

New Research in  
Global Political Economy



Norma  
Tiedemann

**“The City belongs to all of us!”**

Challenging Neoliberal  
Hegemony by Politicising  
Everyday Life

Right to the City Groups in Germany

New Research in GPE  
Working Paper  
No. 02/2017

Department of Social  
Sciences

“Globalisation & Politics”

U N I K A S S E L  
V E R S I T Ä T

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urn:nbn:de:hebis:34-2017062752924

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# **“The city belongs to all of us!”**

## Challenging Neoliberal Hegemony by Politicising Everyday Life

Right to the City Groups in Germany

Norma Tiedemann  
Kassel University

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Working Paper No. 02/2017

Department of Social Sciences

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July 2017

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## Abstract

Since the uprisings in Northern Africa and Arab regions, the global Occupy-movements and mass strikes in Southern Europe, protest and resistance have become again a much-debated topic. However, Germany seems to be rather untouched by such rebellious acts. Of course, it has not been subjected to the harsh austerity measures of “crisis management”, but neoliberal policies are for a long time at work here as well - widening the contradictions between social integrity, democracy and subjective wellbeing on the one side and a globalising (neoliberal) capitalism on the other. Cities and urban regions are the places where collective consumption and societal infrastructure concentrate physically. Market logics and the neoliberal valorisation imperative have modified these physical spaces. They left traces on the conditions of urban life in Germany, characterised by increasing inequality and precarity. Cities are also spaces of dense networks of communication, social interaction and political organisation. In many places, urban citizens come together to claim their *Right to the City* by opposing the commodification of housing, privatisation of space, exclusion and displacement of marginalised and low-income groups and are thus reacting towards the neoliberalising transformation of space. The question, which is central in this paper, is whether the Right to the City groups in Germany can be considered a relevant force in challenging neoliberal hegemonic formations. Concepts in reference to discourse-theoretical analyses of hegemony are developed to better understand the societal context and the protests themselves. Although the Right to the City might seem to delineate a narrow realm of contestation, the analysis shows that it goes beyond the urban scale. It presents an attractive narrative by articulating the promise of a universal social good. The RtC-project’s discourse is carried by a specific kind of political practice, which evolves around the acknowledgement of the importance of everyday life as a point of departure. In this way, RtC-groups challenge the rescaling of the state and might contribute to intensify possible ruptures of the neoliberal project.

## 1. Introduction

*“If you want a revolution you have to organise in your neighbourhood, together with the people with whom you are living there.”<sup>1</sup>*

Resistance and protest have become an acute topic at least since the uprisings in Northern Africa and Arab regions gained international attention, continuing with Occupy-movements around the world and mass strikes in Southern Europe. They have not only toppled autocratic leaders and cracked fossilised party systems, but also accentuated the role of urban space as *public* space and as space for contestation. They left the factories and evolved around squares and places, turning them into symbols of their struggles. What we see now in many regions is an authoritarian backlash with increasing state repression towards dissenting societal actors, turning the ongoing struggles less visible.

Germany seems to be rather untouched by such rebellious acts. Besides the dramatising pictures produced of the 2015 Blockupy protests in Frankfurt, the Euro crisis seems to have silenced anti-neoliberal opposition on the streets e.g. against the Agenda 2010, and has brought back 'normality' to the Federal Republic. And of course, compared to other countries being subjected to harsh austerity measures in the course of the 'crisis management', Germany is still doing enormously better. Nevertheless, austerity and neoliberal policies are equally and for a long time at work here - less sudden, less drastical, but widening the contradictions between social integrity, democracy and subjective wellbeing on the one side and a globalising (neoliberal) capitalism on the other.

Cities and urban regions in this societal formation are not only spaces of highly condensed and accessible labour forces, of productive creativity, of knowledge generation, but are also the places where collective consumption and societal infrastructure concentrate physically. Market logics and the neoliberal valorisation imperative have modified these physical spaces. They left noticeable traces on the conditions of urban life in Germany, in a society which is characterised by increasing inequality and precarity. Cities, however, are also spaces of dense networks of communication, social interaction and political organisation: “The city is manifestly a complicated thing” (Harvey 2009: 22). In many places in Germany, urban citizens come together to oppose the neoliberal development of their immediate living space, claiming a *Right to the City* with reference to groups all over the world that are active under this banner. They organise against the commodification of

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Hugo, activist in the autonomous squatters' movement in Madrid and part of a social centre in Chamberí (Malaboca Kollektiv 2016).



housing, the privatisation of space, the exclusion and displacement of marginalised and low-income groups and are thus reacting towards the neoliberalising transformation of space. Local, urban resistance movements, though often remaining below the attention threshold of nation-wide media coverage, are growing in Germany and are calling into question the long-time prevalent paradigm of a neoliberally turned national state. The question, which is central herein, is whether the Right to the City groups and their discursive project can be considered a relevant force in challenging the neoliberal hegemonic formation in Germany.

The aim is to depict the Right to the City project and its actors more comprehensively than it is often done, not focusing only on the metropolitan areas and taking on the task to inquire the protest's discourse in depth. By casting light on such micro-level practices of contestation more visibility is given to the ongoing challenges every hegemonic formation has to deal with, its daily (re)negotiations and ruptures. Analytical categories are developed to better understand the societal context and the protests themselves, applying them to the practices summarised under the signifier of the Right to the City. Firstly, an overview is given on the (academic) publications around the Right to the City in Germany, identifying a certain biased perspective on urban neoliberalisation and counter-protests. Therefrom the main research question is developed and subsequently broken down into subquestions. The third chapter will elaborate the ontological premises and central aspects of the theoretical framework, namely discourse-theoretical hegemony theory as well as concepts of state theory and radical geography. This will be integrated into an overall elaboration of the methodology and methods adopted in this paper. The fourth chapter provides the historical context of current urban conflicts by retracing the neoliberal transformation of the German state and its social consequences. In the fifth chapter, the discourse of the Right to the City will be analysed as a counter-hegemonic project. The last section contains some brief concluding as well as forward-looking reflections.

## 2. Literature Review and Research Questions

### 2.1 The Transformation of (Sub)national Space

The crisis of Atlantic Fordism (Jessop 2003) and the growing difficulties of the European integration project in the 1970s provided the background to an emerging interest in the interlinkage of the transforming global economy and patterns of political and social organisation, i.e. the interdependence of the changing capitalist mode of production and changes of the national state form. Whereas some already declared globalisation to be an end to the “constraints of geography on economic, political, social and cultural arrangements” (Waters 2001: 5), others have taken a more nuanced position. For instance, Nicos Poulantzas identified an internationalisation of the national state, where the state supports processes of economic globalisation. More precisely, a process of *interiorisation* is taking place (Poulantzas 2008: 245) – via internal reorganisation the state is taking on new functions in favour of internationalised capital. Hence, these processes are not simply forced *upon* the unchanged entity of the national state. Although Poulantzas was pointing out that the state should not be seen as “a monolithic bloc without cracks” (Poulantzas 2000: 132), the internationalisation debate focused primarily on the nation-state-level-effects of supra-national, global developments. Changes at other, specifically subnational scales have rather been neglected by materialist state theory (Duncan et al. 1987: 9).

Building on Poulantzas' and others' insights, a growing engagement between political economists and geographers throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s led to the category of *scale* taking a central role in the attempt to overcome the “territorial trap” (Agnew 1994) of the nation state within political economy (Mahon and Keil 2009). Especially the concept of *rescaling* seemed suited to understand the multiple modifications reconfiguring “the powers of the national state upwards, downwards, or outwards” (Jessop 2003: 30). Jessop used this concept in his ideal-typical analysis of the *Keynesian National Welfare State*, transforming towards a *Schumpeterian Postnational Workfare Regime* (ibid.), where the national state “through the rescaling of state powers, [...] seeks to play a central role in interscalar articulation” (ibid.: 40). He thereby captured both – how nation states, or actors at this level, are actively structuring global economic processes and how states are in turn restructured. However, the focus remained persistently at the national level in this assumed globalising Postfordist meta-governance system.

Following Saskia Sassen's work in the 1990s, attention started to shift, leaving the national container in another than the usual inter- or supranational direction by inquiring the

role of a specific type of subnational entities: The so-called “Global City” (Sassen 2001 [1991]) as a centre of coordination in a world of free-floating capital came under examination. In “Cities in a World Economy” (2011 [1994]) she was probing into the functions of cities such as Miami, Toronto, Shanghai and Hong-Kong as strategic places in a globalised economy. The research was mainly concerned with the emergence of a specific urban form where major cities have taken on new functions resulting from “the combination of spatial dispersal and global integration” (Sassen 2001: 3).

The urban effects of neoliberal globalisation in more general terms, including cities of different size and character, taking into account their regional, national, European and global embedding, was given more attention only with urban theorists such as Neil Brenner, Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore and geographers such as David Harvey and Erik Swyngedouw. Considering that an ever increasing share of the world population, 54% according to the UN (2014), is living in cities (and not just “global cities”) and urbanisation continues to be a relevant process worldwide, they inquire the role of global transformations and their effects on urban spaces as discussed under the terms Postfordism or neoliberalisation. A “strategic role of cities in the contemporary remaking of political-economic space” (Brenner and Theodore 2002: 349) is claimed, where cities are not understood as the last, merely receiving level of neoliberal transformations, but became important nodal points in the “reproduction, mutation and constant reconstitution of neoliberalism itself” (ibid. 375). Urban spaces accordingly have also acquired a specific meaning for the emergence of new social conflicts, which are closely related to the rearticulation of national economies in neoliberal terms. Cities appear to be a scale at which economic, political and social contradictions come forth in comparatively vigorous manners, carried by new movements no longer wrapped in the language of classic labour unionisation and not dependent on workplace struggles.

## **2.2 The Right to the City**

The urban dimension of uprisings, riots and revolutionary struggles has indeed a history and the city as an enabling frame and target of emancipatory demands was discovered earlier – e.g. by groups such as the Situationist International, who opposed the obsession with capitalist functionality in city planning in the 1960s in Western Europe, trying to mobilise the revolutionary potential of the productive forces in modern cities (Baumeister Zwi Negator 2007). Best known, however, for his “cry and demand” (Purcell 2003: 102) for a Right to the City is the French Marxist sociologist Henri Lefebvre. In his essay “Le

droit à la ville” published in 1968 and later texts such as “The Urban Revolution” (2003 [1970]) or “The Production of Space” (1991 [1974]) he developed a concept of space as a product of social interaction and as a political issue. For Lefebvre, the claim of a Right to the City was a utopian critique of what he called the ideology of urbanism (2003: 6). According to him, urbanism is the dominant expression of societal formations in the late 1960s, where a “world’ of commodities [is] realized on a global scale by capitalism and the bourgeoisie” in the name of “reason, law authority, technology, the state, the class that holds hegemonic power” (ibid. 34). Therefore, Fordist city planning, the dominance of motorised traffic and increasing segregation in cities as the concrete targets of his critique have to be contextualised within his wider analysis of the political economy of his time. The Right to the City, he wrote, “becomes the right to centrality, the right to not be excluded” from societal surplus, from decisions, from power, “from the urban form” (Lefebvre 2003: 194).

After years without engagement with these thoughts, the claim of a Right to the City has become popular again. A number of social movements around the world, from Brazil, to the US, South Africa and Germany, have taken up the slogan in their struggles over housing rights, racial segregation or displacement caused by large-scale profit-oriented urban projects. In close interdependence to this development, also in academia the Right to the City is by now a not particularly neglected topic. Especially in the fields of critical urban sociology and radical geography it received considerable attention in the last 15-20 years. The publication of the English retranslation of Lefebvre's “The Production of Space” in 1992 and the essay collection “Writings on Cities” in 1996 containing the first English translation of “Le droit à la ville”, triggered renewed interest in the study of urban space among social scientists outside of the French-speaking world (Holm and Gebhardt 2011: 9)<sup>2</sup>.

A notable amount of essays, journal articles, edited volumes and monographs exists on the topic. Among them, David Harvey's book “Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution” (2012) has to be mentioned due to the author's crucial role for critical research and theoretical developments in the field of radical urban geography (Wiegand 2013). Harvey has been working since the 1970s on the political economy of cities as well as the social practices peculiar to the urban form, to explore how these could

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<sup>2</sup> Moreover, in March 2016 the first German translation of “Le droit à la ville” was published (see: <http://www.edition-nautilus.de/programm/Flugschriften/buch-978-3-96054-006-9.html>, last access: 12.03.2016).

be the modern basis for emancipatory struggles and transformation (see e.g. Harvey 2001; 2005; 2009a, 2009b).

Though undeniably leaving his marks on the debate, the Right to the City is not only investigated from Harvey's Marxist, Global North-based point of departure. Feminist, post-colonial and post-developmental perspectives from and addressing the Global South equally belong to the spectrum of academic thinking on the issue. The magazine *iz3w*, whose thematic focus are North-South relations, assembles in its autumn 2012 edition "Hello City – Wem gehört die Stadt?" (To whom does the city belong?, own translation) articles on feminist architectural critique, street trading as a post-colonial Right to the City, displacements and resistance in the slums of Nairobi or on struggles over dominance in the oldest township of South-Africa (*iz3w* 2012). Similar to the movement contexts in which the claim to a Right to the City is articulated, the entry points within social sciences display a broad diversity.

This double conjuncture – the popularity of the slogan among urban protest movements and among researchers and theorists – has helped to bring the problematique of exclusionary, conflict-ridden and socially destructive urbanisation processes into public political debates. Also in Germany, protests against gentrification, rising rents and big infrastructural projects have entered public discourses. Several documentaries, radio features and TV reports address such problems as well as citizens' associations that became active to have their say in urban developments. This was fuelled by the publication of books from activist researchers and by the release of documentary-movies as well produced by activists. In 2010 for instance, Christoph Twickel – a journalist who is and was involved in anti-gentrification protests in Hamburg - published the book "Gentrifidingsbums oder eine Stadt für alle" (Gentrifi-Something or a City for All) (Twickel 2010). The book provides an overview on processes in Hamburg, which are closely related to strategies of city development pursued by local political and economic elites. Resistance is mainly presented in the context of the Gängeviertel, which is widely considered a success, since its occupation in 2009 was not cleared through the police and a relatively stable form of self-organised, non-commercial cultural spaces directly in the city centre could be established. Three years later, the sociologist and activist Andrej Holm published "Wir bleiben Alle! Gentrifizierung – Städtische Konflikte um Aufwertung und Verdrängung" (We stay all! Gentrification – Urban Conflicts around Valorisation and Displacement, own translation) (Holm 2013). Through international and national examples, it attempts to explain political, economic, social and cultural background-mechanisms of urban valorisation. It also

analyses different counter-strategies of anti-gentrification-protests. Another recent example is the book “Von Wegen - Überlegungen zur freien Stadt der Zukunft” (On Ways – Reflections on the Free City of the Future) (Boeing 2015). Niels Boeing is again a journalist and activist from Hamburg. With its agitating tone, the book can be read as a manifesto, which concentrates on already existing and future alternatives to the currently dominating tendencies within cities. It integrates political and philosophical thought as well as economic theory to reach an understanding of what would characterise the *free city of the future*, including questions of property, production and other forms of decision-making than representational democracy. Boeing aims thereby to push further the current urban movements and activists who defend their Right to the City to explore the potential for more fundamental change.

### 2.3 Three Biases

The focus on cities, where large-scale protests have brought the problem of gentrification into public limelight such as Hamburg, Berlin, Cologne or Frankfurt am Main, applies also to the previously mentioned movies originating in circles of activists. “Empire St. Pauli” (2009) and “Buy, Buy St. Pauli” (2013) address the displacement of long-established residents of a Hamburg neighbourhood. “Boomtown St.Georg” (2014) deals with gentrification processes and resistance in another part of the city. “Mietrebelln” (Rent Rebels, 2014), “Verdrängung hat viele Gesichter” (Displacement has many facets, 2014) and Betongold (Concrete Gold, 2013) depict problems of urban development in the German capital and “Wem gehört die Stadt – Bürger in Bewegung” (To Whom does the City Belong – Citizens in Action, 2014) portrays a conflict over privatisation in Cologne.

This narrowed-down agenda can be equally observed when it comes to academic literature on urban developments and Right to the City protests in Germany. The discourse around the entrepreneurial city in the context of a financialised real-estate sector is for instance analysed by Sebastian Schipper in Frankfurt (Schipper 2012, 2013; Schipper and Wieland 2015). The situation on the Berlin housing market with regard to forced evictions is documented in a study by a research team including Andrej Holm (Berner et al. 2015), Armin Kuhn investigates the squatting movement in Berlin and Barcelona (Kuhn 2014), Lisa Vollmer gives an overview of the rent-related protests movements in the capital (Vollmer 2015a) and Hamburg as a “laboratory of neoliberal urban development” is studied by Peter Birke (2013). Thus, there is a certain bias in the literature and debates towards

metropolitan areas. The situation in other cities or the question of how patterns of privatisation play out in different local contexts, is receiving less attention.

Another bias within academic work on the Right to the City is the prevalent concentration on its theoretical underpinnings, especially by revisiting Lefebvre's texts and discussing its topicality in the transformed cities of the post-industrial age. These themes are extensively explored – Daniel Mullis' book “Recht auf die Stadt – Von Selbstverwaltung und radikaler Demokratie” (Right to the City – On Self-Administration and Radical Democracy) (Mullis 2013), in which the author closely re-reads Lefebvre and Laclau and Mouffe with regard to commonalities and differences in their ontological and political conceptions, is just one example in the German-speaking field. Another is the collection of articles in the urban research magazine *dérive* (2015) dedicated to Henri Lefebvre and the Right to the City, which assembles authors such as Anne Vogelpohl, Andy Merrifield, Christian Schmid or Klaus Ronneberger – all of them urban theorists, sociologists and geographers who are writing on the topic for several years. The texts deal e.g. with the meaning of “city” and “urbanisation” in Lefebvre's work (Vogelpohl), the theory of the production of space (Schmid) or Lefebvre's understanding of centrality (Ronneberger). The edited volume of Andrej Holm and Dirk Gebhardt “Initiativen für ein Recht auf Stadt - Theorie und Praxis städtischer Aneignungen” (Initiatives for a Right to the City – Theory and Practice of Urban Appropriations, 2011) does contain some empirical studies on the actual practices of urban protest groups, but besides the single German case dealing with Hamburg, the contributions are based on experiences in Spain, Bangladesh, Brazil and Turkey.

A third and final bias to be mentioned is not only valid for critical research on neoliberal urbanisation, but can be attributed more generally to scholarship which understands itself as committed to emancipatory goals: The persisting concern with the top-down establishment and reproduction of domination – a phenomenon which has been recently formulated in a pointed analysis of Euro crisis narratives from the realm of International Political Economy by Huke et al. (2015). Especially where the concept of hegemony is used such as in Neo-Gramscian IPE “the ways in which attempts to secure domination are perpetually contested and disrupted” (Huke et al. 2015: 2) are significantly understudied. Besides the variety of works being categorised under the Neo-Gramscian label, there are certain commonalities among them, e.g. the understanding of hegemony as a “unity of structure and superstructure – in which power based on dominance over production is rationalized through an ideology incorporating compromise or consensus

between dominant and subordinate groups” (Cox 1977: 387). Hence, the focus is often with holders of power and the assumed “unity” of the material-ideological system, overlooking cracks and contention at “sub-hegemonic” levels. For social movements, it is claimed, hegemony is only worth to think about, when the movement has reached “a certain societal relevance” (Opratko 2012: 13, own translation), being on the brink to cross some hypothetical line between marginalisation and hegemony.

This top-down-focus holds true also for much of the literature on neoliberal urbanisation where works exploring the place of cities in the world economy and the ensuing local accumulation imperatives, the dominant discourse of entrepreneurial city planning or the successful incorporation of dissent voices is outnumbering research on practices of resistance, protests and politicisation.

## **2.4 Research Interest and Questions**

Discourse-theoretical approaches to the concept of hegemony, especially as developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe with their 1985 book “Hegemony and Socialist Strategy” and subsequent writings, provide a better entry point into counter-discourses, their micro-political practices and embedding in wider (discursive) structures. Discourse-theoretical hegemony theory might not be per se different from Neo-Gramscian conceptualisations with regard to a domination-bias. However, due to its post-foundational commitments and an understanding of discourse as the always ongoing process of (temporarily) stabilising meaning, it facilitates the grasp of disruptions and counter-tendencies. Concepts such as articulation, antagonism, dislocation or politicisation as well as the rejection of definite structural determinations make it appropriate for dealing with conflicts on different levels, involving different actors and identities. Compared to some materialist theories of hegemony, poststructuralist approaches offer advantages since the tendency towards an economistic and class-reductionist framework is smaller. Subjects of struggles and their interests are not perceived to be “constituted at a point external to the space [they] articulate” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 85), i.e. at the level of some immutable structure. Systems of meaning contingently evolve through social interaction (Howart and Stravakakis 2000: 3); society is the outcome of social struggles which can be seen as “wars of interpretation” (Laclau 1990: 216). Thus, there is “nothing inevitable or natural in the different struggles against power, and it is necessary to explain in each case the reasons for their emergence and the different modulations they may adopt” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 152). It is therefore often claimed, that discourse-theoretical approaches to hegemony have



to be seen as answering to the historical context of so-called new social movements, which have not been easily graspable for Marxist analysis (Opratko 2012: 122). Urban movements are then part of the “diverse forms of resistance to the capitalist occupation of social space. [...] Hence the multiplicity of social relations from which antagonisms and struggles may originate: habitat, consumption, various services can all constitute terrains for the struggle against inequalities and the claiming of new rights” (2001: 161). Analysing these social movements means to investigate “the way in which social practices articulate and contest the discourses that constitute social reality” (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000: 3). Examples of such a research agenda can be found in Howarth et al. (2000), where e.g. new environmental movements (Griggs and Howarth 2000), women's struggles in Chiapas (Harvey and Halverson 2000) or the emergence of a democratic imaginary in South Africa (Howarth 2000) are analysed in terms of discourse-theoretical hegemony theory. However, only infrequently the approach has been comprehensively developed for social-struggle-related studies. One example would be Philip Bedall's analysis of NGOs and activism in the field of climate politics “Climate Justice vs. Klimaneoliberalismus” (Climate Justice vs. Climate Neoliberalism, 2014), analysing the movement's tension between hegemony and counter-hegemony.

