Community Volunteering as Neoliberal Strategy? Green Space Production in Berlin

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Abstract: The task for critical urban research is to analyze processes of neoliberalization “on the ground”. This paper examines—based on original empirical research—in how far the outsourcing of former local state responsibilities for public services and urban infrastructure is expressed in the promotion of community gardening in Berlin (Germany). It shows the contradictory outcomes: on the one hand, a failing strategy of outsourcing towards residents and the opening up of opportunity structures for other interests. On the other hand it shows how far the emergence of open green spaces maintained by volunteers can only be understood against the background of “roll-back” neoliberal urban politics and that their rationality cannot be separated from “roll-out neoliberalism”.

Keywords: neoliberalism, community gardens, volunteering, open green spaces, state restructuring, Berlin

Introduction

Recent research on neoliberal urban restructuring stresses its path-dependency and urges further empirical research “on the ground” (Brenner and Theodore 2002a, 2005). It starts with the assumption that there are always contradictions between the neoliberal idea and concrete processes of neoliberalization. The task for critical urban research is thus to analyze these processes of neoliberalization in the practice of urban development. For this purpose not only “classical” neoliberal strategies such as privatization, re-regulation and liberalization in the transformation of cities must be studied, but also the seemingly “soft” strategies of involving civil society actors in urban governance. The new attention being paid to volunteering is an important aspect of this. This is connected to a changing understanding of the state and a changing relation between state and citizens, usually described as a change from a welfare or providing state to an activating state.1

In this paper I will—based on my own empirical research—examine how far the recent promotion and support of community gardening in Berlin (Germany) by the local state can be understood as a form of outsourcing of former local state responsibilities for public services and urban infrastructure. The example of community gardening is instructive because of its ambivalent and complex characteristics, since it is defined both by grassroots characteristics as well as by the production of a public service.2

Moreover, community gardens have received little attention in the discussion around state restructuring so far. Previous research on community gardening has had a strong focus on food production, especially in the North American context,
and has stressed its social, ecological and economic value and emancipatory potentials (cf literature review below). And indeed, the growing number of community gardens in Berlin also seems to be an expression of active and progressive appropriation of urban spaces by citizens. Some of the gardens are the result of long battles by local residents who are eager to influence the shape and the functioning of city parks (Rosol 2010). The gardens are urban open spaces created by users according to their own needs and ideas, aesthetically and functionally different from traditional parks. Residents are not only the decision-makers of how to use an empty lot, but also responsible for the creation and maintenance of the open green space. Community gardens can therefore be interpreted as both critiques of, and actually existing alternatives to, traditional state-provided open green spaces.

However, this article wants to introduce a different view: it analyzes the commitment and voluntary work of the gardeners in the context of outsourcing strategies of the local state. In that context community gardens can be seen as serving the neoliberal idea of self-contained communities and the privatization of the service sector. Thus, this paper starts from the assumption that community participation in public service provision is not necessarily an emancipatory claiming of rights by citizens (anymore), but can instead be understood as part of a distinct political rationality which aims at passing on state responsibilities to civil society. The new model of the active citizen implies a new understanding of the role of the state, deeply interconnected with the fiscal crisis since the early 1970s.

At the same time, my empirical results also reveal that the strategy of using civic engagement as unpaid labor for the maintenance of public urban green spaces is not successful in the sense that it would lead to a lasting outsourcing of the maintenance work in existing park space towards individuals or the non-profit sector. Moreover, when the intentions of the local state are contrasted with statements by the community gardeners about their aims and motivation, it becomes clear that the neoliberal state strategy fails in establishing a shared conviction regarding the necessity of volunteering in the green sector. Nevertheless, I will argue that the emergence of open green spaces maintained by volunteers can only be understood against the background of “roll-back” neoliberal urban politics and that their rationality cannot be separated from “roll-out neoliberalism”.

The paper is organized as follows. After a brief review of the relevant literature, I will present the differing views and aims of representatives from the local state and of community gardens. Finally, I will discuss the political and theoretical implications of community gardening in the context of neoliberal urban restructuring.

