

The Ruhrgebiet as Periphery

In order to understand how the Ruhrgebiet functions, and to define ways to cope with its specific conditions, I once gathered all information on administrative structures relevant for this region. Each of these structures which are founded on respective laws or bodies of regulations based on decisions made by the state government I depicted in an individual map on translucent paper. Thus I obtained about 20 different maps which, placed in a stack on top of each other, clearly brought to view that the Ruhrgebiet is not only determined by what is called its infrastructure – streets, public transport systems, water-supply and sewage system, energy-distribution-systems, communication-systems and so on – but by a large number of mostly invisible structures which however determine many aspects of living within this region.

Clearly, such administrative, and that means politically controlled structures do exist wherever people build communities. What, however, makes the administrative structures defining live in the Ruhrgebiet noteworthy is, that they have been set up initially in order to avoid this region to develop to a centre: Beginning in the second half of the 19th century the Ruhrgebiet became the largest industrial complex of Europe which different to all other industrial centres did not develop out of a historical site of trade and commerce but emerged out of an agricultural structure dominated by an agglomeration of about fifteen, mostly smaller rural cities, some of them like Essen and Dortmund quite important trade-points though. Thus already segmented by these old communities, the Prussian State, afraid of the potential political power of the region, deliberately enforced its segmentation by dividing up its administration into three sections which were controlled by governmental institutions placed in cities far away from the region in the country: in Arnsberg, Münster and Düsseldorf. Moreover, the region was cut in addition into two larger sections ruled by two different regional parliaments and their administrations based in Cologne and Münster, that is in cities not only located quite far away from the Ruhrgebiet and, but, probably more important, with a very different history and mentality. On this basic historical segmentation of the Ruhrgebiet many more built up within the last century, all of them except, one, the Ruhrsiedlungsverband, set up with the more or less outspoken purpose to keep the region under control, as it up to present remains the largest agglomeration of people and thus political power at least in Germany which forming a centre could outbalance the established order. In short: the Ruhrgebiet has been made a political periphery, and this in fact not only kept it from unfolding much of its potential but lead to what I call a provincial mentality of its people, a mentality as much self-contained in local affairs as it dreams of a centre which it in fact fears.

Working in this kind of a periphery means that wherever you try to create a project conceived to however surpass local boundaries you will hit on more or less enforced invisible borders which for individuals are hard to break through. It also means that in case you still succeeded to establish within a greater context you will be subject to all kind of animosities driven and fed by the administrative-political structures which common basic line are that no one should get any further than one self has managed to reach out. In consequence most initiatives are kind of beaten back into the local, or are ignored by a larger audience: The divide et impera principle once established by those in power proves being internalized by the impoverished and becomes a means they fight each other. Those struggles, however, confirm the opinion of the people in power that the region itself is not able to create anything other than of local importance. In consequence and as much as this periphery is seen being unable to create a structure breaking local boundaries and borders, people ruling the superstructures from the centres feel legitimized to implement projects of large dimensions into the region, project which just regarding their size be objected to by the local as they do not have the means to in whatever way top them. As a result we can read especially the cultural history of the Ruhrgebiet as an ongoing re-enactment to establish meta-structures by the people

which are destroyed by superimposing new layers of administrative structures or projects thought up and funded by governmental institutions. In former times, this used to be realized by extra-money spent on respective programs but in more recent years, with less resources at hand such initiatives could be set in function only by re-arranging existing funds, that is, frankly speaking, basically by extricating money from local budgets. The Ruhr-Triennale, a festival nobody but the former minister for culture really wanted, is a clear example for this policy - and one can only hope, that the Kulturhauptstadt-movement will not be the next.

Recognizing these mechanisms, my attempts to reach out over these peripheral conditions, has been to look for out and form what I call a resonating space within the local field. The basic idea is actually quite simple: to either find allies within a community who, for in their own interests, strive for a larger context or are part of it, or to deal with matters which have a local reference but touch a general issue. At this point, there is not enough time to go into details or present the respective projects: they reach from the Festival 'Kemnade International', a festival on the culture of at those times so called foreign workers I organized in the Seventies in Bochum up to a large exhibition on Non-objective Painting which took simultaneously place at nine different exhibition-spaces in different cities of the Ruhrgebiet in 1999/2000 , a competition on shopping-window-design for which the city of Hagen became a benchmark and, finally, the Landschaftsbauhütte, a research in a peripheral region of the valley of the Ruhr-River near to the city of Hagen. In all cases, the efforts focussed on bringing together the local potentials and utilize an established institution, in my case it has been a museum, as a production-site.

Again, this is not the place to go into details. But what I would like say here at the end of my contribution is, that instead of creating new institutions and organisations I believe it to be more effective to study existing structures and institutions thoroughly with the aim to find out about their potential how to develop and re-orientate them onto fields they usually do not 'see'. To this belongs an understanding of the structures they themselves are a part of or to which they refer. Analyzing institutions and structures will lead to a clear view on where it could make sense to apply one's own usually limited means; here, again, applies the idea of finding a resonating space at first hand which is premier a question of size and dimension: It always seems to be better to grow with an existing institution as much as it engages for new ideas instead of having them swallowed by it thus enforcing only its consisting form and existence. This is basically the concept we once entitled 'the march through the institution'; looking back I believe it to be much more effective than any single revolutionary event, however, I have to admit that many of its results emerged in ways and forms not expected, and that for many individuals it didn't pay off personally.

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