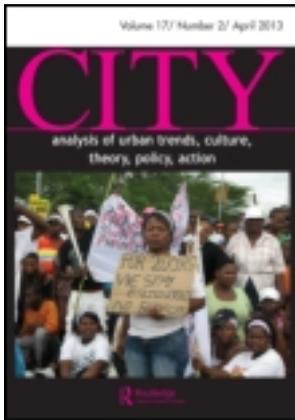


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First world urban activism

Beyond austerity urbanism and creative city politics

Margit Mayer

The paper looks at contemporary urban activism as it mobilizes around policies and conflicts characteristic of the comparatively privileged Western cities of the global North. It first analyzes the particularities of neoliberal urbanism and its implications for (divisions between) urban social movements, and secondly looks at how today's movements might move beyond their current predicaments, which lie in the tensions between more and less privileged movement groups occupying rather different strategic positions. Corresponding to the widespread trend of creative city politics, a sector of urban movements has flourished that benefits from innovative policies fostering alternative and (sub)cultural activism; on the other hand, various movements mobilizing around the intensifying trends of austerity urbanism have largely remained at a distance from leftist, autonomous and countercultural movements. The divides are beginning to be bridged in new forms of (post-)Occupy collaborations that bring together austerity victims and other groups of urban 'outcasts' with (frequently middle-class-based) radical activists, allowing both to acknowledge their differences. This, it is argued, constitutes a necessary condition for struggles against the exclusivity of neoliberal urbanism to be effective.

Key words: neoliberal urbanism, urban activism, Occupy, creative city, austerity, global North

In order to understand contemporary urban activism in the so-called advanced capitalist countries of the global North, we need to look at how the neoliberalization of cities over the last three decades has impacted that activism.¹ The successive waves of neoliberalization affected urban movements quite significantly. Today's mobilizations look very different from earlier urban struggles since the 1960s, and they operate in very different settings, which means that much of the conceptual and theoretical framework traditionally used for understanding the dynamics and potential of urban

activism is no longer helpful. In the current period, even while they continue to be shaped by the specific legacies of prior phases of urban struggles in each country and each city, urban protests and the claims made on urban development address—and correspond with—specifically neoliberal designs and enclosures.

Thus, in order to understand the novelty of contemporary movements, their trajectory, their distinct problems as well as their opportunities, I suggest that we interpret them within a phase model framework. We can trace their development from the post-war Fordist era through the 1980s, when a

global shift towards the neoliberal paradigm began to impact cities; through the 1990s, when roll-out neoliberalization brought with it flanking mechanisms and reforms that sought to ameliorate some of the dysfunctional effects of the roll-back neoliberalization of the prior phase; to the first decade of this century, kicked off in 2001 by the dot.com crash which was shaped by the increasing financialization of the economy and by urbanization going global through the integration of financial markets. This last wave of neoliberalization in particular has tended to privilege a segment of the movement scene that had emerged during the roll-out phase of the neoliberalization, when it could thrive thanks to a new direction in municipal politics geared towards the so-called creative classes (cf. Markusen 2006; Colomb 2012). At the same time, the accelerating trends of austerity urbanism and the cutbacks justified by the financial crisis have triggered protests by other segments, movements that have their traditions in anti-poverty work, in the mobilizations against welfare reform, in the advocacy and political work around unemployment, but also in ethnic and immigrant organizations and their fight for immigrant rights. These make up an even more heterogeneous sector than the former, which thrive in the context of creative city politics. In this field of austerity urbanism, we find welfare associations, soup kitchens, homeless activism, local exchange and other solidarity networks. In addition to such projects, the North American version of this sector also includes community-based organizations and a panoply of advocacy networks oriented towards the concerns of people of color and various immigrant groups.

Today, five years into the unfolding of the North Atlantic financial crisis, urban activism on both sides of the Atlantic finds itself surrounded, in some places inspired, periodically swept up in and often supported by movements like the Indignados or Occupy. These groups pose new practical and political challenges as well as

opportunities. We need to understand both—for analytic as well as for political reasons—as we seek to explore or enhance the movements' capacity to bring about 'cities for people, not for profit' (cf. Brenner, Marcuse, and Mayer 2012).

Thus, the first part of this piece lays out the macro trends transforming cities and the milieus in which movements operate. Secondly, the paper discusses the neoliberalizing city and the unfolding within that context of a new interplay between political-economic and spatial transformation of cities on the one hand, and social mobilizations on the other. It ends with a look at how today's movements might move beyond their current predicaments.

1. The macro trends transforming cities and the political milieus of movements²

1.1. *Fordism and its crisis: the politicized opposition of the 1960s–1970s*

If we look back at the first large wave of urban mobilizations, which took place in the 1960s, the challenges and opportunities of those movements looked very different from today's. Urban struggles were—in some countries more, in others less—inserted and politicized by the 1960s era movements, but they all responded to or were triggered by the norms and standardization of the Fordist–Keynesian city, its functional zoning, suburbanization, urban renewal and the 'inhospitability' of urban space, as Alexander Mitscherlich (1965) famously described the result. In Europe, the movements for more hospitable cities were mostly spearheaded by youth, students and migrant workers, whereas in the USA the urban rebellions were led by those most excluded from Fordist prosperity, especially by Afro-Americans. Central for the movements in all these Western cities was the 'reproductive sphere' and issues of 'collective consumption': demands focused on public infrastructures and services,

challenging both the cultural norms and the price and quality of public infrastructures. The movements demanded 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. In many cities, the movements developed progressive alternative projects of their own, generating a vibrant infrastructure of community and youth and cultural centers, alternative and feminist collectives, autonomous media and a host of other self-managed projects.

