CULTURE-LED URBAN REGENERATION

The discursive politics of institutional change

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Summary

Urban policy makers have in recent years sought to use culture-led regeneration to design collective visions of urban futures. In doing so, they compete for external investment and political support of voters, civil society and interest groups. Critically elaborating the political economic approaches to urban regeneration, this chapter traces the various interpretations and interactions through which actors and institutions legitimate and renegotiate the issues motivating policy decisions in the local context. Discourse analysis is used to examine the Museumsquartier Vienna and the planned Humboldt Forum on Berlin’s Schlossplatz, two of the most controversial sites of urban regeneration in Europe. So how can culture assist urban leaders to redefine legitimacy and govern institutional change? The lessons from these old European capitals facing diverse pressures of state-transformation serve to elucidate culture-led urban regeneration as an open-ended and local political process of institutional change. Contrary to public choice and critical approaches of urban political economy, argumentative policy analysis conceives discourse as a source of political agency and legitimacy that can reconstruct power structures. The chapter concludes by discussing the potential contribution of discourse analysis to ‘the cultural turn’ in urban political economy as a field of regeneration research and practice.

Introduction

Since the 1980s, cities’ competition for external investment resulted in a focus on culture in urban economic development. Cultural pluralization has affected state transformation also by opening the field of cultural policy as a local political arena. Also in the academic debate, the focus on place and community introduced the cultural turn into urban studies and shifted cities into the focus of globalization studies and policy advisors. In response to these diverse challenges, urban policy makers use cultural heritage to design collective visions supporting their claims for a political and economic revival of their constituencies. But instead of promoting collective mobilization, the symbolic nature of urban culture can also initiate political contestation and conflict. This poses the questions of who makes places and how in the local context. How can culture – in its various forms and meanings – serve urban leaders to redefine legitimacy and govern institutional change?
Associating cities with public space and centrality, urban cultures have emerged as focal points of larger societal transformations, reflecting the various interpretations of their respective worlds. The contemporary urban debates – brought onto the public agenda by academics, practitioners, business leaders, and politicians for various different reasons – contribute to constructing a revival of some cities. Thus, the political discourse about urban culture constitutes an open-ended political process of institution building and state transformation. The examples of specific culture-led urban regeneration sites illustrate how political processes connect the local micro-level of community identities and socio-cultural diversification to the macro-context of European state-transformation and globalization.

This chapter begins by reviewing the literature on culture-led urban regeneration as discussed in the public choice and the critical approaches of urban political economy. It then summarizes important lessons from the cultural projects of the Museumsquartier Vienna and the planned Humboldt Forum on Berlin’s Schlossplatz, which present two of the most controversial sites of urban reconstruction in Europe in recent times. I argue that the lessons from these old European capitals serve to assist in our understanding of culture-led urban regeneration as a local political process of constructing urban and institutional change.

By combining discursive interpretation, process tracing and reflective comparison of the two in-depth case studies, I reconstruct the regeneration narratives and embed the diverse outcomes within the different institutional contexts. The sources used for the discourse analysis stem mainly from the media, in particular, newspapers were highly informative on urban politics (e.g. Der Standard, Die Presse, Kurier, Kronenzeitung in Vienna; Berliner Zeitung, Der Tagesspiegel, Berliner Morgenpost, Berliner Kurier in Berlin). The political debates focused on the period between 1990 until 2002, partly extended in the case of Berlin until 2010. Other information sources include some national magazines (Profil, Falter in Vienna; Spiegel, Zeit in Berlin), official documents (e.g. parliamentary protocols of Deutscher Bundestag), interviews with decision makers and bureaucrats and public podium discussions. In addition, an extensive body of literature – specialized monographs, grey literature, guide books, and city marketing brochures – served as an introduction to the urban contexts (De Frantz 2011). Thus focusing on discourse in policy-making, I exemplify the open and diverse contexts of urban institutions and intervene in the political and academic debates by contributing my own research narratives of urban regeneration.

