

In the eye of the storm. Urban Transformations in Berlin - Realities of Crisis and Perspectives for Social Struggles

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Abstract:

Based on a group research conducted in summer 2013 this article approximates crisis through historical and current realities and dynamics in the urban context of Berlin. Departing from the field of real estate our perspective is shaped by new forms of activism and resistance contrasting local conditions with their connection to global processes.

We emphasize that changes in urban planning in Post-War (Western) Berlin, contesting the strong squatting movement (2.), led to specific organization of neoliberal policies, thus financialization as a glocal phenomenon (3.). Then gentrification is discussed as a relatively new condition for struggles around living conditions at Berlin (4.). Thereafter we show the ambivalence of the creative sector containing both possibilities for urban resistance and restraints of neoliberal subjectification (5.).

Our approach approximates several crises as a historical condition for Berlin's development and current dynamics, with struggles and movements as a part of those.

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1. Introduction

The following text summarizes our group research for the summer school program “Teaching the Crisis”, held in Berlin in September 2013. We have re-evaluated our findings based on the discussions and lectures held during the course of the seminar.

Our main concern is to understand realities and dynamics of crisis in the urban context of Berlin. To external viewers, Germany in general and Berlin in particular may currently seem as moderate social-democratic islands amidst a sea of neoliberal turmoil – the proverbially quiet spot in the eye of the financial storm that is devastating Europe. The fact that Berlin as well as Germany are generally perceived as a case of “exceptionalism”, as a sphere untouched or even profiting from the current European and global financial crisis confronted us with the challenge to move beyond the concept of crisis as a one-dimensional, spatially confined phenomenon and point to the complexity and interrelatedness of local, national and transnational transformations.

In doing so, we built on the assumption that neoliberalization is not a universal and unilinear process, but mediated, variegated and (re-)produced by specific historical and geographical contexts. "Cities are not just relay stations for a singular, unchanging, world-encompassing neoliberal project, but are better understood as institutional forcefields positioned within (and continuously transformed through) an always mutating and unevenly developed landscape of regulatory reform, experimentation, circulation" (Brenner/Theodore 2002: 1093) – and social struggles. The latter is crucial in our approach.

Our research thus started from the subjective experiences of crisis that are voiced in social struggles in Berlin today: They can be found in the field of real estate and housing, where rising rents are leading to increasing segregation and displacement. They can also be found in the (subculturally dominated) struggles around the commodification and commercialization of urban space. Both processes stem from a new global dynamic of financialization as well as from national and local policies of de-regulation and privatization. At the same time, the speed of these processes and the resistance that they evoke account for the city's specific historical legacy: the character of Berlin as a tenement city and as a city of counterculture is at stake.

In this article, we further elaborate on these instances as local phenomena of crises and fields of struggle, involving new forms of activism and resistance. Firstly, we explain the specific historical conditions that have shaped Berlin's urban politics during Fordist times with particular regard to the regulation of the housing sector. Here, we take a closer look at the role of social movements (especially the squatters' movement) and explain its interaction and conflict with Fordist forms of urban planning. Secondly, we describe the (de-)regulatory shift to neoliberal urban politics and examine its consequences for the housing and real estate sector. In taking a closer look at the recent real-estate boom and the related process of financialization, we can see the current transformation as one that encompasses different spatial scales as well as political, cultural and subjective dimensions. Departing from that, we draw attention to the question of new urban movements in Berlin. We discuss new struggles around rising rents and displacement as well the role of the so-called “creative class” in its ambivalence as a resource for capital and a possible source of resistance. With these two perspectives, we try to investigate the potential, the dilemmas and the specific resources for urban movements to confront the particular reality of neoliberalization in Berlin.

Furthermore, our research repeatedly confronted us with the ambivalences and complexities of the concept of “crisis”. In a seemingly paradoxical way, in Berlin economical and political crises often coincided with a flourishing of (counter)culture: vice-versa, economical growth and political stabilization often led to a progressive disappearance of those celebrated spatial, legal and cultural

“grey zones” on which the city's independent scene has always thrived. Beyond the neoliberal platitudes that try to present the current crisis as a period of opportunity, lies a truth that points towards potential spaces of liberation to be found amidst the rubble of economical and social breakdown. This said, one should always be cautious when generalizing findings from the German capital, given the unique conditions that bred them – as we will see in the following paragraph.

2. Historical Background: Regulation and Resistance in Fordist Berlin

The pace and shape of the current transformations in Berlin's urban space can only be understood by relating them to the historical legacies of this city, stemming from a history of recurring crises and constant social struggles. This is true especially in the sector of urban planning and housing in the post-war period, where Fordist regulation kept rents on a relatively moderate level and set boundaries for commodification and financialization of housing up until the 1990s. At the same time, the Fordist planning rationale was constantly challenged by social movements who demanded democratization and created counter-cultural spaces.

Social Movements as a driving force in urban politics at West Berlinⁱ

The creation of post-war urban space was affected by different forms of crises. Resistance, diffusion of power and economic calculations have shaped city-planning since the 1960s from above and below.

In 1963, shortly after the Wall had been built, West-Berlin was increasing its importance to the German Federal Republic. The city government decided to launch one of the biggest building and urban renewal programs in its history. Under the catchword "Kahlschlagsanierung", which roughly translates as clear-cut rehabilitation, an extensive purchase of lands and houses was planned, entailing extensive, publicly financed demolition and reconstruction works, in order to create an efficient, car-friendly city with modern, “healthy” housing. Many neighbourhoods in the city centre were supposed to be cleared of large parts of their older buildings, while poor sectors of the population living there were displaced to newly constructed apartment blocks in the suburbs, as they couldn't afford to pay the sharply increased rents (see Holm/Kuhn 2010).

