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The inhabitant as expert: the social construction of local knowledge in a large housing estate of Eastern Berlin.

Studies on social movements usually insist on two ways of using expertise: the first one is to cooperate with experts of the claims' object, the second one is to appropriate this expertise (Mathieu, 2004). In Marzahn Nord West, a large housing estate of Eastern Berlin in which I'm doing my fieldwork, I observed a third way of using expertise that I'll expose in this paper.

Since 1999, this large housing estate is part of the federal program Soziale Stadt ("Social City") aimed at the social and economic development of neglected neighborhoods in German cities. As part of this program, managers are sent in the neighborhoods to network local stakeholders and initiate or encourage development projects. In 2000 the neighborhood managers of Marzahn Nord West created a Council of Inhabitants in order to bring together inhabitants and these projects. In 2002 the Council learned from the press that the buildings situated in the central part of the district are planed to be partly or completely demolished. This plan is the result of a negotiation between the Berlin Senate and the housing company as part of another federal program, Stadtumbau Ost (City Reconstruction in East Germany), aimed at the demolition of vacant buildings in East German cities[i].

As the Council of Inhabitants organizes the social mobilization of the tenants against political and professional actors promoting buildings' demolition, it also promotes a knowledge based on their native status. In order to explain that new discourse, I'll first describe the political context in which it emerged and then analyze the different situations in which it is used. I indeed intend to show that this specific form of expertise is an action repertoire mobilized in conflicts between insiders and outsiders.

I. Politicization of discourse in the Council of inhabitants

The creation of the Council of Inhabitants results from the first district conference, which was organized by the local managers in Marzahn Nord West in order to present the program and its aims to the inhabitants. The principal function of the Council of Inhabitants is to advise the neighborhood management in the direction of its action by identifying the problems of the district. It was only after the demolition project had been announced in 2002 that the Council of Inhabitants played another role by organizing the tenants' claims against this project. In this part, I'll describe how expertise evolved with the Council's function in the neighborhood.

I.1. Inhabitants' expertise as part of the Social City program

During the first years of the district management's existence, it organized series of conferences with the inhabitants in different parts of the district. Martin Witte, the Council's president and speaker who attended most of them, remembers the process as great public consultations in which inhabitants said what problems they had and managers listed them in order to develop the first projects to solve them. Martin Witte describes consultations used by the district management as a method of social investigation: they identify and list the district problems by asking its inhabitants.

This is an astonishing process when we consider how the Senate administration first identified the neglected neighborhoods to be concerned by Social City program: it asked the sociologist Hartmut Häußermann, who leads the Institute of urban sociology at the Humboldt University to make a study on segregation in Berlin and to identify the most neglected districts in which the Senate had to intervene. But when it came to identifying problems at a local level, the managers simply asked the inhabitants, which then determined how money had to be invested in their own neighborhood. For example, 2, 9 Million DM (1, 5 Million euros) were invested in the district of Marzahn Nord West in 1999[1].

These two different ways of using expertise in the political sphere can be explained by the fact that the whole Social City program views the inhabitants as endowed with a specific knowledge which makes them "experts of their own neighbourhood". For example, Gerhard Schröder, the German chancellor, said during the Social City Congress organised in Berlin in 2002, that the inhabitants were the "only ones who know what they really need for

[1] Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin, *Quartiersmanagement (I) – Einsatz von Fördermittel*, Anfrage Nr. 14/419, 30 mai 2003 (Anlage).

themselves[2]". In this statement, Gerhard Schröder makes what Doug Mc Adam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly call "certification" (Mc Adam, Tarrow, Tilly, 2001, p. 145): he validates the inhabitants, their performances and claims by recognizing them as necessary. When the district managers create the Council of inhabitants with an advising role, they are then also referring and reproducing the definition of inhabitants as given in the whole program.

