Questioning the Nation State: A Possible Future for Urban Citizenship
Mathias Rodatz Interviewed by Hana Cisar

Hana Cisar: For about ten years, you have been researching the influence of migration on the spatial and political reassignment by governmental policies in cities. What was your initial motivation to start this research?

Mathias Rodatz: Back then I was living in Leipzig. I had been working mostly on questions of neo-Nazism and the ways in that neither society nor the state found adequate ways to respond to this threat to an open and democratic society. Sometime in 2006 I stumbled upon a headline of the local newspaper: "City hall is planning Chinatown". This headline and the story about it raised so many questions that I decided to start to work on these issues. So what was going on? The city's planning department had developed a small project in a district in the east of Leipzig, close to the train station. Their idea was to turn a small block of empty houses into an "international district" with space for small shops to be operated by migrants that are specialized in international (what the planners called "ethnic") goods. With this idea, they were actually just doing what is very common in planning today: they were looking at this former shopping street in a district that—in their eyes—was poorly developed and needed attention due to the concentration of poverty and social problems. And they were asking: What is unique here, what can we put on display to put life back into this former centre for local commerce and urban life? What they saw was what we know from all our cities: in areas that are not perceived as profitable, it is often (former) migrants who are securing the local supply in the neighbourhood. And such commercial services often function as a precondition of life on the streets and sociability in public spaces. So the project that was planned was not doing any-

thing new, really. They wanted to provide some more space for small commerce and use the framing of the "international district" as a selling point for an economic and social revitalization of the street in a city that for the most part lacks cultural diversity.

HC: And what happened to the project?

MR: The public and political reactions to these plans were devastating. Under the above-mentioned headline in the local newspaper, it read that the city was seeking to develop Leipzig's East into a "district for foreigners, something like a 'China-Town' or a 'small Arabia'". And this was perceived as a threat to public order and safety. Politicians and commentaries from almost the complete political spectrum started to issue warnings that this development would equal the construction of a "parallel society", threatening the integrity of Leipzig's society. You have to understand that the city of Leipzig—as all cites in Eastern Germany—is not very diverse. At the time, only 7% of the city's population had what German statistics call a "migration background" (meaning that they themselves or one or two of their parents had migrated into Germany). The district in question had an elevated share in diverse population (15%). This elevation was seen as a warning sign of a bad future that would be fostered by the idea of the planning department. As a result of this debate, the project was cancelled.

HC: How would you explain to a child that a couple of houses providing space for commerce to migrant citizens of Leipzig are perceived as a threat to the social integrity of the city?

MR: That depends very much on the child you are talking to. If you talk to one belonging to the 15% that are object of the public fear, she will not need an explanation. She will tell you that she is not surprised, because she hears again and again how she doesn't belong—in her classroom, in the tram, in the big commercial supermarket at the end of the street (where mostly white, "ethnic" German people work). Being an object of that fear is just one instance of the institutional and everyday racisms that are common to our cities. And it is this experience that you would have to try to explain to a child who does not share it. You would have to explain how migrants of colour or from certain supposed "cultural backgrounds" are considered fundamentally different to the "ethnic" Germans in newspapers, on TV, in public discussions; how this order of things has been repeated for decades in both the former East and West of Germany; and how theories from biology, sociology, and other social sciences have been used to provide proof for the idea that this difference turns into a threat as soon as too many of "those" migrants live in one area of a city. And you would have to explain to her as well, how this has been so obviously wrong for so many decades: how many (former) migrants in the east of Leipzig just as much as in the commonly known, so-called "breeding grounds" of "parallel societies" in Germany—in Berlin-Neukölln or Duisburg-Marxloh—how these people are struggling to make a living, to build communities and neighbourhoods, just to be called out as extremists, thugs, or criminals again and again. In short: you would have to explain to her the functioning of a racist society and its spatiality. You would have to explain to her the reality that people without white privilege are experiencing every day in our cities.