The plan was first implemented without much resistance in Wedding, a poor district in the north of Berlin (see Sethmann 2013). However, it did become much harder to realize it in Kreuzberg during the late 1960s and 70s. This had to do with the fact that in the course of the 60s this area, characterized by its working class composition and local craft, had become one of the main centres for migrant workers (predominantly from Turkey) as well as alternative and leftist activists. The new residential composition was partly favoured by the renewal program itself, as a great amount of housing was left empty and unattended, awaiting destruction; and partly by the intents of Western Germany to regulate where migrant workers could live – namely in the city's periphery and close to the Wall. The area's overall neglect created an open space for marginalized groups and self-organizing subcultures to emerge. The reaction to these changes were diverse: tenants were cleared from their houses, rental contracts agreed “until the house's demolition”. Even repressive measures were undertaken to control migrant influx to areas like Kreuzberg (by the so-called “Zuzugstop”, defining districts where migrants from specific countries were not allowed to move in), which demonstrates the vision of their temporal stay confronting already established people.

The district's strengthening sense of collective identity, in combination with the rising spirit of the new social movements that had emerged in the late 1960s, resulted in resistance gaining ground in many ways, from neighbourhood committees to squatting, as well as militant attacks on the state and its symbols. In the wake of the global energy crises of 1973 and 1979 and the wide-reaching

transformation of Fordist production, the conflict between the city administration and Kreuzberg's residents escalated. On the backdrop of rising unemployment rates and lack of housing, one of the biggest squatting movements in Europe emerged. From 1979 until 1984, more than 160 houses were squatted (Holm/Kuhn 2010) and numerous spaces for projects and collectives were established, where different concepts of cohabitation and organization were experimented. To avoid further confrontations with militant movements, while at the same time preventing new occupations, the city administration decided to implement the so called "Berlin Line of Reason" (*Berliner Linie der Vernunft* – which, with mixed success, is active to the present day). This meant that, from 1981 onwards, all existing occupations were granted a certain degree of protection from violent evictions; in turn, they had to undergo a progressive legalisation process, either by means of rental contracts, long term leases or collective acquisition of ownership. As a flip side, no new squats would be tolerated, and all new occupations would be evicted within 24 hours. As a consequence, Kreuzberg was conservatively consolidated as a centre for alternative living and oppositional politics. At the same time, the prospect of legalization led to lasting internal conflicts and fragmentation within the scene, considerably defusing its radicalism.

Even if the squatting movement seemed weakened after its peak in the early 1980s, it had a lasting impact on urban policies and planning: this became obvious with the call for "Behutsame Stadterneuerung" (careful urban renewal, program from 1981-1989, introduced by the International Building Exhibition Berlinⁱⁱ): instead of authoritarian programs like the "Kahlschlagsanierung", "careful urban renewal" stood for a preservation of basic building structures, stepwise modernizations and tenants' involvement in the planning process. The squatting movement was central to this shift, being cause, object and partner of the new model for urban renewal (see Holm/Kuhn 2010). But this shift stresses also how the older model of clear cut rehabilitation was drawn into crisis.

Another turning point came closely after. The fall of the Wall in 1989 led to radical changes in Berlin's landscape and Kreuzberg suddenly became a central district. The sudden disappearance of the German Democratic Republic and the consequent mass migration to West-Germany left thousands of state-owned apartments empty, while the East-German police force had basically become powerless. At the same time, the incipient collapse of the GDRs industrial apparatus created an almost endless reserve of vacant, ruinous spaces. The peculiar period until the official reunification was used by thousands of East and West Germans to take over hundreds of buildings in East Berlin, creating new alternative living projects in many of them.ⁱⁱⁱ After initial uncertainty, the reunified city government decided to extend West-Berlin's "Line of Reason" to the new occupations in the former East, slowly forcing them into legalisation. It should be added that some considerable, violent infringements of the Line's rule saying that existing squats should not be evicted happened on a regular basis throughout the 1990s (most notably in Mainzer Straße in November 1990, see Arndt et al 1992, as well as during Jörg Schönbohm's tenure as Berlin's *Innensenator*, Minister of the Interior).

With the Hauptstadtbeschluss (the German parliament's decision to move the capital of unified Germany back to Berlin) in 1991, it became clear that the stage was set for Berlin's normalisation. Local and national elites didn't hide their intention to reshape the German capital into a global economic player. Soaring expectations of an incipient boom lead to massive national and international investments and initiated huge construction programs, fuelling a veritable real-estate bubble. It didn't take long, however, before, by the second half of the 1990s, the sobering realisation of the city's desolate economic condition put a halt on most investments, granting its thriving subcultural scene a decade-long period of grace.

