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Problematising Urban Social Cohesion: A Transdisciplinary Endeavour

1. Introduction

Conceptualising, exploring and operationalising different meanings of social cohesion to make them useful for studying the dynamics of 'cities and social cohesion' in urban Europe: that is what this Special Issue aims at. It is based on research on 'Social Cohesion in European Cities' within the FP7-SSH-Project Social Polis, the first social platform funded by the EC SSH programme.1

Decades of European research on urban development and economy, urban social fabric, housing and labour market, social, cultural and political fragmentation and, more recently, on security issues and citizenship in the city have produced an extensive body of results in different disciplines that are relevant to urban social cohesion research. Social cohesion is given various meanings in the scientific circles, social milieux and policy arenas in which it is addressed. Most frequently, it is presented as a policy objective with reference both to the social forces and public actions that are needed for the inclusion of all groups, citizens and migrants into urban society and, more recently, as an opportunity for diverse urban communities and the collective making of 'their' city.

In the conceptual framework underlying this Special Issue, Novy, Coimbra Swiatek and Moulaert present an overview of the complexity and multidimensionality of social cohesion in the city. They address social cohesion in the city as a problématique. This implies asking the right questions about and obtaining deep insights into the diverse life worlds of urban inhabitants and their values. It requires structural knowledge about causalities, contexts and time–space regularities within and across different urban life spheres. From this perspective, the Special Issue is organised stepwise. First, it examines the dominant meanings of social cohesion terminology in scientific circles (section 2 of this introduction). Social cohesion terminology and its meanings have evolved over time, as a result of politico-ideological debates and epistemological (re)positioning within scientific communities. Obviously such a social-political theme is continuously bargained between science and politics, with many stakeholders claiming a stake in the bargaining process. Thus section 3 explains how social cohesion addressed as a problématique, through a transdisciplinary problematisation—i.e. involving both researchers and practitioners, offers opportunities to confront and partially conciliate epistemological stances and create a multi-actor platform for exchanging views on how social cohesion should be analysed and politically pursued. This section explains the methodological aspects of the problematisation of social cohesion in the city. To this purpose, a progressive neo-structuralist analytical framework matching socio-political perspectives with analytical foci is developed. Section 4 then briefly pictures the way in which Social Polis partners (scientists, public agents, activists …) have co-operated and what the role has been of 'surveying literature and practice of social cohesion in the city' in the overall Social Polis mission.

The subsequent sections then cross-read the articles forming the Special Issue in accordance with four transverse streams of inquiry reflecting the analytical foci of the neo-structuralist framework: the exclusionary dynamics of urban change (section 5); policy approaches to foster social cohesion (section 6); bottom–up and bottom-linked collective action for social cohesion (section 7); and, the conflictive dynamics of governing social cohesion and diversity (section 8).

2. Social Cohesion: A Problematic Scientific Concept

In the European policy world, no clear progress in understanding 'urban social cohesion' has been made ever since the publication of the EC DG Employment and Social Policy's analysis of Urban Social Development (CEC, 1992), where—starting from the concept of 'urban social development'—a proxy definition of social cohesion was provided

Not only policy-makers, but also scientists are struggling with the conceptualisation of social cohesion. Conceptualising social cohesion and giving it the status of a meaningful term capable of grasping the plurality of urban life in its spatial and social dimensions is not an easy task. One has to take into account multiple interplays between physical, economic, political and cultural transformations in cities on the one hand and to achieve sufficient conceptual clarity to inform targeted and coherent policy on the other hand. Arriving at a coherent and meaningful understanding of 'social cohesion' in urban studies has become even more difficult in this time of rapid urban change. The term is being increasingly used within local, national and European policy communities to express widespread concerns about economic decline and to provide legitimisation for the application of competiveness-geared recipes in local policy agendas which—ironically—have systematically undermined the competitiveness of Europe's periphery.

To overcome this reductionist position towards social cohesion, we have gained inspiration from Kearns and Forrest (2000), DCLG (2006) and others who simultaneously embrace the ideal, material, behavioural and institutional aspects of a cohesive society to conceptualise social cohesion in the city. Hence, we accept a plurality of mostly complementary features and qualifiers to address urban social cohesion. The literature evokes a wide diversity of cohesion 'features' and explications as well as ways to connect and contextualise them, including

Cohesion: spatial, territorial, regional, urban, both from an analytical and a policy perspective. A process perspective, privileging integration and exclusion factors and mechanisms, is favoured in our conceptualisation of social cohesion (Moulaert, 1996). However, these mechanisms and factors are active in an ensemble of 'existential fields' constituting urban life, many of which are covered in the subsequent articles, and refer to different types of collective agency (for example, public policy, civil society mobilising, enterprise networking).