Overall, the movements challenged the 'Keynesian city', in which the state—bureaucratically and patriarchally, in more or less authoritarian fashion—took over a large part of social reproduction, and which represented the climax of a very direct relationship between the urban scale and social reproduction. This is what led many authors at the time to define 'the urban' explicitly in categories of collective consumption.³ In hindsight, this Fordist city appears positive and negative: its bureaucratic and top-down authoritarianism provided cause for grievances, but its Keynesian welfare disposition, the expansion of the infrastructures of collective consumption and state-underwritten social reproduction not only met people's needs, but also provided opportunities for mobilization, particularly where social-democratic governments allowed for political openings. In spite of the breadth of the mobilizations and the vibrancy of the movement cultures at the time, it was not possible during this period to join the movements made up of the culturally and politically alienated, primarily young activists, with those discriminated by or excluded from the blessings of the Fordist model (cf. Marcuse 2009).⁴ This schism between the 'alienated'/culturally discontented and the 'dispossessed'/excluded is still present today, and faces in some ways better, in other ways worse chances of being bridged in joint mobilizations.

1.2. *Roll-back neoliberalization: the transformation of relations between urban movements and the state in the 1980s*

The austerity politics of the 1980s initiated a global shift toward a neoliberal paradigm, which in its initial roll-back phase⁵ grinded away at Keynesian-welfarist and social-collectivist institutions (which had also provided a material base for much of the alternative movement activities) and brought so-called 'old' social issues back on to the agenda of 'new' social movements. Increasing unemployment and poverty, 'new' housing needs, riots in housing estates and new waves of squatting changed the make-up of the urban movements, while local governments—confronted with intensifying fiscal constraints at the same time as their expenditures for social services were increasing—became interested in innovative ways to solve their problems. This led to municipalities opening up towards some of the successful ways with which movement organizations had tended to problems of youth unemployment, housing decay, and other social and neighborhood problems. This opening process dramatically reconfigured the relations between movements and local states: what used to be a rather antagonistic relationship transformed into a more cooperative one, as newly installed innovative comprehensive urban revitalization programs encouraged movement organizations to move 'from protest to program' (cf. Mayer 1987). Participating in such programs helped the movement organizations to put their precarious alternative practices on to more stable footing, but created, over time, splits between those who managed to routinize and professionalize their (development and service delivery) work, and groups whose needs were not addressed by these arrangements and who in turn radicalized.

1.3. *Roll-out neoliberalization: fragmented movement milieus of the 1990s*

Since the 1990s, a regime of flanking mechanisms or roll-out neoliberalization responded

to the contradictions and problems which the previous phase of retrenchment had generated. While the basic neoliberal imperative of mobilizing city space as arena for growth and market discipline remained the dominant municipal project, it now foregrounded even more supportive mechanisms such as local economic development policies and community-based programs to deal with some of the problems austerity had generated. These mechanisms began to address social infrastructures, political cultures and ecological foundations of the city—but in a way that was to transform these urban conditions into locational assets useful in the intensifying interurban competition. Corresponding with this competition, new institutions and modes of delivery for social services were fashioned—such as integrated area development, public–private partnerships in urban regeneration and social welfare, all with a heavy reliance on civic engagement. These policies integrated earlier movement critiques of bureaucratic Keynesianism, and seized formerly progressive goals and mottos such as ‘self-reliance’ and ‘autonomy’—while redefining them in a politically regressive, individualized and competitive direction, turning them into a part of neoliberal governing techniques towards the development of a revitalized urban growth machine.

The consequences of these novel urban development policies and of the de facto erosion of social rights, which they implied, politicized distributive conflicts towards the question whose city it is supposed to be. Again and again, in the course of this decade, waves of anti-gentrification struggles swept across New York, Paris, Amsterdam, Berlin and later Istanbul, Zagreb and Poznan. ‘Reclaim the Streets’ and similar local mobilizations of the anti-globalization movement popularized the slogan ‘Another world is possible!’, as well as ‘Another city is possible!’ Simultaneously, the increasingly professionalized, formerly alternative community-based organizations became more completely inserted into the neighborhood revitalization and activation programs that

have become such a hallmark of the roll-out neoliberalizing city.

1.4. *First climax of neoliberalization: movements against the neoliberalizing city in the 2000s*

By the beginning of the new century, urbanization had gone global through the integration of financial markets that have used their flexibility and deregulation in order to debt-finance urban development around the world (cf. Harvey 2008, 30). However, because economic growth rates as well as wages began to seriously stagnate with the dot.com crash of 2001, increasingly sharper social divides became expressed in deepening socio-spatial polarization within and between cities. By then, social reforms (Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 in the USA, Hartz IV reforms in Germany) had everywhere replaced welfare with workfare systems, which meant that the new urban, social and labor market policies have ‘activated’ large parts of the urban underclass into (downgraded) labor markets. Their impacts also have affected many social movement organizations, a growing number of which now reproduce themselves by implementing local social and employment programs or schemes for community development. They often operate through municipal or other state programs, as in Germany, or through a mixture of state, philanthropic and faith-based organizations’ programs, as in the USA (cf. Eick et al. 2004)—and they are probably doing a better job ‘combating social exclusion’ than any competing private or state agency ever could, but many of them can no longer count as *social movement* organizations.

