

## Thinking the City: The Arena of Conflict

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### Abstract

This paper examines how the city is conceptualised and defined as a place of conflict and how a critical urban theory can emerge from this very conception. To this end, I will first analyse Henri Lefebvre's central urban text *Le droit à la ville* (1968) and work out its idea of the city. I will discuss whether 'the city' is a suitable object of study at all and examine Lefebvre's position on this question. Thinking of the city as 'a thing' will play a central role. I will then focus on the definitions of the city Lefebvre formulates. Lefebvre offers various ways of conceptualising the city. One of these proposals is to define the city as a place of conflict. This proposal is to be understood in the tradition of Marx and Engels, for whom the relationship between city and conflict played a major role. I will briefly describe their assumptions putting it in dialogue with Lefebvre, as real expert on the idea of the city highlighted by Marx and Engels. In the other direction of time, the concept of the city as an arena of conflict has various possible connections. I discuss these possibilities and propose a post-foundational concept of conflict with which Lefebvre's concept of the city can be made fruitful. Eventually, I explore the question of whether – and if so, why – a concept of the city centred on conflict might be of interest to urban studies.

Questo articolo illustra come la città venga concettualizzata e definita in quanto luogo di conflitto e come da questa concezione possa emergere una teoria urbana critica. A tal fine, si analizzerà innanzitutto il fondamentale testo di Henri Lefebvre, *Le droit à la ville* (1968), lavorando sull'idea della città che vi si evince. Verrà discusso se la 'città' sia un oggetto di studio adeguato, esaminando la posizione di Lefebvre su questa questione. La concezione della città come entità giocherà in tal senso un ruolo importante. Mi concentrerò poi sulle definizioni di città formulate da Lefebvre. Quest'ultimo propone diversi modi di guardare alla città tra cui quello della città come luogo di conflitto. Questa proposta va intesa nella tradizione di Marx ed Engels, per i quali il rapporto tra città e conflitto ha avuto un ruolo fondamentale. Indagando questa tradizione interpretativa il testo tornerà poi a Lefebvre, voce autorevole rispetto all'idea di città proposta dai due autori. Per altri versi, il concetto di città come arena di conflitto apre a diverse possibili connessioni. Nel testo discuto di queste possibilità e propongo un concetto di conflitto post-fondazionale che può essere messo in dialogo con l'idea di città di Lefebvre. Infine, mi chiedo se - e perché - un concetto di città incentrato sul conflitto possa essere interessante per gli studi urbani.

**Keywords:** concept of the city; Henri Lefebvre; post-foundational theory.

**Parole Chiave:** concetto di città; Henri Lefebvre; teoria post-fondazionale.

## Introduction

What kind of concept of the city do urban studies have? Is there even a need for such a concept? How and from what perspective can we narrate the case studies that are at the core of recent urban research? What could a theoretical framework look like in which such research is embedded? What is the relationship between the case studies and theoretical discussions? Is there such a thing as urban theory and if so, what exactly does it theorize? Asking such and similar questions is an ongoing task in a field of research and knowledge that bears the city (or the urban or urbanization) in its name<sup>1</sup>.

The texts of Henri Lefebvre are a permanent guest in the relevant discussions. Particularly in the field of urban studies, which calls itself critical (or sees itself as such), Lefebvre is without doubt one of the most frequently invoked references. The fact that Lefebvre's books addressing the city and the production of space were written over 50 years ago does not detract from this interest. On the contrary: new waves of Lefebvre are constantly rolling through international debates and producing new approaches and references to the French thinker. Current examples include the comprehensive *Routledge Handbook of Henri Lefebvre, The City and Urban Society* (Leary-Owhin and McCarthy, 2020) or the fiercely contested discourse space that has been working on the Lefebvre-based concept of 'planetary urbanization' for several years (Brenner, 2018)<sup>2</sup>. The most recent new translations of Lefebvre's texts should also be mentioned, for example into English (2016a; 2023), Italian (2014; 2022) or German (2016b). Finally, more recent monographs that deal with Lefebvre's texts, such as those by Stefan Kipfer (2022) or Francesco Biagi (2020), deserve special mention<sup>3</sup>.

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1 Cf. Brenner, 2009; Roy, 2016; or the debate 'What is city? What is critique?' in *sub|urban* 10(1). <https://zeitschrift-suburban.de/sys/index.php/suburban/issue/view/48>.

