“No place for wilderness”: Urban parks and the assembling of neoliberal urban environmental governance

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ABSTRACT

For well over a decade, urban political ecology has been concerned with the neoliberalization of infrastructure as a key site of struggle in the reproduction of urban space. While urban forests, trees, and parks have not featured as prominently in that literature as other resources (e.g., water), they are increasingly managed and promoted as a form of “green” infrastructure by city governments eager to ally themselves with new environmentally-oriented framings of the modern city. Yet, the relationship between these new forms of green infrastructure and the neoliberalization of the city, in particular their ability to enable new ways of taking about the city and nature, and to constrain others, has been understudied. In this paper, I examine the ways in which urban parks are enrolled in political struggles to reorient the techniques of urban governance toward entrepreneurialism as the only viable model for economic development. Through a case study of Philadelphia’s Fairmount Park System, I examine a series of events during the previous three decades in which Fairmount Park has become subject to this reorientation toward entrepreneurialism. Specifically, I examine how parks, no longer treated as spaces of “nature”, have been reframed as self-supporting constituents of a business-minded urbanism, promotional tools for the attraction of new labor to the city, and a reinforcement of the notion of entrepreneurialism as the inevitable urban development strategy for the 21st century. Yet, I also argue that these transformations are always in a process of negotiation. Even as parks become subject to these dominating discourses, new park construction is a site in which the conceptual assumptions that underpin neoliberal urban policy aren’t frictionlessly transferred from one instance to another but, even when successful, require significant work to overcome competing visions of urban nature.

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1. Introduction

In 2009, the City of Philadelphia held a public meeting concerning the future of Fairmount Park, in which the city’s mayor and urban development professionals discussed the importance of promoting parks as a draw for tourists interested in active recreation. During the question-and-answer session, one member of the audience expressed concern that increased use of parks by tourists might cause increased ecological stress, and they might be “loved to death”. In response, one of the panelists, a nationally recognized expert on urban park management, explained that this was a misguided concern since, in his view, urban park management should be focused on helping to make the city attractive to a 21st century workforce, and that “there is no place for wilderness in the city.” The comment first drew unhappy murmur from the crowd, then anger and frustration from an audience for whom parks were understood precisely as sites of wilderness that helped to mediate the problems associated with urban life and work. And yet, while the speaker’s message was received unfavorably by his immediate audience, his sentiment has since come to infuse and underpin a new form of urban environmental management in which the park has been repositioned not as a ‘natural’ refuge from the city, but as an appendage of the entrepreneurial city in the first decades of the 21st century. This shift was brought about by a series of acts that have helped to materially and discursively reconfigure the relationship between spaces of urban nature and the people who use them. In this paper, I draw on political ecology, actor network theory, and assemblage theory to understand how such a shift came about, and what effects it had on the relationship between urban forests and the city more broadly. Specifically, I focus on a series of moments in which the outcome of political movements around the status of parks vis-a-vis the city were uncertain and contested, since these are sites in which otherwise invisible assumptions and alliances are thrust to the foreground, and become what Latour calls “matters of concern” (2005).

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In order to understand the ways that urban sociotechnical assemblages become rearranged around entrepreneurialism as a matter of concern, this paper traces four political moments that helped to usher in the sea change toward entrepreneurial urban environmental policy described in the vignette that opened this paper. I employ an assemblage-oriented theorization of urban process to understand neoliberalism as the effect of the inter-relationships among a diverse array of actors rather than as the central organizing principle around which urban power relations revolve. I show how urban parks in Philadelphia have become repurposed as infrastructural supports of the entrepreneurial city over the past few decades through a series of policy interventions and shifts in public discussion. Much of this repurposing is achieved through the establishment of particular truths about the nature and status of parks. Specifically, I demonstrate how parks, once managed and used as spaces that were conceptually external to the social spaces of the city, became integrated into a framing of the city oriented around an economic development agenda based on entrepreneurialism. These truths, I argue, set limits on how parks can be performed and imagined, which has consequences for public participation in park management.

