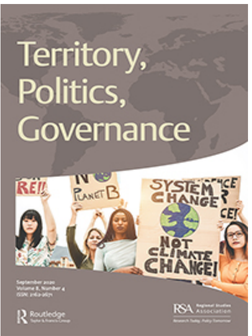

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Ulrike Hamann & Ceren Türkmen

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Communities of struggle: the making of a protest movement around housing, migration and racism beyond identity politics in Berlin

Ulrike Hamann [a] and Ceren Türkmen [b]

ABSTRACT

After the initial moments of political protest have passed, urban protest movements and neighbourhood initiatives often face the challenge of establishing a sustainable organizing structure in their neighbourhoods and of creating long-lasting collaborations, including maintaining relations among various participants and heterogeneous political actors in the city. This paper analyses the political practice of Kotti & Co, an urban neighbourhood initiative that has been active in political struggles pertaining to social housing and displacement and working against racism and neoliberal urban politics in the super-diverse city of Berlin. In the larger context of urban protest movements since 2011, the initiative managed to overcome a series of political challenges and to build a long-lasting organizing practice. The authors identify Kotti & Co as a 'community of struggle' that was able to foster a lasting movement through three elements of sustainability. The protest first managed to build bridges across and beyond its members' differences (class, migration background, sexual orientation) by finding a common set of political demands and social practices as well as by establishing collective place-based subjectivities. These place-based subjectivities have contributed to overcoming conventional identity politics by forming a new kind of political identity through the struggle itself.

KEYWORDS

urban movement; social movements; migration; social housing; racism; neoliberal urbanism; place-based subjectivities; Berlin

HISTORY Received 6 August 2018; in revised form 27 December 2019

INTRODUCTION: A PLACE OF POLITICAL STRUGGLES

The protest of the neighbourhood initiative 'Kotti & Co' began in 2011 in an elevator in one of the social housing blocks at Kottbusser Tor in Berlin-Kreuzberg. Riding down the high-rise building together, a group of neighbours with working-class, precarious middle-class and migrant backgrounds began talking to each other and to object to the rising rents in their buildings. That same year, they founded Kotti & Co, whose local connection is reflected in the nickname of the area around Kottbusser Tor, the 'Kotti'. One year later, in May 2012, Kotti & Co went public with an action: they occupied the square in front of the group's social housing complex at

CONTACT

[a] **(Corresponding author)** ulrike.hamann@sowi.hu-berlin.de
Berlin Institute for Empirical Migration Research, Humboldt University, Berlin, Germany.
[b] Institute for Sociology, Justus Liebig University, Giessen, Germany.

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Kottbusser Tor to protest rising rents, falling wages, displacement and racism. As part of their occupation of the square, the members of the tenant association built a protest house that they named Gecekondu. This term, which literally translates as 'built overnight', and refers to buildings in informal settlements in Turkey, was chosen because many of the neighbourhood working-class activists with a family history of migration speak Turkish. Importantly, the larger history of migration to Germany has shaped both the neighbourhood and the tenants' protest. The Gecekondu, as a symbol of both the location and the cause, still stands today, in 2019, at Kottbusser Tor, the heart of Berlin Kreuzberg, as a platform for protest and neighbourhood organizing.

This paper traces the aspects within this specific alliance of social housing tenants that built and ensured the sustainability of their protest. At this point the protest has been going on for eight years and has substantially changed the political culture of social struggles pertaining to social housing in particular, and the scope of urban struggles for the right to live and remain in the city in Berlin in general. This locally based struggle emerged within a heterogeneous, mainly working-class neighbourhood. Kotti & Co's members – a diverse groups of neighbours, including women working in precarious jobs in the low-wage sector, children, pupils, academics, the unemployed, cultural economy workers, radical activists, social workers and intellectuals – initiated and sustained a new political constellation across various differences. The tenants and activists created a platform for protest that emphasizes migrants' rights – the struggle is taking place in the midst of the multicultural neighbourhood of Kreuzberg, which is shaped by a history of labour migration after the Second World War – while expanding the scope of their local organizing to political demands for all social housing tenants in Berlin. The paper contributes to debates around transformations of urban social movements and tenants struggles in the late 1990s and early 2000s by providing the perspective of an ongoing protest movement. As the editorial to this special issue illustrates, recent scholarship in this field has examined the highly diversified and unequal city and its implications for collective urban mobilizations, including transformations in the scale and scope of their political actions and demands, and the sociocultural recomposition of urban social movements. Different social classes in the diverse city are affected differently and to varying degrees by the effects of an intensified neoliberalization of labour, social and housing policies and by austerity politics (Leitner, Peck, & Sheppard, 2006). Simultaneously the agency, action repertoire and organizing strategies of those highly diverse groups are heterogeneous, whereas the city constitutes the space of politicization and contestations for all tenants (Nicholls, 2008). A German citizen living on welfare, a labour migrant who has lived in Berlin for decades or a recently arrived refugee are each likely to experience discrimination, although the specific forms of discrimination they encounter may vary. However, the conditions to remain in the city have become increasingly difficult since the end of the 2000s, and not being able to afford housing is a threat faced by many low-income tenants. In her research on urban social movements, Mayer highlights how 'austerity urbanism' (Peck, 2012) and its link to the housing crisis have triggered protests by groups that differ from traditionally politically engaged activists. Mayer finds (referring to Kotti & Co, amongst others) that new forms of coalition building are taking place that manage to bridge 'the gap between the "materially dispossessed" and the "disenfranchised"' (Mayer, 2013, p. 13).