2 This stream of thought understands planetary urbanization as a dominant condition of globalized society. However, in urban studies a highly controversial discussion is ongoing about the concept. Some critics accuse the planetary thesis to constitute a totalizing and generalizing exclusion of different things: non-urban and rural places, different claims in critical theory, other positions at all (Derickson, 2018; Jazeel, 2018).

3 In his extensive exposition of *Henri Lefebvre's Critical Theory of Space*, Biagi (2020: 228) argues for a «coherent, aware and precise return to the author's sources», i.e. for looking more closely into Lefebvre's texts themselves and

In my contribution, I would like to examine how – in critical urban theory – the city is conceived and defined as an arena to the conflict, or rather how a critical urban theory emerges in precisely this conception. The starting point of my discussion is to subject Lefebvre's central urban text *Le droit a la ville* (1968) to a close reading and to work out the conception of the city to be found there. First, I discuss whether 'the city' is a suitable object of study at all (i.e. not cities, but the idea of the city) and examine Lefebvre's position on this question, where, among other things, thinking the city *as a thing* will play a role, as we will see (II). I then focus on the definitions of the city that Lefebvre formulates in *Le droit a la ville* (III). In his text, Lefebvre offers various ways of conceptualizing the city. One of these proposals is to define the city as a place of conflict. This proposal is to be understood in the tradition of Marx and Engels, for whom the relationship between city and conflict played a major role. I will briefly outline this line of tradition (IV) and inevitably end up with Lefebvre again, as he is the actual expert on the idea of the city in Marx and Engels. Thinking in the other direction of time – i.e. in the *Jetztzeit*, as Walter Benjamin (1991) repeatedly referred to the present of a writing author – the concept of the city as an arena of conflict has various possible connections. I discuss these possibilities and propose a post-foundational concept of conflict with which Lefebvre's concept of the city can be made fruitful (V). Finally, I consider whether, and if so why, a concept of the city that focuses on conflict might be interesting for the field of urban studies.

So, I am trying to develop my argument along the lines of 'Lefebvre - Marx - once again Lefebvre - post-foundational thinking'. I find this configuration promising for my concern to unfold a definition of the city as an arena of conflict. My thesis here is that the centrality that Lefebvre (via Marx and Engels) attaches to the thinking of conflicts as constitute of the city is itself a post-foundational impregnated thought, on the one hand, and can be analytically sharpened through a post-foundational perspective, on the other<sup>4</sup>.

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engaging with them more literally. I would like to attempt such a return with my contribution.

4 I discuss the relationship between Lefebvre and post-foundational theory further below

## The city thing

Today, Lefebvre's «Right to the City» is considered the best-known urban text, and rightly so – at least as far as the title is concerned. As a slogan and motto for many urban movements, talk of the 'right to the city' has become established and today leads a rather turbulent life of its own (see Mayer, 2009; Leary-Owhin and McCarthy, 2020). The title of the book is on everyone's lips, but the content of the text is far less well known. However, Lefebvre provides an enormously complex analysis of the urban, urbanization and urbanism and does so far less unsystematically than is often reported.

Lefebvre's *Le droit à la ville* does not begin with Marx, but with Nietzsche. At the beginning of his text, Lefebvre places two quotations from the manuscript collection entitled *The Will to Power*<sup>5</sup>. From my perspective, the second Nietzsche word used by Lefebvre is of particular interest. In the English-language edition of *The Right to the City*, this reads as follows: 'I would claim as property and product of man all the beauty, nobility, which we have given to real or imaginary things'. The original quote reads in full (1988: 41): «*All die Schönheit und Erhabenheit, die wir den wirklichen und eingebildeten Dingen geliehen haben, will ich zurückfordern als Eigentum und Erzeugnis des Menschen: als seine schönste Apologie*»<sup>6</sup>. It is striking that in the many texts on Lefebvre's right-to-the-city-book, hardly any thought has been given to the content and meaning of the Nietzsche quote that precedes it and introduces the founding text of critical urban studies. What exactly does Lefebvre want to tell his readers with these two quotes? I do have two suggestions. Firstly, it is the motif of 'reclaiming' that is probably decisive for Lefebvre. Reclaiming something is a combative stance and here, too, the conflicts that are to be expected can already be surmised. The 'right to the city' is a gesture of reclaiming and Lefebvre's quote marks the level at which it is located. Secondly, perhaps what interests Lefebvre so much about the quote is that Nietzsche

<sup>5</sup> Various compilations of Nietzsche's posthumous notes have been published under this title, some of which differ considerably. The reference is – at least in the context-free form used by Lefebvre – not unproblematic, also because the title «The Will to Power» was very popular in National Socialist circles.

