Identities, Borders, and Ecologies:  
Change over Time in Rural Brandenburg and Metropolitan Berlin

Research Project Description

My project is a study of place, focusing on two localities of Germany: the Brandenburg village of Schlalach and the Berlin district of Steglitz. The project will emphasize the interactions between humans and the natural environment during an extended chronology from the eighteenth through twentieth century. My objective is to document ways in which human alterations of the landscape and environment shaped culture and society.

The two communities, Schlalach and Steglitz, are geographically close to one another, and they share many geophysical characteristics and even a common watershed. Prior to the nineteenth century they had similar cultural-historical profiles. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, the two communities experienced widely divergent environmental histories, and consequently different social histories.

In the 1770s the village of Steglitz, approximately 10 kilometers southeast of Berlin’s center, had a total of 81 inhabitants. It belonged to the manorial estate of the von Carmer family, and its inhabitants worked their own lands and delivered in-kind taxes to the von Carmer family while rendering enforced labor in the landlord’s fields. Like other villages of the time, and despite its proximity to Berlin, Steglitz was a relatively closed agricultural community.

Approximately 60 kilometers southeast of Berlin lay the larger village of Schlalach with slightly less than 200 residents. In the 1770s its inhabitants likewise procured their livelihood from the soil, performed unfree labor service and paid taxes in kind. Schlalach was a domain village, owned by the Prussian king and entrusted to a landlord-administrator.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these two villages—like all of Germany's agrarian population—experienced incredible change. In a gradual process of land reform, (Separationen) communal holdings and hereditary leases were transformed into private property. This meant that many small holders lost their right to live in villages and work the soil, while the more prosperous agriculturists were able to obtain deeds of ownership and become independent farmers. In the process, they had to forfeit the right to use the common meadows and forests. This essentially dissolved the traditional economic and ecological communities of Steglitz and Schlalach, although many families who successfully endured the transition certainly retained a sense of social community.

While these developments were relatively parallel in Steglitz and Schlalach, the two villages took radically different courses after the 1830s. Steglitz, situated on the main road between Berlin and Potsdam, began to experience an explosive population growth and by 1875 had expanded its numbers by a factor of 650%, with
5,467 inhabitants; by 1919, Steglitz had over 83,000 residents, and its village character had been completely obliterated by urban buildings, paved streets and other infrastructures. The suburb, New Steglitz, on the former common lands of the old village, was the site of bourgeois villas, and nearby were the new dwellings of proletarian families. The ever expanding Steglitz also gained a cotton mill and a silk weaving business. One of Germany's earliest railroad lines cut right through the former fields and pastures of the village. In 1920 Steglitz was annexed into the city of Berlin. By the early twentieth century the former landscape was unrecognizable; on its soil stands one of Greater Berlin's bustling modern retail and residential centers. In the post World War II era it is impossible to imagine agriculture ever having been practiced on the ground that now bears Steglitz's pavement and department stores and which is bored through by Berlin's U-9 subway.

Schlalach, in contrast, grew by only 101 inhabitants during the course of the nineteenth century and retained its overwhelmingly agricultural character. However, its environment and economy did change in profound, if less visible, ways. Villagers extracted new crops and a greater abundance of produce from the sandy soil due to “scientific” farming and new technologies. The village’s native hardwood forest largely disappeared, most likely as a result of a massive drainage project involving the Nuthe and Nieplitz river basins. Prussian foresters cultivated straight rows of pine trees in place of the former woodlands, which for five centuries previously had been the source of fuel, building material, animal fodder and food for village inhabitants. The pine trees instead were harvested for distant markets, forever changing the villagers’ relationship with the flora of their territory. Small entrepreneurial farmers, craftsmen, and hired laborers (Büdner) replaced the former royal villagers (Hufner and Kossäten).

