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Learning from Jerusalem: Re-thinking Urban Conflicts in the 21st Century Introduction

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Jerusalem - its past, present and future - will serve as the foundation of our understanding of the geographies of cities within contemporary urban theory and practice in the 21st century. The underlying theoretical supposition in this special feature¹ is that what have been labelled *contested* cities have growing similarities to less polarized cities—similarities found in the expansion of ethnic, racial and class conflicts that revolve around issues of housing, infrastructure, participation and identity. In this sense, Jerusalem represents a rather exceptional case study and demonstrates a powerful spatio-political urban pattern in the field of urban studies. The examination of Jerusalem can advance our understanding of the relationship between planning conflicts and urban geopolitics in a growing number of cities worldwide. With its unique position as the global center for the three largest monotheistic religions Jerusalem's history stretches back to biblical times. For the last century it is at the epicenter of a violent Israeli Palestinian nation-building project earning its place in the urban studies and planning literature as a self-explanatory category of an *ethnically contested city* (Bollens 2000; Shlay and Rosen 2015).

However, *the contested or divided cities* label commonly used in most Western academic writings has profound shortcomings. More precisely its focus on

¹ The papers in this special feature result from an academic workshop ('Learning from Jerusalem— Rethinking Planning and Urban Geopolitics') conducted in May 2014 in Jerusalem, organized by Jonathan Rokem and Haim Yacobi. The event was funded by The French Research Center in Jerusalem (CRFJ-CNRS) and the Bezalel Urban Design Program, Jerusalem. Special thanks to Haim Yacobi, Laura Vaughan, Oren Yiftachel, Michael Safier and Oren Shlomo for their constructive comments on earlier versions of this text.

ethno-national violence oftentimes lacks an ordinary understanding of the historical, political and religious daily frames of reading the urban. It is impossible to understand the history of municipal politics in cities with ethnic diversity that have been at one time or another under European control without relating to the colonial foundations of modern urbanism. In this sense colonial power relations remain an integral part of the contemporary urban condition that still resonate today (King 1990; Jacobs 1996). With regards to Jerusalem, it is impossible to discard the concept of *colonialism*, especially in the historical sense, but also with regards to present conditions; increasingly, researchers are diagnosing the distinct colonial features here—see Oren Shlomo (2016) and Oren Yiftachel (2016), with the latter proposing taking this line of thought a step further, insinuating that Jerusalem should not be treated as an exception but rather as a window to understand neo-colonial relations emerging in a multitude of other cities worldwide.

Broadly used within this special feature, *ethnically contested cities* and *colonial urban-ism* serve as alternative and partial theoretical frameworks that offer dominant explanations within urban studies literature to some of the deep-rooted forces of ethnicity, nationalism, religion and class conflicts. Precisely, the combination of all these interrelated forces shaping spatial and social conditions on the ground move us away from all-inclusive explanations of the politics and power nexus in Jerusalem. Instead, it points us towards the theoretical and practical potential of *Learning from Jerusalem* as a way to approach wide-ranging (un)ordinary complexities constituting local and global conflicts in cities at the core of every ordinary urbanism.

This special feature is based on a critical reading of the expanding literature on urban conflicts and contested cities, and consists of six papers covering a broad range of topics, including: gentrification, urban sovereignty and infrastructure, Agamben's theories, comparative urbanism and flexible structuralism. It is important to note it is not suggested that Jerusalem is a *model city* of urban conflict (nor that such a category exists), but rather that other cities are starting to echo some of the extreme urban conditions seen in Jerusalem (see Safier

2001; Yiftachel and Yacobi 2002; Wari 2011; Bollens 2012; Rokem 2013; Dumper 2014).

One rapidly evolving field of research within urban studies is the spatio-politics of contested urban space (Hepburn 2004), especially in relation to the role of planning in such sites (see, e.g. Anderson 2010; Bollens 2001, 2012; Calame and Charlesworth 2009; Gaffikin and Morrisey 2011; Pullan and Baillie 2013; Rokem and Allegra forthcoming). This interest is not surprising, given that several cities and postcolonial regimes are witnessing violent ethnic, racial, religious and class-based conflicts. This has led to an increasingly critical review of some of the contributions to the study of spatio-politics of contested cities. Although most of the research about spatio-politics in contested cities has been associated with extreme national conflicts concentrated in urban areas such as Jerusalem, Belfast, Sarajevo and Nicosia (see, e.g. Calame and Charlesworth 2009; Bollens 2012), conflicts related to nationalism, ethnicity and race are becoming more common and relevant to a growing number of urban spaces worldwide (Marcuse 2002). More specifically, the majority of contemporary urban studies literature overlooks similar conditions in a growing number of *ordinary* urban areas, which are not considered part of the typical *contested cities category* (see Allegra, Casaglia, and Rokem 2012). Mass urbanization has meant that cities have developed 'brand identities' to attract tourists and investments. Noticeably, some cities highlight social and political values, which Bell and de-Shalit (2011) have described as a city's *ethos* or *spirit*. Different cities compete globally and become known for specific qualities to attract tourists and new residents. In this sense, Jerusalem is a religious magnet for three major world faiths, placing it in the same urban typology as Varanasi, Mecca and the Vatican. However, as the following papers will discuss in detail, it contains several other qualities that can be used as a focus for wider comparison.