Regulation of housing: from the Fordist tenement city to subsidized sell-out

Approaching Berlin's historical housing policies and struggles remains incomplete without mentioning the deep changes in ownership structures when it comes to real estate and lands at Berlin. For decades the geopolitical isolation of Berlin, its industrial decline and class composition – a high concentration of unemployed and precarious as well as migrant and subcultural populations – kept real estate less attractive for capital investment. At the same time, extensive public programmes for social housing and a high level of legal protection of tenants kept housing affordable and reduced profit margins. In Berlin, a Fordist regime of urban governance remained persistent over the 1980s, also due to its special role as a receiver and administrator of subsidies from the central government (Heeg 1998). At the same time, as we have seen, strong urban movements such as squatters' initiatives challenged the technocratic Fordist planning and finally achieved participative rights. Aforementioned programs of "careful urban renewal" (Bernt 2012: 3045) set boundaries for profit-driven modernization. In Eastern Berlin, meanwhile, real estate was fully state-owned and centrally distributed (ibid.). "Berlin was not only a tenement city, Berlin was the city of social-housing construction par excellence, on this side as well as the other side of the Wall. (...) In both cities of Berlin, rent was subsidised to a degree that is no longer imaginable" (Bodenschatz, quoted and translated by Uffer 2011: 93f.). It was exactly this "oversupply of affordable living space" (Hung 2012) up until the late 1990s that contributed to the image of Berlin as a realm of alternative lifestyles.

In the 1990s, Fordist policies started giving way to an „entrepreneurial form“ of urban governance that tried to redefine and „re-vitalize“ Berlin as a metropolitan center in a globalized economy (Heeg 1998). The formerly state-owned real estate of Eastern Berlin was radically privatized and „restituted“ to private landlords while regulations and rent controls were successively abandoned in both parts of the city (Bernt 2012). Social-housing units in the Western part were privatized on a large scale while the housing companies that remained state-owned changed to market-oriented policies. Selling to the highest bidders, institutional short-time investors were systematically favoured in the privatization process. As a result, the ownership structure on the Berlin real-estate market radically changed. A large number of private institutional investors entered the market by real-estate private equity funds (Uffer 2011: 105). Local regulatory shifts have thus prepared the terrain for the recent dynamics of financialization. "The combination of the effects of local regulation and global accumulation strategies created the perfect storm. It was a mutual reinforcing mechanism" (Uffer 2011: 104).

3. Boom and Crisis in Berlin Real-Estate: Financialization as a “glocal” phenomenon

As we have seen, it was local neoliberal de-regulation as well as a new global dynamics of capital accumulation that has radically changed the sector of real estate and housing within the last decades. The most recent phenomenon is the “boom” in Berlin real estate that has been pushing prices and rents up shortly after financial and economical crisis 2008 and raises the fear of a speculative bubble. It is directly linked to financialization as a political strategy that is exposing the real estate and housing sector to market volatility and the pressures of value extraction. At the same time, it accounts for the various ways in which the situation of Berlin is linked and entangled with transnational dynamics of crises. It can thus be considered as an example for the new geographies of neoliberalization producing „increasingly „glocalized“ configurations (Brenner/Theodore 2002: 363).

The “underprized” metropolis as a safe haven for Crisis Capital?

The demand for Berlin real estate by private as well as institutional investors has massively increased over the last five years. A similar trend can be observed in all big cities in Germany, but the rate of change in Berlin is clearly above average (Hintze 2013). This process is driven by a new desire for real estate as an asset for speculation and capital accumulation. In the course of the global financial and European debt crisis, many investors have lost faith in capital assets and started looking for a safe haven for their money. The constantly low interest rates for capital assets by the European Central Bank, as well as numerous local incentives such as low taxation and special contracts, are another incentive to switch to real estate - “Betongold” (concrete gold) as it is called in recent discussions. As the German and especially the Berlin market is considered to be “underpriced”, they appear as a profitable investment (Hintze 2013, Ahr 2012). Since 2007, prices for real estate in Berlin went up an estimated 72%, while rents – which are supposed to repay the investments and create profit - have gone up by an average of 28% (Jensen/Syrovatka 2013). Gentrification that has started in the inner city areas is now expanding even to outskirts of the city and has been leading to the displacement of poor (but also middle class-) populations (Holm 2013). The fact that rent increases are immense and yet do not reach the level of other European capitals points to the previous forms of regulations and struggles that have kept rents unusually moderate.

Financialization of Real Estate as a political strategy and a new social practice

As apparent in the case of Berlin, financialization cannot be understood as a merely economic process. The re-organization and re-definition of housing as an object of financial speculation rather than a (private or public) good has been actively promoted by political actors on the national and local level. Moreover, it is reproduced by a growing number of individuals who act as investors or homeowners in the financialized field of real estate. Financialization should therefore be analyzed in the context of the finance-dominated accumulation regime, in which financial criteria increasingly become the dominant benchmarks for political, economic and social institutions (Aglietta 2000). Liberalization and privatization policies have created new means of accumulation and turned public goods and services into objects of speculative investment. At the same time, the deregulation of labour markets and the cut-back of social services have increased insecurities and risks for people. These are interpellated as self-reliant subjects who should adapt to these changes by rational and calculated forms of risk provision (Heeg 2012: 77f). Heeg links these strategies of responsabilization to the financialization of real estate, as homeownership is currently enforced as a social norm and a form of taking care for one's future security and wealth. This is apparent in new incentives, subsidies and credit offers by state and finance institutions that encourage individuals to buy real estate or invest in real-estate assets (ibid.: 80). Moreover the vast influx of private savings into capital markets increases the activities of institutional investors such as pension funds and insurances. In their constant search for profitable investment, they tend to invest in those real estate

funds that are boosting the current boom on the German real-estate markets (Heeg 2012: 81f.). The role of real estate as a means of private risk provision is yet more evident in the growing number of individuals who seek for investment in real estate on their own account – also in the case of Berlin. Many of the private persons currently investing in Berlin real estate are trying to find secure investment for their savings (e.g. for their retirement provision) while others simply try to escape the skyrocketing rents. These private investors come from various geographical backgrounds. Interestingly, it is especially the upper middle classes of Southern European countries who try to secure their capital from the turmoil of the financial markets (Ahr 2012, Spiegel-Online 2012). Berlin has thus become a target not only for young migrants from the European South and East that are looking for affordable living and job opportunities, but also for “crisis capital” from institutional as well as private investors.

