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JÖRG HÜTTERMANN

Situational Ranking and Conflict:  
A Bottom-Up Perspective on Urban  
Intergroup Life

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MPI zur Erforschung multireligiöser und multiethnischer Gesellschaften  
MPI for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen  
Hermann-Föge-Weg 11, 37073 Göttingen, Germany  
Tel.: +49 (551) 4956 - 0  
Fax: +49 (551) 4956 - 170

[www.mmg.mpg.de](http://www.mmg.mpg.de)

[info@mmg.mpg.de](mailto:info@mmg.mpg.de)

## Abstract

The article discusses a trend within some branches of sociology to see urban diversity in general and urban intergroup life in particular from a top down perspective substituting empirical evidence by teleological arguments. To overcome the epistemological and empirical consequences of such sociology the author opts for an approach that focuses on the effects and side-effects of casual everyday actions on space and urban intergroup relations. This perspective would be based essentially on the analysis of figuration-building situational rankings in the figurative fields of the urban community. It is a bottom-up approach that focuses on interactions of avoidance and displacement that frequently occur in everyday life. Its changing patterns shape urban intergroup life. Taking this perspective seriously would bring to light intergroup processes that change local power balances which on their part not only effect the urban figuration of group-based diversity, but can also generate urban conflicts.

## Author

JÖRG HÜTTERMANN ([huettermann@mmg.mpg.de](mailto:huettermann@mmg.mpg.de)) is research fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Department of Socio-cultural Diversity, Göttingen.



## Contents

Prologue.....	7
1    Urban Groups Without Group-based Interaction? .....	8
2    Situational Ranking and Conflict.....	17
2.1    Situational Ranking in Urban Life .....	19
2.2    Situational Ranking in Urban Life .....	24
2.2.1 Situational Ranking in the Corporeal Public Sphere .....	29
2.2.2 Situational Ranking in the Corporate Public Sphere .....	32
2.3    Conflict in Urban Life .....	36
2.3.1 Conflicts in the Corporeal Public Sphere .....	38
2.3.2 Conflicts in the Corporate Public Sphere.....	41
3    Situational Ranking and Conflict in the Boundary Zone .....	47
3.1    Boundary Zones between Urban Groups .....	48
3.2    Between Corporeal and Corporate Actors.....	50
4    Reclaiming Space .....	52
Literature.....	55



## Prologue<sup>1</sup>

In urban life individuals are always passing by one another at closer or less close quarters, on trajectories that occasionally intersect. This unspectacular to-ing and fro-ing can make urban life appear at first glance to be a bloodless affair. These ubiquitous situations, which involve reciprocal categorization and avoidance of collisions, frequently bear acts of displacement and episodic confrontation. Observing these inconspicuous interactions grants insight into situational rankings that on their part shape and sometimes change urban intergroup relations.

Consider the diversity of interaction of situational ranking, which involves not only individuals but also groups and organizations (corporate actors) in acts of power that claim or grant space. The spectrum of situational ranking extends from taking place to avoiding action ourselves to forcing others to do so. Especially in the city, situational ranking may mean merely a spontaneous avoidance of the collision of approaching bodies without respect to the individuals involved. But situational ranking can also include accommodation, retreat or even surrender based on anticipated or direct experience of the other. In such cases it usually does take into account the persons or their group habitus and respective categorizations. Furthermore, interactions of situational ranking can be associated with an active, space-claiming effort to suppress, displace, constrain or even compel others – whether individuals and groups or corporate actors. Not all encounters occur face-to-face; situational ranking gains additional complexity when it is mediated through third parties (e.g., boundary crosser, gatekeeper or intermediary), symbolic boundaries or physical structures.

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1 This essay was written in the course of a bi-national research project on “Immigration, Figuration, Conflict: A Comparative Social Space Analysis in Bradford and Duisburg” (01/2008 – 12/2011), which was generously funded by the DFG (German Research Council). Inspired by talks with British colleagues on the fine-tuning for the aforementioned project and after having performed several empirical research projects on shifting urban intergroup figurations and conflicts (Hüttermann 2000a, 2000b, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2010, 2011, 2013), I felt the need to draw some conceptual conclusions for future research on urban intergroup life. The theoretical point of reference for this venture has been the figurational sociology of Elias. Whereas Elias designed figuration sociology for analyzing the stabilization of hierarchical intergroup figurations, the author of these lines regards the dynamization of figuration analysis as an important precondition for adequate research on changing intergroup relations in urban contexts characterized by increasing diversity. The present draft of the paper owes much to Karen Schönwälder and other colleagues at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity. Thank you all! I want to express particular gratitude to Charlie Husband, with whom I had and go on having the most fruitful controversies and consensus.

