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Uitermark, J.; Nicholls, W.; Loopmans, M.

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Guest editorial

Cities and social movements: theorizing beyond the right to the city

Cities breed contention. Social movements usually express themselves in cities, but cities have nevertheless been seen merely as a backdrop, as the empty canvas on which social movement activity unfolds. We maintain that the city is constitutive of social movements. The defining features of cities—density, size, and diversity (Wirth, 1938)—provide the basic elements for contention to develop. Because cities are dense, they are likely to trigger conflicts over space. Because they are large, they have sufficient numbers to sustain organizations of even small minorities. And because cities are diverse, they become the laboratories where new ties are forged and the battlegrounds where competing demands vie for domination. Contention thus emerges from the microinteractions between large numbers of diverse people living in close proximity. Social movements crystallize when people organize to collectively claim urban space, organize constituents, and express demands. Contention and movements emanate from cities but also stretch outwards as activists broker relations between local and their more geographically distant allies. The recent series of protests demonstrate how the urban is uniquely conducive of contention and reveals the linkages that connect contention between different locales (Salah Fami, 2009). All over the world, protesters occupied central areas, formed relations among themselves, and expressed their demands for equality and liberty. During the Arab revolutions, relational and cognitive connections permitted activists in Tripoli and Bahrain to imagine their struggles in very similar ways to those in Cairo, in spite of very different and uneven political opportunities, mobilization capacities, and cultures (Lopes de Souza and Lipietz, 2011). This movement then inspired protesters in Spain to take to the squares, which inspired Occupy Wall Street, which in turn spiraled into the global—yet geographically uneven (Uitermark and Nicholls, 2012)—Occupy movement.

Cities not only breed contention; they also breed control. In their ongoing struggles to maintain order and power, local states and their partners develop strategies and techniques to direct the ebbs and flows of contentiousness constantly bubbling up from the urban grassroots. The city is a generative space of mobilizations and, because of this, it is also the frontline where states constantly create new governmental methods to protect and produce social and political order, including repression, surveillance, clientelism, corporatism, and participatory and citizenship initiatives. These techniques combine in different ways from one city to the next, making cities not only prime sites for contentious innovation but also the places where new ways of regulating, ordering, and controlling social life are invented.

This collection of papers examines the dialectic of contention and control within cities. On the one hand, it identifies when, how, and why cities breed contention. On the other hand, the papers explore when, how, and why governments and their partners regain control over urban space. The dialectic of control and contention is explored—in this introduction as well as in the various contributions to this theme issue—from a decidedly *relational* perspective (cf Emirbayer, 1997; Nicholls, 2008; 2009) that gives analytical priority to the mechanisms that make or break relations among and between challengers and elites. Such a relational perspective is very general and can incorporate a range of different views rooted in political economy, institutional analysis, or discourse analysis. Nevertheless, we argue that it is distinctive as it provides a different analytical emphasis than other frameworks for analyzing movements, especially the currently dominant way of analyzing movements in the 'right-to-the-city' framework.

The remainder of this introduction outlines the rationale for the collection and, more broadly, for a relational view of cities and social movements. First, it identifies some problems with the right-to-the-city literature. Second, it indicates how cities come to perform the role of incubating and connecting various movements. Third, it identifies the particular features of cities that contribute to the splintering, co-optation, or perversion of movements' radical claims for social change. Finally, this introduction argues for a political sociology of cities that eschews localism and analyzes the dynamics of contention and control relationally.

Moving beyond the right to the city
Before outlining the relational rationale that ties together this set of papers, we first need to engage with the recent literature on the right to the city, as this is currently the most prominent framework for analyzing cities and social movements. The right-to-the-city literature maintains that mobilizations within cities arise in response to 'neoliberal urbanization' and employ their indigenous organizations to launch struggles for a better and more just city (Brenner et al, 2011; Harvey, 2003; Marcuse, 2009; Mitchell, 2003; Nicholls and Beaumont, 2004; Purcell 2006; 2008; Staeheli and Mitchell, 2008; Smith and McQuarrie, 2012). The right-to-the-city literature asserts that the grievances of activists are rooted in the urban, their claims and political targets are urban, and their mobilizing discourses are framed through urban concepts and symbols. In this way, structural, institutional, and cultural elements interact with one another to channel insurgents into a particular issue and geographical space centered on the city.

