



## Urban ethics: Towards a research agenda on cities, ethics and normativity

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To live in a city is to be confronted with difference, contingency and conflict, and with questions about how one should live one's life in the urban context. What is a 'good' life in the city? How does my 'good' life affect others and vice versa? Is the 'good' also that which is 'right' and 'proper'? Or, perhaps, who should be *made* to live in accordance with specific values, how and why?

Urban dwellers do not encounter such questions in a realm of pure freedom. In contemporary cities, as elsewhere, the question how one should live often seems determined by norms and practicalities, by culture and authority, by one's access to resources, regulated by regimes and legal prescriptions, negotiated by power struggles that are both macro- and micro-political. Under such conditions questions of good life attain a cultural or political edge; they have an economic dimension, and they often concern legal matters. However, the question how one should live in the city will never be completely answered through culture, religion, politics, economics, or law alone. Negotiation through ethics and therefore a vocabulary of ethics become pivotal, we argue, when the logics of socio-economic relations, law or political conflict do not prevail. To speak of urban ethics is to point toward a *dimension* of normativity in cities that is constituted relationally and differentially. Urban ethics also denotes particular *means* with which people and institutions negotiate urban life. If urban researchers want to come to terms with the complexities of normativity in urban life, they need to address the fundamental aspects of urban ethics more explicitly.

In doing so, we also must take into account discourses on ethical urban life in recent conjunctures. Whereas the ethical dimension of the urban has been addressed through different vocabularies and practices that can be understood as forms of urban ethics in an analytical sense, we contend that over the last two decades, questions about urban life have increasingly been raised explicitly as *ethical* questions. These patterns of ethicization are part of a wider, in some ways problematic

ethical turn that has been diagnosed in social science and humanities disciplines. In these recent conjunctures, to pose a question about urban life as a question of ethics is to envision debates about choices that individuals should make freely, on their own accord, because they are motivated by a desire to do what seems good and right – and, to some extent, urban. In this imaginary, 'good' urban subjects are universalist, post-cultural ethicists.

Urban research must address more directly how this rise of ethics talk leads to depoliticization and what that means in different settings. Ethical framings and concerns have been on the rise in diverse urban social fields (Amin, 2006; Mostafavi, 2013), for example, in architecture and urban planning. One signpost was the Venice architectural biennial in the year 2000 titled "Less Aesthetics, More Ethics".<sup>1</sup> This explicit demand for ethics – used here as a shorthand for good and responsible rather than merely profitable designs – represents an important aspect of practical urbanism, architecture, design and participatory art in city spaces (Bishop, 2012; Collier & Lakoff, 2005; Thompson, 2012, 2015). Discussions about living ethically in the city are also apparent in the area of ecological sustainability. Explicitly ethical initiatives target regular city dwellers and experts alike, focusing on the ways we are supposed to act with regard to the waste we produce, the energy we consume, or the traffic we cause. Ethical appeals for changing the lifestyles of urbanites – voluntarily, through bans and incentives, and through benignly authoritarian nudging (John, Smith, & Stoker, 2009) – have gained in importance in the context of global climate change, which is often presented as a consequence of accumulated individual consumption. In many academic disciplines researchers search for an environmentally ethical urbanism, while such programs' urban-ethical frameworks have rarely been investigated.<sup>2</sup>

In such settings, urban-ethical discourses and strategies are relatively easy to delineate. In everyday life, however, urban ethics have a

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<sup>1</sup> It shifted the discussion from the built environment towards the intersections of architecture, planning and urban development, particularly in cities of the global South, focusing on questions of the environment, society and technology under the rubric of ethics, rather than politics (Biennale di Venezia, 2000). Writing about architectural circles in Turkey, Uğur Tanyeli (2011) notes: "few things have been talked about as much in recent years" as ethics. Tanyeli shows that the denotation of ethics-talk often remains unclear: In debates among architecture professionals, the term can refer to professional standards, to environmental concerns, to non-commercial orientations, or to aesthetic conventions. Nevertheless, the majority of buildings being built show little attention to ethical deliberation.

<sup>2</sup> Case studies and further reflections on urban ethics along the lines discussed in this article can be found in Ege & Moser, (forthcoming). For an approach that takes ethics as a resource for "normative demands to bear upon the social world of order, rules, and public policy", along the lines of an ethics of care and cosmopolitan responsibility, see the geographer Popke (2006, 2007, 2009).

much broader meaning that goes beyond these discursive forms with their rationalist, voluntaristic and individualist tendencies. We argue that the rationalist ethics discourse and the governmentality with which it is associated often obscure actual ethical antagonisms, complexity and subaltern critique.

In this article, we develop a research agenda on urban ethics to better understand the role of ethics in the conduct of everyday life in cities. Drawing on examples from our own research, we highlight how the ethical dimension of urban life can be analyzed without losing sight of materialist aspects. In order to carve out our argument, we first outline the main features of our research agenda, which we apply to a case study. We then scrutinize the urban studies literature and show how the relationship of urban life and ethics has been discussed so far: We include work on the anthropology of ethics, on morality in cities, and on social and environmental (in)justice and ethics, and we point out what is different from our approach. In the last sections, we review two ways of looking at urban ethics that we consider particularly promising – and challenging – for analysis because they highlight different aspects of ethical normativity: a focus on moral economies, which primarily refer to historical sedimentations of rights and responsibilities in moments of crisis, and a focus on social creativity, which stresses imagination and the future tense. Our conclusion describes the research agenda that is emerging from our interdisciplinary research.<sup>3</sup>

## 1. Researching urban ethics

For our research agenda, it is crucial to understand what urban dwellers articulate as “good life” and “living in the right way”. For that purpose, rather than starting with definitions of ethics by philosophers and ethicists, we outline an approach that leads to a clearer sense of what is being problematized as (un)ethical in what ways and by what means. Drawing on the work of the anthropologists Stephen Collier and Andrew Lakoff (Collier and Lakoff, 2005, p. 22), who re-formulated Michel Foucault’s (1985) work on ethics and the subject in their study on regimes of living, we analyze the components of urban ethics in particular contexts of urban life. Urban ethics, then, express, practically and theoretically, answers to this rather general question: How should one live in the city?

### 1.1. Ethics of urban life: forms of problematization

Following Foucault, and Collier and Lakoff (see also Faubion, 2011), this question has the following components:

- (a) imaginations of *practices and virtues* deemed good and proper (“how”),
- (b) *types of normativity* involved, that is, the norms, values, virtues, incentives working on what Foucault (1985: 26) calls the ethical substance (“should”),
- (c) *actors* and the imagined models of the ethical *subject* (“one”/“we”),
- (d) imaginations of good, right or proper *urbanity* and *urban form of life* (“live in the city”).

These stipulations understand ethics as the ways in which individuals engage with and relate to moral codes, that is, socially legitimated and, in that sense, normative schemas of good behavior and the proper conduct of life (Foucault, 1985; Dreyfus et al., 1983). Social actors may refer to explicit moral imperatives or principles, rather than an understanding of mere correctness or propriety. They may or may not label these debates explicitly as ethical, but, in engaging with how one should live in the city, they refer to values, virtues and the conduct of life, and can thus, in an analytical sense, be understood as

<sup>3</sup> A note on the research context and funding will follow. (Removed for anonymity).

problematizing urban ethics. While moral and ethical implications pervade social life, urban ethics can be understood as a field of interaction in which a range of actors in cities negotiate moral and social ideals, principles and norms.