We draw on Mayer's thesis that old concepts and theoretical approaches to social protest and movements no longer suffice to grasp the new urban struggles and the unique composition of the activist groups involved. Taking Kotti & Co as an example, we analyse the novelty of these struggles and how the interlocking power mechanisms of class oppression and racism under today's neoliberal setting can become common denominators to unite against. We analyse the political organizing strategies, campaigns and everyday community practices of Kotti & Co in order to understand better the conditions and obstacles that shape the building of new alliances in cities under neoliberal restructuring. The set of social relationships and narrations of transnational localized belonging emerging from the diverse neighbours' interactions and political organizing

practices led us to interpret Kotti & Co as a 'community of struggle'. Other concepts that use ethnicizing or culturalizing categories to frame a social group or moments of political cooperation between people of diverse backgrounds fail to describe what is actually connecting people in a highly diverse and socially mixed neighbourhood. Thus, we introduce the term 'community of struggle' as a critique of conceptualizations of multiculturalism that idealize notions of intercultural bonding built merely on tolerance or an assumed shared ethnicity (Glick Schiller, 2016, p. 7; Türkmen, 2015). Although the term 'community' is a contested sociological concept often referring to a racialized or ethnicized group of origin, we think it still fits best to describe the collective sense of organizing as it emerges in highly diverse, but long-term sustainable place-based political groups. The concept of communities of struggle looks at the connection between heterogeneous people who build alliances of interest in the struggle for their right to the city, while also referring to multiple domains of urban inequality, including racism. Our understanding of community refers to the community as a social system in which heterogeneous social groups use their place of residence to create local political and social participation and distribute services. Within these sociabilities, the participants' ethnic, religious or political differences, derived from discourses on nation and ethnicity, are re-negotiated and simultaneously placed into the context of the place-based struggle. We do not argue (nor did we observe this during our research and engagement within the struggle) that historically based national, ethnic, cultural or religious reference points or different experiences of racist discrimination and social inequality have disappeared or that activists felt as if they all had equal footing in the social order. What we want to discuss is our observation of a group that has developed a broader scale of localized belonging by transgressing traditional forms of belonging and by working productively with and across differences. Nicholls (2008), expanding on Granovetter (1973, 1983), has termed this kind of alliance building as 'building bridges'. The concept has recently been added to by Mayer (2013), among others, and we employ it as an analytical frame in order to establish how these kinds of 'bridges' are built, what group members do to make them last and what factors are necessary to construct them in a sustainable manner. We analyse them as trans-sociocultural alliances between people who are 'unlike' each other. In order to identify the starting points (the alliance of members in their differences) and the materials of such bridges (the ties that members build among each other), we need to define what we are looking for when we follow Mayer's categories of 'disenfranchisement' and 'dispossession'. Looking at transversal alliances between people from differing social classes and people with different experiences of racism in German society, we were focusing on the outcomes of organizing efforts that seek to overcome the gap created by two sets of power relations: one structured along class and access to economic resources, the other along racism.[1] The interrelation of class oppression and racism produces varying subject positions that are affected differently in a crisis, especially in societies with a long history of labour migration and racism such as Germany.

The paper is structured as follows. Following a description of our methodological approach, we contextualize our case study in relation to two dynamics: austerity urbanism and the interplay of classism–racism as it affects the kinds of neighbourhoods described elsewhere as 'super-diverse' (Vertovec, 2007). We explain why it is no coincidence that the struggles emerging against a combination of neoliberal urban politics and a new racist discourse articulate the issues of both racism and rising rents. In the second half of this paper, we discuss three central elements of sustainability for communities of struggle that have contributed to the formation of bridges and alliances within neighbourhoods threatened by displacement and the forging of strong ties in the case of Kotti & Co: (1) the development of *political practices* that are inclusive for each member of a super-diverse group that becomes a community of struggle, specifically taking into account broad structural discrimination such as racism, physical ability, and migration status; (2) the social practices of everyday encounter in protest settings; and (3) the necessity of the formation of place-based subjectivities.

Methodology: scholarly activism–activist scholarship

One of the authors of this paper has been involved in the protest movement as a resident since its beginning in 2011. The other author, while not residing in the area, has also been active in the protest. Dozens of researchers have by now written their bachelor's, master's or doctoral theses *about* the protest, only some asking the group for permission.[2] Having been the object of such research projects, we take the liberty of not referring to most of them. This text is to speak on its own terms. We do not claim to be objective; rather, we embrace being subject in and of this research. In terms of methodology, this means that our knowledge about the protest has been gained through being a part of it, that is, neither via traditional interviews nor by merely studying the material, but by acting, thinking and *being in it*. We thus contribute a subjective and first-hand perspective that reflects on the actions and discussions within the group.

These circumstances have raised questions about the methodology of our research, especially the analysis and interpretation of the empirical data. How does one distinguish our activist thinking, our engagement and the political analysis of the struggle itself from academic reflection in theoretical concepts? How does one engage with the different questions that emerge out of our activist participation in versus those emerging from our academic analytical perspective on the struggle, as they involve different logics and directions? We have used our academic skills, such as research, writing and analysis, for our work in support of the protest itself, partly shaping it by our actions. Now we attempt to switch roles, writing – as scholar-activists – about a struggle we ourselves are committed to.

In doing so, we refer to a long history of discussion that we also seek to contribute to, with our own findings. In our research framing and empirical approach, we draw on activist participatory research. We consider scholar-activism not as a problem of academic neutrality, but as a question of academic integrity and academic ethics of directions (Taylor, 2014). Second, we view the political field is a social field, which is itself contested, diverse and anything but homogenous (Bourdieu, 1996, pp. 138ff.). Operating within an urban movement means to be part of a struggle comprised of a variety of actors and perpetually changing dynamics. As Choudry suggests, the specific methodologies 'employed are less indicative of what constitutes activist research than the questions asked and the purposes to which the analysis is put' (Choudry, 2014, p. 76). Conversely, we frame the direction of the research with regard to questions that are raised in the movement itself. Our material of 25 semi-structured interviews with participants of the Kotti & Co movement has mainly been collected and published within the group's efforts to represent itself (Hamann et al., 2015). We draw on these narrative interviews as a source. In addition, our research also draws on field notes taken during our involvement in the struggle as well as on published documents of the group.

