Making Tracks: Lisa Pettibone

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In the “Making Tracks” series, RCC fellows and alumni present their experiences in environmental humanities, retracing the paths that led them to the Rachel Carson Center. For more information, please click **here**.

By **Lisa Pettibone**

I have had to justify my academic path to many people in numerous contexts on two continents. Moving from a BFA in film production to work in the US Senate and the German Bundestag seems to clash about as much as my MPA (like an MBA where you get paid less in the end) and year of long-distance hiking. The culmination of these experiences—a doctorate in political science—seems a fair synthesis, but just as far from environmental humanities. I’m still not sure how easily the moniker sits with me, but I’m honored to accept it from others.

I’ve wanted to make the world a better place my whole life and have seen my role as telling stories. My doctoral dissertation, published as *Governing Urban Sustainability: Cities in the USA and Germany* by Ashgate in 2015, examined what I considered the silver lining in the very bleak world of climate and sustainability policy: the work happening in cities in the United States and Germany. I picked six cities considered leaders by many, and hoped to share the inspiring story of how these places like Portland and Heidelberg, Seattle and Hamburg, New York and Berlin represent the vanguard of a sustainable future. All six had used strategic plans and sustainability indicators sets to better link policy to sustainability goals.

Needless to say, my findings were depressing. I was blessed to meet with dedicated activists and administrators in all six cities, such as volunteers at the **Zukunftsrat** (Future Council) in Hamburg and analysts at **Sightline Institute**, Seattle’s sustainability “think-and-do tank.” They showed me how important it is to translate sustainability into the local political. The Zukunftsrat’s sustainability indicators reports hold politicians accountable for environmental outcomes; Sightline’s research emphasizes the connections between

transportation, housing codes, and international energy markets and sustainability. Both provide real ways for citizens to get involved and advocate for concrete policy suggestions. But the deeper story they shared was not one of easy change through a broad-based movement, but of struggle against unseen forces. The villain in most cases was not conservative government or an apathetic public, but a local political class that equated sustainability with growth, particularly of rich, well-educated migrants (both from within the country and abroad). The very tools that urban planning and political science scholars praise as advancing sustainability policy were used to advance an agenda that solidified the status quo and made livable neighborhoods a priority for the city's wealthiest residents. In other words, it seemed that there were two definitions of sustainability being used in cities: one advanced by growth-oriented elites, and the other by proponents of equity.

The word I came away with that seemed to best describe this phenomenon is an ugly one to political scientists: ideology. I saw that a coherent set of values seemed to drive the political narrative, values not only inconsistent with the imperative of true sustainability, but sometimes in direct opposition. How did the drive for new residents fit with sustainability's uneasiness with growth? How did politicians' interest in poaching "good" migrants from rival cities match calls for whole-system health or social equity? In short, how was fighting other cities for the strongest tax base in any way sustainable? Change appeared to happen when advocates with different views talked to each other, expanding their views and making them more sensitive to the other's concerns. I decided to focus on building that conversation, by joining a project on citizen science at the **Museum für Naturkunde** in Berlin. There, I sought to improve dialogue between citizens and scientists (themselves citizens as well!) working together in the pursuit of scientific knowledge.

But the questions I failed to answer in my earlier research still interested me. And I couldn't help but wonder: What are the visions and values behind citizen science? How can values—ideologies—change our behavior on a larger scale? This is what brought me to history. Because in order to understand how ideology drives politics—and how it can be changed—I needed to look at the past. History has countless rich examples of ideological change; by examining these, I could learn how to spur similar change toward sustainability today.

Of course, it's obvious to historians that learning from the past can help us create a better future. This is why I suspect many academics choose history (that, and the ability

to share their research through stories). So I still feel a bit nervous even as I am honored to join their ranks. My time here so far has given me a new perspective on the puzzle of sustainability and politics. I hope all the creative writing and screenwriting classes I took in college can help me tell that story in a way that is compelling to those beyond my discipline, and outside academia. That my time working in politics will help me translate what I've learned into language compelling to politicians and administrators.

And if you're wondering, my two long-distance hikes have been the most valuable experience I've had thus far. They grounded me, made me humble, and showed me the full glory of the natural world it is so critical we protect.