Cities are concentrations of both material and social relationships. Their consolidation in urban densities also creates inequalities and contradictions and can bring conflicts to the surface. In critical urban research (Roy 2016; Brenner 2009), the city and the urban have always been defined as spaces of conflict and as places of resistant, unsettling and insurgent practices. The urban, as such an approach might suggest, is constituted in conflict. From this perspective, urban contestations are urban constitutions. They are the very stuff cities are made of and that are continuously made in the city.

Approaching the city through the concepts of conflict and contestation is primarily a legacy of Marxist thought. In the 19th century, the fields of city and contestation were brought together and interwoven in specific ways. In his early text on the *Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), Friedrich Engels passionately and vividly describes the social conditions in working-class towns in England. He describes the economic and everyday hardships of the proletariat and analyses the realities of workers’ lives using statistics, tables and even urban planning sketches. Engels is outraged by the social situation he witnesses in cities. Primarily concerned with the starting point for the social struggles of his time, he perceives the city as the place where social movements are formed. Engels explicates the revolutionary potential of the urban industrial reserve army and analyses the consequences of the permanent violence that manifests itself structurally in the cities. He does attribute a political quality to organized and targeted acts of resistance. For him, the spontaneous and oft-perceived aimlessness of urban forms of violence also has something subversive: the proletariat is being fought against by the bourgeoisie and fights back (1845: 88). The capitalist city of modernity is founded in this combat.

The specific urban conditions Engels argues within his text are focused on the English working-class cities, such as Liverpool or Manchester. In his analysis,
he mixes classical urbanist thinking, which is oriented toward urban conditions and conditionalities, with a theory of revolution that identifies such conditions as forms of structural violence. On the one hand, Engels clearly borrows from the contemporary narrative, especially in conservative circles, in which the city is biologically conceived as a body that can be healthy or sick. It is precisely this narrative which will serve as the basis for orthodox urban discourse’s conception of urban pathologies in the 19th and 20th centuries (Foucault 2008). On the other hand, the idea of class struggle and the hope for the proletariat expand Engels’ urban image and save it from deterministic and reductionist closure. For Engels, too, the city is seriously ill and needs to be cured. The cure he wants to give the cities, however, is not an urban planning or town planning cure, but a cure that takes place through confrontation, revolt and insurrection.

Engels sees the city as a place of revolution, a site of conflict, a haven for urban uprisings and deviant behavior. For him, urban conflicts are part of the solution and not part of the problem. Such a solution, however, only becomes possible through urbanity itself. Because of the proximity established by centralization, workers begin to feel as a class in their totality, they become aware that though weak individually, together they have power. This process arises in and through the city:

The great cities are the birthplaces of labour movements; in them the workers first began to reflect upon their own condition, and to struggle against it; in them the opposition between proletariat and bourgeoisie first made itself manifest; (...) Without the great cities and their forcing influence upon the popular intelligence, the working-class would be far less advanced than it is.

(Engels 1845: 120)

A turn to the city is also found in Karl Marx’s work. The discussion of historical materialism and urban circumstances belong together for Marx, since the city is a material precondition of ideology and thus part of the basis underlying all history. Marx uses the city primarily as a category and result of his historical analysis of the division of labor and, like Engels, sees it as the place of origin of the urban proletariat. He draws a complex picture of the power structure forming in the pre- and early-capitalist city, which, guided by different interests, produces manifold inclusions and exclusions. Marx’s diagnosis is that the ‘urban rabble’ was too powerless and on the other hand the journeymen and apprentices of the economy, which was still primarily organized as a craft, were too integrated into their “contented, slavish relationship” (Engels and Marx 1970 [1846]: 41). Only through industrialization and the accompanying progressive alienation of labor would the conditions have become so uncomfortable, the number of the ‘rabble’ so much greater and the supposedly harmonious structure so disturbed that a revolutionary proletariat could form in the cities. In this story, too, the decisive historical step comes in the form of urban contestations.
The connection between the city and contestation, which is often touched upon and often seen only implicit in Marx and Engels, is developed into a theoretical model in Henri Lefebvre’s post-Marxist urban theory. Lefebvre develops his theory with a passage through the texts of Marx and Engels and with an exploration of the role that the city plays in them. In a sense, the lack of such an elaboration of the socialist founding fathers means that Lefebvre (2016 [1992]) must conceive the ‘Marxist thought and the city’—the title of one of his books about the urban—himself. He evaluates and discusses a Marxian concept of the city in and with his explicit analysis and thereby brings it to light.