<sup>6</sup> In the classical English translation (2015) by Anthony Ludovici: «All the beauty and sublimity with which we have invested real and imagined things, I will show to be the property and product of man, and this should be his most beautiful apology».

is writing about *things*. Nietzsche's intervention is about the shifting back of a merely conferred (but existing) power of effect and interpretation. Things – things like the city – are human-made and we need to become aware of this again. In Nietzsche's words above, at least that is my interpretation, there is on the one hand an initial outlook on the way in which the right to the city is to be claimed (namely as a reclaim)<sup>7</sup>. On the other hand, the subject of things seems to me to give an initial indication of what idea of the city Lefebvre is aiming for in his writing.

What is Lefebvre's idea of the city? In *Le droit à la ville*, Lefebvre proposes various approaches. Initially, he discusses the idea of viewing the city as a text, as a «written book» (Lefebvre, 1996: 102). That is obvious: A book has an author (it is made by man); to write a book, you need a plan; a written book unfolds its effect in its entirety; a book is a thing that collects thoughts. However, Lefebvre urges caution: Those who view the city as a «semiological system» should not «forget the aspect of mediation» (*Ibidem*). In general, the book/the city can neither be separated from what it contains nor from that in which it is itself contained. The city is «a text in a context» (Ivi, 101)<sup>8</sup>, namely in a context permeated by ideologies that can only be opened through reflection. The whole is therefore not directly present in this book. The book produces «mental and social forms and structures» (Ivi, 102) that can only be recognised and understood through an extended analysis. At this point, Lefebvre combines his approach with a materialist perspective: The core of the extension he is calling for is to reintroduce matter/material in the concept of the city. Lefebvre thus supplements his discursive view (the city as text) with the element classically attributed to the city, namely the material: the buildings, the structures, the things. More generally, according to Lefebvre, the city is inconceivable without «practico-material reality»; the city does not exist «without things» (Ivi, 103). What I think is important

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7 In *The right of the city* Lefebvre does not define 'right' as a legal right, but as a philosophical-political question (cf. Biagi, 2020: 256). In my opinion, Lefebvre's reference to Nietzsche's (re)claim at the beginning of his text is also to be understood as a point to what possibly holds both versions of rights (the juridical as well as the political-philosophical) together, namely a conflictual core of both versions: Both types of right must be fought for, won, reclaimed.

8 Just as Nietzsche's *The will to Power* is a text in a context, it could perhaps be added here somewhat sophistically.

here: Lefebvre only emphasises materiality (in the city) *after* he has taken the diversions via the discursive (the text, the book). This is relevant because this shift leads to a new starting position, from which the analytical re-reification is something completely different than when it is carried out directly (for example in the classical definition of the city as a collection of buildings). It is a conscious materialisation of the city that Lefebvre undertakes here, and it is also an abolition of the demarcation between the discursive/non-discursive<sup>9</sup>.

Lefebvre's remarks on the city turns not only to things, but to 'the thing' itself. Lefebvre takes pleasure in thinking of the city as a 'thing'. He creates something like a 'thingness' of the city and describes it as a «'thing' which is not a thing» (Ivi, 153). For him, the city is a specific thing that is to be distinguished from normal objects «such as a pencil or a sheet of paper» (Ivi, 102). During this distinction, Lefebvre ascribes to the thing 'city' its own «objectality» [*objectalité*], which he compares with the properties of a language that is in a state that has not yet been appropriated or modified (*Ibidem*). In his reification of the city, Lefebvre refers to Hegel, who described the Greek city as the «perfect thing» [*la Chose parfaite*] (Ivi, 91). Lefebvre wants to re-establish the unity between the thing 'city' and the idea 'city', which has broken apart today, and thus overcome the dualism between thing and idea (spirit). The endeavour of Lefebvre's urban theory is thus to a certain extent to give the city – via its conception as a 'thing' – an ontological, non-essentialist privileged status.

