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More than Exception

Categories and the Problem of "Nature" in the Ruhr

Abstract

This essay reflects on the conceptualisation of the Ruhr region as an urban and historical research object in English-language scholarship and the effects of this understanding on historical social analysis. It focuses particularly on how signs of "nature" – in the form of green space incorporated into industrial workers' colony housing (*Arbeitersiedlungen*) around the turn of the last century – have been seen as "exceptions" in an industrial environment, and are subsequently interpreted as indicators of anti-modern values or pre-industrial ideals. I argue that this is the result of the production-centric frame that has dominated urban and historical analysis in the Ruhr, and suggest an alternative interpretation. These are new uses of green space that emerged *through* industrialisation and urbanisation, and that reflect a modern sensibility towards "nature": one in which these material referents become legible as vehicles for social goods.

Keywords: *Ruhr, urbanisation, industrialisation, nature, social history, history of everyday life, modernity*

Introduction

As an object of analysis in English language scholarship, the Ruhr area has attracted only certain kinds of scholars. In the past 40 years it has been home mostly to production- and political economy- focused urban inquiries, American and British new social history, and German *Alltagsgeschichte*. These vary in the scale, scope, and strengths their research, but in many ways share a broad orientation towards analysis. Each is interested in new forms of settlement space, social life, and politics, and understands them first as shaped by industrial modernity. As scholars of urban culture and consumption have looked elsewhere, urbanisation in the Ruhr has been defined in terms of production (the mode of and way of life that follows), and politics as labour politics (class-based, organised, collective). Historical experience has been examined in terms of these primary categories: how work conditions consciousness, how life is shaped by work, how work shapes life.

This essay examines the effects of this framework on historical analysis in the Ruhr by looking at apparent "exceptions" such a lens creates. It focuses particularly on "nature"

in this industrial environment as it appears in the form of everyday green space: the small fields and gardens of workers' "colony" housing, built from about 1850 to the First World War, that are such a distinctive element of the industrial geography of the Ruhr. Because a production-centric frame tends to place "nature" analytically opposite, temporally before, or spatially outside industrial, urban environments, historical research in the Ruhr has only been able to account for these forms of quotidian green space as material exceptions, to be taken as signifiers of pre-industrial ideals. This, I argue, is particularly problematic in the context of German historical scholarship, as researchers aim to counter interpretations of a German *Sonderweg* that would describe its historical development as peculiarly anti-modern.

Reading nature as exception has shaped social historians' interpretations of the Ruhr's industrial history. Though the colonies and their green spaces are empirically difficult to ignore, their morphology is a poor fit for categories of analysis that flow from industrial production as a frame for research; time spent in gardens is a difficult activity to reconcile with historical subjects who are supposed to be occupied with new, factory-based activities. Through such a lens, the clusters of houses seem to mimic pre-industrial economic (agrarian) and social (communitarian) forms, and the activities surrounding them look like distractions from the proper forms and locations of contemporary politics. Though they might be welcome research objects for other types of urban researchers, in other types of metropolitan centers, doing analyses rooted in other types of categories (such as those of urban culture and consumption), in the Ruhr they become anomalies and exceptions – problems to be explained.

This essay begins by examining the Ruhr as a first, urban, and second, historical research object, in order to outline the consequences of these analytical frames for social analysis done there. It then illustrates how "nature" is treated as an exceptional presence and signifier of backward or regressive tendencies in an industrial environment, and concludes by offering a different reading of these materials and spaces as indicators of common contemporary sensibilities rather than anti-modern exceptions.

What Kind of Urban Object is the Ruhr?

If, in the history of urbanisation, the Ruhr is both everything and nothing, to the extent that it is everything it has remained very much *one* thing: (changing) modes of production have remained the dominant research frame.

It is an exaggeration to say that critical urban studies, social history, and sociology all have ancestral roots to the Ruhr – but only a little. Each could without much difficulty trace their intellectual origins to the emergence of industrial modernity in Germany. Marx, Engels, Weber, Simmel, Tönnies, Benjamin: urban studies is in many ways a child of German sociology. It is perhaps only a historical accident that we know the name

Manchester better than the Ruhr; Engels wrote on the Ruhr miners' strike of 1889,[1] and a *Condition of the Working Class* written in Germany would surely have used the Ruhr as its research site. For Weber Essen and Bochum were models of the producer city[2]; historians list them alongside Paris, London, Berlin, and New York as places to examine the new agglomerations of people, production, and capital in the late 1800s.[3] Germany's own school of *Alltagsgeschichte* ("history of everyday life") has more recently drawn on Lefebvre to create an indigenous "history from below" that developed its methodologies significantly focused on the Ruhr.

Yet despite its illustrious academic pedigree and birthright to a central place in the history of industrial modernity, in contemporary English-language scholarship the Ruhr is comparatively little well known. Relatively few Americans have heard of the area, and among Germans who have left it its mention yields only a raised eyebrow. Though it remains one of Europe's largest metropolitan regions, its polycentric character, successive economic and social reinventions, and strong regional identity have remained of surprisingly little interest to international urban studies.