HC: Could you say something about the definition of terms such as migration, post-migration, integration, assimilation as you are using them in your research and in which concept of culture they are imbedded?

MR: In general, I argue from a poststructuralist perspective. So I do not use terms such as "migration", "integration", "assimilation", or "culture" as theoretically defined concepts that I can draw upon to interpret certain developments in the city. I am interested in the way such terms and concepts are part of the way we are governed. I want to understand the role they play "out there", what meanings they entail and which orders they enforce upon the world if they materialize as practices of governing and everyday routines. If we look at the history of the

migration regime in Germany, we can see how dominant categories have changed. There is a big part of the population that has been addressed in episodes as "guests","foreigners","migrants" , or "Muslims" over the last fifty years, but never as plain citizens belonging to Germany as a society of migration. And these categories are related to changing concepts such as the German self-understanding as a non-immigration country (that lasted over almost four decades of migration history) or the newer idea of a German "Leitkultur",[1] but also sociological concepts such as "assimilation", "integration", "multiculturalism" or "diversity" that form and rationalize the way migration and society are related and acted upon by the state. I am interested in the orders produced by such concepts, as well as their contradictions, and how (migrant) social and political struggles act upon them and how they are re-negotiated over the long run and in everyday politics, the economy, or the workings of public administrations. As you can imagine from the example above, this perspective allows one to connect developments in urban governance and public administration or planning to questions of spatial configurations, citizenship, and the right to the city.

HC: Your current research is focusing on Frankfurt, one of the most diverse cities in Germany. Looking at Frankfurt, how would you say that the governance of migration and integration has changed in the last decade?

MR: Our project is discussing Frankfurt as a case study for what has been called a paradigm shift of local integration policies in Germany. Up until the 1990s, no German cities had developed permanent institutional structures or explicit strategies in the field of migration and integration. This has changed dramatically since then, and especially in the last ten years. Today, more than 90% of the major German cities have developed formal strategies that define integration policy as a core task to be mainstreamed in all fields of urban governance. These cities have established offices or departments that monitor, control, and regulate the implementation in the day-to-day business of public administration and to align projects and services carried out by private organizations with their goals. So it is clear that there is a quantitative leap in activity in this area of urban governance. But in this process, there is also a qualitative shift to be witnessed that leads back to my answer to your last question. We can see how conceptions that inform migration and integration policy have changed vastly in this process. In the past,

cities understood migration and integration first and foremost as a synonym for problems that needed to be solved. Migrant populations were addressed as (potential) troublemakers, as a threat to the order of the city. As integration was often understood in the simple terms of cultural and social assimilation, all visible forms of (social, cultural, religious, political) difference that could be associated with migration were taken as signs for the potential "failure" of integration, be it—as in the example above—a couple of shops serving the consumption needs of migrant communities, or the construction of mosques visible in the urban landscape. Such problematizations were often associated with demands on the federal government to increase efforts to reduce the migrant population, but they also resulted in interventions on the city level. Their most vivid expressions were regulations that banned foreigners from moving into certain districts defined as overpopulated by migrants, or quotas for migrant residents in public housing.

The underlying images remain central to public discourse until today, oftentimes driven by the rise of anti-Muslim racism from the 2000s onward. However, many of the newly developed explicit city strategies are based on much more complex understandings of the role of migration and processes of integration in cities. Frankfurt may be the best example for this: the strategy on "integration and diversity" that was formally adopted in 2010 represents migration as a driving force of economic, social, and cultural city development in the "global city" of Frankfurt, drawing on scientific concepts such as transnationalism or "super diversity". In a nutshell, the strategy states that in a city where almost 30% of the population does not hold a German passport and where almost 70% of children under six years of age have a migration history in their own family, migration and cultural diversity cannot be represented first and foremost as a source of problems, but are simple facts and conditions of urbanity in a globalizing world. In consequence, the concept calls for an adaptation of the city's self-perception, along with its institutions and structures, to this fact. According to the concept, this not only implies efforts in anti-discrimination throughout the administration's departments as well as structures in the city such as the labour or housing market, but also questions of representation, such as the aim to increase the diversity of city staff to match the actual composition of the city's population. In summary, this shift could be described as a re-conceptualization of urban citizenship. The old discourses framed migration as a threat to the citizens of the city, understood as a community of German descent and culture. In the new concepts, urban citizenship is disentangled from questions of national belonging and national citizenship, and instead derived from a description of the city as a place of globalization, where the history, presence, and future of migration are simple facts. Such concepts speak for the people that are actually living in the city.