The pace and pressure of the current real-estate boom can thus be traced back to the pressures of finance-driven accumulation. In this process, new subjectivities emerge that operate on a terrain of constant insecurity. Housing thereby has changed its meaning and has been turned into an object for profit-driven speculation as well as individual risk-provision.

4. Gentrification as new conditions for social struggle

If financialization of real estate is a glocal phenomenon, then so are struggles around the urban. It might be helpful here to not only emphasize the specific histories and developments, but to grasp how Berlin, as many other global cities, is experiencing a brutal change, gentrification in times of austerity – a change that is reshaping the terrain for social struggles.

Austerity refers here to policies dealing with various financial and political crises at Berlin. We want to highlight one recent, the “Berlin Banking Scandal” (at the 1990es and early 2000s): Through rescuing the corrupt and bankrupt Berliner Bankengesellschaft and the call for a “extreme budgetary emergence” the retreat from local programs has been justified.^v Since then the main goal of politics has been a balanced city budget, long before the so-called debt brake was introduced into German constitution at 2011. Some consequences have been stated before and will be looked upon again, through the lens of social struggles under new conditions: Gentrification.

“Belated” Gentrification and its costs

Gentrification has been an object of scientific interests but also of political debates in the last years and takes us back before crisis became a popular point of reference. Gentrification describes urban developments of both constructional and economic up-valuation and a cultural revaluation that leads to the exchange of populations in affected residential areas (Holm 2009). Displacement and change in neighbourhoods are simultaneously the principle and goal of those reorganisations, regulating social participation through money and origin (Twickel 2010: 5). We suppose that a further understanding of Gentrification need to acknowledge both, Berlin's and Germany's peculiarities and the phenomenon of gentrification, being both, global and diverse (cf. Holm 2013).

This process is strongly linked to racism in German society. Not only does being migrant still matter for getting good marks at schools, jobs or an apartment at Berlin^{vi}. Today's “Gentrification Hot-Spot districts” Neukölln and Kreuzberg have been accused for being “Ghettos” or “Parallel societies” (compare Friedrich/Gürsel/Kahveci 2013). Through these affective discourses specially migrant and social disadvantaged populations have become (again) a political problem and object, thus preceding the first stage of gentrification^{vii}. That's why the politically demanded and desired “social mixture” in Berlin has become a paradigm to unidirectional claim for gentrification – with racist undertones.

Even if the leftovers of German welfare system may have slowed these processes at Berlin rents costs are becoming an existential threat. Berlin is still a “Mieterstadt” (city of tenants), more than 80% of its population lives in a rented apartment. It shows the most intense increasing of rents in Germany.^{viii}

Increasing rents as a condition for political struggles

Gentrification is more recent at Berlin than in other German cities like Hamburg or Munich. In the last years Berlin got to a point, where not only single neighbourhood but the whole city center (marked by the circular railway ring) is affected by different shapes of gentrification – individual agency is highly reduced and institutions to directly confront and to make responsible for what is happening progressively disappear. “Berlin seems to be a laboratory for all the variations of gentrifications one knows from the international literature” (Holm 2013).

Nevertheless it is – at least in Germany – still difficult to follow the tenor of “post-politics” and “post-democracy” (discussed e.g. by Žižek following Rancière): Municipal and state institutions can still be held responsible for the sell-out of real estate and building that was mentioned before, even if this is almost completed. Or for passing a new law that weakens tenants rights (which

happened 2013^{ix}). That implies that there exist structures like institutions, laws, public spendings and so forth, that may be worth to be defended, transformed or expanded again, such as happened when the initiative *Energietisch* (“round table for Energy”) tried at November 2013 to re-communalise the production of energy by referendum^x.

But there are also houses managed and owned by funds, new migrants arriving from Eastern and Southern European countries, some global actors are speculating with real estate in Berlin and tourism is becoming a big economical sector in the city what puts Berlin in competition with other (global) cities.

All this is well connected to very local dynamics and conditions for gentrification. During the last decades displacement pressure increased, leading to evictions due to the gap between long term rental agreements and new contract rents. In other areas living apartments are transformed to holiday flats for tourists. Most permitted construction projects are linked to the idea to concern Berlin's high unemployment: and thus hotels or offices are built while social housing aren't. Or rents increase despite long-term rent contracts through “energy-related renovations” and modernization of houses and simultaneously channelling money from public funds into house-owners pockets.

In this context new questions are emerging: Who will be attacked or confronted in cases like the one of Reichenberger Street 114, where the house was sold by auction and bought from some non-German investor? Who will be addressed besides the state or municipal institutions and politics?

Increasing rents became the condition for political struggles in Berlin. And struggles point to answers to urgent matters.

The dilemmas of insurgent political agency

Even if the changes of housing market and urban planing stress the very local and historical political decisions taken, it appears to be less and less promising to organize only around distribution of municipal resources. The difficulty for struggles lies in detecting the practices that link local political programs and authorities with global developments. Gentrification at Berlin is whether just a global, too complex (unstoppable) situation but neither can it be understood just through the local.

