

Frank Eckardt

## **Enjoying Water in a Fragmented City: The Rhine–Herne Canal as a Mirror of a Changing Society**

### **Abstract**

*Objectives:* This article aims at increasing the knowledge on how cities are changing by processes of post-industrialism.

*Research Design & Methods:* The article reviews the historical process of the use of water in the Rhine–Herne canal and the surrounding city of Gelsenkirchen.

*Findings:* The article shows that the canal has regained significance to people. However, depending on the social status, the canal means something different now. For the urban poor, it is again a place for refreshment and free swimming. For the middle class, it is a popular spot for dining out and acquiring a sense of maritime atmosphere.

*Implications / Recommendations:* Water in post-industrialism requires a socially differentiated understanding.

*Contribution / Value Added:* The article contributes to a critical review on contemporary urban planning policies regarding water.

*Keywords:* Rhine–Herne Canal, water, swimming, social polarisation, de-industrialisation

*Article classification:* theoretical article (conceptual article)

*JEL classification:* O29, Z13

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## Introduction

Climate change has also made water an important issue for cities that did not have to worry about their water supply for a long time (Urich et al., 2013). This also applies to cities in Europe, which through modern urban planning have so far been able to provide problems with the disposal of wastewater and the supply of clean water (Gandy, 2005). Water became an elixir of life that for many people in the course of the 20th century was associated with relaxation and freedom from stress in the world of work. Today, this aspect of urban water is less the focus of specialist discussions, while urban planning is primarily concerned with regaining the ecological qualities of waterways and making the necessary adjustments to climate change (Haaren & Galler, 2011; Libbe & Nickel, 2016).

The Ruhr area in Germany is a good example of this. For two decades, great efforts have been made to restore the Emscher river to its natural state (Cormont, 2012). The activities of the “International Building Exhibition Emscherpark” (Faust, 1999) have received a lot of recognition in the professional world as well as in the society (Shaw, 2002). It is also noticeable that the social significance of the Emscher – and, above all, the Rhine–Herne Canal next to it – has hardly received any attention.

As will be shown below, this canal has fulfilled an important social function for the workers and their families since its construction. As a free space in an industrialised landscape, it had an identity-creating meaning, and shaped a working-class culture that is now largely lost. Through the modernisation of industrial cities and social democratic reform policies, offers such as swimming pools and later leisure facilities – such as the “sports paradise” – were set up, and as such were supposed to enable the population to have access to a safer and more pleasant form of swimming and bathing. Such offers got more and more determined and devalued by the economic process of deindustrialisation as well as by the social fragmentation. Dealing

with the public baths also reflects how society falls apart into different living environments if it is not held together by common work contexts.

With the following case study – namely the observation of the Rhine–Herne Canal over time – the academic knowledge on what the processes of post-industrialism mean for the life of the affected people can be improved. Therefore, the author intends to contribute to an international debate on post-industrial cities (Leary-Owhin, 2016; Eckardt & Morgado, 2011). As recent studies have acknowledged a particular way of experiencing the landscape and nature of these cities (Zimpel, 2019; Włodarczyk-Marciniak, Sikorska, & Krauze, 2020), the following pages are meant to deliver an insight into the social meaning of water. Methodologically, such cities are representing a case study motivated by the work of Robert Beaugregard’s *Voices of Decline* (2003), but due to the space limitations, this article cannot unfold the variety of sources of his book.

## An icon of industrialism – the Rhine–Herne Canal

Transport lines have been crucial for the Ruhr area to develop as the largest industrial area in Europe at the end of the 19th century. Coal mining and steel production shaped the economic geography in all regards: in addition to collieries and blast furnaces, the residential colonies were built and railroad lines cut through these residential areas, leaving little space for the little free time that the workers and their families had. The high density meant that epidemics such as cholera could still spread at the beginning of the 20th century. Wastewater was concentrated in the immediate vicinity of the houses. Fresh air was also not available due to the massive burning of coal. In short, the residential area was bad for health and offered little opportunity for relaxation and recreation. The strong population growth that resulted from industrialisation made the situation even worse. Toxins discharged into the groundwater, and running water by industry led to extreme

contamination of drinking water to such an extent that already in the 1870s, the residents of the Emscher area were increasingly susceptible to diseases of all kinds. Malaria was endemic and five to ten times as common as in other places of the Ruhr area, and typhus mortality was twice the Prussian average (Wehling, 2014, p. 83).