The most explicit claims are articulated by movement organizations actually mobilizing around 'the right to the city,' a "cry and a demand" for a "renewed *right to urban life*" (Lefebvre, 1996 [1968], page 158, cited in Purcell, 2003, page 564, original emphasis). The central idea is that the right to the city entails the capacity to remake ourselves by remaking cities (Harvey, 2003; Lefebvre, 1996 [1968]). Although Lefebvre coined the phrase in the turmoil of the revolts of the late 1960s, recently a number of new initiatives have reinvigorated the right to the city. Initiatives around the right to the city first emerged across the United States, Western Europe, and Latin America and are now also popping up in Middle Eastern cities like Beirut and Istanbul. The International Alliance for Inhabitants and the United Nations Habitat also adopted the notion at the 2004 World Urban Forum, translating it into lists of legal rights to basic necessities like housing and clean water (Mayer, 2009). The right-to-the-city movements are inspired by and resonate with attempts to forge projects for housing rights and empowered participatory democracy in countries like South Africa, Brazil, and India (Fung and Wright, 2003; Scott, 2010). Within various cities in the United States, the interurban Right to the City Alliance united a great diversity of groups struggling for social justice, including activists concerned with housing, immigration, the environment, and jobs. While in the United States radical labor organizers have been at the organizational core of the right-to-the-city alliance, in Western Europe the concept of the right to the city has been mobilized in struggles around housing and urban space. It often serves as a discursive vehicle to reinvigorate squatting movements which, after their expansion in the 1980s and the subsequent contraction and isolation in the 1990s, seek to broaden their agenda and connect to groups like immigrants, artists, and environmentalists. The most vocal and explicit claims for a right to the city are perhaps expressed in academic conferences and publications. A large number of articles have in recent years used the right-to-the-city framework to make sense of a diversity of movements in a range of different contexts, often ending their analyses with a cry and demand for more and fuller rights to the city.

One problematic aspect of the prominence of the right-to-the-city frame within academic circles is the tendency to project the frame on social movements which may or may not heed the 'cry and demand'. Many of the movements organizing within cities do not call for a 'right

to the city' or an 'urban revolution'. While space may be crucial to how they organize and voice their demands, it is not usually at the very core of their discourse. The right-to-the-city frame then becomes part interpretation, part distortion, as analysts import Lefebvre's notions and project them onto people articulating a range of different claims (Attoh, 2011). While there certainly are movements claiming a right to the city, it is clear that the concept remains much more popular in academic than in movement circles. The unity among various movements or issues is thereby not so much established or noted but rather suggested or promised. While the theorizations of the right to the city may inform some local activists, it is so far a frame that has united analysts of cities more than activists.

Another problematic aspect is the nature of the distortion—once the right-to-the-city frame is adopted, claims for *local* democracy and *rights* come into view while claims articulated on a larger scale move into the background (Harvey, 2008). Mayer (2009, page 71) points out that Lefebvre thought of the 'right to the city' less as a juridical right than as an "oppositional demand, which challenges the rich and powerful". While the most vocal movements question the very foundation of authority and law, the 'cry and demand' for a right to the city easily gives the impression that the poor and weak articulate demands to the rich and powerful and wish to see those demands enshrined in law.