The role of parks and forests vis-a-vis urban development, and as a form of urban infrastructure, has long been a subject of inquiry in the urban political ecology (UPE) literature, beginning with Gandy’s (2002) work on Central Park (as well as other sites of urban nature) in New York City and Heynen’s (2003) work on the link between urban forests and urban investment. Brownlow’s (2005, 2006) work on Cobb’s Creek in Philadelphia explores the racialization of park landscapes within the context of declining park budgets and unequal impacts of disinvestment on racially-diverse populations. Byrne et al. (2007) demonstrate that park creation as an economic development tool is by no means a new phenomenon, tracing its roots in Los Angeles to the 1920s. And yet, the current incarnation of the park as a tool for economic development takes on new characteristics within the context of a 21st century urban neoliberalism. Perkins (2011) has been highly critical of this development, particularly with regard to the shift toward the intentional promotion by municipal governments of urban trees and tree maintenance as economic and ecological urban infrastructure. Within this new neoliberal framing, the “public” in public parks has receded as parks have been mobilized through a set of neoliberal governance strategies reliant on public/private partnerships and volunteer labor in the maintenance of public goods, which I explore further elsewhere (Author, forthcoming).

With respect to the broader movement toward neoliberal rationales in environmental management, research on urban neoliberalism has conceptualized urban infrastructures, and especially their construction, maintenance, and distribution, not as inert backdrops or inactive fields in which urban politics happens, but as coconstitutive with the forms of social power that enable neoliberalism (MacFarlane and Rutherford, 2008; Monstadt, 2009). Taking the point further, St. Martin (2007) and others (Lofthus, 2012; Kaika, 2005; Gandy, 2012) have emphasized neoliberal formations’ contingency on specific and unique political acts, including framings of urban environments in policy documents, managerial activity, and the everyday activities of resource users. On this point, recent work on urban assemblages develops an understanding of urban neoliberalism as shaped by “numerous systematizing networks […] which give provisional ordering to urban life” (Amin and Thrift, 2002, citing Latour, 1988; see also Fariás, 2011; Fariás and Bender, 2010; McFarlane, 2011), shifting away from a focus on power as the sole domain of the ruling class (Fariás, 2011, p 365). Here, neoliberal governance is understood “not as a global abstract logic imposing its forms into local spaces, but as a concrete process assuming multiple forms even within a city” (Fariás, 2011, p 368).

This paper explores four ‘moments’ in which park management in Philadelphia was reconfigured toward neoliberal ends in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. I begin with a discussion of the Fairmount Park Commission Master Plan in 1983, which categorized and ordered park space according to a spectrum of human interference in urban ecological processes, which I argue is distinct from later, “entrepreneurial” framings. Nevertheless, this early categorization of park lands reframed the discursive differentiation of nature from society, and refocused attention on the intersections of urban natures and urban people-in-particular, the damage that human activity can cause to adjacent woodlands. I then discuss how these concerns were taken up in an effort in the 1990s to employ already-existing pools of volunteer labor to institute specific elements of that plan aimed at protecting Philadelphia’s remaining “natural lands.”

In the final section, I discuss a period, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, in which a strategic shift took place that drew on the ethical commitments of citizen volunteers to reposition parks as structural components of an entrepreneurial urban economic strategy, which could be managed in such a way as to buttress the economic viability of the city’s management structure. Following a discussion of these changes, which led to the acquisition of the quasi-independent Fairmount Park Commission by city government, I conclude with a brief discussion of new park construction as an example of the ways in which the conceptual assumptions that underpin entrepreneurial urban policy aren’t frictionlessly transferred from one instance to the other but, even when successful, require significant work to overcome competing, if subjugated, visions of what urban nature is for.

The research from which this paper draws was conducted from 2008 to 2011; data was gleaned from a wide range of sources that provide a means of tracing the genealogy of these assumptions, including printed texts associated with park advocacy groups in Philadelphia, newspaper articles from the city’s major newspaper (the Philadelphia Inquirer), and government documents, including those produced and distributed by the Fairmount Park Commission. In addition, maps and images, especially those that accompanied the documents described above, prove useful for making sense of the broader context in which these documents are situated. Finally, these materials are combined with ethnographic data gathered at public meetings, in which many of the struggles that characterized the day-to-day use and management of the park were fought. These include meetings organized by the now-defunct Fairmount Park Commission as well as community groups like the Philadelphia Parks Alliance and the Friends of the Wissahickon.