Neoliberal Urban Restructuring—New Forms of Urban Governance, Outsourcing, and Green Volunteering

Research approaches on the neoliberalization of space focus on the implementation of neoliberal ideology into urban policy since the 1980s (eg Brenner and Theodore 2002b, 2005; Jessop 2002; Painter and Goodwin 2000). Peck and Tickell introduced a helpful analytical differentiation of neoliberalization processes, distinguishing

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the “roll-back” of the Keynesian welfare state in the 1980s from the “roll-out” of neoliberal institutions in the 1990s, which they see already as a response to neoliberalism’s immanent contradictions (Peck and Tickell 2002). This roll-out neoliberalism involves “new state forms, new modes of regulation, new regimes of governance, with the aim of consolidating and managing both marketization and its consequences” (Peck and Tickell 2007:33, see also summary p 34). Changes in form and function of statehood (Brenner 2004; Jessop 2002; Mayer 1996; McLeod and Goodwin 1999) take place alongside the understanding of cities as “enterprises” as well as the re-orientation of the local state away from redistribution and towards competition in order to attract investors (Harvey 1989; Mayer 1991).

Crucial for the following discussion of community gardens is the rising significance of “governance-beyond-the-state” (Swyngedouw 2005), that is, the increasing participation of non-state actors in (local) state decision making and the transformation of roles, responsibilities and institutional configurations of the (local) state and citizens in urban spatial politics. In many cases, this inclusion of non-state actors is less geared at citizens’ participatory rights, but rather at the outsourcing of traditional state functions to civil society organizations (eg Fyfe 2005).

This is especially obvious in the shift of responsibilities for service provision towards the profit-making and the non-profit sector and to volunteering citizens (Bondi and Laurie 2005; Fyfe and Milligan 2003; Kearns 1992; Mayer 2006a, 2006b; Milligan 2007; Milligan and Conradson 2006b). However, this outsourcing of welfare state functions and the erosion of basic welfare entitlements do not result in a shrinking state or less bureaucratic control. On the contrary, it comes along with an even increased dependence of voluntary organizations on state contracts and grants as well as a growing state regulation and administrative oversight (Kearns 1992; Milligan 2007). The role of the state can be seen rather as an “attempt to hold on to the steering wheel while prompting others to do the rowing” (Lindenberg 2002:78, translation by author). The role of the voluntary sector then is to meet the shortfalls in services and benefits that result from entitlement reductions and withdrawal of funding (Wolch 1989, 1990). This again leads to an increasing professionalization of the voluntary sector, the adoption of a managerial rationality and increasing competition between voluntary organizations at the expense of cooperation (MacKinnon 2000:298; Wolch 2006).

As elsewhere, in Germany the ongoing fiscal pressure and welfare reform has led to growing attention given to voluntarism (for critical reflections, cf amongst others Eick, Mayer and Sambale 2003; Haus 2002; Hoch and Otto 2005; Kearns 1992; Lindenberg 2002; Reichert 2002; Roth 2000; Stecker and Zimmer 2003; Wohlfahrt 2003). The leitbild of the activating state was central to the Red-Green government in power between 1998 and 2005 (Bundesregierung 1999)—very much like the “Third Way” agenda of Blair’s New Labour. This leitbild entails an outsourcing of former state functions towards both the private for-profit and the non-profit sector while maintaining a state-led regulation. The state now is to be defined by its role as moderator and activator.

Within this larger context, I take a closer look at an example of volunteering in the urban green sector. So far—and in comparison to other cities especially in the
USA (eg Pincetl 2003)—there are few examples of volunteering in the public green sector in Berlin. How the inclusion of non-commercial actors in green space provision develops in practice and what the political implications of this development are, is still to be clarified. Community gardens constitute a useful example of this state/non-state co-production of urban green space.

**The Benefits of Community Gardening**

So far community gardens have been discussed from many different perspectives: as a form of urban agriculture and a means for food security both in the global North and South (Baker 2004; Domene and Sauri 2007; Gottlieb and Fisher 1996; Haidle and Arndt 2007; Johnston and Baker 2005; Mougeot 2005; Pothukuchi and Kaufman 1999) and their potential for alleviating poverty (Hanna and Oh 2000). They also evoke the interest of urban planners for their potential as interim uses of empty lots in shrinking cities (Bauhardt 2004; BBR 2004; Eißner and Heydenreich 2004; Rosol 2005). Furthermore, they are seen as an example of the public/private divide in land-use conflicts (Blomley 2004; Hassell 2005). They are praised for their role in community and grassroots urban development (Armstrong 2000, Grünsteidel and Schneider-Sliwa 1999; Knigge 2009; Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny 2004), for their health (Wakefield et al 2007) or environmental benefits (Hudson 2000; Malakoff 1995). Scholars point out their diversity especially in terms of the ethnic backgrounds of those who tend them (Baker 2002; Deutsch Lynch and Brusi 2005; Holland 2004) or their progressive gender politics (Buckingham 2005; Meyer-Renschhausen 2002). Some of them are even seen as an urban social movement against neoliberal urban development politics (Lebuhn 2008; Schmelzkopf 2002; Staeheli, Mitchell and Gibson 2002; Stone 2002) or the globally controlled food system (Wekerle 2004).