Taking a city-wide awareness about the all in common problem “increasing rents” as given, daily perception of ongoing processes got radicalized and politicized, people start to feel affected, talk as affected. Traditional institutions like social-democratic and leftist parties but also traditional tenants consultations and older movements like the housing movements are still in search for explanations and solutions. Most scientists and journalists join in the chorus of problematizing but not focusing on possibilities for changes - that exist. And most political groups stay in their sub-areas of competences losing sight of most processes and actors.

In the meantime fear regarding the future becomes a motor for mobilization and new forms of protest appear. Or mainly still have to be found, as there doesn't exist any direct connection between being affected, struggling and being involved in political movements. It seems that new movements are needed – but not easy to find.

New on stage

Not only the scenery changed at Berlin, but so did the protagonists. The city walk during summer school took place at Kreuzberg, an area with a special history of migration and alternative and leftist cultures that has been subject to gentrification processes for years now. Political struggles are taking place here, located spatially close to each other: Over a year ago refugees arrived after a long march throughout Germany and occupied a square and an empty school as part of their protest against asylum laws and for improved living conditions for refugees in Germany^{xi}.

Kotti&Coxii is another example of apparently individual cases becoming collective and finding a new political expression beyond former actors and leftist forms. The neighbourhood close to Kottbusser Tor, at Kreuzberg, started with a single issue: the massive increases of rents in their apartments, all part of a privatized social housing unit that is owned by GSW and HERMES. The increase has forced more and more tenants to leave their homes. They began to meet, at the beginning at the crappy, noisy elevator and talking about the problem. Some went to tenants consultations with the response that law doesn't provide any protection for their case.

In May 2012 they occupied the square opposite to their houses and constructed a Gecekondu (Turkish: a house built over night) out of shelves. Kotti&Co became a visible, audible and political protest – and still is.

Their neighbourhood has continuously changed since then: lively “noisy demonstrations” depart at the weekends from Gecekondu. In those demonstrations some of us felt remembered to Argentinian Cacerolazo protests the early 2000s. Gecekondu became a space where people meet, chat, drink a Turkish Cay, where events take place and everyone is invited. Mainly but not only migrants and women are active at Kotti&Co, many of whom haven't been politically active before. Some of them live at Kreuzberg since generations, some have stories to tell about being Gastarbeiter, being involved in social struggles around living conditions. According to the name Kotti&Co, the protest includes friends, scientists, political groups, tourists, everyone who wants to participate. But at the same time it is holding on being a tenants initiative in a particular situation – negotiating with politicians, inviting everyone to their noisy demonstrations and Gecekondu, show students and tourists around, writing proposals demanding (and partially achieving) the limit of rents and solutions for social housing at Berlin, networking with initiatives around Germany and sometimes also beyond it.

Another initiative appeared last year: “Zwangsräumungen verhindern!” (impede evictions) started after the Spanish example of PAHxiii (the platform against evictions) that is actively blocking evictions by means of civil disobedience. The aim is to turn individual displacement into a collective and public issue. Evictions have massively increased in the course of the gentrification of the inner city areas – approximately more than 22 households are evicted throughout the city every day. It is mainly the most marginalized people, such as unemployed or precariously employed people who are affected. The campaign successfully managed to re-frame the issue from a matter of individual failure to a prevalent social problem. Despite its symbolic and discursive effect, the campaign is based on networks of mutual support, offering advice and help to the affected people, thereby inducing a process of organizing beyond the traditional leftist spectrum.

Considering just these two examples of newly emerging struggles, it can be justified to speak of a new momentum of struggles around housing in the last years. It remains open, which effect those will have – remembering those of the squatting movements.

The old can't remain as it is

But not only new agents emerge but “old” groups and movements are going through changes as conditions changed. These can be illustrated by the example of the “Mietshäuser Syndikat” (syndicate of rented houses)xiv: This network was founded to legalize occupied houses through buying them in a kind of co-operative-model at the beginnings of the 1980th. In the last years it turned more and more into a model to to “safe” houses from speculation on the real estate market, with traditional occupations becoming nearly impossible due to new forms of repression. In times of uncertain futures regarding living conditions and the growing difficulty to afford living in the inner city areas, the Mietshäuser Syndikat offers a structure for organized groups to be self-governed and having low rents according to the principles of the network. This model actually became increasingly interesting for groups at Berlin in the last years – and proved successful: Despite increasing real-estate prices a handful of projects have been or are to be realized during the

last year. And around 100 groups are currently searching for houses and consultation at Berlin. Being an alternative model that does not provide future security through private properties it is still the question whether this very individualized and relatively demanding form (in terms of time and work to be done, to finally get a house and organize collectively) can be applied on a larger scale.

Does this mean that we are witnessing a new urban movement at Berlin? Even though there have been new actors emerging that don't fit old schemes of (identitarian) political agents, they might not include enough participation and dynamics to be called a movement. Under these present conditions many questions remain unclear. What are standards to measure success or failure? Or the beginning of new urban movements?

5. The creative sector – a potential terrain for urban resistance?

As the persistence and incisiveness of these new urban struggles remains an object of debate, recent investigations suggest the emergence of consistent new urban social movements (USM) amongst actors and along thematics most critical thinkers have so far been reticent to consider (see Novy/Colomb 2013).