The situation did not fundamentally change in the decades before the First World War. The concerns of industry had absolute priority and instead of taking greater account of living conditions in urban planning, the landscape was further fragmented for infrastructure buildings and industrial plants. The railway lines were no longer sufficient for the transport of coal, and industrial goods and the construction of the Rhine–Herne Canal was supposed to ensure the further expansion of the transport routes. The construction of the 45-kilometres-long canal took over eight years (1906–1914) and cost around 60 million German marks (Eckoldt, 1998). At times there were three excavators and 200–250 people deployed on the construction site. Many of the workers came from abroad, presumably from Poland. They lived in a specially established canal workers' quarter in the north of Herne (Schmidt, 2009, p. 94). The construction was directed by the Royal Canal Construction Directorate, which had been founded for this purpose in 1906. Partly, the canal was laid in a river bed of a small river at the same geographical position (the Emscher). When the construction was planned first, the Emscher was meant to be transformed into a shipping lane. The Emscher Canal Committee had already been set up in 1873 and a plan for canalling this small river was presented two years later. Obviously, however, the capacity of this river was regarded as not sufficient, and regardless of the realised canalling, a new and bigger canal was assumed to be needed (Sympher, 2012). With the Rhine–Herne Canal, a missing link between the Duisburg harbour and the already built Dortmund–Ems Canal was closed. Already in 1915, over 3 million tons of cargo were transported on the Rhine–Herne Canal; in 1918, it was three times as much (Schmidt, 2009, p. 95).

Twenty-two harbours were built, of which some were also linked to single coal mines, such as the harbour of “Unser Fritz” in Wanne Eickel, where up to 318,556 tons of coal (1922) were shipped (Adolph, 1927, p. 106).

As a result of the construction of the canal, the industrial landscape continued to expand and compact along this waterway. An industrialised space was created with a highly dense ensemble of bridges, cranes, rails, warehouses, lines, and a wide variety of buildings. For the people of the Emscher region, however, this canal also meant that they now lived near flowing water. While the Emscher itself was only used as a sewer pipe, the new canal was a kind of river that quickly became something special in the perception of the residents. The canal was quickly adopted as a swimming opportunity, especially by children and young people. More precisely, it was about jumping into the canal. With the many bridges over the canal, jumping into the water became a very popular leisure activity where one could show courage, because the ship traffic had to be carefully observed. In fact, swimming in the canal was not only dangerous because of the high volume of ships, but also because people in the Ruhr area did not know how to swim. Small and sometimes larger accidents, some with fatal consequences, were common. To this day, however, swimming in the canal has an unbroken positive status and is considered a cultural working-class tradition that otherwise hardly exists in Germany.

### **My city – valorising water**

“Meine Stadt ist kein Knüller  
in Reisekatalogen  
kein Ferienparadies  
mit Sonnengarantie  
sie ist ein  
kohlenstaub-getränkter Riese  
der seine schwarze Vergangenheit  
im Rhein-Herne-Kanal  
blank wäscht.”

(Ilse Kibgis, 2017, p. 10)

[En. “My city is not a big hit/in travel catalogs/no vacation paradise/with sun guarantee/she is a/coal dust-soaked giant/his black past/in the Rhine–Herne Canal/washed clean.]

