Performing gaps
The relationship between alternative economies and urban planning in Dortmund

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1. Introduction: Alternative economies in urban planning processes

In light of the urgent global crises, both science and practice alike emphasise the necessity of a 'progressive, emancipatory, socio-ecological transformation' (Acosta/Brand 2018: 17, translated from German). Key actors of the transformation process are so-called alternative initiatives, whose approaches aim to establish local resources and regional economic cycles in the context of critiques of the traditional growth paradigm. Alternative initiatives are often located in urban areas characterised by dynamic and high concentrations of exchange and diversity that encourage spaces of opportunity for the emergence and testing of alternative economic approaches (Krueger/Schulz/Gibbs 2017). These spaces are often fiercely contested (Kipp 2018: 212). They are locations of political negotiation, as practices of transformative innovation and alternative action are associated with a questioning and criticism of the hegemonial settings and patriarchal power relations linked to traditional economic understandings.

At the heart of the critique is an understanding of success and growth that focuses primarily on quantifiable variables. Numerous initiatives and social movements therefore try to counter these traditional economic forms with *other* ways of assessing value that use alternative and non-quantifiable factors. Such approaches include practices of solidarity, civil society self-organisation, sufficiency and all notions that focus on social well-being, health and social justice. Particularly prominent in the literature are discussions of

'transition town movements' (Hopkins 2008), revived debates about urban commons (Helferich 2012; Nikolaeva/Adey/Cresswell et al. 2018), economies for the common good and cooperative approaches. All of these approaches are characterised by their criticism of conventional patterns of consumption, production methods, top-down forms of organisation and competitive market economy behaviour (Schmelzer 2018; Schmid 2018; Müller 2018; Lange 2017). Both science and practice therefore see such approaches as playing a significant role in driving the transformation of society.

While resistance as protest can indeed function outside of social structures, this article argues that it is not only resistant activities outside of social norms and fields that are of great importance. In order to establish and perpetuate alternative approaches and initiatives, ultimately an interface with the societal mainstream is required. For alternative initiatives this interface primarily involves cooperation with municipal administrations, planning and politics. Alternative initiatives are frequently dependent on spaces and areas in the city which urban planning authorities allow them to use (sometimes temporarily). Urban administrations and policies enable the emergence of these niche spaces, protect them from market forces (even if often only temporarily) and, ideally, provide the necessary infrastructure.

At the same time many of the focuses of the heterogeneous post-growth initiatives mentioned above coincide with the original tasks of urban planning. Beyond a neoliberal 'public management' approach (Peck/Theodore/Brenner 2013; Fuller/Geddes 2008), urban planning continues to be viewed as the guardian of urban processes (Klaer 2008: 203) and is tasked with creating opportunities for social action and managing them within the framework of political guidance. Urban planning should focus on the objective of creating good living conditions for all parts of society (Wiezorek 2017: 53).

Urban planning administrations are thus less rejecting of alternative approaches than the classical neoliberal critique implies. Nonetheless, in the context of well-rehearsed and routine administrative practice, the initiatives are often (benevolently) marginalised, which hinders the development of cooperative, equal relations between alternative initiatives and urban planning. The literature contains research on the emergence of alternative economies, sub-cultural initiatives and growth-critical innovations in local areas and their diffusion on different spatial scales (Gibson-Graham 2008; Roelvink 2011; Fuller/Jonas 2003; Schulz/Affolderbach 2015). However, the

nexus between alternative initiatives and the bodies of urban administrations and planning has received comparatively little attention to date.

In light of the lack of research into the potential of interactions between initiatives and urban planning, the empirical study on which this article is based attempts to identify theoretical, abstract and explanatory approaches from the empirical field (Strauss/Glaser 1967). Using the case of the city of Dortmund, the empirical research focused on the requirements and support needed by the initiatives to enable better urban integration beyond neoliberal appropriation. To this end, interviews were held with representatives of various initiatives and the urban administration and participant observation was conducted in the period from February to May 2019.

