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Introduction

Wendy Pullan and Britt Baillie

Urban conflict/urban plurality

Cities have emerged as the epicentres for many of today’s ethno-national and religious conflicts. Some are household names, like Jerusalem and Berlin, featuring regularly on television and computer screens all over the world; others are more obscure, such as Vukovar and Ceuta, known primarily to regional populations; and certain locations linger in our urban historical memory, including Odessa and Jaffa. Likewise, we find cities that have been avidly researched and others hardly at all. What unites them, at least for the purposes of this book, is that all are or have been subject to intense levels of conflict. Most of these cities experience or have experienced some form of unusually prominent division or segregation in their populations, activities, spatial topographies and aspirations. Each one may be or has been regarded as contested, and most have developed some form of urban frontier within them; these may be physical barriers in the topography, noticeable variations in societal markers and practices, or what are often less visible rifts in cultural perception and understanding.

In all, plurality is a question. This materialises in two different ways: most obviously, within the cities themselves plurality is usually weak or largely rejected, particularly in terms of how conflicts are perceived and enacted. At another level, it has to do with a plurality of cities, a collection. In gathering together in this volume a number of cities with diverse causes and manifestations of conflict, one might consider what, if anything, unifies these places. If the first question is rooted in the problems of the cities themselves, the second may be regarded more as a concern of research and better understanding. Locating Urban Conflicts has been prepared with the attitude that contextualisation and where possible, comparison, as well as good respect for difference, can offer insights into both specific situations and urban conflict in general. It offers a variety of ways to locate urban conflicts both inside and between cities. The matter of location, being relational rather than isolating in either
or all of its physical, social and metaphorical guises, is itself taken as key to understanding.

Not everyone would agree with this idea. In the academic study of contested cities it is notoriously difficult to find meaningful relationships beyond checklist comparisons. The problem is worsened by the fact that complex and emotional situations often dominate the cities, producing intense and long conflicts. Residents of conflicted cities are often quick to declare that they are not interested in other places with similar problems. They claim that no city could be as difficult as the one they live in, no conflict as intense or unjust as the one in which they find themselves entangled. Regarding themselves as victims, they perceive their fates to be distinct and exclusive. Thus, the question of whether, and to what extent, each urban conflict is unique is one that must be taken seriously and sympathetically. There is no question that historical contexts and the convergence of political, social and economic conditions, as well as the effects upon residents and otherwise involved individuals and groups, are particular to each city.

Nonetheless, many cities are now subject to ethno-national and religious disputes, and whilst some conflicts may be longer, or more violent, or less intractable, the studies presented here show that common themes do emerge and similar narratives may be recognised from city to city. And as much as residents claim that their situations are unique, there is evidence, often at a
grassroots level in inter-urban support groups, political links, urban arts movements, and perhaps most blatantly in graffiti (Figure 1.1), that some people do wish to learn from each other. At an academic level, whether as outsiders or direct stakeholders, the researchers that study such cities are also subject to the biased nature of the conflicts and, for most, the terrain of study is metaphorically, if not occasionally in actuality, an urban minefield. For both residents and researchers, the value of context is unmistakable. The recognition that similar situations exist in other cities certainly may begin to loosen if not break down claims of unique victimisation.

Even more important is the opportunity to explore where and how the understanding of conflict can be prodded and shifted from singularity to plurality, and by doing so, be pushed beyond the tendency to see only in partisan ways to something that is more collective in its constitution and accountability. In cities where identities are overwhelmingly rendered and internalised in terms of ‘us and them’, or ‘me, my people’ and ‘those people, the Other’, the introversion of monolithic factions results in entrenched and polarised opposition. In fundamental terms, the problem requires a consideration of the usefulness of the notion of ‘we’. Hannah Arendt explains it as the primary reality of all political life, corresponding to the human condition of plurality in inhabiting the earth.¹ With respect to conflicts of identity – ethnic, national and religious – ‘we’ stands apart, certainly, from the individual or the world as a collection of individuals, but also from the oppositional, my camp against yours. Overly simple black-and-white definitions rarely suffice; plurality is a play upon difference and similarity, based upon potentially infinite distinctions – both within groups and between groups – that are key to our humanity where, in Arendt’s words, ‘we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live’.²