But, of course, the existence of such concepts cannot be confused with their implementation. This becomes particularly clear in our case study in Frankfurt. Even though the city was the first in Germany to institutionalize integration policies on the city level with the introduction of the Department of Multicultural Affairs in 1989, and even though the strategic reorientation with the concept in 2010 was very far-reaching, the efforts of implementation have since been marginal. While the department itself has introduced the strategy and is strongly identified with its goals, every step of implementation that reaches into other departments' routines has been accompanied by strong opposition. As a result, the claim of new forms of urban citizenship remains in large parts an unkept promise—one that may only come to reality through external pressure. And we can see in Frankfurt how migrant communities and social movements are using this tension in their struggles for equity, as the right to the city movement is beginning to join forces with migrant and refugee organizations.

HC: Do you think the current Frankfurt Urban Citizenship model can and should be implemented in Zurich? Relying on your past experience of the project of the Shedhalle, which fostered this discussion in Switzerland, would you say that the cities of Frankfurt and Zurich are comparable? If so, could you explain how?

MR: Both cities are considered small global cities whose economies and urban societies are heavily transnationalized. And I believe for both cities it is true that while the important role of transnational corporations, for example, within the finance industries and the free global flow of the management class and high-skilled labour forces of these economies have been recognized as decisive factors for the futures of the cities, the role of migration and diversity in a wider sense is too often taken for granted. Both cities have to learn that their urban realities are in contradiction with ideas of national homogeneity and the integration "into" some abstract notion of

national culture that still substantiate their nation's migration and integration regimes. It is these cities, and within them the districts that are most commonly described as problematic due to their high diversity (i.e. "parallel societies"), where local communities have long learned to live the future of a majority-minority society (where racial and ethnic minorities make up the majority of the population). Cities such as Frankfurt and Zurich have to understand that it is of vital interest for them to speak and act in the name of this urban reality. The fact that so many members of urban society are formally or informally lacking political, economic, and social rights and subject to discrimination and racism has been unbearable all along; but in the face of the demographic developments, the democratic duty of the cities to recognize all of their populations as citizens and to further their rights if necessary beyond and against their nation's conceptions has turned into a social, political, and economic necessity. Just to point to the most obvious example: a voting system that excludes 30% (Frankfurt) or 40% (Zurich) of the urban population has long lost its democratic legitimacy—and is nothing more than an exercise in nationalist romanticism.

Frankfurt may be some steps further along than Zurich in recognizing the necessity of adapting to the diversity of urban life and the far-reaching implications of urban citizenship when we look at the city's diversity strategy. But as I described above, the actual practices are far from a state that one could describe as a working "urban citizenship model" as one that is successfully tackling the injustice in our cities. For the moment, we have to look at other places for working models of the future city such as formal or informal implementations of an actual urban citizenship in places like San Francisco or Toronto, who have declared themselves "sanctuary cities". But, of course, even there we see that movements cannot rely on urban politics and municipalities to provide solutions, but that the necessity for migrant and refugee organizations and social movements in general to organize and develop and maintain political pressure is substantial. In this regard, I think the work that is developing in Zurich at the moment, in terms of organizing the city's various stakeholders in these questions ("Wir alle sind *Zürich")* and also of mobilizing far-reaching concepts of urban citizenship from working examples in the North American context, is very promising. I believe that the efforts of translating such conceptions politically and legally for the Swiss context along with the experiences that are gathered in

Zurich at the moment could foster the practical political discussions and efforts in terms of these questions in many European cities, including Frankfurt. But most importantly, the city of Zurich should listen closely and care for what is happening there. Such movements are practicing the future of our cities.

