Whose city? From Ray Pahl’s critique of the Keynesian city to the contestations around neoliberal urbanism

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Abstract
It is instructive to look at Pahl’s Whose City? from today’s perspective, though urban development and governance, in fact the very definition of the urban, have fundamentally transformed over these last 50 years. Comparing and contrasting the meaning of Whose City? then and now allows for a critical reflection of the changes neoliberal restructuring has wrought on urban landscapes and various stakeholders struggling over (the definition of and access to) the city. Such comparison helps to shed light on the (changing) role of urban sociology and urban theory in these transformation processes in general and on the ways in which critical urbanism has changed in response to these processes in particular.

Keywords
Keynesian city, neoliberal city, urban governance, urban movements, urban sociology, critical urbanism, right to the city

Looking, from today’s vantage point, at Ray Pahl’s essays from the late 1960s published in Whose City? (in 1970), both similarities and differences jump out in the contestations over who cities are supposed to be for, who is running them and in whose interests.1 Recent years have seen big protests, in cities around the world under the banner ‘The City Belongs to All!’ over developments such as downtown upgrading, rising rents, displacement, evictions, and the privatization processes underlying all of these. Across Europe, the same question is being asked with increasing intensity: Berliners demand to know ‘Whose city is Berlin?’,2 thousands of Belgrade citizens have repeatedly taken to the streets under the slogan ‘Belgrade is our city!’3 demonstrations in Hamburg insist that ‘The city belongs to all!’ – but all too frequently such demands are violently rejected...
by police forces protecting the interests of real estate owners, developers and gentrifiers. Such contemporary contestations show that the question Pahl raised almost 50 years ago, in the context of Fordist Britain, is still – or again – highly relevant, but the urban situation, the problems, and the answers look rather different than in the 1960s world of Anglo Fordism.

When Pahl raised the question ‘whose city?’ he was interested in finding out how the owners – the capitalists and managers – of the city kept reproducing this ownership, kept appropriating rents and profits from the city: through what mechanisms and methods did they make it their city? He identified the various ‘urban managers’ who, employed by state authorities and local municipalities, got to allocate the distribution of public goods and services, and the ways in which they did this. Thus Pahl could show how this ‘urban managerialism’ produced territorial inequalities and social exclusions, which was a breakthrough for critical urban sociology at the time. When today’s urban movements raise the question ‘whose city?’, they don’t inquire into the ways and means with which the obvious owners reproduce their ownership, but they demand – in challenging this appropriation – that the city should belong to those who inhabit it. Wherever this slogan is raised today, it expresses not only a growing, shared sense of exclusion from decision-making about and access to the city, but also scandalizes the dispossession urban residents experience: while they realize in more and more urbanized regions around the world that it is they who produce the city, they experience being dispossessed of their creation by powerful alliances of finance capital, global developers, corporate landlords, property speculators and a local state more often in service to these global players than to the local population.

Why would it be instructive to look at Pahl’s Whose City? when urban development and governance, in fact the very definition of the urban, have fundamentally transformed over these last 50 years? This article argues that comparing and contrasting the meaning of Whose City? then and now allows for a critical reflection of the changes neoliberal restructuring has wrought on urban landscapes and various stakeholders struggling over (the definition of and access to) the city. Such comparison helps shed light on the (changing) role of urban sociology and urban theory in these transformation processes in general and on the ways in which critical urbanism has changed in response to these processes in particular. Contemporary analysis of the question who the city belongs to has come to see urban governance in terms of an interactive field made up of institutional actors as well as residents’ mobilizations. Therefore, and not only because the contemporary appropriation of the slogan ‘Whose City?’ by urban movements encourages us to include them in the analysis, it seems productive to focus not only on city managers and their bosses, but also on their challengers. Finally, the article thereby illustrates the usefulness of a reflexive approach that situates knowledge – whether Pahl’s of urban managerialism or contemporary theorizing in critical urban studies – in the (changing) historical conjunctures of their emergence and their obsolescence.