Those demands are furthermore oriented towards—and become locked into—the city. Many observers have pointed out that Lefebvre's key concern was with the development of capitalism as a process effectuated through planetary urbanization (Lopes de Souza, 2010; Merrifield, 2011); he certainly did not want to fall into the 'local trap' (Purcell, 2006). However, the focus on (concrete places within) cities does in effect focus the analysis and activism on the local expressions and repercussions of global processes. The urban social movement literature identified the localization of claims as a fundamental weakness decades ago (but see Becher, 2012). Both Saunders (1979) and Castells (1983) concluded that mobilizations beginning in cities tend to fragment and have great difficulty in shifting scale and linking up to broader (nonurban) social movements. Likewise, Harvey's (2001) use of the concept of 'militant particularism' warns that urban-based mobilizations are susceptible to being directed away from general social movements and locked into engagements over fragmented and particularistic issues. So far, the right-to-the-city literature has not responded to the conundrum of 'reactionary utopianism' identified by their 1970s forerunners, even though its militant particularism has been identified both theoretically and empirically as an obstacle to movement unity and upscaling (Ahmed, 2012; Loopmans and Dirckx, 2011; Mayer, 2006).

The rights-to-the-city literature has not provided insights into how cities connect to and play a powerful role in social movements that extend beyond the political, geographical, and ideological spaces of cities. This is all the more remarkable considering that the right-to-the-city movement is itself a global movement that not only unites activists and academics within cities but also (and especially) activists and academics rooted within and moving in between urban nodes. The right-to-the-city literature, in other words, does not provide the analytical and conceptual tools to understand its own emergence, uneven development, and various effects. As a political slogan, the concept of right to the city inspires at least some activists. As an analytical concept, it diverts scholarly attention away from understanding the role of cities in social movements within and beyond the city. Opening up the black box of the city therefore requires the adoption of different theoretical tools than those offered by the right to the city. We turn to relational perspectives on cities and movements to provide these tools.

Contention from a relational perspective

The city is a necessary point of passage in an exploration of the sociospatial dynamics of capitalism and the state. We are not only interested in the city as the space where demands are made but as the relational conduits where movements connect and develop. It is because cities have this latter function, that a number of 'nonurban' social movement scholars have turned their attention to cities. These scholars—who are interested in movements in cities not because of the cities but because of the movements—have provided some of the building blocks for a relational understanding of cities as sites of coordination, connection, and concentration.

This literature, first of all, suggests cities are incubators of contentious relations (Nicholls, 2008). Gould's (1995) classical work on the Paris Commune, *Insurgent Identities*, provides key insights into how the conflict emerged from a "multiplicity of bases" (Gould, 1995, page 11). For Gould the structure of the city is of interest because he studies the Paris Commune as the outcome of "the networks of social relationships in which potential protesters are implicated" (page 12). Gould's analysis shows that the strong ties within Paris's working-class neighborhoods helped to generate commitment among their residents and provided the relational conduits for collective actions like barricading. Diani (2004; 2005) has shown how engagement in local struggles over environmental concerns often lead residents to connect up to national and transnational campaigns. Diani views struggles in towns and cities as extensions of larger scale campaigns, with activists renewing their commitment and ties to the general struggle through the activities and connections made in their everyday lives. Local actors are here conceptualized as nodes performing specific functions within global circuits of contention. Lastly, Armstrong (2005) has effectively shown how San Francisco was an important site for producing a gay political identity, but also for leading local and national political struggles on these issues. Large concentrations of gays and lesbians, diversity of organizations and resources, and proximity between leaders (ie, key *urban* attributes) fostered rich, productive, and innovative relations between activists in this city. These powerful relations enabled activists to assert their right to this city but their rights claims did not end at the city gates. Instead, having established a base of power in this city, San Francisco became an institutional and relational platform for making broader rights claims in state and federal governments. This was not an 'urban social movement' per se, but the urban served as strategic space through which this stigmatized minority was able to assert broad rights claims in the country.

Cities and neighbourhoods can also become the focus of mobilizing local identities (eg, Cox, 1998; Elwood, 2006; LeGalès, 2002; Nicholls, 2009). Martin (2003) considers place identities as 'place frames' for collective action: selective, but shared, experiences and understandings of collective interests which can stimulate collective organization and mobilization. From a relational perspective, cities not only form the backdrop of social networks, but are also nodes in relational networks of meaning and collective identity which may stretch far beyond its territorial boundaries (Massey, 2004; 2005; Pierce et al, 2011). Hence, place frames can connect struggles over distant places. For instance, the centrality of Cairo in the social, cultural, and political networks of the Arab world without a doubt strengthened the visibility of the Arab spring movement and its rapid diffusion across North Africa and the Middle East.