To the extent that German cities were research objects for the first scholars of urban experience, this paradox has roots in the last century. Germany's geography literally mapped a division that has been followed in subsequent urban research. In the 1850s Marx and Engels' research lens was trained to the west – to the Ruhr (and then Manchester); in 1900 Benjamin and Simmel looked east to Berlin. There is of course a relationship between the qualities of a research site and kinds of analysis that is done there, and urban research that has drawn from either a 1850s Ruhr or Berlin around 1900 reflects two different empirical templates and conceptual orientations.

Though scholars of both sites were interested in historical experience, and the new problems of social life and of politics emerging in the context of industrial modernity, for Engels capitalism was the motor of historical change, and industrialisation the primary research object.[4] Analytically, this came first, and the problems of social life – migration, poor living conditions, class formation, and organised politics, etc. – followed. Thus Engels' brief glance at the Ruhr was fittingly a miners' strike.[5] By contrast, scholars of what we might call urban "culture" turned to other kinds of sites in the following dec-

1 Frederick Engels: The Ruhr Miners' Strike of 1889, in: The Labour Leader, 1889, at: http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1889/06/01.htm (accessed on 27 December 2011).
2 Richard Sennett (ed.): Classic Essays on the Culture of Cities, Englewood Cliffs 1969, p. 27.
3 E. g. Andrew Lees: Cities Perceived, Manchester 1985.
4 Andy Merrifield: Metromarxism: A Marxist Tale of the City, New York 2002.
5 Frederick Engels: The Ruhr Miners' Strike of 1889, in: The Labour Leader, 1889, at: http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1889/06/01.htm (accessed on 27 December 2011).

ades. Berlin (along with Paris) was the place that shaped Simmel's,[6] Benjamin's,[7] and later the Frankfurt School's urban imaginations, their subjects the new forms of sociability and psychology of new urban spaces.

From these twin roots the family tree of urban research could be seen as having two trunks. Some researchers share Engels' and Marx's economic focus on the *production* in and of urban space, others Simmel and the Frankfurt School's interest in urban *consumption* and culture. Though most research in reality tacks between these two or makes bridging them an explicit goal (and of course capturing this contradictory nature of the urban form itself has long been at the root of the urban project), each orientation has led scholars to work with very different kinds of categories and empirical research sites, and has led to very different kinds of research – sometimes reflexively, and sometimes less so.

Because research in the Ruhr has been attracted by and drawn from its industrial past, its "urban" categories have been those of mode of production; its categories for social life have been those of work and social *re*production; and of politics, labour and class. For historians of Wilhelmine Germany its "urban" characteristics of interest have been those of industrial modernity; like Engels a century before, they studied the new mode of production and ways of life that followed. Urban scholars and political economists have focused on its subsequent transformations with similar eyes, examining its changing productive modes,[8] environmental degradation and preservation,[9] and economic redevelopment efforts.[10] A few have also been drawn by its morphology – both its relatively long history as a multi-city network and present life as a polycentric metropolitan region – again asking how its changing production patterns have affected the relationships among its cities.[11]

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6   Georg Simmel: The Metropolis and Mental Life, in Donald N. Levine (ed.), Georg Simmel: On Individuality and Social Forms, Chicago 1971, pp. 324–339.

7   Walter Benjamin: Berlin Childhood Around 1900. Translated by Howard Eiland, Cambridge 2006.

8   James H. Jackson Jr.: Migration and Urbanization in the Ruhr Valley 1821–1914, Boston 1997; Mark Roseman: Recasting the Ruhr, 1945–1958, Oxford 1992.

9   Franz-Josef Brüggemeier/Thomas Rommelspacher: Blauer Himmel über der Ruhr: Geschichte der Umwelt im Ruhrgebiet 1840–1990, Essen 1992; Andreas Keil: Use and Perception of Post-Industrial Urban Landscapes in the Ruhr, in: Ingo Kowarik/Stefan Körner (eds.), Wild Urban Woodlands, Berlin 2005, pp. 117–130.

10   Sebastian Müller/Constance Carr: Image Politics and Stagnation in the Ruhr Valley, in: Libby Porter/Kate Shaw (eds.), Whose Urban Renaissance?, New York 2008, pp. 84–101; S. Thomas/J. Tuppen: Readjustment in the Ruhr – the Case of Bochum, in: Geography 62:3 (1977), pp. 168–175.

11   Hans H. Blotevogel: The Rhine-Ruhr Metropolitan Region: Reality and Discourse, in: European Planning Studies 6:4 (1998), pp. 395–410; Claude Neuschwander/Pierre Berthe: Town Networks – the Ruhr Example, in: Ekistics 352 (1992), pp. 40–50.

The Ruhr has never lacked "culture" in the anthropologists' sense (practices tied to particular people, places, and times), but throughout its industrialisation (and into the present) it has lacked high culture in the art gallery owner or flaneur's sense; the Ruhr is metropolitan but it has never been cosmopolitan. Miners' wages did not support many artisan or craft workers in the Ruhr cities at the turn of the last century;[12] today it likewise lacks the activities, institutions, and aesthetics that make it an obvious object of study for these interested in such things. This has changed to the extent that the Ruhr's most recent redevelopment has brought high culture in the form of museums, art and performance spaces, and landscape – as illustrated when *Essen for the Ruhr* was named the European Capital of Culture in 2010 – but the indigenous culture and identity has remained one of coal, soccer, and beer. As culturally oriented scholars left it to political economists and historians to think about the social life of the Ruhr, the kinds of questions asked of it have remained – remarkably consistently – those of the first type.