Social exclusion: understood as a state, a process (multidimensional), a collective agency (including public policy). These aspects are connected by a diversity of authors such as Moulaert (1996), Paugam (1996), Vranken (2001), Morlicchio (2004), Moulaert, Morlicchio and Cavola (2007) into a multidimensional understanding of exclusion processes, capable of grasping the various sectors of urban society, but addressing them from a multiscalar perspective (neighbourhoods, urban villages, cities, metropolitan areas, urban regions), following work by Kearns and Forrest (2000), Mingione (1996), Moulaert et al. (2000), Murie and Musterd (2004) and Musterd et al. (2006).

Social inclusion: as a process (multidimensional), a collective agency, a policy perspective and strategy, an institutionalisation process (Vicari Haddock, 2004).

Particular exclusion/inclusion dynamics privilege particular spatial scales or relations between them. For example, inclusion and exclusion in the labour market should primarily be addressed at an (urban) regional scale; access to social services is mainly a proximity issue (at the neighbourhood level); while the integration of a city in wider trade networks concerns the connection to transport networks, migration flows, global economic communities, etc. (Murie and Musterd, 2004; Sassen, 2001, 2002). Still, multiscalarity is ubiquitous. Urban labour markets may show their local character but are

intrinsically spatially articulated through the strategies of corporations, through regional and national policy-making, through migration, etc. Collective agencies for social change may be locally rooted but regionally and internationally co-ordinated. Local ethics borrow a significant part of their values and principles from national, European and 'global' grand discourses—for example, about the partaking of all citizens in the 'knowledge society', participation in a local solidarity action to eradicate hunger at the world level as the Millennium Agenda proclaims or adopting values learned from international migrants.

3. Social cohesion as a *Problématique*

How, then, should one address the complexity of the triple urban exclusion–cohesion–inclusion dynamics? How to account for conflictive interests, agencies and institutionalisations at articulated spatial scales? This Special Issue approaches urban social cohesion as a plural, scale-sensitive and multidimensional yet structured *problématique*. Cities are privileged places where multiple dynamics of the inherently contradictory *problématique* of social cohesion materialise. According to this approach, the understanding of social cohesion and the definition of public action including policy responses both have to be context-sensitive and based on the democratic negotiation of interests and values. Obviously, the choice of concepts to construct this *problématique* influences the ways in which problems are identified and solutions proposed. In the paper by Novy, Coimbra Swiatek and Moulaert (this issue) four perspectives on the problematisation of urban social cohesion are laid out. They can be analysed through a diversity of complementary theories and concepts, but within a quadruple methodological structure—as explained in the following sub-sections.

A Socioeconomic Perspective on Social Cohesion: Solidarity versus Social Exclusion

This perspective stresses the disintegrative effects of social inequality and exclusionary dynamics with regard to access to resources and markets, in contrast with solidarity and the reduction in wealth and income disparities that are required to create equal opportunities and a sense of fairness and belonging. Solidarity is, for instance, linked to forms of redistribution and to commitment to universal welfare rights, such as guaranteed through social contracts about the financial mechanisms of the welfare state.

Culture: Common Values and Identity Building versus Intercultural Clashes

The second perspective in the problematisation of social cohesion is cultural. It problematises identity and common culture as key dimensions of belonging to a social entity, in contrast with sociocultural discrimination and isolation. While there is a broad consensus that belonging is a key dimension of social cohesion, there is also an increasing awareness that difference and diversity are constitutive of local communities. Cities are places of encounter, formed by networks of interaction bringing people from different backgrounds (age, lifestyles …) together through migration, commuting and co-operation. This encountering creates hybrid cultures and cultural heterogeneity in multiple time–space frameworks, which are often territorially expressed (Dukes and Musterd, this issue).