Often, ethical debates challenge what has been taken for granted or seen as normal and morally sound. Urban ethics are linked to debates about justice, but they represent and negotiate the related principles and ideals in specific ways that tend to scorn established mechanisms of adjudication and legal frameworks. Urban ethics are expressed in discourses which involve public statements and actions, they are strategically formed into urban ethical projects, but they also link to a more diffuse realm of everyday ethics. In that sense, ethics necessarily points to affect and embodied practice, which often remain implicit in lived practice, in gestures and in silence (Zigon, 2007; Das, 2015; Muehlebach, 2012, p. 19).

Ethics as a set of attempts to prescribe specific ways of conduct (as in the formation of good subjects living good urban lives) are shaped by specific contexts. What is considered ethical is not merely a question for individuals, but also one of groups, milieus and collectives, even though the ethical must pass through individuals’ work on their selves. For instance, waste recycling, urban gardening, conscious shopping and cleaning up polluted spaces congeal into specific lifestyles and subjectivities, often prevalent among relatively privileged middle-classes. While these practices are considered ethical by these actors, they may take on different social meanings in the eyes of less privileged urban dwellers (see Dürr & Fischer, 2018; Dürr & Winder, 2016).

Many forms of urban ethics depend on discourses that are emphatically ethical *and* urban. Despite the complexities of lived ethics and moralities, ethical discourses and projects – especially those calling themselves ethical – often address their subjects as free human beings who negotiate conflict, and are motivated only by their own conviction about the good, as opposed to cultural traditions, a natural attitude (Husserl, 1913), pure economic rationality, “mere” political self-interest, straightforward legality or obedience to superiors. In the logic of such discourses (also in Foucault’s terminology), the presupposed individual responsibility may even serve to distinguish ethical debates from questions framed in terms of conventional morality. This typology may help to distinguish urban ethics within the wider field of moralities.<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that the creation of urban ethical subjects tends to imply a specific kind of exclusion of others: some are framed as people who have different values, some as unethical or immoral, and others as not capable of acting ethically at all – and thus also insufficiently ‘urban’. These subjects are often represented by counter-images of bad, failed, irresponsible urban lives. Constellations of subjects labelled as ethical and unethical often involve a self-confident politics of representation in which self-described ethical, emphatically urban subjects represent those who, in their view, cannot represent themselves. The political dangers of positioning reflexive, enlightened ethical subjects in opposition to followers of tradition and moralities are obvious as such discourses reproduce ideologies of civilization, cultivation and modernity. Rather than using a clear-cut distinction between morality and ethics, research on urban ethics should address the complexities of normative engagement with the urban world and different ways of classifying them.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> For elaboration on a “natural attitude” type of normative life which reserves “ethics” for more conscious forms of engagement see Zigon (2011). As a result of “moral breakdown” and – with a different focus – see Foucaultian authors such as Collier and Lakoff (2005), Rabinow (2008) and Faubion (2011).

<sup>5</sup> Social and cultural anthropologists (for example Laidlaw, 2014, p. 4) argue that ethics and morality are practically indistinguishable in empirical, ethnographic research, so terminological discussions should be left to others.

## 1.2. The urban in urban ethics

Since we claim that there are urban ethics, we must explain how the city and concepts of the urban enter the equation. Henri Lefebvre's concepts of the production of space (Lefebvre, 1991) and the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1996, pp. 147–59) allow for an interdisciplinary framing of social processes as bound to the space they imagine, produce and use. These concepts permit inquiries into the interstices between the legal and the political understanding of right, which can be negotiated as ethical, especially in a historical conjuncture in which this mode becomes particularly prominent. Building on this starting point, we suggest four ways of thinking through the *urban* in urban ethics. Each opens up new vistas on how the urban can be framed in urban ethics, but also implies some blind spots.

In a first approximation, urban ethics can be understood as ethics *in* the city, treating the city as a backdrop for ethical experiences and brokering. Such an approach has the advantage of not presupposing any essential notion of urbanity and of being open for a wide range of research that follows the concerns of different actors. Obviously, however, the idea of an urban 'backdrop' remains analytically unsatisfactory.

Secondly, the urban appears as an object of ethical negotiation and reflection – ethics of urban life in the sense of, for example, housing, traffic and pollution, but also wider questions of a good and just city. Again, at least provisionally, such an approach can rely on common-sense notions of what a 'city' is and what 'urban' problems are – and it can follow actors' understandings of these questions.

Thirdly, using the (highly contested, see Robinson, 2006) notion that the urban has generic properties or tendencies (see Amin, 2006<sup>6</sup>) we can ask about ethics that are not only *in* the city and *about* concerns with domains of life in cities, but about ethical negotiations that take place *under urban conditions*. Conventionally, the urban is connected to the routine experience of dealing with difference in shared or public spaces, with anonymity and stranger sociality, a range of complex social networks, and with specific cultural economies and spatial representations of social order. In anti-urban discourses, the anonymity and heterogeneity thought to be typical conditions of urban life are considered detrimental to genuine ethical motivations, let alone to warm-hearted behavior towards other city dwellers: We may think of Simmel's blasé urban man (Simmel, 1971 [1903]) or Putnam's (2000, p. 205) argument that urban heterogeneity leads to weak social capital and a lack of social coherence. More optimistic appraisals of urban behavior take urbanity as a precondition for ethical patterns of behavior or for desirable ways of living. Anonymity here takes on a positive meaning, for instance in moments of political upheaval when new bonds and solidarity among city dwellers form.

This leads to the fourth meaning of the urban in urban ethics, which refers to the ethics *of the urban*, of urbanism, urbanity or *Urbanität*, that is, to ethical postulations according to which people *should* be urban and behave in specific ways when making use of the potentials that are seen as specific to cities and, thus, to urbanism. In this understanding, urbanity comprises particular ways of life and aesthetics, the social texture and built environment of a city, and the ideas and discourses related to them such as order, diversity or the negotiation of different interests. These views of what it means to be emphatically urban, of how truly urban lives are to be lived, frequently have strong normative implications. When ideals of urbanity and modernity are articulated,

<sup>6</sup> Reflecting on the "good city", Amin (2006, p. 1012), argues that "no discussion of the good life can ignore the particularities of the urban way of life, ranging from the trials of supply, congestion, pollution and commuting, to the swells of change, scale, inequality, distribution and sensory experience in urban life. The daily negotiation of the urban environment has become central in defining the privations, provisions, prejudices and preferences of a very large section of humanity."

the rich and educated are often particularly privileged. Other urban-ethical projects, however, attempt to use the potentials of the city and the ethical imagination (Moore, 2011) for more subversive, minority, even counter-hegemonic purposes, such as designing new forms of everyday life. These projects take issue with gloomy perspectives on cities and embrace the opportunities that size, heterogeneity and anonymity (are taken to) offer.<sup>7</sup>

These perspectives highlight the ways urban ethics, in problematizing how one should live in the city, function as modes of dealing with tensions, challenges and conflict in urban settings, and they also create specific ways of taking issue with *conditions urbaines*. In urban ethical discourses and negotiations, power operates in distinct ways. Urban ethics are a discursive space in which not only the potentials and restrictions of urban life are debated, but also in which creativity in shaping the social texture and spatial design of cities becomes possible.