As regards relations with the (local) state, there has been research on conflicts over land use or land tenure, especially prominent in the case of New York City (amongst others, cf Schmelzkopf 1995, 2002; Smith and Kurtz 2003; Smith and DeFilippis 1999; Staeheli, Mitchell and Gibson 2002), or on the role of community gardens as a measure in local food security plans (Mendes 2008; Pothukuchi and Kaufman 1999; Wekerle 2004). In her work on community gardens in Buffalo, Knigge (2009) observed that community gardening organizations also provide different types of social services and care beyond those typically associated with community gardening. She ascribes this expanded role of community gardening organizations to the relocation of responsibility for social welfare and care to individuals and the community, which especially affects women, ethnic minorities and immigrants. Thus, she analyses community gardening in the general context of state restructuring and welfare devolution.

Differing from these perspectives, in this article I want to concentrate on the role of community gardens as a form of voluntary provision of public green space and on what this tells us about the changing role of the local state. Whereas Smith and Kurtz (2003) identify the attempt to sell garden lots for profit in the New York case as a neoliberal privatization strategy, here the use of gardens and the voluntary labor of gardeners is discussed as a form of neoliberalization of urban governance.
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Community Gardening in Berlin

The term “community garden” is mostly known from New York City and other cities in North America but so far is rarely used in Germany. The phenomenon, however, does exist. Community gardens differ in size (from 700 m$^2$ to 4.5 ha), target group (local residents, migrants, children) and appearance (landscaped park, organic vegetable garden, brown fields with spontaneous vegetation). They all have in common that they differ from both uniform institutionalized public green spaces as well as other forms of urban gardening. In contrast to city parks they are community managed, that is, they are collectively designed, built, and maintained by local residents. In contrast to other forms of urban gardening like the well-known—private—German allotment gardens (Schrebergärten) they are at least sometimes open to the general public. They heavily depend on voluntary work and reflect the needs and ideas of the volunteers in management style and appearance. In contrast to other forms of voluntary engagement as, for example, stewardship for existing green spaces or sporadic volunteers’ days, the involved residents create new green areas according to their own ideas. Moreover, community gardening implies the steady, more or less long-lasting commitment of residents through different stages of green space production (concept, creation, maintenance).

Most importantly, they differ from many North American community gardens, in that they are not food gardens. Vegetables and fruits are sometimes grown, albeit not for self-supply or economic reasons but rather for demonstration purposes.\textsuperscript{4} Most gardens in Berlin, especially the fully publicly accessible ones, cultivate only flowers, shrubs and sometimes trees. This reflects a different food retailing system as well as the still very different socio-economic background in Germany with a better social welfare system than in the USA. In times of neoliberal restructuring of welfare policies, however, the latter is changing. The growing number of “table” (Tafel) projects (which collect and distribute food to those in need, similar to food banks in the USA or Canada) indicates the increasing importance of food, hunger and poverty in times of the erosion of social security systems (Selke 2009).\textsuperscript{5} Nevertheless, the benefit of community gardens in Berlin is still to be seen more in their aesthetic, recreational and environmental qualities, and not in their potential food supply function. Thus, I argue, the salience of community gardening in the context of food security and food justice stressed in many North American research contributions (eg for Toronto, see Wekerle 2004) is so far not as relevant in Germany.

Because this article aims to explore if and how community-based volunteer groups unburden the local state by taking over responsibility for public green spaces, I will now look at the specific aims and strategies of the local state concerning community gardening initiatives before I turn to the volunteers themselves.\textsuperscript{6}

Saving Costs, Beautification, Stabilization, Civic Engagement—Views of the Local State

As one of our central aims in the urban renewal process is the enhancement of the public space … it is of course even better if initiatives can be found who also take on the maintenance (City Staff Berlin, interview 33/2004).
The idea—expressed by the Berlin Senate and various borough authorities—to hand over the maintenance of public green spaces to citizens and community initiatives emerged in Berlin in the early 2000s (e.g., Berliner Morgenpost 2004b; Planergemeinschaft 2006). The following two examples of recent campaigns illustrate that Berlin’s policy actors have discovered the advantages of civic engagement in the green sector. Subsequently, I will present results from my interviews with administrators and politicians, first, their aims and aspirations concerning green volunteering, and second, their view of the current situation.