Whenever a deviation from the expected course is not a single instance, but involves many follow-ups, the underlying balance of power between individuals or social groups may change. If I am no longer able to presume that others which I categorize as members of a given group will keep out of my way where, when and how I have come to expect, or if I indeed find them deliberately stepping into my path, apparently regardless to the prospect of collision, then the familiar power hierarchy will be disturbed. If my peers experience similar then intergroup life is affected.

## 1 Urban Groups Without Group-based Interaction?

Until the 1990s sociologists often succumbed to the temptation to examine contemporary realities through a utopian ideal of spatially independent socialization,<sup>2</sup> often skating over the distinction between present and future with theoretical arguments that largely dispensed with spatial reference.<sup>3</sup> Not until the advent of globalization

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2 The end of this period is only an approximation. While French sociologists and historians like Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault were already rediscovering the significance of space in the 1960s (Soja 2009, 249ff.), even in the twenty-first century German adherents of Luhmann in particular still cling to modernization theory's assertion that social space is a negligible variable. One representative example would be Armin Nassehi, whose essay on the question begins by stating that space is first and foremost a passive quality, at best a medium for compressing simultaneous activities (2002, 215). As if that was not inferior enough, he goes on to make the city and its space ontologically subordinate through the way he positions them in system theory: "Cities are ultimately neither unit nor systems, they operate not as cities but as densely filled spaces where many loosely interconnected things are happening at the same time" (translated from Nassehi 2002, 223f.). According to Nassehi cities are not systems. They relate to spaces that somehow or other are what they are because something happens to them caused by others (real systems) perceiving and communicating them as simultaneous and equilocational. By this urban space is reduced to a *flatus vocis systematis*. To dispel any last doubts about the unimportance of urban space, Nassehi goes on to assert that cities are no longer the leading edge of modernity anyway (2002, 222). Modernity, according to Nassehi, is defined solely by the consummation of functional differentiation in society. Here the system theorist finds confirmation of the hierarchy of social being he holds so dear – cascading down from the great whole of world society to the space-sensitive microcosms of interaction among actual individuals. This says little more about the city and its spaces than that they are subordinate social facts. But from Nassehi we learn the inadequacy of a German Sociology that prefers to exhaust itself with problems of inherent theoretical consistency and persistence rather than according the objects of its concern (here, urban space).

3 Spurred by the triumph of industrialization, urban sociologists share a vision of a global conquest of traditional distance and spatial barriers that has been repeatedly



discourse were social theorists forced to rethink the relationship between space and society (Berking 2006b: 29f.).

The same phenomenon is also seen in the conceptual treatment of urban space. Whether they desire the future or fear it, anticipation leads urban sociologists – who have come to regard the space-sensitive Chicago School as passé (Soja 2009, 248) – to treat space as an obstacle on an apparently irresistible path to a new form of community emancipated from the bonds of distance and location (Schroer 2003, 73). In the face of this almost oracular trend, urban space shrinks to a mere transitional problem to be solved by the development of new resources for communication and mobility.

Similar overstatements are also made about urban intergroup relations. For example, urban sociologists studying the links between urbanization and industrialization jumped to the one-sided conclusion that all intergroup relationships were shaped by social inequality and its projection in space (above all in the form of residential segregation) and were consequently articulated as distributional conflicts or class struggle. Today, among certain sociologists swayed by globalization discourse we observe a different one-sided urban analysis: Their “global age” is characterized by the absence of relationships between urban groups, interaction between them ceasing as the “inter” is lost in the course of despatialization of the global city.<sup>4</sup> Whereas the indifference Simmel described was based on the equidistant social relations and interpersonal nonchalance cultivated and institutionalized in urban society, we now

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reinvigorated since the time of Karl Marx, first by classical sociologists such as Simmel, Weber and Durkheim (on the latter see Dünne 2006, 289) and on to human geographers like David Harvey (Faist 2005, 760). Peter Saunders pointedly sums up this stance, which went largely unchallenged until the 1990s: “social theory has been quite right to treat space as a backdrop against which social action takes place” (1986: 201).