Moving away from the domination-bias might be facilitated by a discourse-theoretical understanding of hegemony, where social practices are part of a struggle over the prevailing structuration of social reality, thus putting greater emphasis on processes and their constantly contested flux. This should be added, moreover, by taking seriously an element of hegemony, which Gramsci is said to have innovatively stressed: the importance of everyday life as the arena in which consensus is produced and negotiated. The “mole's work” (Agnoli 1999: 226, cited in Huke 2013: 235) of bringing to life counter-hegemonic ideas, shaking up the sedimented structures of hegemonic discourses, is very often not the most visible form of contestation. “Subversive or resistant acts, which are opposing or undermining established norms and thus take up existing contradictions, are located equally in everyday life – hidden, unspoken and oftentimes unintended” (Kuhn 2014: 31, own translation). Hegemonic projects need to be anchored into daily life to secure their continuous reproduction. If this acceptance of life practices is a condition for hegemony, then everyday life is also “the place of their questioning [...]: social struggles, not only at the factory or the office, but also in the neighbourhood, in public space, in schools, universities, hospitals [...] etc. can undermine social order in substantial ways” (ibid. 33, own translation). Bargetz' project of developing a critical political theory of everyday life is

worth to be taken into account to position everyday life in analyses of societal conflicts – an undertaking already attempted by Lefebvre. Bargetz identifies everyday life as the place where needs are satisfied, but also where dissatisfaction and the desire for change are prompted (2015: 18). Especially times of crises and/or transformation are throwing into sharp relief the modes in which “politics, economics and ideologies are inscribed into everyday life and in the daily ways of existence of people, how they shape and mould these and how politics is done via these modes” (ibid. 15, own translation).

Having this in mind, urban protests seem to be an interesting case of contestation in the German leftist, social movement landscape. Similar to feminist movements, they very often evolve around issues of social reproduction such as housing; non-exclusion from mobility, cultural activities, public spaces and other social infrastructure. Cities are characterised by the collective consumption of broad-scale infrastructure – a public bus system, kindergartens, a park etc. are more or less used by the whole urban population. In addition, their quality and accessibility are affecting many people’s everyday life – the same is true for the urban housing market. The increasing pressure levelled by processes of neoliberalisation, i.e. the expansive stretching-out of mechanisms such as competition and commodification and their intrusion in an increasing array of socio-political realms, has an impact on wide segments of society in their everyday routines. Such remaking of urban space seems to evoke political resistance, spreading beyond gentrification-ridden cities like Hamburg or Berlin. In the last five to six years, groups which are referring to a Right to the City have been founded in many places of different size and with seemingly different structural conditions. A sense of injustice, democratic deficiencies and acute social distress drive these developments in a country where the biggest politico-economic crisis of the last decades is said to have been overcome long ago: the crisis “has widely vanished from the German public imagination” (Sommer 2014: 11). The prevailing discourse is one of *keep calm and don't worry*: “Far and wide no recession is making itself noticed. Germany is doing well, the economy is thriving, the benchmark data are correct: flourishing company profits, a low inflation rate, unaltered high incoming orders, historically low finance costs” (Hulverscheidt 2014). On the basis of this discourse, German politicians also expand their economic formula of budget discipline and labour market reform into the European Union's economic governance (Wissel 2012). Increasing inequality and precarity as results of these policies in Germany itself (Dörre 2014) – though being criticised and challenged from various actors – have not yet been successfully opposed.

My guiding assumption in here is that Right to the City groups are part of those actors challenging hegemonic neoliberalisation in Germany. In order to understand the emergence of these groups, they have to be studied in the context of the scalar dimension of neoliberalisation, i.e. taking into account that the Fordist national welfare state is restructured in a way where different scales acquire new meanings in the accumulation dynamic. Although I do not assume a simple causality between macro-structural change and resistance, this overall framework seems justified since the groups themselves, through the common claim to a Right to the City, contextualise their practices within broader developments. However, neither the groups' motivations, analyses and strategies in the movement's whole spectrum, nor urban protests as a micro-level challenge to neoliberal rescaling, have been studied so far.

Therefore, I am going to answer the following research question: *What is the relevance of Right to the City groups in challenging the hegemonic formation of neoliberal re-scaling in Germany?* This can be broken down into the following subquestions: In what ways can one speak of a *neoliberal rescaling* in the case of the German state and how do these changes affect urban space? How do Right to the City groups problematise, politicise and (re-)negotiate these conditions? Through which practices do they establish their identity and corresponding counter-hegemonic narrative(s)? What is their current role in the struggle against urban neoliberalisation and neoliberal rescaling?

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical and methodological framework of this paper builds on at least three distinctive sources: state theoretical considerations, reflections from critical geography as well as discourse-theoretical hegemony theory. These three conceptual strands will be applied to analyse a specific case of politics of contention in Germany, beginning with an inquiry of the structural context in which Right to the City (RtC)-groups are acting.

In the first section I will set forth basic ontological considerations of discourse-theoretical hegemony theory including some of the herein analytically relevant concepts, since it provides the broader conceptual frame against which the ideas and propositions of the other theoretical sources will be interpreted. Moreover, this theoretical approach provides the central categories for investigating the practices of RtC-groups on which the assessment of their relevance rests. In the second section, I will briefly introduce additional concepts deriving from state theoretical reflections as well as critical geography. These help to understand the contextual setting of neoliberal rescaling in Germany which on the one

hand shapes and conditions the groups' engagement and on the other represents a major target against which they articulate their demands. The chapter ends with some general remarks on post-positivist methodology and the specific methodical design of this paper.

### **3.1 Discourse-Theoretical Hegemony Theory**

Poststructural discourse theory as it is utilised in here is characterised by its conceptualisation of society as not emerging from an ultimate ground or essential structure. No abstract, ahistorical foundation of society is assumed. Instead, a radical contingency rests at the heart of societal structures and processes. This amounts to the absence of strictly necessary developments and thus of structural determination, but not to chaotic and arbitrary constellations. Social meaning, identities, rules, norms and institutions do exist in a more or less stable mode – otherwise, society and agency would not be possible. These societally enabling elements are constantly produced and reproduced, temporarily fixed and eventually undermined in a relational system of meaning, which is called *discourse*. Laclau and Mouffe describe a discourse as the “structured totality” (2001: 105) resulting from the practice of *articulation*, that is from every act of generating meaning, be it verbal or non-verbal (Bedall 2014: 87). “Every discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity” and stabilise meaning (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 112). Articulations are thus the smallest elements of a discourse and constitutive for societal organisation. Importantly, discourses are not “merely 'cognitive' or 'contemplative' entiti[es]”, they do not exist as purely linguistic structures, but consist of material elements and have material effects, since discursive structures are constitutive for the organisation of social relations (ibid. 96). The identification and analysis of concrete articulations and articulatory strategies constitutes the main entry point to the study of a specific discourse, in this case the Right to the City.

#### *The Primacy of Political Struggles and Hegemony*

Without a ground or foundation, the structuration of society must accrue from another set of mechanisms than abstract and metaphysical rules. Thus, *dominating the field of discursivity* bespeaks a relation of power where certain discourses are gaining acceptance whereas others are excluded. Different interpretations or systems of meaning are thus competing with each other over the domination of the field of discursivity, i.e. over the (always only partial and temporary) structuration of the social. Society is thus fundamentally contested. The involved struggles, carried by social actors such as individuals, groups, institutions etc.

are understood as struggles over *hegemony*. Laclau and Mouffe understand the theory of hegemony as “a theory of the decision taken in an undecidable terrain” (2001: xi) – undecidable, because discourse theory assumes the “infinite of the social”, meaning that no structural system is ever complete and total, but has borders, which keep on changing due to an insurmountable surplus of meaning (Marchart 2007: 136). Therewith, the primacy of the political and the centrality of hegemonic struggles is established: Since “the social field can never be closed [...], *political* practices attempt to 'fill' this lack of closure” (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000: 8, emphasis added). Along with this goes a radically historical understanding of society and societal processes (Laclau 1990: 209), i.e. concrete spatio-temporal phenomena and their conditions of existence have to be investigated. Political subjectivities, interests and the course of struggles are not deduced from a definite, determining structuration principle of society. The only necessity is the contingent nature of “the conditions of existence of any identity/objectivity/system” (Marchart 2007: 141).

Hegemony in this approach is not understood as dominance, complemented by consent, of a certain group or of certain individuals as it would be the case with neo-Gramscian hegemony-conceptualisations (Opratko 2012: 65ff.). Instead it is seen as the universalisation of a specific pattern of interpretation, a certain relational system of meaning. It is thus a specific discourse which can become hegemonic (Wullweber 2010: 113 ff.) by winning the hearts and minds of a range of societal groups and materialising itself in relatively stable structures e.g. state, cultural or educational institutions. Such a discursive constellation is, however, not once established as a fixed structure to dominate from thereon, but represents a social practice dependent on its permanent reproduction (Nonhoff 2006: 11). This is what makes discourse-theoretical hegemony approaches more sensitive towards the question of disruption in the reproduction of hegemony. Whereas historical materialist approaches often focus on elites and the “internal fractionalisation of national and transnational capital” (Wigger and Horn 2014: 2), marginalising the importance of contestation (ibid.), discourse-theoretical frameworks might be better suitable to grasp the daily, not always smoothly reproduction of social relations of power.

### *Political Subjectivities*

From these considerations follows a key aspect concerning the subject of societal transformation: There is no a priori privileged social actor to challenge the prevalent order. Contestation and counter-hegemonic discourses can originate from every corner of society where a viable *antagonism* is articulated. Though social struggles in many places around

the world take the form of class struggle, there is no necessity for this (Laclau 1990: 37). Rather, it is the collective struggles in which certain antagonisms and subjectivities of social actors are articulated and where “the unity of their positions as subjects” is forged (ibid.), be it as working class, as “a lesbian group, a neighbours association or a black self-defence group” (ibid. 216). Therefore, hegemonic struggles comprise a variety of actors at a variety of scales with different political subjectivities who articulate numerous demands and practices (Bedall 2014: 2). The form that an antagonism takes and what kind of actors are involved is itself a result of hegemonic struggles (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 168). Instead of asking who the agent of hegemony is, one should inquire how hegemonic articulations are constituting someone as a hegemonic or subaltern subject (Laclau 1990: 210). For the inquiry of social movements and protest this means not to assume externally given interests and identities, but to analyse the “concrete circumstances and contexts” in which social agents are moving, through which their agency is enabled and which, due to their fundamental impossibility of total structuration, open up the possibility to articulate new forms of social being (ibid. 15).

#### *Antagonism, Equivalence and Difference*

Every discursive project competing for hegemony or challenging the current hegemonic discourse formation engages in the articulation of an antagonism. The basic logics of articulation, i.e. of generating, shifting and partially fixing meaning, are the logic of difference and the logic of equivalence. The logic of difference constitutes single and distinct elements as such, thus distinct elements and their meaning only arise through the articulation of difference by being identified as non-identical. The logic of equivalence on the other hand links elements to groups, referred to as *chains of equivalence* (Bedall 2014: 41). Equivalential relationing emphasises the similarity between the constituting elements and blurs their differences (Wullweber 2010: 144). It reduces complexity and potentially leads to the articulation of a broader social antagonism (ibid. 145).

Antagonism in the Laclauian understanding denotes the division of a discursive field into two opposing chains of equivalence. One, “with which a specific (societal) universal and one with which all forces of resistance towards the establishment of this universal is articulated (the specific other excluded from this discourse)” (Bedall 2014: 42, own translation). The elements of a chain of equivalence become equivalent to each other either because of their articulated equivalent relation towards the excluded other, the rejected identity, or because of their articulated equivalent relation to the universality

represented by the chain (Laclau 2005: 70). This universality, however, is not constituted by already existing parts of the single elements' identity, by something they have in common a priori. The demands knitted together share “just the fact that they all remain unfulfilled” and are thus defined by a specific negativity or absence (ibid. 96).

Connected to the antagonistic chains or political frontiers are corresponding logics of fantasy. Whereas one chain represents demands supposedly leading to societal harmony and completeness after being implemented and thus “operates by providing a fantasmatic narrative that promises a fullness-to-come once a named or implied obstacle is overcome (Howarth 2009: 322), the other represents barriers to the realisation of this harmony and “foretells of disaster if the obstacle proves insurmountable” (ibid.). Howarth refers to these as the *beatific* and *horrific* dimensions of fantasy which help to understand why subjects are compelled to identify with certain discourses, thereby excluding other identifications and interests (ibid.).

#### *The Universal Good*

The reference of a chain of equivalence to a universal good is central to the understanding of hegemonic struggles. Hegemony as conceptualised by Gramsci means that a particular social group succeeds in “bringing about not only a unison of economic and political aims, but also intellectual and moral unity, posing all the questions around which the struggle rages *not on a corporate* but on a '*universal*' plane” (Gramsci 1999: 406, emphasis added). It is thus the universalisation of the particular interests of one group. In a poststructural reading, it is the universalisation of a specific discourse's demands, ideas and interpretations of the social, carried by a potentially heterogeneous coalition of social actors. Without reference to a universal good by certain words, images or practices no discourse could become hegemonic by definition (Wullweber 2010: 139). The term attached by Laclau to the element which is representing this impossibility of the universal social good and of social totality is *empty signifier* (Laclau 2005). It is emptied of its own particular content to give certain cohesion to a varied chain of demands, which is knitted together by strategic articulations. Empty signifiers are thus socially produced by subordinating the particular meaning of an element of the equivalential chain “to the '*universal*' function of signifying the chain as a totality” (ibid. 99).

### *Structure and Agency*

Strategic articulations presuppose the existence of actors who are capable of taking decisions and are thus not determined in a definite sense by the surrounding structures. Within discourse-theoretical hegemony theory, subjects and discourses are conceptualised as complexly interrelated (Nonhoff 2006: 21). The assumed impossibility of society to be fully constituted, to endure with a finally fixed structure, also denies the possibility of stable and determining foundations for a subject from which to speak or act (Howarth 2009: 314). The emerging gaps and inconsistencies instead force the subject to take decisions and to identify with particular possibilities: “the actions of subjects emerge because of the contingency of those discursive structures through which a subject obtains its identity” (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000: 13). It is thereby constantly re-arranging relations of meaning, and thus reproduces and shifts discursive structures while being enabled by these as an acting subject. Structure and agency are thus conceptualised as being in a dialectical relation – one moment is not per se privileged ontologically, they destabilise and enable each other.

Collective actors such as social movements, political parties or spatio-temporal discourse coalitions are characterised by a specific set of articulations which constitutes their collective subjectivity by the temporarily stable reproduction of “a particular organisational form or a particular socio-political practice” (Bedall 2014: 87, own translation). Different demands and practices are therein linked to forge projects of interrelated practices and ideas aiming for hegemony or contesting prevailing forms of rules, societal practices or policies.

### *Sedimentation, Repoliticisation and Dislocation*

Of capital importance for the understanding of social struggles over hegemony and the position of the described structure-agency relation therein, is the notion of *sedimentation*. The actions of individual or collective actors, though not being deducible from an essential ground, are not arbitrary actions which take place in a vacuum. No crude voluntarism is put forward. Instead it is acknowledged that political acts are always carried out in “sedimented layers of traditions, [...] we never sail on a sea without waves” (Marchart 2007: 3f.). Agency and processes of change are embedded in a certain structural context which is historical – it developed from previous struggles where certain discourses gained hegemonic significance, while others have been excluded. Constellations of power shaped structures by inscribing themselves not only into the surface of society, but by partially



instituting particularly interlinked systems “of rules, norms, resources, practices and subjectivities” (Howarth 2009: 312). This process of stabilisation of certain discursive formations is referred to as sedimentation. Sedimented discursive categories are those the contingent nature of which has been made forgotten and which are taken for granted as objective and mostly immutable reality. Objectivity is thus “nothing but the sedimented form of power, in other words a power whose traces have been erased” (Laclau 1990: 60). However, the assumption remains that these objectified relations have a contingent origin and are traceable to a moment of decision where alternatives to the subsequently dominating rule, norm, identity etc. have been excluded. *Reactivation*, as this reverse mechanism is termed, is the act of calling to mind and making visible these decisions and thus the political moment of any structure (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: viii, Marchart 2007: 134). Thus, it can also be framed as an act of *repoliticisation*. This practice, when applied as a strategic articulation by individual or collective actors, aims to generate awareness over the historical, socially produced core of any relation of power or oppression. It thus “opens new opportunities for a radical politics” (Laclau 1990: 4). Repoliticisation is, therefore, a common practice of progressive social movements, whose challenge of dominating rules is often based on the assumption of these relations being inherently political and thus open to change. When the world is increasingly seen as the consequence of contingent discursive struggles, without an eternal truth constituting society, the resolution of social actors might grow to oppose the existing factual, making them more willing to found new, contingent, principles to organise social reality.

The contingency of societal relations can also become apparent in another way, which also has the potential to play into the hands of actors who contest the prevailing discursive formation. Since discourses are continually constructed without necessary grounds, they are comparatively vulnerable human products and can be undermined by forces which turn out to be beyond their control (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000: 4). Laclau introduces the term *dislocation* for these moments of subversion of the structuration of a specific discourse. Structural dislocation, due to the impossibility of total closure, is a constitutive element of any discourse formation (Laclau 1990: 42). It has a stabilising effect, since it allows for the generation of meaning, the articulation of differential and equivalential relations, but it also threatens stability since thereby the radical outside breaks into a discourse and it might prove impossible to domesticate these disturbances in terms of legitimate difference within the hegemonic discourse (Bedall 2014: 43), hence exerting a pressure for (contingently evolving) shifts and transformations. By making visible the

historicity of a spatio-temporal structuration, oppressed alternatives could be reactivated and established signifiers newly articulated. In this way, dislocatory effects can provide opportunities to strengthen the ruptures of a discourse which social movements can exploit to make plausible alternative visions of society.

However, sedimented discourse formations cannot be reactivated or repoliticised anytime at pure will of the respective actors. They do not only possess a relative stability due to their inscription in institutions. Over time they become also deeply entrenched in the daily practices and cognitive structures of individuals and groups and thereby structure the range of what is possible in terms of practices and articulations at present and in the future in the broader social realm. The pre-structured field of discursivity “operates permanently in a strategic-selective manner towards the rearrangement of discursive elements and privileges certain forms of reorganisation more than others” (Wullweber 2010: 117, own translation). Strategic selectivities have been brought into the discussion within materialist state theory by Bob Jessop (2007) with his strategic-relational approach. Influenced by critical discourse analysis this approach attempts to take into account the often neglected “interaction of discursivity and materiality within the field of political economy” (Jessop 2003: 50).

### **3.2 State Theory, Critical Geography and Further Concepts**

Materialist state theory as well as critical or radical geography offer useful concepts to analyse the contextual setting in which social actors, such as the RtC-groups examined in this paper, are moving and against which they articulate their discourses. Among these, without diving deeper into the respective debates, I want to stress the importance of *strategic selectivities*, *state apparatuses*, *scale*, *spatial imaginaries* and *rescaling*. These concepts can be embedded into discourse-theoretical hegemony theory, since they share certain perspectives on the social world. Discourse-theoretical hegemony e.g. provides an entrance into the analysis of the constitution of hegemony which resembles and is combinable with neo-Gramscian and neo-Poulantzian reflections while leaving behind the essentialising tendencies of these frameworks (Bedall 2014: 39).

With the understanding of society as a spatio-temporal constellation of sedimented discourses and discourse fragments which have left their traces on the social fabric in previous and ongoing hegemonic struggles, one can perceive institutions like the state and its segments, the market, bureaucracy or civil law as relatively stable sedimentations of discursive systems (Howarth 2009: 312). They nevertheless remain contingent in nature

and thus results of politics of exclusion, i.e. consequences of decisions which involve relations of power. An inquiry into the discourse-organisation of a society thus sheds light on these relations in a historical perspective and helps to analyse which articulations and projects became hegemonically prevalent (Wullweber 2010: 114).

### *Strategic Selectivities*

The state itself, being a specific system of societal arrangements, is such a consequence of hegemonic struggles. Within the scope of the state, different projects compete with each other for the specific structuration of this frame. The spatio-temporal specific, hegemonic discourse organisation of the state is thus not a neutral terrain, but has an impact on present and future social processes, identities, practices and the agency of individual and collective subjects (ibid. 125). This constellation can be understood in terms of strategic selectivities as described by Jessop. According to this concept, given (discursive) structures shape but not fully determine the agency of social actors. Similarly, the acts of subjects do influence the structures of social reality but are not free from structural limitations. The previously elaborated dialectical reproduction of structures “is always multiply tendential” (Jessop 2007: 29) and thus exerts a certain selectivity towards articulations, i.e. those more compatible with the hegemonic discourse-organisation might find higher resonance. This selectivity, however, is not a structural one. It displays a strategic dimension which means that “there is always scope for actions to overflow or circumvent structural constraints” (ibid.), i.e. to subvert the dominant structuration of society e.g. by way of repoliticisation. Actors thus can and do pursue different strategies in a relatively stable field of discursivity which privileges certain articulations and certain subjects over others. Consequently, one can speak of a “reciprocal interaction between structurally-inscribed strategic selectivity and structurally-oriented strategic calculation” (ibid.). Calculation, however, should not be understood as conceptualising political agency and subjectivity in a rational-choice manner. Spatio-temporally specific selectivities reflecting the interests of societal groups as the ones who carry a hegemonic discourse, are not per se institutionalised in the state, but “embody the conflictual result of prior hegemonic struggles” (Wullweber 2010: 121, own translation).

### *State Apparatuses*

Certain discourses are therefore inscribed into the state as an entity and, as rightly pointed out, into the everyday micro-level reproduction of the discourse by having a certain grip on

the subjects on whom the constant re-performance of the hegemonic rules, norms and identities is dependent (ibid. 125). However, to grasp the societal structures sedimented in state institutions also as a terrain and target of the strategies of social actors, the state should not be conceived as a homogeneous and monolithic bloc. Instead, its internal fragmentation can be described as an ensemble of *state apparatuses* which are differentiated in scalar and (dys)functional ways, reflecting “the material condensation” of a relationship of forces (Poulantzas 2000: 128) or rather of multiple relationships inscribed as conflicting political struggles into the state. The single state apparatuses are connected each in a specific way to societal power relations so that the state appears as a “complex composition of competing power and decision centres within and among state apparatuses” comprising a variety of dispersed micro-practices (Wissel 2012: 8, own translation). State apparatuses might be distinguished functionally e.g. along the lines of repressive or ideological apparatuses (Althusser 1970) or along the lines of different *scales*, constituting the scalar construction of the state.