Cities thus not only provide the relational conduits for challengers but also concentrate social and symbolic power. Such centralization fulfills key functions for political and economic elites (Sassen, 1991) but also represents a potential weakness that challengers can exploit. As Lefebvre said, "Power suffers, as in Shakespearian tragedy: the more it consolidates, the more afraid it is … . The places where power makes itself accessible and visible—police stations, barracks, administrative buildings—ooze with anxiety" (Lefebvre, 1976, pages 85–86).

These words resonate strongly in the contemporary context where systemic challenges have claimed public space exactly where political and economic power concentrates. Spaces of concentrated political and economic power were targeted by recent protest movements from Cairo (Tahrir square), Madrid (Puerta del Sol), to New York (Wall Street). Interestingly, these eruptions are linked through the chain of reactions outlined in the beginning of this piece: revolts spread from Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia, to Tahrir square in Cairo, to many other urban centers in the Middle East, to Spain and other countries of Southern Europe, to New York and, from there, to countless other cities in United States and the rest of the world. These dynamics show how social movement activity—like policies (Peck, 2010)—can be swiftly diffused from one place to the next, taking on different guises depending on local circumstances yet being linked through both symbolic references and social contacts.

The papers in this issue speak to the strategic significance of the urban (Uitermark, 2004) that derives from the role of cities as relational incubators and power concentrations. The paper by Arampatzi and Nicholls (2012) shows how the mass mobilizations in Greece were facilitated by strong ties within and between neighborhoods forged over a prolonged period of time through a series of mobilizations. As organizations have overlapping memberships and harness radical subjectivities, constituents develop the tacit knowledge needed to undertake long-term, strategic, and risky collective actions. Centner's (2012) comparative ethnography shows how, even within the same urban context, interneighborhood variations in the nature and texture of social relations produce dramatically different political outcomes. One neighborhood he studied felt like a "sea of cousins" to one of his respondents as a result of the density of *comodores* (soup kitchens and dining halls) *agrupacion* (neighborhood-based associations) within that area. These thick relations stayed intact even when people moved outwards into different areas. In another area Centner studied, in contrast, residents were dependent on municipal instead of grassroots organizations. In this neighborhood, residents were divided along various lines, reducing collective efficacy in the face of the threat and actuality of displacement.

In short, the principal argument is that cities breed contention because they produce a wide variety of grievances among its inhabitants and offer opportunities for developing ties between proximate activists. The city concentrates the conduits through which relations are formed but also represents a privileged point of attack for all kinds of movements because it concentrates power and prestige. The task of analysts of social movements is then to understand how, where, and when contention which bubbles up from the urban grassroots, is channeled in various ways depending on local relations, and connects to broader struggles that extend beyond the local level.

Control

The city not only breeds contention; it also breeds control. The city is not only a place that breeds movements that claim rights and equality, it is also a space where new technologies and ideologies of control are developed. These include policing strategies to enforce the legal order (eg, Mitchell and Heynen, 2009) as well as efforts to enlist free social actors—associations, intellectuals, corporations—into programs of government (Uitermark and Nicholls, 2011). Municipal governments and their partners continuously innovate their governmental and technological techniques and systems to create productive citizens, controlled spaces, and profitable corporations. The theoretical argument about cities as breeding grounds for social movements thus has to be complemented with a discussion of how they quell social movements. Just as cities are spaces that support innovations in politics, they also become sites for the innovation of techniques to monitor subjects and maintain social order.