A strong attachment to place and the intertwining of people's identities with places are important for social cohesion (Kearns and Forrest, 2000, p. 1001). More internal cohesion within a community might either strengthen segregation and discrimination with respect to outsiders or alternately create a kind of human bonding and solidarity which can be universalised. This tension between two connected, but sometimes competing, dynamics often leads to conflict due to diverging views and interests. In our understanding, such a *problématique* can only be mediated and accommodated context-specifically via

democratic negotiation based on the recognition of basic human rights, including the right of individuals and communities to be different.

Ecology: Sustainability and Ecological Justice versus Technological 'Middle-class' Environmentalism

While there is a long tradition of holistic approaches towards nature–society relations, these only re-entered urban development discourse and analysis in recent decades. As environmental 'goods and bads' are unevenly distributed between and within cities, processes of socio-spatial exclusion and social justice in the city should be linked with issues of ecological justice. The environmental justice movement is a powerful actor stressing the links between ecological sustainability and social cohesion. Nevertheless, connecting social with ecological justice is not a mainstream practice and the dominant policy approach is, all too often, to opt for individual technological solutions which are only affordable by wealthier citizens—unless the state assumes a role of rewarding positive externalities in a redistributive way. Shifting the financial burden from public transport, cycling and walking to road and air transport is an emblematic issue of environmental and social justice, as it is directly linked to the broad socially stratified modal split in transport (Graham, 2000; Cabinet Office, 2009).

Politics: Citizenship and Participation versus Elite Politics

The final perspective on social cohesion we adopt here is political. It mobilises the three aforementioned perspectives by stressing political action such as participating in public affairs as essential for being a full member of the local community. However, political dynamics involves much more than consensual public choices and action. It is a contradictory process full of conflict and conflictive agencies which cuts across the socioeconomic, cultural and ecological contradictions and struggles (Mouffe, 2006). To keep an (urban) society socially cohesive, the political arenas need to be open and sufficiently democratic to have the potential to reach consensus on the collective action and policies needed to reproduce cohesion.

This leads us from analysing urban social cohesion as a *problématique* to its problematisation as a political project. Thus the four perspectives of the urban social cohesion *problématique* are not only offering an analytical focus ('What is to be examined?') for analysing social cohesion, they also refer to 'How to problematise?' social cohesion—how should social cohesion be analysed, which actors should be involved and how such shared analyses can lead to coherent agendas and strategies for collective action and public policy. Therefore the analysis also involves unravelling the political and normative consequences of the decision to take on social cohesion as a *problématique* and would naturally trigger collective action including public policy (see Figure 1).
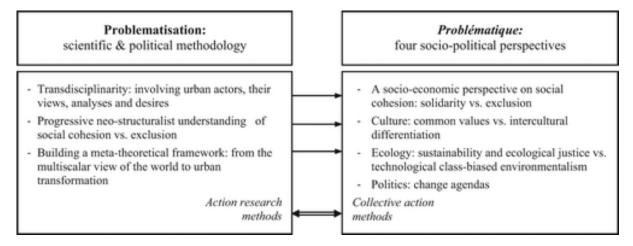

Figure 1. Urban social cohesion as a *problématique* and as a problematisation.

Transdisciplinary Problematisation

Because of the involvement of actors both in its analytical and political moments, the problematisation of social cohesion in the city is truly transdisciplinary in the sense that, methodologically speaking, it teams up scientists and practitioners from different knowledge and practice communities (see Figure 1).

This problematisation has three significant methodological aspects. First of all, transdisciplinary problematisation is an active process involving different types of actors (stakeholders, policy-makers, citizens, movement leaders …) with different aspirations for, and roles in, urban life, who also use a diversity of concepts and discourses, while being influenced by different value systems and analytical perspectives. We understand that a *problématique* cannot be built without a positioning *vis-à-vis* the genesis of a city, its social structure, the building of its social institutions and the way in which its different groups of inhabitants and actors should have a voice in the making of 'the good city' of the future (Cassinari *et al*., 2011). Such a positioning cannot be based on a pre-defined consensus, but concerns the gradual sharing of views of how the city works and how it could work in the future.