When discussing the comparative value of urban difference (McFarlane and Robinson 2012) it is useful to acknowledge the current lively debate regarding the Euro-centricity of the canonical theories of the academic field of urban studies (Roy 2009; Peck 2015). This debate has focused on the validity of singular

cases from the global North as main sources of urban theory production, instead arguing that such cities should be considered as *ordinary cities* within a multifaceted conceptual framework (Robinson 2006, 2011). It is suggested that the texts throughout this special feature should be read as a hypothetical framework for an academic discipline more open to the varieties and complexities of urban conflicts. We are fully aware that de-exceptionalizing Jerusalem within a wider prism of global urban conflict runs the grave risk of de-historicization or homology. As several of the papers in this feature suggest, this might be overcome by a contextual understanding of the local conditions. Building knowledge from a particular case can uncover in what ways the more extreme political and historical circumstances in Jerusalem are echoed in contested urban practices and policies and how they compare across the wider world of cities (Robinson 2011, 2014).

The initial proposition is that emphasizing the uniqueness of Jerusalem (and other contested cities) can prevent us from recognizing the commonalities between this iconic city and other cities with social and spatial divisions. Obviously, there is no intention here of ignoring Jerusalem's past and current colonial geographies; yet the very question that remains open is whether one should challenge the canonical differentiation between causal categories of spatial segregation, division and conflict (i.e. driven by market gentrification, state led or social dynamics, with the latter perhaps encompassing some form of societal *othering* of individuals and communities). Indeed, there is a tendency in the literature to essentialize specific *contested cities* as the containers of particular attributes that distinguish them from other urban areas. In this sense, it may be better to reconsider the conventional urban division and the way it is utilized to define spatial and social conditions in different cities (van Kampen 2007).

One such example is the claim that a major part of urban growth worldwide—and the global *West* and *North* are no exception—takes place in informal settlements. Theoretically labelled *urban informality* (Roy and AlSayyad 2004) or *grey space* (Yiftachel 2009) and encapsulating a multitude of groups, bodies, housing, lands, economies and discourses, these settlements lie in the shadows of formal

cities and exist outside the gaze of state authorities and city plans.

Cities are becoming increasingly polarized, with ethnicity and migration augmenting the existing multi-layered (physical, legal, symbolic) city boundaries. However, existing *theories of everything* (see Yiftachel 2016), such as dominant globalization discourses (Sassen 2001), urban age theories (Burdett and Sudjic 2006) and more recently planetary far-reaching neo-liberal explanation of *the urban without an outside* (Brenner 2013; Brenner and Schmid 2015) do not explain the new forces behind the partitioning.

The papers in this feature take a less all- inclusive approach and focus on case studies of the built environment and planning policy in the formal and informal processes of urban development. The papers portray individual urban planning stories involving diverse communities. Overall, the aim is to learn from the local conditions in Jerusalem and to focus on spaces of conflict and negotiations on the one hand, and on territories of hope and cooperation on the other.

The first paper by Hila Zaban investigates the gentrification processes in West Jerusalem's Baka neighbourhood. It presents the story of the housing market and its shift from the Palestinian residents to Jewish immigrants of Moroccan origin. In the last few decades, houses in Baka have increased in value and it has become one of Jerusalem's most sought-after areas with an influx of affluent immigrants from the USA displacing the earlier Moroccan population. Zaban suggests this adds a layer of complexity to the past and present transformation of the neighbourhood. Oren Shlomo investigates the darker side of planning, with a specific interest in the multidimensional aspects of sovereignty in urban systems. This paper assesses Israeli policies and practices and their impact on the ongoing (lack) of infra- structure development and its (mis)management as a means to control East Jerusalem's Palestinian population. Amina Nolte unpacks the complexity of the recently opened Light Railway and its dual role in both connecting and dividing Palestinian and Israeli populations in Jerusalem. Nolte questions whether large transport infrastructure is inherently political or if there is a *politics of infrastructure* at stake in Jerusalem where the Light Rail can be seen

as an effective governance tool but also as a political claim in that it connects the current de facto separated Palestinian side with Jewish West Jerusalem. Moving on to a wider look at the prism of the *contested* and *ordinary* debate in urban studies, Camillo Boano's investigative theoretical approach employs Agambenian *paradigmatic whatever urbanism* and Foucaudian *governmental* and *biopolitical* readings, suggesting 'an alternative narrative for the urban'. The direct research by design activity experiences of the author are discussed as a means of contrasting the 'hyper-potential case of Jerusalem beyond its exception', pointing towards what we can learn from comparing incommensurable cities. This is further elaborated upon in my own contrastive assessment of Jerusalem and Stockholm within Jennifer Robinson's (2006) *ordinary cities* theoretical framework. I argue that via a development of urban patterns based on local contextual factors, there is a growing need to start de-orientalizing the research on extreme urban conflicts.

In the concluding commentary, Oren Yiftachel further reflects on the various types of structural forces that can be found in Jerusalem: colonial, religious, gendered, national, global, political and ordinary. Grounded on a South-Eastern theoretical perspective, *dynamic structuralism* is proposed by Yiftachel as a framework to capture and unpack the overarching forces shaping the contemporary urban. Metaphorically captured within Jorge Borges' short story of the *Aleph—A Place of All Places*, Yiftachel calls for a more reflective research agenda suggesting a move beyond the logic of most traditional critical urban theories (CUT), which tend to privilege a particular all-inclusive narrative of the world. Yiftachel compellingly concludes that Jerusalem is not an exception, but a hyper-example of the major forces that shape the contemporary city. Rather than being extreme, it is the harbinger of things to come.

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