Lefebvre unfolds his approach by first placing the city in the context of Marx’s perspective proper, that is, by thinking of it within the framework of the critique of political economy. Lefebvre (2016: 91) writes that “the bourgeoisie invented political economy; it is its condition, its means of action, its ideological and scientific milieu” and therefore it (the bourgeoisie) should be attacked precisely in this field. However, such an approach required “courage” and—“like every combat on enemy territory”—it also harbored specific dangers (ibid.). Lefebvre thus alludes critically to the two basic evils of Marxist dogmatism that he has repeatedly highlighted: empiricism and economism. The city, that is Lefebvre’s actual thesis, could help prevent the critique of political economy from degenerating into economism and the view of the “conditions of existence that can be empirically determined” (ibid.: 27) from degenerating into empiricism. Lefebvre’s thesis is that the city is not only the empirical or real core of Marxist thought, but above all that the city—as a theme, as a problematique—can save Marxian thought from stagnation and keep it alive by importing its own complexity and heterogeneity.

The concept of the city, which is found at the bottom of Marxian thought, finds in Lefebvre’s version a rich offer of possibilities for further thinking, especially for urban research that is interested in the states and processes of the unsettled. This is concretely related to the city as a place or entity—the host of class struggle. Lefebvre (2016: 145) puts it this way in his summary:

> For both authors [Marx and Engels] this incessant combat had its origin in production, its basis in economic reality, its motives in its demands, its active support in the working class. And yet, the class struggle occurs in the city.

The city is the site of struggle and contestation—Lefebvre, Marx and Engels can agree on this. This approach has become something like the common ground for the field of critical urban research.

In current contributions to critical urban studies, the themes of ‘confict’ and ‘struggle’ continue to be central. Urban contestations themselves are at the center of many studies and research in this field. In the context of economic crisis and politics of austerity (Benach 2015), counter-movements and civic protests, such as Occupy (Hurwitz 2020) and Indignados (Ancelovici et al. 2016),
as well as right-to-the-city movements, loudly voiced their discontent with the current political and economic system and demanded radical democratic alternatives. Recent anthologies in critical urban studies (Ward et al. 2018; Hou and Knierbein 2017; Brenner et al. 2012) might create the impression that the field itself can be identified as a contestation; a contestation of more orthodox or mainstream analysis of urban development, that is grounded in a concern for social justice. This concern, in turn, is based on a critique of neoliberalism and its repercussions for urban politics and urban life, and may lead to envisioning a “radical […] alternative to the dismal, destructive status quo of worldwide capitalist urbanization” (Brenner et al. 2012: 9).

Such thinking of urban contestation is complemented by approaches from political theory in which the themes of conflict, contingency and antagonism are foregrounded. For example, the debate on the post-political city (Swyngedouw 2007) draws on Ernesto Laclau’s (1990) theory of antagonism, among others. An extension of this thinking consists in the fact that the concept of conflict takes on an ontological/hauntological role (Derrida 1994) in a post-foundational urban theory (Heindl 2020). Such social-theoretical foundations of the urban, however, are not firm and stable foundations, but precarious and contested matters of dispute (Landau et al. 2021). They form a shaky stage from which critical-reflexive thinking about the city can begin, for example: about the question of the materiality of the city (its materiality, its matter); about what it excludes and what emerges anew through this exclusion; about its thing-like and ghostly essence and set pieces; about current forms of spatialization and dislocation. Common ground of all these approaches is to describe the city as a condensation of conflicts, opposites and antagonisms.

The settlement of the city is the result of hegemonic efforts. In an approach in which urban conflicts are seen as defining elements, urban social movements, which have traditionally been of great importance for urban studies, are at the center. The right-to-the-city activists draw attention in their actions not least to the fact that the lines of conflict have become differentiated and multiplied (Hardt and Negri 2004). Multiple and small-scale urban lines of conflict have emerged from large-scale systemic struggles, from which the urban is composed, constructed and destroyed. The “social movements actualise antagonism” (Marchart 2013: 410) and they prefer to do so in the urban context. This is why movement research is important for understanding the city. The city can preferably be grasped through its lines of conflict, through an approach that is able to recognize and explicate the constitutive antagonistic element. Urban appropriation efforts—in the form of organized urban movements, but also in the form of everyday ‘desubjugation’ (Butler 2002) in the context of the city—move to the center of attention for an analysis of different forms of urban contestation.