'AUSTERITY URBANISM', SOCIAL HOUSING AND HOUSING STRUGGLES IN THE CITY

> We know what's going on here. How it's linked to the crisis and who's selling houses to whom here in Berlin and why. We earn less than we used to and our children don't have proper jobs, but the rents keep rising and rising. We're not going to stand for it. (Field notes 2013)

Berlin's history has shaped the specific trajectory of the city's neoliberalization. Urban scholars mark two events as significant in this regard (Bernt, Grell, & Holm, 2013; Lebuhn, 2015): the collapse of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, then Berlin's financial crisis of 2001, followed by strict austerity politics and a growing financialization of rental housing (Heeg, 2013). These developments resulted in the sale of more than 50% of the public housing stock to private investors from 1989 onwards

(Holm, 2007). As a result, affordable housing has become extremely scarce (Holm, 2016; Kuhnert, Leps, Siebenkotten, Göring-Eckardt, & Kühn, 2017). The commodification of social housing that occurred due to the local state's providing financing to large-scale institutional investors and selling significant parts of its housing stock to such investors, along with urban redevelopment and continuing gentrification, have affected a multitude of actors with varying access to resources, networks, and knowledge.

Following the 2001 financial crisis, Berlin's government (formed by a coalition of SPD and Die Linke, the Social Democratic Party and the Left Party) implemented structural austerity policies (Kraetke, 2004; Lebuhn, 2015). One of the most influential figures in managing the crisis was the Social Democrat Thilo Sarrazin, at the time Senator for Finance. In 2003, Sarrazin sold the largest city-owned housing company, GSW, to a hedge fund. A total of about 60,000 apartments were thus privatized (Holm, Hamann, & Kaltenborn, 2016). This selling off of municipally provided affordable housing must be understood not only in terms of fierce austerity politics but also as tainting a neoliberal agenda with a new racist discourse targeting the migrant and racialized poor. The senator himself expressed his opinion about poor migrant Berliners, the majority of social housing tenants, in his highly controversial book *Deutschland schafft sich ab* (Germany Abolishes Itself) (Sarrazin, 2010), in which he attacked not only the poor but also specifically the poor migrant population. In this book as well as in public talks, Sarrazin used a biopolitical racist argument against migrants, whom he sees as merely 'reproductive', but not 'productive', members of society. He views these social groups as situated on the margins of a homogenous society because of their own doing rather than because of structural discrimination. In this discourse, being on social welfare or chronically unemployed culturally predestines people for a voluntarily 'lazy' way of life. Sarrazin blamed these 'unproductive' groups for what he described as Germany's economic self-abolishment (Sarrazin, 2010). The interrelation between the racist ideology of his arguments and his neoliberal politics has been extensively analysed (Altenried, 2011; Butterwegge, 2011; Friedrich, 2011; Türkmen, 2010). We draw on the analytical connections between racism and neoliberal politics the researchers have identified in Sarrazin's arguments and apply them to the aftermath of the structural austerity politics mentioned above.

A growing scene of urban resistance movements has developed in Berlin since the early 2000s in response to the neoliberal urban politics. Starting with the movement against the large-scale waterfront investment project Media-Spree in 2002 (Dohnke, 2013), the struggles became locally based around specific sites and neighbourhoods. From 2011 onwards, the political struggles against rising rents, gentrification and evictions gave rise to a new movement which continues to grow. In 2015, it resulted in a Berlin-wide referendum for affordable housing; and in 2019, it pushed for a further referendum to expropriate housing companies that own more than 3000 units of housing stock.[3]

The neighbourhood around Kottbusser Tor was particularly affected by the interrelation of neoliberalism and racism evidenced in the selling off of social housing units and the public and published racist sentiments of the sale's initiator. Local residents responded to both of these elements by arguing:

> We are Kreuzberg – and not just since yesterday! For us there is no concept, no category. Even their words mirror the helplessness of their language in its inability to capture us: 'Germans', 'foreigners', 'foreign people with immigrant background', 'German Turks' … etc., … We are a community that does not exist in the world of Sarrazin … . (cited in Hamann et al., 2015, p. 100)

A 'community of struggle' came into existence through the struggle of individuals within this constellation of neoliberal housing politics and racism.

Against rising rents in social housing

Much like other inner-city districts of Berlin, Kreuzberg has been under gentrification pressure for several years (Helbrecht, 2018; Holm, 2013). For the neighbourhood around the Kotti, an even greater threat is posed by the rising rental costs in Berlin's social housing stock, where levels have increased above the city's average rental rate. The area around the Kotti consists of about 1000 social housing units constructed during the 1970s. The surrounding neighbourhood is home to a poor working-class population, 37.3% of which are on social welfare (Bremer, Klahr, & Porst, 2014, p. 19). The area has been shaped by several histories of migration, and 80% of the residents of the social housing blocks of southern Kottbusser Tor (about 3500 people) have a migration background (p. 15). Most of the residents are part of the group of migrants that began arriving from Turkey in the 1960s through Germany's so-called 'guest-worker' programme. In terms of youth and general unemployment as well as poverty in young and old age, the figures for the Kotti neighbourhood are two to three times above the Berlin average and exceed the numbers for the surrounding district Kreuzberg-Friedrichshain. The residents in the area are amongst the most disadvantaged in Berlin (Bremer et al., 2014, p. 18). In 2012, 130,000 apartments built as part of several social housing programmes since the 1970s were affected by rising rents through a built-in mechanism of rent increase. This unusual development in the social housing sector is a specific effect of German urban politics, where social housing is not a category of non-profit or rent-controlled housing for low-income groups. Instead, it was created through several state-financed programmes involving private owners, private funds or municipal housing companies, where the state offered huge tax abatements to investors in social housing accompanied by long term-loans and subsidies (Holm et al., 2016).