These political–economic and policy developments have narrowed the space for social contestation in many ways. Instead of the institutional arrangements and political compromises of the ‘Keynesian city’ that provided openings for struggles around improved collective infrastructures, movements have since

been confronting a ‘neoliberal urbanism’, which has rather different implications for the movements, the interplay between which is the focus of the next section.

2. The particularities of ‘neoliberal urbanism’ and their implications for urban social movements

The gradual and cumulatively entrenched neoliberalization of the city and of urban governance over the last 40 years has fundamentally transformed the ways of planning, building and governing the city. The resulting urban formation—though provisional and constantly evolving and (re)adapting—can be characterized in four dimensions:

- Instead of the regulations of the Fordist city, we now have deregulation in the housing market, and a growing role and influence of real estate owners on planning and developing our cities; in fact, we have *global* developers and *international* investors playing leading roles, and shaping the investor-driven upgrading of urban environments.
- While the gap between economically thriving and struggling cities has been widening, the central areas of the former, and increasingly their not-so-central areas, have all been turned over to gentrification. In the most ‘competitive’ cities this has meant mega-gentrification, while new types of ‘mixed use’ policies are deployed to ‘improve’ poor neighborhoods through influx of more affluent people, and area-based social programs are applied to ‘blighted’ neighborhoods presumably to stem their downward spiral. The intricate causal relationship between these processes—the gentrification-led restructuring of city centers and inner-city housing markets through new and often gated development projects, the clearance of public housing, the elimination of protections of tenants and the exacerbated exclusion of disadvantaged places, milieus and

social groups—is obfuscated in new discourses of (in)securitization and self-responsibilization.

- As cities compete for global investors, affluent residents and flows of tourists, they have developed a whole new set of policies that center on their own marketization: they brand themselves as event cities, culture cities or creative cities with festivalization and mega events, or with the attraction of creative industries, all of which require a sanitation of urban space for the purposes of consumerism, tourism and ‘work–play’ environments for the desired clientele.
- With the bulk of manufacturing outsourced to the global South (at wages and working conditions far below first world standards) or relocated to highly automated production complexes in industrial zones away from thriving urbanized areas, the post-industrial cities of the North have become the playgrounds for the upper classes, serviced by armies of downgraded and increasingly precarious workers. With their ever-expanding gentrification strategies and host of policies designed to attract tourists as well as ‘creative classes’, these cities offer rich soil for alternative milieus and cultural producers to flourish. Creative city policies provide niches for artists and alternative activists to play crucial roles in spiffing up bland neighborhoods and turning them into vibrant and attractive ones.

Overall, the *modus operandi* of the form of neoliberal urbanism established by 2008, that is, even before the financial crisis unfolded, can thus be characterized as one of enclosures (cf. Hodkinson 2012). It has privatized many spaces and services that used to be publicly owned and more open and/or affordable (from social housing and public transport, to utilities). Privatization of municipal public sector and collective infrastructures and the new types of developments (such as gated communities, and the new privatized spaces of elite and corporate

consumption) have come with more surveillance and securitization, which implied more physical fortressing, illiberal social control, displacement and exclusion. As new developments have destroyed existing use value and publicness of a variety of spaces, they also sought to rid this city space of whoever might threaten to devalorize its exchange value or disrupt the exclusive business and consumption meant to take place there (cf. Beckett and Herbert 2010; Brenner and Theodore 2002). The displaced have either been pushed to the peripheries or confined in targeted neighborhoods, where so-called revitalization and activation programs claim to ameliorate their problems. These populations are far from homogenous: they include the de-industrialized (white or 'guest') working classes (targeted by xenophobic and right-wing organizations) as well as immigrant communities, often addressed by a new generation of ambiguous integration policies (cf. Eckardt and Merkel 2009; Gesemann and Roth 2009; Rodatz 2012).

Thus, the neoliberalization of our cities has created highly uneven and differentiated geographies of enclaves of wealth and new regions of deprivation, dispossession and marginalization. When the financial meltdown of 2007–2008 and the ensuing economic crisis hit, far from inducing a 'crisis of neoliberalism', these trends were intensified. In North America, and across Europe, devastatingly in southern Europe but even in the least hit core countries such as Britain and Germany, governments have used the financial crisis as an opportunity to implement more severe cuts than ever seemed justifiable before, and to push through more privatization. Particularly local governments have been hit with more and more revenue shortfalls and budget restrictions, and many have drastically cut back on local social services, public infrastructure, and on pensions and health benefits of municipal employees (Peck 2012).

As Western governments have spent massive amounts on bank bailouts and stimulus packages, while instrumentalizing the

crisis for pushing through ever deeper cuts, more and more people, particularly youth, but also segments of the middle classes, have been thrown into real hardship. The destructiveness of the neoliberal growth model has become obvious to more and more groups. In the USA, the Occupy movement crystallized the anger and frustration of the 99% and identified banks in tandem with government as the culprits. Southern European countries erupted with Indignado movements and massive waves of strikes and protests—galvanizing civil society, and neighborhood-based assemblies, exchanges and networks of mutual support have been intensifying the urban activism. Moreover, the presumably stable northern European countries have also seen growing anti-austerity protests under the motto 'We don't pay for your crisis.' In May 2012, a broad coalition calling itself Blockupy brought 30,000 people to the center of the European finance capital to disrupt business as usual, in spite of the authorities criminalizing every form of protest.