2. The Fairmount Park Commission—Reassembling the binary

In 1983, the Fairmount Park Commission conducted a survey of its property holdings, which it used to develop a master plan for the management of its 8700 acre park system (now more than 9200) (Finkel, 1986). The resulting master plan was the first time in decades that a set of clear goals for the park commission were articulated, establishing guidelines for the preservation, administration, and future acquisition of park lands, a system of categorization in which all park lands could be designated as one of three types: recreational resources (which focused on active recreation, like ball fields and playgrounds), designed landscapes (city parks with natural components like trees, fountains, and grass lawns, but characterized as a place for human enjoyment), and natural lands, some of which were acknowledged as being in use for passive recreation, but whose primary importance was defined in terms of ecosystem services, as well as their intrinsic value as sites of urban biodiversity (Academy of National Sciences of Philadelphia [ANSF], 1983).
As a political intervention, the plan helped to shape the material and discursive landscape of the city, mobilizing a diverse array of actors in the identification of a set of urban-adjacent natural objects to be managed and used, and a set of human subjects to manage and use them, while simultaneously renewing managerial concern for the relationship between parks and people. In this sense, the types of park landscape found in the city were placed along a continuum based on the degree of contact between the human and the natural. For example, recreational sites were given over completely to human use, where the presence of non-human life was left out of the managerial calculus (except when targeted for removal, as in the case of persistent colonizing weeds on ball fields and other recreational spaces). In ‘designed landscapes’, non-human nature was highly managed according to human needs and desires (as in the case of manicured lawns and botanical gardens). Of the ‘natural lands’ described in the master plan, a small subset of sites were considered to be relatively free from anthropogenic disturbance, and these were held up as ideals to strive for in the management of other natural, but “degraded”, lands. Within this designation, the report identified areas which were of particular ecological significance (for example, those that contained rare ecological configurations), as well as ones that were in acute danger of disturbance as a consequence of forces associated with the built environment, like increased erosion from run-off from impervious surfaces.

Nevertheless, the master plan helped to position park lands within a coherent urban policy agenda, and its specific goals languished for more than a decade because of a lack of funding. Eventually, a grant in the late 1990s helped to renew attention to a subset of its concerns, the “natural lands” designation, by funding a new round of environmental assessments to be carried out under the Natural Lands Restoration and Environmental Education Program (NLREEP). This new round of activity reinforced the discursive distinction between humans and nature, in part because it drew heavily on the then-emerging field of ecosystem restoration, which takes as its starting point the concept of ecological disturbance (see Gobster and Hull, 2000 for more discussion on and philosophical critique of ecosystem restoration). While it was not new for surveyors, naturalists, foresters, and lay people in Philadelphia to talk about the park in terms of damage caused by human activity, ecosystem restoration lent scientific certitude to a managerial agenda that treated park users as antagonists in urban ecosystems, and supported a preference for particular types of park landscapes and the human activities that attended them.

With a turn toward ecosystem restoration, park governance had become firmly grounded in an ecological science based on the notion of ecological succession, in which most of Philadelphia’s ecosystem was understood as being in recovery from intensive farming in the 18th and 19th centuries on most of the land now encompassed by the Fairmount Park System:

[People have controlled, reshaped and destroyed [park] lands as a means of supporting human life for thousands of years…. In the mid-nineteenth century, natural lands were the prescription for the ills of the city. People were encouraged to go to natural areas and find solace, peace and redemption in the land. […] Parks with carefully designed natural areas were planned and implemented throughout the country in hopes of saving mankind from itself. Natural lands in the Fairmount Park system were conceived through such thinking, and today a park system with natural lands is accessible to most every Philadelphian. The Fairmount Park system offers a variety of restorative opportunities for contemplation and meditation, as well as active recreation […] The natural lands are important…for lessening the environmental impacts of a highly developed and busy city. (Fairmount Park Commission, 1999, pg 1-9)