Because all of these dynamics deserve closer attention, we present in the following section an example of how one activist group expressed ethics in an urban situation through an urban-ethical intervention. Drawing on this case study, we show how ethics and the urban are intertwined in ways that are less obvious than in the fields mentioned so far – but just as important.

## 2. Goldgrund's activities in Munich

In Munich, Germany, the housing market is under pressure. Rental prices are increasing rapidly and real estate is expensive. For a long time, this situation attracted little attention and was barely scandalized, possibly because Munich residents tend to consider their city to be a good place to live, with a broad middle-class whose members were expected to make ends meet. Lately, however, the housing situation has triggered public actions. In these, an art and activists network named *Goldgrund* (golden ground) plays a leading role (Moser, 2017).<sup>8</sup>

In 2012, Goldgrund appeared in the public sphere for the first time, in the guise of a real estate company planning a large project near the university in the central district of Schwabing. They advertised a place called L'Arche de Munich, conceived as "a perfectly closed city district" for so-called high performers directly on the traffic hub *Münchner Freiheit*, where "self-confident citizens, chatoyant artists and internationally well-established professors" abound.<sup>9</sup> Goldgrund promised a "comprehensive feeling of safe comfort" and "durable security" in an "appealing *Compact Community*" (English in the original German advertisement). With a view "of both the Siegestor and the Feldherrenhalle" – prominent remnants of past militarism – victories in one's professional life would come true, the advertisements suggested, while at night, residents could enjoy "the vibrant City in Cinemascope on our strictly private freedom plaza" (Goldgrund, 2012). The project was released in an online real estate portal, flyers were distributed, and a

<sup>7</sup> For decades the ideas of the Situationist International, such as the practice of "dérive" as ecstatic urban experience, have found wide circulation among artists, activists and intellectuals and are continuously appropriated for new purposes. On ethics of urbanity see Ege, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> These observations were collected in the urban ethics research group's Munich project "Housing and Housing Politics," which used participant observation, interviews with the organizers and participants, and analysis of media and internet material.

<sup>9</sup> The exuberant tone continues in the description of the location: "city, country, river – we offer you all at once: You live directly beside the Leopoldstrasse and hear only the ripple of tasteful fountains. You are proud citizen of a vivid metropolis and, at the same time, resident of a classy luxury oasis. By day you work in the city's heart and at night you sit under the acacia trees of our plaza." Note that "L'Arche de Munich" in German is homophonous with "the arse of Munich". <http://www.goldgrund.org/die-lage/> Accessed

fictitious sales office was set up (Günther, 2012, p. R3).<sup>10</sup>

On a closer look at the text's diction and the planned location, it becomes obvious that this was a satirical project. Still, the campaign moved various groups to action. A number of real estate agents offered their services for selling the planned apartments. People inquired about service jobs. The chairman of the district council received furious phone calls and parents of the nearby elementary school collected signatures against the project. Even the councilwoman heading the department of urban development reacted to the project with a letter underscoring the specific regulations that real estate projects are subject to in Munich (Goldgrund, 2012).

Goldgrund continued this satirical take on Munich's escalating gentrification. The group campaigned for maintaining undeveloped empty spaces in public ownership and against the demolition of inner-city buildings. They organized a sales tour for speculators and advertised a training course for real estate agents: "how to sell, how to trick, how to bluff" (Becker, 2015, p. R4).<sup>11</sup> Their activities culminated in 2015 in the – genuine – effort to establish Bellevue di Monaco, two vacant buildings in the city center that were to be turned into a meeting space where young refugees and families could live while studios, workshop and rehearsal spaces for the cultural scene were created. In 2016, the City of Munich approved this project, and contributed the property along with 1.7 million Euros in subsidies to cover renovation costs to Goldgrund's non-profit social cooperative.

These projects express a strong sense of what the good urban life and a just city are. In some ways, Goldgrund's campaigns fit into recent writing on urban social movements and politics (Mayer, 2010; Harvey, 2013; Castells, 2015). The Goldgrund activists are part of an intellectually oriented middle-class, and also of the local arts scene. Research on urban social movements in many cities stresses the importance of these milieus. Many "creative artists and members of the educated classes" (Holm, 2011, p. 94) engage in activism and know how to generate attention. Cities are crucial sites of social protest, as shown during the debates over the right to the city stirred by Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, Ida Susser, Andrej Holm and others. Goldgrund positions itself in the tradition of subversive politics and activist (art) forms, especially those that have been labelled communication-guerilla.<sup>12</sup> The Goldgrund activists mobilize artists' and intellectuals' networks and use their access to (local) media (Holmes, 2012).

However, the Goldgrund activism illustrates a configuration of ideals of the urban, of politics, ethics and moralities, and thereby of urban-ethical discourses and subject positions that has not been adequately understood so far. In order to achieve a stricter regulation of the housing market, for instance, the movement constructs Munich's particular urbanity as something that needs to be preserved. A leader of the group, the cabaret-entrepreneur Till Hofmann, comments: "We want to create a consciousness about what makes Munich worth living" (Fischhaber, 2013, p. R4).<sup>13</sup> In Goldgrund's public statements and

(footnote continued)  
22.3.16.

<sup>10</sup> The production of flyers and the use of taglines is reminiscent of the so-called "ad busting" strategy through which advertising is alienated, misconstrued or reinterpreted (Beaugrand & Smolarski, 2016, pp. 6–7).

<sup>11</sup> These actions are reminiscent of groups like *The Yes Men*, an activist group whose two leading members, "Andy Bichlbaum" und "Mike Bonnano," present themselves in disguise to different audiences mobilizing support for outrageous neoliberal economic projects (Doll, 2008, pp. 245–7; Mouffe, 2013, p. 513–4 and the website [www.yeslab.org](http://www.yeslab.org)).

<sup>12</sup> In 1967, writing about "semiotic guerilla," Umberto Eco pleaded for a subversive use of symbols/characters (1985, p. 146–7). The term is used for people employing subversive political acts involving manipulating the signs and codes generally used by power-holders for oppositional purposes. Examples include the Situationist International, a host of cultural geographers and the culture jammers (cf. *autonome a.f.r.i.k.a-gruppe et al.*, 2001, pp. 5–7).

<sup>13</sup> The term "worth living" (*lebenswert*) has many applications. It evokes the problematic of the good life in the city, resonating with older, social-democratic

actions, social and economic questions are present, but in a specific way, connecting them to the ethical project of the urban good life.

It is worth noting which forms of protest Goldgrund did *not* use. In contrast to earlier waves of urban protests in German cities, Goldgrund members never organized a permanent squat. When they did break into houses this was only to repair apartments or conduct expert assessments of building structures with the aim of proving demolition to be unnecessary. In these ethics-oriented forms of urban activism, antagonistic confrontations are avoided. The challenges to the principle of property ownership have their limits.