The point of these caricatures (of both the Ruhr and of urban research) is that, as the Ruhr has been dealt with in these terms, other categories – its "urban-ness", its politics, the experience of its subjects – have likewise been defined by them. Intellectually, it has remained Engels' Ruhr. It is a site of production not consumption; economics not culture; society not nature. Its politics is understood in terms of the collective, labour, and class. It has been studied as an industrial culture, a workers' culture, and a labour culture, but never an urban culture.

What Kind of Historical Object is it?

Contemporary research in the Ruhr is interested in categories of experience, and scholars have had more recent role models than Benjamin and Engels for thinking about experience historically, but new ideas have been taken up from the path laid by Engels a century before. Although historians aimed to carve out, as a research site, a realm of everyday life where structures and experience meet, their analytical categories have been dominated by another binary – in this case between the realm of work and the not-at-work – despite their intentions.

Social historians of the Ruhr have been influenced by authors who were building bridges across the kind of divide caricatured in urban research (above) in history, social theory, and cultural studies in the 1960s and 1970s: E. P. Thompson, Henri Lefebvre, and Raymond Williams. British and American historians drew particularly from Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, while German *Alltagsgeschichte* was partial to

12   David F. Crew: Alltagsgeschichte: A New Social History "From Below"?, in: Central European History 22: 3/4 (1989), pp. 394–407.

Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life*.[13] Urban studies' two research orientations (described above) were only one crystallisation of a set of oppositions – structure and agency, macro and micro, and objective and subjective dimensions of social life – that were polarised in the 1970s around, on the one hand, "base" variants of Marxism that privileged structure and derived categories for understanding social and political life from it, and more "cultural" approaches, on the other, which risked fetishising new social experiences in a structural and historical vacuum. Scholars inspired by Lefebvre and Thompson were excited about escaping just these dualisms, and their texts provided language for historians seeking new interpretations of German history through concepts that promised to mediate between them, such as "everyday life", "culture", and "experience".

These were perhaps particularly influential for scholars of the Ruhr because the central question of German historiography – from the industrial revolution to the rise of Hitler's Germany – was the relationship between Germany's economic and political trajectories, or the relationship between industrialisation (or urbanisation, or modernity) and social change. Both the American and British "new social history" and West German *Alltagsgeschichte* were interested in countering the first generation of post-war German history (characterised especially by the work of Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Jürgen Kocka, and Reinhart Koselleck) and its story of German exceptionalism. The Bielefeld School had named backward cultural values as the source of "industrialisation without democratisation", which they saw as setting the stage for fascism and imperialist tendencies, and explaining the lack of organised resistance among workers in the Ruhr. Scholars in the 1980s and 1990s started to make alternative arguments by studying workers' everyday experience and politics;[14] their project was to mediate between "cultural" and "structural" explanations by shifting the analytical center of gravity of critical, historical social analysis to the realm of the everyday.

But as Lefebvre and Thompson were put to use for these purposes, neither source was quite embraced in their own terms. Central for Lefebvre, Thompson, and Williams was understanding the terrain upon which consciousness was forged as wrapped up in the inherent contradictions of a specific historical context and system – industrial capitalism – through which the tugging poles (production/consumption, objective/subjective,

13   Edward Palmer Thompson: The Making of the English Working Class, New York 1966; Henri Lefebvre: Critique of Everyday Life, translated by John Moore, New York 2008 (1947, 1967).

14   David F. Crew: Town in the Ruhr: A Social History of Bochum, 1860–1914, New York 1979; Geoff Eley: Labor History, Social History, "Alltagsgeschichte": Experience, Culture, and the Politics of the Everyday – a New Direction for German Social History?, in: The Journal of Modern History 61:2 (1989), pp. 297–343; James H. Jackson Jr.: Alltagsgeschichte, Social Science History and the Study of Mundane Movements in 19th Century Germany, in: Historical Social Research 16:1 (1991), pp. 23–47.

structure/agency) plaguing social research had in some ways emerged in the first place. Whether through the production of cultural products (Williams), of social consciousness (Thompson), or of space (Lefebvre), their shared project was to understand this intersection between social context and social consciousness by marking it out as an embedded, *positive* terrain of study – rather than fully autonomous or, as Lefebvre put it, a mere "leftover" or "reflection".[15]

The English-language research worked from the top down, looking at the effect of large-scale structures and (political, national and professional) context on patterns of everyday life and behavior. They asked how particular work experiences affected the likelihood of workers collectively organising (answer: miners were more likely to strike than steel mill employees because there was less professional differentiation among kinds of labourers, and more literal dependence upon each other and physical proximity in the mines),[16] or how professional opportunities shaped family structure (answer: few job opportunities for women meant that more single men migrated to the Ruhr cities, and that more families took in boarders, leading to more open, less nuclear families).[17] By locating themselves as the intersection of several traditions – Chicago School sociology, historians of everyday life, German *Alltagshistoriker*, and cross-cultural anthropology[18] – they used local stories to put flesh on the bones of structural analyses of macro-historical transformation, showing their human sides or local variation.