This poem by Ilse Kibgis, titled “My City”, is probably the best known one by this poet from Gelsenkirchen; she wrote it in 1977. Kibgis worked all her life in this city on the Rhine–Herne Canal as a cleaning lady, in a washing saloon, or as a waitress (Kirbach, 2017). Her poems found recognition late and can now serve as an important and rare testimony to how the people in the Ruhr area perceived their homeland and what they valued about it. It is no coincidence that the Rhine–Herne Canal is featured at the beginning of the poem. The canal had become particularly important for Gelsenkirchen. It divides the city into a northern part and a southern part, and thus is located centrally. However, this “city centre” does not include any classic facilities such as those offered by cities that have grown over centuries with their marketplaces, town halls, and bourgeois residential facades. This centre is a place that lets one feel a piece of freedom in the midst of work and poverty. Ilse Kibgis put this into words with another of her poems, namely one titled “Auf der Kanalbrücke” [En. “On the Canal Bridge”]:

“eine Prise Wind  
im Gesicht  
scharf die Konturen  
schneidend wie ein  
Scherenmesser  
  
ein bisschen Spucke  
abgetrieben in die  
Böschung  
  
ein Himmel mit  
Rauchglaswolken  
  
Hochöfen  
die mein Blickfeld  
abstecken  
  
Sonnenuhren  
die langsam gehen

Emscheraroma  
das mich  
chloroformiert.’

(Ilse Kibgis, 2017, p. 20)

[En. “On the canal bridge/a pinch of wind/in the face/sharp contours/cutting like a/scissors knife/a little bit of spit/aborted into the/embankment/a heaven with/smoked glass clouds/blast furnaces/which is my field of vision/marked out/sundials/who go slowly/Emscher aroma/that me/chlo-roformed”]

Standing and jumping from the canal bridges always happened in the horizon of the industrial plants and yet with a view of the sky, which in the Ruhr area was seldom smog- and cloud-free until the 1970s due to the many exhaust gases. The belated sundial that Kibgis speaks of here expresses the longing that people nevertheless were filled with under the overcast sky.

Besides Kibgis’ poems, this area has never entered literature, films, or other forms of cultural communication. In general, the Ruhr area – and in particular the canal – has been regarded as devoid of culture and simply “dirty” – a stigma that last until today. After the Second World War, the Ruhr area experienced the second renaissance, and Germany’s economic resurgence is closely related to it. Because of its economic importance, both the Weimar Republic and the Allies did not grant the Ruhr area independent political representation in the reorganisation of Germany after the war. Despite many plans to give the approx. 5 million people more political say and visibility, this has not happened yet. One reason for this was the well-known left-wing orientation of most of the workers, which in 1920 led to the largest armed conflict in Germany since the peasant wars in the Middle Ages in the so-called ‘Ruhrkampf’ [‘the Ruhr battle’], where 80,000 workers took up arms against political repression (Gietinger, 2020). Social democrats and communists, however, established a diverse working-class culture at the local level, which included, for example, intensive club life, sport, allotment gardens, and union representation.

An outstanding example of the increasing quality of life was also the planning for the Grimberg outdoor pool, which was carried out in 1927 by the city of Gelsenkirchen. As a replacement for the completely inadequate outdoor swimming pool at the head end of the city harbour in Schalke – which had to be abandoned as a result of multiple accidents and the effects of mountain damage (sinking of the beach) – a new facility was to be created that met all requirements. It was difficult to find the right terrain for this. In the city centre, there was a lack of the necessary open spaces; in addition, the smoke and soot development was unfavourable to the construction of an outdoor swimming pool. The original intention was, therefore, to create the planned facility in the immediate vicinity of the Rhine–Herne Canal. Finally, an area of thirty-one acres was leased by the city from the owners of the Emscher for the construction of a spacious outdoor swimming pool and a recreation facility. Horticultural facilities and berths as well as sand areas and smaller trees – and sports and playgrounds – gave the outdoor pool a high value to stay in, and ensured that the outdoor pool was not only seen as a sports facility, but also became the centre of leisure activities. As a result, the outdoor pool was almost always very busy, as can be seen in Photograph 1. The pool actually offered the opportunity to do active sport, and with a 50-metre pool, a 10-metre diving platform, and a spectator terrace that could accommodate around 2,500 people, the outdoor pool was also important for German swimming. In 1958, the German Swimming Championships took place there. Together, the three pools contained around 8,000 cubic meters of water. The sports and general swimming pools were filled with canal water via a pumping station that ran through a filter system, which meant the filling of the family pool with tap water. At all times it has been a real concern for the city council and administration to maintain and improve this facility. Even during the Second World War, the Grimberg pool was kept open almost to the end, and made accessible



**Photograph 1.** Stadt Archiv Gelsenkirchen, FS V-20878, Hans Rotterdam, 1953, *copy rights: ISG.*

to the population again in June 1946 after the war damage had been removed. Still, it was closed in 1983.