It quickly became clear that there were significant gaps in the interaction and cooperation between urban planning and initiatives, as we briefly outline in Section 2. A possible explanation for such gaps is provided in Section 3, drawing on the social theory of Judith Butler (1991; 1995). On a conceptual level, we argue that it is important to recognise the gap between the externally defined, hegemonic characterisation of what alternative initiatives should be, on the one hand, and the self-performance and lived-out position of the initiatives, on the other hand. This gap is responsible for the speechlessness alternative initiatives and urban planning mutually experience and for potential misunderstandings between them. We want to demonstrate here that Judith Butler's notions of performativity and processes of subjectification, which were originally related to social constructions of gender identities, can also be applied in research of economic dualism (mainstream – alternative) and have particular potential for providing explanations of the lack of effectiveness of alternative initiatives in urban contexts.

2. The marginalisation of alternative economies in urban planning

The growing number of alternative approaches in the fields of supply, consumption or sufficiency and mobility indicates not only the great potential here for urban development and planning but also the increasing spatial relevance of these activities. However, despite numerous proposals for sustainable, democratic and participative urban planning (Elsen/Reifer/Oberleiter

et al. 2015; Klaer 2008), post-growth initiatives and approaches have so far been largely marginalised in urban planning processes.

Although in theory towns and cities are called upon to apply post-growth initiatives, in practical terms this does not occur. However, on the level of federal state politics in, for instance, North-Rhine Westphalia, such initiatives are given considerably more attention (WIKUE). The consumer advice centres and other organisations that are concerned with the networking of so-called 'spaces of possibilities' (Kerekes 2015, translated from German) also refer to the significance of these initiatives and their contribution towards the transformation of society. A similar position is adopted by planning sciences. The (urban) policy side occasionally recognises individual potentials but seldom specifies ways of fully exploiting these potentials. Accordingly, in many cities – including Dortmund – there are strong networks between individual initiatives, but for questionable reasons they tend to be reluctant to involve urban planning and administration.

In Dortmund, for example, structural change resulting from the steel crisis that started in the 1970s enabled the early establishment of a broad landscape of alternative initiatives and approaches. Dortmund is characterised by a comparatively high number of still unutilised brownfield sites, and in recent years there has been a strong focus on promoting the cultural and creative economic fields. The city particularly favours a policy that promotes a creative economic milieu true to neoliberal maxims (Florida 2005). This involves, firstly, a creative approach being taken to the brownfield sites. Secondly, it recognises an innovative strength in niche economies and creative initiatives that can successfully overcome the effects of deindustrialisation (Wascher/Hebel/Schrot et al. 2018: 4). The policy is flanked by a focus on the university as a locational advantage and the embedding of the city in the 'Spatial Strategy for the Ruhr 2035+' ('*Raumstrategien Ruhr 2035+*'), which inter alia aims to attract and retain businesses (Wagner/Hegmanns 2017: 91 ff.).

A creative scene has developed in the shadow of this classical neoliberal economic policy, giving rise to many initiatives based on alternative economic approaches. These initiatives benefit from the availability of the old brownfields and comparatively low-price housing and commercial sites. However, they also profit from the political promotion of creative and small-scale innovation, the creative milieu surrounding the colleges and university and a supra-regional planning strategy that supports such approaches.

Nonetheless, there are barriers to the development of alternative initiatives, but – in the general opinion of the various actors – they could be overcome with the use of cooperative approaches by the urban administration and planning.

In Dortmund, however, this kind of cooperation is extremely rare in practice. In our research interviews, representatives of alternative initiatives repeatedly referred to a lack of flexibility and openness and insufficient trust and goodwill on the part of urban planning. The wish was expressed that there should be more courageous support of approaches that the city does not view as contributing significantly to traditional economic growth. In this context, reference was made to the need for better support and the development of growth-independent criteria for urban planning (Lamker/Schulze Dieckhoff 2019).

A central role is played by the interpretation and application of (legal) regulations, statutes and ordinances, which – in the opinion of the initiatives – could sometimes be more creative, even within the framework of the existing provisions. Due to their low degree of institutionalization, the alternative initiatives often have great difficulty fulfilling or complying with rules and regulations. From the point of view of the alternative initiatives, the urban administration's self-conception of themselves as the 'guardian of laws and regulations' and their associated notion that 'all [rules] are enacted for a good reason' (Interview 6 2019) is not conducive to flexibly supporting the concerns and projects of the initiatives. Especially for initiatives that are active at the borders of regulation conformity or that move outside the provisions, urban planning needs to apply small-scale, cautious and situationally specific efforts to transfer them into formal structures. However, this is only possible if the initiatives' activities are recognised as valuable in the first place. Moreover, it is often unclear which regulations apply to new or different ideas, which can then lead to misunderstandings and later to rejection. In addition to the problem of adherence to a largely inflexible set of regulations, the initiatives also criticised the inertia and anxiety of urban planning vis-à-vis innovations and change and in this context 'wished […] that then the plans of thirty years ago were not dug out but that people would really look at the current situation and really determine the true needs' (Interview 2 2019). Many initiatives were discouraged by the fast and direct rejection of their ideas. There was a wish for more dialogue about the reasons for the rejection so that it would perhaps be possible to together identify a different way in