To this purpose, there is a second aspect to transdisciplinary problematisation—namely, a progressive neo-structuralist understanding of social cohesion which not only refers to the integration or the inclusion of particular social groups—or their negation—but also addresses the generic forces that create cohesive interdependencies and prompt agency via options of choice expressed in a gradually shared ethics (Sen, 2001). A progressive neo-structuralist understanding of society (Alcock, 2006) links the four perspectives of social cohesion analysis to a context-sensitive scale-integrative collective action and policy-making (Byrne, 2005, p. 65; Immerfall, 1999, p. 121). Such an approach does not 'naturalise' structural constraints, but perceives them as both socially reproduced (Moulaert, 1987) and emerging. The former refers to understanding how structures come about; the latter refers to their collective shaping through conscious and ethical agency (Moulaert and Jessop, forthcoming).

The third methodological aspect concerns the role of theory and meta-theory. The neo-structuralist approach is best served by collective negotiation among researchers and stakeholders of a 'meta-theoretical framework' capable of 'hosting' the contradictory relationships of socio-political reproduction and leaving room for complementary, but also contrasting, explanations of social cohesion and exclusion processes. There is no unique understanding of a 'meta-theoretical framework'. Consider it a framework with a (negotiated) view of the world that fits a neo-structuralist understanding of society. Such a view would bring to life relations between structures, institutions and agencies (and their agents), with their typical, well-recognised discursive and cultural practices. The meta-theoretical framework is inherently multiscalar and historical, and is thus meant to host a context-sensitive analysis (Moulaert and Jessop, forthcoming). It should also allow analysis of the role of different types of actors involved in the problematisation according to their actual positions in existing social relations, as well as exploration of their potential to work collectively towards 'the good city'.

The articles in this Special Issue do not cover all three aspects of this methodology. Their role is to discover what has been written in the literature connected to their specific fields and thematics from the four perspectives put forward in the *problématique*. The diversity of explanations and proposed strategies cum policies will nevertheless be valuable for continuing the problematisation of urban social cohesion by building better bridges between transdisciplinary research and collective action. Actual transdisciplinary work modes, however, have been applied in the making of this Special Issue, as the next section briefly explains.

4. The Transdisciplinary Nature of Social Polis

This Special Issue has evolved in a transdisciplinary way by actively involving stakeholders in the selection of existential fields of the urban world, research themes, policy challenges and ways to analyse them. The articles included are a result of critical analysis of theoretical, empirical and—depending on the thematic focus—policy-oriented scientific literature, that was carried out by the authors who—as members of the consortium that formed the first Social Platform 'Cities and Social Cohesion' (Social Polis) funded by the European Commission DG Research—were asked to define research priorities for the 7th Framework Programme of the European Commission.[2] The stakeholders, coming from research, policy, private-for-profit and NGO backgrounds, have been engaged in several ways in the conceptualisation of social cohesion, as well as in discussions of multilayered problems and diverse approaches to building more cohesive urban societies. They took part actively in the orientation and evaluation of the articles in this Special Issue.

In line with the methodological aspects presented in the previous section, the Special Issue brings a diversity of views, discourses and perspectives useful to conceptualise urban social cohesion through its problematisation. The articles navigate four transversal streams of inquiry. First, they analyse the socioeconomic dynamics of urban change that produce exclusionary structures and undermine social cohesion. Secondly, they provide a critical inquiry into public policies that aim to foster social cohesion in various spheres of the city. Thirdly, they examine innovative opportunities for socially cohesive environments carried by bottom–up and 'bottom-linked' collective action (García *et al.*, 2009; Eizaguirre *et al.*, this issue). Finally, they reflect upon the conflictive dynamics of governing social cohesion and diversity in urban environments.

5. Exclusionary Dynamics of Urban Change

The papers in this Special Issue explore links between financialisation, urbanisation and economic globalisation processes in neo-liberalised environments, wherein cutbacks of the welfare state and retrenched social policy produce uneven and unstable social, economic and political relations (see Fainstein, 2001; Harvey, 2005; Purcell, 2009). The authors reflect upon "a contingent, path-dependent, amorphous and selective process of market-like state restructuring" (Cook and Swyngedouw, this issue, p. 1970) within and across different urban domains. In doing so, they mobilise different concepts relating to urban social change. Pratschke and Morlicchio (this issue) point to increasing social polarisation resulting from the restructuring of urban labour markets; Cassiers and Kesteloot (this issue) examine socio-spatial inequalities and residential segregation; Cook and Swyngedouw (this issue) analyse socio-environmental injustice; while other authors trace the dynamics of social exclusion in urban transport (Miciukiewicz and Vigar, this issue). Reference is also made to the key role of education systems (André *et al.*, 2010).