The benefits or not of plurality may be debated, but as a primary quality of modern cities it is sine qua non; for a city to be a city, it must be seen in such terms. Yet when conflict becomes extreme, plurality, and especially diversity, is one of the primary qualities to be rejected. In the short term, it may be sacrificed in order to separate warring groups and stop violence. But more sustained situations show that plurality becomes expendable in favour of divisions, fragmentation and isolation, producing the short-sightedness that characterises urban conflicts. In bringing together the essays for this volume, we suggest that exposure to a spectrum of urban examples, considered from different points of view, begins to challenge the myopia. Many of the chapters examine the oppositional factions that have developed as a result of lack of foresight and intolerant attitudes and practices, including the place-appropriation strategies that accompany them. Others investigate the make-up of population groups and factions that are often described in relatively simple and monolithic terms but are usually more complex and fragmented than would appear.
Plurality, even when its presence is feeble, remains the over-riding theme to urban everyday life. The ontological understanding of plurality can be, and has been, interpreted in a variety of ways. In this book, which dwells upon the many roles of the everyday in urban conflicts, practical situations are used to describe and assess conditions that may or may not be similar, and from them glean insights that are more broad and interpretative. Ethno-national and religious conflict in cities exists all over the world. Here we concentrate upon Europe and the Middle East, as areas that have enjoyed cooperation but, more frequently, experience misunderstandings and conflicts, many of which have emerged from the colonial legacy. The cities of these two regions have developed differently in many ways, but share certain roots and traditions. A combination of historical and contemporary contributions questions to what extent shifts in larger bodies of state, empire or global sovereignty impact upon centres of population in cities that themselves are also undergoing rapid change: how is it that the conflicts which stem from larger fields of ethnicity, nation and religion become reinterpreted at the urban level? The essays have been compiled with the belief that such a question is best approached through involving many disciplines that interrogate the city: urbanism, architecture, politics, archaeology, geography, anthropology and sociology. Reflecting this scope, the phenomena observed and investigated range from the verbal and textual to the spatial, material and environmental. We are resigned to limited unity in methods of research in favour of the critical distance that juxtaposition rather than integration poses.

This acceptance and even willingness for friction in both approach and findings reiterates the nature of the cities themselves as well as the wider research field. We emphasise that this territory is not consensual and our aim is not, even if we were able, to make it more so. Such an attitude does not lend itself to tidy research, but instead gives credence to the complexities of the struggles and attempts to dismantle the idea that any city can be comprehended from only one perspective or domain. It is a point made by Carl H. Nightingale in his extensive history of urban segregation: ‘if we emphasise the messier aspects of segregation, we actually get a clearer picture of the long-distance connections between different cities’ experiences with racial dividing lines, and we can also offer richer contexts for comparisons between cities’.³

It should be stressed that we do not assume plurality to ensure equality. In many of the chapters in this book there is a deep sense of pervading inequality in urban conflicts between peoples and their opportunities. The situations described can be highly asymmetrical, especially in the case of conflicts that have emerged from war or occupation. Although most peace negotiations and many academic studies at least pay lip-service to a notional equality between proponents or factions, in reality it is unusual to find a truly balanced situation. At most stages of enquiry we deal with what is related but unlike. William
E. Connolly points out that pluralism does not necessarily mean equality or relativism; rather, he suggests the need for a ‘tolerance of ambiguity’ that ultimately allows some form of identity which may be found over time. This results from the possibility of change, made effective in the sharing of time.

In a broad sense, everyday life in urban situations is based in praxis, that is, simply what people in cities do. It is a form of participation affirming Arendt’s contention that ‘plurality is the condition of human action’, so that plurality, action and the everyday become a framework in which to locate urban events. Many of the essays in this book examine how extreme levels of conflict can distort or even fracture relationships, thrusting ordinary people into an unexpected public arena of disputed rights and violent territories. Michel de Certeau’s ‘strategies’ and ‘tactics’ are useful to distinguish between what may be seen as formal proposals and human responses to such scenarios. He argues that tactics use, manipulate or divert a given situation as a means of adapting but not succumbing to conditions on the ground. Although he judges tactics to be primarily ‘the art of the weak’, in contrast to strategies that are ‘places of power … elaborate theoretical places’, he points out that with tactics an inhabitant can establish ‘a degree of plurality and creativity’. The essays in this book show that quotidianal practices in contested cities require adaptation on a regular basis, so that life becomes a form of survival or resilience, or in some cases, resistance.

