"Policey"* and Environment as a Form of "Social Discipline" in Early Modern Hamburg

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The 16th century marked the beginning of Hamburg's heyday both as a commercial centre and as a bastion of political and religious tolerance. Many people were attracted by the relative prosperity and the stable political climate of the German town. Among these were numerous foreign traders and craftsmen. They had suffered religious or political persecution in their native countries following the 30-Year War and thus sought refuge in Hamburg. The hanseatic town's reputation as a trade centre was enhanced both by its newly gained trading connections and by the introduction of the migrants' modern commercial practices. Additionally, Hamburg also proved attractive to the less wealthy and powerful. Persistent political and economic crises had compelled many of these people to abandon their livelihoods in the country and to seek a new life in the town.

Simultaneously, the resultant growth of the population — at about 1560 some 25 000 people lived in Hamburg, by 1600 there were around 40 000 — led to a high population density. Since Hamburg had no real hinterland of its own and a city-centre that was traversed by waterways, the potential for expansion was severely restricted.

The resulting town-planning problems increased with the transition from the late Middle Ages to the Renaissance when, with the incipient breakdown of the feudal agrarian society and the beginnings of early capitalism, urban commercial production overhauled agricultural output. This led to radical changes in the status quo and, in particular, the creation of a more dynamic social infrastructure. Previously powerful institutions, e.g., the various craft and industrial corporations, suffered a considerable loss of influence.

Furthermore, towns, as the social form furthest removed from nature, became arenas for pollution and environmental damage. Thus the above social, economic, and demographic changes led directly to an aggravation of Hamburg's ecological problems.

In particular the level of hygiene deteriorated proportionally to the increases in urban development and population density. Every additional household within the city walls increased the demand for water and the number of pigs

*The concept of "Policey" refers to a state of, or the creation of, 'good or harmonious order' in society. It is a reflection of the Germanic concern for pattern and regularity.
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roaming free in the town, and thus the amount of dung and refuse lying about in the streets. Furthermore, private buildings often both infringed upon public space and constricted the thoroughfares, resulting in an increasing obstruction of traffic and the enhanced risk of fire spreading throughout the town. There was also intensive industrial exploitation of the Alster (a large, artificial lake in Hamburg) and its canals, notably by numerous mills, tanneries and dye-works. These contributed substantially to the pollution of Hamburg’s water.

These problems were identified at the time. Both the first attempts at early modern town-planning and the utopian perspectives of the 16th and 17th centuries show consistent developments in the fields of both preventative and remedial urban hygiene. The concern of town-planners for hygiene, for example. in respect of water, air and refuse, also offers us insights into their general thinking about matters like water-supply and waste-disposal. Against a background of advancing urbanization, the awareness of the link between health on the one hand and the cleanliness of the water and air on the other led the Hamburg district council to pass a large number of conservational decrees. Private exploitation and influence on the public environment was thus curtailed and regulated.

This was achieved through the issue of decrees which were called *Burspraken* and later *Mandate*. Through legislation, the authorities used the only means available to impose their political will on the everyday lives of the citizens of Hamburg. For this reason the legislation was generally easy to understand, detailed, of an explanatory nature, and directly relevant to specific problems. At least twice a year, at the beginning and end of the winter break in ship-traffic both new and existing decrees were proclaimed in public.

It is this frequent repetition of *Burspraken* and *Mandate* which enables the modern reader to trace the development of Hamburg’s environmental politics. The decrees, which were issued over a period of centuries, show that certain problems like pollution of the streets and water could not be dealt with effectively. But it is not just the content of these regulations but also their language and quasi-clamouring tone which bear witness to the nature of the situation. Often they consist of set phrases which do little more than emphasize the seriousness of a problem through the medium of warnings, demands or punishments. Furthermore, the importance attached to environmental problems can be inferred from the severity of the penalties that were threatened. In some cases rewards were even offered for reports of especially severe cases of pollution.

Here are two illustrative decrees of the period. In a *Bursprake* of 1457 we read: “As it has had to do every year, the Council is compelled to proclaim and decree that nobody shall throw, or cause to throw, refuse into the Elbe or the Fleete (Hamburg’s canals). The Council will make sure that this decree is observed. Whoever fails to comply will be fined three silver marks. Should he not be able to pay this, he will have to live on bread and water in prison for four weeks.”

And in 1567 the Council proclaimed the following edict: “Everyone shall sweep their rubbish and when the cart comes shall help the driver to load it on.”