German *Alltagsgeschichte*, through scholars such as Hans Medick, Lutz Niethammer, Franz-Josef Brüggemeier and Alf Lüdtke, took the opposite path, telling history from below alongside a broader public movement effort to revive national conversation and historical memory in a kind of collective reinterpretation of the preceding decades. Their work was characterised by its focus on "ethnological ways of knowing" and the explicit priority it gave to understanding the social history of subjective meanings in small-scale, concrete settings.[19] Though the research was intended (at least by some) to focus exactly on Lefebvre's "articulation" between individuals and structures, taking "quotidian culture as an elementary site of contradiction",[20] critics argued that the interest in the everyday turned, as a research methodology, into a micro-focus that led mostly to subject accounts

15   Henri Lefebvre: Critique of Everyday Life, translated by John Moore, New York 2008 (1947, 1967), p. 97.
16   Richard J. Evans (ed.): Society and Politics in Wilhelmine Germany, London 1978.
17   James H. Jackson Jr.: Migration and Urbanization in the Ruhr Valley 1821–1914, Boston 1997.
18   Ibid., p. xvii.
19   Geoff Eley: Labor History, Social History, "Alltagsgeschichte": Experience, Culture, and the Politics of the Everyday – a New Direction for German Social History?, in: The Journal of Modern History 61:2 (1989), pp. 297–343, pp. 316–317.
20   Ibid., pp. 324–325.

of forgetting, making do, and getting by, depoliticising the research and leaving it vulnerable to conservative reinterpretation.[21]

Though both traditions aimed to mediate between these poles, the Ruhr's social-historical story remained one of lives shaped by the rhythms and mandates of production. As a research focus, this meant labour – as a category, a setting, a social relationship – became the primary source of historical understanding. English-language historians looked to factories and mines to explain labourers' politics while German historians looked to their leisure time; political economists looked first to macro-historical explanations for behavior while *Alltagsgeschichte* looked to the micro – but the fundamental terms of the question did not change. The problems Ruhr workers had were conceived as problems of working or of not working. Class remained the driving category and work the primary setting. The scholar's task was to explain the presence or the absence of class consciousness, organised politics, political resistance in the terms outlined by the kind of production-focused political economic analyses epitomised by Marx and Engels in the first section of this paper. Social life was seen as an outcome of these experiences and the forms it took as shaped by them.

Nature in the Ruhr

Environmental history has also fought these modern antimonies – in the form of society/nature dualisms – in urban-historical research in the past few decades, by bringing nature in to the study of industrialisation and urbanisation and helping us come to see the production of urban space as an interaction between "natural" and "social" worlds.[22] But with few exceptions these new approaches have not much reached the Ruhr, and even when they have, they too retain a focus on production: the "nature" that is examined is in its role as an ontologically real force in historical transformation – natural resources, ecological change, etc. – rather than social ideas about nature that might emerge from and affect the realm of everyday life.

Environmental historians have for the most part so far looked to superficially "greener" pastures such as the Rhine River Valley or the Black Forest as sites for such research in Germany,[23] though "nature" in various forms has been critically important across several

21   Mary Nolan: The Historikerstreit and Social History, in: New German Critique 44 (1988), pp. 51–80; Martin Jay: Songs of Experience: Reflections on the Debate Over Alltagsgeschichte, in: Salmagundi 81 (1989), pp. 29–41.
22   E. g. William Cronon: Nature's Metropolis, New York 1992; Martin V. Melosi: The Place of the City in Environmental History, in: Environmental History Review 17:1 (1993), pp. 1–23.
23   David Blackbourne: The Conquest of Nature, New York 2006; Mark Cioc: The Rhine: An Eco-Biography, 1815–2000, Seattle 2002.

phases of the Ruhr's development.[24] Long before its present green renaissance the Ruhr's natural resources shaped its character. It was first an agricultural valley, but farming was slowly supplanted by coal mining in the 19th century. With the onset of large-scale industrialisation – and large-scale environmental management – in the second half of the 19th century, waterways were altered for sewage or transportation and large areas of farmland were developed for factories and housing – including the low-density workers' colonies to which I will return in the next section of this paper. In the first years of the 20th century preserved green belts and woodlands shaped its cities and set the contours of its regional urban form. And of course the Ruhr's nature has long been a problem as well as an asset. After a century of pollution, flooded ground and sooty air, Chancellor Willy Brandt promised "blue skies over the Ruhr" in his 1961 election campaign, and since then deindustrialisation and economic transition have seen huge numbers of former factory sites return to "nature" and its waterways been cleaned up at great effort and expense. In the past ten years the "renaturalised" river Emscher and high-profile projects such as IBA Emscher Park have become images central to the Ruhr's new economic structure and regional identity.