### **Times of hope and a society in transition**

When the Grimberg outdoor pool closed, the Ruhr area had already been undergoing a change in its industry for more than two decades. One was about the process called ‘Strukturwandel’ [‘Structural change’], which initially represented itself as deindustrialisation, which meant the closure of mines and steelworks as well as other industrial areas, such as textile production. As a result, many people lost their jobs, and cities were faced with the cost of structural unemployment. This,

in turn, meant that the cities of the Ruhr area went into a massive debt so that they could deal with the specific needs of their residents and so that the social infrastructure could be maintained. For the cities along the Rhine–Herne Canal, the closure of the Graf Bismarck colliery in Gelsenkirchen was a particular shock (Rudolf, 2014).

This mine was one of the most efficient ones in Europe and as such consistently produced more coal – and faster – than the previously closed mines. Since 1958, the competitiveness of German coal was in trouble and there was talk of “coal crises”. Politically, however, the main aim was to oppose this by means of lowering the price of production for investments in increasing efficiency. In particular, the Graf Bismarck colliery had been extensively modernised shortly before its closure. When it closed in 1966, 7,000 workers lost their jobs. The conservative state government reacted incomprehensibly and without a concept. The furious protests of the workers, who felt they had been abandoned, meant that the Social Democrats were able to take over the state government for the first time. They should shape politics continuously until the year 2000. Their concept was that the economy must be actively reformed. This included, among other things, the founding of mass universities in the Ruhr area as well as the establishment of new industries, such as the Opel car factory in Bochum.

However, these programmes did not prevent structural unemployment from developing in the Ruhr area, which, in turn, brought about further social problems. The industrial landscape of the Ruhr area changed in such a way that large areas were no longer used and were partially contaminated, and new industries settled in clusters, most of which are located in the southern cities of the Ruhr area. In particular, the cities on the Rhine–Herne Canal were largely decoupled from the new dynamism of re-industrialisation and the service economy. People who worked in the old coal and steel industry were mostly retired early or were long-term unemployed. For the cities, this meant that social costs were incurred that were

not compensated by the national social security funds or the federal government. From the 1980s onwards, a downward social spiral developed in which the de-industrialised cities had to take on more and more debt and at the same time were able to invest less and less. This, in turn, led to social problems becoming more acute and concentrated in some parts of the city.

During the 1960s and the 1970s, however, there was still great optimism and it was believed that structural change was a temporary phenomenon. The general belief in progress led to continued investments in social infrastructure. The building of the ‘Zentralbad’ (‘Central pool’) in Gelsenkirchen was an expression of those hopeful decades. The planning had begun in 1965 and the closure of the Graf Bismarck colliery one year later did not dissuade the initiators. The indoor pool was realised as planned and opened in 1971. It had the great advantage that swimming was also possible in the colder months, i.e. *de facto* most of the year. An indoor swimming pool was opened in the north of Gelsenkirchen in 1955, and another one was completed in 1962 in the Horst district. However, both pools are not easy to reach for large parts of the city and the modern central pool should also be used as a sports facility where swimming competitions could take place. Providing children with swimming lessons was an important motive for the construction of the central pool. Its geographical location was also intended to underline the central function of the inner city of Gelsenkirchen.