In 2004 the council of the Berlin borough of Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf launched a campaign to activate volunteers for the “rescue of the borough’s parks”. Reasons stated for taking this step were the lack of staff and financial means for the maintenance of the green areas. The borough presented volunteering as the only alternative to an unwanted selling off of public green spaces or the introduction of entrance fees for parks. The campaign asked residents to adopt their parks in order to support the local parks department (Berliner Morgenpost 2004a). The residents’ work was supposed to be coordinated by the parks department. In addition to the engagement of individuals, the department also hoped for financial support from the business sector (Berliner Zeitung 2004b). Similarly, in the borough of Steglitz-Zehlendorf the local councilor and other political party representatives advertised a call for voluntary support and citizen stewardship for green spaces in the press in 2004. As in the neighboring borough, they rationalized their call by referring to the lack of resources for public green spaces (Berliner Zeitung 2004a).

The financial situation in Berlin is undoubtedly severe (Krättke 2004): while in 1993 the different boroughs of Berlin altogether had about €60 million at their disposal for the maintenance of public parks, in 2003 only €20 million were left. According to estimates based on square meters and maintenance level, €82 million for staff and materials are necessary annually to keep up the current maintenance level (Profé and Plate 2004). In 2000 the boroughs received on average only 39% of what they needed for the adequate maintenance of green public spaces (EA.UE 2000:25).

These budget cuts have severe consequences for public green spaces and their use. Analyzing the current debate and praxis, I identified five main strategies or options in order to deal with this problem.2 One option is of course to increase budgets again and related measures include: demanding a higher budget from the city, the introduction of user fees, sponsoring and donations as well as receiving money from foundations. The second option is to reduce spending for staff by privatizing parks, the reduction of the maintenance level, the introduction of new management methods, and the outsourcing of maintenance work towards private firms, local businesses and housing corporations, social welfare recipients and of course volunteers. The third option is an increased control and the regimentation of uses, for example, the prohibition of barbeques in parks, the enclosure of parks and closing at night, monetary incentives for reporting graffiti taggers and other “troublemakers”. Fourthly, the already adumbrated reduction in the service and maintenance level, including no fixing of playgrounds, no planting of summer flowers nor regular cutting of hedges and trees anymore, and restricting tasks to garbage collection and some basic safety measures, all of which results in a poor quality of urban parks. Finally other practical solutions are also discussed, like the use of plants...
which need only a low maintenance level and are especially adaptable to urban use or the introduction of a new category of urban greenery: industrial forests, which have fewer requirements in quality and maintenance than urban parks.

In this paper I concentrate on the outsourcing of maintenance work to citizens in the form of voluntary work. My interviews with local politicians and administrators who are key actors in the implementation of green volunteering or the agenda setting process revealed similar aims for the promotion of community gardening as in the aforementioned two campaigns. Two of the studied gardens in the inner city—the “Marie” and “Dolziger Straße”, both situated in formal urban renewal areas—were set up by the local administration. Especially in the second case, the involved administrators were mostly concerned with the “ugly” appearance of neglected empty lots and the potential hazard resulting from their use as illegal garbage dumps. Because the city boroughs are responsible for illegal dumps (even on private land), their aim is the cleaning of these lots and prevention of their future use as dumps. An additional concern of most boroughs is the lack of public green space. By using the unpaid labor of local residents to turn urban wastelands into public gardens, the interview partners expect low-cost and more sustainable solutions to these problems than through regular cleaning by city staff.

In addition, they have social and political aims: civic engagement is to be supported and local residents are to be activated, especially those who were seen as not (yet) active and involved. The collective effort of cleaning and greening an empty lot is identified as an important means of creating community identity and thereby responsibility for and “stabilization” of the area (ie the attraction of middle-class families). Despite having set off the two community garden projects, the state representatives envision the role of the local state as supporter of these initiatives rather than taking on a leading role because:

... this kind of initiative from above, from the administration, well, you can do that, but it does not correspond to our idea, actually. Basically it is always the call for the state which, I think, is not appropriate anymore (borough administrator, interview 13/2003).

Local politicians and administrators who are not directly interacting with community greening groups have even higher expectations. One borough development councilor (Baustadtrat), for example, explained that his calls for more civic engagement are above all an expression of an emergency. Due to a severely cut budget, the borough can no longer guarantee attractive public spaces. His second argument for more volunteering, however, relates to a changed understanding of the role of the state. He proclaims a need for a new model of distribution of common good tasks between state (or public administration) and citizens:

The financial situation is really always the fulcrum and pivot. That’s unfortunate to a certain extent. But, on the other hand there is also... the fact that one should not only count on the state, but also, as far as possible, take care of something with one’s own resources (borough councilor, interview 45/2004).