- 4 In contrast to the concept of deterritorialization in cultural geography, history, political studies or sociology of transnational migration (Papastergiadis 2000), the concept of despatialization refers not only to the loss of territorial sovereignty caused by flows of migrants, capital and information but first and foremost to the eradication of distances between things, actors and groups in globalized urban societies. While deterritorialization is linked to decolonization and globalization, despatialization is an aspect of modernization. Whereas deterritorialization can be accompanied by reterritorialization (for instance the change from the old binary world order and its boundaries to the new polycentric world order of our time) the process of despatialization refers to the shrinking of space in favour of time, both on an epistemological and an every-day basis. Reaction to the exaggeration of the significance of despatialization in the social sciences and humanities contributed to the “spatial turn” (Warf and Arias 2009).

– according to this school of thought – are observing an absence of relationships between virtually monadic group milieus.<sup>5</sup>

Martin Albrow in particular develops a perspective that focuses on the indifference of urban intergroup relationships (Albrow 1997, Albrow et al. 1997). His concept of the “socioscape” centres neither on the impersonal nature of relationships between individual actors in the city nor on the separate existences of ethnic communities resulting from the segregation of housing and work (Chicago School and Wilson 2001).<sup>6</sup> Rather, the concept of the socioscape sums up the way the social networks and ethnic groups of the global city live side by side and follow one another in daily rhythms (see also Sassen 1994). Albrow hones his theory with recent empirical work in community studies (Albrow et al. 1994), demarcates it from classical community studies (e.g., Elias and Scotson 1965; Hoggart 1957; Lynd and Lynd 1929), and relates it to new (or revived) concepts from globalization research such as “ethnoscapes” and “imagined communities” (Appadurai 2008; Bhaba 1990; Robertson 1992).<sup>7</sup>

Albrow conceives of the socioscape as an ensemble of social networks and “fields of concern or relevance” (Albrow 1997b, 51) or “sociospheres” that coexist in a local area and vary from place to place and neighbourhood to neighbourhood.<sup>8</sup> Only when the researcher steps back to take in the panorama of the city are the sociospheres “floating in the landscape” revealed through sociological comprehension of socially networked and largely congruent participant perspectives. To an outside observer the sociospheres of a city may overlap in a given urban landscape/socioscape, but from the participant perspective they exhibit no points of contact, for they offer

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5 Other sociologists get so carried away by modern technologies like the internet that not only do they shrink urban society to a global village but they also compress time within it to a synchronized present (e.g., Nassehi 2002, 215, who calls the city a “synchronisation machine”). Given that a machine is characterized – among other aspects – by strict interdependency of its parts, the machine concept contradicts Nassehi’s statement that the city consists of loosely connected incidents (Nassehi 2002, 223ff.).

6 Albrow’s socioscape is plainly inspired by Appadurai’s concept of the “ethnoscape”. But whereas Appadurai’s ethnoscapes are populated by “moving groups” (Appadurai 2008, 33), socioscapes harbour established and outsiders, allochthonous autochthonous groups.

7 Bhaba takes up Benedict Anderson’s concept of the “imagined community” (Anderson 1990, 291ff.), extracting it from the historical context of nation-building and applying it to communities which constitute themselves not solely (or not at all) through nation-state territory but emerge out of relational spaces conditioned by urbanization, migration and globalization.

8 The sociosphere can be understood as a milieu of urban we-groups emancipated from the underlying material reality or from the concept of space as container.

sphere-specific taken-for-grantedness and sociometrically closed and placeless parallel worlds. The “fundamentally different horizons and time-spans” of sociospheres and their inhabitants cause their “indifference to place” (Albrow 1997, 46, 47) which characterizes the global urban life of our time.

A locally rooted sense of community that could connect actors from the different social arenas, or a local culture of the kind taken for granted by classical community studies or the Chicago School, is no longer present in the sociosphere. Instead the social arenas of all actors are permeated by trans-national, super-spatial relevances. This globalization of relevances comes to affect not just migrants and members of ethnic diasporas, as noted by Appadurai (1990), but also autochthonous actors (Dürschmidt 1995; Keim 1997). The global relevances of the sociospheres are reproduced by mass media and trans-national migration and by interactions in “time-space compression” (Harvey 1990).