The first task in this new agenda of environmental assessment was to develop a database all of the park’s natural land holdings, divided into what would become hundreds of discrete sites, with data on their quality and character, including the type of disturbance that affected each location. The full report, published in 1999 as the “Natural Lands Restoration Master Plan” (Fairmount Park Commission), included individual reports for the seven major watershed parks in Philadelphia, produced by field researchers, many of them volunteers trained by the Fairmount Park Commission and the Academy of Natural Sciences. Fragmentation of urban forest canopy features prominently, since it meant greater exposure to “external” influences emanating from the city, leading to higher mortality rates and shorter life spans for trees and other organisms. As stated in the report, “[b]ecause of the complexity of management of natural lands in an urban setting, goals for restoration need to be established to ensure common understanding and continuity of activities undertaken…. The goal of restoration is to strengthen the viability of self-sustaining ecological communities containing native species appropriate to the region. . . .” (Fairmount Park Commission, 1999, 1-18). Researchers’ preferences for end-stage successional landscapes were clear in their descriptions. For example, one land parcel is described as having “a large woods with some good, diverse canopy” while others are described as being “scrubby” or “overrun by invasives” (Fairmount Park Commission, 1999, p 838). For the authors of the report, the purpose of the park remains much the same as in the 19th century; only now, this view had the weight of restoration science behind it. As such, it enabled managers to organize their activity around these new matters of concern.

The field reports and historical accounts produced through the project became part of a larger story about the state of the park; the report’s conclusions reinforced and re-inscribed well-worn lines of demarcation between nature and the city, and became a rallying point for other groups in the city tasked with the maintenance of Philadelpia’s ecosystems. The notion of disturbance became the center around which the NLREEP’s activities revolved and, in the following years, the everyday activities of park managers and volunteers that put this new system of knowledge to work. But almost as soon as the work began, its tenets were mobilized by a new narrative of the city, this time in service to economic development.

3. The end of the Fairmount Park Commission

In the first decade of the 21st century, press releases, newspaper editorials, and government reports began to articulate a new knowledge of the urban park. These efforts increasingly framed the park as a tool for economic development, a vital component of the economic fabric of the entrepreneurial city, even as they drew heavily from the differentiation of the park from the city that ecological restoration efforts promoted. However, this new vision no longer framed the park as a bucolic site for re-attuning oneself to nature’s rhythms or preserving the non-human world. Rather, it was framed as a financial asset, one that could contribute to the city’s economic base by becoming financially self-supporting and “reap[ing] dividends” from the services it provides (Shields, 2008). In short, the park was being leveraged an integral part of the urban economic fabric rather than an exceptional space outside of it.

This position was first clearly articulated in the Fairmount Park Commission’s 2004 strategic plan for the park system, called “A Bridge to the Future.” Then-mayor John Street’s introduction to that plan, in which the old idea of the park as wild space is clearly

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1 The seven parks are: Tacony Creek Park, FDR Park, Fairmount (East/West) Park, Pennypack Park, Wissahickon Valley Park, Poqueessing Creek Park, and Cobbs Creek Park.
discernible, describes the park as a “place of adventure and exploration . . . of quiet contemplation and hidden beauty” (Fairmount Park Commission, 1999). Images that accompany the report reflect this vision, including the cover image, taken in Wissahickon park, the most heavily wooded of the seven watershed parks, in which nine out of ten acres were declared “natural lands” by NLREEP. The image captures demonstrates at once Street’s vision of the grandeur and the human scale of its historical structures (Fairmount Park Commission, 2004, pg 4).

At the same time, following Street’s introductory statements, the report’s primary authors argue that the original, nineteenth-century-era goals of the park system had been achieved: open space had been secured, forests preserved, water resources protected. A new challenge faced the park commission, they argued, required a reconfiguration of park land governance and the recalibration of park commission goals so that they were more in line with the needs of a different kind of city. The park’s problems at that time, the report argued, resulted from “years of financial hardship and decline” and a lack of “philosophical approach to reach its full revenue-generating potential” (Fairmount Park Commission, 2004, pg 3).

Not long after the release of this report, in June of 2005, city council members Darrell Clarke and Blondell Reynolds Brown introduced a bill to dissolve the semi-autonomous Fairmount Park Commission and merge its functions with the city’s Department of Recreation, eliciting an angered public response in the form of letters to area newspapers and frustrated comments at town hall meetings (the scene that opened this paper took place at one such meeting). Clarke and Brown’s justification for absorbing the park commission into city government was that it lacked transparency, and used public funds ineffectively and irresponsibly.