This very heterogeneous picture needs detailed and differentiated analysis, which many observers and activists immersed in different areas are currently engaged with. The following section restricts itself to the urban settings in the most privileged areas of the global North. It focuses on how neoliberalization and the current neoliberal crisis politics have affected the mobilizations and their possibilities of resistance in the metropolitan North.

3. Today's movements: between austerity urbanism and creative city politics

From the perspective of urban movements, the neoliberalization of first world cities presents a contradictory set of changes. On the one hand, it has led to intensifying social fragmentation: the upgrading of central areas has curtailed public space, and has exacerbated polarization and displacement, while the recent austerity cuts have been hitting not

only the already disadvantaged, but increasingly youth, students and more segments of the middle class. On the other hand, it has allowed concessions and offerings to those movement groups that may usefully be absorbed into city marketing and the locational politics that municipalities everywhere are now tailoring to attract investors, creative professionals and tourists.

The interplay of *both* of these tendencies is at the root of the disparate make-up of today's urban activism, some of which—in European as well as North American cities—is trying to make this disparateness cohere under the label of 'right to the city'.⁶ These networks and alliances (in US cities the national Right to the City Alliance, in Hamburg, Frankfurt and Berlin more local networks joining forces under the label) have been more heterogeneous than similar coalitions in earlier waves of urban movements. They are now made up of combinations of the following social groupings:⁷

- radical autonomous, anarchist and alternative groups and various leftist organizations,
- middle-class urbanites who seek to defend their accustomed quality of life,
- disparate groups that share a precarious existence, whether in the informal sector, in the creative industries or among college students,
- artists and other creative professionals which may cut across these backgrounds,
- frequently, local environmental groups that fight problematic energy, climate or development policies,
- and finally, but in Europe so far rarely present: the marginalized, excluded, oppressed, people of color.

Though all of them are affected by contemporary forms of dispossession and alienation, they occupy very different strategic positions within the post-industrial neoliberal city. It is crucial to acknowledge and understand these differences if we want to succeed in bringing these forces together.

3.1. *Movements corresponding with the creative city brand*

So-called creative city politics, which city managers are so enamored with, have provided a boost to specific parts of the movement to flourish, when municipalities, in the ever-intensifying interurban competition, discovered cultural revitalization and creativity-led economic and urban development as a useful strategy to enhance their brand and improve their global image. Local authorities nowadays eagerly jump on (sub)cultures wherever they sprout in order to harness them as location-specific assets and competitive advantage in the interurban rivalry. For example, milieus made up of music scenes and hip neighborhoods filled with clubs and beach bars have become key to official urban marketing discourses (as, for example, in Berlin, cf. Scharenberg and Bader 2009, 331). They can even be used for pacification purposes, as media and politicians pit them against more politicized or radical movements, as, for example, Oakland's Art Murrmur was played up against Oakland Occupy.⁸

Not only the cultural milieus of artists and other 'creatives', even radical squats and self-managed social centers have taken on an ambiguous role as they mark urban space as attractive. The sub- and countercultural activists charge such spaces with cultural capital, which in the scheme of 'creative city' policy then becomes transformed by investors into economic capital. Formerly squatted buildings, open spaces and other 'biotopes', which precarious artists made interesting or anarchists spiffed up and furbished, become harnessed by clever city officials and (especially real estate) capital as branding assets that contribute to the image of 'cool cities' or 'happening places'.

City governments and urban development actors have begun to institutionalize making use of countercultural actors for their purposes. Many German cities have launched explicit programs that provide artists and creative workers with interim use of vacant

space until investors are found to develop them (Colomb 2012), while Dutch cities have initiated a so-called 'Breeding Grounds' policy in order to 'maintain and recreate the cultural functions previously performed by large squats' (Owens 2008, 54).

These policies benefit both empty city coffers and precarious creative workers who cannot afford the high costs of central city space, but they also hijack movement practices for purposes of urban restructuring and enclosure. Such hijacking occurs not only with regard to *cultural* branding and upgrading. Some Swedish cities are also making use of particular *ecological* practices to market their gentrification projects. Stockholm for example has incorporated *City Soil*, an urban gardening movement, into a best practice project of sustainable lifestyles, environmental housing and ecological food-growing/-buying residents. Invariably, the white, middle-class, environmentally conscious new citizens that are attracted to these development projects displace previous industrial working-class and/or migrant residents.

The appropriation of movement principles such as self-management, self-realization and all kinds of unconventional or insurgent creativity has become not only easily feasible, but a generative force in today's neoliberalizing cities. These movement principles have lost the radical edge they used to entail in the context of the overbearing Keynesian welfare state—in today's neoliberal urbanism they have been usurped as essential ingredients of sub-local regeneration programs. However, these programs and the concomitant public discourse tweak the purpose of participation: they are designed to encourage activation and self-responsibilization rather than political empowerment. The difference between them and movement forms of activation is, however, not always clear-cut, even to activists, which makes co-optation and incorporation of progressive social movements' demands into neoliberal urban policies frequently so effective.