In addition to the constitution of the city-thing, Lefebvre proposes – as a further approach to the concept of the city – a difference-theoretical distinction, namely the distinction between «the city» and «the urban» (Ivi, 103). According to Lefebvre, the city on the one hand could be conceptualised as the immediate reality and as a practico-material and architectural fact, while the urban on the other hand could be conceived as a relational social reality that is perceived and (re)constructed exclusively by the thinking mind. But Lefebvre does not trust this conception. He warns – immediately after proposing it – that such a differentiation is

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<sup>9</sup> The reintroduction of materiality into the discourse is reminiscent of the post-Marxist theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001), who – some twenty years later – developed a very similar movement of thought (see also Roskamm, 2022; 2021).

dangerous and insists that the relationships between the city and the urban must always be analysed with the utmost caution. What he fears is that, in separating the urban from the city, an ontological exaggeration is being applied to the urban that does not do justice to the complex urban problems. The urban, Lefebvre warns, is not a «philosophical entity» and has neither a soul nor a spirit of its own (*Ibidem*). Lefebvre thus remains rather reserved towards the specifically introduced *urban difference* between the city and the urban.

Nevertheless, the proposal is worth mentioning, not least because it is still virulent today in some urban discourses. This is probably also because we encounter the difference between the city (the thing) and the urban (the process) again in David Harvey's work. Harvey argues that: firstly, «processes are more fundamental than things»; secondly, «processes are always mediated by the things they produce, preserve and annul»; and thirdly, the «permanence produced by processes» functions as the «fixed and immobile basis of everyday material existence» (2000: 29). Harvey then derives the ontological primacy of the process from his first premise. For Harvey, the city is the inhibiting, static and hindering, while the urban as a process is the flowing, moving and shaping. What Harvey's critique – which has done much to avoid thinking about 'the city' in contemporary urban studies in favour of talking about 'the urban' (see Brenner and Schmid, 2014) – threatens to sideline (and this is presumably precisely the risk that Lefebvre warned against), however, is that the thinking of the thing points in yet another direction. Any simple 'object versus process'-thinking not register the dialectical interaction (*Wechselwirkung*) between both: things trigger processes, and processes trigger things. The question of whether the city or the urban (or urbanisation) should be placed at the beginning of critical urban theory cannot be clearly answered with Lefebvre. His thoughts are more suitable for putting forward arguments against the question.

### **'At this point the city should be defined'**

With these words Lefebvre proposes some definitions of the city – again with sympathetic hesitation. According to him, the city could possibly be defined as the «projection of society onto the ground» (1996: 109) perceived and realised in the mind.

This attempt reveals the internal resistance that Lefebvre had to fight against. His provisional definition of the city is – and this is probably also an expression of his intention to correct the reification of the city thing that he himself had undertaken – doubly secured against being material substance. On the one hand, it is a projection (i.e. at least an image, nothing to touch, nothing with its own materiality; but perhaps also a projection in the psychoanalytical sense, a defence mechanism with which inner conflicts are displaced through the depiction of one's own emotions and desires) and on the other (as an additional protection against becoming substance, so to speak) something that only arises in thought. Because of the abandonment of the material core of the city, this definition seems to get stuck halfway. As a second variant, Lefebvre therefore proposes to define the city as an «*ensemble of differences between cities*» (*Ibidem*). How fragile, too, such a structure is, is shown by the fact that he supplements the ensemble of differences with an addition (between cities) and thus – as he himself admits – places an unsatisfactory «*emphasis on particularities*», which threatens to lose sight of the totality of the phenomenon (*Ibidem*)<sup>10</sup>. Here, the attempt to materialise the radical relationality in the differences between the physically-spatially defined entities called 'cities' fails due to the unmediated shift from the ontological to the empirical level. Lefebvre himself also seems to sense this, at least he hastens to emphasise that both proposed definitions are not exhaustive and by no means exclude further attempts at definition.

Another definition of the city that can be found in *Le droit à la ville* is the one that is probably most present today when talking about Lefebvre's concept of the city. Here it is about the city as a place of possibilities and the possible (Lefebvre, 1996: 156). It is a hopeful possibility that Lefebvre assigns to the city. It is a positive, but also a paradoxical attribution of meaning. It is an occupation with holes, abysses and fissures, which Lefebvre identifies as the actual substance of the city. Through its voids, the city becomes the «*medium (milieu, means, mediation, intermediary) of the transformation*», the «*theatrical space that blends the illusory and the real*» (Ivi, 25). The voids do not exist by chance, Lefebvre (Ivi, 156) proclaims, but they are the

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10 On the important question of totality, see for example Goonewardena, 2018.



logical expression of the fragmented, alienated social, they are the spatial expression of the incoherence that constantly breaks out, of the impossibility of closing society. But at the same time, and this is the point, they are also the place of the possible. The positive possible, the overcoming of alienation, the realisation of utopia – all this happens, according to Lefebvre's proposal, in the urban interstices and residual areas<sup>11</sup>.