Pratschke and Morlicchio (this issue) examine profound transformations in the occupational structure and labour markets of European cities that have polarised urban societies by the concentration of wealth at the one end of the social strata and poverty at the other (Burawoy, 2007). The article recognises the interaction between deregulated labour markets and dualistic immigration policies in Europe as a major threat to social cohesion in its socioeconomic, cultural and political dimensions. A particular strength of Pratschke's and Morlicchio's contribution lies in the complex and contextualised analysis of the fragmentation of labour markets and social polarisation in European cities as they problematise Sassen's (1991, 1994) dual city hypothesis. They point to the diversity of roles of the state as employer and

service provider in countries across Europe (see also: Musterd and Ostendorf, 1998; Mingione, 2004; Silver, 1993; Esping-Andersen, 1990; and Hamnett, 1994).

Cassiers and Kesteloot (this issue) focus on increasing socio-spatial inequalities and socio-ethnic segregation that operate across and within urban areas. The authors assert that the specific socio-spatial lay-outs of cities have a crucial impact on the production and reproduction of social inequalities. In the contemporary knowledge economy, capitalist production of wealth is driven by multiple networks which span across territories but are linked through territorially based hubs. As urban spaces play a crucial role in capital accumulation (Harvey, 1973, 1982), the organisation of flows, the shaping of networks (Castells, 1998) and the reconfiguration of scales (Brenner, 1999; Cox, 1997; Fontan *et al*., 2005), multiscalar socio-spatial divides tend to be reinforced by the constant reproduction of 'winner' and 'loser' cities, as well as opposition between striving or 'better' urban areas and deprived neighbourhoods. While better jobs, schools, housing opportunities and higher levels of quality of life are accumulated in the winner cities and in the better urban areas, the losing ones serve as spaces of containment for precarious jobs and their holders, refugees, local impoverished populations, low-quality services, underfinanced and underdeveloped local welfare systems (Andreotti *et al*., this issue) and high levels of crime. By looking at the impacts of concentration of the poor, unqualified and vulnerable populations on individual chances for upward mobility (van Kempen, 1994; Buck and Gordon, 2004) and examining how spatial organisation frames opportunities for political and societal action (see: Abu-Lughod, 1999; Hanhörster, 2001), Cassiers and Kesteloot (this issue) provide insights on how social structure is projected onto urban space (Häussermann and Siebel, 2001). On the basis of empirical evidence from many countries and cities across the European continent, they concur that—although socio-spatial segregation has multiple manifestations and different causes—it is on the rise almost everywhere in Europe (for example, Préteceille, 2009; Mudu, 2006; Eraydin, 2008). However, both the thesis about correlation between spatial segregation and social inequality and the assumption that spatial segregation in unequal societal settings would always further reinforce social exclusion are by no means self-evident. Cassiers and Kesteloot (this issue) following Hamnett (1996), claim that spatial segregation does not have to occur in socially unequal cities. Still, spatially segregated cities might constitute environments instrumental to the provision of targeted social inclusion policies—in the transport domain, for instance (Miciukiewicz and Vigar, this issue), but not in the field of education (André *et al*., 2010)—than cities with dispersed enclaves of poverty. Moreover, segregated social milieus often foster powerful innovative capacities and potentials for self-help solutions, safeguarding the arrivals of ethnic newcomers, the creation of alternative economies and political mobilisation (Cassiers and Kesteloot, this issue; see also: Marcuse, 1997; Moulaert, 2000; Gerometta *et al*., 2005).

Social Polis authors examine exclusionary dynamics in specific urban spheres or existential fields of the city. André *et al*. (2010) explore threats to social cohesion posed by unequal access to quality formal education across different areas of the city. This is of particular relevance in ethnic neighbourhoods where the lower performance of pupils with immigrant backgrounds, arising from different cultural resources, different language competences and the socioeconomic status of their parents, locks the schools in a vicious circle of disadvantage. Miciukiewicz and Vigar (this issue) reached similar conclusions when screening opportunities for spatial and social mobility while looking through the lens of urban transport systems. The authors point to the uneven distribution of mobility opportunities across urban areas and among different social groups that arise under privatised and deregulated transport regimes. Furthermore, drawing on Graham's and Marvin's (2001) concept of 'splintered urbanism', they examine how in a socio-spatially polarised city the mobility poor are exposed to the externalities of prime transport networks designed for the mobility rich. This also corresponds with the findings on

environmental (in)justice by Cook and Swyngedouw (this issue) who depict how the urbanisation of nature shapes socio-ecological relations through the unequal distribution of environmental 'goods' and 'bads' (see also: Keil, 2003, 2005; Walker, 2009a, 2009b).

