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## Editorial: Contentious urban politics and the struggle for housing

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### 1. Introduction

The struggle for housing, especially by less affluent groups which are, depending on the perspective, addressed as the “excluded”, “working class”, “oppressed”, “alienated” or “insecure” (Marcuse 2012: 31f.), and the probably most spectacular form of protest and disobedience – squatting – pave the recent history of contentious politics.

In the long history of worldwide squatting and struggles for adequate housing, the question of the right to housing together with the right to the city (in the sense of a right to live in a central urban location and not only in social housing estates in peripheral areas of big metropolises) arose all over the world. Since 2011, the *indignados* movement in Spain, together with the wave of protests in Northern Africa, Turkey, Greece, Hong Kong, Thailand, Brazil, Argentina and many other countries, for very different reasons, but always appropriating central urban space, show how contentious politics grew and gained social and political weight in the last ten years. These new forms of protest and social movements also advanced research on resistance and disobedience from a human geography point of view, conceptualizing spatialities in the context of contentious politics (e.g. Leitner et al. 2008 and Nicholls et al. 2013). Behind this background of a worldwide spread and acceleration of disobedience, protests and the formation of new social movements in urban contexts, this special issue of DIE ERDE seeks to enrich the debate on housing for less affluent people under the conditions of predominantly market-driven housing policies on the

one hand and resistant urban politics on the other hand from a human geography perspective.

### 2. Neoliberal urbanism and contentious urban politics

In a nutshell, neoliberal urbanism may be described as a growth-oriented concept of urban development by means of liberalization, deregulation and privatization of public goods and space and the outsourcing of public services (cf. Peck and Tickell 2002, Brenner and Theodore 2005). Pursued rigorously and efficiently, neoliberal urban politics leads to a selling-out of public steering possibilities, reduces participatory options, especially those of the civil society, raises serious questions about democratic legitimacy, and usually increases social polarization. This concept – already conceptualized by Logan and Molotch under the designation of a growth machine (Logan and Molotch 1987) – operates around the world in varying manners and to different extents. Despite similar experiences with urban neoliberalism, it must not be considered as a fixed theoretical approach and a consensually and equally applied urban development strategy. Rather should neoliberal urbanism be regarded as a process-related concept, and research on it should take this into account (Harvey 2005, Peck 2010).

Neoliberal urbanism is at the same time characterized by processes of up-scaling – mega-projects, mega-events, festivalization etc. as key strategic concepts of urban policy (e.g. Steinbrink 2013) – and down-scaling tendencies: the transfer of public responsibilities to the local civil society or by creating business improvement districts

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on the street level. This is far apart from a paradox since both processes, actively pursued, strengthen, especially taken together, private actors at all levels of urban decision-making. Thus, capital-driven urban development can be interpreted as a form of switching capital within the contexts of economic, political and societal frames to different, but reciprocally linked, levels of space and time. This relational and contextual perspective on the political helps to reveal (discursively) hidden powerful actors and networks, which substantially contribute to the perpetual reproduction of neoliberal urbanism. *Peck, Brenner and Theodore (2010)* widened the debate on neoliberalism after having deconstructed the politics, strategies and discourses of neoliberal protagonists during more than a decade, e.g. in *Peck's* state-of-the-art compendium (*Peck 2010*; see also: *Harvey 2005*). *Peck et al. (2010)* identified a post-neoliberalism, not without dismantling this long-expected process as only one facet of post- and neoliberal developments in (urban) political terms.

Post-politics and consensus-seeking policies have been considered as central concepts for characterizing urban development processes under the neoliberal paradigm. We have observed a de-politicization in the sense of an exclusion of major parts of urban society from decision-making processes. Post-politics as critical theory and critical urban research understand it means a reduction and a widening-up of the political field at the same time (*Swyngedouw 2009*). More actors participate, especially those of the market and some of non-governmental organizations, but less subjects are open to negotiation. The 'political' is treated as already-reached consensus, as given and no longer necessary to be discussed. Only the 'how', e.g. how to develop a certain project in detail, may be discussed. Current literature questions this agreement on the post-political (e.g. *Beveridge et al. 2014, Davidson and Iveson 2015, Hölzl 2015: 44ff.*), since a number of empirical research revealed new political movements (and moments) that state a sort of renaissance of the political in public debates. The papers of this special issue largely refer to the concept of contentious politics which is characterized as "[...] concerted, counterhegemonic social and political action, in which differently positioned participants come together to challenge dominant systems of authority, in order to promote and enact alternative imaginaries" (*Leitner et al. 2008: 157*) as well as to the concept of multiple spatialities (*Leitner et al. 2008: 159ff.*).