The largest amount of housing stock was built in West Germany in the 1970s. Investors had an interest in building as expensively as possible because of the tax-reduction deals, thus the costs of these buildings have been tremendous, especially in West Berlin, where the authorities approved the highest costs, which they justified with the difficult, island-like location of the city (Ulsen & Claassen, 1982). The aim of this housing programme was 'to provide housing for all parts of society' (2. Wohnungsbaugesetz – WoBauG2). In order to provide affordable housing for the working and poor classes the authorities arranged for property owners and investors to receive even more subsidies and loans so as to lower the (high) rental costs. However, the housing companies were also obliged to raise the rents each year in order to reduce the subsidies. Thus, by 2011, social housing rent levels had risen above the amount deemed acceptable by social welfare offices, which consequently requested that social housing tenants either sublet or move out of their (subsidized) apartments. At the same time, global capital began pushing into the Berlin housing market, which exacerbated the shortage of affordable housing.

At Kottbusser Tor, a second effect of austerity urbanism has been intensifying the already tense situation. Through Sarrazin's sell-off of the formerly city-owned housing company GSW to a hedge fund in 2003 and to the international investment company Deutsche Wohnen in 2013, 1000 of the 1200 apartments in the area were not just privatized, but became part of the portfolio of a profit-oriented joint-stock company with all the well-known consequences of outsourced services, disinvestment in maintenance and reduction of services.

THE MAKING OF 'COMMUNITIES OF STRUGGLE' IN THE CITY: ELEMENTS OF SUSTAINABILITY

This section deals with the growing movement of anti-gentrification and housing struggles in the context of austerity urbanism (Mayer, 2009). We take a closer look at the social and political practices of Kotti & Co in order to identify what makes these practices sustainable and lasting. We investigate how the neighbourhood actors established a popular organizing process that managed

to overcome limits of traditional urban mobilizations, which mainly recruit people already active in urban social movements, such as the subcultural squatting scene in Berlin. First, we look at the group's political practices that take into account the perspective of the most vulnerable members of their constituency. Second, we show how the protest movement was able to build bridges across differences, for example, by finding a common set of social practices of care. The third element we examine is the strong sense of place involved in the struggle, linked to the urban neighbourhood where the organizing originated. This aspect has created a reference point for place-based subjectivities that have contributed to overcoming conventional segregated identity politics in the city and that are forming a new kind of collective identity through the political struggle and collectivity itself (cf. Vollmer, 2019, pp. 149ff.).

Political practices – bridging differences

> We would like to express a big thank you to all the people who have contributed to our struggle over the last weeks, who took on shifts at the Gecekondu, brought cake, made signs [posters], offered activities for children, organized events, distributed flyers, donated, gave a concert, showed films, and brought their neighbours; to everyone who offered help, cleaned up, brought flowers, and came to the 'Lärmdemos' (noisy protest parades); and to everyone who simply keeps expressing their curiosity, interest and solidarity. Thank you – we could not have come this far without you![4]

As one can see from this quotation, social and political practices are equally important to Kotti & Co: cleaning the Gecekondu and bringing flowers are as relevant as organizing political events such as protest parades. This equal appreciation of the productive and reproductive elements of the struggle, the acknowledgement of political action and care work as equally necessary elements, resonate with feminist political struggles. From our perspective, the equal valuing of these elements is intrinsically related to the sustainability of the protest. It suspends any hierarchy between the group's public political activities and daily social practices, rendering both political. Before we look more closely at the daily practices, we analyse the political practices that we consider to have a sustaining effect on community building. Our analytical framing of the contested term 'community' differs from Nikolas Rose's (Rose, 1996, 1999) recent diagnosis that the terminology of 'community' was re-invented in neoliberal times within a reorganized territorial spatialization of governmental techniques. He argues that communitarian non-political associationism between groups that were previously differentiated from each other and/or split into culturalized assemblies and allegiances is on the rise. While we agree with this diagnosis, we would like to add a contemporary dynamic from an urban social movement perspective to his diagnosis made in the mid-1990s. With reference to Rose, we present the struggles around social housing as a political answer from the 'bottom-up' to post-political neoliberal governing. This points to a novel trend towards a new sort of urban politics transgressing communitarian, cultural, social and also political diversity among tenants that translates into urban tenants' rights action.

In early 2012, the Arab Spring protests at Tahrir Square and the Occupy Wall Street protests in response to the global financial crisis found their local echo in Berlin, when an elderly Turkish woman in Kreuzberg proposed that the group of tenants occupy the square in front of their social housing blocks to ensure the constant visibility of their protest (Tahir Sözen cited in Hamann et al., 2015, p. 68). As the majority of the group did not have German citizenship and therefore did not have the right to vote in municipal elections, despite having lived and worked in Germany for more than 40 years, most of the members had never been politically represented or symbolically acknowledged at any level of state institutions, agencies or organizations. Some of the neighbours were voicing public protest and committing to a political struggle for the first time in their lives – but without receiving any political response in city parliament. Coming from an abandoned social position that had no place in the political realm of governance and state representation, the group

members empowered themselves and claimed their place in society by developing self-organized, popular spaces for their political actions. On 25 May 2012, they organized a street fair and built the Gecekondu. The group's first act was to declare its message to the public: it would not end its occupation of the square until the social housing rents were lowered.