This brings us to the six contributions we have gathered in the section. All of them are connected to the theme of urban contestations in one way or another. All of them bring together the complexity and heterogeneity of specific urban sites of contestations with larger questions of conditions, processes and outcomes of political and social struggle.
María de la Paz Toscani, Paula Rosa and Regina Vidosa write in their Chapter 17 “‘Ni Una Menos’: Practices, Aims and Achievements of a Grassroots Women’s Movement against Femicide and Patriarchal Relations in Argentina’ about a collective in Argentina that resists femicides and patriarchal relations. The actions emerged in 2015 to raise the visibility of the femicide issue that was occurring in the country for decades, violence that most often occurs behind the veils of private spaces. The authors write that the activist collective succeeded in bundling and making visible the historical claims of the Argentine feminist movement through its actions and with its presence in public space. The chapter analyses the way in which the collective challenges traditional gender concepts and practices in Argentina’s society, and also presents how the actions carried out by the collective have been able to institutionalize many of the demands of the feminist movement.

In Chapter 18 ‘Setting, Setzung, Sedimentation: Political Conflict and Radical Democracy in Urban Planning’, Gabu Heindl concretizes the attempt to bring urban planning into conversation with a post-foundational theory. In this theory, the concept of contingency refers to the always precarious character of social order, yet also to the necessity of founding ever new acts of social order(s). This leads, not least, to the fact that these efforts get into new disputes. Heindl uses the German term Setzung for her conception which can mean different things: Positioning and placement, settlement and deposition, the submission of a planning proposal or even the solidification of an issue in a law. According to Heindl’s thesis, explicit positioning is currently particularly important in democratic struggles over public space.

Based on a post-foundational approach, in Chapter 19, ‘(Un)Settling Urban Cultural Politics: New York’s People’s Cultural Plan and the Dislocation of Ghosts’, Friederike Landau deals with recent contestations of urban cultural politics. She analyses how the strategic cultural plan by the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, which aimed at fostering cultural production, was contested by self-organized cultural producers with their own People’s Cultural Plan. While the city’s plan can be understood as an attempt at settling urban cultural politics, the counter-plan openly unsettled and destabilized it, making visible the inequities affecting cultural production which were previously obscured by the generalizations of the official plan.

Nanke Verloo’s contribution ‘From Dispute, to Controversy, to Crisis: Conceptualizing Unsettling Dynamics in The Hague’ (Chapter 20) traces the escalation of an urban conflict about exclusion from public space. Conceptualizing the dynamics of the conflict as a dialectic of settling and unsettling at the street-level, the author shifts the focus of her analysis from the violent outbreak of youth riots and the police intervention itself to practices of everyday violence by the state, professionals and citizens alike in the aftermath of the closing of a community center. Verloo identifies the often-unattended everyday practices of exclusion and domination as the foundation of an open and physically violent conflict. Her analysis and further insights from research on youth riots offer a deeper understanding of violent urban contestations over the access to public space.
In ‘Served but Unsettled: The Contentious Side of Services for the Homeless’ (Chapter 21), Massimo Bricocoli and Simon Güntner shed light on welfare spaces in Europe by focusing on accommodation and support for the homeless in shelters in Hamburg and Milan. While shelters are crucial for day-to-day survival, these welfare spaces also represent ambiguous sites of stigmatization and exclusion. The authors address caring for the poor as contentious, where places designed as sanctuaries can easily be experienced as sites of bordering, ordering and othering due to the various constraints local care provision is confronted with.

Sophie Watson’s chapter on ‘The Challenges of Consensus, Conflict and Democratic Participation in Turbulent Waters’ (Chapter 22) deals with difference and diversity shaping cities and the contestations this leads to. These reflections are illustrated by the case of the Hampstead Ladies Pond in North London. In 2018, the dispute over the presence of transgender women at the ponds unsettled their previously harmonious shared use, with some women welcoming transgender women to the pools, others loudly objecting their access. The conflict and the way the conflict was resolved depict that belonging and inclusion are always contingent and subject to power relations, a dynamic of settling and unsettling of common spaces in changing contexts inevitable.

Overall, the section makes the city visible as a place of conflict and contestation, constantly entering unsettled relations with its institutional form, which, in turn, is the very breeding ground for unsettling. Contestations thus are not just an urban constitution, but a constitution of the unsettled.

References