3.2. *Movements of the urban outcasts*

A completely different strategic position is held by movements confronting the other side of neoliberalizing urbanism—the side that entails austerity measures and cuts, intensifying repressive strategies, increasingly stricter laws, tougher policing, disenfranchisement and more criminalization of unwanted behaviors. This is what communities of color, informal workers, austerity victims and urban rioters experience and what shapes their position and their mobilizations.

The macro processes underlying this aspect of the neoliberalizing city consist in the deregulation and flexibilization of labor markets, in welfare retrenchment, and the expansion of low-wage and informal sectors that employ and discipline growing sections of the (racialized) so-called underclass, growing numbers of migrants, growing and differentiating sets of precarious, often paperless workers (cf. Wacquant 2009; but also Mayer 2010; McNevin 2006). Their struggles—though less visible than those of other urban movements (at least until they break out in riots)—against the discrimination, dispossession and disenfranchisement they experience have been turning our first world cities into arenas of anti-colonial as well as anti-racist struggles. This field of struggle is enormously heterogeneous and fragmented, involving vastly different concerns and grievances, from homeless advocacy and activism, via 'Food not Bombs' and similar anti-hunger and anti-poverty organizations, via the panoply of Workers' Centers, all the way to the community organizations of peoples of color involved in various forms of transformative organizing.⁹ Most of their struggles face—if not deaf ears—far more restrictions, surveillance and more aggressive policing (such as 'stop and frisk' towards young black males, zero tolerance to minor violations of city ordinances against homeless people [cf. Amster 2004]) than those of their more comfortably positioned (potential) allies in the alternative/

anarchist/(counter-)cultural scenes. But even before accounting for differential forms of state repression, which contributes to creating divisions between different movement groups, we have to recognize the huge distances in terms of cultural and everyday experience between the comparatively privileged movement groups and the ‘outcasts’, and even within the latter, where undocumented day laborers face, for example, very different challenges and harassments than the black young adults who are unemployed and over-policed.

The reality of these different experiences creates all kinds of hurdles for connecting their shared interests in contesting neoliberal urbanism. But the struggles of all those excluded from the neoliberal city, be they at the peripheries of this model (in the *banlieues* and ghettos) or invisibly servicing the privileged city users from subliminal and precarious spaces, will need to be connected. And if the more privileged urban movements would add their leverage to the struggle against the exclusivity of neoliberal urbanism, the weaknesses of traditional urban activism might actually be overcome.

But often, municipal policies tend to deepen the existing divides and oppositions among the different groups locked out of or exploited by the neoliberal city and dispossessed in its crisis management. They even create further splits and divisions. By implementing both, the inclusive and repressive strategies simultaneously, the concessions and incorporation offers to the savvy creative types, and the marginalizing, stigmatizing and punitive strategies to the rest, local authorities contribute, for example, to sharpening the differences among (and creating collisions between) more culturally oriented vs. more politically oriented movement groups. They also tend to exacerbate the distance and alienation between stigmatized and othered groups, whether homeless, undocumented or migrant youth, who, at least in Germany, rarely participate in urban mobilizations, not even in the celebrated case of the Right to the City movement in Hamburg.¹⁰

Summing up then, urban movements in first world countries—at least until the Indignados took to the squares and plazas (May 2011) and Occupy Wall Street (OWS) swept across the USA (September 2011)—have basically been stuck between two deeply interrelated challenges. On one hand, they must contend with creative city politics, where politicized movements are prone to sell out and become less concerned with the exclusion or repression experienced by other, less favorably placed groups. On the other, they face a renewed form of austerity urbanism, where movement groups try to service and support (but often fail to mobilize and politicize) those dispossessed and disenfranchised by the neoliberalizing city.

4. Moving beyond the divides

Since the Occupy and M-15 movements have diffused from the encampments into the neighborhoods and joined anti-foreclosure struggles, what used to be separate and disconnected mobilizations have begun to connect, and in this process some of the distances described above are beginning to be bridged. While the encampments were triggered by the crisis-induced austerity politics, they also invented, practiced and consolidated—at least temporarily—new common spaces for socialization and political action, thereby sparking a new radical-democratic process. Thus, the protests against the slashing of public infrastructures and services have not only been contesting the dispossession wrought by this latest round of neoliberalization, but have also expressed new progressive visions of the appropriation of urban space and the production of radically socializable spaces. Unlike the politicized oppositional movements of the 1960s–1970s, which attacked the norms and design of the (from today’s perspective generous) Fordist provision of collective consumption, these new movements, while confronted with the dramatic dismantling of what eroded welfare institutions remain, have

articulated and defended visions of the commons and have attempted to prefigure such radical concepts in their encampments. Long after the encampments have been dissolved, their experience continues to resonate in decentralized direct actions and new forms of organizing in a variety of settings.