**Culture-based regeneration: the political economy of urban development**

Resulting from critical reflections of the universal knowledge claims and the idea of progress associated with modernity, the cultural turn in the social sciences has tended to oscillate between two extremes. On one side, a normative argumentation for culture and community has led to subjective or place specific perspectives stressing the ambiguity of power and identity. On the other side, the fluidity of identities has implied that culture can be manipulated at the will of powerful interests. This ambivalence is also reflected in urban studies, and particularly urban political economy’s take on culture. From their various political economic conceptions of cities, the neo-classic public choice, the neo-Marxist globalization critique, and the new institutional perspective have come to acknowledge the relevance of culture for urban development. This has fostered a debate on the normative and empirical merits of culture-led urban regeneration as a policy model (Keating and De Frantz 2004). Continuing and elaborating this debate, this chapter discusses how the theoretical and epistemological implications of the cultural turn in urban political economy may contribute to a redefinition of the concept of urban regeneration.

From the perspective of political economy, place constitutes a varying relation between states and markets, which mediates the impact of globalization. Possibly in response to the perceived analytical problems of cultural studies, many political economists have avoided explicitly addressing the concept of culture. Treating it as an essential or fixed characteristic of a place, culture became like a black box that was excluded from the analysis. Instead, local dependence, production clusters, social capital, creative class, entrepreneurial milieus, public good, regulative regimes, or governing coalitions served as
explanatory variables for local difference of economic performance. Urban culture is thus a comparative advantage that attracts mobile consumers whose investment choices may also profit the local production base (Clark 2005; Florida 2005). In addition to the critique economists had applied to the original public choice model (Martin and Sunley 2003), the concepts and methods employed for analyzing the so-called creative class and its importance for urban economic growth have met with some skepticism (Peck 2005).

The term of culture-led urban regeneration rose to prominence mostly among critical observers of the so-called ‘neo-liberalist’ trend toward urban economic competition. Most studies reflect in some way or other Philo and Kears’ (1993) critical notion of cultural city-marketing as ‘selling’ and ‘making’ of places. The contradictory forces of capitalism at work in global markets often become manifest in negative social consequences of cultural regeneration such as exclusion, alienation, and homogenization, which may even result in the loss of the locational advantages for the local economy. Thus distinguishing the functions of culture as an economic capital and product from those of a public good, critical political economists aim to explain disparities and uncover conflicts of interest between or within urban societies.

The field of cultural policy then shows different institutional structures and diverse paths, embedded in the various countries’ different constitutions and histories (Bianchini 1993). Traditional symbols, and in modern times increasingly the arts, have long served the institutionalization of statehood by representing the power of monarchs, to entertain the elites, and to pacify the people. In a similar vein, republican governments have used such instruments of legitimacy to build and preserve the collective identities of nations, to advance education, and to symbolize the equality of the citizens. In many countries, including Austria and Germany, cultural policy still serves the representation, construction, and legitimation of state power (Wodak et al. 2009).

Emerging from the historical building and the present transformation of states, the contemporary cultural field testifies to a more complex institutional context (Lowndes 2008). Diverse contemporary rationales of cultural policy constitute a ‘heterarchy of governance’ (Pratt 2005): economic discourses construct culture as an exchange commodity, as the public choice of voters, or as a public or meritocratic good. The emerging economic paradigm – of corporate sponsorship, state privatization and cultural entrepreneurship – adds up to and sometimes is given priority over other, pre-existing social and political policy objectives. But the flourishing economies, social cohesion and successful adjustment strategies of some European cities speak of a good fit of some local institutions with the new political economic context (Le Gales 2002). For, culture is not only an instrument of political or economic strategy or a public good that can in principle profit everybody. Culture also has social functions of constituting collective identities, practices and values that feed feelings of belonging and guide policy decisions.

Urban culture is then often associated with the localized notion of public space, which is ideally defined by plural civil society, participative democracy and self-government (see Part 3, especially the chapters by Paddison and by Jacques for more discussion of public space and urban regeneration). Political references to these mythical European roots of historical city-states may have contributed to a contemporary urban revival (Le Gales 2002). But as state-transformation opens diverse constraints and opportunities for local actors, such collective mobilization processes are not always harmonious or successful. In addition to conflicts over the distribution of public investments and their returns, the diverse normative associations with legitimacy can initiate political contestation (Keating and De Frantz 2004; De Frantz 2008; 2011).