It was a moment of disobedience and empowerment that many members refer to as one of the founding moments of the initiative (Hamann et al., 2015, pp. 44ff.). In this action, the group members simultaneously employed a defiant gesture (occupying public territory) and a cooperative gesture by inviting neighbours, politicians and even the police to join them and have a cup of tea in the protest house. As a result of this inclusive gesture, the group was granted a semi-permanent right to remain in the square by the local district government, a first victory that helped to establish the location as a place of protest.

Over the course of the subsequent organizing, the protest movement arrived at political practices that provided the possibility to articulate disagreement (Rancière, 1999) and to build a community of struggle not only by occupying the square and maintaining the Gecekondu but also through another set of political practices based on a popular format of the political protest parade, so called 'noise-parades'. The aim of these parades was to mobilize the neighbourhood beyond the intersection of the two streets where the Gecekondu is situated. The group members sought to reach out to adjacent streets affected by other aspects of Berlin's housing crisis (such as rising rents on the private housing market) and to make their disagreement with the silent removal of Kreuzberg's migrant population public. To involve the neighbourhood, the members brought pots, pans and other utensils to produce a cacophony of noise during their marches. Intentionally, there were no long speeches in the initial demonstrations, just growing numbers of protesters making noise against the rising rents. People whose grievances had been considered as nothing but 'noise' to the political realm were making themselves heard with literal noise and used this symbolic gesture to express their intention to stay in their social environment. Making as much noise as possible is a popular form of protest accompanying movements globally – from the 'cazerolazos' in South America and Spain, to the 'casseroles' in Canada, Morocco and Turkey. In the case of the Kreuzberg neighbourhood and given its role in the history of Berlin as a city of migration, the group members knew full well that they were considered 'voiceless' and 'inarticulate'. This impression stems from the introduction of so-called 'Integration classes' by German migration politics in the early 2000s, which framed the acquisition of German-language skills as the most important task of migrants in integrating themselves and proving their willingness to become part of German society. In the imagination of the majority of Germans, the responsibility for 'failing at integration' falls on the 'guest worker' generation, despite the fact that the state never offered labour migrants any language courses (zur Nieden, 2009). In this context, the group members' decision to articulate their initial protest in a common language of noise instead of elaborate speeches reflects their political resistance to disparaging hegemonic images of migrants. One of the slogans at these parades was 'Up with the wages, down with the rents'. Accompanying this short, but clear message regarding wage inequalities and unsustainable social housing policies, was physical action: The protestors moved their arms and bodies up in the air and down to the ground to mark the words 'up' and 'down'. Even children participated and enjoyed being at such demonstrations, where the shared choreography added to the sense of collective protest and created a common experience.

Following the building of the Gecekondu and these initial protest parades, over time the tenants of the Kotti managed to inscribe their rights into the public discussion and to turn their political claims regarding social housing into a city-wide discourse about tenant rights. One of their discursive strategies was the inversion of existing discourse:

> The Senate still has not made any proposals for dealing with the impoverishment and displacement of social housing tenants. In the protest camp and among the supporters all across the city, the impression

> is spreading that the politicians live in a parallel world in which the social reality of many tenants does not exist. We have therefore decided to bring our reality to the place where the decisions about us are made.[5]

In this statement, made by the protestors to inaugurate a week of action in October 2012, it is not the tenants who live at the margins of society, but the professional politicians. By invoking the term 'parallel society', which is frequently used by Sarrazin, the protestors turned that very sentiment back on the policy-makers. It is not they who, generations after the initial migration of their ancestors, are 'deficient' as (eternal) migrants, but rather a politics that rests on policies of segregation, repressive integration, and open racism. The protestors posit a long-existing conviviality against a politics that measures urbanity exclusively in terms of the cultural and economic appeal of specific locations while allowing the market to 'regulate' as much as possible. The protestors insist on seeing multiple power structures – poverty, racism and participation in society – as linked and interdependent.

The political practices described above have been tailored to the needs of the least privileged members of the group – short rallies that do not require multiple-language skills, and protest notes that refer to the main issues of the community: racism and the housing question. For many of the participants it was a new experience to protest in a unity of diversity: where, for example, atheist, queer students joined hijab-wearing Muslim women working in the low-wage service sector. In order to create trust and avoid getting dragged into ideological politics and splitting up, the group had worked to define a common political base for its practices. The protest is built around two points of consensus: to target the rising rents as well as racism. This combination is remarkable in that it reflects the significance of the perspective of migration for the protest. The experience of living in a society where racist discrimination is present on a structural and individual level was a constitutive experience for the initiative. Referring to a series of racist attacks in the 1990s, including an arson attack in Solingen in 1992, one woman mentioned, for example, that she still keeps a ladder in her house in case she has to flee. Stories such as this describe the extent of feeling marginalized in a society that has regarded migrants as unworthy of state protection from violence, as a problem rather than as fully fledged members of society.

DIRECT DEMOCRACY

In 2014, when it became clear that their protest had been registered by the media and local government as well as the state senate, but that no change to the system of rising rents had been implemented, Kotti & Co joined with other activist groups to introduce a referendum on social conditions for housing in Berlin. Many Kotti & Co members for the first time familiarized themselves with strategies of direct democracy, collecting signatures from neighbours around the Gecekondu and thereby launching the citywide referendum movement known as the *Mietenvolksentscheid* (plebiscite on rents). Already in the first of three official phases, the action was so successful that the city government negotiated with the referendum initiative and drafted a housing law that covered their demands to such an extent that the groups saw no further need to proceed with the referendum. The resulting new legislation (Wohnraumversorgungsgesetz), introduced in 2016, made significant changes to the housing politics of the city, such as guaranteeing social housing tenants that they do not have to pay more than 30% of their income for rent.