In the USA, after their eviction from squares and plazas all over the country, the Occupy movement has fanned out into neighborhoods to (re)claim abandoned and foreclosed properties for ‘ordinary’ people.¹¹ ‘Occupy the “hood!”’ became a new rallying cry, spin-off organizations (such as Organize4Occupation) were formed, and OWS activists keep tabs on municipal lists of upcoming evictions and send out messages the evening before these are scheduled to take place. Often the gathered Occupiers succeeded in preventing the marshals from entering and evicting, at least temporarily. They have also re-taken and refurbished homes, and staged direct action events at bailed-out banks, disrupted auction sales of foreclosed houses, frequently with singing ‘Mr. Auctioneer’ in the style of a gospel civil rights song.¹² They have also addressed the origin of the foreclosure problems by ‘visiting’ banks’ shareholder meetings to demand that the banks write down the mortgages that are underwater to fair market value.¹³

Beyond actions dealing with the housing and foreclosure crisis, OWS has also gotten involved in neighborhood assemblies and other issues, such as a neighborhood assembly in Sunset Park, Brooklyn that was started by and consists largely of Chinese and Latin American immigrants, and addresses immigrant rights. Occupy Oakland activists won union endorsements of the General Strike, which were crucial to the massive mobilization on the day of the strike. The second port shutdown, on 12 December 2011, highlighted Occupy Oakland’s willingness to mobilize its own membership in support of labor struggles. The Occupy Oakland labor support committee has also mobilized support for

striking workers: for example, a licorice factory in Union City with mostly Latino workers, several of whom had asked Occupy Oakland for support. Occupy Oakland members have also worked for solidarity between bus drivers and riders around the issue of fare hikes.¹⁴ And when hurricane Sandy struck the New York region, Occupiers have gone to flooded (working-class and public housing) neighborhoods providing what they described as mutual aid and support—the most recent occasion for the ‘dividing lines in a city long fractured by class, race, ethnicity, geography and culture’ to become seen and felt, and thus possibly bridged (Maslin Nir 2012, A1).

Similarly, the Spanish M-15 movement, after it was pushed off the Puerta del Sol in Madrid, joined community groups and came to the defense of homes threatened by foreclosure, occupied an abandoned hotel and more than 30 buildings, and secured, through negotiations with the federal government, a vacant tobacco factory and turned some of these buildings into social and community centers.¹⁵

While these expansions into neighborhoods and communities other than their own often did not evolve easily or ‘organically’, but involved intense and extended internal debates and struggles, their effects have, most often, been noteworthy. Because in these encounters the pragmatic contestations of community organizations and the defensive struggles of anti-poverty and anti-foreclosure groups have become infused with a more radical critique of financial and political power and with direct democratic and prefigurative organizing styles. In this process, distances and divisions between a (racialized) ‘global proletariat’ and progressive or radical (often middle-class-based) activists are coming to the surface and thereby also begin to be recognized. Thereby the potential emerges for them to also be respected and maybe even bridged—a process that certainly will not occur overnight.

Still, the forging of new connections in these encounters between the Occupy movement and community-based groups is extremely important. In the short term, it has been lending more visibility to the struggles resisting evictions and displacement that had been going on in scattered fashion for years.¹⁶ As these campaigns have been getting more coordinated, they scale up local struggles, turning them into regional movements that occasionally protest the same banks at the same time and often attend each other's rallies; participants increasingly see themselves as part of national and international movements. Most crucially, though, the opportunities of collaborating in these campaigns help mend the reservations and mistrust between communities of color and Occupy 'radicals', between 'outcasts' and beneficiaries of the neoliberal city. Such mending, however, is a precondition for the movements' long-term potential to overcome the weaknesses of traditional urban activism.

In northern European countries, the effects of the financial crisis have not yet impacted the movement milieus in quite the same ways. Germany, the comparatively calm epicenter of the Euro crisis, has seen quite impressive anti-austerity and specifically urban mobilizations, but even the broadest alliances under the Right to the City label have included neither welfare recipients and their advocacy organizations, nor did they attract migrants into their campaigns. Such vulnerable groups are partially organized in Hartz IV initiatives¹⁷ and in organizations that seek to support and mobilize the unemployed, and they in turn have participated in the large 'crisis coalitions' formed by the anti-globalization network Attac, the Left Party, some unions and progressive youth and social organizations (where, however, few autonomous leftist movement groups took part). These nationally coordinated crisis coalitions have staged huge 'We don't pay for your crisis!' demonstrations (twice in 2010, in Berlin and Stuttgart, each time 30,000 people took to the streets, and in October 2011 the national demonstration

numbered about 80,000) and countless local protests, action days and blockades, which were basically ignored by the ruling parties, demonstrating their unwillingness to represent their constituencies. The (local) Social Forums, which for some years tried to bring together a variety of particular struggles—over local schools, childcare as well as job centers—with some of the left engaged in anti-globalization movements, basically failed in making this a more lasting collaboration. Some feel this failure is due to the open space concept, which ended up attracting primarily leftist students and academics, and the organizers did not manage to deal with the informal hierarchies developing on that basis.

While much of the German Left is critical of or keeps a distance to the Occupy movement,¹⁸ the so-called Blockupy actions of May 2012 were in many ways successful. A blockade of the European Central Bank and the Federal Bank was supposed to disrupt business as usual in the heart of the financial capital, and a great many assemblies, rallies, vigils, teach-ins and performances were arranged to educate and mobilize around the austerity politics of the German government and the accompanying processes of de-democratization, but the city of Frankfurt decreed a total ban on all planned events. The courts confirmed the ban and police cordoned off most of the city. The broad coalition,¹⁹ which had planned these Blockupy actions, had not anticipated a complete prohibition and was not prepared for the possibility that not a single legal meeting point would be permitted. Even though this made it extremely difficult to house people and even though only a fraction of the projected events could be relocated from the public squares where they were supposed to take place to union halls and the buildings of other supportive organizations, Frankfurt's central business district was effectively shut down—albeit more by the police than by the 3000 activists who defied the ban (1430 of whom were detained). Only one final demonstration was permitted which attracted 30,000 protesters—more than

anyone had anticipated—sending a powerful message of protest. The public debates that were not allowed to take place due to the state of exception the city created were postponed to the fall, when the organizers also began to plan for more Blockupy actions for spring 2013.