Thus, culture serves multiple – political, economic and social – functions, and the collective interpretations of urban heritage in a specific local context are diverse. As urban policy makers aim to position cities as political and economic entities, the various claims to urban culture give rise to political choices between competing policies. This draws our focus to the policy processes in the local context. Reviving the community power debate in the context of globalization, urban political economy can be understood as tension between the elites’ shared interest and the plural coalitions ‘of’ or ‘within’ local societies (Harding 2009). Concerning culture-led regeneration, this raises the question of how urban
culture – its various frames and discursive associations – may help to create, within relatively stable institutional processes, the plural politics emerging from a changing political-economic environment.

Yet, studies of culture-led urban regeneration or urban cultural policy have taken to discourse analysis less frequently than could be expected. Apart from De Frantz (2011), Garcia (2005), for example, has used discursive content analysis for a longitudinal study of the impacts of culture-led regeneration upon image change in Glasgow. In planning studies, discourse translated on one side as a methodological tool to disclose the dominant power structures underlying policy making (Murdoch 2004), and on the other side, as a normative claim for community participation (Healey 2012). However, in other fields of the political sciences, the new institutional debate about cultural aspects of power has translated methodologically as well as conceptually and epistemologically into discursive approaches to policy analysis (Hajer 2009; Fischer and Gottweis 2012). The insight that knowledge and power are socially constructed has led to a rethinking of the policy process and the practice of research itself. Instead of inherently fixed power structures and interest constellations producing ‘unauthentic’ cultural representations for the global market, the diverse adjustment pressures can be anchored and renegotiated in the discursive interactions constituting local policy decisions. The researcher turns from an outside observer and provider of substantive expertise to an active participant as claims-maker and potentially powerful mediator who may also contribute alternative cultural visions to the policy process. Elaborating this constructivist approach in the field of urban policy (Hajer 2005; Rydin 2005), the following sections examine culture-led urban regeneration as a discursive political process constituting diverse and open-ended institutional changes.

Lessons from Vienna and Berlin

Instead of either deploiring the decline of urban culture, or celebrating its global, local, or European revival – as much of the literature does in one way or another – I propose the reversal of the question: how does culture serve to make places urban? How does culture in its various forms and meanings serve urban leaders in redefining legitimacy and governing institutional change? How do policy makers construct and reconstruct the social and political institutions constituting cities as symbolic and material manifestations of urban centrality? This reformulates Philo and Kearns’ well-known hypothesis of the selling and making of places as an enquiry into local politics as an open-ended process of institutional change.

Researching urban culture only as a product, variation, or resource of larger political economic restructuring processes neglects the complex and diverse local contexts of contemporary cities. Instead, by addressing the relations between these contradictory concepts, I propose to take a dynamic approach to power relations by focusing on culture as input as well as output of policy-making. I approach urban culture as an open-ended concept that can take on diverse meanings in different contexts as well as reconstructing the power relations constituting the institutional legitimacy of these contexts. By enquiring into urban culture in various specific local sites, we can understand the political struggles involved in this search for a collective future and thus shed different contextual perspectives on the process of state-transformation.

In De Frantz (2011), I aimed to complement the urban debate by focusing on a previously neglected aspect: the role of political discourse as a realm for pluralism and agency in the local policy process. For example, the Museumsquartier in Vienna and the planned Humboldt Forum on the Schlossplatz in Berlin can be seen as symbolic political projects of culture-led urban regeneration that illustrate two contested local perspectives of state-transformation.