**Urban theories and contestations in Pahl’s 1960s**

When Pahl originally explored how it is that the city is not the residents’ but the capitalists’ city, his answer was very much shaped by the specific historical moment: high
Fordism and its incipient erosion. It was equally shaped by the orientation and assumptions of the then prevailing urban sociology – which Pahl simultaneously sought to challenge. While his analysis of the Keynesian city, with its emphasis on bureaucrats, planners and their city bosses as responsible for the (mal)distribution of local resources, captured the logic of urban managerialism, his later call to shift our focus to the rich, ‘[t]he glamorous wealth creators in finance, IT, the media and so forth … whose galloping incomes and bonuses inflate property prices and services’ (2001: 881–882) begins to point at the decision-makers behind the mid-level managers, and also in the direction of a critique of the neoliberalizing city. While thus tracing the changing ‘owners’ of the city, from the Keynesian to the neoliberal era, Pahl remained, in and for both eras, the sociologist who would reveal the real power-holders and decision-makers. He did not, however, include in his analysis the challengers who use the question ‘Whose City?’ as a battle cry for all people’s, not just rich people’s, access to and shaping rights to the city.

Pahl was part of a generation of radical urban scholars who were disenchanted with the urban sociology hegemonic at the time, dominated as it was by functionalism and the Chicago School themes of urban ecology, urban ways of life, and disconnected from urban economics. This approach no longer seemed adequate to the ‘new urban sociologists’ or writer-activist Jane Jacobs who contributed significantly to the emerging new sociology at the time (cf. Pickvance, 1976; Lebas, 1982; Jacobs, 1961). They felt that the many urban problems that emerged with the crisis of Fordism could not be resolved with the tools of technocratic planning that was so essential to Fordist urbanism. These critical sociologists had developed an ambivalent relation to the Keynesian-welfarist and social-collectivist institutions, which – while often autocratic and exclusive – did hold a potential for redistributive justice. Thus, Pahl explicitly embraced welfare statism, but he problematized the role of the ‘urban managers’ and their ideologies shaping the urban environment and responsible for the uneven distribution of local resources.

While this neo-Weberian perspective, so well articulated by Pahl (on the basis of his first-hand experience and disillusionment with the planning process that he got to participate in as sociologist adviser to various regional plans developed by government bodies), was widespread in Britain, in other European countries, especially in France and Italy, where the social struggles of the 1960s and 70s were strongest, critical urban scholars evolved more neo-Marxist orientations. Foremost amongst them was Manuel Castells (1972, 1973) who saw class relations and conflicting class interests behind the unequal access to urban resources, and suggested seeing the city in terms of class struggle over collective consumption. Thereby urban protest movements came into his view and he foregrounded their struggles in his analyses (eg 1973). In Pahl’s Whose City?, by contrast, there is no mention of mobilized actors who challenge the uneven effects of urban policies and development plans, even though such mobilizations did take place in Britain at the time, if not as widespread as in France or Italy. Particularly prominent were the UK tenants and squatters movements, which protested local authorities’ housing policy and addressed a dire housing need by direct action while also exploring and practising alternative life styles challenging Fordist norms (eg Kay et al., 2007 on the tenants movements; Bailey, 1976 and Reeve, 2005, 2009 on the squatters movements). Also movements around welfare benefits, the so-called claimant unions, were quite visible within the terrain of urban activism at the time (eg Rose, 1973; Harrison and Reeve, 2002).
Where Pahl and Castells converged was in their rejection of the possibility of rational planning as a solution to the urban problems of their day. They both criticized (along with other ‘new urban sociologists’) prevailing urban sociology and called for a re-interpretation of core concepts such as urban, urbanism and urbanization (cf. Pahl, 1970: 5–6; Castells, 1972). In contrast to the hegemonic urban sociology, they were concerned with patterns of inequality and exclusion and the institutions producing them. Especially their critique of planning, their idea ‘that planning must be social was really radical at that time. It was a thing done by engineers’ (Pahl, quoted in Milicevic, 2001: 765).

Thus, both Pahl’s and Castells’ positions reflect the specific historical context in which they emerged and were operating: the Keynesian city, which represented the climax of a very direct relationship between the urban scale and social reproduction – where the state, in all the Western countries, had taken over a large part of social reproduction and social investment in the urban realm, in more or less authoritarian, more or less technocratic fashion. In this context it made good sense for critical scholars seeking to transcend the traditional Chicago School themes, to define the urban in categories of collective consumption (for which a Marxist approach was helpful, as chosen by Castells) or in terms of the distribution of resources through urban managers (for which a Weberian perspective emphasizing the role of bureaucracy and the distribution of life chances was helpful, as chosen by Pahl).