Goldgrund not only practice urban ethics in the sense of ethics *in* the city. They ethically problematize specific domains of urban life, especially the housing market and thus engage in an ethics *of* living in the city. In order to understand their strategies and their effects, it is important to consider that they act under specific urban conditions: they initially made use of urban anonymity and the opaque nature of housing providers and marketers in a large city. They then mobilized an urban network of cultural entrepreneurs that again mobilized further networks (as well as pre-existing images of Munich as a liberal place). They orchestrated public spectacle in different media, making use of a highly symbolic urban space. What is more, in the rhetoric and the imagery of 'welcome', people involved often referred to the diversity of urban life, and turned it into an ethical argument in the sense of an ethics of urbanity: To live in a city *should* mean to live with strangers, to "tolerate" or even embrace heterogeneity.

Another example of voluntaristic ethical engagement in Munich made headline news worldwide when, in 2015, refugees arriving at the city's main train station were greeted enthusiastically by large numbers of volunteers – at least for some time. Goldgrund's Bellevue project perfectly fits into this drive for a good and ethical city in the context of migration. In addressing questions of migration and citizenship, projects like these re-phrase them as questions of how the inhabitants of Munich want to live and what they take to be a good city. In trying to be inclusive, they attempt to foster a *just* and therefore *good* city, which they also take to be an emphatically *urban* city, in the sense of embracing difference.

The political ambivalences of such projects need to be spelled out elsewhere. We have dwelled on this case because it exemplifies how multi-layered ethical questions and rhetoric come to the surface in urban conflicts. These are difficult to address with conventional frameworks of analysis but can be understood in a nuanced way through a lens that focuses on urban ethics. Goldgrund is imaginable only in an urban setting – and the group engages in what it regards as essentially urban solutions to urban problems. Munich may be a city specifically known as wealthy, liberal, supportive of the arts, bourgeois, and down-to-earth with regionalist tendencies, and while other cases may highlight different aspects of urban ethics, similar ethical urban activism can be observed elsewhere.

Our purpose here is to introduce a research agenda on a more general level and to show what it can add in comparison with other, more established lines of research on the city. In the following section, we situate our research agenda in the literature of urban studies and adjacent disciplines more broadly. We review three research strands which deal with ethics: the anthropology of ethics, sociological writing on cities and morality, and social and environmental (in)justice in the city. Our aim is to discuss their understanding of ethics and to show how our research agenda can advance these strands.

(footnote continued)

discourses on quality of life (as opposed to single-minded economic growth), with a specific aesthetics of urban planning (see Crowhurst Lennard & Lennard, 1995), and with more recent discourses around liveability which emphasize the amenities of cities for upper-(middle)-class residents.

### 3. Research in anthropology of ethics, on morality in cities, and about social and environmental (In)Justice

#### 3.1. Anthropology of ethics

The emergence of urban ethics as a concern and our interest in their historical trajectory resonate with recent writings on ethics in many disciplines, including anthropology (for an overview, see Fassin, 2009; Lambek et al., 2015), geography (Amin, 2006; Barnett, 2010, 2012, 2016; Popke, 2006, 2007, 2009), sociology (Bergmann and Luckmann, 1999a, b; Bogner, 2011), and cultural studies (Zylinska, 2005). There is also a slightly older turn to ethics in cultural and social theory (Garber et al., 2000).<sup>14</sup> These lines of research not only reflect a broader ethical turn, but also offer frameworks for conceptualizing ethics as a field in social and cultural studies.

If there is one argument that unites recent approaches, it is that research in different disciplines has conceptually (though not necessarily empirically) neglected the ethical dimension of peoples' lives. In social and cultural anthropology, it is argued that this has led to the illegitimate reduction of actors' normative sensibilities, commitments and reflections to mere ideologies, interests or strategies (Das, 2007; Laidlaw, 2014; Zigon and Throop, 2014; Lambek, 2015, Fassin, 2015).<sup>15</sup> Popke (2007) and Barnett (2012) advance similar arguments in human geography. Both practically and in terms of methods, the resulting studies have pursued the goal of uncovering this ethical dimension. This holds true for studies of religious life and competing ethical demands (Laidlaw, 2014; Robbins, 2012), research on moral breakdown in individual and collective crises (Zigon, 2007), analyses of large-scale ethical conflicts (Fassin, 2015, p. 178) in the civic realm such as debates about 'humanitarian military interventions' and the treatment of refugees, and accounts of social change and the ethical imagination (Moore, 2011). Further studies investigate embodied ethical sensibilities in mundane activities, especially those performed under conditions of inequality and legacies of violence – phenomena termed ordinary ethics by Das (2015, p. 64).

In some cases, anthropologists frame their arguments as a critique of ideology, registering (neo-)Marxist skepticism towards idealist ethical debates and their functions in the context of neoliberal governmentality (Muehlebach, 2012), or in that of international interventions legitimised through humanitarianism (Fassin, 2015; Ticktin 2014). One important inspiration for this criticism is the work of Chantal Mouffe (2005) who has argued that the concept of the political should be reserved for straightforwardly 'agonistic' forms of collective struggle, rather than de-politicized imaginaries of pluralist consensus. Mouffe and others who critique a liberal state of post-democracy, have taken ethicized and moralized discourse to be an integral part of post-political conjunctures.<sup>16</sup>

However contentious the relationship between politics and ethics may be, in the anthropological literature attempts to resolve it in conceptual terms are rare. The general view is that researchers should explore the meanings adopted by actors and the dynamics of different discourses, rather than pre-judging through analytical terminology.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> The "turn to ethics" is usually diagnosed to have occurred in the mid-1990s (Badiou, 2012; Jameson, 2002; Rancière, 2006, p. 2); the upsurge of "urban ethics" appears to have started a few years later.

<sup>15</sup> These writers take care not to be dismissed as moralists: "The claim on which the anthropology of ethics rests is not an evaluative claim that people are good: it is a descriptive claim that they are evaluative" (Laidlaw, 2014, p. 3).

<sup>16</sup> Alain Badiou (2012), Jacques Rancière (2006) and Chantal Mouffe (2005) associate ethics with an ideological realm, ascribing greater ontological weight to "the political" (though not necessarily parliamentary politics in a "post-political" context), which is conceptualized as antagonism/struggle/event. Both anthropological "pragmatism" and Marxist critique contrast with conventional sociological positions following systems theory such as Bogner's (2011).

<sup>17</sup> Interested in large-scale public controversies as ethical questions, Fassin

In this perspective, attempts at distinguishing between ethics, morality and politics are caught up in a vicious circle – as such distinctions are themselves a question of politics, morality, and ethics (see Holbraad, 2018).

For inquiries into urban ethics, this sort of social and cultural anthropology pragmatism is helpful because it produces analytical vocabularies and genealogies. These concern, for example, the ethical subject in relation to societal moralities and historical conjunctures, and notions of autonomy and decision-making in their real-life complexity. The latter are also of potential interest to other disciplines such as history or geography. The focus on everyday practices, thoughts and affects puts notions such as that of the free, ethical subject in context, without giving in to social or cultural determinism. It thus uncovers the ways in which ethics are embedded in everyday life (Das, 2007, 2015) and connect with public debates (Fassin, 2015), and is therefore freed from confinement in rationalist models of debate and communication. Such studies, however, have generally not paid much attention to the urban, beyond using cities as research sites. Research with an urban ethics lens builds on this work, but it can also add to it significantly by relating ethics to spatial arrangements, the urban dimensions of social networks, and the production of ethics through everyday practices that are specifically urban.