This diversity of coexisting sociospheres in the social landscapes of the global city is not to be misunderstood as chaos or a source of grave social deficits, says Albrow, who finds no sign of “anomie or social disorganisation” (1997, 45). Instead, the social landscape is an expression of a new order. Power differentials and intergroup figurations such as Elias and Scotson investigated in their famous community study of *The Established and the Outsiders* (1965) have no place in this new order. The mutual indifference of the sociospheres literally robs them of the ground on which they might meet. There is no elite with the power to define other groups as outsiders from the secure vantage point of centralized control over the local public sphere, for the social landscapes of which Albrow speaks are explicitly polycentric, in contrast to the classical place-bound urban community. Where people cease to listen to one another, the symbolic violence of stigma loses its power. There may be barriers between the ethnic groups, but the global indifference of the urban sociospheres can “obviate direct confrontation between the sociospheres” (Albrow 1997, 54).

On the one hand, a growing importance of global relevances in local life is a plausible finding. On the other hand in his Global Age approach Albrow tends to exaggerate the new quality of the globalized urban lifestyle mix. Perhaps this stems from a comparative design that is inherently questionable. In order to underline the discrepancy between “traditional-modern” and globalized urban community life, Albrow contrasts classical studies on community life in small and middle-size towns with recent studies of community life in a metropolis, namely London (1997, 38ff.). It will surprise nobody that the break between the urban way of life of middle size-towns and life in a metropolis is striking (Otte/Baur 2008) – perhaps too striking. Thus it

remains an open question to what extent the new way of life is an effect of globalization and to what degree size matters.

For our purpose of shedding light on urban intergroup life it is of even greater importance to highlight another critical point. Albrow's concept of socioscapes filled with free-floating sociospheres without contact in local space must be called into question. When we remember how violent urban intergroup conflicts hit the headlines during the first decade of the twenty-first century – for example in France (above all Paris in 2005) and the United Kingdom (especially the north of England in 2001) – that suggests anything but a fluid, placeless coexistence of fundamentally separate networks. Along with such violent clashes, we also observe countless non-violent group-related conflicts in towns and cities, including disputes over Islamic religious buildings (e.g., the so-called “mega-mosque,” whose proposed site in London would have been close to the 2012 Olympic village).<sup>9</sup> Such conflicts suggest that urban social contexts – for all their signs of globalization – cannot be characterized as mutually inaccessible placeless social networks.

Martin Albrow might respond that although Paris and Bradford and other cities where group-related conflicts have been fought over Islamic symbols, road-building projects or local social and school policy have not developed the indifference supposedly possessed by London and New York, they will do so in future.<sup>10</sup> But what is there to suggest that all the cities of this world are merely trailing an avant-garde of global cities? Why should London and New York mark the pinnacle of socio-

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9 The Abbey Mills mosque project appears to have failed because the initiators, the international Muslim revivalist movement Tablighi Jamaat, never worked for acceptance in the urban community or were never interested in the local urban geographical context in the first place.

10 And with them similarly teleologically-minded system theorists who for example assert that the emerging world society will do away with the problem of the stranger or even the stranger himself: “The emerging world society, on the other hand, is also in the process of causing the disappearance of the stranger. One decisive aspect is the functional specification of all interactions that, even in unfamiliar places where one has never been before, allow relatively certain conclusions to be drawn about the respective other. His or her potential strangeness is so to speak dissembled into functionally specific interactions, each of which is relatively easy to cope with without having to address the compact strangeness of the other.” (Stichweh 1992, 311 f.). The social figure of the stranger would then be supplanted by the highly formalized “impersonal relationships” (Stichweh 1992, 312) preordained by the function system or the “structural stranger” (Nassehi 1995, 454 ff.) which ultimately must include ourselves (see Hüttermann 1999). So is the stranger but a blip in a sweeping trend of complete and utter functional differentiation that will carry all cities and regions along with it?

cultural evolution? The globalization rhetoric here is plainly based on a deterministic ideology of progress paired with a centristic focus on a handful of Western cities (cf. Berking 2006a, who speaks of globocentrism in this context).