Over time, the variety of formal attempts to deal with urban conflicts have become embedded in common forms of institutionalisation, making conflict resemble an industry in some cities. Treaties, agreements, memorials, iconic buildings and sometimes the city itself may be construed as scenes of fracture or resolution. With the latter, an image of post-conflict may be propagated even when it is not clear to some parties that the conflict has ended. Such practices raise expectations to unrealistic levels, assuming that widely disparate cultures, their beliefs and practices can be united in the city and rendered as fact. Town plans, minority policies and even peace negotiations can carry similar risks of being too encompassing, too quick or too complete, glossing over nuances and leaving out subtle details of the problem. A significant value of urban praxis is its capacity for ambiguity that systematic policies, planning and monuments are intended to rule out. To be sure, many of the problems of urban conflicts are rooted in the inability of populations in contested cities to appreciate the ambiguities of their own claims and causes. But first of all we must question whether this is based upon insurmountable differences between urban groups or the obduracy of parties and institutions – whether national, municipal, military or paramilitary – who seek an incontrovertible right to control. What creates or contributes to flashpoints, why urban populations do or do not cope, which urban practices survive and prevail, and ultimately what hope exists for transformation, remain key areas in understanding urban conflicts.
A further question centres around the singularity of the urban experience: is the city central to the argument or simply a lens through which a wider conflict is viewed? One direction of scholarship claims that the built environment of cities, as repositories of cultural identity, have become targets for attack rather than collateral to be claimed or negotiated; from this, the idea of urbicide has developed. However, not all of the conflicts in this volume can be attributed to the intentional targeting of cities; perhaps less dramatically, some are the result of differences that have arisen between groups from within cities, reflecting larger ethno-national and religious disputes. A city may be contested because of its standing as a capital or major religious centre, in which case it usually takes on an overall symbolic significance, as in the case of Berlin or Jerusalem. In other cases, conflict may form new urban topographies where certain quarters or landmarks, are repeatedly threatened whilst other parts of the city may be rarely affected and relatively calm.

People associate themselves with their own communities, where they feel most secure, and it is residential segregation that usually forms the basis for how we envision divided cities. Maps of urban conflicts often show this as a way of determining boundaries. However, the essays in this volume focus mostly upon the urban public sphere, and more specifically upon public places. The public domain – the places where people do or do not meet, where people congregate to socialise, eat and drink, shop, pray, demonstrate, even riot – are key indicators both to the reasonable functioning of the city and to its conflict. These are the spaces of encounter, and therefore of risk. Whilst neighbourhoods that are predominantly integrated or segregated say much about the city, the active and performative qualities of conflicts are located mostly in the public sphere. They may be more difficult to revive and maintain, yet at the same time are often more fluid and open to change than well-entrenched residential areas. The scenarios may vary, but the public sphere and associated spaces is where we are best able to judge if cities are working; they are essential for viable cities.

Structure of the book

The chapters in Locating Urban Conflicts reflect on three themes: ‘Spatial Horizons’, ‘Reassessing Divisions’ and ‘Being Modern’. Various understandings of space inform our thinking about contested cities. In the ‘Spatial Horizons’ section, the authors consider how urban space is defined, shaped and/or transformed by conflict. In all cities, walls and borders exist. They help people to orientate, navigate, frame and define themselves, their city and their community. Yet, boundaries are manifested in various forms. They can be both zones of interaction (with high permeability) and spaces of division (with low permeability). Whilst borders and boundaries seem to define many contested cities, the notion of the horizon offers a different insight into how urban spaces may
or may not be determined. Gadamer explains horizons as ‘not a rigid boundary, but something that moves with one and invites one to advance further’. In cities, they reflect the fluid and open nature of the urban domain which, in favourable circumstances, allows seemingly limitless possibilities. In contested cities the mercurial urban horizon is often ossified by hard boundaries that arise from limited interaction and diversity. Here, the activities of everyday life become constrained by truncated horizons, leading to the breakdown of the transitional and spontaneous spaces that allow a rich variety of urban life to unfold.

Topography plays a major role, whether the city is targeted or functions as a cauldron for conflict. In 1991 the hilltops above Dubrovnik became the ‘ideal’ location from which to besiege the city below. In Nicosia today, the hillside on the Turkish Cypriot side of the city, highly visible from the Greek Cypriot side, has become a prime ‘billboard’ for nationalist symbols. Clearly, topography can be manipulated by political interests and in the case of vested architectural and planning interventions, it can be irremediably changed. Wendy Pullan’s chapter ‘Spatial Discontinuities: Conflict Infrastructures in Contested Cities’ introduces the term ‘conflict infrastructure’ to explore how certain planning apparatuses can alter spatial configurations to seriously affect the workings of the city and the life of ordinary people. In arguing that not all walls and borders are automatically injurious, Pullan distinguishes between ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ borders, which are respectively more or less differentiated; thick borders have the capacity for movement, diversity and spontaneity whilst thin borders are monodimensional in scope without the facility to absorb and transmit the varieties of urban life. She argues that common urban infrastructures – certainly security walls, but also buffer zones, inner-city motorways, and even stretches of park and greenbelt – can act as thin borders, fragmenting a city, introducing frontiers into its centre, perpetuating the damaging legacy of conflict.

