



Local debates about 'landscape' as viewed by German regional planners: Results of a representative survey in a discourse-analytical framework

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ABSTRACT

The word 'landscape' has attracted increasing attention from both researchers and practitioners in recent years. Although much has been written about the meanings of 'landscape', little is yet known about local landscape discourses in Germany. The article gives an overview of local debates in which 'landscape' plays a role and introduces a framework for studying the discursive constitution of landscapes. The empirical part is based on a comprehensive telephone survey among representatives of regional planning agencies. Among the key findings is that wind energy and regional development seem to be the most frequent subjects of landscape-related debates at the local level – particularly in the southern states of Bavaria and Baden-Wuerttemberg, where comparably few renewable energy facilities have so far been installed. The article concludes with an outlook on how the survey might be used in further discourse analytical studies.

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Introduction

What are the local debates in which the words 'landscape' or 'cultural landscape' play a role? – This is the question we put to representatives of German regional planning agencies in a comprehensive telephone survey. In this paper we give an account of the results and situate them in a discourse-analytical framework. We are interested in local discourses as opposed to broader areas of discourse production such as science, politics or general media because little is yet known about local landscape discourses in Germany. By contrast, much has been written on the etymology of 'landscape' (Fischer, 2007; Haber, 2007; Hard, 2001; Muir, 1999; Olwig, 2005; Piepmeier, 1980) and the use of the word 'landscape' in academic, political and other professional contexts (Hard, 1970; Henderson, 2003; Jones, 2003; Jones and Daugstad, 1997; Olwig, 2002; Schenk, 2002, 2006; Swaffield, 1993, 1998; Wylie, 2011).

The semantics of 'landscape' have undergone considerable changes in Germany in recent decades and the meaning of 'landscape' has become the subject of sometimes fierce disputes – particularly among those concerned with planning and designing physical environments. Influenced by Jackson (e.g. Jackson, 1984) and the European Landscape Convention (CoE, 2000), some argue that landscape is everywhere (e.g. Prominski, 2004), while others insist

on a spatially distinct notion of landscape which applies only to certain parts of the land with specific qualities (Körner, 2006; Wöbse, 2002). Among the issues around which this argument have crystallized is whether suburban areas as a whole ought to be regarded as a new type of cultural landscape (Breuste, 2001; Breuste and Keidel, 2008; Sieverts, 1999 [1997]; Sieverts, 2007) or not (Curdes, 1999; Kühn, 2001). Against this background it is interesting to look at the way 'landscape' is employed in debates at the local level.

Why did we interview representatives of regional planning agencies? Gathering comprehensive information on 'landscape'-related local debates is a more complicated matter than one would assume at first sight. The internet or newspaper archives yield scores of hits in which 'landscape' is used in passing (e.g. 'the festival took place in a beautiful landscape') or in a metaphorical way like in 'landscape of universities', 'landscape of political parties', 'landscape of theatres' or 'landscape of emotions'. We therefore decided to conduct expert interviews. Regional planning agencies are a particularly promising type of organization in this regard because they deal with all issues of spatial relevance within their jurisdictions and since regional planning is institutionalized all over Germany – notwithstanding significant differences between the sixteen constituent states of the Federal Republic of Germany (cf. Leibenath, 2011).

Moreover, the notion of 'cultural landscapes' has moved up on the agenda of law-makers, politicians and practitioners in the field of spatial planning and spatial development policy to which regional planning belongs. European strategy papers such as the European Spatial Development Perspective (European

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Commission, 1999, pp. 30 and 33 f.) or the Territorial Agenda of the European Union (TAEU, 2007, p. 9) dwell on the function of cultural landscapes as assets for development. This is paralleled by recent policy documents in Germany. The Federal Spatial Planning Act (ROG, 2008, art. 2 [2], subpar. 5) stipulates that ‘cultural landscapes are to be preserved and developed’ in order ‘to overcome structural problems and to open up new trajectories of economic and cultural development’.¹ The authors of a federal document on ‘Visions and Strategies for Spatial Development’ (MKRO, 2006, pp. 18–22) also advocate a proactive approach to cultural landscapes. The Federal Ministry for Transport, Construction and Urban Development together with the subordinate Federal Agency for Building and Spatial Planning generated further momentum by publishing a scenario booklet entitled ‘Future Landscapes’ (Artner et al., 2006[2005]) and by contracting a spate of R&D projects on cultural landscapes, regional development and the role of regional planners in this field (e.g. Gailing et al., 2007, 2010; Kühn et al., 2007). Hence there are legal provisions as well as a broader discussion on the links between the issue of (cultural) landscapes and regional planning. This is another facet of the rationale underlying our decision to interrogate representatives of regional planning agencies.

Before proceeding, we should clarify our understanding of the discursive constitution of landscapes and the relevance of studying it. To this end, the next section examines literature on discourse theory and a constructivist epistemology of landscape. In the subsequent two sections we present the method and results of the telephone survey among representatives of German regional planning agencies. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings and an outlook on options for further research.