which the individual projects could be implemented (Interview 1, 2, 5 2019). Lastly, attention was drawn to the discrepancy between bureaucratic processes and procedures and the temporal and spatial routines and rhythms practised by the representatives of the initiatives. This is a classic problem of cooperation between alternative initiatives and urban administrations and is much discussed in the literature (Cramer 2013; Selle/Wachten 2011; Selle 1997).

Private-sector planning offices (Interview 6 2019) also support this impression of a lack of flexibility and exercising of individual discretion. This similarly confirms the need to allow experimental trial-and-error to be part of planning and to 'first let things just go their own way a bit' (ibid.). This is, however, only possible under cooperative conditions when there is no shying away from conflict.

These and other statements seem to contradict the self-definition and self-perception of urban planning within the urban administration. Those responsible for planning suggest that informal instruments help them to be particularly agile and react flexibly to different claims and types of use. The urban administration furthermore emphasises that urban planning processes are extremely 'people-oriented' (Stadt Dortmund o. J., translated from German). Interviews with representatives of the urban administration also clearly show that seeking individual solutions and especially compromises is indeed a major concern of planning. Here reference was made to the way in which the requirements of alternative initiatives had been accommodated by making generous use of the scope for weighing up interests (Interview 5 2019): 'They are colleagues with whom you can consider how you can manage something like that and how you can do that. And a great deal is possible there'. The urban administration demonstrates openness towards projects with an uncertain or risky outcome (ibid.) and explicitly states in this context that funding does not depend on success or on agreements about objectives. Projects that planning representatives predict will fail even right at the beginning are particularly difficult to fund, but plausible reasons are nonetheless put on the table: 'Why should I fund a project that I think from the outset will fail? […] Well, basically I just fund the learning process. How many euros is a learning process worth in comparison to a project that you can see will work?' (ibid.).

In summary, the empirical insights show that alternative initiatives and projects are fundamentally possible in Dortmund but they have to be based

primarily on *established* visions, values and understandings of the meaning and success of urban planning. In addition to the focus on traditional ideas, the empirical findings also suggest there is mutual misunderstanding and that this results in a lack of support. The mutual misunderstanding is not caused only by inertia within the urban administration. The flexibility often displayed by the urban administration frequently goes unrecognised by the initiatives. The relationship between the urban administration and the alternative initiatives is characterised by different perceptions, contrary expectations and conflicting ideas which lead to a general speechlessness with one another.

The selection of empirical approaches discussed above demonstrates that alternatives to established, conservative and traditional structures and values are not always understood by the urban administration as criticism. They are rather viewed as open spaces and innovative experiments and are acknowledged by the dominant system of urban planning. The relationship between urban planning – which represents the dominant hegemonial system – and alternative initiatives – which understand themselves as counterprojects to existing capitalist routines – is characterised by power asymmetries (Healy 2009). The initiatives coexisting in economic and planning niches are therefore denied the ability to effectively represent a justified counterproposal to capitalist economic forms. Even with well-intended funding and support they are basically assessed as trivial and incapable of entering into *real* competition with capitalism (North 2007: 22). They may be viewed as interesting and promising exotics but are nonetheless degraded and marginalised within the existing system.

Closer observation reveals, however, that this marginalisation, as already implied above, does not take the form of one-sided exclusion or simple repression. Rather, a complex coexistence between dominance (urban administration) and alternative (initiatives) emerges in which the marginalised alternative as a 'constructed other' develops into an indivisible part of the identity of the whole (Hillebrand/Zademach 2013: 11). The marginalisation is thus part of a complex and mutual dependency between the hegemony and the marginalised. As Healy (2009) puts it, marginalised initiatives are indivisibly linked to the acknowledgement of dominance. He describes this interaction as binarity (ibid.: 6).