6. Policy Approaches to Foster Social Cohesion

In line with the political perspective within the problematisation of urban social cohesion, this section addresses the potential of diverse types of public policies to foster social cohesion through approaching different aspects of its socioeconomic, political and cultural dimensions. Andreotti *et al*. (this issue) trace the relationships between local welfare policies and social cohesion by looking at local welfare systems as tools for the distribution of welfare services (Jenson, 2009; Esping-Andersen, 2003) and economic opportunities, as well as vehicles for building and exercising urban citizenship (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1992; also Fraisse, 2011). As Andreotti *et al*. (this issue) point out, although local welfare systems are often considered more efficient and democratic than homogeneous top–down national welfare policies, their success can by no means be taken for granted. Activation of citizens and facilitation of operations of non-governmental actors at the local level require substantial investments from the state and often fail when they are undertaken with a purpose of financial savings instead of the interactive reactivation of different actors involved in welfare provision.

Social cohesion, especially in difficult urban sociocultural environments, is also fostered through inclusive and innovative education and training systems. The field of education and education policy has been thoroughly studied as a pathway to social cohesion with respect to the distribution of skills and thus economic opportunities to individuals, as well as with regard to processes of collective identity formation and civic participation (for example, Green, 1997; Green *et al*., 2003; OECD, 2007a, 2007b). André *et al*. (2010), in a Social Polis working paper, move this inquiry forward by discussing opportunities for inclusive innovation in the field of education that would develop competences relating to creativity, citizenship and multiculturality, and that would go beyond the nurturing skills and capabilities recognised by mainstream society. These authors argue in favour of the transformation of traditional educational systems into emancipatory learning arenas wherein teamwork, information sharing and creative thinking surpass individualism and competition. They see an opportunity for embedding such innovative learning into urban regeneration policies, thus creating opportunities for schools in deprived areas to contribute to the creation of local learning communities wherein cultural dialogue, tolerance and solidarity become key values for urban citizenship formation.

Intercultural pedagogy has a particular role to play in immigrant neighbourhoods where socioeconomic exclusion cuts across cultural heterogeneity and negotiation of host–stranger relationships. However, multicultural perspectives to education have become increasingly difficult to pursue as, since the mid 1990s in most EU states, there has been a shift towards essentialist concepts of national citizenship (Novy, 2011), a neo-assimilationist reconceptualisation of social cohesion and neo-assimilationist integration policies (Dukes and Musterd, this issue). Dukes and Musterd, scrutinising changing policy approaches to cultural diversity in a number of European states and in the Netherlands in particular, emphasise the growing convergence of assimilationist and multiculturalist policy approaches whereby a monoculturalist vision of a cohesive society based on dominant values, norms, languages and national ideologies is prevalent. These authors observe that multiculturality is increasingly recognised by policy-makers as a problem for cities and urban areas where immigrants live. However, the 'problem status' of multiculturality contrasts with the observations from intensive exploration by different community and civil society organisations of cultural heterogeneity as a source for social cohesion. This positive

embracing of diversity, confirmed by many reassuring multicultural urban development experiences, challenges the traditional nation-based concepts of citizenship.

7. Bottom–Up (Bottom-linked?) Collective Initiatives for Social Cohesion

The emergence of multiscalar and pluralistic modes of urban governance (Eizaguirre *et al.*, this issue; Brenner, 2004; García, 2006; Jessop, 2002) and of communicative, collaborative and community-led planning practices (Healey, 2006) have encouraged or facilitated the rise of civil society 'strategies from below'; these have fed into urban and social policies for fostering social cohesion. The current financial and fiscal crisis and the withdrawal of national welfare systems from communities living in deprived urban areas, have forced these to deliver creative bottom–up strategies to satisfy basic human needs and to create new socio-political capabilities to interact with, but also to transform, wider governance arenas (Moulaert, 2000; Moulaert, 2010; Gerometta *et al.*, 2005).