It is well-known that since scholars like Richard Florida and Charles Landry have initiated the so-called “creative turn” in urban regeneration in the early 2000s, “creativity” has become an acclaimed and successful instrument in the neoliberal tool-kit of urban governmentality (Florida 2005, Landry 2000). Its synergic integration with consolidated strategies entailing privatization, touristification and eventisation of urban space, prefigured what critical urban scholars of the network INURA^{xv} fittingly dubbed the “new metropolitan mainstream”: meaning a complex, interconnected set of practices of urban restructuring, which can be seen as paradigmatic of neoliberal globalization (INURA 2009).

Yet, despite this suffocating neoliberal embrace (or maybe exactly because of it), over the past years “urban creativity” seems to have developed a stubborn dynamic of its own, increasingly aspiring towards an emancipation from institutional and corporate cooptation.

This is becoming more and more evident in a city like Berlin, which has eagerly implemented its own “creative city” strategy over the past decade - not without a certain success, we should add, at least from a neoliberal viewpoint. To a good degree, this must be acknowledged as a merit of the city's governing social-democratic major, Klaus Wowereit. His communicative strategy has proven immensely effective in establishing and consolidating Berlin's image as new “capital of cool”, international mecca for creatives, students and tourists and last safe haven for global bohemia: a cynical and crafty rebranding of the city's image, perfectly epitomized by the major's famous “poor but sexy” motto. The reinterpretation of the city's chronic indebtedness, widespread poverty and increasing social exclusion as soft location factors - initially a desperate move dictated by the sobering post-1990's economic slump - has gradually unfolded into a comprehensive and somehow coherent, though often erratic strategy of neoliberal urban restructuring. It should not be seen as a contradiction that such a strategy has been implemented by a social-democratic major (at times even in coalition with the leftist *Linke* party), as so many allegedly centre-leftist experiences since New Labour onwards have shown that they are more than willing and capable of implementing such policies, somehow leaving a strong tatcherian *TINA*^{xvi} aftertaste.

The successful instatement of a narrative capitalizing on Berlin's historically strong subcultures, including the outspokenly countercultural squatter scene, has greatly favoured the exploitation of those vast reserves of *collective symbolic capital* Harvey deemed essential to post-Fordist gentrification processes (Harvey 1989). There seems to be a rebound though. While, as we have seen, the inherent dynamics of real-estate financialization have impacted the city with unprecedented intensity over the past few years, it has become increasingly clear that the Creative City strategy is facing a conundrum. The conditions on which Berlin's “creative scene” has thrived for decades – cheap, subsidized rents and a seemingly endless reserve of vacant spaces – are rapidly vanishing because of those very same processes of urban restructuring they helped to ignite, thus leading to new, harsh conflicts.

“Mediaspree versenken”: a jaded success story?

As a response to these developments, new political actors seem to be emerging from the very same groups Florida identifies as constitutive of his criticized “Creative Class” (Florida 2005).

“Mediaspree versenken” (“Sink Mediaspree”^{xvii}) has been acknowledged as the first and most prominent of a new series of initiatives dealing with urban restructuring from the perspective of the city's (sub)cultural sector. Initiated by a heterogeneous set of actors with a robust presence of members from the creative field and the local techno scene, the initiative's main goal was to stop the realization of a vast project of urban restructuring along the Spree river called “Mediaspree” (see also Bader/Scharenberg 2010). The project was (or rather is) located on the border between the traditional strongholds of Berlin's leftist underground scene, Kreuzberg and Friedrichshain, now amongst the hippest areas in town. While the initiative was initially successful in stalling the project, the impact of institutional attrition and subsequent fragmentation of the activists, combined with the new vigour of the local real estate market, has put the Mediaspree project back on track, once again gravely endangering the many clubs and subcultural venues still to be found in the area. Furthermore, it became evident over time that, despite temporary and partially successful attempts to form a vast coalition encompassing militant leftists from the squatter scene, club owners and simple Kiez-Aktivisten (neighbourhood-activists) under the label “Megaspree”^{xviii}, many actors were following hidden agendas and pursuing diverging goals.

It thus appears understandable that, especially in the field of traditional leftist activism (itself not immune to a certain self-referentiality and rigid orthodoxy), a certain suspiciousness of creatives rising the flag of the “right to the city” remains. This seems justified when looking at recent developments in the Mediaspree area: while corporate actors are ruthlessly implementing their long cherished plans, single actors from the subcultural scene are fighting for a “place in the sun” on their own account, using all the communicative and symbolic means at their disposal. Their projects raise difficult questions, deserving further investigation: to what extent can the “creative class” steer urban development? Is it willing and capable to project alternatives to the neoliberal mainstream, or is it rather creating new laboratories for its biopolitical refinement?

Such is the case, for instance, of two cooperatives, called *Spreefeld* and *Holzmarkt*^{xix}. Led by former club owners and activists, they succeeded in snatching away desirable and valuable lots of land from traditional investors, and are now putting their visions of socially and ecologically sustainable urbanity into practice. While this may be celebrated as a partial victory by optimists, it must be said that in order to be part of such groups, even more than in the aforementioned case of the Mietshäuser Syndikat, considerable amounts of social and cultural capital are a mandatory precondition, making this a very elitist endeavour. Furthermore, it can't be overseen how, especially in the case of the Holzmarkt project, countercultural language and symbols have been skilfully integrated into a very professional business plan, comprehensive of a start-up incubator, a restaurant, a hotel and a club, all framed by urban gardening, art venues, organic groceries and a manneristic, aestheticized informalism, reminiscent of a certain bourgeois “slum romanticism”. While it must be acknowledged that the project's profitability and spectacular appeal have been central preconditions for its financing through a Swiss pension fund, thus thankfully thwarting the construction of yet another glass and steel office building, it should be debated to what degree such a kind of “creative-alternative” urban village, as enjoyable as it may be, will be really capable of granting an authentic “right to the city” for all. Nevertheless, its positive, experimental potential shouldn't be overlooked: much will depend on the projects implementation over the next years.