While this view of marginalisation is, on the one hand, helpful for further consideration of the interface between urban planning and alternative econ-

omies, on the other hand it carries the risk of misunderstanding the ambivalence of the alternative within the hegemonial system. Alternative initiatives can only exist within the dominant system (Linnemann 2017: 8 f.) but they nonetheless still attempt to subvert and reformulate existing power relations (Müller 2018: 218 f.). It would therefore be fatal to write off alternative initiatives as integrated elements of the dominant system and thus to accept their marginalisation as a matter of course.

In Section 3 we take a theory-oriented look at the interface between dominance and alternative and, starting from the marginalisation of alternative initiatives, shed more light on this complex coexistence. The aim is to conceptually grasp the mutual speechlessness outlined above, which contributes to the underpinning of the dominant and the alternative. This should increase understanding of what hinders the development of a cooperative coexistence of initiatives and urban planning. Our focus is therefore on *what* and *how* the positions of the alternative initiatives and urban administration are constituted. Here we draw on Judith Butler's understanding of performativity as this allows a conceptual approach that helps to render the incomprehension of those involved explicable and tangible by revealing so-called performing gaps.

3. 'Performing gaps': on the difference between the performativity and self-perception of alternative initiatives in urban planning

With her work in the social sciences, the US philosopher Judith Butler has made a significant contribution to understanding individual and social differences as the result of a process of social construction. At the heart of Butler's proposition is the idea that existing power relations are fed by ritualised speech acts which emanate from specific performative constructions. Such constructions are the result of hegemonial attributions, practices, values and ideas in society, which are stabilised by the performativity of the social environment (Healy 2009: 4). Butler understands performativity as the result of specific, cultural constituted performances (Fischer-Lichte 2013: 41). For Butler these performances manifest themselves, for instance, in the social perpetuation of binary gender identities, or for Healy in the dominance of neoliberalism (Butler 1991; Healy 2009). Everything that exists outside of

these settings appears (inter alia) as economically vulnerable and temporary or, for instance, as scientifically or socially irrelevant and becomes marginalised (Callon 1998; Healy 2009: 4).

The discursive constitution of otherness and difference and the resulting marginalisation does not always or only occur via language and speech acts (Austin 1962), but is also expressed via symbolic actions (Fischer-Lichte 2013: 41 ff.). The 'speechlessness' with which urban planning and alternative initiatives encounter one another (as described in Section 2), and their mutual inability to recognise the potential of the other, can be understood as the difference between externally ascribed and self-perceived positions. In theoretical-conceptual terms, we argue here that this represents the gap between alternative initiatives and urban planning that must be overcome – it results from different performativities, that is, from different constructions of the *self* in relation to an *other*.

The social marginalisation of alternative initiatives occurs primarily through a distancing from capitalist structures. Their marginality becomes apparent through the lack of an accurate fit with the established and institutionalised rules and ideas of growth-oriented planning. However, the positioning of alternative initiatives occurs not only through attributions from the outside – for instance on the part of the urban administration, planning or traditional business ventures. The initiatives themselves understand their lack of fit, difference and marginalisation vis-à-vis the mainstream as the core of their own identity (see Section 2). They use strong symbolics and speech acts related to their marginalised position to articulate their *otherness* and, for instance, more *sustainable* nature as alternatives. Terms like solidarity, cooperation, market independence, sustainability and nature conservation and, on the other hand, terms from which they consciously and decidedly distance themselves – growth, market and competition, resource exploitation – become powerful attributes with which the initiatives reproduce their own subordination.

The initiatives thus actually strengthen the boundaries of the discourse. Their self-attribution reinforces these boundaries instead of weakening them and this in fact undermines the actual intention of the initiatives. Their existence is made possible by their own reproduction of the discourse but at the same time limited by it. What alternative initiatives have to be, how they have to design themselves, what positions they should criticise, and what institutions and forms of the economy they should address – all this

is defined from the outside. Paradoxically, this limits their ability to act to precisely the sphere in which they are also visible to the outside under the discursive hegemonial conditions (Butler 1991). Alternative initiatives are only perceived as long as they appear as utopian, largely ineffective activities that do not fit into existing structures and routines, that disregard rules and that even dare to criticise. Outside of these boundaries they are irrelevant for urban planning.