Despite the fact that the number of jobs in industry continued to be cut and deindustrialisation was shaping the region increasingly, local politicians did not allow themselves to be confused in their belief that investments must continue in the city’s social services. Another bath was planned at the end of the 1970s. With the ‘Sportparadies’ [‘Sports paradise’], a multifunctional pool has now been built near the Rhine–Herne Canal, which has both indoor and outdoor areas, and, therefore, offers swimming all year round. Additional leisure activities were built, such as bowling alleys or a sauna. The ‘sports paradise’

is located in the immediate vicinity of the sports facilities of the FC Schalke football club and the newly founded Berger Feld comprehensive school, which also stood for the social reform claim of social democracy. In 1984, the ‘Sportparadies’, which cost around 25 million DM at the time, was opened. The water areas in the bathing paradise are distributed over three pools as well as six pools in the covered area. The offer is complemented by a 10-metres-high diving platform in the outdoor pool area as well as a 58-metres-long slide with a separate catch basin in the indoor pool.

In addition, an ice rink was built, which is now also used as an event hall under the name ‘Emscher Lippe Halle’. Conceptually, therefore, the ‘Sportparadies’ is not a classic swimming pool, but, rather, an attempt at a modern leisure facility that should also offer families a place for all-day stays. The prices of the tickets are significantly higher than in the other baths. The indoor pool is designed as a wave pool that produces artificial waves every hour and is, in fact, not suitable for sporty swimming. The sports paradise is, therefore, an early example of the slowly developing ‘adventurous society’, in which swimming is replaced by the experience of water and in which leisure activities are in the foreground. Thus, it also represents the requirements and needs of a society in which work and integration through the work in society no longer functions the way it used to in the industrialised city. Offers such as the ‘Sportparadies’ were not intended to compensate for the loss of the world of work, but they offered the opportunity to temporarily escape from worries related to this.

### **A double return of the canal**

Today, thirty years later, the ‘sports paradise’ is to be demolished. The city council of Gelsenkirchen decided in November 2019 to dismantle this facility and the central pool, and rebuild it at the same location. In the 1980s, the social situation in the Ruhr area’s cities developed almost dramatically. Unemployment solidified at

a high level and the cities could no longer get out of the debt trap. The swimming pools were dependent on subsidies from the city. However, the city tried to enable poor families to continue visiting the baths with grants and, as a result, there was a lack of funds to renovate the swimming pools. The structural and visual condition, especially that of the central pool, could only be poorly improved. Its dilapidated condition became a symbol of the decline of the city, which has since lost massive numbers of inhabitants.

The poverty perpetuated, and in many parts of the city solidified over generations to such an extent that child poverty in Germany’s Gelsenkirchen is one of the greatest. In rankings of urban development, the city often takes one of the last places. Local politics refers to the successes that have been achieved in spite of the limited scope of action of the heavily indebted city. Nevertheless, the everyday situation in many old working-class neighbourhoods is difficult for many citizens, as private investments in apartments and buildings have also failed to materialise. Anyone who has money and wants to own their own apartment or house prefers to build a new house rather than invest in the existing residential buildings. As a result, a social geography has developed that has brought about a polarisation of social differences in the immediate vicinity.

The most haunting example is the newly built ‘Stölting Hafen’, which is a kind of marina on the Rhine–Herne Canal (Photograph 2). The Stölting company, the owner of the facility, advertises itself on its website as follows: “Your nautical oasis of wellbeing right on the Rhine–Herne Canal. On an area of more than 10,000m<sup>2</sup>, we offer you peace, quiet, relaxation and idyll in a state-of-the-art port facility. Maritime flair near you to relax, stroll, feast and relax.” One can anchor their boat there all year round and pay up to 2,000 euros a year for it, depending on its length. The port is now connected to a company that offers boat tours. The marina is structurally designed in such a way that one can sit on the edge of the harbour. The benches and other seatings invite one to linger,



**Photograph 2.** The Stölting Marina

*Source:* the Author's archive.

and in the eyes of many people from the city, it actually arises as a kind of maritime flair that is otherwise not to be found anywhere in the Ruhr area. The gastronomy – which consists of two restaurants, a bakery, and an ice cream parlour, and is priced in the middle range – is also important.