Finally, Lefebvre addresses the classic theme of urban-rural conflict in his approach to a definition of the city. Historically, he argues, the violent clashes in the cities can be traced back to the confrontation of urban reality with industrial reality. According to Lefebvre, the urban-rural antagonism has by no means disappeared; on the contrary, it has even intensified in the most industrialised countries and has led to «latent conflicts», which repeatedly comes to light under urban conditions (Ivi, 72). All urban conflicts, according to the classic Marxist thesis here, ultimately stem from the opposition between the city and the countryside. Possibly, as Lefebvre argues, the city can thus be defined as a «place of confrontations» – as an area of «conflictual relations between desire and need, between satisfaction and dissatisfactions» (Ivi, 109). According to Lefebvre, it is in the city that the battles for power are fought, where different interests clash, not least class interests. For Lefebvre, it is the city itself that becomes the actor. The city is the place and arena of the class struggle and the associated urban-rural conflicts, but it is a place that itself makes a difference. The city is in a kind of dialectical interrelationship with the conflicts that take place within it. Partly the city is the result of these conflicts, partly it produces them.

### **Class struggle and the city**

The approach to the city via the conflicts that take place in it is a legacy of Marxist thought that Lefebvre utilises for his definition of the city. This line of tradition is best illustrated by examining

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<sup>11</sup> However, Lefebvre hesitates to assign an ontological status to his voids, too. Ultimately, they seem to be only spatial containers that contain the elements of the possible, but not the power to assemble them. Only the «social forces» would ultimately be capable of realising urban society (1996: 157). Lefebvre is also attested elsewhere that he is «extremely cautious» when there is a danger that the things he investigates could be hypostatized (cf. Revol and Shields, 2023: xii).

the original texts. I would therefore also like to take a brief look here and ask what the connection between the city and conflict looks like in the texts of Marx and Engels.

In his early writing on *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), Friedrich Engels passionately and vividly describes the social conditions in English working-class towns. He depicts the economic and everyday hardships of the proletariat and analyses the reality of the workers' lives using statistics, tables and even urban sketches. Engels is outraged by the social situation he experiences in the cities. He is primarily concerned with the starting point of the social struggles of his time and sees the city as the place where social movements are formed. Engels explains the revolutionary potential of the urban industrial reserve army and analyses the consequences of the permanent violence that manifests itself structurally in the English working-class cities like Liverpool and Manchester. In his analysis, he mixes classical urbanist thinking, which is orientated towards urban relations and conditions, with a theory of revolution that identifies such relations as forms of structural violence. On the one hand, Engels clearly borrows from the contemporary urbanist narrative, in which the city is conceptualised biologically as a body that can be healthy or sick. On the other hand, the idea of class struggle and the hope for the proletariat expand Engels' image of the city and save it from a deterministic and reductionist closure. For Engels, too, the city is seriously ill and must be healed. However, the cure that he wants to give to the cities is not an urban planning cure, but a cure that takes place through confrontation, revolt and uprising. For Engels, the city is a place of revolution, and thus also a place of conflict, a place of urban turmoil and deviant behaviour. For him, urban conflicts are always part of the solution and less part of the problem. However, such a solution is only possible through urbanity itself. Due to the proximity created by centralisation, the workers begin to feel as a class, they become aware that although they are weak individually, together they have power. This process takes place in and through the city:

«The great cities are the birthplaces of labour movements; in them the workers first began to reflect upon their own condition, and to struggle against it; in them the opposition between proletariat and bourgeoisie first made itself manifest; (...) Without the great cities and their forcing

influence upon the popular intelligence, the working-class would be far less advanced than it is» (Engels, 2022: 127).

For Engels, the great towns are therefore pathological on the one hand and reveal the suffering and misery of the exploited workers. On the other hand, however, they are also the places where the struggles of the workers begin and condense into the (victorious) revolution of the proletariat. Here, too, the cities are the arenas, but also a necessary condition for the emergence and success of this revolution.

