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Urban stewardship and urban policies: cross-regards between cultures

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If I speak from Cape Town: What happens when 'environmental stewardship' travels the world? On knowledge politics, activism and governmentality

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Stewardship groups, nature in cities and changes in Western democratic systems

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Abstract Henrik Ernstson If I speak from Cape Town: What happens when ‘environmental stewardship’ travels the world? On knowledge politics, activism and governmentality

My intention with this paper is to present two provocations on how we think and treat “environmental stewardship”. The first provocation is that the term might be too narrow in capturing all those social groups that are of interest in understanding how the social and ecological are interrelated in urban areas. Departing from an emerging trend to study “environmental stewardship” using social network analysis in US cities (Dana Fisher et al), I contrast their studies with my research group’s network survey of 129 organisations in Cape Town. Based on this empirical base, I demonstrate that a narrow “environmentalist” focus downplays both the number of organisations that engage in ‘green’ spaces and fundamental networked processes of social mobilisation. The second provocation is that the broader use of “stewardship” in environmental studies, which carries an explicit normative connotation and with its origin mainly from global North institutions and contexts, might work to diminish important dimensions of what those we are studying are up to. Based on ethnographic work in Cape Town, a deeply unequal city with legacies of colonisation and racist town planning during apartheid, activists are acutely aware how ‘nature’ and the ‘environment’ is connected to elitism, elite spaces, and elite or expert professions. The notion of “stewardship” or “environmental champions”, which is frequently used by NGOs, State authorities and researchers alike, might depoliticise how environmental issues are connected to deeper issues of social change, equality and democracy. Both provocations serve towards a reflection on our practice of environmental science and contributes to theoretical discussions on environmental stewardship where the context of the global South is a crucial ‘testing point’ to interrogate how scientific concepts ‘travel’ and the knowledge politics they give rise to when they face new contexts.

Résumé Blanc Lamarche : Notre programme de recherche repose sur notre intérêt pour le rôle que les organisations de la société civile, plus ou moins formalisées, qui se multiplient en ville et dans les périphéries urbaines, jouent dans la gouvernance urbaine à diverses échelles au travers de réseaux hybrides privé-public. Nous nous attacherons à analyser les manifestations pratiques de ces expérimentations, dans leur diversité (« stewardship regimes »). L’objectif principal est de rendre compte de l’environnementalisme civique à travers l’inventaire des groupements (collectifs informels ou formels, associations, fédérations) de citoyens qui oeuvrent à introduire, entretenir, conserver, diversifier les espaces naturels sur des territoires urbains donnés et à cartographier les interactions après les avoir caractérisées : échange de matériel, d’idées, application de politiques locales sectorielles ou thématiques, etc. Par environnementalisme civique, nous entendons donc une action sur le milieu, qui vise à le transformer, à l’améliorer, qui l’instaure de ce fait en ressource et institue conjointement des communautés environnementales locales (« stewardship groups »). Cette étude de la contribution de la société civile à la gouvernance urbaine vise à instruire la problématique de l’évolution des systèmes démocratiques occidentaux et de la place qu’ils accordent à la nature.

Abstract Blanc Lamarche Our scientific programme is based on our interest in the role of Environmental Civil Society Organisations, which are more and less formalized, in cities and their peripheries. One of our driving questions is how these organisations participate in urban governance at various scales through public-private hybrid networks, characterizing and differentiating the ways city-dwellers invest in their living environments through urban spaces. In terms of understanding environmental stewardship, we will explore broader action towards the environment, which aims to transform and improve it. The central purpose is to create an inventory of stewardship groups (informal or formal collectives, associations, federations) of urban citizens working to introduce, maintain, conserve, diversify natural areas on given urban areas and to map the interactions after having them characterized: exchange of materials, ideas, implementation of sectoral or thematic local policies, etc. The study of how civil society contributes to urban governance aims to respond to changes in Western democratic systems and to understand the their conception of the natural.