The urban movements of the time also reflected this historical context: they were either triggered by or responded to the norms and standardization of the Fordist-Keynesian city, its functional zoning, suburbanization, urban renewal programmes, and the resulting ‘inhospitality’ of urban space (Mitscherlich, 1965). Central for the movements in all these Western cities was the ‘reproductive sphere’ with its issues of ‘collective consumption’: movement demands challenged the cultural norms as well as the high price and insufficient quality of public infrastructures and services. The movements demanded – as did sociologists such as Pahl and Castells – not only improved institutions of collective consumption, but also more participation in the decision-making about their design so they would actually meet people’s needs. Social movement scholars observed that the Fordist city had contradictory implications for the movements: while its bureaucratic and top-down authoritarianism provided cause for grievances, its Keynesian-welfarist disposition, the expansion of the infrastructures of collective consumption and state-underwritten social reproduction met not only material needs of urban residents, but also provided opportunities for movements to flourish, particularly where social-democratic governments allowed for political openings (cf. Mayer, 2009).

In many cities, the movements developed progressive alternative projects of their own, generating vibrant infrastructures of community, youth and cultural centres, alternative production and feminist collectives, autonomous media, and other self-managed projects. But in spite of the breadth of the mobilizations and the vibrancy of the movement cultures at the time, it was not possible to join the movements made up of the culturally and politically alienated, primarily young activists, with movements of those who were discriminated by or excluded from the ‘blessings’ of the Fordist model; to join, in Marcuse’s words (2012), the ‘discontented’ with the ‘dispossessed’.

Looking back at the critical scholarship of the late sixties and early seventies, Pahl described those Fordist days as an era ‘when the public sector was larger, taxation more
redistributive and economic growth slower…’ (2001: 880). As he saw it, the professed goal of urban policy back then was to compensate for the inequalities created by capitalist urbanization: cities, because of their size and density, represented a concentration of public works, and the point of urban policy was to cope, through rational planning of infrastructure and provision of housing, health and education, with the collective demand for goods and services not provided by the market. ‘[T]he issues I raised in Whose City? … were generally received sympathetically by all political parties. There was a greater sense of common decency… a pragmatic One-Nation Toryism, which was offended by too great contrasts between the public and the private at that time’ (Pahl, 2001: 880).

In such conditions one could indeed hope, as Pahl did, to make a contribution towards a more ‘just’ urban system by focusing on the distinctiveness of urban resources, allocated through the bureaucrats, professionals and their political bosses in the public sector. Back then, one could assume that ‘the way these urban resources were allocated could reduce, reflect or reinforce the inequalities already established through inheritance and by the labour market’ (Pahl, 2001: 779). Unlike the radical movements of the time which both benefitted and suffered from the top-down Fordist welfarism, Pahl embraced what he saw as benevolent welfare statism, as a way to enhance redistributive justice – maybe anticipating that its promise would soon need to be defended against the looming roll-back neoliberalism waiting in Thatcher’s wings that was to dismantle all notions of allocative redistributive justice.

Contemporary neoliberal urbanism: Whose City? today

Since the reflexive approach informing our analysis requires us to interrogate the constantly changing urban conditions, it is crucial to understand the dynamics of contemporary neoliberal urbanism. This section summarizes its features and thereby reveals the complexities and contradictions, which any answer to the question ‘whose city?’ would need to address in the current configuration, and which become quite manifest in the contemporary urban movements, which the last part of this section will highlight.

After several rounds of neoliberalization – roll-back, followed by roll-out, followed by a post-crisis round of austerity urbanism – urban conditions have fundamentally transformed. As many urban scholars have shown (eg Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Peck et al., 2009 and 2013; Künkel and Mayer, 2012; He and Wu, 2009; Geddes, 2011), urban policy-making hinges no longer primarily on the institutions of the elected state and its bureaucrats, but ever more on business, real estate and developer interests, the point of urban policy has become to facilitate the unfettered operation of ‘the market’. Urban services (what is left of them) have become increasingly privatized, and city governments the purchasers rather than providers of services. The question ‘whose city?’, while raised more loudly and by more and different groups, has taken on new meanings, and the practical as well as theoretical answers look increasingly complex.

