“...in my opinion, people won’t accept forever the high wealth of a few in front of them. In terms of criminality you can see wars on wealth distribution in other metropolises in this country...My fear is that this will also happen here. We shouldn’t jeopardise the social peace, also a soft factor for business locations [in this city]” (p.346-7, emphasis added)

A neoliberal rationality in urban governance has increasingly become naturalised in the local politics of the German city Frankfurt am Main since the 1990s. As the quote above, from a deputy of the German leftist party Die Linke in the city parliament, from July 2010 illustrates, a neoliberal logic established itself even within leftist-oppositional positions. In general, since the middle of the 1990s, speeches of different parliamentary groups in power repeatedly refer to urban entrepreneurialism, hard and soft location factors as well as to a global competition around creativity and productivity, which all cities around the world are supposedly confronted with.

In Genealogie und Gegenwart der “unternehmerischen Stadt”: Neoliberales Regieren in Frankfurt am Main Sebastian Schipper presents a detailed historical account of how a neoliberal rationality of urban governance came to be established in Frankfurt am Main. He empirically traces a political history from the crisis of Fordism in the 1960s to the hegemonic position of a neoliberal logic in the present. Furthermore, he investigates debates from the Frankfurt parliament in the first phase of the global financial crisis of 2008-2010 in great detail, looking for disruptions within this hegemony. Theoretically, this broad empirical study is embedded in a historical materialist understanding of capitalist regulation and crisis combined with a Foucauldian perspective on governmentality. On the one hand, he argues that material structures are fundamental to an understanding of neoliberal hegemony. A Marxist regulation approach, sensitive to social forms of capitalist socialisation, serves to encompass the dialectical relationship between structural constraints and human practice within capitalist societies (p.49). On the other hand, however,
Schipper notes a gap in materialist theory concerning questions of “why local subjects do not perceive socially constructed forces as such” (p.123) (but, rather, interpret them as really existing ‘natural’ necessities) and why – as a result – they “want to steer their ‘entrepreneurial city’ through the stormy seas of global competition” (p.124). He wants to overcome this gap with the help of a governmentality perspective. According to Schipper, this theoretical combination makes it possible to examine the “genealogy of the ‘entrepreneurial city’ through concrete examples as the expression of a specific mixture of enforcement and acceptance as well as in relation to crises of capital accumulation” (p.125).

Following the introduction, chapters 2 and 3 present and discuss these theoretical backgrounds. Chapter 4 explains the methods and variety of data sources. The empirical work is presented in chapters 5 to 7. Based on regulation theory, chapter 5 shows the restructuring of the spatial Keynesianism of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) into a ‘rescaled competition state regime’ (Brenner 2004a) between the 1970s and 1990s. Using statistical data on the economic development of the FRG and the city Frankfurt am Main, as well as historical geographical materialist literature, as its sources, this chapter provides insights into the new challenges and constraints for the agency of local politics in post-Fordist times. Since it remains insufficiently theorised in this perspective why local subjects ‘want’ to act in terms of entrepreneurialism, Schipper complements the analysis, in chapters 6 and 7, by working through the “reality-constituting effects of discourses and practices and the social production of subject-positions” (p.54). An interpretative discourse analysis of the debates in the Frankfurt city parliament and other speeches and interviews is used to investigate the genesis and establishment of hegemonic rationalities of urban governance.

Overall, the study shows how structural constraints of local politics advise political actors to pilot their city into global competition over resources and ideas – but nevertheless does not force them to do so. However, politicians in power in Frankfurt am Main are still accepting or even pushing this trend: as one put it, “[i]n times of globalisation we are…in a world-wide competition – and we want to design this competition instead of suffering from it” (p.12). Schipper stresses that the rationality of the entrepreneurial city is used in the discourse as a ‘natural force’, and thus
“essentialised and treated as an objective necessity” (p.216). According to Schipper, this essentialisation is based on the hegemonic position of an “economic rationality…as the epitome of general reason and as the ideal model of urban governance” (p.208), which has been established over the last three decades. As a consequence, private capital appears no longer as the materialisation of particular interests, but as a natural ally of the city. Neoliberal politics can now prioritise capitalist interests by claiming to “do the best for the city as a whole” (p.12).

