been touched, particularly urban planning procedures are touched. In most of the *Länder*, the subject of strategic planning (*Bauleitplanung*) is explicitly excluded from being a potential issue of a citizens' petition or decision. As a consequence, the majority of petitions is directed towards problems in the public social and educational infrastructure, that is schools and public baths. Although the area of urban strategic or master planning cannot be addressed directly in most of the *Länder*, the impact for urban planning is undeniable. As F. Rehmet and V. Mittendorf (2008) have found out, nearly every second procedure deals with subjects which are influenced by and linked to activities of urban planning.

To understand the significance of the German participation boom, it is important to see that there are regional differences. Mostly, these procedures are taking place in the *Länder* of Bavaria, Hamburg, Berlin, and Bremen. A closer look on the situation in Bavaria reveals that the cities of Munich and Augsburg are mainly contributing to the high rank in the statistics. Evidently, the appearance of more direct forms of democracy can be regarded as a phenomenon of large cities. It is also obvious that they are more successful in urban areas and large cities. Nearly three times more petitions are rejected because of formal reasons in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, which is the thinnest populated *Land* in Germany. A higher degree of successful petitions and decision making processes in large cities also shows that the boom of direct democracy can be linked to a certain profile of citizenry using existing opportunities for more participation.

6. Preconditions of participation

It is apparent that cities are not only showing a higher rate of petitions per

capita but that initiatives are better prepared, more successful and have a higher degree of acceptance. There is thus reason to assume a kind of professionalised form of using these kind of political interventions. In Hamburg, no less than 31 petitions have been send in and five of them have been followed up by a citizens' decision. In Munich, the rate of success is even higher, as seven of 20 petitions have been finalised with a successful citizens' decision. Other Bavarian cities show the same proportion and are contributing to Bavaria's extraordinary position as leading 'direct democratic' *Land*. Augsburg is an often quoted example of a very active participatory culture, as it had 18 procedures and three *Bürgerentscheid*. The case of Erlangen is even more impressive, where 13 out of 17 procedures have led to a decision by the citizenry. Regensburg holds the same high percentage (16 procedures and 10 *Bürgerentscheide*). Other cities of Bavaria, e.g. Passau (15/5), Nürnberg (14/1), and Coburg (11/8), indicate a similar situation.

With the exception of Coburg and Passau, being rather small cities, one can say that living in a larger city is likely to encourage citizens to engage themselves into direct democracy procedures. Although three quarter of all Germans communities have less than 5,000 inhabitants, only one third of all procedures can be found there. In contrast to expectations of the influence of size on the will of the individual to engage himself in local politics, it is the large city (more than 50,000 inhabitants) that sees the most activities of citizens in this regard. Different hypotheses have been discussed about the reasons for this discrepancy. It has been suggested that in smaller places, citizens still can influence discussions more directly without any formal procedure. Urban sociologist have worked out that in smaller places the acceptance of a life style of plights and acceptance of social norms is more likely and protest against authorities, e.g. the local mayor or planning authorities, is not a real option (Eckardt 2002). Forms of direct democracy are still regarded as 'unconventional' or 'rebelling' and a petition can be seen rather as a personal interest and not be made in the name of a generalised 'other'. The relevance of social cohesion, understood as a way of enabling social tights beyond social borders between different social groups, might be seen and the remaining significance of social control seems to be still more given in communities where face-to-face contacts, a short distance to the authorities,

a sensible presence of politicians and a rather slow path of change can be observed, which is the case of rather small than larger cities.

The relationship between social coherence and the relevance of (formalised) direct democracy appears to be negatively correlated in small towns and the consequent hypothesis would be that in larger cities petitions, referendums, and citizens' decisions are more used because less social cohesion, and a higher degree of segregation then, exists. This argument is underpinned by the observation that the larger the city, the less people participate in these forms of direct democracy. As one could argue that this has to do with the fact that issues in a small place might easier raise concern by a larger part of the citizenry, it would be then true for larger cities that common subjects are harder to find and thus single-issue-movements will never address subjects important for all parts of the community. In the following, the author wishes to argue, however, that the appearance of direct democracy cannot only be understood by a simple correlation with size but needs to be placed into the context of a changing social landscape in Germany where poverty has become a severe problem and cities are increasingly fragmented.