The city is also a theme in Karl Marx's texts. For Marx, the examination of historical materialism and urban conditions belong together, because the city is both a material prerequisite and a form of expression of capitalism. Marx uses the city primarily as a category and result of his historical analysis of the division of labour and, like Engels, sees it as the place of origin of the proletariat. He draws a complex picture of the power structure that emerged in the pre-capitalist and early capitalist city, which, guided by different interests, produced a variety of inclusions and exclusions. Marx's diagnosis is that the «rabble of these towns» was too powerless and that the journeymen and apprentices of the still primarily artisan-organised economy were too tied into their «filial relationship» (Engels and Marx, 2022: 40). Only through industrialisation and the accompanying progressive alienation of labour would the conditions have become so uncomfortable, the number of the «rabble» so much greater and the supposedly harmonious structure so disturbed that a revolutionary proletariat could form in the cities. In this story, too, the decisive historical step comes in the form of urban conflicts.

The city therefore certainly plays a role in the thinking of Marx and Engels. The city is an expression of capitalism, and it plays a role in the class struggle. But it is more an effect or phenomenon and neither Marx nor Engels is concerned with a *theory of the city* (but with a theory of political economy and a theory of revolution). A specific Marxist concept of the city is only included in rudimentary form, if at all. This in turn changes Henri Lefebvre. In his book *Marxist Thought and the City*<sup>12</sup>, Lefebvre undertakes a journey through the texts of Marx and Engels

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<sup>12</sup> The book was published in 1972, followed by a translation into German in 1975, English in 2016 and Italian in 2022.

and analyses the role that the city plays in these texts. In and with his explicit analysis, Lefebvre evaluates and discusses a Marxian concept of the city (see Biagi, 2022: I). Lefebvre develops his approach by first placing the city in the context of Marx's actual perspective, i.e. by considering it within the framework of the critique of political economy. Lefebvre writes that «the bourgeoisie invented political economy; it is its condition, its means of action, its ideological and scientific milieu» (2016a: 91) and therefore it (the bourgeoisie) should be attacked precisely in this area. However, such an approach requires «courage» and – «like any struggle in hostile territory» – also harbours specific dangers (*Ibidem*). Lefebvre thus critically alludes to the two (in his view) fundamental evils of Marxist dogmatism, which he also repeatedly emphasised in other texts: empiricism and economism. According to Lefebvre's actual thesis, the city could help to ensure that the critique of political economy does not degenerate into economism and that the view of the «conditions of existence that can be empirically determined» (Ivi, 27) does not degenerate into empiricism. Lefebvre's thesis is that the city is not only the empirical or real core of Marxist thought, but above all that the city – as a theme, as a problematic – can save Marxist thought from stagnation and keep it alive by importing its own complexity and heterogeneity. In his consideration of the city in Marxist thought, Lefebvre once again emphasises the connection between the city and conflict, or more precisely, between the city and class struggle. The «class struggle occurs in the city», formulates Lefebvre (Ivi, 145) and he adds that «emphasizing the relationship of conflict in his [Marx] consideration of the past was an essential component of his argument and an achievement of historical materialism» (Ivi, 6). Lefebvre develops his idea of the city with and in this passage through the urban aspects of Marx's thinking. In his urban theory, the city is conflictual in nature: it is the site of conflict, it is the result of conflict, it ultimately consists of these very conflicts themselves.

The city is the place of struggle and conflict – Lefebvre, Marx and Engels all agree on this. This approach thus describes something like the common basis for the field of critical urban research<sup>13</sup>.

13 Stuart Elden (2016: xiii) writes in his preface to the English translation of *Pensee marxiste et la ville* that Lefebvre emphasises the enduring relevance of Marx's thinking not least by showing that this thinking still helps us today

Lefebvre develops his thoughts on a concept of the city based on his study of the texts of Marx and Engels. His approach to describing the city as a place of conflict, which Lefebvre creates in his urban texts, derives from the role that Marxian thought ascribes to the city. Such a definition is not yet fully formulated in the texts of Marx and Engels, but it already exists in rudimentary form. Lefebvre works this out as the basis for a critical theory of the city. The conflicts, one could perhaps say, are the transmitters of Marxian thought that make Lefebvre's urban theory a Marxian theory. Or to put it another way: in the urban conflicts of a critical urban theory à la Lefebvre, the class struggle is abolished<sup>14</sup> and haunts the cities.