But what do the inhabitants exactly know about their neighborhood? To answer this question, let us see the results of the conferences organized by the district management in Marzahn Nord West: what sort of problems do the inhabitants identify? In the list on which the first constituting meeting of the Council of inhabitants from 26th June 2000 was based, we can read that, according to its inhabitants, the district lacks benches and trees, possibilities for spare time or cultural activities, restaurants, clubs and so on. They also mentioned growing vandalism and a lack of information on what was going on in the neighborhood. To summarize, the inhabitants know how the district is actually used by them and how they would want to use it or how it should be used by them. In the same perspective all advises and actions lead by the Council of inhabitants after its creation where oriented by the way they wanted the district to be used. For example, Martin Witte explained how they conceived the orientation of benches in the district in order to encourage people to use the local shops. We can then qualify the expertise mobilized inside the Council of inhabitants as an "expertise of use", which public or private administrations commonly ask for when it comes to adapt a service to a specific category of population (poor, addicted, handicapped or sick persons for example).

[2] Gerhard Schröder, *Rede anlässlich der Eröffnung des Kongresses „Soziale Stadt-Zusammenhalt, Sicherheit, Zukunft*, 7 et 8 mai 2002, Berlin, http://www.sozialestadt.de.

I.2. Decertification and local knowledge

In this context, the Council of Inhabitants interpreted the announcement of the demolitions' project as a decertification: the fact that public authorities didn't ask their advice on the project showed its members that they were no longer seen as experts. This interpretation is present in the letters sent to authorities and in the interviews when the members regretted that the authorities did not respond to their questions or simply ignored them. These letters show that the definition of the Council and the knowledge it uses evolves: in a letter addressed to the Berlin Senator for Urban Development, they demonstrate dramatically the collapse of the whole neighborhood as a result of the demolition project by speaking on behalf of the whole population ("public announcements of the WBG [housing society] did not only let a bad taste and atmosphere by the tenants but also by the whole inhabitants of the district") and by putting forward their local membership ("here it's our little piece of country"). In this letter, they do not argue that the project doesn't fit the common use of the neighborhood by its inhabitants. They are more arguing that the project demolishes not only some buildings but also a part of their home. The knowledge they define then is not linked with their practical use of district equipments in their daily lives, but appeals to their local membership. The description they make of the atmosphere of collapse produced by the announcement of the project among the local population presents some similarities with the type of descriptions made by ethnographers of exotic cultures: they put forward feelings, impressions and mobilize their own sense of the situation. The Council's members oppose actually what James Clifford calls "experiential authority" to the political authority of the Senator: "Experiential authority is based on a "feel" for the foreign context, a kind of accumulated savvy and sense of the style of a people or place" (James Clifford, 1983, p.128). To summarize, the Council of inhabitants now defines its knowledge by giving it a cultural dimension and the 'inhabitant' as a representative of local and native population. In the following developments I'll refer to that definition of knowledge as "local knowledge".

How can this evolution be explained? The theoretical perspective provided by Doug Mac Adam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly's work should help to answer this question (Mc Adam, Tarrow, Tilly, 2001). They first define identity as products of social interactions: "Identities in general consist of social relations and their representations, as seen from the perspective of one actor or another. They are not durable or encompassing attributes of persons or collective actors as such. To bear an identity as mother is to maintain a certain relation to a child" (Mc Adam, Tarrow, Tilly, 2001, p. 133). If we see identity as defined by

the situation and the type of actor we are facing, we can then explain that an identity changes by saying that the situation itself and the type of actors we are facing also changes. What has then changed in the political situation of the Council of Inhabitants, when it has begun to mobilize the tenants against the demolition project? Before the mobilization, when the Council was confined in the role of advising the district management, it was mostly confronted with local representatives of housing societies and political administrations: these actors were the ones who should be networked by the district managers. With the mobilization the Council writes for the first time a letter not to the district's mayor or to the representative of the district's urban services but directly to the Berlin City Senator. In the same way, it invites to public assemblies not only the housing societies' local representative but its main manager. That's to say, with the tenants' mobilization the Council of inhabitants is now facing new actors which belong to a wider sphere of action. Facing these new actors, the Councils' members defined their identity by putting forward their local membership and by founding their local knowledge on this membership. Doug Mc Adam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly insist in their analysis on the link between pears of identities and action repertoires they define as "limited ensembles of mutual claim-making routines available to particular pairs of identities" (Mc Adam, Tarrow, Tilly, 2001, p. 138). Being confronted with a higher type of actors, the Council of Inhabitants not only changes its identity but also its ways of operating by redefining the type of expertise used against outsiders. In that way – confronting the Council to another type of political actors – the tenants' mobilization against the demolition project leaded by the Council has changed the ways he defines himself (its identity) and the type of knowledge he uses to promote its expertise on local objects (its action repertoire).