These findings suggest the emergence of a new acceptance of civic engagement in the public green sector. This is obvious both in the activities and the discourse of local state representatives in Berlin. The analysis also shows that the starting point of
the reinforced interest in civic engagement is to be found in the financial situation of the Berlin boroughs. Although the aims include the beautification of public spaces and thereby the creation and bonding of active citizens in the neighborhood, of central concern is a lasting unburdening of the parks department.\textsuperscript{9}

This is far from being realized though. On the contrary, my interviewees lament that events such as Volunteer Days in fact increase the workload for the paid staff, while lasting engagement remains wishful thinking. Nevertheless, this is a central concern, or in the words of one councilor:

\begin{quote}
It would be a real help for us if an initiative, an association said: “We will take care for park X for a year.” Really the way that they—with the exception of what is not possible without professional help like tree care—take care of foliage raking, garbage collection etc. Really take care of a whole public park as an obligation. Stewardship really means this: I cede responsibility towards a steward and I relieve myself of the responsibility (borough councilor, interview 45/2004).
\end{quote}

A councilor of another borough also sees great potential in the idea of giving a park effectively into the hands of an association. In his opinion this does not aim at compensating the withdrawal of the welfare state, but represents an “institutionalized exercise of self-responsibility” (borough councilor, interview 16/2004). However, he reports that in his district such a planned “people’s park project” (ie volunteer’s care for an existing park as opposed to the common community gardens creating new green spaces in former empty lots) has not come into existence yet. He believes that the reasons for this are the scarce financial means the borough could provide for such a project. He is also disappointed by the limited support for sporadic voluntary events of the parks department and wishes for more overall commitment, for example, from unemployed people, whose share in the borough’s population is above the Berlin average.\textsuperscript{10}

In sum, the interviewed local politicians and administrators hope for more engagement of citizens in the maintenance of urban greenery. But they also recognize that their hope for a long-term commitment of volunteers to maintain the existing green spaces of the borough independently from administrative support cannot be realized currently. The projects where residents maintain small new green spaces or the occasional Volunteers Days might fulfill other hopes—like the beautification of the neighborhood, community building and preventing illegal dumps. But they fail to reduce costs for green space maintenance by the parks department.

### Gardening and Self-determination—Motives and Demands of Involved Residents

So why do residents not fulfill these expectations although the desire for more self-determination of the environment is often expressed? In order to shed some light on this question it is revealing to study the motives of people who are community gardeners, that is, those who do commit their time and energy to running public green spaces. Generally it can be said that their motivation does not stem from calls for volunteering or an abstract sense of civic engagement. Instead they participate
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for specific personal reasons. Motives vary a lot and range from self-serving motives to political claims far beyond the actual gardens.

Analyzing the in-depth interviews I found four motives to be most important. First of all, most of the community gardeners enjoy the gardening itself. Secondly, most of the garden members want to be part of a group, socialize with others and get into contact with their neighbors. An aspiration of some, for others a nice surprise, the gardens have become important local meeting places where neighbors get to know each other. Thirdly, they are not satisfied with the number and appearance of existing parks and green spaces and wish to improve the situation of the lot or the neighborhood, beautify them and make them accessible to themselves and the public. And fourthly, many of them also want to provide a safe and enjoyable outdoor space for their children.

Other motives mentioned by some gardeners were: recreation and fitness through gardening, exploring one’s own creativity, affinity to nature and environmental concerns including the questioning of the corporate food systems. Last but not least, there are pedagogical motives (teaching children about nature in the city or demonstrating organic gardening techniques combined with the joy of cooking), economic reasons (because private or allotment gardens are not affordable for many), the desire to promote a co-operative form of working together and solidarity economy and this way transforming the city. Some gardeners also expressed the feeling of responsibility for their neighborhood and the future of a gardening project.¹¹

Not surprisingly—if familiar with other empirical research concerning volunteering (eg Klages 2003:92–93)— “having fun” is the factor that predominates and combines all other motives for the commitment of the community gardeners. In other words: if it does not bring fun, they do not engage in it. Therefore they seek those activities that are most likely to be enjoyable for them—be it the actual gardening, fund raising, public relations or designing the garden, negotiating with local politicians or organizing a garden party. It is these motives that drive residents to green and maintain small lots and take on responsibility for them. Conversely, they do not take on responsibility for a whole existing park or parts of it by joining a registered association or the like; or assist the parks department more than sporadically through labor-intensive, executive work such as garbage and leaf collection. This is simply because “just cleaning, picking up garbage and so on, that is no fun” (gardener, interview 12b/2003).