HC: Human Geography draws its particularity and methods from connections with other disciplines. What forms of attitude or action are possible in that field from your perspective as political scientist working in a human geography department to induce a movement to transform, reform, or revolutionize life in cities?

MR: I guess if I would be a political scientist in the sense of the discipline's tradition or canon, I would readily find the idea to "induce a movement to transform, reform, or revolutionize life" appealing—because it is based on the assumption of sovereignty central to that discipline. Only in the political sciences can you still so easily get away with the idea that social sciences can take a bird's-eye view and just see how the world should be changed to be ordered well. As Warren Magnusson once put it in an insightful critique of the political scientists' gaze: "Sovereignty in general and the state in particular is the condition that we assume […]: we are not megalomaniacs, but only advisors to those who could implement our dreams." But as Magnusson goes on, nobody ever does successfully implement such dreams. Because our worlds (including our cities) cannot be ordered neatly as can be done with thoughts on a piece of paper. Our worlds are always already filled with complex interactions, structured by power relations and subject to contestation and struggle. This is what I believe political science should be about—and fortunately I was trained in a context of an interdisciplinary political theory that very much attended to such questions. But even more so I find my discipline of human geography to be perfectly equipped for the task at hand—not only because of its interdisciplinary interferences, but because of its focus on spatial configurations, on place and locality, and its foundation in field work.

So to come back to your question from this perspective: if we do want to transform, reform, or revolutionize life in cities, we should not see our role as those that "induce", that lead the way. Instead, we should engage with the political and social movements in our cities that we find struggling with the state of things. Human Geography, and especially the

Frankfurt department, is great for this kind of work. There are many inspiring colleagues in the discipline here and abroad who are practicing such an understanding of engaged social sciences. What reduces the possibilities for this dimension of scholarly work is thus less the disciplinary restrictions, but the state of the German university as a working environment, that is, reducing academic work at the doctoral and post-doctoral level to a competition for the very few positions with permanent contracts. As only publications in peer-reviewed articles in high-ranking journals seem to count in this competition, other equally important aspects of academic work become side-tracked—most often the ones that produce the social and political relevance of academia as an educational system as well as within society as a whole.

Notes

1 "The term was coined by the political scientist Basam Tibi in 1998, as a description of the dominance of traditional concepts of German culture in a multicultural context. It soon developed into a central term of a populist political discourse constructing migrants from non-Western and especially Muslim cultures as problems of integration that should be answered with the political enforcement of a German Leitkultur." (M.R.)

Mathias Rodatz *is a political scientist and geographer and has been working at the Department of Human Geography, Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main since 2010. His current DFG-funded research is investigating the governance of urban citizenship in the "city of diversity" in Frankfurt as part of the joint research project* Re-Ordering the City in the Age of Neoliberalism. *His general research interests are stateness and the city, focusing on fields such as migration, racism, and neo-Nazism. He is co-founder and editor of movements. Journal für kritische Migrations- und Grenzregimeforschung (journal for critical research on migration and border regimes).*

Hana Cisar *studied architecture at the ETH Zurich and the EPF Lausanne. She has worked as an architect in Zurich, Lugano, and Paris. She has taught architecture at the EPFL, the University of Liechtenstein, and the University of Applied Sciences in Chur. At Eindhoven University of Technology she was Chair of Architectural Design and Urban Cultures. She works independently as a designer and author, and is currently a student of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating ZHdK, as preparation for establishing a platform on curatorial practice ('curating architecture').*