

The Startbahn. The Conflict Surrounding the Expansion of Frankfurt Airport 1962 - 1987

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For the two decades leading up to 1987, the extension of Frankfurt Airport through the construction of a new takeoff runway (*Startbahn 18 West*) was accompanied by vivid protests of environmentalists and local residents. The study aims to explain why this particular project galvanized a protest movement of considerable size and duration. The approach will be object-centered, following the ‘material turn’ in science and technology studies. What properties of the runway made it the target of relentless protest, occasionally resulting in violence, and what properties made it so attractive for planners and engineers who, unmoved by its unpopularity, aimed to see it through?

The runway was opposed due to its extensive noise pollution and the fact that it would remove a forest that locals used for recreation. This could be dismissed as a mere ‘not in my backyard’ reaction of limited scope, but the movement expanded beyond the boundaries of regional concerns. It should be noted, additionally, that the runway did not represent the introduction of a new technology, while the risk of a major accident that would affect an entire population seemed negligible. Aviation was also not a technology that could be ‘phased out,’ like nuclear energy and the burning of coal. The question thus is: what was at stake for both supporters and protesters?

The hypothesis of this work is that the runway was the concrete outgrowth of a technocratic regime allegedly lacking democratic legitimacy. It was thus both a tangible disturbance of suburban living and a symbol of a tenacious elite that moved along with plans that promised enhanced aeromobility and economic growth. The aim is to follow the runway’s material qualities through several layers of discourse. It touched upon environmental, medical, economic, political, and cultural concerns. Installations like aviation infrastructures have obtained a cultural meaning and are thus socio-technological systems that challenge the distinction between knowledge-based expert regimes and laypeople, especially as they are caught in an entanglement of expertise and counter-expertise. The runway stands for two kinds of mobilizations, one within a system of globalized connections, and another within a social movement that mobilized public protest and alternative forms of knowledge to reach their objectives.