#### *Scale, Spatial Imaginaries and Rescaling*

The concept of *scale* originated in geography, but found its way into state theoretical as well as political economy debates to the extent that some even speak of a new “political economy of scale” (Mahon and Keil 2009). It is one among a range of concepts utilised in the analysis of the spatial organisation of political, social or economic processes and phenomena next to place, territory or network (Jessop 2009: 96) but has gained particular significance due to its analytical advantages. On the one hand, the sole concern with the state as defined by a national territory and a monopoly of power exerted over this geographical space has led social scientists into a “territorial trap” (Agnew 1994), which, especially with the 1980s onset of a new round of globalisation, has been found unsuitable to understand the bigger and smaller problems coming along with this process (Jessop 2009: 87). An opposite focus on place, on the other hand, might easily tempt to adopt a narrow understanding of localities as “distinct, discrete, institutionally thick, more or less self-contained, more or less self-identical ensembles of social-ecological relations” (ibid. 95). Conceptualising spatial relations instead as networks might overemphasise the horizontality of these relations and neglect the hierarchical power relations involved within and among different networks. Using the concept of scale or scalar formations then enables to conceive states and state apparatuses to be organised in and across multiple interrelated spatial levels within political and economic contexts (Wissel 2012: 7). Scale as such can

thus not be the object of social scientific inquiry, but only the “scaled political economies”, i.e. the scale-differentiated structuration of society (Brenner 2009: 48). This perspective adds another dimension to the understanding of the way sedimented discourses constitute the structure of the state and the state apparatuses as well as the strategic selectivities they wield. Scale is equally a constraint on social actions and a result of social actions, i.e. it is socially produced by economic and political processes such as “the geographic strategies of capitalist firms, of political institutions such as the nation-state, and of labor organizing [...] in the face of challenges posed by capital mobility and/or state strategies” (Mahon and Keil 2009: 8). Analysing the scalar dimension of specific social phenomena such as a particular state thus includes asking which *spatial imaginaries* (Jessop 2009, 2012) have been competing with each other, how certain scales have been defined therein and how these became institutionalised. Imaginaries in general can be understood as the horizons and frames for the interpretation of individual and collective experiences (Jessop 2012: 8). They are, moreover, part of the ensemble of social practices that (re-)produce meaning and have thus a performative character as well, i.e. their very articulation has effects on the structuration of discourses. *Spatial imaginaries* then can be elements of a discourse in which the „inherently unstructured complexity of a spatialized world“ (Jessop 2009: 97) assumes an order by articulating certain distinct scales, their function and positioning in the structured totality. Although Jessop is proposing the concept in the context of a clear distinction between semiotic and extra-semiotic elements of the social world, it represents a useful analytical category to understand the process of changing scalar constellations.

Since there are always a number of spatial imaginaries articulated by different actors and favoured in the different state apparatuses, the process of instituting scaled social structures is dynamic so that one can speak of a “scaling and *rescaling* of distinctive political-economic processes“ (Brenner 2009: 49, emphasis added). Globalising tendencies within economic and political structures since the 1970s, in reaction to the crisis of Fordism in the Western European and North-American hemisphere, have re-articulated the role of the national scale and decentred its position “as a self-enclosed container of socioeconomic relations” (Brenner 1999: 435). At the same time the significance of other forms of territorial organisation has been intensifying. In the struggle of national states to reorient themselves towards increasing global interdependencies, a restructuration, which emphasised sub- and supranational forms of scalar coordination, has taken place in order to “promote capital investment and renewed accumulation within [the states'] territorial boundaries” (ibid. 433). Rescaling, as a “reconfiguration of a complex set of hierarchical

arrangements” (Mahon and Keil: 13) has thus been one of the strategies to manage the politico-economic crisis of Atlantic Fordism. Brenner denotes this particular rescaling as “neoliberal crisis management”, since the state increasingly focused on operating as an organiser of capitalist growth of a specific kind (Brenner 1999: 441) thereby slipping off its Fordist outlook as also an organiser of general wellbeing.

### *Neoliberalisation*

The neoliberalisation of the former Keynesian national welfare states (Jessop 2003) is understood as a process in the course of which society, not only economic relations, is increasingly organised on principles such as the market, competition, commodification, individuality and inequality. Neoliberalisation fosters entrepreneurialism and shifts responsibility for a good life to individuals. Solidarity and social balance as guiding precepts for organising social security are increasingly replaced by personal contributions and self-responsibility.<sup>3</sup> The state therein assumes the role of an ensemble of apparatuses, differentiated by functional and scalar logics, whose foremost task it is to secure the conditions for neoliberal market capitalism.

In the context of this paper, neoliberal rescaling is considered to be part of a hegemonic discourse in the constant (re-)making. In a Western-European setting this process targets a crucial terrain of stabilising hegemony: the state apparatuses. It is about materially manifesting a set of interpretations and ideas, i.e. a hegemony project, in the very structures of the political formations of the respective society. This is where the “armour of coercion” (Gramsci 1999: 532) is produced. Codifying the constitutive elements of a hegemony project into law, as part of a successful hegemonic struggle, protects these elements relatively from challenges and significantly shapes the conditions of future social struggles. The rescaling of the national state thus modifies the constellation of strategic selectivities. It does not imply a specific content or a specific pattern of the way the national state is changing – it does not describe the different directions in which power is shifting, what kind of ideas are behind the process, nor the pace of it. It is thus a contingent process and has to be concretised for each social formation. Before moving to the question of methodology, two further concepts need to be clarified.

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<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that real-existing Keynesian welfare states have engendered a paradise of de-commodified, solidary social security and individual autonomy. Being structured by a socio-political paradigm affirmative of capitalism, the main purpose was still to manage and secure capital accumulation.

### *Social Reproduction*

One of the central assumptions of this paper is that the restructuring of the German state has resulted in a crisis of social reproduction, which becomes visible at the local level, specifically in urban spaces. Social reproduction is a concept originally proposed by Karl Marx, but as it was later criticised, remained highly under-theorised and marginalised in Marxist theory (Bhattacharya 2013). Specifically, feminist scholars have explored later the importance of domestic labour for the reproduction of capitalism as an overall social formation (e.g. Costa and James 1972). The concept can be defined as the process through which all central societal relations are recreated and sustained. It refers to the recreation of the labour population on an intergenerational basis as well as to capital and its constitutive relations. It comprises the “provision of food, clothing, shelter, basic safety, and health care, along with the development and transmission of knowledge, social values, and cultural practices and the construction of individual and collective identities” (Bezanson and Luxton 2006: 3). Social reproduction has been recognised as a highly contested and conflictual process, which requires “from time to time, action by the state [...] to try to safeguard it” (Elson 2012: 63). It is thus not only a highly gendered and racialised process, but also displays a particular scalar organisation within the state, since social reproduction is mainly carried out on a micro-level. Although necessary infrastructures for collective consumption, as a part of social reproduction, might be organised on a broader scale, e.g. nationally, the very act of sleeping, eating, using health care provision, public transport, housing etc. is happening at a smaller scale with a specific density in cities and urban regions (Castells 1978: 32). The way social production is organised – in individual responsibility, collectively in kinship networks, in solidarity with a broader circle of persons etc. - is thus highly affecting the everyday. Political and economic relations of power, i.e. sedimented discourse formations, are structuring every person's life on a micro-level not only by offering certain subject positions to identify with (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000: 12), but also to a more or less stable extent the conduct of these recurring acts of social reproduction.

### *Crisis and Everyday Life*

Due to this complex interrelation of economics, politics and everyday life, a situation of crisis has always multiple dimensions (Bargetz 2015: 21). It can crop up and be articulated on very different scales, including micro-political settings. A crisis is not a phenomenon to be determined in some objectivistic way, defined by definite, abstract criteria once and for all. Instead, it is always a struggle for interpretation and an act of successful hegemonic

articulation to make plausible that people's concrete life context is in a situation of crisis, i.e. in a situation where current practices lack their conditions of existence and cannot be pursued any longer. It should therefore always be asked: What constitutes a crisis for whom? This also means to “address critical developments, to make them visible and to subject them to societal discussion and decision” (Demirović et al. 2011: 8, own translation). This paper shall contribute in a modest way to the broader project of addressing critical developments and gaining another perspective on the crisis discourse in Germany. By shifting the focus not only to the consequences of neoliberal rescaling on social reproduction in urban spaces, but to emerging practices of resistance and forms of political agency, I would like to draw attention to the multiple ways hegemonic formations are actually contested.

### **3.3 Methodology**

The idea to study the discourse of RtC-groups evolved during a meeting of urban activists from Germany and Vienna, which took place in April 2015 in Kassel. As a member of a RtC-group since summer 2014, I was involved in the preparation and organisation of this event which brought around 60 activists together in workshops and discussion rounds. Taking a peek at how these groups analyse their local situation in relation to wider contexts of political-economic developments in Germany and Europe and getting to know their concrete political practices, encouraged me to not only rethink our local activities, but also to inquire more in depth what it means to fight for a Right to the City nowadays in Germany.

With this paper I take a specifically positioned point of view and acknowledge the writing to be itself an act of generating meaning, having thus a political dimension. Being located in the field of critical post-positivist research, the idea of science to be a neutral process in the course of which objective knowledge is accumulated independently from the researching subject and the contexts it is embedded in, has to be rejected anyway. However, this does not equal the abandonment of the principles of scientific integrity such as “objectivity, impartiality, systematicity, consistency, and so on” (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 191). Following a discourse-theoretical hegemony approach, academic knowledge-production must itself be understood as a crucial part of constantly (re-)creating discourses, truths and thus the conditions for the structuration of society. To account for the embedded character of any research, Glynos and Howarth even suggest to replace the term



*methodology* with *research strategy* since it captures more accurately “the ontological, normative, and sociological presuppositions framing [...] our research agenda“ (ibid. 201).

Since within the discourse-theoretical camp methodological questions are acknowledged as constitutively intertwined with ontological and epistemological ones (Bedall 2014: 202), the outlined theoretical framework cannot leave the research strategy untouched. It has to be reflected from formulating the research question to the method of collecting and interpreting data. Especially, because discourse theory does not offer - and repudiates the idea of doing so - a readymade toolbox of one-size-fits-all-methods (Bedall 2014: 202). Instead, the chosen methods of analysis have to be consistent with the ontological and epistemological premises of the theory and oriented towards the 'object' of study. The herein pursued theoretical approach is therefore considered to be a problem-driven, as distinguished from a method- or theory-driven approach (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 167). The chosen 'object' of research is furthermore not just out there to be discovered by the researcher, but emerges out of the process of problematisation itself. It comes forth, because a certain empirical phenomenon causes an initial irritation and hence catches the interest of the researching subject (Wullweber 2010: 45).

In line with this, the idea of objective causal explanations for social phenomena has to be dropped, since this would presuppose the existence of ahistorical or at least temporarily immutable laws which drive the course of human history and could be discovered by an inductive or deductive research process (Howarth 2005: 322, Wullweber 2010: 47). This, however, would contradict the ontological assumption of discourse-theoretical approaches as outline before. The aim is then rather to gain a better and different *understanding* of the articulated problem, i.e. in this case the contestation of the neoliberal restructuring of the German state by a specific kind of urban protest, thereby offering a narrative to make plausible the existence of the phenomenon.

In this context, it has been suggested to transfer the concept of *articulation* from the study of social practices to the mode of studying itself (Glynos and Howarth 2007, Howarth 2005). Social science explanations within postpositivist strands of theory thus involve “the articulation of different theoretical concepts together in a concrete empirical context, in an effort to provide a singular critical explanation of a problematized phenomenon” (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 180). The interpretation of empirical facts necessarily involves their contextualisation within the wider range of discursive structures and is dependent on the theoretical concepts the research is based on. Such interpretations are thus always contingent and contestable; no eternal truths are furnished (Howarth 2005: 321). Whether

however the formulated explanations meet the criteria of plausibility cannot be ultimately established – discussions among discourse theorists concerning this issue are still going on. For the moment, “one can only say that the ultimate ‘proof of the pudding’ consists in the production of persuasive narratives” which offer a better understanding of the problem at hand (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 191) and are to a certain extent compatible with the respective hegemonic truth horizon (Wullweber 2010: 49). These more general clarifications regarding methodology in a discourse-theoretical framework have to be briefly translated in terms of the specificities of this paper, concretising the articulation of the problematised phenomenon.

The main body of analysis is constituted by the next two chapters. The first one deals with the specific spatio-temporal phenomenon of what I call the neoliberal rescaling of the German national state roughly from the 1970s onwards until today. In this first analytical chapter a historical context analysis is undertaken to trace the ideas, discourses and sedimented structures which constitute the current scalar constellation of the German state. These structures have to be understood as the historico-structural conditions giving rise to conflicts within urban space today including the contestation articulated by RtC-groups. The time frame corresponds to developments triggered by the crisis of the older regime of the national-centric Fordist welfare state in Western Europe. Neoliberal rescaling was one of the responses to this crisis in the framework of a newly arising hegemonic formation. An overview of the different steps of rescaling, which have been stabilised by institutionalisation in laws, the constitution and re-compositions of the federal system, will be given, to understand the current strategic selectivities with which urban actors are faced. These comprise also the impact of neoliberal rescaling on the urban social fabric, framed as a crisis of social reproduction. This analysis, I contend, is necessary to establish the structural context in which urban protests emerge, to which they refer and with which they are dealing. Political agency in a specific spatio-temporal context cannot be separated from the respective hegemonic discourse formation, since it presents the grounds of possibility of this agency and at the same time the arena which is addressed.

The ensuing part takes the form of a discourse analysis in more narrow terms. It investigates the discourse around a Right to the City as it is practised by groups in Germany. The analysis is mainly based on semi-structured qualitative interviews and draws additionally on about 60 documents of different length taken from the groups' websites. Texts such as a self-understanding or 'information about us' were included as well as calls to demonstrations, information leaflets, general reflections about the Right to the City and

reports about demonstrations and other events, published between 2009 and early 2016.<sup>4</sup> Interviews have been chosen furthermore, since the documents and articles to be found online do provide a good overview on the publicly communicated political agenda of the groups and on some of their activities. However, these did not seem sufficient to grasp the motivations and reflections behind the eventually taken decisions. To understand the social practices, political identity and the groups' relation to broader politico-economic developments also requires the actors' self-representation. Compared to public documents “interviews provide a less sanctioned, formalised or rationalised image of the world. The respondents provide individual, spontaneously phrased impressions of discursive patterns of interpretation [...]. Through interviews knowledge can be generated about how individuals [...] construct meaning and identity” (Bedall 2014: 210, own translation). Since I was interested in how the groups articulate the meaning of their practices and how they link their struggles to the conditions which produce the problems they face, interviews seemed to be in line with discourse theory, seeking to “provide second-order interpretations of social actors' own self-understandings and interpretations of their situations and practices” (Howarth 2005: 319). This way the discourse connected to the signifier of a Right to the City, the articulated antagonism and its fantasmatic dimensions can be made intelligible as an instance of micro-political practices of resistance.

I conducted seven interviews with fourteen activists from Jena, the Ruhr area, Cologne, Freiburg, Regensburg, Frankfurt am Main and Hamburg. Interview requests were sent to groups in fourteen cities - four of them did not reply, one was not active anymore, with two it was impossible to find a convenient date. The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were connected each time with a visit to the respective city, only once the interview was conducted via skype (Hamburg). All respondents agreed to be recorded and quoted as part of their group. In order to broaden the range of groups incorporated in the analysis, websites were also consulted.<sup>5</sup>

The semi-structured interview guide contained different sets of questions targeting a) the motivation and reasons to found a group or a network (how do they problematise their social context, which critical developments do they observe, what mechanisms and actors are addressed, i.e. which antagonism is articulated); b) the focal themes of their work (what has been prioritised as the issues to act upon); c) their everyday work, the kind of

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<sup>4</sup> In order to limit the material to a processible amount, a cut was made after January 2016, the month in which also the last interviews were conducted.

<sup>5</sup> Information about the interviews and references for the additionally used documents can be found in the appendix.

political or legal actions they undertake, including the scales of action and the question of their success; d) the social composition of the group (who is active and who do they speak to, including collaborations with other groups); e) their understanding of a Right to the City (what imaginaries do they connect to this slogan); f) their political identity (how do they understand themselves, also compared to other groups). The initial guideline was subject to changes after the first interview and emphasis on different blocs was modified according to the individual groups' and activists' foci.

The interviews have been transcribed and together with the additional sources closely read to establish recurring kinds of articulations to be clustered further into categories, which are reflected in the structure of chapter 5. This clustering does of course not represent a simple move from element A to category B or vice versa. Ordering the distinct elements of the discourse under these categories can neither be framed as discovering objective truths in the empirical material and translating it to theoretical concepts, nor as matching unchangeable theoretical concepts with their empirical instances. Instead, it has to be understood as an act of articulation itself to form a plausible narrative of the phenomenon under investigation.

The ontological and rather abstract considerations of discourse theoretical hegemony theory have been further concretised into small- and middle-range concepts. This cannot happen in a purely deductive process where the more concrete concepts are straightforwardly deduced from discourse theoretical ontology since it is the historically-specific hegemonic struggles which are of interest and an investigation of structuration processes must take into account the actors' own interpretations. The assumption herein is that “institutions and practices are partly constituted by the beliefs and desires of social actors; that there is an internal relation between subjective meanings and actions” and that therefore the “set of shared, background practices” (Howarth 2005: 319) must be analysed to understand meaning-making processes. These actors-specific practices and beliefs cannot be grasped with the researcher's political ontology alone but have to be translated into political and social theoretical concepts to “re-describe the ontical level in terms of the distinctions brought about by that ontology” (Laclau 2004: 323). A close engagement with both – the theoretical groundings and the empirical material in a back and forth, i.e. a retroductive movement (e.g. Blaikie 2010: 87ff, Hauf and Belfrage 2015) seemed thus the most appropriate research strategy to be employed.

The starting point is the open question whether the RtC-discourse can be perceived as a fully developed counter-hegemonic project and whether it has the potential in a

hegemonic logic of politics to be part of radical transformation. The focus is thus less on the cohesiveness of the hegemonic formation embodied in the neoliberal rescaling of the German state and more on urban protest as part of the ongoing contestation of hegemony. The concretisation of concepts to analyse the potentially counter-hegemonic project articulated by RtC-groups therefore takes up more space than concepts to analyse the neoliberal state project.

#### **4. Outwards, Upwards and Downwards – Rescaling the State**

##### **4.1 Capitalism and Urbanisation – from Fordist Cities to Neoliberal Space**

Having introduced the concept of rescaling and its effect on different scales, it remains to be explored what transformations exactly the local scale is going through. The chapter thus serves to answer the sub-question: In what ways can one speak of a *neoliberal rescaling* in the case of the German state<sup>6</sup> and how do these changes affect urban space?

Approaching space and scale as social products implies to recognise their embeddedness in a complex constellation of social, political and economic processes. The geography of globalising capitalism is not only characterised by uneven developments in the international division of labour but equally within states, on subnational, regional and local scales. With increasing capital mobility and the relativisation of the national as the prevalent form of organising socio-political cohesion as well as economic accumulation, cities and urban regions progressively gained importance as geographical nodal points in a contingently (un-)structured space.

David Harvey theorised urbanisation and the enfolding of the capitalist mode of production to be inherently intertwined. Within capitalism, surplus value has to be produced for the reproduction of the system as a whole. “[T]his in turn must be reinvested in order to generate more surplus value” (Harvey 2009: 316) – this reinvestment is not space-neutral, it shapes geographical space and is shaped by it. The age of industrialisation has seen a growth of urban centres to channel accumulated capital into the built environment and stabilise the further reproduction of capitalist relations. Favourable conditions could especially be forged within densely populated industrial cities, supplying a

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<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, for the period between 1945 and 1990, the historical context analysis is only concerned with the developments of the Federal Republic of Germany, thus leaving out the specific conditions of the spatial organisation of the GDR. It is thereby not assumed, that the rapid integration of the former Eastern German structures into the neoliberalising state project of the FRG has simply cancelled out all its specificities. Investigating the different former Western and Eastern German scalar constellations and their effects on the urban scale had to be neglected due to time and space restrictions.

sufficient, relatively immobile labour force, short transportation and communication routes and creating urban cultures of consumerism to steady demand for industrial products (ibid. 240). Cities can therefore be perceived as social products, “built in the context of a given mode of production” (ibid. 203) or more generally: in the context of a certain discursive formation. Thus, the rearticulation of the role of cities can be better grasped when analysing transformations at more than the urban scale itself.

In the regime of Atlantic Fordism, the national scale was of foremost relevance for economic and social policy making, whereas the urban scale represented an inferior “nodal point for collective consumption and social policy” to cope with the side-effects of the Fordist mode of growth (Jessop 2009: 98). The organisation of geographical space and the scalar constellation of the state were mainly created and supervised at central state level. In the Fordist-Keynesian era, cities’ and municipalities’ main function consisted in the administration of decisions taken elsewhere. Urban politics was mainly concerned with “social engineering” (Brenner 1997: 553), supplied with the required means by the central state. Fordist city design was characterised by a relatively standardised division of space – working, living and leisure were neatly separated in a car-friendly environment to be traversed in private motor-vehicles. Suburban sprawl was a characteristic feature of this period (Jonas et al. 2015).

With the global economic crisis of the 1970s “the historically entrenched relationship of ‘mutuality’ between cities and territorial states“ was slowly wearing away (Brenner 1999: 432). The Fordist spatial constellation witnessed a process of dislocation challenged by the rise of neoliberal discourse and the corresponding politico-economic drive to (geographically) restructure relations of production. Dynamism and flexibility became leading signifiers also for organising state space. Conceptualised as a *glocalised* configuration (Brenner and Theodore 2002: 363) the initiated process comprised the conflictual shifting of responsibilities between different scales or (re-)creating scales as privileged sites of e.g. capital accumulation or care work. Circuits of capital, the regulation of labour or social reproduction were upscaled or downscaled in varying combinations (Mahon and Keil 2009: 12), dynamically rearranging the territorial organisation of the Atlantic Keynesian national welfare state regime in the 1970s and '80s. The former spatiality shifted towards increasingly uneven geographies of “actually existing neoliberalism” which no longer converged neatly with national state territories (Brenner and Theodore 2002: 363). This *rescaling* is not purely corrosive since “an ongoing *creative* destruction of political-economic space at multiple geographic scales” (ibid. 351, emphasis

added) is involved. The dismantling of national redistributive institutions is accompanied by the establishment of “new institutional capacities for promoting capital investment within major urban growth poles” (ibid.). Within neoliberalising social formations, the urban scale has gained new prominence due to a change of state strategies, turning towards a differentiation of spatial and production realities (Mahon and Keil 2009: 13). Rescaling was part of managing the crisis of the Fordist accumulation regime. At the local level, small-scale policy experiments reflected the neoliberal popularity of open coordination, governance mechanisms, benchmark setting, best practice exchanges and the competitive search for innovation. Urban spaces became the site of a range of policy attempts from “place-marketing, enterprise and empowerment zones, [...] public-private partnerships, [...], property-redevelopment schemes, business-incubator projects, new strategies of social control, policing and surveillance” (Brenner and Theodore 2002: 368). The new prominence of urban regions as socio-economic nodal points in the uneven landscape of neoliberalism should not be understood as cities having “slipped anchor' and now float free of national states in a space of global capital flows” (Mahon and Keil 2009: 13). They are connected, in contradictory ways, with developments at the national state, European and global level. Thus, “cities have become strategically crucial geographical arenas in which a variety of neoliberal initiatives - along with closely intertwined strategies of crisis displacement and crisis management - have been articulated” (Brenner and Theodore 2002: 349). A process which can also be grasped with the term *neoliberal rescaling* of the state, taking place throughout the capitalist world of the North-American and West-European hemisphere, including (West-)Germany.