In 2019, a further referendum for expropriating the large private housing companies such as Deutsche Wohnen (DW) has been launched. Referring to article 15 of the German constitution, which allows for the expropriation of private property for the sake of the common good,[6] this campaign requests a law from parliament that would expropriate financial investment housing companies that own more than 3000 housing units. The campaign criticizes the selling of municipal housing stock and problematizes the business model of companies that seek to make huge profits out of former social and privatized municipal housing.

With Kotti & Co, sustained protest was established in moments of joint action that were accessible to different political subjectivities and showed an awareness not only of the different needs of the participants but also of their respective strengths, histories and experiences (e.g., of migration and racism). The group learned that political formats that generate the possibility to garner public acknowledgement and legal impact can become popular and work well as starting points for ongoing struggles in a heterogeneous political community. The case also manifests the building of a common protest identity on the basis of political points of consensus in order to avoid the pitfalls of identity politics and their tendency to divide groups along lines of religion, nationality or political camp affiliation. Conflicts arising out of divisive topics have the potential to demolish nascent political alliances of communities of struggle. Tackling them openly and directly made the protest cohesive and sustainable.

Potentials for conflict

As demonstrated by the case of Kotti & Co, place-based practices can increase identification with a protest and support the building of subjectivities of struggle. However, despite the many bridges the protestors were able to build on the basis of place and their collective struggle against rising rents, several conflicts emerged as a result of the different backgrounds and political affiliations of the members. While they were able to bridge differences regarding the actual politics of the group on the street, towards the city government and towards each other, other differences, especially with regard to Turkish politics, have complicated the common ground. The Gezi Park and Taksim Square protests beginning in Istanbul in 2013 provoked a conflict that nearly shattered the community of struggle. While the leftist members, who for the most part do not have ties to Turkey, were eager to issue a solidarity note, the Turkish-speaking neighbours were predominantly affiliated with the ruling AKP party, which was suppressing those protests in Turkey. The issue was not essential for the politics of the group in Berlin, as the events were happening in another place, but it challenged the members' abilities to respect each other's diverging political opinions and revealed the difficulties in growing a movement that transcends the local struggle and its focus. For the group, it was important to find a compromise that reflected both sides. Eventually, the group issued a note of solidarity with the protest at Gezi Park, recognizing it as a similar event directed against the neoliberal politics of the city, without, however, expressing solidarity with the actions of Taksim Square, where demonstrators protested against the AKP government. In order to address the division within the group, which threatened to widen in response to the deteriorating relations between Turkey and Germany, the members decided to concentrate on the local struggle and the common political ground they had established.

Social practices: informal political organizing based in everyday life

> Creating a new culture means not only making individual, 'original' discoveries, but also, and most especially, disseminating a critical view of already discovered truths, to 'socialize' them, so to speak, and thereby let them become the foundation of vital actions, elements of coordination and the intellectual and moral order.[7]

Particularly among migrant tenants, the lack of political representation corresponds with a sense of disenfranchisement that most migrant families in Germany have experienced across one or two generations. This lack has long contributed to inhibiting migrants' political self-organization (Türkmen, 2014a, 2014b). At the same time, the numerous traditional community organizations that exist in Berlin for migrants and religious associations take no action for migrant tenants' rights or issues, but rather focus on cultural self-organizing activities. Since there was no institutional representation at a political scale, Kotti & Co and an informal organizing context based in

everyday practices intervened into this institutional gap of representation and organizing. In this section we show how one specific moment in the organizing of Kotti & Co's popular protest arose from the informal political organizing embedded in the everyday life and history of the area.

In the case of Kotti & Co, the process of analysis and politicization took place through the creation of social relationships between group members and the collective reorganization of their members' daily lives; this is what enabled the group to solidify its protest and to develop long-term stamina. The neighbours in the specific setting of the social housing buildings around the Kotti first needed to share their experiences with each other, in spaces they themselves created, in order to begin the process of self-constitutive political organization. The latter process in turn enabled the tenants to produce their own knowledge through collective discourse, and to acquire situational knowledge, critical analysis, and the political and legal vocabulary needed to describe their problems with the ongoing urban transformation processes (Hamann & Kaltenborn, 2018).

Initially and throughout the first summer of protest in 2011, the Gecekondu consisted only of two walls and a floor made of wood – no roof and no door to lock it. Thus, it was open for every kind of interaction with the public, but also vulnerable to potential acts of vandalism. The neighbours therefore took shifts 24/7 in order to maintain the meeting headquarters; they made tea and coffee and welcomed everybody who was interested in the protest. These kinds of daily practices entail the 'capacity of organization', which Bareis and Bojadžijev (2012) call 'associating practices' (see also Hohenstatt & Rinn, 2014).

The connection between politics and visible daily organization at the main site of protest, the Gecekondu, and the social practices organized within it, therefore, deserve special consideration. The success of Kotti & Co and its ability to anchor the protest within the broader social fabric of the neighbourhood and a larger field of solidarity is due to the fact that its members established the Gecekondu out of the diversity of their social practices and made it a vital part of the everyday infrastructure for their neighbours and the friends supporting them. Its spatial anchoring within the neighbourhood itself provided a significantly different approach compared with sites of protest such as Taksim Square or Occupy Wall Street. It thus provided a space to 'socialize' a new culture (as illustrated by Gramsci's quotation above). Through the social practices as well as the institutional consolidation of the developing protest community, politics changed the daily life of the tenants in the sense that a type of solidarity emerged between them and the political activists of the wider housing movement in Berlin, who for the most part lived elsewhere but supported it by taking shifts in the Gecekondu.