Discursive constitution of landscapes and the relevance of studying it

In one of his illuminating writings about landscape, Cosgrove (2003) distinguishes between ecology and semiosis. Ecology and other positivist disciplines such as physical geography are grounded in a particular ontology (or in fact several different ontologies) of landscape. Following Hay (1995, p. 80), we mean by ‘ontology’ a ‘set of assumptions made about the nature, essence, and characteristics [...] of an object or set of objects of analytical inquiry’. According to Cosgrove (2003, p. 15), ecological landscape research ‘focuses on the complex interactions of natural processes [...] shaping characteristic land areas, and extending its concerns to the ways that human activities interact with these natural processes’. A case in point is Antrop (2006, p. 188) for whom landscape denotes ‘a material-physical reality, originating from a continuous dynamic interaction between natural processes and human activity’. In the same vein Neef (1967, p. 36) understands landscape as ‘a concrete part of earth’s surface characterized by a homogenous structure and a similar set of interactions’ (cf. Sauer, 1963[1925], p. 321). In another tradition of – especially German – geography can be traced back to Alexander von Humboldt, landscape is defined as a kind of *gestalt*, i.e. as the essence or overall character of a distinct part of earth’s surface (cf. Schmithüsen, 1964, pp. 7–13).

By contrast, semiotic approaches to landscape are post-positivist in that they ‘are sceptical of scientific claims to represent mimetically real processes shaping the world around us’ (Cosgrove, 2003, p. 15). Semiosis can be defined as ‘meaning-making through language, body language, visual images, or any other way of signifying’ (Fairclough, 2001, p. 229). Studying landscape from a semiotic perspective implies laying ‘scholarly emphasis more on the context and processes through which cultural meanings are invested

into and shape a world whose <nature> is known only through human cognition and representation, and is thus always symbolically mediated’ (Cosgrove, 2003 p. 15). Hence, semiotic landscape researchers work with an ‘empty ontology’ (Andersen, 2003, p. XII) of landscape. They are interested in how the signifier ‘landscape’ acquires meaning, how it is brought into relation to physical objects through linguistic and non-linguistic practices and, importantly, how certain socially constructed concepts of landscape prioritize certain social practices over others. This is in line with what has been dubbed a ‘reflexive, constructivist notion of landscape’ (Gailing and Leibenath, 2010, p. 12) or ‘the critical-constructivist paradigm of <new> cultural, social and historical geographies’ (Wylie, 2007, p. 95). Such a perspective on landscape and space is linked to the works of scholars such as Duncan, 1990; Duncan and Duncan, 1988, 2004), Matless (1998) and Mitchell, 1996, 2002 in the English-speaking world and, for example, Kühne (2006, 2009), Schlottmann (2005) and Werlen (2007) in the German context.

Discourse analysis is a specific type of semiotic analysis. When we speak of discourse, we draw on the discourse theory of Laclau (1990, 2007), Laclau and Mouffe (1985). In Laclau’s thinking, a discourse is an attempt to establish a closed system of meaning. For a discourse to come into being, different elements have to be articulated as belonging to some kind of interior as opposed to other elements which form an antagonistic outside. The interior can obtain its full identity only in opposition to the outside, which is why the outside is constitutive of the inside (cf. Dixon and Jones, 2008). The rather traditional landscape discourse, which is still widespread in everyday usage, may serve as an example. In this discourse, ‘landscape’ is treated as equivalent to ‘beauty’, ‘recreation’, ‘wholeness’, ‘purity’, ‘scenic quality’, ‘conservation’, ‘wildlife’, ‘countryside’ or ‘nature’ and contrasting with ‘city’, ‘pollution’, ‘factory’, ‘motorway’, ‘destruction’, ‘fragmentation’ or ‘noise’, to mention just a few elements. It is furthermore obvious that this discourse privileges activities such as designating protected areas and hiking over constructing wind turbines or removing groves and hedgerows.

The foregoing example shows how closely linguistic and non-linguistic practices can be intertwined in a discourse. Therefore, Cosgrove (2003, pp. 15 f.) states that ‘anyone seriously concerned with understanding and perhaps regulating the changing appearance of Europe’s landscapes and the natural and social processes that have shaped and sustain them needs to be attentive to both’ the ecological and the semiotic approaches to landscape ‘and to hope for some kind of dialogue between them’, notwithstanding ‘the problems of communication that emerge from the lack of a shared ontology, epistemology and scientific language’.

The example also makes clear that our notion of discourse is distinct from both Habermas’ concept in which ‘discourse’ is largely synonymous with ‘discussion’ or ‘debate’ and the definitions proposed by authors such as Hajer (1995), Keller (2005) or Schmidt (2008).² This section has outlined the perspective from which we do our research. What we describe in the following two sections is by no means a fully-fledged discourse analysis. Instead, we discuss a preliminary survey we nonetheless consider revealing. It provides the point of departure for more in-depth analyses to which we will give an outlook in the discussion section.

Method

A comprehensive list of the agencies in charge of regional planning in Germany is provided by ARL, 2009. In our survey

¹ All quotes from German sources have been translated by the authors.

² Closer scrutiny of the differences and similarities between these concepts is offered, e.g., by Feindt and Oels (2005), Glasze and Mattissek (2009) and Laclau (1993).

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