In response, park commissioner Robert N. C. Nix III and Park Commission vice president Alex Bonavitacola issued comments that argued that the park commission’s problems stemmed not from the fact that the commission lacked vision or competence, but because it had been underfunded for decades. Indeed, according to one independent report, the Fairmount Park system was one of the worst funded park systems in the nation (Philadelphia Parks Alliance, 2007). For the next four years, a succession of competing reports from various organizations appeared, each envisioning a different future for the park system, each marshaling a different body of evidence to support its view of how the park ought to be governed. In the process of articulating these seemingly divergent stances, old visions of the park were being dismantled and a new park began to emerge.

In March, 2006, less than a year after Clarke’s and Reynolds’ bill was introduced, the Philadelphia Parks Alliance, the dominant park advocacy group in Philadelphia, articulated its own vision of the future of parks, detailed in a report entitled “Better Parks for a Better City” (Philadelphia Parks Alliance, 2006). The report presented findings from a public opinion study, and was widely accepted as an accurate representation of both the desires of the city’s populace and as a fair description of the park and its value.

The report established the city parks’ state of disrepair and the public’s desire for parks for recreation, before it outlined a three-pronged improvement strategy, involving the adoption of more accountable and “visionary” leadership, closer partnerships between the public and private sectors, and increased funding gained not primarily from the city government, but through an entrepreneurial strategy that would create a financially self-sustaining park commission (Philadelphia Parks Alliance, 2006, p5).

The Parks Alliance also offered some indication of the kinds of practices that accompany this new vision of the park, which included new projects to make the parks more amenable to recreational use: a Trail Master Plan, lighting and safety improvements in neighborhood parks, better alignment of park policy with efforts to protect the environment, improve neighborhoods, and promote economic growth. This new strategy for park management eventually became, under the leadership of Mayor Michael Nutter, directly integrated with the city government’s priorities aimed at “a healthier, more vibrant city” because “parks make cities livable” (Philadelphia Parks Alliance, 2006, pg 13).

A month later, writing on behalf of the Fairmount Park Commission, Nix (2006) released his own report, agreeing to a large extent with the Parks Alliance’s entrepreneurial vision, even supporting the dissolution of the Park Commission and replacing it with an independent Board of Trustees. As Nix wrote, “Fairmount Park has the ability to attract tourists and recreationalists from throughout the region, [and] has the opportunity to capture outside revenues”. Its entrepreneurial portfolio would be expanded to include “revenue intensive zones and districts” in the park, fee-charging activities (such as ice-skating rinks), a “park improvement fund” that would levy a mandatory fee for groups using the park, people attending events, and institutions using park land, and naming rights for park structures (Nix, 2006, pg 8). Its new board would be dedicated to public-private partnerships, and board members would be chosen in part on the basis of their ability to attract and raise private money. According to the authors of the report, these organizational reforms would ultimately “encourage a more entrepreneurial mindset” among park officials (Nix, 2006, pg 3). These improvements in the way the park system governs itself are part of what Nix understood as “the city’s cultural and economic renaissance” (Nix, 2006, pg 3). This new vision had come a long way from the notion of the park as a wilderness preserve. To fit within it, the park needed to be reimagined. While “[n]atural areas would remain wild”, park management required a reorientation toward amenity provision2. Deteriorated historical homes within the park would be “restored to their former grandeur” for the purposes of attracting tourism, and historic fountains, once used to water horses and people along Kelly Drive, “would flow once more” (Nix, 2006, pg 22). While natural lands are vaguely featured in this list of amenities, wilderness is no longer the primary feature of parks management.

The Parks Alliance continued to be a strong voice in the struggle to redefine the park, publishing reports throughout the period during which the merging of the Fairmount Park Commission and the Department of Recreation was an active matter of concern. In its 2007 report “Parks in Trouble”, the Parks Alliance continued its efforts to frame the park as a neglected resource, but began to shift the burden of responsibility, if not the blame, to the ordinary citizen (Philadelphia Parks Alliance, 2007). Enlisting citizen researchers to identify and catalogue poor conditions in many of the city’s parks, the Alliance’s findings were presented to public audiences as a rallying cry to save what it saw as a crumbling park system. Plans for improvements along these lines framed parks as financial assets, and directed the task of responsible management to individual citizens. The goal was no longer to force the city government to increase budget spending on parks, but to support citizen-led groups that could step in to fill the gap left by the retreat of the state.