Moreover, the gardeners ask for basic conditions and provisions from the local state concerning funding and support in bureaucratic and legal issues. Without financial assistance many of the gardeners could not afford the costs for the sites. Furthermore, the gardeners typically see funding for gardening material as an appreciation of or compensation for their voluntary work: “because we do the work and they give the money” (gardener, interview 12a/2003). Another one has this request for local authorities:

Well, the only thing we really ask for is that they should give us the site at no cost. And really, at no cost. And they should make their contribution in the form of ensuring safety and paying other costs. So they should still fulfill their public duties. And even then we
would still give more than enough work in maintaining ... the sites (gardener, interview 47/2004).12

They also ask for minimal interference in the design and their way of running the lots. The self-determination, the voluntary nature of their engagement and the openness of the process are important factors for many of the gardeners. This does not mean that the gardeners would completely reject outside support or ignore other needs and critique. But they would not work in a hierarchical project, controlled and managed from outside, for example, the city’s park department. Thus, representatives of the garden “Dolziger Straße”, for example, approve of an expansion of community gardening projects, but nevertheless doubt that it would work with a master plan imposed upon them from above (interview 8/2003).13

Another gardener answered the question whether he favored an expansion of community gardens by saying that it would become dangerous if local authorities forced people. He refers critically to the obligation of social welfare recipients to do community work. In his view local authorities should act according to the motto: “We don’t cede work, we cede decisions” (gardener, interview 17/2003).

Community Greening—A Successful Outsourcing Strategy?
The calls from the Berlin politicians and administrators for stewardships for green spaces show unambiguously that they consider unpaid voluntary work above all as a stopgap. That means that volunteering citizens should stand in where the state fails to provide attractive public green spaces. The administration, faced with massive financial cuts, has an interest in reducing its own workload particularly by outsourcing unskilled, repetitive, non-qualified work. The community gardeners, however, seek a self-determined use and organization, which necessarily also includes decision-making power. Thus, there are different interests involved on the part of the local state opposed to those of the inhabitants.

These conflicting interests, however, may be reconciled in specific circumstances. Community gardening projects initiated by the local state can be successful in finding citizens to run them voluntarily, if the gardeners can determine the manner and extent of their commitment and work (Rosol 2010). In the studied cases of state-initiated and voluntary-run projects, the residents groups were given freedom over how to design and run the gardens—as long as these remained open to the general public, followed some basic safety requirements and as long as the gardeners accept the only temporary admission to the land. In providing these conditions, both sides’ interests are met—the gardeners’ desire for self-determination, for putting into practice their ideas for an empty lot on the one hand and the interests of local authorities, that is, cleaning of empty lots, prevention of garbage dumps, and encouraging residents to take on responsibility for their neighborhood and the appearance of public spaces on the other.

However, the local state has not been able until now to establish a consensus for the need of citizen engagement for the “rescue” of public green spaces. As shown in the section on the interest of the local state, generic calls from local
politicians and the district administration for volunteers to actively support the city’s parks departments fail. People are not willing to give their unpaid time for tedious cleaning tasks nor do they want to take over responsibility for a whole park. And it is not even the intention of the actively involved community gardeners—who do give their time and labor for the creation of a public accessible urban green space—to help out the local state, but to pursue their own personal interests, even if secondary effects are not restricted to their own advantage. Thus, the neoliberal strategy of outsourcing responsibilities for public green spaces to citizens in the form of promoting voluntarism has failed so far.

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Discussion

Thus, I think all these projects in this so-called third sector are moving at the moment—and this here is also part of that sector—are moving along a very thin line. A very thin line between social change on the one hand and, on the other hand, complete cooptation by the system (gardener, interview 47/2004).

My analysis demonstrates the increasing interest of the city of Berlin in civic engagement and confronts it with gardeners’ motivations and aims. It shows that the outsourcing of open space maintenance of existing parks to private non-profit actors as a neoliberal strategy cannot be realized easily “on the ground”. Reasons for this are firstly that voluntary engagement is a limited resource in general as regards time, skills and the amount of work that can be provided (cf Dettling 200012). More importantly though is, secondly, that these actors are not willing to take on the role of providing unpaid labor for what they still see as municipal tasks. The interviews with engaged citizens show that they do not accept their prescribed role as a stop gap.14

Nevertheless, the neoliberalization of urban politics still plays a distinctive role in current developments of the public urban green sector and the emergence of community gardens. “Roll-back” neoliberalism (Peck and Tickell 2007) with its cuts in public spending and re-orientation of the role of the local state prepared the ground for new forms of creating and maintaining public green spaces. Many of the gardening projects came into existence due to the withdrawal of the local state from adequate service provision and the severe fiscal crisis of the city of Berlin for two reasons. Firstly, lots became available for interim uses because important public amenities were not built due to a lack of resources (specifically, a public playground, a police station, a school garden). Secondly, the engagement of the residents is a response to lack in quality and maintenance of existing public parks due to their inadequate funding.

