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Entrepreneurial Urban Politics and Urban Social Movements in Los Angeles: The Struggle for Urban Farmland in South Central

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by Henrik Lebuhn

1. Introduction

'Entrepreneurial urban politics' have a long history in the United States. As Dennis Judd and Todd Swanstrom point out in their book about 'City Politics', cities in the United States have always been "places of economic opportunity." (Judd/Swanstrom 1994: 3) With the recent shift from fordist to postfordist economy, and the rise of neoliberal policy regimes, entrepreneurial urban politics have become even more crucial. Not only for cities in the US, but also for cities in most other western democracies.

David Harvey has been very influential in shaping this concept. It refers to an urban agenda, in which "traditional local boosterism is integrated with the use of local governmental powers to try and attract external sources of funding, new direct investment, or new employment sources." (Harvey 1989: 7) In a very general way we can state, that *every* capitalist city depends on successful capital accumulation. More specifically, current entrepreneurial urban politics can be described as a strategy to deal with the local consequences of the structural transformations on a national and global scale: increasing regional and global economic competition, the loss of industrial employment, and federal budget cutbacks for urban programs and social services.

Far from solving these challenges, entrepreneurial urban politics play an important role in producing and re-producing the vicious circle they are struggling with. Even if cities successfully master the pressure of regional and global competition, it doesn't necessarily mean that this pays off. At least not, if we look at 'the city' from a perspective of how livable it actually is for the majority of its inhabitants. As scholars like Saskia Sassen have pointed out, successful global cities produce particular local conflicts: many entrepreneurial cities struggle with severe financial crisis due to giant direct and indirect business subsidies and lack of tax revenues, they have to deal with severe social polarization, segregation and inequality, and they face dramatic social and social-spatial conflicts, especially in their marginalized neighborhoods.

While we do have some knowledge about how entrepreneurial city politics actually work, it seems that a lot less attention has been given to contemporary local protests, networks, and movements that resist these politics and call for political change (Mayer 2000; Nicholls/Beaumont 2004). The "insurgent civil society (...) has been mostly unnoticed", as Roger Keil puts it (Keil 1998: 35).

In this sense I'd like to take a look at a local conflict in Los Angeles that I am currently working on: the struggle for urban farmland in South Central. I will first give you a brief sketch of the conflict. Second, I'd like to make some remarks on the specific entrepreneurial politics that have led to this conflict. And third, concerning the political perspective I'd like to point out the difficult catch-22 situation the land struggle in South Central is trapped in.

2. The Struggle for Urban Farmland in South Central, L.A.

With its 14 acre size, the South Central Gardens are probably the biggest community garden in the United States, located right on the border between the district of South Central and the city of Vernon (for a detailed report on the gardens' history see: Kuipers 2006).

In the mid-1980s, the City of Los Angeles was planning a massive trash incinerator project, known as LANCER. The first incinerator was to be built in South Central. Searching for a site, the city took a 14-acre property on Alameda Street by eminent domain, and paid the owner Ralph Horowitz $4.7 million.

The incinerator was never built though. Massive environmental protests forced the mayor Tom Bradley to pull the plug on LANCER. Instead, the property in South Central was abandoned.

The story continues in 1992. After the uprisings in Los Angeles, the city government was desperately looking into possibilities for social programs in marginalized neighborhoods, especially in South Central. When they approached the Regional Foodbank, located right across the street from the original LANCER site, the Foodbank suggested to make that land available for low-income families to farm on it.

And that's exactly what happened: Families from South Central and other neighborhoods cleaned the trash up, divided the property into plots, and started to grow fruits and vegetables. The Foodbank officially administered the land, but in fact, this really was a grassroots project.

Since the mid-1990s, 350 low-income families, mostly migrants from Mexico and other Latin American countries, many of them undocumented, are farming the land. The Campesinos can easily cover about one third of their food demand through the gardens. On weekends, neighbors and friends stop by to trade, sell and give away fruits, vegetables and herbs. In places like Vernon or South Central, where the average family income amounts to about 1.500 dollars per month, this form of solidarity economy makes a huge difference for everyone.