The latest round of neoliberalization (where the neoliberal project has been discredited by the 2008 crash and the stagnant growth rates that followed, as well as delegitimized by social movements but still not weakened) is characterized by a devolved form of extreme fiscal constraint: except in flourishing wealthy cities, municipalities are adversely affected, many of them have therefore developed an advanced form of
austerity politics, which not only dismantles Fordist social welfare infrastructures, but grinds away at what has survived the repeated rounds of cut-backs and neoliberal restructuring. Contemporary neoliberal urbanism thus denotes a complex configuration involving the local adaptation of neoliberal regulations, such as the enforcing of low wages and insecure working conditions, restrictions of tenants’ as well as workers’ rights, debt as both enabler of continuing habitual levels of consumption and as disciplinary technique, as well as specifically spatial adaptations of neoliberal tenets, such as increasingly uneven spatial developments. The politics of neoliberal urbanism have been characterized by the deliberate valorization of real estate and public space, creative city policies, as well as punitive (austerity) policies. Drawing on the work on recent urban restructuring and transformations of urban governance in the process of neoliberalization mentioned above as well as work on austerity urbanism (eg Oosterlynck and González, 2013; Peck, 2012; Schipper and Schönig, 2016), four dimensions in particular can be distilled as characteristic features of contemporary neoliberal urbanism (for a more elaborate presentation of these features see Mayer, forthcoming).

1. The overarching political strategy shaping the city continues to be the pursuit of growth first. That is, city officials do whatever they can to accelerate investment flows into the city and to improve their position in the interurban rivalry. They prioritize ‘highest and best use’ as the criterion for land use decisions, roll forward gentrification and create (frequently privatized) spaces of elite consumption and sanitized areas of social reproduction, thereby transforming the built environment. Increasingly, non-central areas are also subject to such upgrading, leading to changing relations between central cities and their peripheries. An effect of such growth-chasing projects, heated by international property speculation, have been exploding property prices, which in turn have led to surges of evictions, social displacement, and a new homeless crisis. While global city hotspots attract international investments, most ordinary cities face tightening budgets, which prevent city leaders from implementing the type of big projects and urban spectacles they previously used to radiate the message of success to investors and tourists. Cash-strapped cities have turned to locational politics that rely more on low-cost, symbolic ways to play up the local flavour and to attract creative classes that help culturally upgrade their brand. The search is on for innovative, low-budget, especially culture-led, ways to mobilize city space for growth. Frequently, sub-cultural and dissident movements are instrumentalized in these upgrading programmes: clever city officials and real estate capital see them as branding assets useful in building an image of ‘cool cities’ or ‘happening places’ (Mayer, 2016a).

2. Neoliberal urbanism has also been defined by officials’ adoption of entrepreneurial forms of governance in ever more policy areas, where they try to make use of presumably efficient business models, privatized forms of governance and public–private partnerships. Municipalities have been aided along in these moves to outsource and out-contract their projects by disseminators of policy intelligence such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, and the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and
Development) (cf. Theodore and Peck, 2011). Under conditions of slow growth, however, municipal treasurers become wary of failed projects and speculation ruins. As funding streams from superior levels of government have dried up for more and more localities, but municipalities need to do ‘more with less’, they are turning to ‘the markets’ – not merely for funding speculative projects, but even basic infrastructure, that is, urban governance structures have become more and more financialized.

These processes of entrepreneurialization and financialization signal a transition to a new mode of urban governance. In contrast to the previous Keynesian mode, which sought to secure the consent of the governed through tripartistic, corporate and long-term designs, these novel modes of regulation are less transparent and often not democratically legitimated, and produce hegemony – if at all – by making flexible, small and constantly changing concessions to different groups, primarily to middle class-based and upwardly mobile groups. In the trend towards an increasingly ad hoc and informalized political process, out-of-town investors, global developers and corporate flippers have come to play ever stronger roles – though it has been local politics that, by adopting entrepreneurial strategies, has allowed them this role.

These entrepreneurial governance strategies, their lack of public transparency, and their strengthening the hand of outside investors have given rise to all kinds of struggles over the (erosion of) representative democracy and over the exclusion of ‘expendable’ groups from the city (cf. Brenner et al., 2012; Smith and McQuarrie, 2012).

3. Intensified privatization of state assets, public infrastructures and services is another key feature of neoliberal urbanism, which keeps being pushed to new levels. Initially, privatization transformed the traditional relation and boundary between the public and the private sphere by rolling back and reorganizing the socially oriented institutions of the public sector; now, as collective infrastructures are exposed to the market, privatization has actually turned into financialization (cf. Hodkinson, 2012; Rolnik, 2013). In this raiding of public coffers, often by government-sponsored private companies, urban resources have been turned into options for expanded capital accumulation by dispossession (cf. Merrifield, this issue).