The local state can absorb contention by channeling diffuse discontent into local institutions. For example, Saunders's (1981) 'dual state hypothesis' suggested that the

division of labor between the local and the national state (with the local state focusing on legitimation-oriented social policies and the national state regulating economic production) has contained urban social movements at the local scale. Katznelson identified the ways in which local officials work to fragment urban movements by driving wedges between different segments of the local population. His *City Trenches* (1981) examined how urban political machines in New York created powerful divides between ethnic groups in the city, and between mobilizations arising in the separate spheres of home and work. While Castells (1983) highlighted the mechanisms that made it difficult for actors to connect up to broader scales of activism, Katznelson identified the barriers for urban activists to connect across ethnic and geographic differences. Mayer (2000) has added that urban governments in Europe have effectively co-opted large segments of radical activists in the 1980s and 1990s through 'partnerships' and similar participatory schemes. This has helped drive a wedge between radical and moderate activists while presenting significant governmental constraints on the various associations within urban movement milieu. These contributions highlight how urban institutions preempt or break down the types of interorganizational and intercity alliances needed to shift the scale of mobilizations beyond particularistic and local issues.

The key idea that connects these different classic works of urban political sociology is that incorporation into local institutions and dependence on local governments discourages (potential) challengers from forming relations to challengers in other sectors, at other scales or in other places. Drawing on Castells and Katznelson, Sites (2012) demonstrates, in his comparison of the interactions between elites and challengers during two mobilizations in Chicago, how the government and its allies (like Wal-mart) selectively provided incentives to challengers. While the representatives of some groups were allowed at the negotiation table and provided with concessions, many constituents were not represented or served. This strategy of 'divide and conquer' created a wedge between different groups, while elites remained cohesive and retained their capacities to strategically 'play the field'. Local state actors or other business elites can thus muster political leverage if they manage to break the ties among challengers through selective incorporation into local institutions. Such selective inclusion not only broke relational circuits between activists—ie, the trust, contacts, dependence—but also locked them into the scale of the city. With respect to the mobilization for immigrant rights, Sites shows that what had started as national campaigns with radical demands was transformed into a local compromise that, in the end, strengthened the power of local-state elites.

Conversely, the *absence* of a strong state presence within urban milieus increases the probability that challengers operating in different sectors, at different scales, and in different places will form ties. Arampatzi and Nicholls argue that the processes of relation formation among various radical groups were facilitated by the 'power vacuum' resulting from the underdevelopment and dismantling of the Greek state. Athens' neighborhoods (as well as Greek universities) can become hotbeds of radicalism and the promotion of radical alternatives exactly because state actors are incapable of penetrating the urban grassroots and accommodating the challengers, which would divide challengers and contain them within their specialized bureaucratic domains.

In sum, the evolving transformation of the state (Brenner, 2004) refigures the playing field on which social movements and other actors engage each other.

As a general working hypothesis, radical change occurs when movement participants forge ties between different sectors, scales, and places. Conversely, movements are contained within their sector, place, or city when they are fully oriented to and under the control of the state. In practice, however, individual movements and cities exhibit complex combinations of contention and control. There are also considerable complexities, as in some cases where states help to parachute locally based movements by resonating their claims in national or

global politics or by supplying movement organizations with funds. Local state strategies towards urban movements are not limited to oppression or co-optation, but include attempts to deflect contention to other state scales and local state–movement alliances collaborating in higher scale struggles (Ahmed 2012; D'Arcus, 2003; Loopmans et al, 2010). If we want to understand the sociospatial dynamics of contention and control, we have to examine how the urban political field transforms and how actors within those fields strategize to improve their position and reach their goals.

Between contention and control
Our aim is to stimulate social scientists to move beyond the perspectives of Castells and the rights-to-the-city literature and interrogate the qualities that make the urban particularly fertile grounds for broader social movements. Studying how the dialectic between contention and control plays out is a major task of political urban sociology to which this collection of papers makes a minor contribution. We hope this theme issue advances the knowledge in the area of city and contentious politics in new directions by examining the roles of cities in generating, harnessing, and containing contention. Critiquing the localism that plagued many contributions to the urban social movements literature, we argue that an analysis of cities and movements requires, first, engaging with a reading of the role of cities as incubators of wider struggles and, second, accounting for the ways the local state affect the sociospatial development of social movements. Such a relational approach to cities and movements provides a basic framework for examining the changing dynamics of contention and control across cities and movements.

Justus Uitermark
Department of Sociology, Erasmus University Rotterdam

Walter Nicholls
Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Amsterdam

Maarten Loopmans
Division of Geography, KU Leuven

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