The growing political acceptance and support of community gardening projects, that is, of a “private” activity in the public realm is an expression of roll-out neoliberalism with its changes in form and function of statehood and governance. Voluntarism gains new importance in this creation of the active and responsible citizen by means of an “enabling” and “activating” state—it embodies the ideal of the active citizen and unburdens the state at the same time (Kearns 1992; Krummacher et al 2003; Lindenberg 2002; Milligan 2007).
However, this roll-out neoliberalism is not free of contradictions and it changes opportunity structures. Well-organized groups do have, and actually take on the opportunity to insert, their own interests and promote a different agenda. The public support for community gardening has also had quite desirable effects: private lots become public, new kinds of uses and designs become possible, actual users become decision makers, and enjoyable public green space is created.

This paper has shown that open green spaces maintained by volunteers emerge against the backdrop of “roll-back” neoliberal urban politics and their rationality cannot be separated from the reality of “roll-out neoliberalism”. Therefore, the outcome of this kind of self-organization is still open and depends not least on questions of how far community gardening groups critically engage with this reality and thus on small and mundane local struggles and actions.

Outlook

Community gardening as an expression of a new form of urban (green space) governance, however, also has more problematic implications. Some of them need to be sketched out in this final section.

First, besides outsourcing to the voluntary sector, outsourcing to private for-profit organizations and the privatization and commercialization of public parks is continuously debated and ongoing (cf eg Handrich et al 1999; for a detailed analysis, cf Rosol 2006:99–106).

Second, as one of the gardeners mentioned critically (see above, interview 17/03), volunteering is just one way of integrating local residents into the service of green space production. Equally important are the increasing low-wage sector and workfare programs (Ehrenfort and Wagner 2007; Eick, Mayer and Sambale 2003; Mayer 2006a). The separation between those two very different forms—voluntarism and workfare—also involves questions of class. Whereas civic engagement is mostly the privilege of the middle class (empirical studies show this at least for the German context, cf Heinze and Olk 1999:92, also see other chapters in this volume), workfare is used to control the unemployed and discipline mainly the lower classes.

This is connected to the third point: the continuously emphasized self-determination becomes problematic when civic engagement is exclusively focused on certain groups and values. This may promote exclusionary or even “revanchist” (Smith 1996) spaces. When the local state, in contrast to Fordist times, “allows” intensified participation in the shaping of urban green spaces in order to rid itself of work, certain usually middle class groups are likely to appropriate these projects and spaces as they are able to better articulate their demands and needs (Nohl 1984:91, referring to Offe 1972).

Fourth, of similar concern, although starting from a different point, are observable tendencies for the local administration to spend the little money it still has at its disposal on those green spaces and parks where civic engagement is already taking place. This is a valuable form of approval, but as a result money is withdrawn from other areas with less engagement. Those areas are often the very areas with the greatest needs, lacking in public and voluntary infrastructure and with a population under great economic pressure and time constraints so that providing voluntarily
for neighborhood greening is far from possible (see also Milligan and Conradson 2006a:4).

Fifth, where “upgrading” and beautification are the aims of local authorities (see above), gentrification is close. If strategies to improve living conditions in a neighborhood are not combined with mechanisms that prevent displacement of residents and keep housing affordable, even the most well-meaning projects can become the engine of gentrification. That this is not merely a theoretical consideration becomes obvious as the traditional task of providing affordable housing through urban renewal has decreased dramatically in Germany and is no longer considered a public responsibility (Busch-Geertsema 2004; Holm 2006). Policy makers’ interest in rearranging the public realm according to middle-class values is a common trend worldwide, closely attached to gentrification and “urban renaissance” (Imrie and Raco 2003; Porter and Shaw 2009). The New York City case is instructive in that it shows that community gardening that once “flourished through a kind of benign neglect by capital accumulation” (Pudup 2008:1232) turns into contested space as soon as land exchange values rise again dramatically (Schmelzkopf 1995, 2002; Smith and Kurtz 2003; Smith and DeFilippis 1999; Staeheli, Mitchell and Gibson 2002).