Situated in the historic center right next to the Imperial Palace and other historic monuments of the capital city, the Museumsquartier Wien represents Vienna’s most ambitious cultural project in recent decades. The new complex combines a broad variety of cultural offers including museums, an exhibition hall, a contemporary dance venue, two event halls, offices and workspaces for international artists and local initiatives, as well as cafes, restaurants and shops.
The Museumsquartier goes back to an initiative by the Austrian Federal Government for the cultural regeneration of a prominent location in the center of the national capital. The idea to turn the run-down baroque buildings into a museum complex first appeared in a national parliamentary debate in 1977. The former imperial horse stables required urgent renovation, as they had been used as a fairground since the 1920s. In 1980, the project development agency was established as a public partnership of the Federal State (75 per cent) and the City of Vienna (25 per cent). The following years were marked by a discussion of the different use possibilities – from shopping mall, to hotel and back to varying museum conceptions. In 1989, the Federal minister of science and education, Erhard Busek (Conservative Austrian Peoples Party, VP) took up the plans of his Social Democratic (SP) predecessors, and awarded the architectural competition to the Austrian architects Ortner & Ortner. In 1990, the Federal Parliament approved the project, pending only the municipal parliament’s decision on the zoning legislation and the construction permit.

However, the project was confronted by a wave of protests led by several prominent experts who formed a citizens’ initiative in defense of the historic cityscape. Supported by UNESCO, the local right wing opposition party (Freedom Party, FP), and between 1992 and 1994, an aggressive media campaign carried by a tabloid newspaper with about 43 per cent national coverage (Kronenzeitung), the protests achieved major political leverage. The evolving controversy about architectural design and use concept addressed Vienna’s history as former capital of the Habsburg Empire, the legacies of National Socialism, contemporary globalization pressures and opportunities in the new post-1989 European context. The political controversy inhibited the realization of the project and allowed for a flourishing local arts scene to develop autonomously in the abandoned complex.

Particularly, the two consecutive mayors of Vienna’s long-standing Social Democratic government reacted indecisively to the political pressures. Ultimately, a personnel change in the respective Federal ministry prepared the way for a compromise. In 1996, the municipal parliament found a way to transfer its political responsibility back to the Federal bureaucracy, which mandated an expert commission with decision-making powers for the preservation of the cultural heritage. The redesigned buildings were smaller and the symbolic towers were removed, so that they would not interfere with the historic sight axes of the cityscape. The built heritage was extended to include not only baroque but also the nineteenth century buildings in the complex. As a result, the whole inner city of Vienna could be approved as a UNESCO World Heritage landmark in 2001. Doing away also with many of the small local initiatives but including instead more contemporary programming, the new cultural district was inaugurated in June 2001. Despite the long preparation phase, it has been marketed highly professionally since and is mostly well accepted by tourists and local residents.

While many of the sites included in Berlin’s urban reconstruction process of the 1990s constituted part of the city’s economic restructuring (Strom 2001), some of the new buildings also served the symbolic representation of Germany’s new capital city. Whereas, by the turn of the twenty-first century, most of these new developments were realized successfully, the Schlossplatz represents the focal point of a highly emotional and politically sensitive controversy about Berlin’s identity. Constructed by the German Democratic Republic (GDR) regime in 1973 at the site of the former city castle of the Prussian Hohenzollern kings (Stadtschloss), the Palast der Republik emerged as a contested site following German reunification. The Prussian castle, partly in ruins after World War II, was demolished in 1951 to make space for a political and military parade area. As part of the GDR regime’s redesign of East Berlin’s center, the symbolic state building contained the plenary room of the ‘People’s Assembly’ (Volkskammersaal), the GDR parliament that was actually a rather powerless body in the authoritarian government of the Communist party executive. For a short period after the fall of the Communist regime in 1990 and before German reunification in 1991, the post-Communist transitional parliament used the building for a few sessions of the new – some say, first democratically constituted – government of
Eastern Germany. But more importantly than any political symbolisms, the Palace of the Republic held for many East Berliners memories of their everyday lives during the GDR period. As the official cultural center, the palace had offered concerts, theaters, restaurants, a discotheque, and other facilities used for entertainment, recreation and celebratory events.