But such a history – even when told in the Ruhr – tends not to account for nature in social or cultural historians' terms. Describing the role of ontologically "real" nature (natural resources and geography) in the physical and political-economic transformation of the region does not much help social historians decipher the social meanings that grow up around spaces or materials that come to be called "nature" in a more everyday sense. Franz-Josef Brüggemeier's *A Nature Fit for Industry* illustrates this point.[25] The article reviews the use and abuse of air, coal deposits, waterways, and geography in the service of industry, but not the quotidian forms of green space such as workers' colonies, allotments, and parks. And while social ideas about nature have been well-studied in Germany, the research has focused on national history, identity and politics – from German romanticism to National Socialism – again not providing many analytical cues for how

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24 E.g. Franz-Josef Brüggemeier/Thomas Rommelspacher: Blauer Himmel über der Ruhr: Geschichte der Umwelt im Ruhrgebiet 1840–1990, Essen 1992; Jörg Dettmar: Forests for Shrinking Cities? The Project "Industrial Forests of the Ruhr", in: Ingo Kowarik/Stefan Körner (eds.), Wild Urban Woodlands: New Perspectives for Urban Forestry, Berlin 2005, pp. 263–276; Ursula von Petz: The Environmental Transformation of the Ruhr, in: Jeffry M. Diefendorf/Kurk Dorsey (eds.), City, Country, Empire: Landscapes in Environmental History, Pittsburgh 2005, pp. 52–76.

25 Franz-Josef Brüggemeier: A Nature Fit for Industry: The Environmental History of the Ruhr Basin 1940–1990, in: Environmental History Review 18:1 (1994), pp. 35–54.

such spaces and materials might be theoretically incorporated into analyses interested in urban transformation and the new industrial everyday.[26]

Thus, in most social-historical research, the Ruhr still looks like an industrial environment in which nature has long been harnessed in the name of national interests, destroyed or driven out, or one to which it now returns in the service of economic development. Nature as a social category remains an uneasy fit for such frames.

With what Effects for Social-Historical Analysis?

The effects of all this are that the empirical presence of everyday forms of "nature" in the Ruhr – such as green space in industrial workers' daily lives – has become an exception and an indicator of something to be explained. Categories organised around industrial production define and set parameters for categories for understanding social life, and through such a lens, these are taken as material signs of anti-urban or anti-modern tendencies – regressive or nostalgic referents to a preindustrial past.

For example (1): the "feudalism of the bourgeoisie"

One place where "nature" surfaces in historical analysis is in attempts to give an account of why factory owners chose to build workers' housing in the form of colonies in the first place. The explanation offered by a critical, production-centric analysis is a combination of economic rationality and pre-urban nostalgia. Locating factory owners in a field of action in which they strive to maximise profit and efficiency, reduce labour costs, manage periodic crises, and find a perfect balance between the region's productive capacity, actual output, and market scale, researchers have found the Ruhr industrialists guilty of pre-urban, "feudal" sensibilities in their management practices and aesthetic preferences.

The evidence of the bourgeoisie's feudalism was material, as normative ideals were "given form and substance" in company housing design that seemed to mimic pre-industrial social forms.[27] The indicators of this sensibility lay in the design: low-density, small-scale clusters of semi-detached houses with gardens seemed to literally preserve pieces of agricultural life. Much like feudal lords (or owners of mill towns in the United States), the factories were not just productive units but part of a "whole organised social system", which provided social services, health care, entertainment, and housing in addi-

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26   Thomas M. Lekan: Imagining the Nation in Nature, Cambridge 2004; Thomas M. Lekan/ Thomas Zeller (eds.): Germany's Nature. New Brunswick 2005; Frank Zelko (ed.): From Heimat to Umwelt: New Perspectives on German Environmental History, Washington, D. C. 2006.

27   David F. Crew: Town in the Ruhr, New York 1979, p. 153.

tion to employment.[28] Ideals of morality, reciprocity, loyalty, and community were communicated through employer-employee contracts, but reinforced through housing that segregated workers by nationality in enclaves that recreated village life.[29] 96 per cent of all units had a shed for keeping animals and almost all had a garden, which men still laboured in after their shift in the mines or factory.[30] Though in truth employer and employee were now tied to each other through the new demands and codependencies of industrial capitalism, the spatial forms and material qualities of daily life falsely mimicked the old economic and social relationships.

It is seeing this behavior as an aberration in a modern industrial context that causes such problems for scholars of the Ruhr, in particular. The "paternalism" was for the most part a (very successful) strategy effort to improve worker retention – not sentimentality or sensitivity to the perceived desires of their workers,[31] yet the behavior was an anomaly in research models that sought new forms of industrial capitalism and found instead expressions of pre-industrial community. As suggested by the word "feudal", scholars interpreted design choices as a kind of hangover from an earlier mode of production. And while the Bielefeld generation could happily cite these choices as an example of exactly the cultural backwardness that they argued characterised Germany's exceptional path to modernisation, American and British social historians, invested in countering this argument, had to find a different explanation.

Working from within the confines of production-centric, industrial categories, their best explanations didn't get us far from the Bielefeld "exception" model. Some described it, for example, as a situated "form of industrial rationality appropriate to the German context",[32] but *rationalising* exceptional behavior doesn't normalise it. All still agree that these are supposed to be subjects of the industrial revolution. Theirs is an environment of mines and factories; their class position one of owners of property and managers of men. Their experiences are of soot and profit and power and steel. All seek to answer the question, "Why would a historical subject formed through these experiences engage in these behaviors, have these values, or express them in these ways?", and whether they explain it as a temporal lag or rational response to a specific context, industrialists still become a case of a group not fitting well into the analytical frame of industrial modernity. The owners of the means of production are acting out the wrong values, social relationships, and self-understanding.