Amidst the excitement over imploding space, time and relationships, the diversity of urban socialization modes is lost from sight. Three main factors contribute to this misapprehension. First (a) is the connection between urban research and modernization that is inscribed into the history of urban sociology and exemplified by the invasion and succession model of urban transition developed by Ernest Burgess in the mid-1920s. In this context urban phenomena are regarded as portents of future developments and serve as ornamentation for teleological short-cuts (e.g., the idea of the melting pot). Second (b) is a fixation on indifference generators, in which underlying mechanistic preconceptions (plainly also coloured by Le Corbusier's understanding of architecture) lead to a misunderstanding of the city as a giant machine generating indifference. The third factor (c) is the disdain that certain sociologists reserve for anything that is socially commonplace even though the commonplace is where interaction not only takes but also "makes place". Commonplaces are where social relations are not only reproduced but also created and where the horizons of time expand or shrink (see the whole sociology of Erving Goffman and Alfred Schütz).

#### (a) Teleology

Central oppositions in urban sociology (town/country, centre/periphery, fast/slow) are based on value-judgements favouring the former over the latter. Some authors are not satisfied simply to be led by such preferences. They go on to develop stage theories of urban social development. These are mostly based on teleological short-cuts.

A teleological short-cut begins by inferring a trend on the basis of very few factors, looking to the predictable culmination of the trend and focusing so exclusively on it that all sight is lost of other contradictory factors – substituting the anticipated final state for the actual current state through sheer force of theoretical will. Once one has entered this epistemological tunnel one can only race towards the proverbial light at the end, barely sparing a glance at apparently irrelevant details alongside. Just as the trees lining the tracks blur into quivering lines when seen from a high-speed train, the breakneck epistemological trajectory of the teleologists also reduces relatively immediate objects of knowledge into coarse lines that apparently all lead to the light. The remaining residue of urban society is divided into two epistemological

classes: transitional problems (comprising practically all social problems, which are explained as an effect of the transition from one stage of development to the next); and indifference generators.<sup>11</sup>

(b) Indifference generators

Indifference generators include the market, functional differentiation, transport, communication and information technology, the law, bureaucracy, science, and so on, wherever these can be held responsible for creating pre-modern relationship forms. Historians and sociologists regard market exchange as an important contributing factor for the dissolution of traditional modes of relationship.<sup>12</sup> Alongside the much-discussed effects of exchange-value rationality and the fetish character of commodities, which mask class power differentials and which Horkheimer and Adorno believe permeate all aspects of modern mass culture, the expansion and interlinking of the chains of interdependence conditioned by market relations are worth mentioning. Market-led activity at one place can have simultaneous or delayed effects at other places, of which we may obtain at best a partial overview. In the case of urban housing markets, researchers in the 1950s were already able to demonstrate the far-reaching side-effects the activities of a handful of market participants could have for local intergroup relations. The arrival of just a few African American residents in a “white neighbourhood” quickly caused the white population to move away. This “white flight” occurred because property values could be expected to decline when the number of Afro-Americans in a white neighbourhood reached a certain level – the “tipping point”. At the time, this phenomenon was discussed as “neighbourhood tipping” (Grodzins 1957; Duncan and Duncan 1957) or “change without conflict” (Mayer 1960). Then as now, almost all segregation processes, whether in urban housing, education or culture markets (on the latter see esp. Bourdieu 1984),

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11 Systems theory provides a good example of the way problems are simply dismissed as transitional. Societal and urban conflicts connected with immigration are represented as problems that will automatically decline in importance with the move from stratified to functional differentiation (Hüttermann 1999). System theorists also use the same sleight of hand to get rid of problems associated with the spatiality of urban communities (Schroer 2006, 231 ff.). Thus Stichweh asserts that in the course of socio-cultural evolution society increasingly asserts control over spatial conditions. (2009, 156). This claim contrasts conspicuously with observations of human geographers and sociologists who deal not only theoretically but also empirically with space (e.g., Soja 1995; Keith 2005).

12 This would include central works by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Werner Sombart, Simmel (philosophy of money), the Annales School and Wallerstein (world system theory).



result from anonymous decisions by numerous individuals. Responsibility for the effects of individual actions is not easy to attribute, and often remains concealed from the participants themselves. And yet it is precisely these segregation processes caused by anonymous sequences of activity that fortify the predominance of affluent urban elites over poorer or immigrant population groups, because the better-off are thus able to create spatially exclusive communities and accumulate high-value social capital and privileged information. Conversely, the disadvantaged are sifted by segregation into the “mobility traps” (Wiley 1967) that arise in structurally segregated communities, where the transfer of accumulated social, (counter-)cultural and symbolic capital into the dominant community, with its relatively location-bound forms of capital, is impossible or can be accomplished only at great cost. Put bluntly, the greater the career success in a disadvantaged and segregated community, the more impassable the social barriers become for those who wish to leave. All this happens without any kind of master plan and without an identifiable causal act of authority setting off the process.