“Creative Class” as an antagonistic actor?

While single local episodes of the international protest cycle of the past years may greatly differ from each other, they shared one aspect: seeing actors from the well-educated middle class fighting in the first rows, be it in the paradigmatic case of Gezi Park in Istanbul, in the Occupied squares of

North America or in the Spanish Acampadas. This may point towards a transnationally shared condition amongst members of what has been called the “precarious cognitariat” (Newfield 2010), prefiguring an antagonistic *Doppelgänger* to Florida's neoliberal “creative class” (see for instance McKenzie 2004).

To this regard, scholars standing in the tradition of Italian post-workerism have justly suggested to shift the focus of critical studies on the role of the general intellect within the post-Fordist urban fabric, showing how under the neoliberal condition the very essence of embodied subjects and their mutual relations come to be exploited as sources of value (Lazzarato 1997), thus rendering urban spaces a productive infrastructure in themselves and turning them into widespread immaterial factories aimed at the exploitation of *symbolic labour* (Negri 2008). In order to make them function as such, capital needs to recognize individuals as autonomous subjects, reminding us that the individual's entitlement of neoliberal agency, while coming with all the well known burdens of personal accountancy, consumeristic alienation and compulsory entrepreneurship, also inevitably entails a residual acknowledgement of individual autonomy that may contain a crucial hint at the immanent limits of capital, as Toni Negri recently pointed out (Negri 2013).

Berlin may be considered as a unique laboratory to this regard, as few other cities depend as much on the production of symbolic capital as the German capital. Researchers have shown how, out of this reason, it may serve as a crucial example falsifying Florida's “creative city” theory, since, at least so far, economic growth has not been following talent and creativity in the expected measure (see for instance Krätke 2011).

Notwithstanding, the city's strong tradition concerning “urbanism from below” goes to the account of members of Florida's “creative class” (or, drawing upon Warck McKenzie's *A Hacker Manifesto*, “hacker class” - McKenzie 2004): artists, students, academics, who through their agency have left a deep and lasting mark on the city's urban fabric. And who, in the face of the institutional-corporate sell-out of their work, started to coalesce into pressure groups and lobbying initiatives, showing a strong self-confidence and discussing the role of culture and creativity for the city's fortunes.

At least two initiatives should be shortly mentioned here. *Stadt Neudenken*^{xx} (“Re-think the city”, SND), probably the most influential so far, was born in 2011 with the aim of archiving a general moratorium of sales of city-owned properties, joined with the demand that such sales should be recalibrated to take social, cultural and ecological aspects into account, rather than mere economical ones. Thus, not the highest bidder should get the lot being sold, but the project offering the best perspectives in terms of sustainability, liveability and long-term gain for the city and its inhabitants. After obtaining a certain mediatic attention and appreciation for its ideas, SND initiated a round table comprising politicians from all parties, artists, activists, representatives of tenants associations and more (Mietshäuser Syndikat was involved in the talks as well, amongst many others). Its outcome is still uncertain, as the now governing great coalition of social- and Christian-democrats has tried to get ahead in the game by declaring its will to stop sales of public properties, while fighting over the criteria to be established in order to judge the worthiness of a project.

The second initiative worth mentioning here is the *Koalition der Freien Szene*^{xxi} (“coalition of the free scene”, KFS), an unlikely alliance of a myriad of small venues and groups from Berlin's magmatic “Off” scene. Showing a subtle understanding of the city's marketing mechanisms, the KFS proposed the introduction of a *city-tax* on the 25 million overnight stays by tourists recorded in 2012 (a new record, and the sharp increase is set to continue over the next years), whose income should benefit the free scene. Arguing that Berlin's touristic appeal is greatly owed to its renowned independent culture, the KFS aims to create a “virtuous circle” between a quickly growing tourism industry and a free scene struggling with the newly rising living costs. Over the past weeks, while it became clear that the governing coalition would introduce the city-tax, but would use its revenues for other purposes, a roar of outrage has come from the free scene: it seems like this will remain an open conflict in the foreseeable future.

While both initiatives try to present the recent developments of Berlin – gentrification, increasing living costs, growing social segregation – as interconnected with their own issues and aims, somehow always implying a general “right to the city” as opposed to neoliberal urban restructuring, it also seems that both initiatives are not really capable (or willing) of summoning a wide-reaching, socially diverse coalition. Instead, both seem to follow goals appealing mainly to well educated members of the middle classes, leaving out large sections of Berlin's vast socially disadvantaged population.