After its closure in 1990 due to asbestos contamination, the GDR building stood as an empty ruin. During the 1990s, Berlin’s local coalition governments were led by the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), which showed weak leadership, enforced by the changing stances of individual politicians and internal cleavages regarding the future of the Schlossplatz. In 2002, the Federal Parliament voted for building a cultural center of Federal and Municipal museums and library institutions, the so-called Humboldt Forum, in the reconstructed form and façade of the former baroque castle. In 2003, the Federal Parliament confirmed this policy by calling for the demolition of the palace. However, the redevelopment destiny of the Schlossplatz remained unclear. Further uncertainty was caused by the city’s – and intermittently also the German Federal State’s – economic and financial crises. Various other factors continued to fuel the discussion: the reluctance of the urban government, constituted since 2001 by a leftist coalition of Social Democrats (SPD) and former Communists (PDS); several cultural events using the vacated shell of the GDR Palast der Republik for an interim period in 2004; and a temporary Kunsthalle, a building accommodating contemporary arts exhibitions erected on the square in 2008–10.

Only in 2006 did the now conservative-led grand coalition in the Federal Government enact the demolition of the Palast der Republik, which due to technical difficulties took long into 2009. In 2007–8, the Federal Government also realized the architectural competition for the Humboldt Forum in favor of a strictly historicist design resembling the former baroque castle, drafted by the architect Franco Stella. Neighboring and complementing the old national museums on the Museumsinsel, the cultural complex would contain the extra-European collection of the Prussian Heritage Foundation, parts of the Humboldt University’s libraries and the Berlin Municipal library. The major financial share in the project would be carried by the Federal Government, which in 2009 installed a public foundation to administer the construction and organize the private sponsorship. However, the construction start will be postponed until 2014, which is beyond the present governing period of the conservative party CDU, now in coalition with the liberal FDP instead of previously with the SPD. Also the private finance for the historicist façade remains insufficient.

Thus by the end of 2012, despite a general political will and partial consensus, the outcome is still relatively open-ended. Yet, the political consensus achieved in the course of the public debate so far reflects the process of German reunification: materially through the elimination of the built GDR heritage; symbolically, through the acknowledgement of the need for a shared representation of the heterogeneity of Germany’s national heritage in a historically continuous form; and procedurally, through the constitution by the city and the Federal Government of various joint commissions and governing mechanisms for the planning of the new capital city and its heritage.

Case studies’ discussion

Situated in two European capital cities with rather similar heritage, federal governments and party systems, these projects constituted political responses to pressures of institutional transition. Historic buildings endowed with heritage value were not only reused for contemporary urban planning purposes oriented at everyday use by urban residents, or to generate direct economic income. More importantly, the regeneration of these symbolic sites was meant to represent the cities’ political and economic potential externally and to mobilize social and political support for the associated changes internally. The necessary renovation measures for run-down historic buildings in the city centers, initially mere administrative matters of urban planning and heritage protection, were thus turned into large-scale symbolic political
projects. Rather than being left to the market interests of private investors, both these political initiatives combined the efforts of the Federal state and the municipal government for redefining the urban visions from the top down. But extensive public controversies postponed the planning decisions and changed the political outcomes.

The urban policies resulted in different outcomes, politically as well as culturally: the Museumsquartier in Vienna was opened in 2001 and, despite initial criticism, has since gained acceptance among the Viennese public. The Palast der Republik on the Berlin Schlossplatz was demolished with the construction start of the planned Humboldt Forum still pending by 2012. This divergent capacity for collective action was also due to the different political-economic capacities of the institutions. In the case of Vienna they had been long established and stable, in contrast to the new and unconsolidated ones of the recently reunified, new German capital city. Berlin’s role in the German Reich, the Second World War, the subsequent Cold War, its reunification and new capital status, have been characterized as a ‘historic exception’. Following Germany’s reunification in 1991, the state in transition was called ‘Berlin Republic’, after the new capital city, representing a desire for ‘normalization’ as a ‘European city’. Vienna, the former capital of the Habsburg empire, also suffered – though in more indirect ways – from Europe’s partition after the two world wars. With the reopening of the borders following the fall of Communism, it was – besides Berlin – one of Europe’s metropoles most exposed to the transition in Central Eastern Europe. However, Vienna’s Social Democrats have governed the city in machine-like style since the 1920s and the urban government has been well embedded in Austria’s consensus-based and corporatist democracy since 1955.