With marketization and financialization extended to ever more areas of the reproductive sphere, real estate markets have become even more commodified, and the provision of housing has – via mortgaged home ownership as well as via rent – become a crucial frontier of capital’s ever expanding push for value maximization. While finance has always played a central role in (re)developing urban infrastructures, neoliberalization has transformed the built environment itself into a mechanism for value capture by finance as a mode of accumulation. The integration of finance and urban space in turn rendered real estate increasingly ‘liquid’ by converting it into a tradable income-yielding asset (Gotham, 2009). Housing, too, has become a tradable asset in speculative moves on global financial markets – from luxury housing to public housing stocks – where new financial players (private equity firms, hedge funds, and other ‘alternative investment
funds’) discover ‘underperforming’ buildings and set out to ‘optimize’ their value (cf. Beswick et al., 2016).

These various new enclosure strategies have triggered a broad spectrum of contestations: protests against rent increases, blockades of evictions, rallies at banks and auctions, and occupations of vacant buildings (cf. Hodkinson, 2016). Privatization of (semi-) public spaces has also been challenged, occasionally in the form of situationist-inspired guerrilla and other actions scandalizing their role as spaces of surveillance and consumption (cf. Eick and Briken, 2014). And the privatization of utilities has evoked movements that sporadically succeeded to force local authorities to re-communalize them with popular referenda (cf. Becker et al., 2015).

4. Finally, the tool kit for dealing with intensifying social polarization has been ‘upgraded’. Since Pahl diagnosed, in 2001, tendencies towards social and socio-spatial polarization as extremely dangerous because of the loss of social cohesion they entail, they have only intensified as a result of the three strategies just listed. While during the roll-out phase of neoliberalization, territorial concentration of ‘social exclusion’ was addressed with the toolkit of area-based revitalization and activation programmes (cf. Mayer, 2003), such programmes have been severely curtailed and superseded by a novel two-pronged policy. Its prongs are, on the one hand, attrition and displacement policies, and on the other more benign programmes designed to incorporate select impoverished groups and areas into upgrading efforts.

The ‘benign’ prong gets applied to decaying social housing districts or (ex-)industrial areas, which city officials deem to have some development potential. Thus, previously stigmatized ‘problem areas’ have become locations for urban spectacles and (development) projects, with local authorities claiming that such upgrading strategies will benefit the residents of these areas. While not directly displacing poor or unemployed residents with immediate force, such programmes lead not only to the revitalization of such blighted neighbourhoods, but also induce a gradual residential shift. For example, in the deindustrialized district of Hamburg-Wilhelmsburg the municipality achieved an upscale transformation by means of exhibitions and festivals (cf. Birke et al., 2015). Similarly, ‘social mix’ policies that have been widely (re)adopted in order to tackle urban deprivation, are praised by politicians for ‘breaking up concentrations of poverty and providing neighbourhoods with a middle-class voice’ (Bridge et al., 2014: 1133), while being strategically employed in order to undergird efforts to attract growth, investors, creative professionals and tourists. Such ‘benign’ incorporation ‘works’ only where valorization processes, that is, a rise in property values and investments, are promising. Once they ‘succeed’ in attracting the desired clientele – frequently by marketing the ‘wild urbanism’ and exploiting the rough working-class milieu or chic ‘indigenous authenticity’ – the poor and vulnerable populations who have lived there are eventually forced out (eg Mayer, 2008: 324–325).

The other prong, increasingly favoured under conditions of austerity urbanism, consists of repressive and criminalizing measures and instruments. It entails punitive strategies that criminalize unwanted behaviours and groups, as well as attrition and dis-
placement policies that evict and banish the poor, pushing them to further outskirts or into invisible interstices of blight within the urban perimeter. Many communities of colour, informal workers, homeless people, the undocumented, and increasingly the new austerity victims, as well as protest movements and urban ‘rioters’ are exposed to this repressive side of neoliberal urbanism. Traditionally vulnerable groups, the ones Wacquant (2008) labelled as ‘urban outcasts’ and groups unwanted in the core retail districts such as street youth or panhandlers, have been surveyed, controlled or banished for some time. Now the new austerity victims, who are increasingly losing out in labour as well as housing markets, confront this non-benign part of the tool kit as well: more extensive surveillance, more aggressive policing, and generally more stigmatizing, repressive and expelling treatment. Feher (2015) describes increasingly brutal ways of ‘disposing of the discredited’ that have become characteristic of neoliberal governance. Measures to ‘disappear’ people without assets, who are of no use to austere neoliberalism, range from making them statistically invisible, via harassing them ‘to death’, all the way to pushing them out of and/or not letting them in to gated Europe.