#### 3.2. Sociology of cities and morality

While the city mostly appears as a background in recent anthropological work on ethics, it figures prominently in the ethnographic tradition in urban sociology. City dwellers' moral lives have been a crucial concern of Western urbanists throughout much of the last three centuries (Lindner, 2004; Sennett, 1991). In this sense, the history of urban research can be re-read as a history of debates on urban ethics. This requires a careful re-consideration of the ways different registers of normativity have been used in this older research.

Debates over morality and the dangers of moralism offer lessons for the conceptualization of urban ethics. In the view of many authors skeptical of urban life, as industrialization shaped 19th century cities city dwellers were taken out of the social bonds necessary for them to live in conformity with the customs and beliefs that constitute morality – in the sense this was understood by these critics. In the city, with dwellers left to make their own judgements, moral decay was inevitable. In this discourse, morality is a decidedly bourgeois concept. Moralization – the dispositif of improving the popular classes by making them live differently, through moral reform – was a means of disciplining unruly urban populations (Katz, 1995).

For the wider history of urban moralism, the figures of the immoral urban dweller and the related notions of moral indifference and amoralism are crucial. From the 1920s on, sociologists re-imagined the moral aspects of cities through terms like moral order, moral regions and moral life. In such contexts, "moral" refers to the realm of social norms (Laidlaw, 2014). For the early Chicago School, the city was a place where various moral codes thrived and were challenged – through processes of specialization of both social and spatial character.<sup>18</sup> In

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embraces the necessary "impurity" of such categories in the evidence produced during empirical research, and stresses that "political" issues must also be read as genuine "moral" or "ethical" issues and problems (Fassin, 2015, p. 176).

<sup>18</sup> For R.E. Park, *moral regions* referred to any urban space "in which a divergent moral code prevails, because it is a region in which the people who inhabit it are dominated ... by a taste or by a passion or by some interest which has its roots directly in the original nature of the individual" (Park, 1925, p. 45), that is the people who gather in that area. The sum of such regions forms the city as a "mosaic of little worlds". Whereas the wider "moral integration" of society (in Durkheim's terms) depends on the adherence to norms, Park's "moral regions" manifest *alternative* ways of life. Durkheim's idea of "moral integration" and the concept of a "moral order" take the existence of dominant ideas as

these studies, however, ethical reflections and moral reasoning, which figure centrally in more recent research on ethics, are secondary phenomena at best. Furthermore, ecological naturalism may be pluralist when it comes to moralities, but it has a clear tendency towards antimoralism (and also anti-agency implications) because it tends to portray people's decisions as effects of (quasi-)natural forces outside their control (Gans, 1962).

In later urban ethnography, debates about the morality of city dwellers' urban lives took several turns. In the USA, debates in the 1960s about the "war on poverty" and, later, about the welfare state's supposedly negative effects on the economic performance of the poor led to a new moralism in public discourse. Anti-black stereotypes circulated and a supposed lack of morality took center stage (Katz, 1995). As a reaction, many ethnographers created counter-narratives not only by describing structural causes for social problems, but also by stressing poor urban dwellers' struggles for moral rectitude and respectability (Liebow, 1967; Valentine, 1978). Here, the interest in dominant moral orders encountered in mainstream sociology was replaced by a more humanistic, sometimes also neo-romantic focus on the individuals' moral struggles – and their capacities for being good.

In Chicago-style urban sociology (for example Duneier, 1992, 1999; Anderson, 1999, 2006), the moral lives of marginalized city dwellers continue to be an important concern. Now, however, the struggles for moral ways of conducting one's own life in difficult urban circumstances are a focus of ethnographic representation.<sup>19</sup> In all these cases, "moral" refers both to (mostly dominant) social norms of what is right, and to individuals' lives – which could, despite some conceptual differences, possibly be translated into the language of the anthropology of ethics (see Das, 2007).

Debates in sociological urban ethnography highlight a danger inherent in the study of ethics. Loïc Wacquant, as a more materialistically-minded sociologist, attacked the ethnographers Elijah Anderson, Mitchell Duneier and Katherine Newman for their focus on moralities, ridiculing what he perceived as a "thick coat of moralism" (Wacquant, 2002, p. 1469) in their writing. Ultimately, he argues, their focus on their subjects' moralities leads them to tell unrealistic stories of moral heroism and to downplay structural forces. Those unrealistic stories pandered to dominant (white) middle-class prejudices in which only moral people are worthy of state support and of social justice. On the level of methodological critique, Wacquant argues that the research subjects' apparent concern with morality largely results from the researchers' projections and their biased leading questions about morality.

While Wacquant points out some problematic tendencies in urban ethnography, he tends to paint a reductionist picture of normative questions and their relevance to the lives of people. Like Pierre Bourdieu, he sees ethics as little more than an ideology and strategy for gaining symbolic capital (see Pellandini-Simány, 2014, p. 654). However, the set of literature that Wacquant dismisses actually contains important insights into everyday ethics in cities. Far from being exhausted, they can be re-energized when put in dialogue with other, more recent approaches. Relating normative layers of being-in-the-world to the social constraints of living in the city, which Wacquant wants to forefront in urban research, represents an important challenge for urban research. In going beyond the approaches surveyed here, a

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functionally indispensable (see T.M.S. Evens, 2005, p. 48). In U.S. cultural anthropology of Parks' era, authors like Ruth Benedict (1935) stressed the relativity of the world's divergent moralities. Robert Redfield's (1956) view of cultures as characterized by ideas of a "good life" represents a further intersection of anthropological and moral theory.

<sup>19</sup>Quantitatively oriented writers in the Chicago School tradition take categories such as a neighborhood's level of "moral cynicism" (Sampson, 2012, p. 232) as crucial for understanding urban development – in addition to financial and other forces.

focus on urban ethics must consider the complexity of moral lives and ordinary ethics in relation to wider forces, which are encountered in specific urban configurations, including institutionally embedded discursive practices of public moralization and ethicization.

### 3.3. (In)Justice and urban ethics

Research on urban ethics must also engage with a resolutely normative literature concerned with issues of (in)justice in the city. This debate is interdisciplinary but based most strongly in geography. Where the literature reviewed so far is mostly concerned with people's ethical lives and claims, the justice-in-the-city literature often starts out with normative statements about unjust cities and injustice in cities. Over the years, this body of work has elucidated a wide variety of injustices, their causes and the impact of justice-seeking social movements; simultaneously, it has branched out into diverse strands of thought, often productively aligned with specific social movements and in possession of an intellectual heritage of its own, or, conversely, engaging in transdisciplinary efforts (see for example, Harvey, 1996; London, Sze, & Cadenasso, 2018; Sze, et al., 2018; Swyngedouw and Heynen, 2003; Walker and Bulkeley, 2006).

Exemplary recent research concerns not only social and environmental justice, but also justice in relationship to citizenship and care. In research into citizenship rights, immigration and the politics of identity subjects the very idea of citizenship is opened to scrutiny (Isin, 2002, 2009; Isin and Nyers, 2014; Staehili 2008; Staehili et al., 2012). Contested rights need to be performed in order to be substantiated, thus requiring both an everyday politics and ethics of citizenship.