Faced with an increasingly competitive European market, the world-famous historic images of both these capital cities seemed to offer policy makers ample cultural material for urban repositioning strategies combining political mobilization and city marketing. But the attempts to manipulate the meanings of the cultural heritage touched upon deeply rooted identifications and sensitive collective memories. The emerging cultural conflicts provoked political contestation, which mobilized social forces far beyond the local realm. Thus symbolic political strategies could indeed intervene and open rigid identity structures. But political as well as cultural institutions were sticky, and the responses to such interventions diverse and unpredictable. As the urban leaders struggled among different interpretations of urban change, it became hard to manage the redefinition of cultural visions as part of a regeneration plan.

Incapable of controlling the evolving contestations, Vienna’s and Berlin’s political leaders followed rather unintentional and informal institutional paths: in accordance with their more consolidated government, the former turned out more pragmatic and oriented at internal compromise for the sake of external representation. While in both cases the sets of meanings emerging from the public contestations remained quite incoherent, the debates transformed the normative legitimacy of what should be built. The outcomes showed a variety of urban collective action in different contextual combinations of more or less consolidated interest structures, institutional practices and symbolic identifications. This is what could be called a cultural aspect of institutional transformation, complementing the material aspects of culture as collective good, economic capital and product of urban regeneration strategies.

These plural political processes may be explained by the exceptional centrality of capital cities for nation states, as places of struggles over the historical building and contemporary transformation of statehood. The case studies also reflect the contemporary version of an old tale of two European capitals: Vienna and Berlin share a similar cultural heritage, associated with their paths to nation building and their roles in the two great wars of the twentieth century. Throughout most of these interlinked histories, they have stood in intense competition and exchange by representing contrasting models of modernity: one harmonious, consensual and sticking to its historical path; the other one diverse, inherently contradictory and perpetually longing for change. In the new European context since the 1990s, this competition emerged again, as urban leaders considered the other capital city as a benchmark for their repositioning strategies. Both cities emerged from their marginalized post-war positions and confronted
an increasingly competitive market environment in the context of European integration, the post-
Communist transformations in Central and Eastern Europe, and the various phases of EU enlargement.
(See the chapter by Carpenter in Part 2 for discussion of the EU’s impact on urban regeneration.) In
this context, they came to represent central places of Europe’s heritage, including positive connotations
of cultural achievements and creativity; but also the memories of nationalist aggression, wars, occupation,
and crimes against humanity. All these were reminders of the ‘uncultured’ side of European history. As
part of this process, the national significance of the capitals’ cultural heritage was complemented by and
competed with images of their European and global fame.

The case studies exemplify symbolic regeneration sites where some of the multiple functions and
identifications that constituted the capital cities as centers of statehood were renegotiated. But contrary, for
example, to the historic revolutions leading to the establishment of national states and their capital cities,
the cases hardly pointed to any new transnational model of political centrality. Due to the weakness of local
political leadership, the symbolic potential remained largely unused – or unfavorably used – for the purpose
of governing urban collective action. Instead, the central governments could regain control of the urban
arenas through major changes to the projects and some normative adjustments in the cultural fields. However,
they had minimal effects (mainly in transitional Berlin) upon the formal institutions of the states.

The political potential of such contested symbolic interventions may rather highlight a general aspect
of urban culture so far underweighted in urban political economy. In the two case studies, cultural
markers such as architecture, museums, monuments, and fashionable cultural centers with their various
programs symbolized such urban sites. Their construction complements existing historic sites that carry
complex meanings of collective belonging. In addition to corporate representations such as the office
skyscrapers on Berlin’s Potsdamerplatz, old churches, castles, national museums, or traditional artifacts are
still important symbols of the respective cities and their specific characteristics. All these stand for urbanity
as a general concept as well as being associated with the specific contexts of Vienna and Berlin, the
histories of the sites and the planning of the regeneration projects.

The strategic use of cultural symbols becomes more complex when the promotion of the economic
location is intertwined with political representation. The positive image building might serve elected
officials in mobilizing political support and distracting voters’ attention from more serious social or
economic problems. In general, investments in culture are highly visible to the public, thus showing the
local regeneration engagement of the government or municipality. Architecture in particular can often
represent a personal monument to the leader who initiated it. At the same time, its multiple symbolisms
can address, mobilize, and integrate diverse actors into a collective political project. Political institutions
are often grounded in territorial culture – of places, cities, regions, or countries. In the case studies, the
urban heritage was not only deeply rooted in local society but also carried larger symbolisms of capital
cities embedded in European statehood. They provoked reminders of the conflicts gleaming underneath
the collective memories of the nations and were renegotiated in the new transnational – European and
global – contexts.

