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Civic environmentalism and urban renaturation politics: case studies from the greater Paris and New York City

After being at the root of industrial development, the contemporary urban policy discourse is now characterized by a growing interest for environmental preservation and ecosystem services. Alternatively, citizens involved in ecological restoration and management on public spaces tend to be more and more valued. In the last 20 years, North American municipalities were among the first to favor environmental stewardship through community organizing.

This thesis investigates different territorial inscriptions of civic environmentalism linked to renaturation practices in analogous urban contexts of the greater Paris (Paris and Massy) and New York City.

Urban renaturation, policy making and civic engagement

Cities as social-ecosystem are the places of new environmental policy valuing the benefits of biodiversity for urban life. The process of renaturation designates all material, spatial and symbolic progression of vegetal and animal life resulting in a biodiversity increase. Its implementation often bet on civic participation, from the Million Tree Initiative or parks' "conservancies" in New York City to "budget participatif" and planting 170,000 trees in Paris before 2024.

Many citizens are taking part in the process of renaturation and metropolises governments like Paris or New York City are building partnerships in which collectives of inhabitants and local organizations play an active role. This so called "hybrid governance" creates original forms of co-production of politics and urban nature (Lachmund, 2013; Fisher et al., 2015). MacGregor (2019) argues that politicization of ordinary environmentalism happens through renaturation processes as "interstitial politics".

In respect of policy evaluation, the aim of the study is twofold:

- 1) characterize and map emerging forms collective care and civic engagement for biodiversity,
- 2) evaluate the effects of institutional arrangements between civic groups and local governments for urban ecological management and policy making.

In this scope, interactions with policy making and more generally with forms of politicization (infra- or micro- politics) of local groups seems worthy of interest. Literature from urban studies and civic ecology shows that local action takes many aspects: hands-on practices, monitoring, education, online and physical advocacy, also regular interactions with land managers and inhabitants on public spaces. A certain emphasis has been made on the transformative impact of such actions for vulnerable territories or zones impacted by environmental disasters (Krasny et Tidball, 2015).

Multi-sited and multi-species approaches

Main research questions

What are the territorial forms of civic environmentalism focusing on ecological restoration and biodiversity care? How do they relate to institutions and to each other? In what extend do they act as social-ecological innovations in their respective urban contexts?

Methodology

Drawing on the tools of environmental geography (Castree et al., 2009), my methodology focuses on local case studies by crossing interviews with civic and institutional actors (land manager, administrative head, gardeners), ethnographic participant and filming observations with local groups, as well as mapping and floristic surveys. Through relational (Ernstson et Sörlin, 2019) and more-than-human approaches (Cooke et al., 2019), the study will focus on specific civic initiatives in neglected areas or wasteland (polluted zones, fragmented by infrastructure, urban interstices) and try to trace up their scope of intervention and territory of action.



Pictures of sampled civic groups involved in urban ecological restoration in Massy (top left), Paris (top right) and New York (bottom right) 2019 ©

Renaturing the urban wastelands: social-ecological innovations under tensions

Making politics from the ground-up...

The first findings show that multi-species and multi-actors alliances are at the core of civic agency. Civic actors specifically invest land and nature that they perceive as neglected, degraded or under-valued by designated actors (mainly public but also private). Collectives invest wasteland and public interstices because of their lack of management and care. Different forms of planting and green infrastructures are provided as ways to improve the local living environment. Both in Paris and New York City, local organizations are using institutional devices, contracting with local authorities to perpetuate their action on the local environment through tree care, tree planting, pollinators gardening, native plant cultivation, wild zones creation, watershed and river restoration. At different scales, they try to mobilize residents and to build networks in collective action alike volunteer events throughout the seasons. Each group translate biodiversity restoration in a specific action mode in its territory, using innovative methods of renaturation.

Notably in disadvantaged neighborhoods, social and civic movements are restoring sense of (cosmo)politics in the urban public spaces. They engage different publics, from youth to retired up to some minorities in caring for ecological quality of urban biotopes.

...and revealing tensions

The first analysis of the case studies reveal several tensions inherent to local environmentalism as some authors pointed out. Fieldwork studies show the importance of negotiation and power relations between civic leaders and Parks Departments managers and services for material providing (plants, land...) and ecological management practices, knowledge and expertise sharing. Groups using citizen participation devices to act on the public realm also have to adjust to specific procedures and norms that can be both constraints and opportunities. It seems that affective and ethical engagement is a main driver for a civic-based governance systems.

Contexts of public budget austerity, more prominent in New York City, is paradoxically fostering volunteerism. This phenomenon can be interpreted as a « politics of free labor » in a neoliberal system where private funders play a key role (Krinsky and Simonet, 2017; MacGregor, 2019). However, studied groups rely on public funds and material support to function and, especially in New York City, they claim for more public investments in parks and green infrastructures. At the micro-scale, we noted solidarity but also discordant visions about species selection between neighbors and volunteers.

On the whole, the public-civic production of urban nature is making new forms and scales of politics.

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As a geographer and environmentalist, I lead a PhD study on local environmentalism between the two sides of the Atlantic, in the greater Paris and in New York City.

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