### The essence of conflict

If we accept the definition of the city as a place of conflict, it is helpful at this point to consider what a conceptual understanding of conflict might be. Conflicts are social phenomena that can be found wherever human societies exist. Georg Simmel (2009: 227) already ascribes «sociological significance» to conflicts and poses the question of whether «conflict comprises a form of association»<sup>15</sup>. In the sociological literature on conflict, especially from the 1950s to the 1970s (Coser, 1956; Dahrendorf, 1972), but also in many current texts (Kriesberg, 1998; Hartmann-Piraudeau, 2022; Rajagopal and Behl, 2022), conflicts are often categorised as 'constructive' and 'non-constructive'. In such a conception, the 'constructive conflicts' are then regarded as important and productive components for social development. Post-foundational theory takes a different approach. Post-foundational thinking is a field of theory that is based on the premise that absolute reasons are not possible in social and historical contexts (Landau *et al.*, 2021). The explicit elaboration of post-foundational theory only emerged in the early 2000s with the significant contribution of the Vienna-based political theorist Oliver Marchart (2003; 2007). Marchart is concerned with the outlines of a political ontology, which he develops by going

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«to understand contradictions and conflicts».

14 Abolished in the sense of the German word *aufgehoben*: the class struggles have dissolved into the urban struggles, but they are still contained within them; the latter are afflicted by the former.

15 In the original German text, Simmel writes «*Vergesellschaftungsform*», which could perhaps be better translated as «process of socialisation».

through a large pool of political and social theory: Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Ernesto Laclau, to name but a few. Marchart interprets the thinkers as – at least in part – post-foundational thinkers, even if these thinkers themselves never described their thinking in this way (if only because the term was not yet available in their day)<sup>16</sup>.

In post-foundational theory, conflicts are also seen as central to social and historical development, but from a different perspective. The significance of conflicts, this is the point, arises from the assumption that social and historical processes are necessarily contingent. If everything could be different – that is what contingency means – then there are alternatives to everything and everyone. The validity of these alternatives must be constantly renegotiated. There is nothing non-negotiated. Conflicts thus show the ultimate contingent nature and the limits of all idea off objectivity (Laclau, 1990: 17): There are always multiple, opposing and irreconcilable positions; there is never an objective and self-contained whole. That is why there are conflicts, always and everywhere<sup>17</sup>. Marchart (2018) calls this constellation ‘antagonism’, and his thesis is that a fundamental antagonism can be found at the bottom (or the abyss) of all social relations. Marx’s class antagonism is generalised in such a view and conflicts are ultimately nothing other than the expressions of a general constitutive antagonism. Conflicts are thus an instance that, on the one hand, are reminiscent of the contradictions and antagonisms of late capitalist modernity. On the other hand, conflicts carry a certain negativity that makes it difficult to functionalise them for the positive shaping of society (social engineering, urban planning).

While in some areas of the social sciences – including urban

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<sup>16</sup> Such a procedure can also be applied to Lefebvre: Lefebvre’s thinking is clearly interspersed with post-foundational pieces. The similarities to recent post-foundational political thoughts are not only in the shared insistence on the impossibilities of last reasons, but also in the claim to constantly deal with, and challenge categories such as totality or necessity ([1958] 1971; [1961] 2002). Far from stating that everything is random and arbitrary, Lefebvre’s aim is to re-enact categories of totality in order to fight the permanent struggle to explain why the last reason and the final totality are not possible and what follows from this lack of finality (on this thesis in detail: Roskamm, 2017; 2021).

<sup>17</sup> Marx and Engels are important inspirations for the formulation of a post-foundational theory, if only because the class struggle plays a decisive role there (cf. Marchart, 2013: 263-330).

studies (see Saporito, 2018) – there has been a tendency in recent years to place conflicts at the centre and present them as productive, in the context of post-foundational theories there is a decided criticism of attempts to transform conflicts into positive beacons of hope for social development. Conflicts, according to the thesis of such thinking, are constitutive for the emergence of society. In this interpretation, antagonistic conflicts are never productive, positive and functional: they drive society, but cannot be used in an application-oriented manner for a somehow organised positive plan for progress. Conflicts are not divided into good and evil or productive and unproductive. They have a different function: they are a foundational element of social processes. They cause constant change and an unstoppable struggle for hegemonic positions. Conflicts are not functional, not positive and not productive, they are simply there and necessary. What is seen as positive or negative, productive or unproductive is the result of contingent and conflictual disputes.