Thus, state transformation affects urban culture by opening the field of conventional cultural policy
as a local arena of plural politics. This institutional transformation involved a reorientation of diverse
objectives within the cultural field. It also resulted in a partial restructuration of institutional practices
across various policy fields, as well as between state dominance and coordinated local action. However,
instead of a coherent development policy, these outcomes resulted from plural political processes of
contested interactions that were not controlled by any one dominant power (De Frantz 2011).

Conclusions
Culture-led urban regeneration aims to ‘make places’ by way of material reconstruction. More importantly
cultural activities, symbolic manipulation, and political discourse can serve to intervene in the collective
associations with these material markers. Local culture is also an institutionalized set of habitual practices and deeply anchored identity structures that may protect the historical heritage against such transformation pressures. However, none of the theoretical axioms – of culture as a public good, a capital and product, or as community – seemed to fully capture the cultural and political dynamics I found in the case studies.

Complementing the structural conceptions of political economic power, the comparative case study research illustrates how cultural symbols and discourse can change the legitimacy of institutional power itself. While Vienna’s urban context was more path-dependent, and Berlin’s more affected by large-scale political changes; the former more unitary and consolidated and the latter more plural and fragmented, both policy processes combined tendencies of contestation, mutual adjustment and integration in various ways. Thus, external restructuring challenges did not give rise to an optimum public choice. The institutional base was not a unitary, static essence of place unifying the political elites either in support of or in resistance to capitalist globalization, nor even polarized along a growth versus anti-growth divide. But in response to the deadlock of the formal political institutions, the diverse interpretations of urban symbols situated universal urban themes in specific local contexts and turned them into contested political arenas where institutional change was discursively renegotiated. As plural political responses interacted with the institutional practices, the culture-led policies of urban regeneration involved political choices, reflective agency, and public politics as a bottom-up local force upon state restructuring. Local refers here to the urban context as a plural political public evolving from cultural diversity and manifested in the locally specific contexts of the sites of urban regeneration.

Therefore taking a constructivist approach proved most appropriate to research the open and diverse contexts of urban politics. Beyond limiting discourse analysis to a methodological tool, the constructivist policy approach shifts the focus to the discursive constitution of culture in the policy process. As statehood constitutes a multi-level process with diverse actors and practices, the symbolic centrality of urban culture can anchor political interactions within the local arena. But the diverse, contextual and reflexive nature of urban culture leaves the outcomes of these interactions open-ended. These intersubjective and creative discursive dynamics lead the cultural turn toward a plural conception of local state transformation as reflective institutional change. Discursive agency thus poses an analytical complementary, as well as practical alternative to the reproduction of power structures. Instead of merely criticizing the structural constraints of global markets, research in practice also implies the societal responsibility to identify opportunities for collective action and thus constitute political agency in the institutional processes.

In reconstructing the discursive politics of culture-based urban regeneration, I have aimed to contribute to regeneration debates through a triple reflexivity of my research practice:

1. analytically, identifying political agency in the different responses to a plural institutional context. Here, the actors’ potential to choose among various strategies and their interactive processes of deliberation helps reconstruct collective action – either more integrated or more contested or fragmented – thus possibly overcoming structural constraints of states and/or markets;

2. epistemologically, reflecting the relationship of academic and political practice in the construction of knowledge. By referring to shared ideals of urbanity and employing them either critically or affirmatively, theoretical models may translate into political norms that guide collective action in various local contexts; and

3. ontologically, showing the theoretical contribution of a constructivist perspective of local institutional state-transformation. My research may thus contribute knowledge as ‘cultural material’ for developing theoretical and political alternatives to ‘neo-liberal’ market determined conceptions of urban development. More conceptual as well as comparative work will be required though to specify these contributions of discursive policy analysis to urban studies.
References