## **4.2 Retracing the Scalar Neoliberalisation of Germany**

### **4.2.1 *Evolving Spatial Imaginaries in Regional Planning***

One way of tracing the hegemonisation of neoliberal rescaling is an inquiry into the *spatial imaginaries*, expressed e.g. in the modifications regional planning policies have undergone in the last decades. The subsequent section reviews the discursive production of space within regional planning in Germany in the transition from the Fordist to today's neoliberal regime.

In the post-war era up until the early 1970s, the institutionalisation of regional planning took place under the constitutionally prescribed goal of creating *uniform living conditions* in the Federal Republic (Art. 72 GG in its pre-1994 form). The entire state territory was supposed to be targeted as an ideally homogeneous entity in which

geographically consistent growth could be induced (Brenner 1997: 551). This found expression in the 1965 Law on Regional Planning (Raumordnungsgesetz) which defined the task to “lead the federal territory in its *general spatial structure* to a development which serves best the free development of personality in the community” (Bundesgesetzblatt 1965, section I: 306, own translation, emphasis added). Regional planning was highly influenced by the model of an interventionist state. With the grand coalition of 1966, the additional task was taken up to lift comparatively backwards regions up to the level of the economically strong ones via governmental subsidies (Blotevogel 2003: 4).

However, at latest in the mid-1970s, the idea of a centrally steering state apparatus was abandoned in favour of more compartmentalised planning. The development of endogenous, urban-regional growth potentials was articulated as one of the new guiding principles (Brenner 1997: 556). With the first Law on the Promotion of Urban Development in 1971 this shift became institutionalised (Bundesgesetzblatt 1971, section I). The spatial imaginary of the German state discourse witnessed an incremental decentralisation from the Fordist ideal of a balanced national towards differentiated space where uneven geographic development became the fundamental condition of planning (Brenner 1997: 551). In its final 1976-report, the state-appointed Commission on Economic and Social Change in the Federal Republic also declared the goal of a geographical balance to be unrealistic and demanded a re-orientation towards the functionality of different spaces (Gahlen and Hax 1979: 102).

In the 1980s this course was further stabilised and the guiding principle of comprehensive planning was replaced by pluralism in planning (Blotevogel 2003: 5). In line with the emphasis on individual instead of centralised responsibility, the formula of unfolding regional potentials, strengthening self-initiative and local competitiveness (ibid. 8) characterised the spatial dimension of the neoliberal discourse in Germany, implicating a rescaling of the state.

Neoliberalism’s spatial imaginary abandoned „the traditional post-war project of ‘equalising life conditions’ on a national scale“ in favour of promoting subnational scales as the essential levels of securing capitalist accumulation (Brenner 1999: 444). These motifs have been retained also after the accession of the former GDR to the Federal Republic and spelled out more concretely throughout the 1990s, leaving their marks as well on the European Union’s territorial policies. In the course of this concretisation, the question of what has to be understood by *uniform living conditions* has been re-negotiated, resulting in



a constitutional change in 1994 which replaced “uniform” with “equivalent” (Gunlicks 2003: 118).

This rearticulation is time and again stressed in the respective documents. In 1993 the Ministry for Regional Planning, Building and Urban Development published its Orientation Framework for Regional Planning Policies, stating that the equality of living, working and environmental conditions is a „contextually dependent, dynamic destination route, not an absolute rule“<sup>7</sup> (Bundesministerium für Raumordnung, Bauwesen und Städtebau 1993: 21). It warned against misunderstanding the postulate of equality as general sameness implying the state's duty to act in a balancing way (ibid.). Instead it emphasised that the role of economically strong centres must be developed in an environment of increasing international competition to secure their function as regional growth engines and „spatial key players“ (ibid. 6).

These ideas were further extended with the 1995 Framework of Action for Regional Planning Policies in which the element of urban-regional centres evolved into the concept of European Metropolitan Regions. The thus honoured city-regions are expected to act as „engines of societal, economic, social and culture development“ and shall “contribute to [...] the productivity and competitiveness of Germany and Europe“ (Dallinger and Böhringer 2012: 67). Responsibility for national welfare is down-scaled to distinguished urban areas and competition as a mode of coordination is stressed. Also in the 1999 European Spatial Development Perspective competition is explicitly referred to as „very positive“ (ESDP 1999: 65) and „a stronger integration of the European regions into the global economy“ (ibid. 20) is demanded. Urbanised regions are envisaged to play a central part in decreasing unemployment (ibid. 35), requiring them to be „dynamic, attractive and competitive“ (ibid. 22).

Regional planning was again updated with the 2006 Guiding Principles and Strategies of Action for Spatial Development in which „growth and innovation“ are the first of three principles (MKRO 2006: 3). A new element is introduced when globalisation is invoked as an external force to which all social actors, including cities and urban regions have to adopt. Again, endogenous regional potentials and regionally specific competences are stressed (ibid. 16) and regions, in a down-scaling move, declared to have special importance therein (ibid. 9). To make clear that there exists no argumentative ground for a balancing instrument, one is guided in how to interpret the equality-of-living-conditions postulate of the German constitution: This would of course not mean „identical living

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<sup>7</sup> All following quotes taken from official German documents are own translations.

conditions at every place“ but the much more modest „guarantee of the access to the provisions and facilities of public services as well as to employment opportunities“ (ibid. 7). One year later, the Territorial Agenda of the European Union, prepared under German Council Presidency, “Towards a More Competitive Europe of Diverse Regions“ (2007), set out a similar vision for the spatial organisation of the EU. The spatial imaginary put forth on the EU level resembled the German discourse with its strong tendencies towards neoliberal conceptualisations of society and the state. This development was made evident in Germany with a revision of the Law on Regional Planning in 2008. The opening paragraphs with their reference to the German territory as a whole were replaced by the formula of aiming to achieve “a stable and equilibrated organisation on a broad scale with equivalent living conditions in the subspaces” (Raumordnungsgesetz 2008, §1 section 2). National space shall be developed with view to competitive economic structures and in close accordance to economic needs, “regional growth and innovation potentials shall be supported in the subspaces” (ibid. §2 section 2.4).

The imaginary of a differentiated geographical space, in which cities and regions exist in competition with each other in a race for investments, growth and jobs can be seen as a by now sedimented discursive structure. This becomes finally obvious in the latest Regional Planning Report of the Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning. General minimum standards for the whole state are rejected while demanding sub-spatially differentiated standards (Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning 2012: 16). Thus, equivalent living conditions are not to be perceived as a realisable goal (ibid. 30). Growth and competitiveness are framed as universal interests, since significant welfare losses would have to be expected when Germany loses its international position (ibid. 29) and only growth can solve the problems caused by the financial crisis (ibid. 210).

A noticeable transformation of spatial imaginaries has thus taken place in the transition from Fordist to neoliberalising social formations. It can be summarised as a shift from perceiving space as an absorber of accumulated capital, a rather passive condition, to space as a fluid and active complex which needs to be mobilised to serve the continuous accumulation of capital. The discourse visible in these texts is assumed to be the one which could be asserted against alternative imaginaries, thus becoming sedimented in institutions which will be addressed in the next paragraphs.

### **4.2.2 The Changing Role of Municipalities in the German Federal System**

Spatial imaginaries which have become hegemonic in certain societal sub-fields such as regional planning do certainly not translate smoothly one-to-one into corresponding social practices. A state “is not a homogenous medium, [...] but an uneven set of branches and functions, only relatively integrated by the hegemonic practices which take place within it” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 180). Previous discourses inscribed into state apparatuses and routines of reproduction are not easily replaced. In the renegotiation of former concepts with new imaginaries, contradictory and hybrid outcomes might ensue. Such an outcome can be discerned for the changing role of municipalities and thus of the local scale in the German federal system.

German federalism comprises the national and the federal state level. Municipalities do not constitute an independent level in the polity but belong to the federal states. However, the constitution grants them the right of self-government (Art. 28 par. 2 Basic Law for the FRG). One can speak of a relative autonomy vis-à-vis the central state due to the constitutionally guaranteed communal self-administration and simultaneously far-reaching fiscal dependency since options for creating genuine communal income are quite limited (Petzold 2015).

In the post-war era German municipalities mainly carried out tasks which have been decided elsewhere – in line with the idea of the state's responsibility to create *uniform living conditions* throughout the territory (Brenner 1997: 553). Until the 1970s West Germany was characterised by centralising tendencies. The federal system was not geared towards diversity but marked by an aspiration for conformity (Möllers 2008: 80). With intensifying economic stagnation in the second half of the decade, deficit-spending and governmental stimulus packages came under attack. Parallel to the rise of unemployment, a change of thinking occurred and new crisis management measures were implemented already under the Social-Liberal coalition of Helmut Schmidt (Adamy and Steffen 1982: 686). Balanced budgets became the central goal of fiscal policy and competitiveness was to be secured through technological innovation, labour market flexibility and the modernisation of German capital (Brenner 1997: 558). Several laws cut services in the health and pension system and active labour market policies (Adamy and Steffen 1982: 686f.). This restructuring comprised also a new scalar division of labour in which the federal states and municipalities were given greater importance for capital accumulation (Brenner 1997: 551). The neoliberal transformation of the welfare state set in motion under social-democratic

chancellors continued with the neoconservative era signalled by the Kohl administration taking office in 1982. Immediately, the previously agreed austerity package was increased by another 6 billion DM (Adamy and Steffen 1982: 688). New regulations in the field of housing policy further shifted responsibility for the access to affordable, decent accommodation from the central state (*ibid.*). The accession of the GDR to the Federal Republic did not lead to major dislocations (Brenner 1997: 558). The actual “Wende” appeared in form of discursive shifts, discrediting the principle of solidarity in favour of private contributions to individual well-being and the self-reliance of responsible citizens (Adamy and Steffen 1982: 691). Becoming more and more sedimented in the German state organisation and society, this discourse remained hegemonic throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s under the coalition of Social Democrats and Greens. In his government statement of 2003 Gerhard Schröder declared that in the same vein as the government planned to “cut services of the state [...] and demand more personal contribution from each individual” (Bundestag Plenarprotokoll 15/23 2003: 2479), it also envisaged to enforce more self-responsibility on municipalities (*ibid.* 2483).

The centralising tendencies of the German state had been addressed in 1994 with a first federalism reform and again in 2006 (updated in 2009) in order to uncouple state layers, aiming for more federal state independence (Möllers 2008: 81). This followed the idea of a 'competitive federalism' but embodied a highly ambiguous development. Formally, the regional and local state are still deeply integrated into the entire state organisation since the constitutional obligation to safeguard equivalent living conditions binds the central state to request certain tasks at all levels. The promoted unbundling of scalar interdependence, supposed to create a higher degree of autonomy for subnational entities, is executed as a neoliberal rescaling of the state, i.e. responsibilities are downscaled without providing the necessary means. This rescaling has been pursued to abide to the principle of budget discipline, especially since the debt break has been written into the German constitution in 2009. It serves the aim of “fiscal optimisation” (Kuhlmann and Bogumil 2010: 12, own translation) by off-loading costly tasks onto municipalities. This transfer, especially in the realm of social provisions, leads researchers to identify a “fundamental transformation of statehood” (*ibid.* 14, own translation). Instead of liberating the local scale, it has been rearticulated as the place where the 'dirty work' of neoliberalisation is carried out.

Over time, more and more federal laws with financial effects for the local scale have been adopted, such as regulations of child and youth services (Arnold et al. 2015: 8) and social assistance for persons who are not eligible any longer for unemployment benefits or

have no other source of income (Sommermann 2005: 62). This has been delegated to the federal states which in turn mandated their municipalities to pay it out of their budgets. Due to this responsibility “the financial stress of local governments has been exacerbated significantly” (Gunlicks 2003: 101). With the Hartz-IV-laws in 2003 and the associated merging of social assistance and unemployment benefits into ALG II (“unemployment benefit II”), the financial burden accumulated further. The costs for accommodation, educational services, provisions of participation, one-time payments and flanking services for those who receive ALG II, paid nowadays by municipalities, significantly exceed the costs of the previous system (Adamay 2009, Sommermann 2006: 62). With a growing number of benefits receivers in the last decades (Peter 2010: 2) the local dimension of social policy gained increasing significance.

Contradictory expectations towards the urban scale, as provider of social infrastructure commissioned by the regional or central state and at the same time as autonomous growth engine and competitive job creator, are an expression of the hybridising effects of differently sedimented and newly emerging discourses colliding in their strive for hegemonising the social. In this case, it is the centralising Fordist regime being challenged by a neoliberal paradigm of differentiated space. The associated internal transformations and shifts of power centres are not apolitical, technical processes. They involve struggles in as well as outside of the different scalar and functional state apparatuses and they restructure the strategic-selective terrain on which actors at different scales are moving. The specific constellation of state apparatuses is thus a result of contingently proceeding disputes (see e.g. Demirović 2007 99ff.). “Conflicts of this kind are not only argued out informally, but also officially: the tailoring of responsibilities between the central government, federal units, municipalities and [...] regional growth zones; the definition of ministries and their competencies [...]; the creation of new governmental authorities such as federal agencies or police units” etc. (ibid. 112, own translation) are all part of contingent struggles which make clear that the state is not straightforwardly determined by the relations of production. Instead it is a fragmented complex of sedimented discourses and power relations, changing constantly into temporarily stable constellations.

That the municipal level is today ascribed a greater importance for economic accumulation, while bearing the social and financial costs of the welfare state's downscaling, is not a top-down implemented necessity. Much of the contestation of centralised control over the territory came from within municipalities themselves. The

neoliberal spatial imaginary with its promise of greater local autonomy has been shaped by urban political, economic and social agency as well. Rescaling is thus also constituted by a transforming discourse of urban self-understanding.

### **4.2.3 Entrepreneurial City Management**

Part of defragmenting the Fordist spatial discourse formation have been local actors, eager to adopt urban space to world-market competition. Their demands for more decision-making leeway formed part of the neoliberal spatial agenda. An often-quoted example is the '83 speech of Hamburg's mayor Klaus von Dohnanyi "Corporation Hamburg" (Dohnanyi 1983). He analyses therein the problematic consequences of rescaling policies for the local scale, being overburdened with the costs for social benefits and rising unemployment (ibid. 2f.). Dohnanyi's solution is a call to strengthen efforts in developing endogenous urban growth potentials and "a policy which offensively takes up Hamburg's competition in all areas towards other cities [...] in the federal republic and in Europe" (ibid. 6, own translation). He affirmatively refers to and, as the mayor of an important city in the German political economy, vigorously pushes forward the inter-urban competition emerging with the rescaling of the state. The idea that local actors should rely on their own abilities to achieve social cohesion as well as economic growth is cultivated. In the context of a welfare state focused on cost cutting to balance budgets, this new *entrepreneurial city* discourse was not an unwelcomed development. Federal states and municipalities were encouraged to entrepreneurialise their economic policy, taking over a central role in the overall accumulation process (Brenner 1997: 559). Today, the *entrepreneurial city* concept enjoys great popularity across the German party-political spectrum (Belina and Schipper 2009). It translated the "basic neoliberal imperative of mobilizing economic space [...] as a purified arena for capitalist growth, commodification, and market discipline" into local politics (Brenner and Theodore 2002: 374). It can thus be understood as a political project which is constitutive for rescaling shifts in the territorial constellation of the state (Petzold 2014: 20). Municipalities and the federal states aiming for urban-regional competitiveness, flexibilising local labour markets and promoting technological innovations, adapt willingly to a Postfordist knowledge-economy. Through city-marketing, administrations and politicians turn the city into a brand, an urban product to attract high-income and high-skilled citizens (Heeg 2001, Mayer 2013: 159). Harvey notes that even the quality of urban life itself has been commodified in a world "where consumerism, tourism, and cultural and knowledge-based industries have become major aspects of the urban political economy"

(2009: 323).

Hence, urban politics are no longer characterised by the task to achieve common well-being through redistributive mechanisms but are integrated into the constant improvement of the conditions of capital accumulation. Globalising principles of deregulation, financialisation and privatisation thus engender effects on the local social fabric, especially in housing policies and the real estate sector.

#### **4.2.4 Housing Policy and New Financialised Accumulation Dynamics**

In the post-war era, an active housing policy existed to create sufficient affordable accommodation for the majority of the population in Germany. Between 1951 and 1956, 2.1 billion government-subsidised apartments were built (Rekittke and Becker 1995), available for 70% of the population according to the criteria of eligibility (Schmickler 2015). At the end of the 1960s, however, the role of the state as provider of housing was slowly replaced by the faith in market forces (Egner 2014). Government subsidies were targeting increasingly the creation of private housing (Rekittke and Becker 1995). The market was incrementally liberalised, leading to a doubling of rents between the 1960s and 1970s (*ibid.*). In reaction, the Law on Housing Subsidy (Bundesgesetzblatt 1963, section I) was adopted in 1963, shifting governmental housing policy from creating the required infrastructure, i.e. supply-side policies, towards individualised assistance, i.e. demand-side policies. In 1979 only 1.5 billion DM were channelled towards social housing programmes, while 6 billion DM were spent on tax concessions and subsidies for residential home owners (Rekittke and Becker 1995). In the course of the 1980s, 200 billion DM were cut from housing subsidies (Adamy and Steffen 1982: 689f.). The Kohl-government argued that the apartment market was well-balanced as a result of public as well as private investments (Egner 2014.), although in the beginning of the 1990s a lack of 2.5 to 3 million apartment units emerged. In 2001, the social housing construction programmes were *de facto* terminated by the Red-Green government by legislating social housing *promotion*. The law limited the target group of public support to only those households who are existentially dependent on assistance (Wohnraumförderungsgesetz 2001). Therewith, the state's total retreat from supply-side stabilisation was instigated. With the 2006 federalism reform, the central state finally downscaled responsibility for social housing to the federal units without any monitoring mechanisms (Wieland 2013). The attached financial means are often used for other purposes, especially in states facing budget constraints (*ibid.*). Additionally, public housing corporations were frequently criticised for being inefficient,

calling funds for social housing into question (Heeg 2013: 78). Between 2010 and 2013 another overall reduction of social housing subsidies was discerned (Wohngeld- und Mietenbericht 2014: 12).

The state's rollback from ensuring that its built environment at the urban scale is an accessible social good has opened up the housing sector as an object of investment. These transformations effect the commodification of a central element of collective consumption in urban spaces. The financialisation of everyday life, in which citizens are appealed to as self-responsible investors, propels the creation of new financial assets (Heeg 2013 77ff.). Besides attracting private investors, also institutional actors discover residential buildings as a supposedly safe haven. With the worsening of the Euro crisis, investors withdrew their capital from Southern Europe to channel it into the German real estate market (ibid. 85). With demand-side policies at different levels, e.g. payment of housing subsidy (central state) or the costs of accommodation for ALG-II-recipients (local) for 11% of German households (Wohngeld- und Mietenbericht 2014: 12), real estate investors benefit from a state-financed business model. Especially cities with high rents and high numbers of benefit-receivers guarantee a stable profit for those who own what used to be in municipal hands. And estate companies such as Deutsche Annington are counting on further sales of public housing corporations by cities (Schmickler 2015).

Neoliberal policies have been transforming German social and economic structures subtly at least since the 1970s. They proceeded further at an accelerated pace with the accession of the former GDR in 1989 (Hirsch 1995: 126), culminated a first time with the Red-Green coalition under Gerhard Schröder taking office in 1998 and are carried on under the conservative-dominated governments of Angela Merkel. Tightening fiscal discipline, labour market flexibility, the restructuring of public welfare provision and the neoliberal rescaling of the state have been central elements of Germany's development in the last 40 years. These configurations mirror societal relations of power since they represent the, contradictory and uneven, sedimented outcome of previous hegemonic contestation: “the state is the contingent result of social struggles and always instable compromises” (Demirović 2007: 124). There is no guarantee that the current constellation is going to be reproduced incessantly, dynamics within and between state and societal apparatuses might have destabilising effects. One such dynamic might emerge with the disintegrating consequences of neoliberal rescaling on the urban social fabric, i.e. with the potential manifestation of a crisis of social reproduction.



### **4.3 A Crisis of Social Reproduction?**

#### **4.3.1 Growing Indebtedness**

The creative destruction of neoliberalism takes place with particular intensity at the urban scale (Brenner and Theodore 2002: 367). In Germany, processes of neoliberal rescaling have produced a polarisation between shrinking regions and municipalities on the one hand and “boomtowns” on the other (Arnold et al. 2015: 8). The internal differentiation into internationally competitive centres and stagnant city regions represents one of the main characteristics of the German Postfordist economic geography (Brenner 1997: 555). However, all cities and municipalities share concerns over their eroding financial basis (Deutscher Städtetag 2014).<sup>8</sup>

Municipalities are confronted with ever increasing fiscal pressure due to a long-time accumulating financing gap. One way of dealing with this, is recourse to the instrument of debt, even advocated for municipalities with “special structural problems and high unemployment rates” by the Schröder government (Bundestag, Plenarprotokoll 15/32 2003: 2483). The majority of German cities is highly indebted, amounting to 133 billion € in 2012 for all communal budgets taken together - an amount equivalent to one third of the entire Greek debt in 2011 (Freier and Grass 2013: 14). Between 1998 and 2009 municipal debt scaled up by 23% (ibid.) and between 2008 and 2013 another 23.8% (Arnold et al. 2015: 102). What seems especially problematic is the development of communal cash credits (“Kassenkredite”), the purpose of which was originally to compensate for cash flow imbalances in the course of one year. Municipalities, however, increasingly fill their gaps on a long-term basis with cash credits. Between 1998 and 2009 their utilisation has been rising from 77 Euro per capita to 457 Euro (Freier and Grass 2013: 16). Cash credits clearly lost their character as stabilising liquidity temporarily – from 6.9 billion Euro in 2000 they scaled up to 49 billion in 2014 (Arnold et al. 2015: 60). This expresses a structural deficit at the urban scale due to the downscaling of a variety of responsibilities without enabling cities to bear these in sustainable ways. This local indebtedness cannot even be understood as a Keynesian way of deficit-spending since cash credits are not harnessed for social or infrastructural investments, they merely serve to cover overfunding gaps (Freier and Grass 2013: 16).

In a political climate where debt breaks are written into constitutions at the national

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<sup>8</sup>This erosion has been fuelled in the last decades by constant tax cuts especially in the realm of income and corporate taxes favouring high-income earners and financially strong corporations. Since 2001 this has resulted in municipal tax losses of eight billion Euro per year. Also the abandonment of the wealth tax since 1998 contributed to the structural financing gap (see e.g. Sarbok 2015).

and federal state level, and are demanded by think tanks such as the Bertelsmann foundation for the municipal level as well (Burth et al. 2013), this situation is widely acknowledged as a problem. The advanced solution consists of budget discipline by cutting expenditures and social services, as well as further attempts to generate revenues locally. As a reaction to the worsening situation of communal finances in the course of the global financial crisis, nine out of the thirteen German area states introduced special programmes for the financial recovery of their municipalities (Arnold et al. 2015: 124). The crisis indeed resulted in a sharp decline of revenues from the local business tax (Gunlicks 2003: 175) and burdened local budgets with accelerating social-transfer-costs due to a rise in unemployment (Adamy 2009). It thus aggravated the tense fiscal situation of cities and communes. Except from Saarland, all municipalities had to implement consolidation measures in return to the partial take-over of their old debts or annual stabilisation grants (Arnold et al. 2015: 124). Moreover, they had to agree to strict supervision (ibid. 125). The disciplining governmentality of these programmes integrates well into the overall restructuring of the German welfare state.