Another driving force causing power relations between urban social groups to become invisible is, as already mentioned, the functional differentiation of urban society, whose basic traits were outlined----- long ago by Georg Simmel: “The most significant characteristic of the metropolis is this functional extension beyond its physical boundaries” (2005, 29). Proponents of system theory, especially, produce endless new variations on Simmel’s finding that the radical social division of labour in the city alienates its residents from one another, arguing that the modern differentiation of function systems no longer integrates the individual as a whole person, still less as human(e) being, but instead turns individuals into roles or bearers of many provider and client roles integrated into the function systems they serve. The precondition for this form of inclusion is the exclusion of the whole person (which is of course not only “more than” but also “different from” the sum of the roles acted by a person). As Weber shows (1972, 234), both the individual capable of personal relationships and the classical social figure of the stranger who attracts attention and provokes rejection are consumed by the highly formalized “impersonal relations” (Stichweh 1992, 312; Nassehi 1995, 454ff.; 2002, 228f.) determined by the function system. Functional differentiation injects the experience of estrangement into every crevice of urban society. Nobody has expressed this as succinctly as Georg Simmel: “The stranger is near to us insofar as we feel between him and ourselves similarities of nationality or social position, of profession or of general human nature. He is far from us insofar as these common features reach out

over him or us, and only ally us both because they connect a great many. In this sense a trait of this strangeness easily enters even the most intimate relationships. (...) Perhaps this is in many cases a more general, at least more insurmountable, strangeness than that afforded by differences and incomprehensibilities. (1969a, 326).

Of course there are also other generators of depersonalization and despatialization of urban social relations that were similarly institutionalized first in the big cities before becoming established in broader urban society. Contract law would be one example. But despite these and other indifference generators (such as transport and information technologies), even under conditions of extreme urbanism modern individuals have never stopped encountering (or indeed avoiding) one another with more or less interest and empathy. In the process they draw on group categories and group-based habitus forms that are sometimes aligned with functional differentiation (professional and lay, provider and client) and sometimes cut across them (generation, ethnicity, gender, subculture, milieu, migrant group or simply “good guys” and “bad guys”). The interaction of urban actors plainly follows a different social logic than an extrapolation of the effects of urban indifference generators would lead some to believe.

#### (c) Underestimation of the ordinary

Underestimation of the ordinary in urban sociology is the unifying thread the author follows – and contradicts. “(...) the most conventionalized and perfunctory doings we engage in and traditionally have been treated by students of modern society as part of the dust of social activity, empty and trivial ” (Goffman 1971, 64). In fact, if everyday life was driven merely by mass habituation and those involved expressed no agency, it would be a trivial affair. But everyday life is also the space where routines and directions vary and change in a bottom-up mode. The question of reproduction and modification of the many modes of urban relationship – including the casual and the everyday – is accordingly sidelined and ignored. Hence urban sociology partly overlooks aspects I will take up later, namely the nexus of urban social space and intergroup relations in the light of conflict and situational ranking.

In the next section I hope to shed a little sociological light onto some of the diversity of group-based modes of urban relationship and the casualness with which many (but naturally not all) treat relationships. What I am interested in are “intergroup figurations” or “group-based figurations”. I define the group-based figuration as a specific observable interdependency generated and modified by the interaction of actors who refer first to us/them categories, second to a sense of belonging rooted in



urban place, and third to power relations.<sup>13</sup> The central question is: If urban sociology rejects teleological prejudice, what is required for an open-minded exploration of the structure and dynamics of the interactions of groups and actors in urban society?

## 2 Situational Ranking and Conflict

In a circular process every cause is in turn an effect and every effect a cause; space, time and power are constitutive dimensions of social activity, while social activity, in turn, is what brings forth space, time and power structures in the first place. So we cannot simply proceed on the basis of a mechanistic causal ontology to isolate a “prime cause” from which all else derives. Here I will skip over the ensuing epistemological antinomy, starting instead with the publicly observable and reportable practices of urban figuration transformation and entering the physical realm of urban geography itself, without immediately categorizing what we encounter into an all-encompassing hierarchy of causalities. I am interested first and foremost in the specific urban society as it is revealed to an observer, in the characteristic intergroup relationships and their transformation processes. The important question is how the figuration processes of social groups vary from city to city and within time.