## Conclusion

What does all this mean for us<sup>18</sup>? How can the definition of the city as a place of conflict be interpreted and actualised? Lefebvre, as I have reported in this text, conceptualises the city as such a place in a Marxian tradition. Understanding the city as a thing and thinking of it as a place of conflict means ascribing certain abilities to it. The city thing is capable of mobilising and assembling activities. People argue in the city, the city is a matter of dispute. This is why the city is, as Walter Benjamin (2003: 60) once wrote, «the arena of the struggle for existence and of the class struggle»<sup>19</sup>, and it is not by chance, but because it is what it is and because it does something. The city, as Engin Isin (2002: 284) puts it, is a «difference machine» that creates differences and assembles identities, it «relentlessly provokes, differentiates, positions, mobilizes, immobilizes, oppresses, liberates»; it is a place of conflict because these conflicts are produced and fuelled by this difference machine; it is the «battleground through which groups define their identity» by staking their claims and fighting their battles. The city as a

18 «Us» probably means here: urban studies or critical urban studies.

19 To be precise, Benjamin does not say this as his own observation, but in his interpretation of Berthold Brecht's poems. However, the fact that he agrees with such a definition is clear in this as well as in other texts by Benjamin.

concept, «as an object of thought and experience» (*Ibidem*), arises from these conflictual attributes and experiences.

To conclude this short contribution, I would like to return to the questions posed at the beginning: What does the concept of the city outlined here mean for urban studies? What kind of urban theory results from this thinking? How can such an understanding of the city enrich or guide empirical research into urban processes? Some suggestions for approaching such issues can be repeated: A possible continuation of the thinking of the city as an arena to the conflict is to ascribe an ontological-hauntological role (Derrida, 1994) to conflicts in a post-foundational urban theory (Roskamm, 2017; Heindl, 2020). Lefebvre's thinking can be interpreted in precisely this direction: He asks what the city *is* (this is the ontological part) and he links this question to his interest in what haunts the city (this is the hauntological part). Lefebvre thus teaches us, and this is also element of the post-foundational approach<sup>20</sup>, that such operations must always be carried out with caution and care. In my opinion, it is not so much a question of how post-foundational thinking extends Lefebvre or vice versa: in fact, and this is what I want to show in my text, the two approaches to thinking conflict as constitutive complement each other and come quite close: Lefebvre's city/conflict approach is post-foundational in character, and explaining this can be helpful for a current interpretation of the definition of the city as an arena of conflict, since it is precisely this matrix of thought that helps to avoid positivist short-circuits and foregrounds factors such as vagueness, contingency and controversy. Social-theoretical justifications of the urban are not firm and stable foundations, but likewise precarious and controversial objects of dispute. They form a shaky stage from which a critical-reflexive thinking about the city can begin, for example about the question of the materiality of the city (its materiality, its matter); about what

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20 Even if there has only been a marginal space for such a focus in my text, it goes without saying that Lefebvre's approaches can and must also be critically reflected upon (if only to maintain their topicality). In more recent approaches, for example, the rather «heteronormative point of view» in some of Lefebvre's observations is questioned (cf. Revol and Shields, 2023: xviii; cf. also Buckly and Strauss, 2016; Kinkaid, 2018). Stefan Kipfer's confrontation and expansion of Lefebvre's undogmatic Marxism with Frantz Fanon's work on alienation and colonial racism (2022) is also helpful for such an update.



it excludes and what is newly created through this exclusion; about its material and ghostly nature and its set pieces; about current forms of spatialisation and displacement. What these approaches have in common is that they describe the city as a condensation of conflicts, contrasts and antagonism. The city is the result of hegemonic endeavours. In an approach in which urban conflicts are seen as formative elements, urban social movements, which are traditionally of great importance for urban research, take centre stage. In their actions, the right-to-the-city activists draw attention not least to the fact that the axes of conflict have differentiated and multiplied (Viderman *et al.*, 2023). Diverse and small-scale urban clashes have emerged from large-scale systemic struggles from which the urban is composed, constructed and destroyed. The «social movements actualise antagonism» (Marchart, 2013: 410) and they prefer to do so in an urban context. For this reason, movement research is important for understanding the city.

The city is a condensed space. However, not as in liberal-pluralist conceptions of urban life as the epitome of density and diversity, but what is condensed in it are conflicts: the city is a «struggle concept» (Kipfer, 2022: 15). The city can preferably be grasped through its lines of conflict, through an approach that is able to recognise and explicate the constitutive antagonistic element. In such a perspective, urban appropriation efforts – in the form of organised urban movements, but also in the form of daily struggles for emancipation in the context of the everyday politics of commons – become the focus of an analysis of various forms of urban contestation. The right-to-the-city movements are in a position and predestined to repeatedly pose and negotiate urban questions in and with their practice. To obtain a coherent picture, however, it is also necessary – at least if one wants to follow Lefebvre – to rub and confront this practice with urban theory, and to do so incessantly.

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