#### **4.3.2 A Looming Social Infrastructure and Investment Gap**

The immanent over-indebtedness of German municipalities is not a recent phenomenon and the crisis (management) has only sharpened the situation. Financial problems have already in the last years engendered spending cuts in the areas of culture, youth work, counselling and information centres of various kinds, museums, libraries, public swimming pools, zoos, sports grounds and other educational, and cultural offers (Petzold 2014: 7). Many services previously provided by local administrations cannot be maintained any longer (Kuhlmann and Bogumil 2010: 12). Even the Bertelsmann-Foundation acknowledges that more and more cities see the financing of their assigned tasks as compromised, leading them to close public institutions, implement staff savings, invent new taxes or privatise state property (Arnold et al. 2015: 100). Citizens are thereby confronted on a daily basis with the consequences of austerity for the conditions of social reproduction. Local governments postpone investments in infrastructure, although this is the most important level of infrastructural development (Freier and Grass 2013: 13). According to an expert commission appointed by the economy Minister Gabriel, there is an investment bottleneck of 90 billion Euro in Germany compared to the OECD-average, especially at the municipal level (DIW 2015). Closing this gap should comprise the opening up of infrastructural projects for private and institutional investors as it already happened with insurances and

pension funds (ibid.). Hence, the problem is supposed to be tackled with a further financialisation of state services. The investment gap concerns also the construction sector and therewith the question of housing. The crisis-response stimulus packages have indeed relieved municipalities and led to higher per-capita expenditures in construction. However, quickly after their expiration the level declined again back to the previous deficit (Burth et al. 2013: 54). Rather than investing, municipalities are selling their public building stock as well as public utility companies to private investors, with consequent price increases and quality losses (e.g. Gerstlberger 2009).

### **4.3.3 Precarious Housing: Rising Rents and Forced Evictions**

Decent and affordable accommodation – being part of the basic social infrastructure - is progressively jeopardised in many cities. Due to the downscaling of responsibility for social housing, mounting fiscal pressure and the privatisation of previously communal building stock, the housing questions comes to the fore. Rents are rising, less well-off inhabitants are pushed to the margins and an increasing number of households is not able to pay their rents, leading to more forced evictions.

A 2014 report of the German government expounds that many cities have to deal with significant rent increases and problematic housing-market situations (Wohngeld- und Mietenbericht 2014: 11). Average rents in twelve cities were above 9 Euro per m<sup>2</sup> and are rising by 5% per year on average in the metropolitan core regions and in university towns (ibid. 14). In many urban areas these statistics are even exceeded.<sup>9</sup>

With a simultaneously widening low-pay sector (Kalina and Weinkopf 2012) an increasing bulk of income directly goes to landlords or real estate companies. According to the European Housing Exclusion Index, 16,4% of the German population faces housing cost overburden, i.e. these persons cross the threshold of spending 40% of their disposable income on housing. The lack of social, non-profit housing also shows in another number: 58.4% of poor households have to rely as tenants on the private market or have mortgages to pay. There is no supply for these households by a non-private housing sector mitigating

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<sup>9</sup> In the federal capital, Berlin, the rent index was going up by 10% between 2013 and 2015 (Gabriel 2015); in Stuttgart it rose by 7,7% between 2012 and 2014 (Stadt Stuttgart 2014); in Hamburg rent increase has seen a drastic peak of 33% between 2007 and 2012 (Schappert 2015) and has now, between 2013 and 2015, increased by another 6,1% (NDR.de 2015); Munich citizens had to confront a rise of 6% between 2013 and 2015 (Hutter 2015); in Frankfurt average rents increased by 11,3% between 2010 and 2014 (Göpfert 2014); Potsdam's rents started at latest in the mid-2000s to spiral up, when they increased by 26% between 2006 and 2012 (Stadt Forum Potsdam 2013); Jena's population witnessed an increase of partly more than 20% (bigger apartments built after 1949 and middle-sized newly built ones) and 5-10% in other segments (Ebert 2015) and Leipzig had to deal with a rise of 5% between 2012 and 2014 with a tendency towards further cost increases (Stadt Leipzig 2014).

the critical situation. Germany thus finds itself in a line with France, Austria and Belgium, where “housing inequality [...] is increasing more rapidly than elsewhere and the holes in the safety net are getting bigger” (The Foundation Abbé Pierre and FEANTSA 2015: 13). This development puts the already marginalised at risk – women and older people are far more exposed to housing cost overburden than others (European Housing Exclusion Index: Germany 2015).

The inactivity of state institutions or, more correctly, the very regulations issued by the state, eventuate in growing numbers of forced evictions. According to estimations, 20.000 forced evictions took place in 2010, in 2012 this amounted to 25.000. A reform of the tenancy law in 2013 under the Conservative-Liberal government facilitated the execution of evictions even further (Ignatzi 2013). One year later, the numbers had increased again – in 2014, 33.000 forced evictions were registered (BAG Wohnungslosenhilfe n.d.). A consequence of this development is rising homelessness. In 2014, according to estimations, 335.000 people have been without a flat – an increase by 18% compared to 2012. The number of those living on the streets without any kind of shelter even grew by 50% (ibid.). This in turn increases pressure on municipalities to provide emergency shelters.

#### **4.3.4 *Internal Peripheries and the Question of Resistance***

In the prevalent political discourse, despite the fact that the neoliberal rescaling of the German state is undermining basic elements of social infrastructure and the quality of democratic, educational and cultural institutions in cities, this situation is hardly interpreted as a crisis, i.e. as necessitating a fundamental change of path. Compared to the unrest erupting in Spain, Greece, Portugal or Ireland in reaction to the socially devastating crisis management, there is little sense of a threat posed by neoliberal policies. Rather, the prevalent economic strategy is heralded as being in the interest of the whole population (Moritz 2015: 15). A situation of crisis appears to be far removed from the range of possible – macroeconomic indicators are doing well, the labour market is robust, the federal state's budget is in the black after long years of deficits (Süddeutsche Zeitung 2014) and it is claimed that “Germany has overcome the crisis long ago” (Kinkartz 2013).

Critics of the 'German model', however, argue that it has increased inequality in Germany (Dörre 2014) through wage-competition and an aggressive export orientation (e.g. Flassbeck and Spiecker 2015, Legrain 2015). Fiscal consolidation and budget discipline have not only lodged themselves at the heart of the German politico-economic regime.

These doctrines have also been major elements of the last decades of European integration, starting at latest with the Maastricht-criteria until today via newly established EU- or Eurozone-wide agreements such as the Stability and Growth Pact, the European Semester, or the Fiscal Compact moving towards a “constitutionalisation of austerity” (Nahtigal and Bugaric 2013). One of the driving forces is the German government (e.g. SPIEGELonline 2012). The pressure on peripheral Member States to rapidly transform their economies and state structures has been exacerbated via the Memorandums of Understanding.<sup>10</sup> The domestic discourse of post-crisis stability, however, reduces possibilities to challenge both – neoliberalisation within Germany as well as its geographical extension, since no necessity for change can be made plausible.

Crisis narratives, however, allow “for transcending the routinised and taken-for-granted [...] as the status quo obviously cannot be sustained anymore” (Wodak and Angouri 2014: 418). They represent a potential dislocation of the hegemonic discourse. In Germany no clear dislocation in the realm of socio-economic policies has taken place so far. One reason for not addressing the consequences of neoliberal rescaling might be that neoliberalism is often presented as an abstract force e.g. by David Harvey who describes it as “brutally neoliberalizing international capitalism that has been intensifying its assault” in the last years (2012: xii). Processes of neoliberalisation, however, do not appear always as a frontal attack but also manifest in subtle ways at different scales. Changes which occur over an extended period, moreover, are less noticeable, being normalised over time. Neoliberalisation in Germany has been a long-run rescaling of the state where the undermining of the conditions of social reproduction is becoming visible at the urban scale. The restructuring of the Keynesian welfare state in Germany has thus accentuated contradictions of capitalist social formations at the local level.

According to Joseph Vogel, pushing problems towards the periphery is not only a strategy pursued in the case of Greece, but also for Germany's “internal peripheries”, its “internal Greece”: cities and municipalities (Vogel 2015, own translation). In urban spaces, „infrastructures are completely breaking down, [...] people realise that the welfare state framework is not working anymore. Deserted city centres, libraries which can't be supplied any longer, public pools which are closing. I think, at these points, something is collapsing“ (ibid.). He contends that this way of processing contradictions can also turn out as a mistake: At the margins, where a sense of crisis is encroaching, new political agendas are formulated (ibid.) as the protests in Spain, Greece, Portugal or Ireland demonstrate.

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<sup>10</sup>On the latest agreement in Greece see e.g. Ey 2015.

When looking for such potential in Germany, it is the local scale where the loss of social, political, economic and civil rights is increasingly felt by wider segments of society, including the precarious middle class (Mayer 2011: 53). The local is marked by everyday life struggles and thus might constitute a context of collective action challenging hegemonic rescaling strategies. That is why David Harvey (2012) suggests to rethink the significance of urban protests for broader emancipatory struggles. He even claims that the *Right to the City*, thrown into the debate by Lefebvre in a move against the Fordist city, has the quality of an *empty signifier* (ibid. xv) and thus the potential to hegemonise the field of discursivity with a radical democratic, anti-capitalist vision of society.

## 5. The Discourse of the Right to the City as a Hegemony Project

The preceding analysis of the rescaling of the German state established the necessary context to show that current urban protests are not arbitrary developments. The emergence of RtC-groups is part of a historical conjuncture, a contingent condensation of different factors.

The claim of a Right to the City came to prominence in Germany with initiatives in Hamburg in 2009. Enraged by the “neoliberal city of the last 10-15 years” (Vrenegor, 2009), more than 60 groups founded the Right to the City network. Since then, urban protests in many cities adopted the slogan. Approximately twenty groups (see Figure 1) were formed under this header in the last five to six years.

This chapter explores the practices and demands connected to a Right to the City in Germany. The importance of such an undertaking comes with thinking about emancipatory forces mobilising resistance



Figure 1 (own illustration)

to the dominant structuration of the European Union and the crisis management of the Troika, being pushed by the German government. The following subquestions will be addressed: How do Right to the City groups problematise, politicise and (re-)negotiate the

conditions produced by neoliberal rescaling? Through which practices do they establish their identity and corresponding counter-hegemonic narrative(s)? What is their current role in the struggle against urban neoliberalisation and neoliberal rescaling?

Within discourse-theoretical hegemony theory, society is conceived as the ongoing struggle for stabilising the field of discursivity, i.e. for hegemony. Different societal forces engage in conflicts over representing a universal social good and the associated structuration principles of society. The smallest units of the thereby described activity are articulations. Articulations are herein conceptualised as practices - including language - which generate meaning, construct identities and antagonisms, define boundaries of a discourse and extend or minimise a chain of equivalence. They represent a major analytical category to study social struggles. Single articulatory instances, however, must be further synthesised to account for the idea that discourses are *interrelated systems* of practices, ideas and identities. Thus, recurrent similar articulations over an extended period can be summarised into discursive projects which, however, does not imply that they are centrally steered (Wullweber 2010: 143). The concept of discursive projects emerges on one hand from actual struggles, i.e. a project does represent intentional strategies of actors, but on the other, it is an instrument of abstraction, formulated to reduce complexity. Discursive projects which contain hegemonic articulations, i.e. articulations attempting to universalise particular demands, can be referred to as *hegemony projects*. The term captures the fact that they are not hegemonic (yet) but aim at becoming so or, in the field of social protests, challenge the current hegemonic structuration. The Right to the City is a project which contains indeed a range of hegemonic articulations and can thus be perceived as a hegemony project. Discourses or projects are (re)produced by social actors. Although they are not the only ones who articulate a Right to the City, I confine my attention to groups who explicitly refer to this slogan.

### **5.1 'What's the Problem?' - Articulating an Antagonistic Frontier**

Every hegemony project divides the field of discursivity into two opposing camps by articulating antagonistic chains of equivalence. The “antagonistic frontier” (Laclau 2005: 83) can only be determined through empirical study. The 'antagonistic other' presents a threatening force since its existence prevents the realisation of the hegemony project and blocks the therein imagined completeness of society. Understanding the RtC-protests and their position towards the current hegemonic formation thus requires to investigate the articulated antagonism. It is towards this antagonism that the elements of the opposing

chain - the Right to the City - become equivalent, since therein condenses everything that they are not. The analysis of the articulated antagonistic frontier is carried out via the identification of articulations which can be considered to provide a *diagnostic frame* or a *situation analysis* (Buckel et al. 2014: 56). Especially in social movement studies which take seriously struggles around meaning making, the concept of 'frames' has acquired particular utility. Social forces are thereby viewed as “signifying agents actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders or observers” (Benford and Snow 2000: 613). Whatever is negotiated in society as problematic has to emerge in a process of social construction – it has to be plausibly problematised. Diagnostic framing thus comprises “problem identification and attributions” and thereby “delineate[s] the boundaries between "good" and "evil"” (ibid. 615f.). Also in hegemony-theoretical works, the reconstruction of the *situation analysis* of a hegemony project is seen as important in the overall analysis of strategies in hegemonic struggles. A situation analysis in this context is understood as sketching “those elements of a discourse which describe what and who is actually seen as a problem and what is identified as the reason of the problem. [...] Therewith the analysis focuses on the specific 'knowledge' of the actors” (Buckel et al. 2014: 56, own translation). Besides the previous historical context analysis, the subsequent analysis pays tribute to the activists' knowledge and the groups' framing of their social context.

Overall, six aspects of the diagnostic framing or situation analysis will be briefly described to establish a more concrete characterisation of the antagonistic chain of the RtC-project.

A first point of articulated discontent in the interviews and additional documents was the *withdrawal of the state from its responsibilities*, on the local as well as national level. An expression of this is e.g. seen in the neglect of an active social housing policy at least since the 1980s (interview Frankfurt, Cologne n.d., Marburg 2014a11), which means that many flats are falling out of the social obligation clause and into the free market (interview Cologne, Cologne 2015, Kassel 2015). The city itself is seen as reluctant to create affordable housing for its citizens (interview Jena, Kotti und Co 2012). Due to the identified inactivity the state lost its role as a “guarantor for the organisation and distribution of welfare” (Münster 2013a). In line with this is the problematisation of the privatisation of previously communal, state or federal properties (Cologne 2015, similar: interview Jena, Aachen 2015b, Kassel 2015, Münster 2013a). The need to organise social

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<sup>11</sup> All quotes taken from the interviews and documents are own translations.



cohesion is, according to the situation analysis, not anymore recognised as a central responsibility of the local or federal state - “the whole social topic is blocked out” (interview Jena).

A dual movement of withdrawal on one and a speculation-enabling engagement on the other hand has according to the groups' analysis also significant effects on political institutions by *undermining democratic processes*. Part of this is attributed to the “crusted structures” between local political, economic and financial elites (interview Ruhr, Hamburg 2009, IL 2016b). In the context of housing policies, these are also termed “real estate-valorisation coalitions” (Potsdam 2014b). Non-transparency (Hamburg 2015b, Marburg 2014a, Marburg 2014d) as well as top-down decision making is bemoaned. Channels to influence urban policies are non-existent (interview Regensburg, Karlsruhe 2013b, Kassel 2014, Marburg 2014a). The kind of participation which is offered is seen as a “sedative pill”, craving for acceptance towards saving measures (Münster 2013a, similar interviews Hamburg, Frankfurt). A technocratic management is said to install a “depoliticised populism” which suppresses questions of structural contradictions from public discussions (Karlsruhe 2014). Physical repression from state apparatuses towards 'deviant behaviour' (interview Freiburg) is as much part of this as the tight control of certain areas (Marburg 2014b) to secure private economic interests (Ruhrgebiet 2014a). Grassroots initiatives are seen as a threat to the regulatory policy (Ruhrgebiet 2014a), thereby delegitimising their demands. The prevention of 'real democracy' is thus articulated as part of the antagonistic chain.

Due to rent increases, many households are pressured to move away from central urban areas (Cologne n.d., Aachen 2015c, Marburg 2014a, Kassel 2015), making gentrification and *neoliberal entrepreneurial city management* another building block of the situation analysis. The capitalist organisation of economic relations and their neoliberalisation are said to induce the need for competition “not only at a national state level, but also locally” (interview Freiburg, also Marburg 2014c). Inter-urban competition for “international high-tech companies, high-skilled workers and solvent investors” (Munich n.d. b) has been manifesting due to global processes of deregulation, leading to a de-industrialisation of Western urban areas (Aachen 2015a, Munich 2012). The entrepreneurial city is turned into an enterprise which needs to organise efficiently, productively and attract investors (Aachen 2015a, Aachen 2015b, Karlsruhe 2014, Leipzig 2015b, Münster 2013a, Offenbach 2014, Potsdam 2014b, Ruhrgebiet 2014a).

The focus of the diagnostic frame therewith moves from the urban context to a more general social analysis. A further aspect has to be seen in the criticism of *commodifying market logics*, identified in a broad range of statements, such as “the market is placed above everything” (interview Freiburg), “profit rules everything” (interview Cologne), “the economic logic sets the rhythm” (interview Freiburg), “everything which [...] is a barrier to the profit interests of the investors is being destroyed or displaced” (Munich 2012), “the only goal is profit maximisation” (Aachen 2015a), problematising the “commercialisation of public space” (Marburg 2014a). More concretely, the fact that in capitalism also the existential need of housing has been commodified (interview Hamburg, Frankfurt 2015a, Karlsruhe 2013a, Potsdam 2013b) is articulated as a “major threat” (interview Cologne) to societal well-being and the enjoyment of rights (Bündnis für eine solidarische Stadt). Market forces are said to tighten the perceived problems (Cologne 2015, Munich n.d. b) by favouring the better-off (Leipzig 2015a, Munich 2015). A strong antagonistic relationship is articulated by radically opposing the “interests of profit-oriented investors” and the “interests of the people living here” which need to be defended against the former (Offenbach 2014, similar: Aachen 2015d, Karlsruhe 2013a, Karlsruhe 2014, Kassel 2014, Konstanz 2011, Marburg 2014a). Furthermore, it is stated that the commodification of urban space is “preventing us from a self-determined life” (Munich n.d. b), thus presenting it as the antagonistic other inhibiting the realisation of one's own identity. Only when this barrier is removed, when “no one is making profit from the basic need of housing, the need-based provision of good apartments for everyone will become reality” (IL 2015). A clear-cut antagonism is thus formulated, contrasting a universal social good with the current situation.

This antagonistic construction is intensified further by referring to another societal development: *growing poverty, precarity and decreasing wages*. Neoliberal globalisation is said to have caused new jobs to be “precarious, temporary and low-wage” (interview Ruhr). In general, decreasing real wages are identified (Potsdam 2013b), and especially the expansion of the service sector with its comparatively low payments has aggravated the situation in cities with simultaneously rising rents (interview Freiburg). Precarity is especially named by groups in the former Eastern part and in the Ruhr area, but also in Freiburg and Regensburg the issue is brought up (interview Freiburg, Regensburg 2015a). Less income and poverty are said to result in a “frightening degradation which digs deeply into one's mind. Poverty individualises people” (Ruhrgebiet 2014a). These conditions are

thus presented not only as a threat to the social fabric, but to the very individual's mental well-being.

A last crucial element of the antagonistic frontier is the articulation of a *deep divide running through society*. It finds expression in the social segregation of cities (interviews Cologne, Hamburg; Leipzig n.d.), where “the rich live where they want and the poor where they have to” (Cologne n.d.). These inequalities are depicted as the local appearances of global capitalism (interview Jena), where the “owning strata” of society is not only owning the means of production but “in most cases also owns living space” (Potsdam 2014b). A strong, populist antagonistic frontier is created when stating that “the divide runs between above and below” (IL 2016a). Societal wealth is being “massively distributed” from this “below” to the “above” (Hamburg 2009). The diagnosed social divide according to the groups cements a geographical divide. The social dimension of urban space has already vanished (interview Freiburg) and structures of “disadvantages and discrimination” (Aachen 2015c) are sedimenting.

Overall one can thus speak of a frame which diagnoses a crisis of redistributive institutions, democracy and social and individual integrity at the urban level where market logics dominate everyday life. It is, however, not only the local which is problematised. According to Buckel et al. an important element of hegemony projects' situation analysis is also “the question on which scale the problem is to be solved” (Buckel et al. 2014: 56). Since I am interested in the repoliticisation of the rescaling of the state, articulations matter which refer to different than the local scale. A purely localised discourse will have little chances to be universalised.

The situation analysis is clearly going beyond urban confines. The global scale comes in with statements such as “according to the logic of neoliberalism, cities are competing globally” (Munich n.d. b, similar Potsdam 2014b), “this [a specific local instance] can be seen as part of a global urban development” (Aachen 2015a), “what seems like a local problem has global roots” (Munich 2015), or “global capital overaccumulation has led to a new importance of cities” (interview Cologne) which speak of such global embeddedness. A broader frame is also constructed by mentioning a global or national RtC-movement (Hamburg 2009, Karlsruhe 2013a, Marburg 2014b, Münster 2013a, Offenbach 2014, Ruhrgebiet 2014a), pointing out the nation- and worldwide significance. The global financial crisis and the ensuing recession in Europe is equally part of the diagnostic framing since connections are drawn between financial speculation in the housing sector and the increase of rents as well as property prices (Munich 2015, Münster 2013a, Potsdam 2014b).

The search of global capital for profitable investments in the aftermath of the crisis is said to lead to a run on the German real estate sector (interviews Cologne, Frankfurt, Freiburg; Berliner Ratschlag n.d., Leipzig 2015a, Münster 2013a).

To conclude, one can speak of an antagonistic chain of equivalence which comprises the emergence of the Postfordist workfare state, de-democratisation, neoliberal urbanisation, the rule of market logics, growing poverty/precarity and a consequential social divide. What the groups provide is often an inquiry into the structural changes of capitalism in the last decades and their effects on German society. The antagonistic other is not only the state and its bureaucratic apparatuses, but also private actors or more specifically the nexus of the private/public accumulation complex. Neoliberal capitalist developments on different scales are presented as barriers to societal harmony and everything the Right to the City stands for.

Having thereby reconstructed the antagonistic division of the discursive field, the process of constructing its constitutive chain of equivalence must be inquired in a next step.