Whilst some form of divisive boundary usually figures somewhere in contested cities, the places where conflicts are played out, sometimes violently, also carry significance and can come to act as a form of border in and of themselves. Caroline Humphrey’s ‘Violence and Urban Architecture: Events at the Ensemble of the Odessa Steps in 1904–1905’ probes how and why the Odessa steps, built upon a natural cliff, have played such a pivotal role in mob and pogrom violence in the city. From the steps, two horizons exist in opposite directions – down to the port and out to sea, and upward beyond the top of the steps – defining the upper and lower towns. Through this historical case, she speculates that the crowd, often posited as quintessentially modern, may have a special role to play in contested cities as it is able to (re)activate spaces through violent mimetic acts. Yet, she argues that the relationship between the violent episode and urban space is not random, rather it is reciprocal, drawing on particular meanings and spatial characteristics which during peacetime linger less
noticed. Humphrey draws upon Eisenstein’s famous film *Battleship Potemkin* as a way of interpreting this relationship; the violence depicted on Odessa’s infamous public steps have made it an iconic moment of urban violence in the popular historic imagination.

The relatively little studied border regime of Ceuta figures securely in contemporary geo-politics. At the edge of Fortress Europe, it shields against immigration, separating sub-Saharan Africa and Africans from Europe. Felipe Hernandez and Maximilian Sternberg’s ‘Borderlands of the EU: The Spanish Enclave of Ceuta in Morocco’ explores a different conflict: the ethnic segregation between the Spanish (Christian) and Moroccan (Muslims) within the exclave. Hernandez and Sternberg argue that formal planning measures, property laws and the work of Spanish ‘starchitects’ enforces a colonial segregationist urbanism which excludes both Moroccan and Spanish Muslim residents; in doing so, they suggest that a reclassification of spatial configurations might more realistically reflect the ethnically fragmented city as it is on the ground. Their chapter reminds us that whilst contested cities are frequently envisioned as the domain of two (or more) primary ethno-national or ethno-religious groups, the re-categorisation of individuals as citizens (or not), coupled with the impact of continued immigration, can have a massive impact on both demography and conflict – a theme that Anderson returns to in Chapter 11.

The final chapter in this section, ‘Security and the Holy Places of Jerusalem: The “Hebronisation” of the Old City and Adjacent Areas’ by Michael Dumper, explores how the military’s imposition on space can supersede municipal planning, having both less subtle and more lethal spatial implications. In his study of major holy sites in two ancient cities, Jerusalem and, to its south, Hebron, he considers the restricted horizons that have become religio-national hotspots. Dumper highlights a series of Israeli spatial policies which he terms the ‘Hebron’ model, under which Palestinian urban needs have been severely compromised. He traces this model to the division of Hebron’s Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs, where Muslims and Jews now pray, separated by a crude wall. This realigning of a major holy place has fostered its regular use by the Israeli extreme rightwing settler movement that form a tiny minority in the city. Tensions stemming from this relationship prompted the Israeli army to intervene in a manner which has led to the consolidation and extension of settler territorial gains. Dumper posits that a similar trajectory is unfolding in contemporary Jerusalem with potentially dire consequences.

Complex conflicts may present a counterpoint where each side constantly reassesses the ‘other’ to determine where and how they might gain the upper hand or alter the situation in their own favour. Often, this macabre movement repeats the same steps in new variations, over and over again. In contested cities, conflict reassessment can take the form of re-enactment of division and the reification of group identities, protracting the conflict. Alternatively,
reassessment can potentially lead to the opening of new horizons. The second section, ‘Reassessing Divisions’, begins by exploring two different forms of re-enactment: intergenerational transmission and memorialisation. Both publics and counter-publics seek not only to control the past, but to create ‘facts on the ground’ in the present as well as new aspirations for the future. Whilst some actors choose to use heritage or regeneration as their vehicle, others see party politics and activism as a more direct route. Political activism as a form of reassessment acts as a focus of the latter half of this section.