7. The case of Munich

Since many years, the Bavarian capital city of Munich shows the highest rates of rent and real estate prices in Germany for both office and housing buildings. The city has been economically successful since the recent three decades and could benefit by the positive outcomes of a structural change in the industrial landscape of Southern Germany. With heavy investments by the national government and the *Land* have let Munich to be one of the most innovative cities in Germany. The success has been assured by different factors but mainly because of the diversity of branches has been composed of enterprises of the highly advanced technological and knowledge sector (Heidebach 2003). More than 20,000 companies are registered as being contributing to the Information and Communication Technologies sector. Hosting three universities and many other research and educational bodies, the city has been developed as a diverse landscape of different firms. Now Munich serves for one third of the total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Bavaria and is predominantly

a service sector city (75%). The latter is also due to the presence of the administration and government of the *Land* (Freistaat).

With the turn to a city which is mainly characterised by service economy or production branches of high quality, Munich offers particularly work for high skill workers and increasingly less for low paid workforce. Those have been also affected by the current financial and economic crisis. In this context, Munich needs to be also regarded as a multi-cultural city, which mirrors the changes in migratory patterns. While guest-workers have been arriving in the city in the seventies and integrated into the Fordist economy of mass production, their children have reduced chances to find this kind of jobs and thus have difficulties in their integration into the labour market and into the society in total. It is especially the second generation guest workers who are suffering from the lacking social mobility. Once hosted in the newly built, modern and advanced housing estates at the fringe of the city, now these areas are problematically concentrating the guest workers families in areas of above average rates of poverty.

Munich represents the new logic of a post-fordist city where economic development does no longer follow circles of boom and bust but are leaving certain groups decoupled from the overall trend. While Munich has a rate of unemployment far below national average (4,4% in 2009) and not to be compared with the disadvantaged areas even within Bavaria, those social groups depending on low profile jobs have little chance to catch up with the trend setting branches. As a consequence, Munich has become a highly fragmented city with multiple lines of exclusion. The logics of division and segregation have become more complicated and can no longer be reduced to simple correlations, as the example of the ethnic minorities shows: one out of four inhabitants has a migratory background but meanwhile nearly every second migrant comes from a European Union member state. Attracted by the high quality of work and life in the city, these migrants stay in Munich for a certain period in their career and life but they are not intending to settle down like the guest workers did. As Sabine Hess (2010) worked out in her ethnographic research on migrants in Munich, these migrants are often part of a transnational flow of mainly academically skilled people who are profiting and contributing to the cosmopolitan

sphere in the inner city of Munich. Just a few metro stops farther, one encounters the different world of second generation migrants who were confronted with massive problems to realise their life concepts. As the narrative project of Susanne Korbmeier (2004) showed impressively by giving voice to youth of Hasenberg, on the outskirts of the city a whole own universe of fear, anger, despair and desperation exists without much connection to the rest of Munich. The official report on poverty in 2008 maps the social segregation of the city with statistical data: one third of all poor people are concentrated in five (out of 24) statistical areas, while the inner-city (Altstadt, Allach, Maxvorstadt, Schwabing-West) hosts only 10% of the disadvantaged persons.

8. Munich – for whom?

Against the background of a complex diversification of life-styles in the city, the planning of urban affairs respecting the different interests enters the era of direct democracy in the most intensive way. Since 1996, no less than 58 initiatives have been counted to address the city hall with their particular concerns. Except for a few, the subject covered are highly related to particular or more general parts of urban planning and urban life. Petitions have been sent in about the building of the three new tunnels, less housing in a new development area, a less dense building plan in Friedenspromenade, rejection of the building plans of Bergwachtstraße, against a café for drug addicts, for a better urban mobility plan, for a renewed subway station in the inner city and later for a faster building process of subway line 1, in favour of the rebuilding of the Olympia Stadium, against the settlement of the Biller Furniture Fabric, against lorry traffic at the Eichenau Public Bath, against the development of the Kraillinger Field, against the building of the new Olympia Stadium, against the introduction of the purple coloured tram, for a more reasonable fire workers station, in favour of the local libraries, against the ‘double towers’ at the Siegestor, in favour for a public green at Lindenallee, the opening up of the Heimstetter Street for bus transport, against the closure of the Schleißheimer Street for car traffic, against the building of a parking garage in the inner city, a petition ‘For a better Inner-City’, two petitions in favour for more public parks instead of real estate development, in favour for the noise protection at the motorway exit, in favour of

a new social ticket (public transport for poor people), against the 'party meadows' (use of public green for private parties), two more ecological motivated petitions and one against the building of a mosque.