6. Conclusion

When viewed from a historical perspective, it becomes clear that Berlin's urban evolution has always entailed considerable social struggles amongst conditions of crisis. At the same time, the concept of crisis appears as highly contradictory and variable in its evolution. This seems particularly true when looking at the evolution of the city's famed squatter movements, which arose as a response to modernist urban welfare and its totalitarian strategies of urban restructuring. Due to its peculiar recent history, until recently fordist regulatory measures have had a much lasting influence on Berlin's urban structure when compared to most other european cities. This led to the creation of a large pool of cheap, subsidized housing, accompanied by rising levels of public debt. As a consequence, nowadays Berlin seems to be trapped in a neck-breaking race to catch up with dominating neoliberal urban paradigms, somehow becoming a laboratory for austerity measures, reminiscent of what Jamie Peck called "austerity urbanism" (Peck 2012). The neoliberal dynamics of financialization hit Berlin with particular intensity and pace. On the one hand, the allegedly "underprized" preconditions of Berlin real estate have made it a preferred target for speculation and investment in the current financial crisis. On the other hand, its history as a tenement city with strong Fordist regulation and strong social movements account for a relatively "belated" process of neoliberalization that is now experienced as a ruthless "catch-up process". This way, the costs of this transition, segregation and displacement, are highly visible and contested, they provoke public debate, criticism and new social struggles. These struggles are faced with the challenge to confront financialization as a multi-dimensional, glocal phenomenon on their local ground. While new movements and initiatives sprung up in neighbourhoods across the city, partially succeeding in putting the question of housing back on the political agenda, so far it seems like they haven't been able to summon a genuine new urban social movement.

Amidst the spreading local resistance to city-wide gentrification processes and large projects of urban transformation, the role of the so called "creative class" and its responsibility in the aforementioned processes remain unclear and hotly debated. What choices are left for the producers of *collective symbolic capital*, once there's agreement upon the fact that "being uncreative" cannot be an option, if not a very paranoid one? How to get out out of this "typical postmodern cul de sac, where each act of resistance is supposed to reinforce fatalistically the dominant Code" (Pasquinelli 2008)? Is a creative "sabotage of rent" possible, given the fact that "rent is the new profit" (ibid.)? What is the role of Berlin's famous subcultures and its independent art scene, if not that of a mere marketing factor for the rapidly growing tourism industry? Optimists point towards the inherent contradictions of immaterial capitalism, in the hope that Berlin may be one of the first places where the expanding dynamics of global financialization will hit their implicit limits. Though this dream and its implicit "sustainable" version of gentrification may seem to naive, it seems fair to affirm that the city keeps offering fertile ground for the emergence of innovative urban social movements. It remains to be seen if these will be able to coalesce into a spatially, socially and thematically wider alliance, thus becoming true, radical agents of social change.

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- i Being aware that a certain Fordist model could be true also for Eastern Berlin we want to focus here on West-Berlin as this has been the place of our inquiry.
 - ii The IBA was, as publicly financed and privately organized institution, the new urban centre of power during the 1980s, whose “twelve principles for a careful urban renewal” picked up important requests by tenants initiatives, urban activists and squatters (Holm 2009; our translation).
 - iii For further reading on alternative artists at east-Berlin see Bartholmess/Klepp 2001, regarding the new wave of squatting see Holm/Kuhn 2010).
 - iv The question of overspeculation on the German Real-Estate Market is not tackled in this text, for more information see: Jensen/Syrovatka 2013; Hanau/Möbert 2012
 - v The City's deficits sits at the moment at around 60 billion Euro. See this and further details on the case at Bernt/Grell/Holm (2013).
 - vi A fact that provoked the weekly ZEIT at 2012 to launch a series of articles called “Living with Racism” (
 - vii The model foresees four stages of Gentrification: The pioneers, the first changes, the scene-district and the gentrified district (after Clay 1979, Zukin 1982)
 - viii At Berlin 81,2 % lived at a rented house, German intermediate is 52,1% (see table Zensus 2011), compared to an EU intermediate of 29% rented houses (EUROSTAT 2011).
 - ix At May 2013 the “Mietänderungsgesetz” (law of change in the rent) came into force. It includes various changes benefiting the renters, e.g. regarding the distribution of costs in cases of modernization or weakening the protection of tenants in cases of payment defaults (cf. BMV 2013).
 - x Berliner Energietisch is a non-governmental alliance of local initiatives and NGOs. Since 2010 some of the groups were working on the issue of sustainable energy supply which was not realized by the concern Vattenfall. 2011 the round table was founded to struggle for its re-communalisation including demands for social, ecological and democratic power supply based in Berlin. As Berlin's government did not accept to include this in the coalition agreement the round table decided to carry out a referendum. At November 2013 it does not reach the rate needed: 83% voted for the re-communalisation, 17% against/not valid. For further information see <http://www.berliner-energietisch.net/>
 - xi Homepage by Refugee Tent Action: <http://www.refugeetentaction.net/index.php?lang=de>
 - xii Homepage by Kotti&Co with some English texts: <http://kottiundco.net/english/>
 - xiii Homepage by PAH: affectadosporlahipoteca.com/
 - xiv Homepage by Mietshäuser Syndikat: <http://www.syndikat.org/>
 - xv Homepage of INURA: <http://www.inura.org/>
 - xvi “There is no alternative”
 - xvii Homepage of Mediaspree Versenken: <http://www.ms-versenken.org/>
 - xviii Homepage of Megaspree: <http://www.megaspree.de/>
 - xix Homepage of Holzmarkt: <http://www.holzmarkt.com>
 - xx Homepage of Initiative Stadt Neudenken: <http://stadt-neudenken.tumblr.com/>
 - xxi Homepage of Koalition der Freien Szene: <http://www.berlinvisit.org>