Feminist interest in ethics of care (Held, 1995; Clement, 1996), has directed attention to responsibilities in front of strangers through charity, welfare and so on, posing, in each case, ethical questions (for example, Muehlebach, 2012). Thus, in exploring the potential of the term "landscapes of care", Christine Milligan and Janine Wiles (2012) explicitly note the ethical issues that come to the fore when researching care-full geographies and compassion. Alternatively, the ethics as well as the justice of waiting for care are in question (Olson, 2015). Overall, normative principles that guide the work of these scholars are more radical than those that dominate the recent "ethical turn" with its focus on a good and proper life. The latter usually is not articulated in a vocabulary of justice, at least not primarily, and it even tends to eschew one, replacing radical movement politics with consensus-oriented forms of activism and governance. In that sense, an (in)justice lens can correct the shortsightedness of ethics talk.

In some strands of the justice literature, however, normative statements about (in)justice are also being called into question. In a post-structuralist perspective, what may at first sight look like universally binding ethical claims are shown to be situated and particular, so that any appeal to the good of the community is problematic. This is reflected in literature that highlights the competition of rivaling ethics of how to live in the city: Both social and environmental justice movements and city improvement coalitions, for example, couch their projects in terms of ethical claims and positions as they vie for legitimacy when they set rules for distributional systems or renegotiate (non-)citizen rights (Ruppert, 2006). It is not clear from the outset which ethical claims are just or which outcomes of appeals to justice are ethically sound. Rights to work, and to fair wages and conditions are also contested in an array of actions, each with its own ethics and cries against injustice. Seen from this angle, notions of justice and ethics cannot in fact be separated: in many debates, they each imply the other. Competing demands, framed through particular kinds of discourses, thus transform contemporary urban conditions into complicated ethical terrains in which multiple actors call for good and just solutions, each on different grounds and each colliding with alternative ethical positions. Legitimacy is hard to acquire. In these circumstances, everyday politics means an everyday entanglement with ethics. It is therefore urgent to sift through not only the justice claims that are being made in

cities but also the ethical claims. In the end, consensus about justice is difficult to attain.

Clive Barnett (2012), has argued that social scientific work on (in) justice should engage more closely with moral philosophers' increasing attention to the 'worldly' character of questions of justice, their emergence from social practices, and thus partake in (normative) reflection, as a relational understanding of justice and ethics is not only held by social scientists, but by many philosophers as well. Barnett calls for geographies of injustice that focus on the dynamics of claims of justice: that is, on "the situated emergence of felt senses of injustice and the processes through which these claims are processed through practices of public reasoning" (Barnett, 2016, p. 118).

Barnett's assessment of the need to theorize justice from the bottom-up, rather than take it as a self-evident category, resonates with the urban ethics approach which also emphasizes claims-making and ethical problematization "on the ground" – in relation to powerful discourses and forms of government – and has a particular interest in the ways in which the normative dimensions of sociocultural conflicts are negotiated by different actors. Like our focus on urban-ethical problematization and claims-making, this potentially shifts inquiry towards, for example, care (lessness), (un)sustainability, (un)fairness, (un)deservingness, (non)entitlement, or (un)solidarity. We do not see these as new fields of research, but rather as fields of problematization that can give rise to different kinds of (in)justice claims, to different politicizations and ethicizations, even to (in)justice claims by people in roles like 'everyday citizen', 'local activist', 'expert' or 'scholar'. It is precisely in the hope of exploring "practices of 'ethical formation' in shaping capacities to recognize, acknowledge and respond to injustice" (Barnett, 2010, p. 247) that we advocate an urban ethics approach. In doing so, we put greater emphasis on the relationship of such claims to the city; we likewise pay particular attention to the rhetorical and cultural forms of making such ethical claims in the context of negotiations that emerge in public debate in connection with ethical turns.

In the Munich example and elsewhere, we can thus ask which ethical claims are accepted as just or which outcomes of appeals to justice are considered ethical? What arguments are made? How are competing ethical claims resolved? In our view, such questions augment research that prioritizes injustice issues. We do not propose that the study of ethical debates should replace a critical political economy perspective on such urban processes as gentrification, suburbanization, urban greening, or creative and livable city projects. It also should not lead to depoliticized forms of inquiry or a refusal to engage with normative questions or to formulate political critique. Rather, studying ethical debates makes crucial contributions to this kind of critique and can help build better foundations for it. As Barnett (2016, p. 118) puts it, research on questions of justice needs to pay "critical attention to the conditions of dialogue and response through which manifest injustices are recognized and addressed (or not)." For urban contexts, this means a focus on public debates and conflicts over (in)justice issues, and, therefore, over urban ethics.

Having situated our approach within these three related strands of inquiry, we now turn to explore two exemplary forms of how urban-ethical normativity can be investigated within this urban ethics approach. Such public debates are often shaped by recourse to two strands of engagement that are distinct but not necessarily mutually exclusive: the reference to moral economies as a common ground for negotiations, and social creativity as a way to open new avenues for the articulation of ethical claims. Both moral economies and social creativity enable the researcher to frame how conflicts are efficiently addressed in an ethical mode by different actors. Actors constituting themselves as ethical subjects frequently take recourse to them; however, they also can be turned into fields of governance.

## 4. Analyzing urban-ethical normativity

### 4.1. Moral economies and urban ethics

In our research, the term "moral economy" was useful for thinking about ethical passions and moral sentiments in urban situations. Today's protests against high rents in Munich meet the criteria for moral economies – self-confident middle-class citizens, who are convinced that they are an integral part of the city, confront the local authorities and ask to be protected from the workings of real estate and finance capital. They express their request by emphasizing morality: A cabaret artist involved in the Goldgrund organization states: "Letting houses in the city rot away is amoral" (Anlauf, 2014, p. R3). In such statements, economic and political positions are articulated along the lines of moral economies: "A city's municipality should not speculate as if it were a real estate shark. That cannot, and must not happen. The city, that is us, as well" (Hoffmann, in Fischhaber, 2013, p. R4).

Moral economy is useful, even indispensable, because it names a variety of normative reservoirs that are efficient in urban conflicts. Protagonists in such struggles mobilize support for ethical projects that do not conform completely to the logic of a market economy and do not entirely benefit the most privileged strata of urban society. This holds true even under neoliberal labor regimes. In her study on Lombardy, Andrea Muehlebach (2012) has shown how volunteers, religious intellectuals, public sociologists, left-wing social movements and others highlight unpaid voluntary labor in the social sector ideologically as an ethical practice that is connected to good citizenship. Apparently ethical, voluntary labor forms both an integral part of the neoliberal economy in which it is embedded, and offers venues for subjective opposition to many of those participating in it. Organized locally, and most often in an urban context, it works not only as a palliative to and screen for the precariousness characteristic of neo-liberal regimes, it also hosts some potential for transformation that is directly connected to its ethical scope. Moral economies therefore help explain social cohesion in cases of authentic social conflict.

By claiming that moral economies are at work, economic or social tensions are transferred from the field of political contest to that of moral/ethical negotiations, often with open outcomes. The actualization of moral economies constitutes in itself both an ethical and a political choice. Ethically, the recourse to moral economies implies a recurrence on a common ground that serves as a basis for solutions that limit conflict or are even consensual.<sup>20</sup> Such solutions tend to be regarded as preliminary and *ad hoc* as they seemingly lack recourse to legal, principled or categorical judgements.