The neighbourhood-focused politics of Kotti & Co became just as fundamental a part of the everyday culture and practices. Ahmet Tuncer, a neighbour active with Kotti & Co, describes how the neighbourhood organization has become a part of his daily life: 'For me, Kotti & Co is like a child, like a wife, like friends or like a job. It has become part of me' (cited in Hamann et al., 2015, p. 49). At times, the local relationships that emerged as a result of the protest overlap with family networks and contribute to countering the isolation that can affect older people in particular. Neriman Tuncer, the aunt of Ahmet, reports from the perspective of a senior citizen: 'For many single households, such as single women, the square and the support for Kotti & Co became a place to meet with others, a place to talk about our daily lives and concerns' (cited in Hamann et al., 2015, p. 52).

A central element of the organization of a sustainable protest movement is thus the opportunity to encounter each other in diversity while being part of the movement. The following quotation shows how the feeling of a community of diversity applies also to the political meetings of the groups: 'What motivates me every Sunday, when we have our meeting, is this feeling of belonging. Even though we are so different, it is always more fun to be here together' (Jale Öztekin, cited in Hamann et al., 2015, p. 61).

We call this combination of social practices in a political context *informal political organizing*. As such, it does not have institutional political content, but it occurs *within* a political struggle as a

social practice of collective reproductive work. Kotti & Co has created a space for this kind of organizing by building the Gecekondu, which has led to a range of social activities related to the building, its maintenance and its decoration. Inferring the intimacy of the private sphere to a public space, group members call the Gecekondu their 'living room', referring to the possibilities of social encounters and sociality that it provides. Over time, the hut transformed from an open wooden structure without a roof into a house with windows. Today, it consists of one large room that contains a shelf holding a samovar for cooking tea and a coffee machine. The room has three tables as well as benches and chairs that can be flexibly arranged for large group meetings or for three small groups. One wall provides a shelf for flyers and information materials. A locker contains material for social rights counselling, which is offered to the public free of charge once a week. While the group has constantly expanded the structure, the tea cooker and coffee machine along with the benches and tables have been key elements from the very beginning. This interior indicates the relevance of the social practices of the protest group. The cup of tea that members have together is as important as their political discussions, as the group's flyer makes clear:

> Our Gecekondu is an open space. Here, we get to know each other (better) over a cup of tea or coffee and it is here where we exchange ideas. We organize events, movie nights and concerts. We provide information about our protest and about tenant rights, meet new people or simply enjoy Kotti at summertime.
>
> Everyone who comes to the Gecekondu is welcome. It is a special place because we all feel responsible for making sure that everyone can feel comfortable and that this space is open and welcoming. Considering all our differences, the Gecekondu already represents a bit of lived Utopia – or as a matter of fact, ordinariness.[8]

Several elements in this statement strike us as central for establishing shared social practices as vehicle to negotiate differences among neighbours and to develop new ways of place-based belongings while joining forces in the political struggle. First, the utopian element of sharing the space in difference and developing common social practices together strengthens group bonds. By describing the diversity of the group in terms of difference, the members suggest that difference can be a matter of both conflict and normalcy. Through their social practices they negotiate both the option of conflict that arises from different perceptions of, for instance, tidiness of the shared space or the arrangement of the interior. On the other hand, the members are committed to negotiating their sociocultural differences over a cup of tea. The second element is the ordinariness of the fact of coming together in difference. By highlighting the utopia of the moment, the members suggest that it might become the normal modus of the future to be different and to live together in (super-)diversity. What matters to the neighbours are not the differences among them, but their shared experiences of lacking political rights, low incomes, rising rents and structural displacement. Third, the members underline the necessity of their social practices of openness and inclusivity. The gesture of welcoming is essential for a neighbourhood protest in a city where many encounters happen between strangers. The fourth element in the set of essential social practices necessary to bridge differences is the collective responsibility for something that is both materially and symbolically valuable to the group. The Gecekondu has been the group's central meeting point for more than seven years now. When the above flyer-text was published, the Gecekondu was only a few weeks old. The fact that the house is still there and still well frequented underlines the seriousness the protestors have applied to their practice of maintaining this shared collective space. Considering everybody as responsible for the space is not only a gesture of unconditional trust, but also assigns importance to acts of maintenance as social acts for the protest, whether it is carrying water, disposing waste, cleaning, cooking tea, washing seat cushions or baking a cake. Everybody carrying out reproductive tasks undertakes them not only for the immediate benefit of the group, but also as a means of maintaining the protest.

Making the necessary connections between everyday social practices and the political protest has thus helped to establish sustainable bridges between protesters situated in various sociocultural camps. The mere social aspect of practices such as maintaining a common symbolic good, caring together for a specific place that is important to the group and the political protest, help constitute a group and provide a type of sustainability that is capable of conducting a common political struggle over a period of several years.

'Being Kotti': place-based subjectivities

In our case, place is one of the central mobilizing and stabilizing elements in the course of the protest movements around housing issues. By naming themselves Kotti & Co, the protest group articulated a 'place-based identity'. The name reflects their affinity to a place that for many of the protesters has been home for decades.