28   Ibid., p. 145.
29   Stephen H. F. Hickey: Workers in Imperial Germany: The Miners of the Ruhr, Oxford 1985, p. 33.
30   August Heinrichsbauer: Industrielle Siedlung im Ruhrgebiet, Essen 1936, p. 42; Robert Hundt: Bergarbeiter-Wohnungen im Ruhrrevier, Berlin 1902, p. 31.
31   David F. Crew: Town in the Ruhr, New York 1979, p. 143.
32   Ibid., p. 157.

This is because both arguments work from within the same set of assumptions regarding particular spaces and materials (taken to be non-industrial) as manifestations of (non-industrial) ideals. They assume (1) that social ideals are best characterised with reference to particular spaces and times – e. g. they can be located historically as "industrial" or "feudal;" (2) that particular physical, material forms are physical expressions of these ideals – in this case housing oriented towards green space and small-scale forms is the indicator; and (3) that both the ideals and the materials are out of place in a modern, industrial environment.

For example (2): the "Privatisation of politics"

The second question is regarding their use. It is not only the existence of colonies and gardens that causes analytical problems, but the fact that workers loved them. The importance of working in the garden conflicts with the interests of Ruhr researchers who also want workers to be 'like' workers; a gardening worker also fails to conform to their expectations of what subjectivities and leisure time shaped by the factory should look like. Again, the struggle becomes what to do with historical subjects not fitting frames made by industrial categories.

Alf Lüdtke's chapter in his *The History of Everyday Life* examines the journal entries of a laborer, Paul Maik, during the 1920s and 30s. He finds Maik writing not about machines, not organised politics, not his working day, but

> […] aspects of "reproductive labour," in concrete terms: his garden. Not only in his case, but more generally, gardening or small-plot cultivation was a main supplement in efforts to make ends meet among workers and their families. At least every fourth working-class family in large urban areas farmed a "plot," and was able to grow up to half of its fruits and vegetables there. This was an economic activity carried out largely by single households, and involved very little neighborly cooperation.[33]

Beyond the behavior of the owners of the means of production, an ongoing question for scholars has been how miners and industrial workers organised (or didn't) against them in the Ruhr – against the factory owners themselves in Wilhelmine Germany; later, against the post-war French occupation or National Socialism. In many ways *Alltagsgeschichte* has made it its goal to explain the lack of visible, organised resistance in terms *other* than complicity or conservatism – and the garden as exception can easily become another fact that does not help their case. As indicator of a lack of solidarity, a distraction

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33   Alf Lüdtke: What Happened to the "Fiery Red Glow"? Workers' Experiences and German Fascism, in: Alf Lüdtke (ed.), The History of Everyday Life, Princeton 1995, pp. 198–251, p. 231.

from organised politics, a retreat, regression, or anomaly, the Bielefeld school could easily use such activities as evidence in support of the very *Sonderweg* arguments that *Alltagsgeschichte* would rather argue against.

Lüdtke, too, begins with exception: a "retreat" to the garden that has presumably been chosen over leisure time spent participating in politics, that seems somehow connected to this failure, that seems like a symptom of something begging explanation. He ends up using Maik's account to argue for a shift in forms and locations of politics – what he calls the "privatisation of the political".[34] Countering stories about collective work experiences that facilitated worker solidarity (such as in the mines), Lüdtke argues that, as low wages forced workers into the garden, fulfilling material needs individually led, in parallel, to individual ways of "doing" politics: hence the apparent retreat to the private sphere. Maik looks un-political because he is not striking; Lüdtke defends him by finding politics in this other kind of activity.

But again, both Lüdtke and those he would argue against confront the garden as a problem of exceptional behavior, sharing the same three assumptions as Crew's argument regarding the feudalism of the bourgeoisie. (1) That the key categories for understanding the social experience of historical subjects are those of the mode of production – industrial modernity means work time, the factory location, an identity as a laborer; (2) that a garden itself is out-of-space or out-of-time, a material analogue to pre-industrial ideals; and (3) that the existence of these forms and activities are aberrations, indicators of something *other* than the modern industrial imagination at work.

Nature as an indicator of the anti-urban and anti-modern

The "feudalism of the bourgeoisie" and the "privatisation of politics" are problem cases of the same type, both illustrating the analytical consequences of confronting signs of "nature" though these categories.

First, they identify them as exceptions and problems to be explained. Factory owners designing community and industrial workers gardening are, from the beginning, both intrusions in an analysis governed by categories of industrial modernity because they do not reflect appropriate social ideals (*Gemeinschaft* instead of *Gesellschaft*), activities (agriculture instead of factory labour), or politics (individual instead of collective). Second, engagement with green space is taken as a proxy for the expression of pre-industrial or non-modern values. Both cases assume a link between particular kinds of spaces and activities (green space, gardening, small-scale residential spaces) and particular temporal and historical locations (pre-industrial or rural communities) such that these materials and activities are read as indicators of another place and time. Third, the choice to engage with them is pathologised; it is misguided, ideological, or nostalgic to create pre-indus-

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34   Ibid., pp. 231–232.

trial forms in an industrial context. Finally, because concluding that these activities really are signs of "backward" or regressive tendencies among German workers and factory owners is such a politically sensitive and undesirable conclusion in the German context, that scholars find alternative explanations for these as "rational" decisions.