Following closely on the heels of the report in 2007, the Parks Alliance issued another in 2008, much heralded in newspapers, newsletters, and websites. It reported on a joint project by the Parks Alliance and the Trust for Public Land to determine the

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2 These included “a first-class golf experience at 6 golf courses, . . . driving ranges and golf centers; [s]ummer concerts and movie nights; [s]pring wildflower walks, summer kite festivals, fall foliage 5K runs, microbrew sampler evenings, holiday tours of decorated historic mansions; [e]ntryway stands, cafes, and bike/blade/canoe/kayak/fishing equipment rentals; [t]op sun courses, rip-lines, skateboard parks, archery ranges, miniature golf courses and outdoor ice skating rinks” (Nix, 2006, pg 22).

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monetary value of the Fairmount Park System for the city's economy. “This report,” it explains, “isn’t really about parks. It’s about cities and how to save them.” The importance of parks is defined via reference to urban life: “They improve citizens’ health. They fight pollution. They attract tourists.” The report’s econometric framing enabled the city’s populace to view the park as a logical extension of the Department of Recreation, which focused on the maintenance of recreational facilities, rather than as an organization that maintained landscapes and natural spaces. Now, park discourse didn’t require distance from human activity in order to function “properly”; instead, their proper functioning was achieved by integrating them into the urban economy. Five months after the report was released, in November of 2009, years of debate ended when Philadelphians voted overwhelmingly in favor of merging the duties of the Fairmount Park Commission into the Department of Recreation.

4. Reassembling Urban nature

As powerful as these new discourses were, they required constant maintenance in order to retain their power. This need is especially evident in rare instances of new park construction, in which the usually unexamined tenets of park discourse are exposed to new scrutiny. This can be clearly seen in the case of the Reading Viaduct project, an attempt to establish a new park, which emerged amid a field of contested politics around the nature and status of urban parks, but which was quickly subsumed by the new entrepreneurial urban ideal. The Reading Viaduct is a narrow channel of overgrowth that runs for about a mile just north-east of downtown Philadelphia through an area of the city filled with warehouses and lofts, the remnants of the city’s industrial heyday. Once a viaduct for the Reading Railroad that brought goods into the city, its destination was the aptly-named Reading Terminal, about which grew the Reading Terminal Market in the late 1800s, where Philadelphians bought much of their food. Though the Reading Market still exists, it is no longer supplied by the Reading Railroad, which ceased functioning for that purpose in 1976. Its connection to the market was subsequently severed in order to build a freeway connecting Highway 95, which runs along the eastern edge of the city’s core, to Highway 76, which runs along its western edge.

But the viaduct has continued to be productive, if not for the Reading Railroad Company or the farmers whose goods were once shipped to the city via rail. In the intervening years, the viaduct had become home to a host of opportunistic plants and animals, a weedy expanse of grasses, thorny vines, invasive trees, and feral cats. Humans who have experienced the viaduct in its feral state have celebrated the viaduct as a place of peace and quiet in an otherwise noisy and hectic part of the city. At a public meeting in 2011, one such person described walking along the viaduct as a “transformative experience”. They explained that it provided views of the city’s skyline that couldn’t be had anywhere else. Among the vegetation that covers the viaduct’s surface grow abundant wineberries and blackberries. On one covered platform, which once served as a loading dock, a homeless man has arranged what can only be called his bedroom, complete with mattress, night stand, and bureau. Along some portions of the viaduct, two fast-growing species of trees that are capable of laying down roots in only a few inches of soil have formed a substantial tree canopy. To prevent structural damage to the concrete platforms and archways, which could present a danger to people who inhabit the streets below, the trees are cut down periodically by the Reading Company, which still owns the viaduct, but the trees quickly regain their foothold and the process starts over again.