The central concern of the book is “to shed light on the social construction of apparently ‘natural’ constraints and to show how they are the result of power relations and as such can be also modified” (p.11). This is realised through a detailed presentation of its theoretical approaches, a transparent discussion of its methods, and a comprehensive demonstration of its empirical findings. However, some questions remain unanswered. Schipper understands the outcomes of the discourse analysis in relation to crises of capital accumulation. With Chistoph Görg (1994) and Joachim Hirsch (1994) he assumes that “crises have structural causes but they only become de facto crises if subjects perceive them as such, in other words, if ‘institutions, consensuses and moral concepts lose their validity for the people concerned’” (p.46, emphasis added). Based on statistically-identified economic crises (in the years 1967, 1975, 1982, 1993, 2002-03 and 2008-10), Schipper’s discourse analysis aims to reveal if (and when) evidence for a conjunction of “‘objective’ processes” and specific “interpretative patterns of the subjects” (p.46) can be found – a conjunction that leads to a change of rationalities of governing or even of the regulation regime itself. Empirical evidence is found for the years 1993-95 where an economic crisis emerges together with the assertion of the rationality of the entrepreneurial city – which provides the post-Fordist regulation regime with a new (temporarily stable) rationality of governing cities. This procedure becomes plausible in the framework of the study, but it remains questionable whether such a connection fits with the epistemological background of poststructuralist thinking. In Schipper’s argument, the existence of crises is stated on the empirical basis of (quantitative) economical data. Although Schipper states that “statistics are not only meant to illustrate the reality, but must be regarded as specific technologies of governing” (p.93), he himself nevertheless treats them as essential indicators for material conditions. In this way, he prioritises materialist theory in his empirical analysis. Though
this is not problematic in itself, it leads to an unevenly weighted use of the two theoretical approaches he claims to combine – and thus leaves open the question of how Marxist and poststructuralist theory can be combined more adequately in future work.

A second point of critique is the application of discourse analysis. As a whole, the substantial number of data sources used for the study (records of parliamentary debates, texts of political parties, trade unions, trade associations and expert interviews), as well as the long time period analysed (1960-2010), is remarkable. But Chapter 6 (‘Genealogy of the rationalities of urban governance’) seems to be unevenly supported by data sources: until the 1990s it’s almost exclusively speeches of the city mayors being analysed, and their setting (as parts of the discourse about rationalities of urban governance) thus remains vague. The time period from the 1990s to 2008, though, is studied more intensively. Secondly, despite the number of data sources used in chapter 7 (‘The hegemony of the “entrepreneurial city” in the crisis of 2008-2010’) it remains questionable if the short period of two years can give enough evidence concerning the future of neoliberal rationality in face of crisis. However, even more problematic than the quantity of data or the period analysed is their interpretation in regard to the relationship between the spokespersons and the patterns of explanation in the discourse. The patterns of explanation of the crises (the neoliberal, Keynesian, anti-capitalist, even moral explanations) can be related with high correlation to specific political parties in the city parliament. The interpretative discourse analysis appears thus partly as a content analysis of the positions of the different political parties only.

This might be a reason why the empirical findings about the process and establishment of the entrepreneurial city are not surprising, but seem to be a very detailed confirmation of findings made elsewhere (see, for example, Brenner 2004b) in Frankfurt am Main – which, however, provides a good reason to read the book. Especially the section on “the universalisation of location policy” (p.227), which serves to show vividly how neoliberal politics privileges the needs of the upper classes. Even the arrangement of simple children’s playgrounds is discussed in terms of competition for high-skilled (international) workers, rather than as a basic need of all city dwellers: “This playground,...if it is of good quality, the parents will say that [Frankfurt] provides also a good home for their children. This is competition. This is the real big global competition on the
battleground of local politics” (p.231).

Another problem evident in Frankfurt is the difficulty of realising alternative (leftist) politics by social-democrats and the Green Party. The establishment of the rationality of neoliberal urban government took place in the time of a ‘red-green’ dominated city parliament (1989-1995) – which can be read as a forerunner of the neoliberal restructuring of the German national welfare state under a ‘red-green’ dominated national legislative period from 1998-2005 (the so-called ‘Schröder-Fischer’ era). All in all, the data collected for this work presents a rich pool of material that can help right-to-the-city activists as well as critical urban scholars to a better understanding of the logic of neoliberal politics. And the promising combination of Marxist and poststructuralist approaches could and should be further investigated and tested in research questions following Schipper’s study. To what extent could the results be compared with other cities? Are there intersections and/or disruptions between political parties and pressure groups working on different scales concerning the establishment of the rationality of the entrepreneurial city? And, finally, are disruptions in neoliberal hegemony to be expected in the future?

Schipper states that the local subjects in the Frankfurt parliament represent their city using neoliberal logic, largely unbowed, as a competitive unit in the global market (p.376). This is to say that until 2010, no conjuncture of ‘objective’ processes and subjective interpretations of the crises can be observed, and that local subjects continue using neoliberal patterns of interpretation. But even if there are only sporadic disruptions in the hegemony so far, this must not be seen as the ‘end of history’. After all, “[t]he crisis of Fordism was treated with ‘Keynesian tools’ until the 1980s” (p.377). From a political as well as an academic perspective, it remains an open question of high relevance how and when the perception that ‘there is no alternative’ to the neoliberal status quo breaks down. Reason enough to continue working on it.

Endnote

[1] All quotes translated from the original German by Joscha Metzger.
References


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