Here the performing gap between the expectations placed on alternative initiatives from the outside and their own self-positioning becomes clear. They have potential as actors of urban development where they fulfil the expectations of the system: as urban gardening projects that enhance the inner city in terms of design, participation and attractiveness; as open bicycle repair shops that contribute nicely to social integration in the neighbourhoods; or as activists who self-organise to utilise an old-industrial space for creative and artistic projects, at a low cost to the administration. Here they comply with common ideas of volunteering and civil society engagement, enriched in their case by an exotic unconventionality. Outside of this perception of the exotic alternative, initiatives often go unnoticed, for instance as innovators of a holistic and more sustainable urban food supply who also address aspects of formal planning. Or as supporters of the mobility transition, which must also be integrated into current and future transport planning. Or as evidence that the existing regulations and legislation (such as the Federal Building Code) are long outdated and inappropriate.

While these boundaries of the discourse are initially accepted by alternative initiatives and are even underpinned by their self-positioning as 'alternative', they themselves see their strength primarily in the outwards shifting of this boundary. They wish to be integrated in planning as a serious partner capable of making a coherent and important contribution to planning change. The performing gap can be explained by drawing on the well-known tales of Till Eulenspiegel: as long as the court jester wore his jester's cap and amused people, he was accepted even when his stories and antics contained serious criticism of the ruling system. But he was never accepted as an advisor to the court, although he perhaps considered himself to be precisely that.

This perspective offers a possible explanation for the inhibited interaction and the speechlessness between the initiatives and urban planning described above. Clearly the societal definition of alternative economies is much narrower than their self-definition and self-perception. Urban plan-

ning (as the dominant system) exclusively adopts the prevailing discourse on alternative economies, so its scope for action is similarly limited to the socially recognised space or discourse. It remains unrecognised that the identity formation of the initiatives deviates in parts from the categories of the socially hegemonic discourse about alternative economies. In the constructed niche of their own marginalisation, alternative initiatives can act and prevail. If they emerge from the marginalisation and position themselves as something beyond the expectations attributed from outside, then they are no longer perceived. It is therefore impossible for alternative initiatives to stimulate substantial and fundamental change. The key finding is that this performing gap is constructed with recourse to hegemonial discourse from outside (for instance from the urban administration and planning) but is also constituted by the initiatives themselves through their self-attribution as alternative and marginalised. The gap between the external definition and inner performativity thus represents the space of their own failure. Their ability to act increases the more they confirm the hegemonial discourse with their self-definition.

4. Conclusion

It seems that the present understanding of planning faces a dilemma. On the one hand, the intentions of urban planning to improve the quality of urban life correspond with the motivations of the initiatives. On the other hand, urban planning is subject to a striving for growth while the initiatives have a no-profit orientation and act outside the existing regulatory framework. This means that serious interaction between the two makes little sense.

The results of our article suggest that the balance of power between alternative economies and urban planning is not only subject to structural, legal or formal restrictions. Rather the cooperation is also influenced by mutual spoken contradictions and contextual factors. Differences in perception about what urban planning and alternative initiatives should achieve play a role in the lack of interest in mutual interaction.

External hurdles also make the existence of the initiatives more difficult. Their willingness to cooperate with urban planning is generally limited, particularly due to an avoidance of dependencies. The structures of the

dominant economic system prove particularly decisive for the conditions of interaction.

Judith Butler recognises the failure of performative acts as providing potential for change and the emergence of subversive spaces (Wucherpfennig/Strüver 2015: 111). Political discursive strategies can create spaces of possibility for difference and promote a broader social definition of 'alternative' and of 'urban planning'. Butler speaks here of interventionist practices that make local contradiction possible (ibid.: 115). In this way performative reinterpretations allow space for change to develop as emerging confusions lead to new ways of thinking. This should lead not only to diverse thinking about economies but equally to discussion about a more diverse understanding of urban planning. The debate about post-growth planning offers opportunities for precisely this, such as the reinterpretation of planning instruments, more creative and daring processes and a radical rethinking of the fundamentals of urban planning (Grotefels/Mössner in Lamker/Schulze-Dieckhoff 2018: 6). The alternative initiatives are part of and an expression of dynamic developments that live new rules of the game and can develop social impact. Their potential to generate discursive effects should therefore not be underestimated and confined to a marginalised space.

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