During the post-Second World War era, the village’s ecology and society experienced dramatic transformations, due to the land collectivization program of the German Democratic Republic. And it is again, today, a village of private landowning farmers, still approximately 200 inhabitants in number. In appearance, its landscape and built environment strikes the observer as similar in appearance to its eighteenth-century profile. However, its ecology and its culture are increasingly influenced by its proximity to the Autobahn and an industrial park, as well as by the challenges of farming small holdings in the European Community and a global market. Former prosperous farm houses stand vacant, for sale, and affluent Berliners are buying plots to erect ex-urban dwellings in the village.

Increasingly historians are calling into question the problematic tendency to conceptualize the contours of German history as a factor of the nation-state. Scholars such as Jürgen Osterhammel and Niels P. Petersson, for example, are working to create an alternative narrative of German history by taking a broad, global perspective (Geschichte der Globalisierung, 2003). Similarly, I intend to view German history through a lens other than the nation state, but instead of emphasizing the global, I hope to look at the local experience of people as they repeatedly reshaped their physical environments. By analyzing from the perspective of ecological change, I hope to answer in a fresh way the question: What did it mean to be a German through successive generations during the last 300 years? I have deliberately chosen two places in my study in order to illustrate two spheres of culture in modern Germany: agrarian and urban. Until the nineteenth century, as much as 85% of the population lived from agriculture, hence the typicality of both villages of my study. By the mid-twentieth century, the majority of the German population was urban, however, a significant portion continued to live from the land. Thus it is appropriate, when asking what it meant to be German, to maintain a dual focus on urban and rural contexts, right up to the twenty-first century.

I expect to show that, as people transformed their landscape, they were also changing their relationships with fellow humans. Although I seek an alternative to the traditional practice of using the state as the framework for the history, I am nevertheless interested in ways in which authorities beyond the local communities—for example, officials of the Prussian and later the German state, and in the case of Steglitz, those of the municipality of Berlin—were the initiators of change in the physical environment. I am referring, for example,
to land reclamation, introduction of scientific farming, the enclosures of commons (*Separationen*), and in the example of Steglitz, the building of an urban infrastructure. Yet these transformations, while inspired and in part directed by authorities outside the communities, were not entirely externally driven. Frequently local leaders of Schlalach and Steglitz were themselves the agents of change, often welcoming transformations that undermined centuries-old cultural patterns. And one factor that both the rural and the urban community did experience in common was the growth of a sense of nationality and citizenship in a German state. During the second half of the twentieth century, this commonality was broken by the Cold War. A concluding section of my study will ask what it means to be “German” by asking what the two communities have in common and what divides them two decades after the reunification of the German state.

Borders of many kinds were recurrent factors in the changing village ecology and correspondingly in people’s lives, and by the twentieth century, in the urban environment of Steglitz. The lines between village common lands and the individually held, communally cultivated agricultural fields reflected not only the land management system but also the social hierarchy of the village. The constructed boundaries between villages were often a source of contention, for example, when neighboring villagers’ animals transversed them, trampling fields, and eating foliage. External authorities often altered boundaries, for example, when church officials brought the inhabitants of three villages together into a constructed community by placing them in a single parish. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, property lines took on entirely new meanings—and reflected new lifestyles—as the process of *Separation* created private holdings in place of the semi-feudal village layout with its agricultural practice of *Flurzwang*. The lives of Steglitz inhabitants changed in 1920 when they suddenly found themselves inside the city of Berlin instead of outside looking in. In the second half of the twentieth century, of course, international and ideological boundaries not only separated Steglitz (in West Berlin) and Schlalach (in the German Democratic Republic), but even prevented Steglitz’ citizens from using the Teltow Canal, which for half a century had contributed to the economic life, the ecology and the culture of Steglitz. The canal formed not only the southern boundary of the district of Steglitz but was also at that point the border between West Berlin and the German Democratic Republic. Water draining from Steglitz’ gutters and that from Schlalach’s fields, nevertheless, co-mingled during the Cold War, since both formed a part of the watershed that drained into the Nuthe-Nieplitz system. And the disappearance of the DDR-BRD border continues to transform the ecology and human society of both localities, even today.