All of these currently popular instruments and policies have implications for the ways in which urban resistance is formed and they structure oppositional groups’ room to manoeuvre. In contrast to Keynesian policies, they have contributed to broadening the constituencies of urban protest, particularly since austerity policies have moved to the foreground, which hurt not only traditionally vulnerable groups, but increasingly also broad sectors of middle classes with cuts and reductions in services, disposessions through foreclosures and other forms of indebtedness. This expansion of the urban disenfranchised has provided the basis for campaigns bringing together more different types of discontented and dispossessed groups than previously possible. But in spite of the similar experiences of dispossession, shared anger over predatory banks and corporate landlords, and widespread frustration with unresponsive local authorities, differences continue to exist and often hamper the emergence of unified strong movements.

While earlier urban movements confronted mostly city politicians and their local growth machines, today’s activists are dealing with additional and distant adversaries: unelected technocrats, especially financial technocrats, as well as global investors and developers, who are behind the financialization of property markets and push for big development projects. Unlike the business-dominated regimes attacked in the past, today’s adversaries such as banking institutions are increasingly headquartered in other countries. In addition, many movements witness de-democratization processes in various spheres as well as suspension of civil rights, which increasingly affect their own practice, and they face more and new forms of repression. Also, growing numbers of movement organizations lose state funding or legal status as recognized associations, or lose public support as they become criminalized – and thereby suffer from shrinking resources, opportunities and open spaces for their activities.

While neoliberal urbanism has thus produced a growing and differentiated spectrum of ‘dispossessed’ groups, these do not, in spite of many shared grievances, automatically share positionalities and interests. For example, some movement groups become privileged in the context of a politics that seeks to enhance the ‘creative potential’ of cities. So-called alternative and (sub)culturally active urban movements have seen their niche existence nurtured by ‘breeding ground’ or ‘interim use’ policies (Colomb,
2012; Owens, 2008; Pruitt, 2013), and some of the ethnic and migrant-based activism in the informal sector has benefitted from new diversity-based integration strategies that frequently come as part of the creative city package (cf. Rodatz 2012). In many cities, formerly dilapidated neighbourhoods that have been spiffed up by squatters and today feature music scenes and hip clubs and beach bars, have become key to official city marketing discourses (eg Scharenberg and Bader, 2009 for Berlin). Such creative city policies benefit both empty city coffers and precarious creative workers or groups whose talents can be harnessed for cultural upgrades of the city, but who cannot afford the high costs of renting central city space. While thus beneficial, these policies also hijack movement knowledge, civil society experience, and poor people’s survival strategies for purposes of urban restructuring and enclosure. The appropriation of practices and principles that used to be disavowed by mainstream politics – such as self-management, self-realization, and other unconventional or insurgent creativity – has become not only more easily feasible, but a generative force in today’s neoliberal cities. In this process, the formerly insurgent principles often lose the irritant edge they used to entail in the context of the overbearing Keynesian city with its top-down administration. In today’s neoliberal urbanism they frequently morph into essential ingredients of (sub)local regeneration programmes, whose participatory structures are designed to encourage activation and self-responsibilization rather than actual political empowerment of disadvantaged groups.

While such creative city policies have on occasion opened up new space and new resources for some movements to flourish, the simultaneous policies of attrition, austerity and criminalization restrict and suffocate (protest) movements of more vulnerable urban residents who are increasingly robbed of opportunities to voice their needs. These urban outcasts face more stigmatizing and repressive treatment, which in turn deepens the divides among the different groups locked out of or exploited by the neoliberal city and dispossessed in its crisis management.

It is the interplay of both of these tendencies that is at the root of the disparate make-up of today’s urban activism in Western cities. The claim that the city should be ‘for all’ has, in this environment, frequently taken on the language of rights; different urban movements as well as theorists have sought to bridge the fragmentations among the afflicted by invoking Lefebvre’s ‘right to the city’.

**Theory and practice: from Whose City? to The Right to the City!**

As Harvey (2006: 28) has observed for movements in the neoliberal age in general, social activists have increasingly shifted to ‘rights discourses’. The slogans and mottos of urban movements have adapted this shift to social justice discourses by invoking the ‘Right to the City’, and critical urban scholars have seized on the concept as if it might be the analytical key for deciphering urban contestations in the neoliberal age (cf. for many Attoh, 2011; Iveson, 2013; Kuymulu, 2013; Marcuse, 2009, 2014).