Local bottom–up collective action supporting social cohesion has been examined by Fraisse (2011) in a Social Polis research paper that focuses on a shift from 'grassroots initiatives', that used to be in a close relationship to urban social movements, to a new generation of 'local initiatives' constituting pragmatic socioeconomic responses to 'worklessness' and social exclusion. These new-type initiatives abide by the principles of the so-called plural economy and ethical entrepreneurship rather than socio-political urban struggles (Laville, 2010). Fraisse points to the hybrid logic of these initiatives that have "ambivalent impacts on crucial aspects of social cohesion such as sustainability of local activities and jobs created, effective empowerment of inhabitants and new forms of solidarity" (Fraisse, 2011, p. 3). This ambivalence has to do with their relations with policy and governance arenas as well as their spatial-temporal limits.

In contrast with these 'local initiatives', bottom–up collective action in the field of socio-ecological cohesion, such as the environmental justice movements (EJMs) that are investigated by Cook and Swyngedouw (this issue), voice their claims overwhelmingly through protests and demonstrations against socio-environmental injustice. It is the politics and the poetics of conflict, contestation and social struggle that frame these movements' repertoires of action and collective identity formation. Cook and Swyngedouw draw upon Young (1990) and Schlosberg (2003 and 2007) to show how politics of difference have become a key to the formation of environmental justice movements. Moreover, given the relational and interscalar nature of environmental conditions, EJMs increasingly operate at multiple scales; their problems and aims, as well as their modes of networked co-operation, cut across different scales (see also Carruthers, 2008; Pellow, 2007; Walker, 2009b). The reflection upon the diverging nature of the local and non-local modes of collective action is of strategic importance for the problematisation of urban cohesion. It requires critical investigation into the different opportunities, contingencies and difficulties typical of each mode, which may be of particular significance for the problematisation of new innovative frameworks for collective action.

In this regard, the key issue for innovative neo-structuralist approaches (Moulaert and Jessop, forthcoming) to foster social cohesion lies in the capacity of bottom–up initiatives to challenge the hegemonic views, discourses and institutional arrangements, and to introduce socially innovative transformations to public policy. To this purpose, Eizaguirre *et al*. (this issue) drawing upon García *et al*., (2009), explore possibilities of 'bottom-linked' approaches that combine grassroots collective action with top–down policies. There is a real concern to link social and institutional innovation that can take place both through innovative service provision within existing governance structures and also through the transformation of governance arrangements. However, innovation in governance frameworks

through bottom-linked practices is not a smooth process as these are often trapped in conflictive urban relations and as democratic practice suffers from bureaucratic modes of co-ordination and is tuned-down by hegemonic discourses that operate in and through public policies.

8. The Conflictive Character of Problematising Social Cohesion

Eizaguirre *et al*. (this issue) recall Jessop (2002) in their approach to governance as not only "any form of co-ordination of interdependent social relations", but also a form that involves "reflexive self-organisation of interdependent actors" who disagree with mainstream policy formulation and present alternative creative strategies constituting social innovation (Eizaguirre *et al*., this issue, p. 2001). Hence, they defend an approach to social cohesion that embraces inherently conflictive socioeconomic, political and cultural relations within urban societies (Mayer, 2009), rather than a consensual one. This does not exclude of course the possibility that, by way of the problematisation process, a workable consensus on building urban social cohesion may arise. In the face of neo-liberal 'reworkings' of the welfare state and rising urban inequalities (see Cassiers and Kesteloot, this issue), the right to disagreement and the right to articulation of conflict are crucial to civil society struggles for social change, whether they take the form of social movements mainstreamed into entrepreneurial and bureaucratising NGOs and pragmatic 'local initiatives' operating as social enterprises (see Fraisse, 2011) or more radical socio-political movements that actively oppose social injustice by violent or non-violent means (Swyngedouw, 2011; Cook and Swyngedouw, this issue).

Yet mainstream public policy discourses quite often suppress certain dimensions of conflict. As Dukes and Musterd (this issue) point out, since the mid 1990s, European states have observed either a shift from multicultural to monoculturalist interpretations of social cohesion or a radicalisation of the latter; or, at best, a shift towards controlled multiculturalism whereby cultural diversity is supported only to the extent to which it can be accommodated in an unproblematic way inside the national cultural context of a European host society. Both contemporary immigration and integration policies work towards the elimination of conflictive systems of cultural values from conceptualisations of social cohesion.