As this list is indicating, direct democracy enables a wide range of subjects of urban planning to be part of public participation. A majority of petitions are addressing urban mobility projects or are related to it (like plans for car free streets, building parking garages). Only few petitions have, however, the potential to be of relevance for larger parts of the citizenry. This appears especially in those cases to be true when ecological concerns or green area protection are addressed. It is apparent, however, that there is literally none petition to be found deriving from one of the disadvantaged neighbourhoods. It is likely to explain this against the background of the availability of the educational and cultural capital of the inhabitants in one areas and the lack of it in others, consequently. On the contrary, one can say that the most initiatives are based on a NIMBY attitude towards urban life. This is particularly obvious in the case of the petitions against drugs addicts and those that try to protect the authentic appearance of the inner city by rejecting any kind of change, be it the double towers, a new tram, more strict park regimes or others.

Only two petitions can be counted as in favour of the less privileged inhabitants (local libraries and social card) and it is obvious that the social competences in the poor quarters are not developed to use direct democracy. Hasenberg, as one of these areas, has been integrated into the National Programme 'Social City', which works with the idea of empowerment. In 2001, for the only time, the inhabitants have been invited for a 'future conference' and the objectives are related to a more active participation in 'exemplary projects'. Despite the well intended idea for the improvement of the neighbourhood, this attitude towards participation seems to consciously exclude the idea of a decision by the concerned citizenry on these projects and thus reflects a lasting paternalism.

9. The case of Frankfurt

Frankfurt is another example of the advanced transformation of German society in its most dynamic cities. Frankfurt has become a place of global flows by eco-

conomic developments and as a result of a political support for a 'global city' idea of Frankfurt (Keil 2006). Frankfurt has generated a position in the German national urban system that provided a social embedding for the development of a high skill service sector, especially for the financial industries. Many early observers of the globalisation of Frankfurt expressed the fear that the city would develop as a more 'dual city' with sharper contrast between rich and poor (Noller et al., 1994; Noller 1999). Empirical research showed, however, that a simple transformation of the city with the emergence of new or more deprived areas, like in the case of Munich, does not take place (Hennig et al., 1997).

After the Second World War, urban planning tried to recapitulate ideas for common housing projects for which the so-called Nordweststadt and social housing estates in the areas close to the inner city still are testimony for (like the Mainfeld in Niederrad or Bonames). Since the early eighties, it has become visible that the 'integration machine' of Frankfurt started to stumble and to malfunction especially in those areas where until then migrants have enabled to find their first accommodation. As the manufacturing industries required decreasingly less unskilled 'guest workers', many newly arriving immigrants stuck in the Central Station area, the Gallus quarter or Bornheim. In contrast to former years, they could not use the money earned in the manufacturing industries to find more decent housing elsewhere and the concentration of poor people in the inner city created an ecology of crime, prostitution, low wage services, drugs dealing, and spatial decay.

Still, many parts of Frankfurt are consisting of relative stable social characteristics, like Fechenheim, hosting since decades seven times as much poor people than the richest neighbourhoods. Important changes have, however, also occurred in the recent five to ten years (Klagge 2005). Some areas, e.g. Bonames, show clear signs of decline (Kütemeyer 2008) while processes of spatial and social upgrading can be traced in others. The case of Bornheim is a good example, which no longer functions in the geography of the city as a place to come and go sooner or later, that is to say: as a kind of classical zone in transition (Halisch 2008). While the percentage of inhabitants with a migratory background in Frankfurt generally increased over the last two decades, in Bornheim it dropped significantly. At the same time rent prices went

up and the gastronomic infrastructure upgraded slowly and offers more high quality food.

The area next to the Central Railway Station (Bahnhofsviertel) shows all signs of a gentle form of gentrification where the public space now is used by tourists, bank clerks, and the inhabitants and users of this area at the same time (Kütemeyer 2008). What Sharon Zukin (2002) once described as 'domestication by cappuccino' for some parts of the gentrified neighbourhoods of New York, can be also said about the Kaiserstraße and related places. The adjacent quarters of Gutleut and Gallus have also undergone substantial social and physical changes but in a rather different form. Here, large housing estates for the better off have been implemented and thereby shaped a social contrast that is felt on both sides, in the homes of the homeless and the inhabitants of the rich enclave of the new West Harbour.