Legacies are drawn upon to legitimise the contemporary presence of particular groups. Collective memory is an intangible entity that is constantly in flux. Craig Larkin’s ‘Speaking in the Silence: Youthful Negotiations of Beirut’s Post-War Spaces and Memories’ explores how memory of the conflict is passed down to the post-war generation. He demonstrates how the city’s youth are restricted in their ability to renegotiate Beirut as they have grown up living the divisions. Whilst some show the desire to renegotiate familiar or unfamiliar locations, they bear the baggage of memory stemming from their co-ethnic predecessors. Their attempts to reassess, subvert or overcome the city’s divisions for a more pluralistic environment often become, in themselves, a form of re-enactment of an ‘unresolved’ past. A top-down corporate-led reconstruction practice dominates much of Beirut’s downtown. Larkin argues that this development has created a new set of boundaries in the city negating and erasing many lieux de memoire whilst imposing new socio-economic and cultural restrictions.

Memorialisation has become de rigeur in many contested cities and the process is often envisioned as a mechanism which brings closure and assists reconciliation. Yet, memorials reassess and reshape the visual and spatial horizons of the city, offering dominant groups the opportunity to set their stories in stone in the public realm. Britt Baillie’s ‘Memorialising the “Martyred City”: Negotiating Vukovar’s Wartime Past’ probes how memorials are mobilised to act as boundary markers concretising the invisible divisions between ethnic Croats and Serbs. The siege of Vukovar foreshadowed the urbicide which characterised the wars that unravelled Yugoslavia. Baillie argues that the process of memorialisation fractures the once ‘shared’ Yugoslav city and redefines the public as ethnically homogenous. Competitive claims to victimhood have become ‘the knifes with the sharpest of blades’.

In Vukovar, Croats proclaim ‘victory through victimhood’, the innocence of their victims asserted in order to purify their collective identity whilst simultaneously framing the other as ‘guilty’. In Beirut however, the mantra of ‘no victim, no vanquished’ leads to a ‘memory stalemate’, as Larkin demonstrates in Chapter 6.

The latter two chapters in this section use Jerusalem as a vehicle to focus on the potential and will of activists to reassess and stretch contemporary political, ideological and social boundaries. Drawing on extensive interviews, the authors cover a similar period but reach different conclusions about the activist
groups in the city. Hillel Cohen’s ‘Joint Israeli–Palestinian Political Activity in Jerusalem: Characteristics and Challenges’ traces the development of the Jerusalemite ‘peace camp’ since the 1980s. He considers the role that Jerusalem played in the efforts of Palestinian and Israeli activists, particularly during the charged period of the Second Intifada. In doing so, Cohen posits that continuous joint activities and face-to-face Israeli–Palestinian cooperation can, in some circumstances, surmount ethnic divides. He is able to find cases where such activity leads to a reduction in the violence perpetrated by those directly involved.

Amneh Badran’s chapter ‘How do Israeli (Jewish) Protest Groups Envision a Political Solution to the Jerusalem Question?’ contends that although there are many Israeli political parties and activist groups, each professing to be different from the next, in fact their positions are very much the same. Through a reassessment and reclassification of Israeli left-of-centre political groups, she argues that the majority reinforce and perpetuate Jerusalem’s urban divisions rather than challenging them. She blames this on their adherence to a fixed agenda which calls for either a united Israeli Jerusalem or a two-state solution with a divided capital. Whilst a small minority of left-wing Jewish activists call for a one-state solution with an open city, they are often dismissed. Most problematic is reconciling the question of a democratic Jewish state with a capital in Jerusalem, a city where the demographics point to a Palestinian majority. For Badran, the creative potential of breaking the mimetic cycle has been hijacked by political and activist groups whose adherence to the ideological consensus extends the status quo. Ultimately she finds that cooperation between all but the most left-wing Arab and Jewish activists hits a dead end.

Ethno-nationalism is a modern invention, and hence modernity is regularly cited as either cause or salvation to many urban conflicts. Being modern, that is, the active involvement in modernity, may be both unifying and divisive, but for many contested cities, it is an ongoing preoccupation that regularly intermingles with the conditions of conflict. Either blatantly or lightly disguised, ‘being modern’ is regularly contrasted with ‘being primitive’, the latter as an insult flung at opponents or used by international commentators to register disappointment with and scorn for contested cities, with their seemingly endless and unfathomable disputes. The essentialist idea of ‘age-old blood feuds’ is regularly blamed. Section three, ‘Being Modern’, explores technologies and practices of modernity and in doing so, queries how instrumental decision making, colonial domination, strains of globalisation and new forms of capitalism interact with urban conflicts. In the following chapters, it becomes clear that due to the asymmetries of conflict in contested cities, all or parts of the populations may not be able to develop in like ways. In effect some sectors or cultures are held back from modernisation, or, in some cases, locked into conditions of modernity which have been superseded elsewhere.
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