Not directly under the Occupy label, but a promising sign of cross-spectrum mobilization has popped up in Berlin, where a protest camp in the middle of Kreuzberg has been erected to fight against the displacement of low-income migrants and families on welfare. At the end of May 2012, a summer Fest organized by the tenants' initiative *Kotti & Co.*²⁰ morphed into a protest camp, and soon after a wooden shed was erected—a *gecekondu*, invoking the informal settlements sprouting overnight in Turkish cities—surrounded by banners and streamers demanding an end to the rent hikes, supported by neighbors and activists, who bring food and volunteer for night shifts, and by academics who have helped organize a public conference on social housing together with them, in order to force the local authorities to earnestly address constructive solutions. The initiators here are long-time residents of formerly social housing, most of whom came to Berlin as migrant workers ('guest workers') from Turkey 30+ years ago, when then-blighted Kreuzberg was one of the few districts where they could settle. Over the years, they have turned the former 'problem neighborhood' into an attractive, multicultural district. Together with the squatters' movements, they rehabbed old tenements that had been slated for demolition, and they made the drab Fordist social housing blocs put up for low-income families come alive. They built their community while coping with successive waves of influx: during the 1970s and 1980s with hordes of students, squatters and alternative types, then with artists and gentrifiers, and more recently with masses of tourists and global residents, who have chosen Berlin for their second and vacation homes. They are proud to have

integrated all of them. Moreover, they are not even opposing today's newcomers, despite the driving-up of rents. They do, though, demand solutions that don't lead to their own displacement. For them to be able to continue in the community they have created, they are demanding rents to be capped,²¹ but the welfare office—refusing to help with the skyrocketing rents²²—requires them to find cheaper housing on Berlin's periphery. This protest camp, with its assemblies and events every evening, and the 'noise demonstrations' every Saturday, has not only been putting the neighbors and residents in touch with each other. It has also built alliances with tenant groups, urban activists and other squatters, among them senior citizens who squatted their closed down community center in the northern district of Pankow, and defended it for months until the city helped find a solution that allows them to keep their center.

Efforts to displace poorer citizens to the outskirts are observable everywhere. In England, especially in London, social housing tenants are also deemed undeserving of living in areas that over time have become expensive, such as central London (e.g. Sparrow 2012). Berlin has its politicians, pundits and journalists who take London and Manhattan prices as yardsticks for future real estate and housing developments. The 'Urban Design and Urban Think Tank' BMW Guggenheim Lab has gone on a publicity campaign pitching to Berliners how close they are to being as cool as Manhattan and London, even if that implies that the poor have no right to live in the city (McLaren 2012). In addition, even the leadership of the Left Party (Die Linke) in Berlin feels there is nothing they can do to prevent this powerful trend of displacement. As they see it, they only have the power to make conditions on the periphery more livable.

The current conjoining of different strands of movements—with Occupy in the USA, M-15 in Spain or *Kotti & Co.* in Berlin—can offer some pointers as to how the distances between the more privileged and the

more vulnerable types of struggles might be bridged. Linkages can be created between the different worlds of these distant movements, in part thanks to the political spaces opened up by the encampments and the following spilling out into the neighborhoods. These spaces have, however, nowhere opened up automatically nor have the linkages between the relatively privileged and the more vulnerable movements been built without encountering tensions and conflicts expressing the underlying cultural and political distances. One preliminary lesson from the analysis of the struggles against (the exclusivity of) neoliberal urbanism would thus point towards the importance of bridging the currently characteristic divides, a precondition for which is a shared awareness of the importance of critical reflexivity about class and privilege within movements. Otherwise, even where urban struggles succeed in preventing or modifying crass neoliberal urban development projects (as was the case in Hamburg), they will remain meaningless as long as they do not address the basic conflict between privileged city users on the one side and growing 'advanced marginality' on the other, which has become so defining of cities of the global North.

Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this text was presented as the Fourth Annual CITY Journal and UCL Urban Laboratory Lecture in London in October 2012. An important context for its development has been the ongoing debate sponsored by City of 'Cities for People, Not for Profit', co-edited by Neil Brenner, Peter Marcuse and myself, from an initial version of it in the journal (13 [2–3], 2009) to its extended and revised publication in book form (2011). This debate has pointed to many issues of tremendous contemporary political importance, which our book has not dealt with in its effort to show how critical theory matters for the necessary social change. While all of these issues deserve to be taken forward, this paper, while inspired by the debate, again addresses but a limited set of questions pertaining mostly to the very recent movement developments in the global North, which are nevertheless crucial for our activists and allied scholars to grapple with (cf. Mayer 2012a).
- 2 This section is a revised summary of my chapter in Brenner, Marcuse, and Mayer (2012), 'The "Right to the City" in Urban Social Movements'.
- 3 Thus, the first theoretician of urban social movements, Manuel Castells (1983, 319–320), developed his conception of urban social movements on the basis of this practice, claiming that only if they managed to combine activism around collective consumption with struggles for community culture and political self-management, could they be classified as urban *social* movements, that is, capable of transforming urban meanings, and to produce a city organized on the basis of use values, autonomous local cultures and decentralized participatory democracy.
- 4 Marcuse contrasts these groups as the 'discontented' versus the 'dispossessed'.
- 5 Cf. on the periodization of the various phases of neoliberalization, Brenner and Theodore (2004).
- 6 The 'right to the city' motto has emerged in multifaceted ways, around the world, involving significant differences in practice 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 of the spectrum, more activist movements seek to create *the* right to (a more open, genuinely democratic) city through social and political agency (for an assessment, see Mayer 2012b).
- 7 For German examples, see Novy and Colomb (2012), Holm and Gebhardt (2011), Füllner and Templin (2011) and Birke (2010).
- 8 'Last Friday's version of Oakland's Art Murmur—the hip, artsy pub and cafe crawl centered around a stretch of Telegraph Avenue on the first Friday of each month—drowned out the violence-prone (Occupy) protesters who vandalized and ransacked President Barack Obama's campaign office ... The monthly Art Murmurs ... have become an internationally recognized shout-out for Oakland' (Johnson 2012, C1).
- 9 Cf. <http://www.sojustlead.org/ny-transformative-organizing-initiative>
- 10 In the USA on the other hand, community organizations formed by people of color, as well as other precarious and informal workers, have long been a part of urban mobilizations, in fact they make up the core of the Right to the City Alliance (similarly, Domestic Workers United, Excluded Workers Congress, etc.). By deliberate rejection of the *open space* concept, they have also occupied center stage in the Social Forum process kicked off

- by the anti-globalization movement, often for the price of distance from leftist, anarchist and countercultural movements.
- 11 Cf. OccupyOurHomes.org, Occupy Homes Minnesota and Organize4Occupation/OWS.
 - 12 For New York examples, see Fernandes (2011) and http://www.o4nyc.org/about_o4o/. Also see Christie (2011) and Gabbat and Devereux (2011).
 - 13 They have also demanded that these financial corporations pay their fair share of taxes, and that they quit financing predatory payday lending (Moyers 2012; <http://www.confrontcorporatepower.org/>).
 - 14 Also for Los Angeles, 'scattered local victories involving a number of issues, including labor rights and foreclosures,' were reported in the *Los Angeles Times* (Tangle 2012).
 - 15 Cf. 'The Real News Network: Spain's Indignados and the Globalization of Dissent', January 20, 2012, available at http://therealnews.com/t2/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=31&Itemid=74&jumival=7825
 - 16 The groups leading these long-standing activities have been both local, such as City Life/La Vida Urbana in the Boston area, Causa Justa/Just Cause in San Francisco and Oakland, or the Miami Workers Center, some of which formed the Right to the City Alliance, as well as regional, such as National People's Action (a traditional network of community organizations active in 14 states). Locally, they had already achieved some improvements, for example, Causa Justa/Just Cause (with a strong base in Oakland's African-American community and a history of tenant advocacy with the Latino community in San Francisco) was successful in getting the city to establish eviction protections on some housing and to expand the ban of 'owner move-in' evictions to protect tenants with children in the home. The group has been targeting Wells Fargo and protesting their shareholder meetings for more than three years in campaigns to win a moratorium on foreclosures and evictions, and pressuring the cities of Oakland and San Francisco to divest from Wells Fargo and instead create municipal banks. On its website, they acknowledge that 'this work took on a new life and a new shape . . . when we worked in groundbreaking collaborations with Occupy San Francisco and Occupy Oakland activists' (<http://www.cjjc.org>).
 - 17 For instance, groups mobilizing against the new, stricter welfare laws passed by the red-green coalition government during 2001–2004, which abolished the lifelong entitlement to unemployment compensation commensurate with previous earnings for people who lost their jobs, and makes welfare support conditional on 'activation' into the labor market.
 - 18 This generalization needs to be differentiated, as the relationships between Occupy and the local (student) Left vary from city to city. Frankfurt's Right to the City network, for example, developed completely separately from the Occupiers. While a series of squattings took place during the period of the encampment, very few activists tried to establish connections between the two. In other cities, Occupiers were recruited more from the milieus of former 68ers and other local struggles, on the basis of which more organic connections evolved.
 - 19 The coalition was made up of a broad spectrum of positions: from radical to reformist, including the squatters movement, the autonomous movement, leftist groups, unions, especially youth organizations of various unions, organizations of the unemployed, Occupiers, Attac and peace groups.
 - 20 Named after the diminutive of the large square at Kottbusser Tor with a concentration of social housing complexes, which are now successively turned over to market pricing.
 - 21 Rents are to be capped at four euros per square meter. In addition to the rent cap, they also demand municipalization of social housing (Arps 2012).
 - 22 The Berlin Senate privatized more than 300,000 social housing units, and repealed the rent cap that used to apply to the social housing estate of 5.35 euros per square meter.

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Margit Mayer is professor at the Department of Political Science at John-F.-Kennedy Institute, Freie Universität Berlin. Email: mayer@zedat.fu-berlin.de