As a result of these changes, the overall feeling in the inner city and even beyond is surveyed as positive and attractive. It is clear that the city now inhabits mainly people who do like this kind of gentrified urban sphere. Politics and planning have totally taken over a perspective which furthers the upgrading of the physical and social infrastructure. In the preparation of the master plan for 'Frankfurt 2030', it is foreseen to even more intensify the density with high quality housing. Ten thousand apartments for the social disadvantaged are planned and already decided to be constructed outside the inner city. With the new building of the central office of the European Central Bank (ECB) at the old working class area of the East Harbour, the fear of people – as the online platform of the urban planning department of Frankfurt had been able to show in their survey – that this place will be 'lost' and so places to feel at home and to recognise themselves in the city has become widespread. Analyses of the real estate market indicates that the expected and feared further rise of rent prices is possible (Hille 2009; Behrend 2008).

Direct democracy in Frankfurt in a formal sense first was tried out by an initiative in 1993. As their intention to avoid the closure of the slaughterhouses was not in line with the Hessian law (which are more strict than Bavarian), this petition was rejected on legal grounds. When the *Land* corrected to strict regulations on petitions in 2003, Frankfurt saw the mobilisation of the citizenry immediately for four times.

Then, the subjects have been rather political and less oriented to urban planning. Twice a petition was sent in to save the neighbourhood libraries for closure; one initiative had politicised the cross border leasing practices of the Frankfurt magistrate who wanted to sell to and lease them back from an American investor. The frustrating results of these procedures might have discouraged and only in 2005 another petition campaign began. Its concern touches a very controversial aspect of urban planning, the still necessary rebuilding of the war destroyed parts of the inner city. A small but influential group of citizens mobilises with this initiative for a rebuilding of historical houses in a traditional way. The background is that some parts of the inner city, e.g. the so-called technical city hall, ironically hosting the department for urban planning, needed to be either totally rebuild or renovated with high costs. The political establishment and the vast majority of important actors, including prominent architects and the local media, are of the opinion that the city centre should not be made to be a place of nostalgia and therefore should give contemporary concepts of urban design a chance. In the discussion of the city hall on the petition, the political parties offered a compromise that was accepted by the citizens and thereby avoiding a *Bürgerentscheid*. Meanwhile, the debate is again highly on the agenda of public discussion as the citizens have rejected the published plans of the urban planning department for the future rebuilding of the inner city.

In the following years, the initiatives seemed to focus on concerns of the neighbourhood. This is true for a petition in favour of a playground in Eschenheim. However, the mobilisation of citizens remained mainly politically motivated. One attempt tried to prevent further privatisation of social infrastructure, another aimed at the protection of the Gross Trade Hall (Großmarkthalle) to be destroyed for the rise of a new skyscraper of the ECB. A third, still actual campaign, works against the building of a new bridge over the river Main in the east of Frankfurt. This can be also seen as an attempt to prevent the building of the ECB, which the bridge needs to connect with the rest of the city.

10. The example of Niederrad

In contrast to Munich, Frankfurt has established some sort of neighbourhood

planning forums. The status of these participatory opportunities is, however, discussable. Despite the fact that the Frankfurt urban planning authorities are dedicating much time and interest for these meetings with the concerned citizens, neither the accountability of the results, nor the start or process of these kinds of participation are transparent and decided on a rather ad hoc basis by the planners. Based on a two-years-long observation of the process in the neighbourhood of Niederrad (Eckardt, Klocke, 2010), the limitations and difficulties of these processes seems to be evident. Niederrad is an example for the ongoing transformation of a neighbourhood into a place of social insecurity and a loss of social coherence. It is not a 'hot spot' of social problems, a 'potential ghetto' or something alike. The quarter is rather diverse ethnically, culturally, and socially. Located at the edge of the inner city and in sight of the upper class housing of the West Harbour, the area has found the interest of real estate investors.

The city of Frankfurt has addressed one part of Niederrad with its special programme intended to foster social cohesion in the neighbourhood. This is the Mainfeld settlement, a six block social housing estate of the seventies with 13 floors each. A living space for ca 5,000 people: once attractive for young families, now elderly residents, young migrants and people with social problems (mainly young men) are occupying these estates that were in the hands of the AGB Holding, a private enterprise that is weakly steered by the Frankfurt municipality. When this area was included into the social city programme of Frankfurt, a large survey was undertaken and the Mainfeld inhabitants could express their needs and desires for the 'aging' housing estate. The holding promised in a contract to renovate one block every year but until now no major investment was undertaken. Shortly after these promises was made, the Frankfurt planning department started an initiative with the churches of Niederrad to prepare for a Future Forum Niederrad. The broader public of the neighbourhood was invited to take part in meetings and working groups. From the beginning, however, the question of the further development of the Mainfeld was explicitly excluded.