## **5.2 You, and Me, and Everyone – Extending the Chain of Equivalence**

Considering that hegemony is constituted by the (never fully possible) universalisation of a particularistic discourse, an important element of a project's aspiration to hegemony are articulations which incorporate other political demands and refer to other social struggles. This practice can be described as the extension of a chain of equivalent demands by integrating more particularistic positions. Only if such an extension can be forged, it is possible for a project to become hegemonic. Different societal actors must be able to identify with its demands and eventually support its realisation. Subjects have to assume that the implementation of the respective hegemony project is essential for societal harmony, including their own well-being (Wullweber 2010: 150).

While theory-oriented works are primarily occupied with spelling out the particularities of Lefebvre's Right to the City, activists are rather engaged in broadening the term and emptying it incrementally from its historically situated meaning. Whereas researchers of the former kind are specifying the struggles envisaged by Lefebvre, concluding that he was first of all speaking of the “urban working class” as capable of transformative action (Mullis 2014: 63), RtC-groups cross such boundaries and make a larger claim than designating 'only' a class struggle. The elements articulated by the groups traverse and complicate class antagonism by forging hybrid identities with a common interest. This strategy takes different shapes.

One mode is the *reference to other struggles*. Thereby the equal importance or equivalent meaning of different demands is posited. It is thereby recognised that a “multiplicity of power relations exist, which go beyond class relations [...]. Accordingly, there are numerous social struggles, not only class struggles” (Demirović 2007: 129, own translation). Sexism, racism, homophobia, nationalism, capitalism, antisemitism and ableism are all mentioned as central societal mechanisms affecting wide segments of society (Aachen 2015d, Bündnis für eine solidarische Stadt n.d., Marburg 2014b, Konstanz n.d.). These could therefore be opposed together under the RtC-label bringing together “anticapitalist, feminist, antiracist and further struggles” (Marburg 2014d). Thereby the production of a common agency at the intersection of a range of contestation practices is attempted, expanding the meaning of what it means to demand a Right to the City.

This conceptualisation is further enhanced by the strategy to *highlight and thereby construct connections* between the different struggles. These are presented as emerging from urban space containing, delimiting and interrelating different conflicts. The city in this context is said to be the most immediate societal space where topics from social to financial policy can be addressed on an everyday level (interview Ruhr). Conflicts around increasing rents, displacements and urban development policy are shown as already being “linked in our struggles for a city from below” (Website Berliner Ratschlag); improving public transport is as much seen as part of the possible alliance as the development of non-commercial alternatives in housing projects (Marburg 2014a). The variety among activists, living from “Hartz IV and a permanent job, university and lower secondary education, German, Persian, Arabic, English and Turkish etc. speaking, big, thin, old, young”, is said to mirror the diversity in society (Kotti und Co 2012, similar Marburg 2014a) which does not prevent protests to be linked by one thing: “we want [a city] [...] in which all people can live together” (Berliner Ratschlag n.d.). A necessity is articulated with regard to a coalition “of all those who are excluded from societal wealth” (IL 2016a), which requires to go beyond leftist milieus (IL 2016b) and become a “movement spanning” (Münster 2013a) actor, “creating conditions in which people can support each other and cooperate in their diversity” (Ruhrgebiet 2014a). The Right to the City, as a potential “collective alliance in which almost everything can be integrated” (interview Cologne) is constructed as an adequate framework for such a task. In many cities such an alliance seems to be in the process of becoming: in Frankfurt radical leftists, academics as well as citizen initiatives are represented (interview Frankfurt); in Hamburg the autonomist scene works together with the rather bourgeois spectrum (interview Hamburg), in Cologne the group sees itself

as heterogeneous with affected people, activists from the autonomous milieu, party members and neighbours cooperating (interview Cologne) and Kotti und Co in Berlin organises “neighbours, interested persons, friends, tourists and everyone else [...] believing in Allah, God or simply in a more just society” (Kotti und Co 2012).

A straightforward way to appeal to different subjects is to *enlist a diversity of affected and addressed groups*. It makes plausible that the articulating subjects do not speak from a particularistic position. Refugees, migrants, families, pensioners, workers, artists, people with disabilities, students, children, “the banker in her private loft” (Leipzig 2015a), unemployed people, precarious workers, people of all sexual orientation and gender identities, young people, recipients of social transfer, homeless people, old people etc. - all of them are spoken to as subjects who suffer from the current situation analysed above, and for whom a Right to the City would bring fundamental improvements.

The previously described articulation of a social divide is thus not splitting the population into two roughly equal parts but envisages a growing majority on one side opposed to a shrinking minority on the other: An imaginary which resonates well with news spurred e.g. by the Oxfam report revealing that the richest 62 people own as much as the poorer half of the global population (Oxfam 2016).

Recapitulating, the analysed articulations can be characterised as hegemonic strategies since they aim to leave behind a particularistic standpoint, e.g. of an urban middle-class or of the most-marginalised groups living in the city, and instead broaden the chain of affected and potentially acting subjects. It presents a practice in line with Gramsci's thought, that “[a]n historical act can only be performed by “collective man”, and this presupposes the attainment of a “cultural-social” unity through which a multiplicity of dispersed wills [...] are welded together [...] on an equal and common conception of the world” (1999: 665). Whether, however, the rhetorically articulated goal of such diversity can be sustainably implemented has to be seen as work in progress. As explained below, there are a number of obstacles to the desired kind of organising. Nevertheless, the strategic expansion of equivalential relations between demands and subjects has to be seen as an integral part of the RtC-discourse.

### **5.3 Political Agency and the Critical Attitude**

Having established this characteristic, the question of (political) subjectivity comes to the fore. The following section will therefore further analyse articulatory strategies of identity construction.

Similar to antagonisms, identities in discourse-theoretical perspective are not assumed to be pre-given, essential entities. Instead, it is only because of societal relations, through the differences they engender, that identities can come into existence (Laclau 2004: 325). In the RtC-discourse two kinds of articulations can be identified which work to create a certain, always precarious, identity.

Central is first of all the strategy of *boundary drawing*. 'Insiders' and 'outsiders' are thereby demarcated, since "social identities [...] require the constitution of 'others'" (Griggs and Howarth 2000: 55-56). A negative definition is thus occurring far more frequently than a positive one. It is e.g. stated, that the class struggle "is something that others can do better" (interview Freiburg) and that "it is not our task to fight these kinds of struggles" (interview Jena). Besides the boundary to traditional labour organisations and political parties, also leftist groups are articulated as 'others'. Antifascist groups are e.g. seen as "never caring about social topics" (interview Regensburg) and certain groups "always only discuss, but never do anything" and have no interest in problems on the ground (interview Jena). Broad-scale publicity campaigns are rejected, since "this is not my style of politics. We should rather invest time to see what we can initiate locally" (interview Freiburg). Another aspect is the desire to not be part of representative politics, namely to not pursue 'politics in the name of others'. One activist put it this way: "I do not accept that we do something in representation. When people themselves are willing to do something, then we have to support this struggle [...], but not without those being affected" (interview Jena). Those being seen as the relevant political subjects should "articulate themselves" (interview Cologne) since it is their self-organisation which is thought to be powerful. Correspondingly, many of the activists started to organise being themselves affected by neoliberal urbanisation. From these experiences their self-understanding is fuelled, dismissing to behave "offensively leftist and revolutionary" (interview Regensburg).

Beyond the drawing of boundaries, a practice best described as *call to action* can be identified. According to Laclau "the possibility of a democratic transformation of society depends on a proliferation of new subjects of change" (1990: 41). Thus, besides articulating "a plurality of new antagonisms" (ibid.), widening rifts in the hegemonic formation also requires the emergence of corresponding subjectivities to push forward the discourse. In this context, the role of *affect* in politics as appealing to subjects must not be underrated (Laclau 2004: 326). Social linkages cannot simply be forged by signification but depend also on a "libidinal link" which is co-constitutive with the act of signifying (ibid.). The RtC-groups, in accordance with their rejection of representation in favour of 'first-person-

politics', make use of a strategy which can be understood as critical *interpellation*. It is constituted by speaking to a self-determined (collective) subject who is not willing to recede control over her life to some external authority, thereby performatively bringing such subjects into being when the calls find resonance. The concept of interpellation has entered the debate of subject(ivity) formation by Althusser (1970), proposing that a subject is produced discursively through being hailed to by the voice of law. It is brought into existence as a subject by the process of subjection. The concept has been critically elaborated on later by Judith Butler (1997: 106-131), highlighting the aspect of agency involved in responding to an interpellative voice and identifying with the respective discursive structures. Butler points to possibilities of becoming a subject without completely subjecting to repressive/ideological structures, but leaves room for a "critical desubjectivation" (ibid. 130). Many of the statements of the RtC-discourse can be understood as interpellations to exactly such a subject – who is willing to not be subjected. Calls to action and organising belong to a practice of instituting a critical subject. In this context, it is often highlighted, that 'the market' or "the political class" (interview Ruhr) will not fix the problems and therefore "one has to take things into one's own hands" (interview Hamburg). Implied therein is the contingency of the current relations of power whose change depends on concrete social struggles. Nothing will change "on its own, but only when we stand up together and organise ourselves" (Frankfurt 2015a, similar: interviews Freiburg, Regensburg, Ruhr). The "pressure from the street" (interview Cologne) is thus taken to be an important element of transformation (also IL 2016b), especially since it is claimed that "ideas, visions, concepts for a social city in these days rather comes from active citizens than from politicians" (Kotti und Co 2012, similar Karlsruhe 2014). These statements are amplified by constructing a certain urgency: "it is about time to organise" (Munich n.d. b), housing policy is a "tinderbox" (interview Frankfurt) and "social dynamite" (Münster 2013a), "the pain threshold is reached" (Potsdam n.d.) - to give only a few examples of the appeal to become active in the now and here.

Almost no conditions to become part of the protest are articulated.<sup>12</sup> The groups are aware that expanding resistance beyond rather closed circles is a major challenge. They therefore believe that "the generation of a moment of revolt, of collective action" will cause a certain self-esteem to arise (Marburg 2014b) which is necessary for further engagement, acknowledging the need for a different kind of political subjectivity.

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<sup>12</sup> Though of course a number of impediments make it difficult for many people to actually become active. See also chapter 5.7.



The described elements – rejecting exclusively campaign-based politics as well as appealing to 'take things into our own hands' – can be considered as strategic decisions based on previous experiences of organising. On the one hand, using (state) institutional channels or relying on political parties has engendered disappointments (e.g. Initiative Steigende Mieten stoppen 2011, Potsdam n.d.) and on the other, interventions such as campaigns have too often been fizzling out without impact. Combining the question of awareness raising and public interventions with collective organising around everyday struggles seems for some groups the “only way that is left to us” (interview Jena). This choice expresses what one might see as a response to the identified strategic selectivities of the hegemonic societal apparatuses. Observing that other forms of organising have not turned out successfully, it makes sense to modify one's own politics of contestation. Thus, the peculiar situation analysis of the groups and the associated political subjectivity could be understood as the nascent outcome of such an adaption brought together under the label of a *Right to the City*.

#### **5.4 Horrors and Promises: The Right to the City and its Fantasmatic Dimensions**

Without this slogan, without the name, this text would not have a more or less clearly defined object of interest. The Right to the City gives shape to the discursive fragments assumed to form an identifiable hegemony project. It is the “operation of naming” which “performatively brings about the unity of [...] elements” (Laclau 2005: 183). David Harvey even called the Right to the City an empty signifier, i.e. a signifier which has been almost completely emptied of its particular meaning to represent the chain of equivalence central to a hegemony project. Without such a signifier, or a potential candidate, no hegemony project can become hegemonic (Wullweber 2010: 139). To inquire the position of the Right to the City as a signifier in the discourse, I will subsequently analyse those articulations which attempt to give meaning to it.

When asked about the decision to name their group “Right to the City xyz”, the usefulness for uniting different struggles and the claim's catchiness are underlined. It is said to address a variety of power relations and relations of exclusion which are visible at the urban level; and to enable nationwide and international linkages (interviews Freiburg, Hamburg, Regensburg; Bündnis für eine solidarische Stadt n.d., Hamburg 2009, Marburg 2014a). Its power to 'stand for' a multitude of demands and subjectivities seems an important reason for the choice. What is expressed as a quality of the term itself has to be

seen as well as an outcome in the course of urban struggles which constructed over time this umbrella-term-function. A relational dynamic unfolds as groups are building upon what others have already invested in this signifier, translating it into their own context. It was pointed out that the claim already has a presence since it has become the “main-topic of social struggles in German cities” nowadays (Munich 2015). The experience with the term moreover proved that it can be immediately appropriated by different people without having read Lefebvre or other theoretical engagements (interview Hamburg).

However, the slogan might also evoke associations with which the groups do not agree and thus react to potential misunderstandings. Making clear, that the Right to the City is not restricted to the question of housing, its far-reaching meaning is articulated when emphasising that it is about the re-appropriation of living space. It also includes participation, the right to enjoy collective goods and the right of those who live in a city to decide about how everyday life should be organised (Freiburg 2015a, Hamburg 2009, Kassel 2015, Marburg 2014d, Ruhrgebiet 2014a).

Another potential misunderstanding taken up to draw boundaries is the irritation over the term 'right'. A juridical meaning is excluded by emphasising that the right is not an individualised right for which one would appeal to state institutions to safeguard it. “It is not about changing the law, but rather the right to do something” and “it does not matter whether it is legal or not as long as it serves to satisfy our needs” (interview Freiburg). “Our Right to the City is not a right in the bourgeois sense to be claimed in front of a court” (Munich n.d. a). It is thus not a right guaranteed by a state to its citizens, but a right which counts for everyone independent from nationality, wealth, age etc. and is enacted whenever somebody fights for a more social city (Hamburg 2009, Kassel 2015, Munich n.d. a, Ruhrgebiet 2014a). The right is thus clearly differentiated from “a juridical right” (interview Cologne, Karlsruhe 2013a), but articulated as an empowering framework which is about “the entitlement to participation” (interview Cologne) and “the [...] collective invitation to take the livelihood in cities [...] back into our own hands” (Karlsruhe 2013a). The collective moment as opposed to an individualised right as legally granted thus plays a role in giving meaning to the claim.

The third entry point into the analysis of the Right to the City as a central signifier within urban discontent is the investigation of its corresponding affective logics of fantasy and whether “the representation of a totality” is ascribed so as to function as “the hegemonic link” (Laclau 2004: 325).

As previously explained, the fantasmatic dimension of a discourse is closely connected to the articulated antagonistic frontier, establishing two opposing chains of equivalence. The antagonistic 'other' of the RtC-project has already been reconstructed. What is missing is the affective, i.e. horrific dimension connected to this 'other', which helps to assess the strength of the antagonism in terms of how subjects are compelled to dismiss the hegemonic chain of the undemocratic Postfordist state, neoliberal urbanisation, growing poverty/precarity and the ensuing social divide. Such a dismissal represents the first step for collective organising. The empirical material has thus been examined to identify articulations where disaster, catastrophe or something vastly negative is depicted as a consequence of not opposing the current hegemonic formation and implementing a Right to the City.

Generally one can say that capitalist or more specifically neoliberal city development is said to create divisions, segregation and thus blocks society's completeness. It is shown as a force which destroys unity. Gentrification is accordingly constructed as an irrational, destructive “threat to the social structure” of neighbourhoods (Munich n.d. a) as it engenders the “explosion” of rents (IL 2015, Cologne 2015, Munich n.d. b), “rent insanity” (Karlsruhe 2014) or “catastrophically high rents” (Kotti und Co 2012) which in turn produce a “high psychological strain” and “frustration” (interview Regensburg), as well as “social and emotional insecurity” (Potsdam 2014b). It is thus the subject itself which is potentially pushed into crisis. The spread of neoliberal logics is portrayed as leading to isolation, loneliness and the erosion of solidarity (Hamburg 2009, Marburg 2014b, Munich n.d. b, Münster 2013a), since “social networks, friendships, family and communities fall victim to the dictate of the 'free market'” (Munich n.d. b). Political regulation has equally given way to the “terror of exploitation logic” (Aachen 2015d). Traditional political structures are thus depicted as failing continuously to regulate market forces and protect citizens from the detriments of capitalist urbanisation: “tenants are abandoned by politics [and] find themselves at the mercy of property owner interests” (Initiative “Steigende Mieten stoppen” 2011). These actors’ orientation towards profit, market logic and the “dictate of the black zero and the debt break” (IL 2016) has led to the social division of the city (Bündnis für eine solidarische Stadt n.d., Karlsruhe 2013b, Kotti und Co 2012, Marburg 2014a, Munich n.d. b, Offenbach 2014), “stark forms of segregation” (Ruhrgebiet 2014a), “ruined” social infrastructure (Aachen 2015d, interview Ruhr) and perpetuated hierarchies (Marburg 2014b). These developments are termed to be “inhumane” and “absurd” (Potsdam 2013b). Absurd, because it is claimed, that there is no

necessity for a state of exclusion and competition between citizens on the micro level in face of an economy which produces massive wealth. The articulation of this contradiction is addressed below with regard to the question of repoliticisation (subchapter 5.5).

A final strategy of depicting the horrors of the hegemonic formation is a critical re-evaluation of the promises made by the neoliberal discourse, attacking its beatific dimension and breaking up its chain of equivalence. It is stated, that the belief in formulas such as 'work hard and you can pay your rent' can be easily "disproved by looking at the statistics" (Initiative Steigende Mieten stoppen 2011). But also personal experiences are evoked to demonstrate that the once cherished hope of freedom and self-expression presumedly offered by the neoliberal work-fare society is not realising: "there is no happiness to be won in the world of capital valorisation. The best thing which can happen to people is that the threatening collapse hits others, the Hartzies, the Greeks etc." (Potsdam 2014a). Instead of "thinking about how senseless the job is" and to "realise how scarce free time is", people rather work overtime and "drink, shop, consume" to push aside the insight that "utopias lack space in a world" which has no promise to make anymore (Münster 2013b), a discourse run out of its compelling, affective steam but working "like a clockwork [...] eating us up" (Mainz 2014).

This dystopian portrayal articulates the hegemonic project of a neoliberally restructured state as not only a threat to the harmony of (urban) society, but as a threat to the integrity of the subject. A constellation of crisis is constructed, a point at which the current formation cannot be sustained any longer since its societal basis on the micro level of cities and subjects is breaking away. No consensual integration of the urban marginalised population, growing bigger and bigger, is said to be possible anymore. The reasons to believe in the project have gone astray.

A clear contrast to this deadlock is articulated with the beatific dimension of the Right to the City and its reference to a universal social good. The beatific dimension of the discourse is constituted by all kinds of articulations which speak of a general positive value, of individual and collective enjoyment when the current order is changed according to the RtC-project. This dimension is important for the relevance of a project, since every hegemonic formation "must also consist of a set of proposals for the positive organization of the social. If the demands [...] are presented purely as negative demands subversive of a certain order, [...] their capacity to act hegemonically will be excluded from the outset" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 189).

RtC-groups formulate numerous proposals of how to solve or mitigate the articulated problems based on a theoretical and practical knowledge of the German law of tenancy, municipal regulations, processes on the European level, mechanism of gentrification etc. They demand a general de-commodification and stronger regulation of many areas of life, especially urban social infrastructure e.g. by a stop to further privatisations, by real communal instead of state-subsidised social housing, by putting an immediate cap on rents or by taking the public housing corporations from the stock market. They also address the question of democracy by demanding the establishment of tenants' councils or by securing uncommercial spaces for cultural or political activities such as (refugee) social centres etc. What follows, is an inquiry into the affective, i.e. fantasmatic dimension of these demands. How are they articulated into a chain of equivalence and linked to a universal social good?

The Right to the City is presented as a remedy to the previously described situation: it means “to go outside, break the isolation and reach out” (Hamburg 2009). The divisions and societal segregations engendered by neoliberal urbanisation would be overcome, since the Right to the City does not know national belonging (Frankfurt 2015c) and “has no borders [...]. The city is everyone who is here” (Hamburg 2015a, similar Bremen 2014, Leipzig 2015a, Potsdam 2013a). Boundaries, barriers and hierarchies are supposed to be surmountable by creating a 'city for all': “where families can have a good life, [...] where refugees are welcome, where people with disabilities know no barriers, where gay and lesbian couples hold hands and nobody cares and where students can study without trouble” (Regensburg n.d.). The political field should be changed so that “there is no inside and no outside anymore” (Aachen 2015c), thus a truly universal organisation of society which represents a strong affective appeal. Implementing the Right to the City would furthermore imply a reinvention of democracy, since collective decision-making and meaningful participation are seen as central building blocks (interview Regensburg, Aachen 2015d, Bündnis Stadt von unten n.d., Frankfurt 2015a, Hamburg 2009, Marburg 2014a). What would result from this are “liveable public spaces” (Cologne n.d.), an urban development which meets its socio-ecological responsibilities, takes seriously the question of social justice (Initiative Steigende Mieten Stoppen 2011) and sustainably creates more humane conditions of living free of discrimination (Marburg n.d.) and fear (Cologne 2015).

Based on respect (for differences), mutuality, equality and solidarity, the RtC as it is currently articulated promises to work towards an inclusive society of freedom, (collective) self-determination and solidary societal cooperation (Aachen 2015d, Berliner Ratschag n.d.,

Blockupy 2013, Bündnis Stadt von unten n.d., Frankfurt 2015a, IL 2016a, Karlsruhe 2014, Potsdam 2013b, Ruhrgebiet 2014a). The Right to the City is thus articulated as the starting point for an entirely different society (IL 2016a) and as the utopian idea of something that awaits to be created (Marburg n.d.). Its spatial imaginary aims for conditions of self-determination at all levels, but leaves open what kind of institutions would be needed.

The described articulations are part of a hegemonic strategy of strengthening the positive connotations attached to a project by establishing a solid relation to the imagined universality which in this case is represented by the chain of equivalence between (real) democracy, (collective) self-determination, solidarity and non-exclusion in terms of a good life for all. The housing-problem is used as an entry point, since it is said to eventually affect everyone (interviews Freiburg, Regensburg) considering that 80% of the people in bigger cities are tenants (interview Cologne). In this way it would be possible to create common interests and alliances between previously separated groups (interview Regensburg): “We demand a social turn on the housing market and this is simply something we all can agree on” (interview Frankfurt). The struggle for and implementation of a Right to the City is presented as including a range of other demands or more precisely, it is said to *contain* other demands and struggles. The Right to the City as a central signifier thus has the potential to become a 'hegemonic link' for a counter-hegemonic project, at least for the manifold urban protests emerging in Germany.

Hence, the RtC-discourse does indeed operate in a fantasmatic logic with a clearly articulated horrific dimension, embodied in neoliberal urbanisation as a destructive, irrational force, and its opposing counterpart, connected to the central signifier. Besides pointing to the 'rationality' of arguments, an affective moment plays a significant role in the dichotomy of repulsion/enjoyment, i.e. the threat to societal and subjective integrity vs. the promise of a universalised state of social inclusion and self-determination. What remains to be inquired in depth is the resonance of these discursive elements at other scales, similar to the question of potential repoliticisation.

