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Workshop Report

First Workshop of the Working Group *Stadt/Raum* of the Institute for Social Movement Studies: What is the “Urban” in Urban Social Movements?

In February 2016, more than 20 members of the *Arbeitskreis Stadt/Raum*¹ (working group “urbanity and space”) of the *Institut für Protest und Bewegungsforschung* (Institute for Social Movement Studies) met at Goethe-University Frankfurt to discuss the question “What is the ‘Urban’ in Urban Social Movements.” What exactly makes them *urban*? What are the specificities of urban social movements? What distinguishes them from, for example, environmentalist, feminist or workers’ movements? Discussions were based on presentations of how researchers themselves deal with these questions in their individual projects. Additionally, the participants discussed some “classic” texts of the international theoretical debate in smaller groups as well as in the plenary assembly.

The Frankfurt meeting was the first interdisciplinary workshop of *Arbeitskreis Stadt/Raum* that had constituted itself at the Institute for Social Movement Studies’ networking conference in Berlin in September 2015. Sebastian Schipper and Daniel Mullis from the Institute for Human Geography of Goethe-University Frankfurt, together with Raffael Beier from the Institute of Development Research and Development Policy of Ruhr Universität Bochum, convened the one-and-a-half-day workshop. Before summarising the workshop discussions, this report provides some background on the recently founded network *Arbeitskreis Stadt/Raum*.

1 For more up-to-date information on the activities of the *AK Stadt/Raum*, please have a look at the following website: <https://protestinstitut.wordpress.com/uber-das-institut/arbeitskreise/ak-stadtraum/> (last accessed 11 January 2017).

A Researchers' Network on Urban and Spatial Aspects of Social Movements

The Institute for Social Movement Studies is a research hub that connects German-speaking social movement scholars from various European institutions ranging from France to Poland. In 2015, it initiated a process of change that aimed at consolidating and improving the activities of the institute to make them more visible and permanent. One central aspect was the idea to form different working groups dealing with specific topics of social movement research. The directory board of the Institute for Social Movement Studies organised the kick-off conference *Bridging and Bonding* in Berlin in September 2015. The very well attended conference marked the starting point for more than ten new and revived thematic working groups. Among them, Margit Mayer and David Scheller jointly initiated the formation of a working group concerning urban and spatial aspects of social movement research: the *Arbeitskreis Stadt/Raum*, bringing together a great variety of PhD and postdoc research projects, as well urbanists interested in the topics of conflict and contestation within the urban realm, from Germany and beyond.

In the wake of the financial crisis of 2008 and the ensuing (re-)politicisation of public space in the Arab Spring and the occupy and indignado movements in many cities around the globe, urban space has experienced a renaissance in social movement studies. Inspired by these events, international urban scholarship, under the influence of authors such as David Harvey and Peter Marcuse, revived and developed Henri Lefèbvre's *right to the city*, which has now become a fashionable motto in critical thought about the city and its implications. Similarly, in the German context, although the topic has been part of academic debates ever since the squatter movements of the late 1960s, housing movements in Berlin as well as blockupy Frankfurt, brought urban aspects of social movements to the fore once again. Not surprisingly, many young scholars and especially activist-scholars have zeroed in on these developments. The founding of the network *Arbeitskreis Stadt/Raum* aims to bring together the wide range of interdisciplinary German-speaking scholars whose research reflects this renewed interest in the role of spatial and urban elements in and for social movements, and thus to create opportunities for exchange, coordination and synergy.

Given that research on the manifold forms of resistance and contestation around urban developments such as gentrification, shortage of affordable housing, occupation of urban space, demolition in shrinking cities, and alternative modes of urban production is carried on in different disciplines and from a variety of different perspectives, the field has been quite fragmented and scattered. Thus, a networking platform such as the *Arbeitskreis Stadt/Raum* can play an extremely useful role. Not only can *Arbeitskreis Stadt/Raum* facilitate the exchange between urban geographers, political scientists, social scientists and ethnographers (associated with very different institutions), but it can also support interdisciplinary research, which is so crucial for an adequate understanding of

the complexities driving the various forms of urban resistance. The interdisciplinary and non-hierarchical structures within *Arbeitskreis Stadt/Raum* encourage the development and spread of innovative ideas and perspectives, thereby also diminishing disciplinary bias.

Besides providing a platform to discuss individual research and to facilitate cooperation and exchange between members, the working group also provides expertise to the Institute for Social Movement Studies and it organises workshops on specific thematic questions. As its members are based in institutions from Marseille to Linz, Hamburg or Duisburg, the main communication channel used to facilitate exchange is a mailing list. The organisation of thematic workshops, where members present their doctoral and other research projects, allows for face-to-face interaction and exchange. Where a critical number of members concentrate locally such as in Berlin, a regular “jour fixe” has been established to discuss, rather informally, both local events of political or urban significance, and individuals’ ongoing projects. As of October 2016, Jenny Künkel, Weimar, and Raffael Beier, Bochum, act as moderators for the working group and function as contact persons.

Workshop: What is the “Urban” in Urban Social Movements?