But: The gardens are located on the so-called Alameda Corridor, an area that is mostly commercial. For many years, the corridor has been an important transportation link to the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach. In 1997, the city began constructions for a $2.4 billion rail expressway, that runs about 20 miles from the ports through eight cities to downtown Los Angeles, where it connects to transcontinental rail lines (Erie 2004: pp. 147-162). This obviously gives *any* property along the Alameda Corridor a strategic value for trade related investment.

No surprise that the original owner of the property started to pressure the city to sell him the land back. In 2003 he cut a deal with city hall, and bought the land back for $5 million in order to develop it. Negotiations took place behind closed doors, and generous donations were made to city hall members - something very typical for the neoliberal privatization of public space and public goods.

So in 2003 conflict broke out over the farmland: The farmers refused to leave the gardens. Instead they filed a lawsuit against the city to win time for a campaign. Although they lost the lawsuit, they managed to build an impressive coalition to defend the gardens. The strategic step was to name themselves 'South Central FARMERS'. This allowed them to frame the conflict as a struggle for a cross-ethnic project (as opposed to a Latino-project), as a fight for food security, as an environmental issue, and to point out its positive effects on neighborhood-security. In this way they were able to mobilize more then 50 local and regional environmental organizations, student's initiatives, migrant networks, and grassroots groups, and to get a lot of support from the media. Not to forget: The gardens themselves served as a physical space of organization/mobilization and community building through face-to-face communication.

In spring 2006 the farmers are still on the property. An eviction can take place any day, but at the same time would cause a tremendous public scandal. The new progressive mayor, Antonio Villaraigosa, has a vital interest in solving the conflict. However, facing a structural budget deficit of $271 million in 2006, the city won't buy the land back. At this point it seems more likely that

the mayor will intermediate a deal between Ralph Horowitz and an independent nonprofit. This nonprofit would have to raise about $16 million to buy the property from Horowitz, and would then turn the gardens into some sort of environmental community project.

3. The South Central Gardens and Entrepreneurial Urban Politics

The strategic public investment into the Alameda Corridor secures Los Angeles' role as the gateway for US trade with the Pacific Rim. The investment in local infrastructure up-grades the locality, creates favorable business environment, and creates employment and tax revenues. At the same time it leads to the privatization of public spaces and - in this specific case - it threatens the livelihood of 350 low-income migrant families. What we can observe here, is a fundamental, yet very typical conflict between global economy and local reproduction.

However the conflict is resolved, the one actor who will not lose is the developer. Either the farmers will be evicted and the land handed over to him, or he can sell the land to a nonprofit. In the first case, the developer will build warehouses and - thanks to the city's generous investment into the regional infrastructure - he will rent them for good money. In the latter case, the developer would make about $10 million just by signing the contract.

4. Political Perspectives: A Catch-22 Situation

Since 2003, the gardens really have become an example of what Roger Keil calls 'insurgent civil society': It's a place, where Angelinos collectively resist the privatization of public space, and defend a communal project against business interests: through debates and discussions, organized protests, through lobbying city hall, and civil disobedience. Since July 2005, the South Central Farmers and their supporters keep the gardens actually squatted 24/7.

From a political perspective, though, the struggle in South Central seems to be trapped in a catch-22 situation: The gardens will soon be subject to legal definition and institutional action. If the farmers loose the fight, private property rights will be enforced and the farmers evicted. If they win, the land will probably be bought by a nonprofit, and incorporated into the so-called third sector. Its more then likely that the gardens would then be transformed into just another NGO, dedicated to the delivery of alternative community services, which the entrepreneurial city doesn't provide anymore. The rebellious character of the South Central Farmers would be tamed by 'routinized cooperation with the local state' (Mayer 2000). Finally, this brings us back to the titel of this conference: How can the farmers avoid their eviction *and* their domestication - *and* still push the struggle for 'the right to the city'?

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