The relation of moral economies to politics is complex. To transfer a conflict to the moral realm entails a degree of de-politicization that comes with the recourse to an (presumably) external, ethical register, which in turn (presumably) is valid for all parties concerned. Therefore, it is apt to veil the political tension at hand. Alternatively, claims based on moral economies can amount to a rejection of formal law and market relations. In face of the general acceptance that the logics of law and market enjoy in societies, such a rejection is undeniably political and may strengthen radical opposition.

There are some conceptual problems, however. With the connivance of E.P. Thompson (1993), the concept is now used over a broad range (Fox-Genovese, 1973; Kwass, 2004). Still, historians generally use the term as related to notions of economy mobilized against "the logic of the market" – frequently, but not necessarily with recourse to appeals to "traditional" customs or to some form of justice.

As Fassin (2009, 2015) points out, the concept of moral economy had its greatest impact not in history but in anthropology. Introduced in anthropological peasant studies by the political scientist J.C. Scott

<sup>20</sup> This common ground appears to be commensurate with what Clive Barnett (2013) theorizes as normativity of social practice and routine "orders of worth".

(1976), it has taken root there, and especially in cases where subsistence economies were confronted with capitalist markets (Edelman, 2005). For Scott and some of those following his line of thought, the right to subsistence lies at the heart of moral economies. Moral economies appear as imaginations of justice in doings and dealings shared by communities and put forward in front of capitalist market economies. Practices of everyday resistance are as much in focus as rebellions and riots. However, the antagonism between the relations of the capitalist market economy and its mechanisms, and those invoked by moral economies is regarded as at the heart of the matter (Evers and Schrader, 1994).

In contrast, geographers, economists and sociologists refer to moral economies as “notions of reciprocal rights and responsibilities and the fairness and justice of different social arrays” (Svallfors, 2006, p. 162). This is a much wider usage of the term than a perceived right of subsistence put into opposition against capitalist market economy. Several lines of thought are evident in this context, and researchers take up moral/ethical positions in each of them. In the first sense of responsibility for the commons, the geographer Popke (2009) searched for a cosmopolitan responsibility for commons that takes account of the postcolonial condition and results in an economy of collective labor, beyond capitalism. An alternative line of thought calls for a middle ground between antagonistic social actors. Separately, liberal economists and economic geographers use the concept of moral economies to bridge the contradiction between market forces and state-intervention, either by looking for institutions checking both (Powelson 1998) or by claiming the existence of entangled, diverse economies, each with its own economic rules, logics and institutions, and, therefore, ethical claims (Gibson-Graham, 2008). For these scholars, it is important to rethink moral economy by investigating the ethics of diverse economic rules, logics and institutions. Together, these efforts deconstruct and destabilize claims within neoclassical economics according to which market logics constitute a morally indifferent, rational logic that must stand above and outside moral/ethical debates.

Even in the struggles of E.P. Thompson's English crowds, moral economy could only be operative if common notions were not only shared by those who rather spontaneously made up a crowd but also to some degree accepted by those who the crowd addressed itself to. Moral economies presuppose social relations beyond market-mechanisms: some kind of *Personenverband* (association of persons), whether it assumes the form of paternalism, patronage or something else. Moral economies would be pointless without a horizon of a consensual solution for real conflict. In a similar sense, but stressing the dynamic aspect, Didier Fassin (2009, p. 1264) points out that moral economies serve fluid but cohesive entities that do not obey the boundaries drawn by cultural (self-)definitions.

The need for a *Personenverband* – imagined or institutionalized – may be the hidden reason why, as a concept, moral economies remained unattractive to scholars in urban studies. After all, cities – the urban conditions of ethics discussed above – are widely regarded as spaces of anonymity and of precarious social relations. The use of this concept must therefore be integrated with thinking about urban governance and governmentality (Gemici, 2013; Ruppert, 2006), and the establishment of new social relationships. This is the goal of the urban ethics approach advocated here. Following Fassin (2009), moral economies privilege moral over economy, without disregarding the latter term. Urban ethics intends to uncover the hidden moral grammar of economic processes in cities, as well as the ethical dimension of different conflicts. Subsistence is not necessarily the crucial issue here: economy in moral economies bears the meaning of householding, an imagined or performed justice in provisioning, and one of the older definitions of the word.

Moral economies in urban context thus serve to show and transgress fault-lines of conflict, underlying social conditions not obeying the logic of formal law or the market, and imagined horizons of consensus or justice. Understood in this way, the actions of the Goldgrund activists in

Munich can be better understood as can their success and its limits (rent and real estate prices continue to rise). On the other hand, their example shows that moral economies do not work exclusively (as often assumed) in social structures of traditional networks such as of patronage. The imaginations of moral economies may also pertain to the field of social creativity, another research perspective we suggest for understanding urban ethics. In all this, moral economies provide a field of communication in conflict, in which actors take the step of making an ethical decision to accept or reject a logic of moral putative economies instead of putative logics of the market, legal provisions or political ideologies.

#### 4.2. Social creativity and urban ethics

In recent decades, the ethicization of discourses and conflicts, the tendency to frame them as questions of the right or good conduct of life, has often converged with neoliberal forms of governing and subjectivation. This dynamic was influentially analyzed by Nikolas Rose in his writings on community concepts and “ethopower” in Third Way politics in Western Europe (“acting on the ethical self-government of human behavior”, Rose, 2000, p. 1402), which was inspired by Foucault's works on liberal and neoliberal governmentality. Following Rose, the intersection of ethopower and urban governance is a crucial site of present and future research on urban ethics. The delineation of spaces for ethical reflection and self-governance is in many ways functional for a specific style of governing urban populations. Not only are many such processes (participation programs, round tables, coalitions) initiated by government policies, they are deeply embedded in dispositifs or assemblages of ethopower. This is not only a matter of subjectivation and the governance of selves, but also requires that people sustain social bonds. We will not go deeper into these questions here: they are a focus of ongoing work. The question how social ties are being formed in urban sociality, and how their formation relates to questions of ethics, remains crucial.

As a strategic move, in order not to lose sight of the bottom-up and potentially disruptive aspects of urban ethics in that context, we suggest utilizing the term “social creativity”, a concept we take from the anthropologist David Graeber, adapting it to specifically urban contexts and highlighting its ethical implications. While the other approaches and concepts discussed so far have been explored by a range of scholars, this is not the case here – at least if we bracket psychological studies on social creativity, which use the term in a different sense than that we are concerned with here.

Graeber defines social creativity as “the creation of new social forms and institutional arrangements” (Graeber, 2005, p. 407). Building on theoretical work by Cornelius Castoriadis and Hans Joas, Graeber regards social creativity as a crucial dimension of social existence: people's capacity to institute, to (re-)create social relationships and sociality. While classic social theory tends to stress the ways in which social systems, norms and discourses determine the functioning of cities and communities, social creativity takes into account a wider range of intentionality and therefore ethics.

