Editorial: Cities and the politics of urban sustainability

Samuel Mössner[1], Tim Freytag[2], Byron Miller[3]

[1]*Institut für Geographie, WWU Münster, Heisenbergstraße 2, 48149 Münster, Germany, moessner@uni-muenster.de*

[2]*Institut für Umweltsozialwissenschaften und Geographie, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, 79085 Freiburg, Germany,*
tim.freytag@geographie.uni-freiburg.de

[3]*Department of Geography, University of Calgary, Canada, byron.miller@ucalgary.ca*

Today, in many cities around the globe, sustainability policies appear to be broadly consensual. Over 20 years ago, however, environmental movements stimulated antagonistic debates and discussions, raising pointed questions around how society could cope with limited resources, unrestrained growth and rising carbon emissions. With their roots in German and U.S. environmental activism (*Uekötter* 2014), environmental movements often directly linked environmental issues with aspects of distributional justice, redefining conceptions and norms of geographical distribution of environmental improvements and amenities on the one hand and sites of environmental degradation, on the other. Procedural justice became an equally important issue, aiming at the question of who can participate and influence or even make political decisions in this realm.

Since then, the claim for a 'greener' society seems to have become widely accepted as a common sense global value. Today, we see a wide and deep institutionalization of environmental values and policies at various geographical scales, such as national spatial planning codes and regulations, companies' guidelines and marketing campaigns, and in everyday activities and lifestyles. Indeed, as *Swyngedouw* (2007: 20) has pointed out, it is virtually impossible to find anyone who is opposed to the idea of sustainability. Why is this so? Has sustainability won in the battle of ideas, backed by a multitude of elites?

Taking a closer look, however, we can see that environmental and sustainability goals have been profoundly transformed since they emerged at the urban scale (*Béal* 2012: 406) and were translated into urban political practices. The capacity to fundamentally question capitalist growth and democratic practices has been reduced and supplanted by 'manageable' practices that seek to reconcile the contradictions between growth and sustainability, subordinating sustainability to growth machine politics and economic growth. Rather than elaborating an exit-strategy from growth-oriented pathways, 'actually-existing sustainability' policies re-define the limits to growth, placing them somewhere in the distant future, and propose a way to maintain traditional politics. This transformation has evolved as a set of rather non-conflicting consensual political practices, facilitated by technocratic approaches that offer solutions to specific problems, rooted in unquestioned expert knowledge. Governments increasingly seek to emulate so-called 'best-practices', looking for role-models and indicators that can help steer policies toward the provision of "a clean environment, a growing economy, and a society that promotes harmonious citizen interactions, while simultaneously limiting carbon dioxide and other GHG emissions" (*Zhou* et al. 2015: 448). However, these technocratic approaches only selectively problematize urgent problems. Such approaches strive to develop sophisticated, yet apolitical, principles and guidelines that help "to define the

elements and goals of urban sustainability" (*Joss* et al. 2012: 109). The reduction of complexity that goes with positivist approaches allows for the identification of 'best-practices' and role-models for green growth.

With this special issue we argue that research on 'best-practices' and role-models to green growth limits the range of political debate that is necessary to rethink the pathways towards a sustainable urban society. We present a variety of alternative perspectives that help to critically approach 'best-practices' and techno-scientific framings of sustainability by unveiling power relations, contradictions and conflicts (*Freytag* et al. 2014) that are linked to 'actually existing sustainabilities' (*While* et al. 2004; *Krueger* and *Agyeman* 2005; *Krueger* and *Gibbs* 2007).

This special issue is comprised of five papers. *Andrew Jonas*, *Rüdiger Wurzel*, *Elizabeth Monaghan* and *Winfried Osthorst* investigate new alliances between local governments, businesses and civil society that have been built in Hull (UK) and Bremerhaven (Germany), two structurally disadvantaged port cities, around new opportunities opened up by climate change and the green economy. *Aida Nciri* and *Byron Miller* analyze the contested relationship between district heating and combined heat and power (CHP) in Sweden since 1945, focusing on the changing roles of different government and industry actors in the adoption or blockage of combined systems. Examining Boston (US), *Thomas Vith* and *Samuel Mössner* show that the implementation of sustainable modes of transportation is linked to questions of social division and exclusion. *Lidia Monza* discusses the privatization of exclusive housing and its contribution to lifestyle and social inequalities in Milan (Italy), while *Veronika Cummings* and *Aurel von Richthofen* point out how sustainability has been progressively mobilized as a narrative for urban planning and regional development projects in the Gulf States.

All in all, with this special issue we aim to contribute to a richer understanding of the political mechanisms and strategies of building and challenging societal consensus around urban sustainability. We are keen to understand the urban and regional conflicts that emerge through sustainability politics and the possibilities for political alliances and social movements pursuing agendas of both resistance and support. In other words, we seek to bring the political back into the sustainability discourse.

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