While the problems of the built and social environment of the rest of the neighbourhood seems to legitimise this thematic exclusion, it became suspicious

when the AGB Holding director gave an interview that he prefers the total demolition of the Mainfeld to built up a new high quality housing estate. When some inhabitants began their protest against being not even informed by his plans in whatsoever way, planers, politicians, and holding authorities tried to calm down the local anger and opened up a new 'Neighbourhood Mainfeld Talk'. In these meetings, however, the inhabitants have been rather informed that there was any kind of participation in the decision making. In 2010, the city officially announced a design competition for the New Mainfeld which should leave open what is the best solution (renovation or new buildings). There are, however, serious signs that the decision is already taken. Informal interviews with authorities ('Can you please do not quote this'), but also a bus tour organised by the planning department to show the Mainfeld inhabitants 'attractive alternatives' to live somewhere else supports the wide spread fear of long residing inhabitants that they will be forced out, even in the most gentile and participatory way.

11. Conclusions - discussion

Already the Federalist Papers (Furtwangler 1984) have warned us that the will of the people could lead us to consequences which we would not like to see happen for the *bonum commune* of our cities. They saw the greatest danger in the likeliness that minority positions of any kind will not be heard and taken into consideration into the decision making if only those count who has got the most voices on his side. As later Alexis de Tocqueville has been afraid of, the predominance of the majority can create an atmosphere where the freedom of speech and of thought is subdued to a conformist perspective (Horwitz 1966). Also, in post-war Germany the reluctance of introducing forms of direct democracy was motivated by the fear of a too dominant majority, based on the bad experiences of the Nazi period and the repressive, the so called *Volkswille*.

When looking at the development of participation and direct democracy in Germany now, the question is whether these concerns are the most relevant and whether there is reason to be afraid of this kind of hegemony of a majority will, again. This paper tried to argue that the recent state of direct democracy needs to be seen in the light of a transformed society, which is most evidently visible and prob-

lematic in the metropolitan cores. The undertaken analysis on the social fragmentation of cities in Europe has indicated in earlier research another view on their political form of governance (Andersen 2001). The political will of a majority is something that seems to be rather difficult to imagine at all in a exhausted democratic society where the nexus between social milieu, cultural preferences, spatial embedding (neighbourhood) and political representation has become more than fragile and is lost often totally. The cliché of the social-democratic workers' neighbourhood, where all men love their football club, the women chat over the local news and social control is strongly enforced, might have never existed that way, but to some extent has the European city been a place where people shared views on life and politics with those they live together. Now, we see that the longing for such a kind of cohesion is on the hand lost, but that, on the other hand, especially the middle and upper class groups of a city are attempting to recreate this kind of homogeneous places, mainly for their own purposes.

As the examples of Frankfurt and Munich show, the newly created opportunities for direct democracy are not used to influence decisions which would touch a majority of people directly. They are still mostly narrowed down and single-issue petitions, which are either carried by a broader political interest (anti-privatisation, etc.) or by the assumed benefit for the initiative taker. The examples given, however, point furthermore that these kinds of democratic opportunities with a rather far reaching potential significance (up to decision making) are in contrast to the rather weak and arbitrary forms of participatory planning that can be found in urban planning processes and mainly in the disadvantaged areas. In general terms, the options of participation have different impacts due to the stronger or weaker embedding in the framework of decision making. While the better-off creating a culturally diverse urban environment attractive for certain life styles, the de-linkage of certain areas of the urban development seems to accelerate. For the first group, opportunities for direct democracy offer a strong say into local politics, as in contrast, participation in the less favoured areas is nearly de-politicised and reduced to decide on details of design (if at all). What is most apparent, and from a viewpoint of democracy concerning, is the disappearance of the political subjects that would allow to form a shard political

view and a non-residentially based coherence and feeling of belonging to this city. The situation, in short, can be described as follows: when people talk, they do not talk to each other and about the concerns of the others. Initiatives for more participation and empowerment are, however, seldom looked upon whether they support a notion of social cohesion that goes beyond taking care of oneself and one's direct neighbours. In a period of tremendous loss of faith in the democratic institutions and the competences, capacities and willingness of 'politics' in general, a sensibility for the question (cp. Steffek 2008) whether participation is really 'reinventing local democracy' (Fung 2008) and empowerment lets to a political culture of 'sharing the city' (Abbott 2005) or whether they are deepening the gap of social coherence by adding a political chasm of citizenry: claims for empowerment for the losers in the post-industrial city and a direct decision by the winners of the urban transformation to a knowledge based city.

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