### **5.5 The Traces of Contingency – Strategies of Repoliticisation**

This paper is nurtured by the interest in the potential relevance of RtC-groups in challenging the hegemonic neoliberal rescaling in Germany. A subquestion is whether and how these groups are involved in a practice of *repoliticising*. Such a practice is constituted by disclosing the contingent nature or “finding [...] the traces of [...] contingency” (Laclau 2004: 325) of sedimented and institutionalised societal power relations. Three modes of

repoliticising practices are subsequently analysed: references to everyday life, an 'attack' on what is normalised and articulating contradictions.

The centrality of the everyday as the space where commonsensical structures that stabilise a hegemonic formation are fabricated is taken seriously by RtC-groups. Already Gramsci, who theorised the meaning of civil life for hegemony, acknowledged that “diet, housing, clothing and reproduction are among the elements of social life in which social relations as a whole are manifested in the most evident [...] fashion” (1999: 673) and it is accordingly these elements around which politicisation of social relations can take place. Challenging broader processes thus comprises an engagement with the principles structuring common life especially one's own reproduction. Therefore the level of the individual subject often plays a significant role in practices of repoliticisation: „it is acting locally through which one's consciousness is changing, and through which the readiness of the people is activated to care more about social issues [...]. It antagonises isolation [...] by producing community“ (interview Cologne). The link between political processes at larger scales and personal experiences is highlighted, since many have to deal with everyday discrimination (Konstanz 2011), anxiety (Initiative Steigende Mieten stoppen 2011) and increased pressure in their daily lives due to neoliberal policies (interview Frankfurt). Hence, „politics and everyday life cannot be separated from each other“ (Aachen 2015d). The groups' activities are based on the insight that many people worry about questions such as housing, where future developments will have significant impacts on whether and how one is able to organise one's daily life (Initiative Steigende Mieten stoppen 2011). Since it is the groups' goal to mobilise those who „might participate in elections, but have never been to a demonstration“ (interview Cologne), the reference to one's personal life is always made. For example, in a text about the Euro crisis: „it is not only about Greece, austerity, the Eurozone, memoranda and foreign words. It is very concretely about our life realities and local struggles“ (Munich 2015).

In order to cooperate politically, a situation has first of all to be commonly perceived as a problem. Another strategy of politicising is therefore the 'attack' on what seems normalised, naturalised and inaccessible to change, i.e. what has become sedimented. The examined groups often act in an environment where they say problems “can really be felt”, but remain completely swept under the carpet (interview Jena, similar: Karlsruhe 2014, Offenbach 2014). The wide-spread acceptance of treating “housing as a commodity, of privatisation and 'small government'” is questioned (Munich 2015) e.g. by squatting to undermine the “city's domestic peace” (Marburg 2014b). It is thereby attempted to show,

that these conditions are not “inevitable consequences” (Leipzig 2015a) or “natural laws” (Münster 2013a), but produced by a system based on profit-maximisation. The normality of “life is what you make it” (Münster 2013b) then becomes a sham. Accordingly, a number of structurally sedimented conditions is fleshed out – spanning from the already addressed retreat of the welfare state increasing social inequality in general (Aachen 2015c); long years of neoliberal austerity policies subjecting social infrastructure like housing, mobility, education or health to market mechanisms and now leading to shortages especially at the urban level (IL 2016a); over the restructuring of the pension system making the real estate sector an attractive business to secure one's own pension via profitable apartment purchases (interview Frankfurt); legal regulations putting tenants in a vulnerable position towards rent increases (Münster 2013a); up to the problem of municipal budget overburdening due to Hartz-IV-reforms (Initiative Steigende Mieten stoppen 2011).

In the course of the neoliberal rescaling of the state, alternatives have been made unthinkable, thus also the continued speaking about different modes of structuring e.g. the housing sector can be seen as acts of repoliticising the normalised. It is often stressed, that there are “plenty of possibilities to organise housing apart from the market” (IL 2016a) to make clear, that there are no reasons, besides political unwillingness (Konstanz n.d.), to maintain the established modes of politics.

A third strategy is the articulation of contradictions. Contradictions point to the rifts and ruptures of the current hegemonic formation. Such articulations underline tensions, pushing them further to appear as clear-cut antitheses, i.e. conditions which can impossibly exist for long. The articulation of contradictions thus aims to destabilise the hegemonic discourse. One theme is the existence of poverty, precarity and widening social difficulties, although Germany is supposed to be a rich country with a well-functioning economy (Ruhrgebiet 2014a). While worldwide the possibilities of socially producing wealth have „gone sky high, a majority of people is living in poverty“, designating the contemporary as „absurd times“ (Potsdam 2013b). A capitalist economy is said to make it possible for a few to own a lot, while others have nothing and to produce a surplus of apartments while others are homeless (Munich 2015). Ever-increasing rents are contrasted with the existence of abandoned buildings, the creation of new business parks with a shortage in affordable housing and the subsidisation of tourism and prestigious objects with the lack of support for alternative cultural initiatives (Konstanz 2011). Whereas there seems to be always money for the creative industry and promotion of the private economy, it suddenly dissolves when it comes to social concerns (interviews Freiburg, Regensburg). In the Ruhr area it is



emphasised, that social infrastructure, e.g. public transport is „a catastrophe“, while large sums are invested in the mining industry supposed to be shut down in the next years (interview Ruhr). Accordingly, the group calls these policies „not only ignorant, but cynical“ (Ruhrgebiet 2014b).

The RtC-discourse thus comprises strategies of repoliticisation, rejecting the narratives of pure necessity and pointing to structural factors engendered by decisions of the past and present, which are contingent in nature but mirror certain power relations in a neoliberalising societal formation.

### **5.6 Politicising the Everyday: A Specific Political Practice**

So far, light has been mainly shed on practices of the category 'rhetoric movements'. In the following, the analytical focus is expanded to take into account also non-verbal practices.

The analysed groups pursue a plurality of political activities. A major differentiation already originates from the different set-up – whereas in some cities the groups are actually a network of several groups (Hamburg, Freiburg, Frankfurt the Ruhr area), in others they form independent groups under the RtC-label (Regensburg, Jena, Cologne). The networks comprise a diverse range of actors – from self-organisations of unemployed people, post-autonomous and radical leftist groups, citizens' initiatives, people active in the tenement syndicate (Mietshäusersyndikat), individual party members, people living at trailer sites to anarcho-syndicalist unions, refugee-solidarity groups and groups who are active against forced evictions. Beyond their own circle of activists, cooperation takes place with cultural and academic initiatives, street artists, homeless people or migrant self-organisations – political parties or unions are rather left out.

The instruments of contestation encompass conventional ones such as demonstrations, city walks or street festivals; conferences, workshops, public lectures and discussion rounds; showing movies; writing press releases, giving interviews; providing analysis to critically accompany ongoing processes of urban development; being present at official city events to raise a dissent voice, coordinating campaigns which address public agencies and work out concrete policy propositions. At times this mode of engagement is also stretched to forms of civil disobedience when e.g. official events or city council meetings are disturbed by visible protest actions. Also more creative actions play a role e.g. transformative forum theatre, the usage of public space in various ways to make visible demands or the initiation of “fake awards” for urban actors which are accused of socially problematic conduct. These practices are mainly geared to problematising the kind of

knowledge which is produced in the local administration and among political elites. One can thus speak of the production of a counter knowledge. The presentation of concrete alternatives for the design of policies is part of making thinkable other ways of organising e.g. housing. In doing so, the there-is-no-alternative-narratives can be unveiled as concealing the contingent nature of the dominant structures. Another way consists in the strategy of collectively buying up houses like it is coordinated within the tenement syndicate (Mietshäusersyndikat). Thereby, it is proven that withdrawing living space from market structures works not only in theory. Squatting as a version of prefigurative politics is as well entering again the instruments of contestation for urban protests.

Many of the enlisted activities are of course also aiming to mobilise people and broaden the base of the protest. Another category of activities emerges with a look at the support practices which many groups integrate firmly into their political repertoire. Direct assistance is e.g. provided for individuals who are involved in a specific conflict with their landlords, legal problems, issues with governmental agencies such as the Job Centre, problems related to illegitimate increases of their rents, luxury modernisation they have not agreed to etc. The group would then accompany people to those responsible, organise protest actions in front of and inside of courts to use public pressure in the hearings or establish contact with lawyers. Some groups are mainly concerned with how one can support those who are affected by the consequences of gentrification. Emancipatory politics in this view must be low-threshold, which is why it is explicitly mentioned, that they pay attention to language to make flyers and texts most widely accessible. They try to avoid squatted houses or places which are identified with a distinct leftist scene and look for more open spaces such as cafés in the neighbourhood. It is stressed that one needs to pick up people from where they are and understand their everyday life realities as well as support their everyday resistance as an integral part to a broader challenge of (neoliberal) capitalist structures. This orientation is also expressed in the practice of literally knocking on doors to talk to people, asking them about their problems as tenants. This kind of small-scale community organising, however, is usually based on the willingness of the affected individuals to initiate a political conflict. Where such self-organisations are already in place, some of the groups engage in the establishment of networks between existing initiatives. Thereby, the groups act as amplifiers of specific conflicts, construct a broader interest dimension and shape the conditions of a particular dispute. The groups thus work intentionally to break up the isolation of different conflicts and develop a common approach to spatially dispersed issues. At a less conflict-oriented level this also happens by

being active in neighbourhood projects with the aim to bring people together on the basis of a shared livelihood. In self-organised cafés or social centres a sense of re-appropriating one's own surroundings is created at a small-scale.

One can thus speak of a specific kind of political practice, which mirrors what has been said previously about the kind of political subjectivity forged with the RtC-project. In terms of Gramsci's analysis one might say that the strategical outlook of these groups, even if they often lack the capacities to implement these as envisaged, is one of fighting a 'war of position' (e.g. Jones 2006: 31ff.) as the more appropriate form of resistance where a thick entanglement between state and civil society makes impossible more offensive strategies. Faced with a situation in which neoliberal practices are deeply inscribed into everyday realities of urban life, one rather focuses on small-scale but intense political mobilisation. Impulses for this kind of self-organisation and first-person-politics is taken from other geographical contexts such as Spain or Greece. Especially the conflicts of the PAH around forced evictions are mentioned as a "clear point of reference" (interview Jena) and inspiration. A move away from exchange logics towards a culture of sharing is identified in the "numerous grassroots-initiatives which developed to maintain supply structures for food, education and health" serving as a model of practically living alternatives (Ruhrgebiet 2014a).

Far from being petty bourgeois Sunday protesters whose activities are "not about the critique of concrete power relations" but about rescuing their free spaces from the "corrupting influence of luxury, decadence and financial capital" (Klaue 2011, own translation), RtC-groups mostly have a more radical outlook. It was e.g. stated by a group that it considers it important to meet people where they are, but then think beyond housing in order to ask the more fundamental "property question" (interview Regensburg, similar Potsdam 2013b). When the fundamental root for gentrification is located in the relations of production and the commodified distribution of resources (Münster 2013a, Ruhrgebiet 2014a) i.e. "in our capitalist system" (Munich 2012), it seems clear that solutions are somehow connected to "a breaking off with capitalism" altogether (Potsdam 2013b). Thus, small steps have to eventually lead to "big changes" including the redistribution of wealth and property (Münster 2013a) and a break with austerity in a medium-to-long-term perspective (IL 2016a). Hence, conditions for a more far-reaching transformation are inherent in the discourse.

### **5.7 Gaps Between the 'Ideal' and the 'Real': Problems in Organising**

Beyond this optimistic assessment of the potential of this political practice, a comprehensive analysis concerning the relevance of RtC-groups must not neglect factors such as material, financial and personnel resources. It matters how the societal forces carrying a discourse are equipped in a social environment whose strategic selectivities might not work in favour of radical, opponent positions. Although no profound statement can be made, some remarks concerning problems in organising should draw attention to the current limits of the protests.

In smaller cities with a strong conservative climate, protest as such is often not ingrained in the political culture. Despite the fact that people are expressing their dissatisfaction with the situation e.g. on the housing market, they do not dare to object publicly (interview Regensburg). They lost faith in things to be changed by discussions, so the lack of democratic structures is seen as thwarting participation (ibid.). In this way, the solid consensus among urban and political elites is hard to break up. In Frankfurt e.g., the network's demands are partly shared by the Social Democrat mayor. However, he is blocked by the majority of a Conservative-Green coalition<sup>13</sup>. The shielding of such bodies from grassroots mechanisms presents one of the rather structural impediments.

Another aspect is the restricted capacities of the activists. Wage labour and family responsibilities are already consuming a lot of time and mental stability, hence for many it is impossible to do both – being active in their localised conflict and upscaling issues to city-wide cooperation (interview Frankfurt). The growing flexibilisation of life, moreover, results in people often staying only with a limited temporal perspective in the respective town (interviews Freiburg, Jena). Biographical fragmentation represents a problem for more permanent engagement (interview Freiburg). Some groups thus remain small in numbers and influence (interview Jena). Others, however, also voice optimism over the current “valley bottom” to be overcome soon since they see conjunctural dynamics at work (interview Cologne). Furthermore, a general frustration is discerned due to constant new attacks on the conditions of urban life in form e.g. of endless rounds of rent increases (interview Regensburg). People become tired of fighting and deal with issues individually via lawyers and scandalous developments do not generate anymore the necessary outcry for political mobilisation (interview Freiburg).

Bigger cities with a large spatial spread on the other hand face troubles in bringing together those who are already active in their localities –the network in Hamburg for

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<sup>13</sup> After the local elections on the 6<sup>th</sup> of March, the future of this coalition is however rather unclear, since both parties lost votes (Frankfurter Neue Presse 2016).

instance is described as a “totally amorphous, undefined construct”, which alternates between steady and no activity. Also the Ruhr-area network is dealing with the obstacle of larger distances which consumes a lot of time to work together while also being present on the ground. They are therefore currently bound to a more “discursive, journalistic” type of activity (interview Ruhr). This makes it more difficult to integrate those who are most affected by marginalisation and gentrification (interview Hamburg).

A last point concerns the problem of reaching people beyond one's own political scene. Although all groups are actively attempting to not trap into a “traditionally autonomous habitus” (Marburg 2014b) and pursue strategies to avoid encapsulation, it seems to be a relevant issue. Consequentially, the activists problematise their own societal positioning when expressing a dissatisfaction with the societal strata they are able to reach. Besides a noticeable heterogeneity they still claim to be rather middle-class based, though often precariously employed; white; having an academic background and not always being rooted in the local initiatives they support (interviews Frankfurt, Freiburg, Hamburg, Ruhr). It shows that the envisaged strategies and political subjectivity of the RtC-project cannot be translated one-to-one into actual organising. Different layers of sedimented structures, from the, not only materially but also morally constructed, necessity of wage-labour; over additional reproductive work; to the traditionally nursed fragmentation in the (radical-)left political spectrum, considerably hamper the evolution into a more visible social force in struggles against the neoliberal structuration of (urban) society.

## **5.8 The Current Struggle against Neoliberal Urbanisation and Rescaling**

At this point it remains to approach the last subquestion before moving to an overall discussion of the analysis' results: What is the groups' current role in the struggle against urban neoliberalisation and neoliberal rescaling?

### **5.8.1 Achievements and Success**

The described troubles with organising do not equal the absence of impact and successes. Since I did not intend to only apply my own categories of relevance on the RtC-discourse, I was also interested in the activists' self-perception of their role and (potential) success. Overall their assessment is modest, especially compared to what they would like to achieve. Whereas it has been frequently stated that their political work has had an influence on the public discourse, not much has been shifting in substantial terms such as a turn in social

housing policies, a stop to forced evictions or effective measures to prevent increasing rents.

A common outcome is, however, that the local political elites have discovered topics such as abandoned property (interview Freiburg) or had to react to protests with (minor) concessions in individual conflicts (interviews Cologne, Regensburg). Other adopted political solutions are criticised for not going far enough – rent indexes or the federally introduced rent control are seen as being stuck in the logics of commodification, only comforting the middle class (interviews Freiburg, Regensburg). People on the lower ranks of income distribution are said to not profit at all from these policies. Besides this, it is stated that the groups are “taken as a factor, our criticism is perceived” and city representatives are increasingly forced to justify their decisions since housing was turned into a political topic (interview Freiburg, Offenbach 2015). Election campaigns in Cologne shortly after a conflict with considerable publicity were heavily shaped by the question of unfair practices of landlords and the lack of affordable flats, although not much of the promised initiatives have later been implemented by elected politicians. In Berlin, the Kotti and Co protesters have brought the topics of high rents, social housing and racism into the public discussions, with “more than 90 newspaper articles, radio shows and TV reports about our resistance” (Kotti und Co 2012). Also for the network in Hamburg it is claimed that it succeeded at least in making the question in whose name the city is developing one of the main political matters (interview Hamburg). In Marburg the short squatting of an abandoned building “successfully repoliticised the housing question” beyond the city's borders (Marburg 2014b). And in Frankfurt the network was able to change the way the public housing corporation is presented in public discussions. Whereas previous to their campaign “the whole media printed the stories of the manager”, now “there are several people who question the numbers and show [...] that the ABG is not an instrument of social housing, but the opposite” (interview Frankfurt). A certain politicisation of public debates thus often takes place.

Such public sensitisation, although political parties are often able to illegitimately capitalise on it (interview Hamburg), is judged as shifting the grounds for future conflicts in favourable ways. In the context of Hamburg it is articulated that without “such a wide, heterogeneous Right to the City network” many conflicts would not have reached the kind of outcomes they did. The network has “prepared the terrain” in a necessary manner for successes to be possible. Similarly, the presence and support of activists in Frankfurt at

meetings of a newly established tenants' initiative resulted in the initiative establishing itself on a long-term basis.

Furthermore, the fact that, for instance, the network in Hamburg continues cooperating for about seven years is seen as a success and a “remarkable” development (interview Hamburg). It has opened up channels of communication between people who were considered unlikely partners before but are now expressing a common interest. In this way, constructed dichotomies which threaten to divide a movement – such as between the bad radical squatters and the good cultural initiative appropriating free space – can be broken down (ibid.). Therein lies the quality of the RtC-discourse - to broaden the coalition of forces and create new identities in the course of the common struggle.

With a view to the future, it is explained that “this is the chance we have – to accomplish greater publicity in this city [...]. The goal is to [...] put these problems on the agenda” (interview Jena). “We already produced successes, others too, and when we band together, we can achieve even more” (interview Cologne). Previous accomplishments, even if small-scale, present a source of motivation. Possible outcomes are formulated in experience-saturated terms: “When we would say, everything has to change completely now [...], then you don't have success, [...] but I see it as a success when something is accomplished in small steps [...], when we achieve 5% of what we want” (ibid.). Also results of groups in other cities are a driving force. The occupation of an empty house of the German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB) in Göttingen e.g., where a refugee social centre has been established<sup>14</sup>, inspired the group in Freiburg to demand the same there. The success of Göttingen creates optimism, building on the public support the squatters received, thus enfolding relational dynamics between the groups.

In general, cities are assessed as the central scale of social struggles in the next decade. It is in neighbourhoods where change and solidarity can become first-hand-experiences politicising people and making them defend what has been achieved (interview Ruhr). It is expressed, that the concentration of social problems as well as of politicised subjects, have historically always been situated in urban space: “every revolution showed, in the countryside not much was going on, but the cities have proven it [...], it is in cities where history is made” (interview Freiburg).

Some of the activists are therefore highly interested in establishing a stronger mutual support system on a national level. After the first German wide meeting of urban protest groups in Kassel in 2015, a second conference took place in April this year in

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<sup>14</sup> See OM10 – Our House: <https://omzehn.noblogs.org/> (last access: 23.02.2016).

Cologne. It is deemed relevant, since many of the addressed problems have their origins in decisions above the urban scale (interviews Hamburg, Regensburg). The question then becomes interesting how others are dealing with the same obstacles (interview Hamburg) and whether it makes sense to develop demands addressing the federal scale (interview Cologne). The wish is expressed that the meetings bring the loose network a step further in terms of formulating commonalities, „what are our demands, what is the entrepreneurial city and maybe also discussing to organise a decentralised day of action together“ which could strengthen the locally specific conflicts (interview Ruhr). Although it is acknowledged that an additional activity on a broader scale is colliding with scarce capacities, the interest to exchange ideas and evolve together is given (interviews Hamburg, Jena, Ruhr) as long as a centralising tendency can be avoided: „An exchange about how we can progress as a movement – that is important, but this has to happen always of course with the grassroots initiatives from the individual regions“ (interview Freiburg). Overall, more and more supraregional meetings take place on a range of topics connected to urban development and housing, e.g. in September 2015 the „Renting & Housing Conference“ (Netzwerk Mieten und Wohnen 2015) in Hamburg, in November 2015 the „Rent-political council“ in Frankfurt (DIE LINKE 2015) or in February 2016 the „Urban Political Conference of Activists“ in Berlin (Berliner Mietenvolksentscheid 2016).

A scene of activists exists driven by successful small-scale steps towards the politicisation of everyday life. Some try to reach beyond their local confines to figure out how conflicts can be upscaled in correspondence to some of the decision-making. Hence, the range of tasks and goals is far from exhausted. Their organising is, moreover, based on the conviction that there is an important role to play in urban struggles, especially with disputes around migration gathering momentum.

### **5.8.2 *The Crisis of European Migration Policies as a Potential Dislocation***

At the moment, a certain condensation around the question of urban (housing) infrastructure is discernible and not only because of the accumulating number of problems and protests in cities. In 2015, more people than ever before were seeking asylum in Germany (ProAsyl 2015). Their arrival and the therewith given administrative task of registration and provision of health checks, food and accommodation has clearly revealed, what RtC-groups have been pointing at: The neglect of urban social infrastructure due to the neoliberal rescaling of the state has left many institutions and state apparatuses with



insufficient capacities to adequately respond to the challenge ahead.<sup>15</sup> What is often termed a 'refugee crisis' to fend off political responsibility, is thus rather a tightening of the crisis of social reproduction, especially at the urban level. These developments can thus be seen as a potential dislocatory moment with yet to be determined effects on the current hegemonic framework. The signification of the situation as a 'crisis' is partly breaking up a stabilised situation and opens up the field of discursivity for different forces and hegemony projects to struggle over the definition of the crisis' core and appropriate solutions. The RtC-groups are part of this struggle. Besides seeing chances to make their positions resonate with a wider public, they are worried about dangers inherent in the fuzziness of the situation.