Following the popularity of New York City’s High Line Park and Paris’s Promenade Plantée, a number of individuals living near the viaduct began to advocate for converting the viaduct into an elevated park, forming a community group known as the Reading Viaduct Project, whose goal is to gain the support of state and local governments to transform the viaduct from its current state into a city park. According to its website, “the Reading Viaduct will successfully bring together economically and culturally diverse communities, generate economic development, and provide a catalyst for the redevelopment of this section of North Philadelphia” (Reading Viaduct Project, 2012). By contrast, another group, called ViaductGreene (2012), describes the viaduct as an “inconspicuous, intimate submersible space of mystery, [and] wild excitements”. ViaductGreene envisions a future in which “it’s exciting, existing spontaneous vegetation” will be “managed with limited interventions” (ViaductGreene, 2012).

As in other moments in which the status of parks is in question, these conflicting desires and visions give rise to ambiguities and controversies in public debate. At a recent meeting on the future of the viaduct, held as part of Academy of Natural Science’s Urban Sustainability Forum, a number of incongruities between the two visions became apparent. Some in attendance wanted to see the viaduct established as a “wildlife habitat”, while others argued that it was exactly that; it only required official acknowledgement as such, and should be left alone. Some participants attempted to close down possibilities that fell outside the well-established discourse of the urban park. One urban planning professional argued, “As cool as it might be to young people, [the viaduct as it now exists] is still blight”. At the same time, others struggled to expand the discursive field of possibility. In a recent article in the Philadelphia Inquirer, for example, one of the Reading Viaduct Project’s founders, John Struble, is quoted as saying, “I don’t think I should be the one to decide what it should be: [...] Everyone should think about it.” (Saffron, 2004).

In the debates over the Reading Viaduct as a park, the full range of future possibilities for urban parks is clear. In this context, the debates over the future of the viaduct became an exercise in what might be called, after Michel Foucault, “genealogical” thinking, in which “The object [is] to learn to what extent the effort to think one’s own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently” (Foucault, 1990, pg 9). As concerned parties struggled to define the terms of their debate in determining the future of the Reading Viaduct, they began to vocalize what they silently thought about parks, and began to articulate previously unacknowledged assumptions. In the process, they made these assumptions apparent as matters of concern, rather than as matters of fact. To some extent, this made visible the process by which knowledge about parks comes into being, by which specific matters of concern are taken up and codified as truth, and began to open up new political spaces of possibility for the park and, to a larger extent, to the city.

5. Conclusion

This paper has explored the ways in which parks become tied to everyday performances of the city, through which urban parks came to play their sometimes contradictory roles in informing the reproduction of urban spaces. Over the last century and a half, urban parks have served auxiliary functions for the city in a variety of ways: as filters for urban pollution, as playgrounds for the wealthy, and as sites of escape into “untouched” nature. Each in their own way, these relationships have separated urban people from “nature” by establishing and reinforcing the boundary between the economic operation of the city (and by extension, “society” and “culture”) and ecological processes. In this way, the city has been framed as the place of economic development, progress, and growth, while the park has been treated as a static
site of rejuvenation, health, and healing for the city and its populace. In conjunction, park discourses have tended to reinforce the idea of nature not as a broader category of living things that encompasses human beings, their biological needs, and their behaviors, but as an entity whose mysteries can only be viewed with awe and wonder from afar, or pursued, ordered, and conquered through modernist scientific rationality (Author, dates).

These instances of park governance categorized sites of urban nature by placing them along an ecological continuum in which some sites are seen as more valuable than others because they were freer of social contamination. In the foregoing discussion, this process was especially visible in the case of the Fairmount Park Commission’s master plan, as well as the ongoing efforts of various “Friends of the Park” groups. This supposedly inherent quality of urban nature demanded attention from urban citizens, requiring protection and, where compromised, repair. It was through this discourse of purification that urban people became further alienated from a nature that was cast as a fragile substance capable of being diminished by human activity, while humans’ behavior was seen as destructive, to be held at a distance from parks, except when kept within a strict set of approved guidelines that served to keep the social out of the natural. Subjects’ own interactions with parks became scrutinized through this lens of responsibility, and subjects were disciplined (or disciplined themselves) accordingly, developing a sense of individual responsibility toward nature and an internal drive to protect it. This placed considerable constraints on the ways urban people were able to imagine themselves vis-à-vis the environment, ultimately limiting the degree to which human needs were able to be reconciled with those of an external nature. And yet, the assemblages of actors and actions that informed and were informed by these arrangements remained stable only so long as they were continually produced anew: in the late 20th and early 21st century, these assemblages began to reconfigure themselves as new matters of concern emerged, and new networks of actors coalesced around them (see Latour, 2005).