Social creativity in the city entails *urban* ethics: people develop models of urban co-habitation, co-operation and ways of life, sometimes consciously and programmatically in an explicitly ethical framing, but, most often, as the old quote goes, not under circumstances of their own choosing. In doing so, they give practical answers to the question how one should live one's life in the city – which often involves explicitly ethical motivations like overcoming isolation, reaching beyond existing social circles, bridging social networks and instituting more permanent forms of doing so. Social creativity tends to be a collective rather than individual practice. The term carries optimistic, maybe even utopian meanings because, rather than merely describing the workings of sociality, it implies that people institute the rules by which they live, and have the potential to do so in a more conscious manner than they do within their usual routines.



Processes of urban social creativity reach from the small-scale institution of creating a neighborhood association, through medium-scale networks like coalitions of associations or, to use a different kind of example, a music scene, to a large-scale political revolution. Social creativity may involve relatively fleeting, ephemeral types of relationships, or build long-term and stable ones. In Graeber's formulation, these processes often materialize in symbols that mediate them, such as – anthropologically speaking – fetishes. More broadly, there is a material side to social creativity. It is co-constituted by materialities like the built forms of architecture or communication infrastructures without which the urban would not exist.<sup>21</sup>

Protest movements, which often aim to democratically govern themselves, inevitably generate new social relationships and are socially creative in that sense (Susser and Tonnelat, 2013). Figuring out how political representation within a group works, how solidarity can or cannot be organized, or what kind of relationships should be established with people outside the protest and with other movements lead to the institution of new rules and processes, offline and online. At this point, it is helpful to recall the different understandings of the urban in urban ethics we outlined above: Social creativity not only takes place in cities, it is concerned with different domains of urban life, is shaped under the conditions of urban life (restrictions, affordances, opportunities), and often elaborates specific ethics of urbanity, that is, of being urban in an emphatic sense.

This leads us back to the Goldgrund example with their exemplary “Bellevue di Monaco” house and allows us to better understand how it is intended as an emphatically urban project. Social creativity is meant to emerge in encounters among the heterogeneous users of the building, including refugees, artists and other supporters, in negotiating relationships, and in questions such as who speaks for whom in what forum. This links the house with wider urban networks, utilizing the potentials that the city offers. Social creativity also becomes evident as a skill in legal or public relations work. In such processes, on a small scale, the “network of networks” (Hannerz, 1980) that is the city changes incrementally, and the city is experienced and lived differently. In counter-cultural or alternative milieus, and prominently in the context of artistic projects described as social practices or relational aesthetics art (Bishop, 2012; Thompson, 2012), such changes and thus urban social creativity can assume programmatic status. Ethical standards of a good city and the good and right urban life are taken as explicit criteria for art and activism that, for many of the people involved, should also extend into living one's everyday life in the city differently.

These examples of social creativity could be extended beyond the usual suspects of the activist and art world. Social creativity is not an autonomous, innocent sphere; it is rather run through with power dynamics. Processes which we suggest to regard as social creativity can also be read as governance processes, involving different actors and institutions. In all of these cases, however, the focus on social creativity helps us see more clearly how urban life is negotiated in relatively autonomous, practical and irreducibly ethical problem settings. This focus is also connected to the subjectivation of actors who see themselves as motivated by ethical and political concerns.

## 5. Conclusion: Urban ethics – ethics of the urban

This article introduces an interdisciplinary research agenda for exploring urban ethics on the level of public discourses as well as everyday life and the interactions between such domains of urban life. As

<sup>21</sup> Social creativity is never “purely” social: it produces “assemblages” that are social and material at the same time; and it emerges from such assemblages (Farfas and Bender, 2010; Ong and Collier, 2005). The heterogeneous elements of such processes are spelled out in Henrietta Moore's (2011) concept of the “ethical imagination”.

the Goldgrund case study illustrates, analyzing ethical claims can help us better understand, for example, the ways in which a variety of actors discursively represent and socially organize political opposition to gentrification, unequal rights and citizenship, lack of social housing, and the commodification of real estate as a financial tool – all genuine questions of social justice. That case reveals conflicting ethical imperatives: urban ethics – in the sense of foregrounding the question how one should live in the city – for this primarily middle-class, conflict-averse movement also represents a framing of conflicts in preparation for negotiations. In such analyses, moral economies and social creativity are crucial analytical perspectives. Focusing on urban ethics with the analytical tools suggested in this article allows us to discuss the effects and the blind spots of ethicized movements, as well as the inclusions and exclusions that take place. It is important to note that in urban ethical projects like Goldgrund, an ideal urban citizen-subject with proper, good and ethically motivated behavior emerges – and an ‘unethical’ outside as well. This tendency, and the broader ideal of ethical citizenship, was commented on sarcastically in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in which Goldgrund's activities – such as a 15,000 strong demonstration against the right-wing movement “Pegida” – were described as creating a kind of “social campfire that keeps the good Munich warm and enables it to congratulate itself” (Stroh, 2015, p. 95).<sup>22</sup> Such ascriptions of the supposed self-righteousness of ‘urban ethicists’ are politically explosive in cities like Munich, that have an ascendant populist right. On the one hand, urban ethics can be understood as a form of negotiating urban conflicts in a rather consensus-oriented way; on the other, a better grasp of the concomitant dialectics of inclusion and exclusion, and of the imaginations of justice they imply may also help us to make sense of current political polarizations within cities and between urban centers and other regions.

We have suggested a number of strands to build the urban ethics research agenda. We recommend to identify the forms of framing problems at work in specific settings, including the practices and virtues, types of normativity, actors and subjects, and imaginations of urbanity and urban form of life involved. We differentiate between ethics *in* the city, ethics *of* urban life, ethical negotiations *under urban conditions*, and ethical postulations according to which people *should* be urban and behave in specific ways, that is, ethics *of the urban*. Such research builds on and advances a rich literature on ethical discourses and patterns of ethicization, on morality in urban society (including normative dimensions of the realm of everyday ethics), and especially on entangled and competing claims of social and environmental (in)justice. In analyzing “agonistic” negotiations the perspective of urban ethics can draw on approaches such as moral economies and urban social creativity that allow the researcher to paint a fuller and more differentiated picture of urban life. This list is not exhaustive: It should be complemented by a focus on the ways in which ethical urban subjects are discursively created and practically enacted, and on the entanglements of urban governance practices and ethics.

Urban ethics offers itself as a useful focus in many disciplines, enabling researchers to connect actors, practices, techniques and imaginations in urban situations. Urban ethics have not been easily picked up by other approaches in urban research that tend to be concerned either with discourses or with the materiality of changes, with everyday life or institutions, with a Foucauldian focus on forms of governance or an interest in social movements. However, the focus on urban ethics and

<sup>22</sup> In contrast, Goldgrund refers to its opponents by their economic or political positions but primarily portrays them as having a questionable lifestyle. This occurs when the group refers to “*Wohlstandsgesindel*” (affluent rabble) or when the cabaret artist Franz-Markus Barwasser talks about “shopping rabble”. Barwasser refers to people in a position to spend a lot of money for wickedly expensive apartments, but who use them only “to park their shopping bags there”. People like that, by implication, do not comprehend what it means to live in a truly urban and truly ethical way, and can be understood as representing urban-ethical failure.

the analytical perspectives constructing them as a coherent research object connects local and global scales. This approach has the potential to link spatial arrangements, political aims and behavior, and reflections of actors, economic interests, legal prescriptions and everyday practices. Perhaps most importantly, it can serve to unearth hidden conflicts that become visible only in analyzing performed and applied ethical stances in urban situations.

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