II. Local expertise as a repertoire of political action

We have seen that in the context of a contentious situation in which they face outsiders the Council members define themselves as natives and promote a local knowledge based on their native status. I've also met such forms of local expertise in other contemporary situations outside the Council of inhabitants. How do people use local knowledge in these situations?

II.1. Local knowledge vs. public expertise

During tenants' mobilization the demolition project, the Council's speakers have created a Tenants' Defence Initiative whose aim is to represent their interests in the negotiations with the housing society. At the end of the mobilization, when the project was finally decided and its realization began at the end of 2004, the Tenants' Defence Initiative was not dissolved, although the great majority of the tenants was demobilized. Among the 15 members the initiative counted at its creation in February 2003, only 4 to 6 of them came to the assemblies and all of them were members of the Council of Inhabitants or members of another initiative created in the western Part of the neighborhood or members of a third initiative in Ahrensfelde, a village situated at the boundary between Berlin and the *Land* Brandenburg. The former Tenants' Defence Initiative changed its name after the demobilization into Citizen Initiative Marzahn Nord. This new name refers to the ones of the Citizen Initiative Marzahn West and of the Citizen Initiative B 105 Ahrensfelde which both already existed. This demonstrates the mechanism Doug Mc Adam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly call "social appropriation" by which "[activists] utilize an existing [organizational vehicle] and transform it into an instrument of contention" (Mc Adam, Tarrow, Tilly, 2001, p. 47). But our particular case shows how a formal organization, which has been left vacant by its former activists now demobilized, is transformed into a new organization with new political partners, a new identity, new action repertoires and a new goal: the motoway project which the activists accuse of trying to cut the urban continuity between Marzahn Nord, Marzahn West and the village of Ahrensfelde.

In this new political context, we face a new definition of the inhabitant as the one who lives along the future motorway. Following Greta Dahlewitz, the citizen initiative's speaker, the inhabitant defined such a way is endowed with more authority than other inhabitants like her, who will not be directly concerned by the future highway because they live futher away. That argument contradicts the way political authorities usually see groups of such inhabitants when

they qualify them as “NIMBY (Not In My BackYard)” organizations. Following political authorities’ perspective, those groups only represent their own limited interests opposed to common good. On the contrary, according to Greta Dahlewitz, people directly concerned by such projects are the most important because they can identify their on their local environment. The new action repertoire of the initiative is therefore based on the combination between, on the one hand, technical expertise which the members have to appropriate by consulting public archive, informing about plans, technical and legal conditions of such projects, and, on the other hand, local expertise based on their own surveys aimed at demonstrating the deficits of the plan. By leading their own survey they demonstrate for example that the authorities’ experts do not consider the direct consequences on people living along the future motorway and cover up problems such as pipes which will prove more expensive to reroute. The example of the Citizen Initiative Marzahn Nord presents some similarities with the way a group of English sheep farmers in the region of Cumbria mobilizes expertise against scientists (Callon, Lascoumes, Barthe, 2001). As reported by Michel Callon, Pierre Lascoumes and Yannik Barthe, the sheep farmers of the region of Cumbria promote their “fine knowledge of their pasture lands’ geography” to contest the way scientists want to criss-cross their territory in order to test radioactivity. As the authors conclude, a conflict of identity is at stake in this conflict on knowledge, as the scientists ignore the groups concerned by the phenomena they study, their own identity, experience, way of life or survey methods (Callon, Lascoumes, Barthe, 2001, p. 135). Returning to our case in Marzahn, we can then conclude that the mobilization of local expertise in the form of the combination between technical and local knowledge is another variation of the action repertoire used by the inhabitants when they face outsiders, personified in this situation by public experts.