It is in this way that the gardens and residential spaces that are so central to the region's industrial history and contemporary landscape become an interpretive problem for historians of the Ruhr. Research guided by the categories of mode of production (industrial), class (labour), and the social collective (organised politics), found instead pre-industrial forms (feudal, small-town models), non-class identities (formed around culture, nation, or religion), and individual activities in the absence of organised politics. Evidence of each was literally written into the built environment, and objectively "natural" forms were the material referents onto which any one of these "not-X" ideals was cast. Activities in and around "nature" were interpreted as industrial capitalists "acting like" feudal lords, or industrial workers "acting like" small town farmers. The absence of appropriate political consciousness was epitomised by the ideological "escape" to the garden or the countryside; absence of appropriate industrial consciousness by the interest in small-scale gardening and food production; and absence of appropriate class consciousness by housing design that used gardens and green space to recreate small-town life.

What if it's not an Exception?

What might these materials and spaces be, other than agrarian ideals clinging to the first generations of an industrial workforce, or nostalgic attempts to reconnect with the temporal past or spatial far away? An urban-historical lens of the sort that hasn't much been turned on the Ruhr might help us describe this behavior in positive terms, rather than as interferences in the plane of industrial modernity that need to be explained.

In a positive, alternative story these uses of green nature in the Ruhr are not throwbacks or exceptions but actually very contemporary, familiar activities at the very heart of the modern urban project. What scholars have, in both cases, interpreted as *non-urban* (either rural or pre-industrial), is in fact, I would argue, just the opposite. This use of quotidian "nature" is a particular material vocabulary (green, communitarian) that emerged in a particular (urban) context as a vehicle for conveying ideals of (and realising) ideas of the good life.

(1) Environmental transformation

The positive account might begin with environmental history, locating the conditions of possibility for these forms in the region's historical geo-physical transformation. It was not simply provincialism that created colonies in the Ruhr while *Mietskaserne* went up in Berlin, but a historical trajectory that began centuries before. The Ruhr's agricultural history and chain of medieval market towns were the preconditions that gave it its unusu-

ally low-density, polycentric footprint during large-scale industrialisation. The shape the housing took was also affected by activities in the middle of the 19th century. As mining technology improved, factory owners bought up large swaths of inexpensive farmland to access increasingly deep seams of coal far from the old city centers. The size of the farms left owners plenty of land available at the surface on which to build housing, but subsidence from mining activity meant that the ground was unstable and prone to sink and flood. Thus, houses could be no more than two stories tall, while the quantity of available surface area made it reasonable leave space for gardens or lease land cheaply to workers.

(2) Form of activity

The alternative to backwardness among historians of the Ruhr was to search for instrumental impetus to explain the nature behavior "rationally" in its context; another approach would be to define this behavior more sociologically, as a form of activity. No doubt Maik needed vegetables, no doubt the Ruhr's industrial bourgeoisie were driven more by the practical need to retain workers than the desire to create a community of intimate social relationships. But these explanations are incomplete ones, for real changes had taken place. The economy *was* increasingly industrial not agrarian; the farms *had* been sold; agricultural labourers *had* moved below ground or indoors; company stores *did* increasingly offer foodstuffs, clothes, etc.

Far more than simple nostalgia, this activity was communicative and curatorial. What they were doing was designing modes of engagement with a new environment that was a product of new physical geographies and new social relationships of industrialisation. What they were providing was a social ideal, which was conveyed through the physical textures, surfaces, and interactions of workers' everyday lives. It was through the green space – and the forms of engagement with the built environment that they set out – that these "fantasies"[35] of the good life could be connected to and played out.

What was *rational* about the gardens were not that they met people's need for food or that they were required to retain workers, but that they communicated a familiar image of the good life. What was new about them was that, through them, the agricultural past emerged *as an ideal* to be approximated or preserved; at the turn of the last century the good life still looked like a rural one, but growing one's own food had already become, for the managerial class as well as the poorest miners, a symbolic activity rather entirely (or even primarily) a product of economic necessity.[36] New social relationships also produced a new locus of responsibility for defining the social goods to desire (along with the bads to avoid). The new capitalist elite, in designing housing, became responsible for

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35   Oskar Negt/Alexander Kluge: Public Sphere and Experience, translated by Assenka Oksiloff/ Peter Labanyo, Minneapolis 1993.

36   August Heinrichsbauer: Industrielle Siedlung im Ruhrgebiet, Essen 1936, p. 32.

articulating an answer to this question for a new workforce in new environment; this was the positive moment in a set of new responsibilities that were a product of their new social role, and which also included correction, discipline, and control.