While most of the Right to the City (RttC) groups and initiatives refer back to Henri Lefebvre’s definition of ‘the right to the city [is] like a cry and a demand’ (1967: 158), in fact movements under this banner have comprised a great variety in terms of practices and goals. On one end of the spectrum, groups and organizations are working to get
charters passed that seek to protect specific rights (plural) in order to secure participation for all in the city (as it exists); on the other end, more radical movements seek to create the right to a (more open, genuinely democratic) city through social and political agency (cf. Mayer, 2012). While the networks that have coalesced under the motto of the ‘Right to the City’ are more heterogeneous than earlier urban movement alliances, they rarely manage to bridge the gaps sketched above. Typically, activist networks nowadays consist of some combination of the following:

- radical autonomous, anarchist and alternative groups and various leftist organizations;
- middle-class urbanites seeking to defend their accustomed quality of life;
- disparate groups that share a precarious existence, in the informal sector, the creative industries, or youth with uncertain career prospects;
- artists and other creative professionals which may cut across these backgrounds;
- frequently, local environmental groups fighting harmful energy, climate, or development policies;

The marginalized and excluded, ‘people of color’, transfer recipients or the homeless have so far not been very present in the coalitions that have formed in northern European cities – in contrast to southern Europe and North America. But even in the former, in recent years novel, not so familiar movement actors have entered the stage, for example refugees who have marched, squatted and gone on hunger strikes in cities from Amsterdam to Vienna;7 senior citizens and retired tenants have struck for affordable rents and community centres;8 anti-eviction coalitions have organized massive blockades to prevent tenants or foreclosed home owners from getting forced onto the street.9 When in the wake of 2011 the Occupy and Indignado movements diffused from central city squares to more peripheral neighbourhoods, the assembly model and direct-democratic practices of decision-making spread, and non-traditional ‘urban’ protests emerged in peri-urban and ex-urban terrains. But also without any intervention by city activists, new protests have bubbled up in the peripheries of city regions, sparked by the acceleration of environmental and social problems that accompany extended urbanization (cf. Mayer, 2016b).

A movement sparked by tenants in a former public housing district in Berlin represents an interesting instance where an action repertoire resonating with urban and occupy movements was kicked off by non-traditional groups. Low-income, mostly Turkish migrants and families on welfare who called themselves Kotti & Co (after the central square around which their social housing complexes are concentrated) in May 2012 erected a gecekondu in the middle of Kreuzberg, invoking the informal settlements sprouting overnight in Turkish cities, in protest of the rising rents in their (previously social) housing complexes.10 They were soon supported by neighbours and activists, who would bring food and volunteer for night shifts, and by academics, who helped organize a conference to pressure the local authorities. While the welfare office demands that the tenants find cheaper housing on Berlin’s periphery, the protesters formed alliances across large swathes of the city region by organizing joint actions with other tenant groups, anti-gentrification activists and squatters.
The protests of groups such as Kotti & Co, which have also invigorated other groups that so far have not been part of the urban movement scene, reveal that 50 years after Pahl posed the question Whose City?, it is being answered in new ways. New, because both, the ‘city’ and the ‘who’ it belongs to (and who is excluded) have changed, while the struggle over it has become more conflicted and more fierce.

The meaning of ‘the city’ has changed both empirically and theoretically. Lefebvre already wrote in 1967, ‘[the right to the city] can only be formulated as a transformed and renewed right to urban life … thus from this point on I will no longer refer to the city but to the urban’ (1967: 158). Since urbanization has gone planetary, people’s struggles against dispossession, predation and expulsions – not only in what we traditionally call cities but equally in what appear to be peri-urban, ex-urban or rural areas – are, in fact, connected and increasingly making common cause in their resistance against (extended) neoliberal urbanization (Brenner and Schmid, 2011; Merrifield, 2013; Mayer, 2016b).

The ‘who’ has equally become extended: Rather than wrestling merely with the ‘urban managers’ and their ways of allocating urban resources, today’s urban movements and their intellectual allies challenge a conglomerate of powerful actors who have and exercise ‘the right to the city’. Marcuse identified them as: ‘the financial powers, the real estate owners and speculators, the key political hierarchy of state power, the owners of the media’ (2012: 32). Those who do not now have it, and who among them might lead the push for the right to the city, is what should concern us today, Marcuse argues.