II.2. Local history as a form of political discourse

The practice of local history can be seen as another form of local expertise. This practice does also correspond to another group and identity which is represented in the Council of inhabitants: the first tenants of Marzahn. The large housing estate of the Bezirk Marzahn was built between 1979 and 1989 as part of a great social program launched by Erich Honecker in the 1970s. Some members of the Council belong to the first tenants who arrived in Marzahn during the period of its construction, when there was nothing but sand as far as the eye could see. The period of the construction as lead to the production of a myth that the first tenants always repeat when it comes to celebrate the “Wellington years”: to this period the people had

to walk with Wellington boots because of the mud in the streets which were not already finished. The Council's president, Martin Witte, is particularly well-known for its talent as local story-teller. He's often invited by local associations to take part in history afternoons or in publications about local history. In contrary to the local erudites described by Benoît de L'Estoile (De l'Estoile, 2001), Martin Witte does not cultivate his knowledge of local history by studying public archive or by collecting objects for the local museum. He defines himself as a witness not as a student or scholar. He bases his stories on his personal experience of this period. What makes him different from the others witnesses of the "Wellington years" is the formal quality of his stories: "they are well written", according to his public. Martin Witte was actually journalist by the former national radio "Stimme der DDR" (Voice of the GDR). He lost his job in the mid 1990s and then found a form of social conversion in the activity of local history. As Benoît de L'Estoile noted it, the practice of local history "gives access to a form of notability" (de l'Estoile, 2001, p. 127).

At a more general level, his practice is also to understand in the context of a public discourse produced during the 1990s by scholars, political authorities and media about the GDR and in the context of the linked phenomenon of "Ostalgie" (East German Nostagia). As Mary Fulbrook noted (Fulbrook, 2004), scholars, political authorities and media focalized on political, arbitrary and Stasi repression, which lead a greater mass of former GDR citizens to oppose a more positive image by saying "everything wasn't so bad in the GDR" and regretting for example its medical, social care or educational system. Martin Witte himself participates to an anthology of texts edited by an association of former GDR citizens[ii] who tell their stories during the GDR in order to demonstrate that they could live normally in this state stigmatized as a totalitarian dictatorship by the new authorities. If we consider again the way Doug Mc Adam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly defined identities, action repertoires and their relations one another, we can interpret local history as a form of expertise, that's to say a repertoire of action mobilized in a conflict between local (former GDR citizens) and extra-local actors (FRG authorities producing a discourse from the "outside"). In another way, the practice of local history is a repertoire of action in the context of a conflict at the national level usually framed by media as a cultural conflict dividing contemporary Germany between "Ossis" (East German citizen) and "Wessis" (West German citizen).

The way some members the Council of inhabitants use expertise evolves with time and political context. To explain the variations of the definitions of expertise we have to consider it as a repertoire of action which varies with the actors the Council is faced with. However, all

the situations in which local expertise is put forward are characterized by the opposition between insiders and outsiders. Actually all the situations we analyzed here are situations of social domination in which a group has to face laws or norms imposed from the outside by a social group usually seen as dominant. In such situations the reference to the 'local' is then used as a political resource of the dominated to oppose the dominanters.

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[i] Since German Reunification East German cities are confronted with the phenomenon geographers and planner call "shrinking cities": more and more people are leaving the city centres to go in the periphery or, in the case of East German cities, to go to West Germany in order to find a job because the former industrial centres are in crisis. This phenomenon put the housing companies in difficult financial situation as they have to manage more and more vacant flats. A federal expert commission made in 2000 statement on this problem and advised to demolish roughly 400 000 buildings in whole East Germany by founding a program such as "Stadtumbau Ost". For more details see: Bundesministerium für Verkehr, Bau- und Wohnungswesen, *Bericht der Kommission « Wohnungswirtschaftlicher Strukturwandel in den neuen Bundesländer »*, Bonn, Bundesministerium für Verkehr, Bau- und Wohnungswesen , 2000, 75 p. et W. Rietdorf, H. Liebmann et C. Haller, « Schrumpfende Städte – verlassene Großsiedlungen? Stadtstrukturelle Bedeutung und Probleme von Großwohnsiedlungen », *DISP*, n° 146, 2001, pp. 4-12.

[ii] Unabhängige Autorengemeinschaft „So habe ich das erlebt", *Spurensicherung*, Band 1-6, Berlin, GNN Verlag.