### 3. The contributions of this special issue

*Michael Janoschka's* conceptual proposal on politics, citizenship and disobedience in the so-called city of crisis

interrelates current geographical debates on crisis urbanism to political science concepts of citizenship and disobedience. Taking the housing struggles in Spain, and particularly the indignados movements in Madrid since 2011, as an example, the paper conceptualizes the role of 'political moments' in the understanding of *Rancière* for space-related acts of citizenship. Actors, acts, sites and scales together frame and promote new democratic processes in (urban) space. Resistance and disobedience towards dominant discourses, political decisions and administrative acts that follow the neoliberal urban development paradigm disrupt hegemonic consensus-oriented policies and orders creating political space for alternative projects and, in general, modified police orders.

*Sònia Vives Miró, Jesús González Pérez and Onofre Rullan* trace an empirically based way of interpreting acts of home dispossession in Majorca in the light of critical urban theory. By means of statistical comparison they analyze the uneven geography of evictions in the city of Palma. Foreclosures and evictions tend to be the consequence of financial investments in times of financialization. This goes in line with studies on evictions and foreclosures in other parts of Spain, which reveal the central role of the Spanish economic policy of promoting largely the expansion of credits for home purchases in order to support economic growth.

The multi-scalar effects of local protest and disobedience is in the centre of the paper by *Rubén Lois González and María José Piñeira Mantiñán*. They widen the spatial analysis of neighbourhood movements from Madrid and Palma de Majorca to the whole country. Their proposal is to classify urban social movements according to their motives and demands, and to evaluate their impacts on the appropriation of urban space as well as on local and national politics. As a consequence of the economic crisis in general and the evictions in particular, Spanish society has changed profoundly and a re-politization can be observed at all levels. The political moment seems to have been used to reformulate political requirements.

*Yunpeng Zhang's* paper about squatting and resistance to bulldozer urbanism in China is based on an in-depth ethnographic case study of a family evicted in Shanghai by the World Expo 2010 that subsequently occupied a resettlement apartment. *Zhang* argues that squatting is not only a radical but also an effective strategy to fight urban transformation processes in contemporary China that follow (globally) common capital accumulation strategies, here in terms of private homeownership building. The author describes the frames of local cul-

ture together with universe moral standards on which the popular sympathy he observes for this case of individual 'contentious politics' falls back.

*Marit Rosol* analyses the struggle for housing in Vancouver in the light of urban renaissance discourses and strategies and concepts of social mixing and, finally, gentrification. The densification strategy of the City of Vancouver in a public housing complex seems to be an emblematic example for state-led gentrification. Social mixing deconstructs itself as rhetoric in order to justify profit-seeking policies of a public housing agency. The example supports the observations of other scholars (see *Bridge et al.* 2012) who criticize social mix-policies as often disguised revaluation of urban space and upgrading lower-class areas for middle-class clients. Interestingly, social mix is always regarded as a good concept for social housing estates and never for more affluent neighborhoods, which necessarily leads to a valorization of land and a displacement of the less affluent.

The relationship between processes of de-politicization and (liberal) toleration may be interpreted as opposite concepts, but *Michael Helten*, in his contribution on heterotopia and cultural activism, studies how and with which consequences a – small – area of Hamburg's inner city has been delivered to a group of artists and other "creative" people as an intermediate use – under the conditions of a general paradigm of neoliberal growth strategies and political discourses in the city. *Helten* interprets the Gängeviertel processes in the light of *Foucault's* heterotopia concept and shows how social practices simultaneously operate in- and outside of the neoliberal logics. Normalization occurs in the form of perpetual creative-city discourses promoted by the City of Hamburg and heterotopia in terms of a bundle of alternative social practices and orderings during the resistant process of place-making.

*Caterina Gomes de Matos*, in her contribution on the plurality of knowledge production in contentious politics, addresses a special form of knowledge production that is interwoven into the processes of social activism and scientific production as well as of the engagement of scientists as actors of contentious politics. The analysis, first and foremost, proves how both forms of knowledge mutually influence each other. At the same time, the contribution widens the perspective of geographical research on social movements and contentious urban politics by questioning the role of scientists as both members of protest movements and contributors of the co-production of movement and scientific knowledges.

The opinion paper by *Samuel Mössner* finally discusses whether the urban politics of this city, generally praised as explicitly sustainable, is not rather a classical neoliberal approach in the sense of prioritizing housing demands of the better-off in form of costly solar neighbourhoods. This policy clearly disadvantages and even dispossesses other social groups: housing for the affluent middle class as a result of a sustainability discourse that has 'consensualized' contentious politics.

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