Whereas for a long time the dominant discourse in Germany was stuck with the mantra of having-overcome-the-crisis-stronger, it is now with discussions around asylum and migration policies that the social question is rising again. The conflict over the development of cities is said to be already a strong one, where social justice as well as democracy is addressed, but that it now experiences a definite intensification (interview Hamburg). The crisis of European migration policies is thus seen as having “the potential to sharpen the social question” (ibid.). The increased visibility of migration within cities and the urgency to actually act and provide financial means might be a chance, although it can without doubt also lead to a problematic shift in the public discourse (interview Frankfurt). The therewith increased fluidity of the urban population will in any case have an impact on societal struggles: “a continual flow of new arrivals in the city [...] brings with it a continual change in the socio-political composition of the city, thus continually changing the terrain on which the problem of hegemony is to be posed” (Gramsci 1999: 587).

In order to channel the emerging discontent “it is important to have initiatives such as Right to the City” (interview Cologne). The groups accordingly see it as their task to oppose the invoked competition between different societal groups (interviews Freiburg, Regensburg), underline positive aspects such as new experiences of solidarity in the numerous 'welcome initiatives' which can be built upon for further struggles (interviews Regensburg, Ruhr) and tackle the issue of affordable housing together (interviews Cologne, Hamburg, Frankfurt, Freiburg). The strategy would thus be to use the crisis as „leverage to create social housing for all those groups who cannot provide themselves on the market and necessarily include refugees“ (interview Frankfurt). However, the considerable danger

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<sup>15</sup> This is not to say, that the poor management of the situation is purely caused by technical deficiencies, but to considerable amount has to do with political unwillingness to actually allocate the required financial and personal means. The German welfare system is not as overchallenged as it is portrayed in the media and by many politicians (see e.g. Sander 2015)

remains that this approach does not find widespread societal support and the impression takes hold that certain groups are unjustifiably favoured. And things are indeed moving at the policy level. In Hamburg, the governing social democrats have previously adhered to the assertion that 2.000 new apartments in the social housing sector form the absolute maximum and „all of a sudden 5.600 come on top“ due to the newly arriving inhabitants (interview Hamburg)<sup>16</sup>. Also at the national level it is observed, that additional 1.3 billion Euro for the social housing programme have been demanded by the Minister of Housing Barbara Hendricks (interview Frankfurt)<sup>17</sup>. Something as „reformist as social housing is thus now possible again, different than some years ago“ (interview Freiburg). With regard to the housing-question one might thus speak of a window of opportunity to be used to codify certain elements such as social and non-profit housing at the legal level to secure them sustainably (interview Hamburg). Whether such initiatives, however, will really be perceived as a social turn and „an important contribution for the housing supply for everyone“ will only become apparent in the upcoming months (interview Frankfurt).

Certain claims, for which the RtC-groups have been campaigning in the last years, are now seriously discussed in the policy arena<sup>18</sup>, though a fundamental shift might not be on the horizon, yet.<sup>19</sup> It is certainly impossible to determine what contribution the RtC-groups have made to a discursive environment in which municipalities' severe financial situation is now widely recognised<sup>20</sup> and some long-demanded policies in the housing sector become actual possibilities. But their establishment as an actor pushing forward urban protests in the sense of a Right to the City seeking to integrate different struggles, is surely not an inconvenient starting point. In a rather open situation, where certain aspects of a social structure have been detached from a comparatively solid frame of interpretation, such as the conviction that the market will manage the sufficient supply of accommodation, relations of power can shift but the question is in whose favour. The crisis could as well be

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<sup>16</sup> See Drieschner et al. 2015.

<sup>17</sup> See Handelsblatt 2016.

<sup>18</sup> The government just recently decided to introduce a new housing construction programme, aiming to build 350.000 new flats annually with a 25 percentage of social housing included (tagesschau.de 2016).

<sup>19</sup> As can be seen in the recent proposal of the Interior Minister de Mazière, supported by his social-democratic colleague in the Housing Ministry Hendricks, that recognised refugee should not have the right to choose their place of living, but be assigned a specific residence (see Deutschlandfunk 2016)

<sup>20</sup> The SPD started to call for increased financial aid to municipalities in August 2015 (taz.de 2015). In the same month, the German government decided to grant financial support to municipalities with regard to the integration of refugees acknowledging after continuing pressure, that these are often overstressing their budgets (Die Bundesregierung 2015). However, the discussion is far from resolved. Being in the midst of election campaigning, the CDU-politician Julia Klöckner said, that there needs to be more money for communes (Deutschlandfunk 2015) and the head of the German association of cities and communities recently demanded as well an increased engagement by the federal state to relieve municipalities, which are still supposed to be “overburdened” (Brand 2016).

processed in an authoritarian and reactionary way and the changes in asylum law and discussions about a maximum limit of refugees to be accepted into the country indicate such a development. However, protest is forming, refugees are organising together with urban activists e.g. at the International Conference of Refugees and Migrants in Hamburg in February 2016 and within the state apparatuses nothing is settled yet: The lack of consensus in the governing coalition and even within the parties on how to adjust migration and integration policies keeps dragging on<sup>21</sup>.

In this situation, the RtC-discourse might provide a framing for counter-hegemonic interventions where the question of migration policies, racism and urban infrastructure are connected in emancipatory ways. In Hamburg, such a fusion has already happened with the foundation of the network *Recht auf Stadt – Never mind the papers*: “We are an alliance consisting of refugees, [...] activists from the „right to the city“-network, trade union activists, students, left-wing groups and other initiatives . [...] We fight for a city in which all people living here have the same rights. In order to achieve this goal, we support the self-organization of migrants and refugees” (Never mind the papers n.d.). Thus, activities to shift the constellation of forces are taking place, participating in the differently scaled conflicts over the future of migration in Europe and Germany with yet to be determined outcomes.

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<sup>21</sup> See e.g. interview with Hamburg's social democratic mayor Olaf Scholz about the disagreement within the grand coalition and especially between the two Christian-conservative parties CDU and CSU regarding asylum and migration policies (Exner 2016).

## 6. Conclusion: How to Be (Potentially) Relevant?

Coming back to the main question, the results of the analysis need to be brought together to discuss *the relevance of Right to the City groups in challenging the hegemonic formation of neoliberal rescaling in Germany*. What are the criteria to assess the (potential) relevance of a counter-hegemonic project? Given the highly context-dependent, spatio-temporally specific nature of hegemonic struggles, the strategic selectivities they are embedded in and the variety of forces which play a role, no definite list of criteria for the relevance of any (counter) hegemony project can be established (Wullweber 2010: 151). Several dimensions have been developed to evaluate, not primarily to what extent the RtC-groups managed to implement their demands against the hegemonic formation of a neoliberally rescaled state, but rather the *potential* relevance taking into account articulatory strategies and political practice. This bias is a consequence of the narrow focus on the groups themselves and the kind of chosen material. The applied categories, being constructed from theory and empirical data, are assumed to present elements of the (potential) relevance of RtC-groups and thus the hegemony project of a Right to the City. They will subsequently be briefly summarised and discussed with regard to the research question.

It was stated that a basic hegemonic operation consists in expanding the chain of equivalential demands to offer identification with the discourse for an extensive range of social actors and struggles. The RtC-discourse indeed contains strategic articulations which appeal to wide segments of society, traversing divisions of class, age, gender or nationality and making reference to other social struggles. However, some relevant fields are excluded – the ecological question e.g. is almost never mentioned; and although feminist struggles are referred to and labour-relations are frequently addressed, one can hardly claim that either of these struggles is actually integrated into the RtC-discourse. Gender-relations as well as environmental issues do not play a role in the situation analysis and the linkage between politicising everyday life and politicising labour-relations is not constructed from the side of the RtC-groups. The question which then crops up is whether the RtC-discourse can actually be sufficiently backed by societal forces to push forward the project. One might respond, that the potential base is tendentially growing since rising precarisation and the effects of neoliberal urbanisation are encroaching upon more and more societal strata. The processes are reaching deeply into the 'middle classes', who are often strongly represented in the RtC-protests – a constellation which might give strength to the discourse since the groups can build on social capital. It can, however, also form a barrier to further

universalisation since the articulated broadness loses credibility when not being plausibly matched with the activists' social positioning.

A further dimension of (potential) relevance was introduced with the concept of the antagonistic frontier. The RtC-discourse articulates a clear antagonism towards neoliberal urbanisation and the concomitant social divide with a strong horrific dimension, presenting a threat to the integrity of society and the subject itself. The antagonistic frontier is situated on many scales and embedded in a comprehensive critical situation analysis of (structural) power relations in a neoliberally rescaled state. With regard to the challenge of neoliberalisation it thus presents a strong opposition. Although the mechanism of rescaling is never explicitly mentioned, the groups certainly politicise the reconstruction of capitalist states in times of neoliberal globalisation. They moreover portray a situation of individual and collective urban crisis. And crises „always present open situations in which [...] political, economic, cultural and socio-ecological relations of power can be questioned“ (Brand 2009: 10f, own translation). The success depends on the selectivities of societal and political apparatuses as well as on critical voices, perspectives and strategies (ibid.). Pushing forward particular definitions of problems and their solutions, like RtC-groups with their diagnostic framing, can be considered a key element of (counter-)hegemonic movements (Bedall 2014: 71). However, a certain ambiguity can be discerned with regard to the relation of the discourse towards the institutions stabilising the current hegemonic formation – a genuine *counter*-hegemonic discourse could be said to aim for establishing a new kind of hegemonic formation, reforming or fundamentally transforming the given institutions, an *anti*-hegemonic project on the other hand (see Buckel et al. 2014: 51) might straightforwardly reject „hegemony as a form of bourgeois domination“ (ibid.). The RtC-discourse occasionally alternates between the two. There exists a refusal to accept state institutions even as an addressee of activities: “we do not raise demands towards anybody, this would imply to accept the hierarchies” (interview Regensburg). On the other, reconstructing the social welfare state under different terms is seen as desirable. Alongside these two kinds, one finds articulations which emphasise a radical openness to create entirely new institutions of societal organisation. Future discussions within and among the groups will have to show whether one direction prevails and whether the development into a *counter*-hegemonic project is embraced.

Some conditions for the latter outcome are already present. With the claim of a Right to the City there exists a central signifier representing an equivalential chain of demands and struggles around urban conflicts with the potential to become a positively

connoted empty signifier – a necessary, though not sufficient condition for (counter-) hegemonic projects. Although the Right to the City might seem to delineate a rather narrow realm of contestation, the analysis showed that it goes beyond the urban scale and leaves behind its apparent particularistic moment. Other leftist associations in Germany, such as the Interventionist Left (IL) or the Blockupy-platform, concerned with transnational anti-austerity-protests, are mentioning more often the Right to the City as an important struggle.<sup>22</sup> The new Blockupy strategy explicitly refers to RtC-groups and city-for-all associations as integral parts of the transnational movement.<sup>23</sup> The signifier thus assumes an increasingly extensive meaning and is even recognised by the German government in its report for the third UN Conference on Human Settlements as standing for movements against gentrification, exclusion and poverty (Nationale Stadtentwicklungspolitik 2015: 10).

The Right to the City, however, is not simply negating the current order, but presents an attractive narrative by articulating the promise of a universal social good. The groups explicitly state that “counter drafts to luxury construction projects need to be created [...]. Image politics [...] need to be confronted with alternative housing and living concepts” (Offenbach 2014). These visions include strong linkages to an organising of society based on allegedly universal values such as (real) democracy, (collective) self-determination and non-exclusion from societal goods. In discussions about the conditions for a far-reaching, progressive transformation of society, the importance of attractive counter-stories is highlighted, providing background narratives against which new institutions can be created. Therefore, a change in society also depends on such counter-stories which grip people as convincing, plausible and compelling: “Only in this way the progressive socio-political spectrum can take the offensive again, gain credibility and creative political power” (Brand 2014). The Right to the City has the potential to become part of such a counter-narrative. Especially now where a dislocation of discursive structures is taking place due to the movement of people towards Europe and Germany such alternative projects play a vital role in shaping the struggles taking place within and among differently scaled apparatuses, from the very local up to the European Union.

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<sup>22</sup> The German IL network e.g. has a Right to the City section (IL n.d.) and Blockupy is integrating actions and workshops on the Right to the City in their activities (see e.g. Blockupy 2013 or Blockupy Frankfurt 2015).

<sup>23</sup> “In order to get wider societally, we see local platforms and organisations as spaces of concrete grassroots work, of networking encounters and important organisational activity. Blockupy is a local and nationwide, a European and transnational actor, a vibrant alliance. This is why we are able to always point out the transnational dimensions on the local scale” (Blockupy 2016, own translation).

When assessing the (potential) relevance of a hegemony project, one also has to take into account the sedimented structures, which constitute the terrain of selectivities on and against which struggles take place. The spatial imaginary connected to the 1970s neoliberal crisis management, further developed in subsequent decades in German Regional Planning policies, has been manifesting as actual rescaling via directives, laws and constitutional codifications. Thereby, the very socio-political field on which hegemonic struggles take place, has been transformed. Through the paradigm of the entrepreneurial city, local actors themselves adopted the neoliberal spatial imaginary, thus deeply inscribing the logic of inter-urban competition into the conduct of municipal politics,. The state's retreat from social housing and the state-enabled financialisation of the real estate sector bespeak a further sedimentation of neoliberal logics. Such relatively stable structures are felt as a materialised force by the RtC-groups when pursuing legalistic means such as referendums or citizen initiatives. It is said that “a tight corset” of national and EU-law “is securing the misplannings of the past” (IL 2015). The rescaling of the German state can be considered a relatively well secured societal formation - no government has seriously attempted to reverse respective developments. However, the worsening financial situation of municipalities and the concomitant undermining of social infrastructures, described herein as a crisis of social reproduction at the urban level, is engendering dissent. Emerging demands towards state apparatuses can be signs of an evolving hegemonic crack (Wullweber 2010: 140) and non-processed demands can become part of a counter-hegemonic chain of equivalence (ibid. 141).

Going beyond the articulation of demands towards the state, the RtC-project's discourse is carried by a specific kind of political practice, which primarily evolves around the acknowledgement of the importance of everyday life. Hegemonic struggles must not be “reduced to governmental forms of politics and centred on state power”, since it is “economic, political and ideological, i.e. the social struggles which are primary in the extended reproduction and transformation of the social formation” (Demirović 2007: 102). Spain can be referred to in this context as an example where the housing question as an everyday struggle mobilised many people: “At the peak of the crisis in 2012, over 500 Spanish families were being evicted from their homes everyday. As a consequence, La PAH, the housing rights platform [...], became the most significant social movement in the country [...] Through a combination of direct action and political campaigning, La PAH put housing at the top of the Spanish political agenda” (Baird 2015). Learning from these developments, German RtC-groups became convinced that “small steps and the tedious

construction of countervailing power” on a local basis have to shape their strategies (IL 2015). The groups' approach is thus putting into practice what Lefebvre, who devoted a considerable amount of his work to everyday life,<sup>24</sup> was theorising: “Everyday life is profoundly related to all activities, and encompasses them with all their differences and their conflicts; it is their meeting place, their bond, their common ground. And it is in everyday life that the sum total of relations which make the human - and every human being - a whole takes its shape and its form“ (Lefebvre 1991: 97). He wrote against the devaluation of everyday life as an object of study and as a possible origin of change. Instead, he insisted that knowledge about everyday life is essential for every „progressive or socialist politician“ (Lefebvre 1991: 88) and that the practices of everyday life actually constitute the soil on which creativity, agency and human progress can develop (ibid. 87). Assuming that hegemonic stability also depends on its consensual support by subaltern classes, a focus on everyday life becomes relevant. When structures are understood as perpetuated practices, no structure is viable when the practices are not viable any longer. Widening rifts within a hegemonic formation are more likely the more actors are questioning and changing the previously practiced patterns of everyday life. According to Lefebvre this is the process by which a new form of thinking emerges which „pierces through all alienation and establishes 'disalienation““ (ibid. 97).

The practice of repoliticising everyday life and social reproduction more generally, organising people by starting from their lived experiences can be relevant also for more 'traditional' kinds of resistance such as worker movements. 'Social strikes' have become a topic of discussion in the last years again, where an even broader alliance is constructed - “struggles at the workplace as well as resistance against forced evictions and the displacement from neighbourhoods are all important everyday life struggles, which politicise and mobilise people far from events” (Nowak and Riedner 2015, own translation). Only when the social as such is challenged as an area of political action and not only labour issues, strikes “under neoliberal conditions can develop again a societal power” (ibid.). The specific kind of practices unfolding under the RtC-signifier can be a crucial part of this undertaking and might become more relevant than demonstrations and publicity-oriented actions only.

The long-term perspective of the RtC-groups' practices makes it hard to assess their (potential) relevance. As they say themselves: „Maybe we are not heard yet well, but just

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<sup>24</sup> Lefebvre wrote three volumes on the Critique of Everyday Life spanning from 1947 to 1981, published by Verso in a One-Volume edition. See: <http://www.versobooks.com/books/1623-critique-of-everyday-life> (last access: 29.02.2016).



because of that we won't stay quiet“ (interview Freiburg) and „[t]he way to a Right to the City is uncertain and far. However, we learned to walk and now [...] we want to take the next steps“ (Marburg 2014a). The current instability might be favourable and „stronger than before we need to use the open situation to build pressure and shift power relations“ (IL 2016a). The question thus remains: Can the (urban) crisis of social reproduction, as it is articulated by RtC-groups and accentuated by the crisis of European migration policies, be hegemonically processed in the framework of the current discursive organisation? If this is not the case, if politico-economic elites have to react to the pressure of emancipatory forces by making concessions which do not match the austerity-driven spatial imaginary, one can speak of a challenge of neoliberal rescaling. The scope of such a challenge would have to be empirically established. Signs of such giving-way to protests are discernable. In September 2015, after forceful protests by the association “city from below”, the German Federal Assembly took a decision against the plan to privatise a state-owned area of 4700 m<sup>2</sup> in Berlin, which was approved by the German government and parliament: „The success of this struggle shows that austerity policy, allegedly without any alternative, is highly fragile“ (Vollmer 2015b, own translation). The German finance minister, “pushed by a small urban-political group and the crumbling consent towards privatisations” (ibid.) had to accept a defeat. The importance of such disruptions lies in the fact, that every time German policies deviate from the austerity dogma, it makes German politics in the EU towards other countries less convincing. The self-reference to the 'German model' loses its strength and room for progressive renegotiations might open up. Therefore, although many of the struggles of urban protesters might be defensive in the first place, every visible break in the hegemonic formation changes the conditions in which they act and thus might enable more far-reaching gains.

## **7. Forward Reflections**

This paper aimed to make the picture of reproducing the neoliberal social formation in Germany more complete by shedding light on micro-level practices of contestation. A possible counter-hegemonic discourse was analysed by inquiring the articulations of Right to the City groups. Such forms of resistance have to be dealt with on a daily basis within a hegemonic formation since stabilising hegemony is an always ongoing struggle. RtC-groups challenge the rescaling of the state and thus might contribute to intensify possible ruptures of the neoliberal project. Without consensus, hegemony is becoming more

precarious, opening space for emancipatory forces, but due to the inscribed selectivities also more authoritarian forms of rule might prevail.

The urban dimension of neoliberal rescaling in Germany provides a possibility to critically intervene into the (absent) crisis discourse by focusing on the viability of everyday life, pointing out a severe undermining of social infrastructures as well as subjective integrity.

The analysis, however, is flawed by one-sidedness: By interviewing exclusively members of RtC-groups and studying their documents, the focus is almost entirely on those who are already active and on their analysis. This might not bring out insights about the actual relevance of these groups, since no sufficiently elaborated meso-level context, e.g. in comparison to other social movements or urban and regional actors is given. It thus remains to be empirically established further whether individual and collective subjects are actually reacting to the appeals articulated in the discourse: Do the beatific and horrific dimension have effects on the way the societal world is interpreted and reacted towards? Is there a 'grip of the individual'? Are strategies of repoliticisation enfolding the desired dynamics? The analysis of the RtC-groups' activity is thus not well integrated into the societal context in terms of resonance. This would also require a considerably more extensive time frame.

Moreover, although I intended to take seriously the understanding of discourse as comprising material practices as well as verbal articulations, i.e. everything which produces meaning, I often slipped into an analysis of rhetorical figures only. Thereby, verbally expressed goals have taken priority in the analysis at the cost of inquiring in depth actual practices and the different barriers to actually implement what is claimed. This might be facilitated by the textual nature of the empirical material and the many linguistic metaphors constituting the analytical vocabulary of discourse theoretical hegemony theory (signifier, equivalence and difference, discourse, etc.). Due to the decision to attempt an empirical application of the concepts, i.e. a primacy of the 'object of study', no critical engagement with the theoretical framework itself was undertaken. Thus, a thorough analysis of strengths and weaknesses of the taken approach when studying protest movements is missing.

Also empirically, many aspects have not been addressed, including for instance an inquiry into the actor base and concrete process of the neoliberal rescaling project. Which societal groups, strategies and struggles among state apparatuses and civil society played a role therein? How exactly could it be hegemonised, what conditions of existence had to be established? The context analysis was thus reconstructing only in broad strokes, at the level of visible phenomena, the emergence of the neoliberal project and its effects on the scalar

constellation of the German state, but left the inner mechanisms of hegemonic struggles unmentioned. These, however, could provide important insights into the conflicts being observable at the moment over migration policies which significantly affect the state's structures. Another interesting dimension to be further explored in this regard is the interplay between a worsening of the situation at the urban level, increasing inequality and poverty in Germany and protest: Are these developments prompting emancipatory resistance or hindering opposition since apathy takes hold when people become used to the degradation of their living conditions? Or is it, as it seems at the moment, right-wing populist movements which benefit? How moreover is the dynamic between state apparatuses and protesters playing out? The government is reacting to the demands of municipalities to support them with integration efforts, providing among other things more financial means for social housing. Do such policy changes encourage further protests since a window of opportunity is sensed or do they have a sedative effect, breaking down the chain of equivalence represented by the Right to the City by incorporating single demands?

Overall, contestation at different scales, including the challenge of the neoliberal state spatial project at the level of urban life realities, I contend, is a relevant one for a range of future developments in Germany, but also in Europe. Increasingly authoritarian austerity measures are de-democratising the public realm, making state apparatuses become less accessible to societal conflicts and increase the precarity of everyday life. Making visible the forces and narratives which can potentially counter such developments, even if they exist only in a nascent phase, might be the contribution to make by research interested in emancipatory change.

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## 9. Appendix

### a) List of Interviews

City	Name of the group	Date of the Interview	Number of Interviewees	Recorded Length
Jena	STATT – Recht auf Stadt Jena	19.10.2015	2	00:51:41
Ruhr	Recht auf Stadt Ruhr	19.11.2015	2	00:52:58
Cologne	Recht auf Stadt Köln	20.11.2015	3	00:56:12
Freiburg	Recht auf Stadt Freiburg	23.11.2015	3	01:08:56
Regensburg	Recht auf Stadt Regensburg	29.11.2015	2	00:51:36
Hamburg	Recht auf Stadt Hamburg	22.01.2016	1	00:56:48
Frankfurt	Eine Stadt für alle! Wem gehört die ABG?	25.01.2016	1	00:49:50

### b) Additional Documents

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