Those who now ‘have the right’ are turning cities, particularly their downtowns, into exclusive citadels for the very rich, strategically aided by the various instruments the neoliberal urban policy toolkit detailed above offers them. They are the same owners and power holders who turn landscapes of extended urbanization into sacrifice zones, polluting and contaminating soil, water and air with their industries. The residents of all these zones, all who are under threat of displacement and expulsion, under threat to lose their right to ‘the city’, are stepping up and intensifying their protest and resistance (eg Lerner and Brown, 2010). The Occupy and Indignado movements have in many places strengthened and conjoined such protest, put the demand for ‘real democracy’ on the agenda, as well as delegitimized the predatory capitalists as they concentrate their wealth in fewer and fewer hands, exacerbating inequality to a degree not seen before. Pahl may have been anticipating a movement such as Occupy in 2001 when he wrote: ‘Perhaps the anger against unrestrained global capitalism is the only significant urban movement of our times’ (2001: 882).

Going beyond this wondering assessment by Pahl, today’s activists as well as critical urban theorists have evolved a (right to the city) perspective which does not limit itself to questions of material and distributive changes, but also highlight forms of symbolic representation and recognition, importantly also of groups that did not used to be on the radar of urban nor social movement scholars. From the favella dwellers of Latin American cities, the informal workers of African and Asian cities, to the descendants of migrant guest workers, or the refugees that arrive in European cities – and those who are blocked from entering and warehoused in detention camps – scholarship is increasingly directing its focus to the everyday and political contestations around the recognition of these expelled and excluded groups fighting for their ‘right to the city’ and their space within
right-to-the-city networks (cf. Gebhardt and Holm, 2011). At the same time, new research that follows up on Lefebvre’s claim of planetary urbanization (such as Schmid, 2011; Brenner, 2014) unpacks the links between local urban movements and the worldwide struggles for the global commons that are carried out ‘by peasants, small landholders, farm workers, indigenous populations … across the variegated landscapes of extended urbanization’ (Brenner, 2013: 108).

Since Pahl first explored the ways in which local authorities and their urban managers appropriate and shape cities according to their own rather than residents’ interests, both the ‘who’ and the ‘city’ have become thoroughly redefined. While Pahl could show how the ‘urban managerialism’ of the Fordist city produced territorial inequalities and social exclusions, today’s answers to his original formulation have become rather more complex. This complexity has been revealed by linking the analysis of urban (governance) restructuring with that of movement mobilizations, that is, by considering institutional actors and urban protesters as constituting one and the same field of conflict. Those who own and run ‘the city’ today are no longer only traditional city bosses and their managers, but also global finance capital and other corporate players. And the object of contestation, the city itself, has been redefined as access to ‘the urban’ more in the shape of a global commons than to some central area walled off by insurmountable (and clear) boundaries. At the same time, urban social movements have turned the question ‘whose city?’ into a battle cry for reappropriating what ‘the one percent’ is increasingly denying the ‘99 percent’: the ‘right to the city’, which stands not only for the right to ‘the city we want’ but also for the right to representation and recognition of all who are being disenfranchised and dispossessed by the process of (extended) neoliberal urbanization.

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Notes

1 I would like to thank Ray Forrest and Bart Wissink and the Urban Research Group at Hong Kong City University for inviting me to present an early version of this article in October 2013.
4 The phases of roll-back of the 1980s (reacting to the limits of the Keynesian city); roll-out of the 1990s (addressing some of the problems created by the rolling-back and austerity measures of the first phase); and, starting with the dot.com crash of 2001, a third round, in which urbanization became a global phenomenon thanks to the integration of financial markets to debt-finance urban development around the world to rekindle new growth, are well described in Peck et al. (2009), austerity urbanism in Peck (2012).
For more detail on the following four characteristics of neoliberal urbanism, cf. Mayer (2013).

For example, the Spanish safety law ‘Ley Mordaza’ was passed in July 2015 to clamp down on the assambleas, eviction blockades, and protests near government institutions, that is, the forms of activism that had been characteristic of the anti-austerity and real democracy movements sweeping across Spanish cities. Demonstrators participating in unauthorized protest near ‘sensitive’ locations can now be fined with sums as high as €600,000 (Minder, 2015).


http://zwangsraeumungverhindern.blogspot.de

The large housing estate (with several thousand units) was built in the 1970s, originally as council housing. When, in the 1990s, almost 50 per cent of the apartments owned by municipal housing associations were privatized, this policy included the area south of the square Kottbusser Tor. Meanwhile, rents in this area have jumped to levels higher than those demanded on the ‘free market’ (cf. Kaltenborn, 2012).

References