In the same vein, the conflictive problematisation of social cohesion in the light of socioeconomic injustice and class struggle is ruled out by mainstream public policy. In the face of rising budget deficits and unprecedented cuts in public spending, politicians tend to rest moral and operational responsibility for worklessness on individuals rather than on the increasingly unequal distribution of income and wealth (Perrons and Plomien, 2010; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010). Hence, innovation in welfare policies is welcomed by policy-makers only when it leads to short-term economies, but is increasingly restrained when it would require additional public resources or greater public openness for restoring socioeconomic justice.

In addition, it is difficult to voice different forms of articulation of the conflictive problematic of social cohesion in policy circles and in the broader public sphere. The 'democratic deficits' (Swyngedouw *et al*., 2002) which emerge with more pluralistic forms of governance whereby local governments are often "bunkered against popular participation and influence by local community groups" (p. 565) and avoid conflictive forms of political debate. Opportunities for articulation of conflictive urban relations in the broader public sphere have seriously shrunk in recent decades, since in the cases where violent incidents take place, those claims that triggered the violence are being automatically delegitimised and dismissed (Swyngedouw, 2011).

Nevertheless, working towards urban social cohesion needs innovative approaches to governance frameworks to permit more democratic and diverse modes of expressing conflictive interests. These approaches require continuous experimentation with socially creative strategies to innovate institutions at different scales (García *et al.*, 2009). Innovative forms of governance are pursued through continuous mobilisation of diverse urban resources that enable connectivity between different groups of activists and social movements operating in different locations, at multiple scales, and in plural existential fields of urban experience (Routledge, 2010).

9. In Conclusion

Conceptualising, discussing and debating 'what urban social cohesion is' in itself is an expression of agonistic urban pluralism (Mouffe, 2006). The elusiveness of the concept of social cohesion can be understood as an unsettling political statement that reflects pertaining social tensions and the conflictive, rather than integrative, nature of cities; but it is also symbolic of the willingness of communities of practice to negotiate and accommodate different value systems, interests and behaviour in the city, its neighbourhoods and communities, as well as the larger urban region.

Such an attitude of practitioners of diverse belonging is important. It reflects the basic spirit of transdisciplinary research: different communities of practice, interest-groups, private and public actors should clarify their ambitions, views, concepts and initiatives. Confronting these, matching them, agreeing on the action agendas and governance changes essential to pursuing social cohesion are part of this shared problematisation. These procedures also have significance for researchers themselves. Despite the rise of interdisciplinary research, hyper-specialisation in scientific practice continues. At the same time, within and across disciplines, concepts receive different meanings without even discussing these differences and their origin. Social cohesion is a case in point. Its meaning changes over time, within political contexts or because of regime shifts, but also because scientific analysts stick to 'their' definitions. Surveys of the literature have in many cases become an anaemic introductory ritual in many scientific articles and do not really express a concern to understand how peers address a concept or a theory hosting it. In this way, making *interdisciplinary* research more *transdisciplinary* by involving more practitioners could help to overcome this sliding away towards idiosyncratic research attitudes. Involving practitioners in the research process, as we have hopefully sufficiently encouraged and shown to be valuable through this Social Polis experience, can bring researchers involved in interdisciplinary research 'down to earth' and 'back to communication'. Shared problematisation seems a useful framework within which to proceed and we hope its methodology will receive great attention in the future.

Notes

1. Both this introduction and the other articles will occasionally refer to other results obtained in Social Polis. This should help to clarify the full range of the project (see www.socialpolis.eu).

2. The Social Polis consortium produced a collection of call-texts (Moulaert *et al*., 2011) for the 7th Framework Programme which is accessible at: http://socialpolis.eu/focusedresearch-agenda/. Two call-texts from this collection—SSH.2010.2.1-2: 'Local welfare systems favouring social cohesion' and SSH.2012.2.2-1: 'Challenge: governance of cohesion and diversity in urban contexts'—have already formed parts of the EC FP7 Co-operation Work Programmes for Socio-economic Sciences and the Humanities 2010 (CEC, 2009) and 2012 (CEC, 2011).

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