The Frankfurt workshop was the first event of *Arbeitskreis Stadt/Raum* after its constitutive meeting in Berlin and brought together scholars from various cities such as Marseille, Salzburg, Hamburg, Berlin, Frankfurt and Leipzig. Members had suggested texts relevant to the overall question of the workshop. Its organisers selected four of them: an early text by the (then Marxist) sociologist Manuel Castells;² an article advocating a relational perspective on social movements;³ one about planetary urbanisation and social movements;⁴ as well as Margit Mayer’s literature review summarising central disciplinary perspectives about urban social movements.⁵

- 2 Manuel Castells: *Kampf in den Städten: Gesellschaftliche Widersprüche und politische Macht*, (Analysen zum Planen und Bauen vol. 6), Berlin 1975, ch. 1, 6.
- 3 Justus Uitermark/Walter J. Nicholls/Maarten Loopmans: *Cities and Social Movements: Theorizing Beyond the Right to the City*, in: *Environment and Planning A* 44:11 (2012), pp. 2546–2554.
- 4 Andy Merrifield: *The Urban Question under Planetary Urbanization*, in: *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37:3 (2013), pp. 909–922.
- 5 Margit Mayer: *Soziale Bewegungen in Städten—städtische soziale Bewegungen*, in: Norbert Gestring/Renate Ruhne/Jan Wehrheim (eds.): *Stadt und soziale Bewegungen*, Wiesbaden 2014, pp. 25–42.

It was also Margit Mayer who introduced the workshop's theoretical debate by means of a brief input in order to structure some of the perspectives currently dominating the debate over the role of the city in social movements. She distinguished between authors who claim a central role for the city in transformative movements,⁶ authors who recognise the generative power which cities hold for social movements,⁷ and authors who question whether the city is a suitable point of reference in social movement research.⁸ In the following discussion about Margit Mayer's introduction as well as the texts, several participants pointed out that influential and transformative movements have emerged in rural areas as well, raising the question of the lack of appropriate definitions of the *urban*. Researchers obviously need to be careful when using the term *urban social movement*, unless they specify what kind of definition of *urban* they use. Also, it became clear that distinguishing between urban aspects affecting the *emergence* of social movements in cities (generative function of the city) and city-related *foci* of urban social movements (for example neoliberal production of space) would be helpful.

Five members of *Arbeitskreis Stadt/Raum* used the opportunity to present their research projects, highlighting how they have dealt with the question of the *urban* in urban social movements. Rich and constructive feedback on the presentations allowed for productive discussions about very heterogeneous manifestations of urban movements. By comparing anti-austerity protests in Athens with blockupy Frankfurt, Daniel Mullis, Goethe-University Frankfurt, argued that the dichotomy of urban/non-urban is not appropriate for the definition of social movements. Instead, he emphasises spatial and political practices, based on Henri Lefèbvre's understanding of space and new political philosophies. Madlen Pilz, Humboldt University Berlin, took a more ethnographic perspective on urban resistance in Tbilisi, Georgia. She showed that daily urban practices as well as individual's memories and identities attributed to the city remarkably shaped the appropriation of urban space during anti-government protests in 2009.

Raffael Beier, Ruhr-Universität Bochum, focused on the Arab uprisings that started in 2011. In order to answer the question whether the city merely served as a stage or also constituted the focus of the uprisings he suggests analysing post-2011 urban policies. As urban policies have referred to the power of public space and the participation of marginalised groups in the protests, this could support the argument that the city was more than just the passive scenery of the Arab uprisings. Peter Bescherer, University of Tübingen, presented first findings of an interdisciplinary research project about the fair

6 For example, David Harvey: *Rebel Cities: from the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, London 2012.

7 For example, Justus Uitermark/Walter J. Nicholls/Maarten Loopmans: *Cities and Social Movements: Theorizing Beyond the Right to the City*.

8 The debate about planetary urbanisation is a good example (see Andy Merrifield: *The Urban Question under Planetary Urbanization*).

distribution of urban security, funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research.⁹ Through an analysis of institutional initiatives as well as movements around urban security in Wuppertal and Stuttgart, he showed that very different actors share relatively similar concepts of “informal social control,” despite divergent perspectives on causes and actions. In the workshop’s last presentation David Scheller, Justus-Liebig-University Gießen, drew conclusions from a comparison of housing protests in New York and Berlin, starting in 2012. He argued that urban social movements represent “political moments” in times of post-democratic urban neoliberalism, because they imagine possible urbanities while practicing alternative and radical ways of democracy.

The workshop ended with an outlook on future activities of *Arbeitskreis Stadt/Raum*. The participants agreed to organise the next workshop that took place in Berlin on 7–8 October 2016. It addressed the ethics of urban movement research and particularly focus on researchers’ relationship to the movements which they examine. What is the researcher’s role beyond academia? What are the political implications of academic research on social movements? Moreover, the *Arbeitskreis Stadt/Raum* organises a panel on “Cross-Movement Convergences—The Urban as Opportunity or Limitation?” at the upcoming Cross Movement Mobilizations Conference that will take place in Bochum on 5–7 April 2017. A new *Arbeitskreis* workshop is scheduled for the end of July 2017.

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9 Peter Bescherer/Rita Haverkamp/Tim Lukas: Das Recht auf Stadt zwischen kommunaler Sparpolitik und privaten Investitionen: Eine Fallstudie zu Konflikten um urbane Sicherheit, in: *Kritische Justiz* 49:1 (2016), pp. 72–85.