The answer touches on many debates that occupy Western cities and societies with migrant populations: concern over “parallel societies” (in Germany) and “parallel lives” (in the UK), the unending debate about residential segregation and integration in multi-ethnic urban communities, the persistent theme of ethnic economies (and their link to illegal ethnic markets), more recent conflicts over the religious buildings of ethnic minorities, the dialectic of spaces of fear and its control, the “rude-boy phenomenon” (which raises hackles not just among the chattering classes), debates over the limits of neighbourhood solidarity, controversies over poverty in the city (and the poverty of the city), the issue of gated communities, gentrification and sink estates, discussion about demographic ageing and upcoming generation conflict in the city, and so on. Such debates always also reflect a social transformation of intergroup relations that some urban actors and groups wish for and others fear.

With an eye to the sociology and social psychology of intergroup behaviour, the obvious place to generate data for analysing the figuration processes of urban society

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13 Here the “sense of belonging” is understood in broad terms in which even actors who characterize one other as enemies are aware that such characterization involves an aspect of belonging.

is social conflict. Wherever social psychologists and sociologists examine the differentiation of social groups and the figuration processes involved, they always encounter conflict (Esser 2001, 465ff.). Social conflicts create group oppositions that gain and hone their binary edge through interaction. Simmel is impressed by the power of conflict to integrate people into large opposing social groups, indeed sometimes to bring them forth in the first place. A person who has entered into the figuration of opposition can no longer be indifferent about the actions of the opposite side, indeed the other as opposite: “every activity can and must be answered by another one” (Luhmann 1995, 390). The integrative force of escalating conflict – for example about religious symbols such as the Muhammad cartoons or the debates about mosque-building in Western societies – turns bystanders into participants and leads people to adopt group identities about which they were formerly indifferent. Thus residents who previously never have talked of themselves in terms of religion suddenly remember their Christian roots when controversy blows up over mosque-building plans in the neighbourhood: rejection of particular forms of Islamic presence is defended in terms of older “rooted” Christian rights. In the course of a new conflict, older local conflict lines, for example between Catholic and Protestant population groups or between post-war refugees and established residents, are overlain and relativized by new ones. Conflicts in the urban community flag up the formation and transformation of intergroup relations.

To explicate the formation and transformation of urban intergroup figurations, we must also consider less spectacular and newsworthy practices to explain why urban groups take certain paths and in the process interact with other groups: segregated housing, labour and education markets, publicity-seeking lifestyle subcultures, milieu structures, fashions, social inequality, demographic change, migration, the potential of the internet for post-traditional community-building, technical innovations, and the cultural and economic locational advantages and disadvantages of particular neighbourhoods or cities, among others. But such phenomena are often described as if they aggregate somehow into quasi-subjects. Social inequality, segregation or the specific local culture, for example, become mysterious quasi-actors never encountered outside sociological speculation. Making subjects of abstract structures and processes may be unavoidable for reasons of didactic simplification (even for an expert audience) and because scientific focus always involves ignoring apparently less relevant factors. But something is lost along the way, namely, the living, feeling, human being who acts them out in everyday life.

Now it may be true that urban ethnography and urban milieu studies bring a multitude of individual practices to the attention of urban sociology. But because these qualitative studies flirt with the exotic and the unusual – focusing on dropouts, freaks and subcultures – they are usually treated as supplementary illustrations or sources of anecdotes for arguments based on deductive theory or quantitative data. The hierarchy is clear: big structures and mechanisms make little people move. But such a hierarchy neglects the idea that casual everyday interactions can form and transform structures beyond the immediate interaction itself. This point demands closer examination. So, before we come to the inevitable exploration of the connection between conflict and urban figuration transformation, we will first examine the figuration impact of situational ranking in urban context.

### *2.1 Situational Ranking in Urban Life*<sup>14</sup>

It is a characteristic of all interactions that they set something in motion and are themselves motion. This entitles us to examine interactions in the urban community from the perspective of figuration-building situational ranking. Situational ranking in urban life requires both space and motion; it forms and transforms spatial social relations. Conversely, if moving bodies and corporate actors (associations, enterprises, civil corporations etc) cannot occupy the same place at the same time, they need the ability to avoid the movements of other actors or to displace them.<sup>15</sup> Fundamentally speaking, situational ranking has no absolute beginning and no absolute end. Even a hermit who withdraws from the life of society does not escape the logic of social avoidance and ranking. He is in midst of it.