Finally, new research suggests that the problem of community-organized collective consumption does not lie in a potential outsourcing of communal tasks only, but in the more fundamental shifts in the logics of government. Open public spaces created and maintained by communities bring about a new form of social control and are part of a new technology of governing; that is, “governing through community” (Rose 1996). This new strategy of governance combines the political rationalities of a neoliberal ethos of self-responsibilization of the individual and the neo-communitarian ideal of active citizenship and the promotion of community sense (Rose 1996). And indeed, the earlier mentioned study by the Berlin Senate concludes that no real relief for the parks departments in Berlin is achieved via civic engagement, but stresses the importance of effects like increased social control (Planergemeinschaft 2006:16). Another paper co-authored by the head of the department of “Open space planning and urban greenery” within the Berlin Senate administration for urban development also justifies its call for more civic engagement for public parks on the grounds of aspiring to increased identification, appreciation of a public good, and social control (Profé and Plate 2004:665).

With all these considerations in mind, we need to carefully observe the further development of community gardening in German cities. We need to explore further the ambivalences, chances and limits of these new forms of urban governance for progressive urban politics, if we do criticize the Fordist and the neoliberal local state as well as—in different senses—limited local communities.

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Endnotes

1 The most visible form of this new interest in Germany was the establishment of an Enquete-Kommission (committee of inquiry) of the German Bundestag (Federal Parliament) named “Future of civic and voluntary engagement” in 1999 (Enquete-Kommission 2002).

2 The case study is based on 44 semi-structured in-depth interviews with community gardeners from 14 garden projects, local politicians and administrators, scientists and environmental organizations conducted in 2003/04 and analyzed with MaxQDA qualitative data analysis software. Further sources are participatory observation and analysis of secondary literature, media coverage and policy papers. The search for relevant projects was conducted exploratively, because no systematic work on this had been done before. Only garden projects that met the criteria given in the chapter “Community Gardening in Berlin” and enhanced the variety of the projects were included in the sample (theoretical sampling). Also only legalized or at least tolerated projects were investigated. Thus, the study concentrates on showing why and under what circumstances people are active in community gardening projects (for details see Rosol 2006).

3 There aren’t many empirical studies of other German municipalities either and they are hardly comparable. One study for example finds a high rate of expressed willingness of helping in the maintenance of local parks (Kersting 2002:285f), another study by Bogumil, Holtkamp and Schwarz (2003) shows a very low rate of actually existing voluntary engagement in the green sector.

4 A little different is the situation in “Intercultural gardens“ which are created by and for immigrants in Germany since about 1998. Here gardening is also used to supplement grocery budgets and for growing vegetables that are rarely available in Germany (Müller 2002; cf also http://www.stiftung-interkultur.de/eng/index.htm).

5 The first “Tafel” was founded in 1993 in Berlin; in 2008 there are already about 1000 of them in Germany (Rohrmann 2009).

6 For more details on individual gardening projects including realized state-initiated but volunteer-run projects, see Rosol (2006, 2010).

7 The following section is based on interviews with politicians, administrators and academics and several newspaper and journal articles. For detailed information, cf Rosol (2006:99–106).

8 Interviews were conducted with politicians and administrators in Berlin who are key actors, either as contacts for community gardeners (interviews 13/03, 16/03, 33/04) or in the agenda setting process for civic engagement in the green sector (02/02, 14/03, 18/03, 45/04).

9 This aim is also central in a more recent study commissioned by the Berlin Senate which analyzed the potential of public–private cooperation in the maintenance of urban green spaces (Planergemeinschaft 2006:4).

10 The only example of a park entirely run by volunteers in the very south of Berlin (“Lichtenrader Volkspark“) was not known to the interviewees. This park has a long history of struggle and negotiations and evolved in a different sociopolitical context in the early 1980s (for more information, see Rosol 2006:147–159).

11 Food production for self-sufficiency or as self-help in the face of poverty is, as mentioned earlier, in contrast to many other cities (eg Buckingham 2005; Domene and Sauri 2007; Johnston and Baker 2005) not an important factor. The motives listed above confirm results of other community gardening studies (eg Armstrong 2000; Gehl 1987; Hanna and Oh 2000; Stone 2009).

12 One project, the “Kids’ Garden”, however, highly values its financial independence from the local authorities because of fears of too much influence from their side. This garden is more membership-focused and yields only limited access to the general public. Public access for anyone at anytime is a precondition for public funding in the other projects.

13 Stone similarly argues regarding the New York City Green Thumb project that many benefits provided by community gardens depend on the gardener’s autonomy and self-governance (Stone 2009).

14 Also most of the other measures taken by the local state (cf section on views and aims of the local state) are only shortsighted and an expression of the critical fiscal situation and the re-orientation in local state tasks. More generally speaking, I argue that the misery of public urban green spaces cannot be solved through volunteering, but need a re-orientation in...
public spending policies. This does not mean a return to a patronizing welfare state without user participation, but it does mean that public financing is a necessary precondition for any form of volunteer engagement.

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