The awareness of having produced this particular place through the social practices of migration is expressed through another slogan of the group, which proclaims, 'We are Kreuzberg – We are Staying.' One of the women from the Kotti explained, 'We made Kreuzberg attractive – and now we are supposed to leave?' (Field Notes 2013). The place is not merely a symbol of the neighbourhood and its networks, but also a symbol of the protestors' history: a history of their migration and of arrival in a society, which decades ago acted all but welcoming. Against all odds, the neighbours of the Kotti made themselves at home after being deterred by municipal zoning regulations designed to disperse migrants throughout the city during the period 1975–90 (Çağlar, 2001). By subverting these regulations and still settling near Kottbusser Tor and around Kreuzberg, immigrants from Turkey have been making Kreuzberg their home for decades. The Kotti & Co protestors deliberately relate to this place because of this history, and the place-based subjectivity 'being Kotti' became one of the main tools in the group's political organizing.

'I love Kotti': political messaging

When one of the group members, a leftist Afghan–German communications designer, resident and co-founder of Kotti & Co, was looking for a phrase that would express the neighbours' feeling toward their place of residence, he came up with Milton-Glaser's 'I Love New York', a now globalized sign of affection for a place. 'I love Kotti' became he logo of the group, which has been reproduced hundreds of thousands of times on stickers, buttons and flyers. The expression of this sentiment became a powerful challenge of the hegemonic discourse that links this square with 'crime and fear', and also with poverty associated with the high concentration of migrant groups in the neighbourhood. The central intersection is a highly frequented meeting point of a citywide drug scene because of a district policy that tolerates drug use.

The Kreuzberg neighbours' love for their place stems mainly from having lived in the district for decades and generations, and from having built an entire migrant economy and migration-friendly infrastructure around the Kotti. The specific mix of small businesses, poverty, drugs and hope has always been part of the identity of the place, though not acknowledged by outsiders. With the new logo, the neighbours of the Kotti express an ambivalent affection for their place of living, and they associate this affection with their political protest against displacement. In full, the sticker reads: 'I love Kotti – Stop raising rents at Kottbusser Tor and elsewhere.' This symbol triggered surprised reactions among local authorities, some of their representatives mentioned in interviews that they would have never expected anyone to express love for a place that has been troubling policy-makers and police officers for decades.

The expression of love became the strongest symbol of the protest movement, displayed proudly at demonstrations on activists' clothes, cooking pans, bicycles and strollers. Another print product created by the protestors was a postcard designed in traditional style with four photographs and the text 'Greetings from Kottbusser Tor'. One of the pictures showed a protest poster with the heart logo. By issuing a tourist postcard with greetings from a place known to the

outside world as 'problematic', 'crime-infested' and 'dangerous', the protestors revealed this view to be a cliché. The insiders contrast the outsiders' view with their affection for the place; they tell their stories of migration and of protest against rising rents.

The case of Kotti & Co thus demonstrates that place-based practices can create new subjectivities: an expression of affection for a place that represents and speaks to the memories of its inhabitants and to the history of migration and racism of that place can be combined with a consciousness of how the urban space is created by the social practices of its inhabitants. This combination has created the identification with the place that has given the group both a symbolic and material ground from which to intervene into the politics of the city.

THE 'COMMUNITY OF STRUGGLE'

In times of rising right-wing populism, racism and the comeback of nationalist narratives across European cities, a contradictory development on the ground of the local terrain of a major city needs to be noted. The emergence of Kotti & Co, along with a trend of popular housing struggles in Berlin, such as the 'alliance against forced evictions', founded in 2012, or 'Bizim Kiez', founded in 2015, reveal forms of political activism that are based in an awareness of the effects of racism and that actively build a participatory democratic society shaped by solidarity. Kotti & Co found ways to be accountable to at least two aspects of the diverse neighbourhood: the effects of structural racism and displacement of poor migrant neighbours in Berlin's social housing; and cultural diversity or the members' different origins, religions, and class backgrounds. Their answer to the structural urban oppression in the neighbourhood was to identify with their 'community of struggle' by protesting in the interest of the least privileged: fighting for affordable rents for the lowest income groups and for households on social welfare, as well as against racist discourses that discriminate neighbours with a history of migration. The members created a field of participation and imagination about their place-based belonging as an anti-racist democratic struggle for all Berliners, regardless of citizenship and socioeconomic status and despite racialized and ethnicized differences. Through Kotti & Co's political mobilization, demands were made from a perspective of migration to ensure the right to the city and the right to democratic participation for all of Berlin's residents.

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NOTES

1. We are referring to Hall's (1980, pp. 336ff.) definition of racism, which provides a definition of racism as a power relationship manufacturing racialized inequality through political, institutional, ideological and cultural dimensions. Hall insists that racism is a social relation of oppression, and not just a discourse or an ideology, as it can deal with economic and super-structural features of societies and their racialized relationships.
2. For an interesting and rare reflection on the power relations between the objects and the researcher, where the researcher decided not to proceed with her qualifying thesis, because the objects of her research objected to being researched, see Frielinghaus (2016).
3. See https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/berlin-landlords-ban-germany-private-rent-housing-referendum-vote-a8796471.html, dated 27 February 2019 (last accessed 4 March 2019).
4. Kotti & Co, 2012, Merhaba, Salam and Welcome; see https://kottiundco.net/english/.
5. Kotti & Co, 2012; see http://kottiundco.net/2012/10/22/aktionstage-bei-kotti-co/.
6. The campaign has been created by a broad range of tenant initiatives. One was Kotti & Co, which stated that the houses belonged to the people and demanded, in 2016, the expropriation of large housing companies based on articles 14 and 15 of the German constitution; see https://kottiundco.net/2016/02/26/wir-wollen-unsere-haeuser-zurueck/.
7. Gramsci (1999), Gefängnishefte, Heft 11, §12, 1377; translation by Diana Aurisch.
8. Flyer, 2012, Merhaba, Salam and Welcome; see https://kottiundco.net/english/.

ORCID

Ulrike Hamann http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2527-4553
Ceren Türkmen http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0609-3466

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