(3) Medium

The problems of exception surfaced in each case materially; through a frame in which nature is out of place, green in an industrial environment looks like a throwback to pre-industrial times. But what gives the green its historical specificity – and a periodisation that extends to the present – is the fact that it became a vehicle through which ideals were communicated. Quotidian forms of "nature" work, in urban environments, as a medium through which a variety of social ideals can be invoked. The green of the colony housing and their gardens was a vocabulary, rather than a literal spatial or historical throwback; as Craig Calhoun has recently argued of "tradition," "nature" was "the medium and the condition of their action, not its object".[37]

The social legibility of signs of nature as a medium for improving the social is – far from being regressive – quite a contemporary cultural formation. Its emergence in the Ruhr in the midst of large-scale industrialisation was a product of changes in the political and economic structure and the physical environment that affected *how* "nature" was made social and the understandings that resulted.[38] The decline of the agricultural economy was helping to create the modern imaginary of "nature" as separate from the social. Hands-on engagement with the "natural" environment was becoming a leisure activity rather than a necessity. Private entrepreneurs were required to articulate ideals of good ways of living for large numbers of people. The physical spaces, materials, and memories of an agricultural economy became, in a new environment, a vehicle for this social project of collective imagination, a shared sensibility across a socioeconomically heterogeneous group, the members of which could reliably interpret green space as a vehicle for social ideals.

(4) Message

There is one additional way in which these are projects of contemporary, forward-looking imaginations rather than nostalgic ones: they came to be self-consciously understood by their creators as tools in the urban project. After the turn of the century, designed green space became a key tool through which the Ruhr set about fulfilling its promise of urban future, at the level of regional planning as well as in housing.

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37   Craig Calhoun: The Roots of Radicalism, Chicago 2012, p. 290.
38   For more on this historical variability see Hillary Angelo: Bird in Hand: how experience makes nature, in: Theory and Society 42:4 (2013), pp. 351–368.

While the ideal communicated through the workers' colonies before the turn of the century was still a rural one, after 1905 garden cities arrived in the Ruhr. Their appearance is typically interpreted as continuation of old colony model – an evolution that drew on Ebenezer Howard's *Garden Cities of To-Morrow* and improved living conditions, but overall reflected a very similar (green, low density, small-scale) design vocabulary and morphology.[39] But viewing green space, instead, as a medium with variable social content makes quite a dramatic shift visible.

In the garden cities after the turn of the century the ideal communicated through nature became an urban one. As Karl Ernst Osthaus, a Ruhr philanthropist and member of the *Deutsche Gartenstadt-Gesellschaft*, declared, "the garden city should not be a fall back to the half-culture of the small town, but an outgrowth of the metropolis".[40] The low density, green profile was not a regression or a movement *back*, but a movement *forward* – a transcendence of the traditional metropolis, an improvement upon it. This tool was shared by a variety of city-building projects in the Ruhr early in the 20th century. Planner Robert Schmidt's regional greenbelt system,[41] municipal governments' increasing willingness to take on the care for city parks and street trees as public goods analogous to libraries or museums,[42] and a growing interest in preserving the region's remaining woodlands were all green reflections of the Ruhr's urban aspirations. "Nature" became, in the 20th century, a set of materials deployed in the service of city-making, tools in the collective project of making an urban spatial form and cosmopolitan culture in the Ruhr. Rather than nostalgia, it was the kernel of this form and aspiration that the colonies set out.

Conclusion

Is the worker gardening anti-modern? Are company towns that mimic small town rural life? Maybe, but not necessarily – or not *only*. This essay has tried to show how the production-oriented categories for urban and historical analysis that have been used in the Ruhr have contributed to interpretations of green space as an apparent "exception", even

39   Ebenezer Howard: Garden Cities of tomorrow, London 1902.
40   "So sollte auch die Gartenstadt kein Rückfall in die Halbkultur der Kleinstadt, sondern eine Hinausentwicklung über die Großstadt sein," translation by the author from: Karl Ernst Osthaus: Gartenstadt und Städtebau, in: Deutsche Gartenstadt-Gesellschaft (ed.), Bauordnung und Bebauungsplan, ihre Bedeutung für die Gartenstadtbewegung, Paris 1911, pp. 33–40, p. 38.
41   Ursula von Petz: Robert Schmidt and the Public Park Policy in the Ruhr District, 1900–1930, in: Planning Perspectives 14:2 (1999), pp. 163–182.
42   Eugene Charles McCreary: Essen 1860–1914: A Case Study of the Impact of Industrialization on German Community Life, dissertation submitted at Yale University, 1964.

in (or particularly in) analyses whose explicit goal was to move beyond "exceptional" explanations of German industrialisation and historical development. I have tried to outline an alternative reading of these examples of apparent foot-dragging, preservation, or nostalgia by redescribing quotidian forms of "nature" in the Ruhr as a contemporary use of green space as a medium through which to improve the social environment.

By approaching these old cases through new categories, we can re-embed "nature" in the Ruhr's historical transformation and examine changing sensibilities towards it. We can also see more clearly how the contexts in which ideas are formed, the modes through which they are expressed, and the material shape they take changes in different places and times. Through such a lens, nature looks less like an exception or a throwback and more like a medium in the process of taking on a newly symbolic role in a new environment. The Ruhr's use of green might, in fact, even begin to look quite familiar – we might recognise the same relationship to signs of nature as symbols of social goods that has shaped contemporary historians' own interpretations of these spaces.

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