It can be said that the place has been well-received by various social groups, but mainly by the local middle class. The marina is connected to a newly built residential area that offers two-family detached houses. The houses are built in rows one behind another so that only the first row has a view of the marina. House prices are likely to rule out a social mix of residents, and the housing offer can only be accepted by the middle class. The houses are equipped with small gardens, making them particularly attractive to families. The resultant new district is geographically isolated. There are only two access roads, both of which connect to bypass roads. The district is not within walking distance. There is a public transport connection, but it should not be decisive for the accessibility. The marina, which is called 'Graf Bismarck' after the nearby former mine of the same name, is a motorist enclave and a social island. Beyond the bypass roads there are the districts of Bismarck and Schalke-Nord, which suffer enormously from unemployment and poverty. While the structural and social decline

continues there, the marina offers a way out for people who can afford it.

The social polarisation of the city has paradoxically led to the fact that the so-called junk real estate – i.e. houses in which nobody wants to live anymore because of the poor maintenance – have become popular for immigrants from Romania and Bulgaria for about ten years. These people often accept these poor living conditions, because they only have a temporary job. Their work is so badly paid and hard that no one else wants to do it. One can speak of structural exploitation, which also means that the people from Southeastern Europe pay far too high rents for the poor accommodation. The residence of these migrant workers has led to a great deal of strife in the neighbourhoods in question, which, in turn, has further burdened the already disadvantaged districts and has led to further stigmatisation of these neighbourhoods.

Bismarck, once named after the colliery, is now the place where, on the one hand, a middle-class enclave has emerged and, on the other, a poor area has established itself in which the cultural integration of migrants has to be achieved. Since 2015, Gelsenkirchen has also been involved in accepting refugees, mainly from Syria. After decades of shrinking, the Ruhr area, which has a long history of integration and also a lot of experience with the reception of migrants, has to deal again with the task of creating the social infrastructure for the integration tasks through the Romanians and the refugees. After schools had been closed and downsized in many places, a new construction is now being pushed. The 'sports paradise' and other facilities are still available for social leisure activities. It is to be expected that the new building will also be constructed with the sensitivity to accessibility to all people. Even so, even the smallest entry fee is likely to be hefty for many new immigrants. If one drives to the Rhine–Herne Canal today, they will again see many people jumping into the waterway, which is now hardly used any more. It is mostly migrants and refugees who enjoy this free refreshment. At the edge of the canal, one can have a picnic with





**Photograph 3.** Reusing the canal

Source: the Author's archive.

friends or families, and some people unpack their inflatable boats (Photograph 3).

## Discussion

The Rhine–Herne Canal shows that the social significance of water has changed since industrialisation. Clean water as a vital source was of primary importance in urban planning during the development of the Ruhr area, and yet the construction of the canal and the expansion of the industrial landscape were both formative. The largely socially homogeneous – i.e. poor – residents appropriated this canal themselves, which gave them a feeling of togetherness and freedom. Thus, the canal became part of a spatial orientation and it represented a self-image of an egalitarian working-class culture. Despite the attempts to modernise cities in a reform-oriented and socially democratic manner, this has largely been lost through de-industrialisation. This is easy to understand with regard to the importance of water. The attempts to create spaces through the ‘Zentralbad’ and the ‘Sportparadies’, in which places are provided for an inclusive urban society, became too expensive in the long run. In effect, the baths mutated into places that were also affected by stigma and decay. With the decline of the reform-oriented spa culture, the Rhine–Herne Canal was rediscovered.

This time, however, people appropriated the place in a socially selective manner. While the middle class have found an island place to live and tend to spend their leisure time in the Stölting Marina, migrant children in particular return to the canal to jump into the refreshing water in summer for free. The fragmentation of the city continues in its joy of water, and difficult questions of social justice are thus addressed (cf. Finewood, 2015). In a city with limited financial resources, the question arises as to for which place – and thus also for which social group – the communal finances are legitimately used. Will the strong interests prevail over the weaker ones in the allocation of funds? In addition, a question arises as to whether the joy of water can again be used to set up a room that brings different social groups back into contact, at least for the time of a joint visit to the pool. Certainly, one cannot expect too much from the new construction of the baths in Gelsenkirchen in this respect, but the enthusiasm for water of all social groups in the city offers starting points for an integrative perspective.

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