At the beginning of the 21st century, a reconfiguration of actors— including park volunteers, advocacy groups, and park managers—occurred alongside the emergence of new operational logics and governmental strategies, so that a new notion of the city came into view that was not simply an economic space divorced from the environment, but one in which an entrepreneurial approach to urban governance that incorporates environmental governance was central to its continued existence. This new environmental city was informed by, but ultimately pushed beyond, a 19th century vision of the industrial city toward a new kind of spatial relationship in which wilderness or nature are no longer treated as a separate domain, but are acted on as extensions of the entrepreneurial city, a form of urban infrastructure through which human use of nature is guided by an ethic of economic and environmental sustainability.

Nevertheless, just as in the case of earlier configurations of the park and the city, neoliberal rationales continued to operate in Philadelphia only so long as urban actors continued to produce parks and cities as suitable objects of management in a number of dispersed sites. Some of these reflected a form of neoliberal practice, while others did not. The cast of actors acting on these objects collaborated with and contested one another in the reproduction of varied forms of knowledge—neoliberal and otherwise—about parks in the 21st century. While entrepreneurialism in park management, the increasing reliance on volunteer labor, and the shift away from state funding have in some sense ushered in the neoliberal urban park, this happened not simply as a local expression of a larger neoliberal trend whose internal logic demands ever-increasing infiltration of new spaces. Rather, urban parks served as a form of urban infrastructure that helped to systematize urban life through its continual reproduction via the everyday activities of park users. Simultaneously, however, their effects were always open to contestation, as in the case of the Reading Viaduct. As conflicts arose among park advocates, associated with the Reading Viaduct Project and ViaductGreene, both camps, in their argumentation with one another, appeal to divergent sets of knowledge in order to buttress their arguments. But in the process, participants in these struggles began to scrutinize their basic assumptions about what parks should be or what kind of nature is appropriate in urban settings.

At the same time, this is not to say that every political possibility is as likely as the rest. Whatever happens to the Reading Viaduct is unlikely to turn the tide of neoliberalization in Philadelphia on its own, not because it’s too “small”, but because struggles related to the viaduct do not bear sole responsibility for the maintenance of urban park discourse. On the other hand, it is difficult to know the effect of seemingly insignificant changes within such networks. Perhaps the Viaduct will offer a symbolic touchstone for future struggles over the city. Similarly, the set of democratic practices put into place by local governments have the potential to open up this field of contestation and deliberation, but these efforts often fail to deliver, not because they are “weak”, but because the fundamental assumptions that inform governmental rationales aren’t open to critique. For example, in the case of public meetings like the one that opened this paper, participants failed to confront assumptions about what the city and wilderness ought to be, despite an espoused desire for ‘citizen input’ on the part of city government. Rather, some members of the audience found it difficult to respond to ‘experts’ whose knowledge about the nature of parks was implicitly authorized by those participating in the proceedings, including the audience itself. Finally, drawing on volunteers to do restoration work in parks is also an attempt at democratizing park management, but volunteers are rarely given the freedom to define the priorities that drive restorations projects. In all of these examples, alternative matters of concern are invisible because certain truths about cities and nature are taken as given, eternal, and preexisting human knowledge, rather than as discourses constructed through the daily performance of park discourse. The essence of the park, the city, and its people, therefore, are often fixed in participants’ imagination, even as their ambivalence toward these categories threaten to undo them.

Nevertheless, a careful tracing of these fields of contestation opens the possibility of dismantling the dominant truths and knowledge claims that inform such strategies. Likewise, it is necessary to forestall critical analyses of such practices that presume dominance of particular economic regimes over the day-to-day operations that prop them up. Only then can we understand the challenges to— and the possibilities for— a more just urban politics.

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