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14 The following paragraph is inspired by Randall Collins piece on “situational stratification” (Collins 2000) which for his part goes back to Bourdieu’s sociology of inequality. Nevertheless for his purposes the author prefers the term ‘situational ranking’ instead. This is because not all kind of transient interactions of displacement and/or avoidance contribute to societal stratification and societal stratification in turn doesn’t predict the outcomes of all these interactions. In other words the concept of situational ranking is designed for more diverse (including deviant) social settings than that of situational stratification.

15 Incidentally, not only can one extra-social, physical, quasi-Euclidean point in space not be occupied by two actors at the same time, but the same also applies to a socially constructed relational point in space. Thus, for example, the life of a mother and father may revolve entirely around their first child, but a second child cannot simply move into that position. Instead the space of the family is reconfigured.

But at the operative level of sociological analysis we need definitions and divisions that break a complex process into workable units. Accordingly, we propose the following condition: Situational ranking in urban life is initiated by activity claiming space, which must always reckon with force and is executed with force against force. A sequence of situational ranking sliced analytically out of the casual flow of everyday activity can itself be further broken down. A claim on space (including a claim on time-space) can be initiated through motion or immobility (that is to say, when everybody else is hurrying). A claim on space may be preceded by an uneasy hesitation or pause. In situations of “unfocused interactions” (Goffman 1963, 24) between urban actors, claiming space is often the natural continuation of the momentum of a sequence of events in time and space, or of a motion whose absolute origin cannot be identified but always proceeds from a force indicating its direction. The more forcefully the intention to proceed is signalled to the other the more probable that the demand will be granted.

The spaces that are being claimed here may be constituted as intersubjectively binding symbolic or signalled boundaries, obstacles, passages, or openings. They may be experienced as container-like space (Schroer 2006, 174 ff.), such as rooms in a religious building, rooms in a government office, the cabin of an elevator, or a garden surrounded by a fence, among others. But sometimes the claimed space is experienced as a fragile entity whose boundaries are permanently challenged. One example would be the temporary mobile space that a cyclist claims in a pedestrian precinct: projecting it in the direction of motion, signalling it to others, riding through it, and at the same time propelling it before her. The space is communicated by warning signs announcing the rider’s reduced willingness to communicate: a bell or a whistle, a determined expression, or simply maintaining the speed of approach.<sup>16</sup> Traffic psychology uses the concept of the “corridor” for this spatial phenomenon.<sup>17</sup> (Note

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16 In order to assert his claim the actor may make a point of avoiding eye contact with the other. “(...) if a pedestrian wants to ensure a particular allocation of the street relative to a fellow pedestrian, or if a motorist wants to ensure priority of his line of proposed action over that of a fellow motorist or a pedestrian, one strategy is to avoid meeting the other’s eyes and thus avoid cooperative claims” (Goffman 1963, 94).

17 The term “corridor” comes from traffic psychology (applied to developing driver assistance systems), where it is used to visualize the initiated path of a car driver’s motion and the associated obstacles (Piechulla et al. 2002). The same concept appears in air traffic control with the “flight corridor” for the aircraft and pilot. In sociological terms this is not only about the moving actor visualizing her own movement, but includes actors who encounter her or are standing or moving nearby. If we consider the enormous technical achievements required to create the head-up display used by pilots we start getting an idea

also that in addition to physical and social space, time is claimed and granted, too). Space-claiming behaviour is as a rule answered with space-giving behaviour. The counterpart steps aside bodily – with or without any technical and social extensions – to make way for the other. In terms of the time dimension this means that the counterpart accedes and waits, postponing or abandoning the originally intended temporal sequence of activities, giving time to the claimant. The affirmative act of making space or time completes the situational ranking.

Especially in dense urban settings, the claiming and granting of space and time by many individuals may occur at such high frequency that they are experienced as a single event. This perception, along with avoidance activity's redundancy and casualness, is why its significance is often underestimated. As so often, the haste of motion and the visual fixation on its direction (here fixation on and motion towards urban indifference) blind us to the obvious: we do not see the wood for the trees. What we miss specifically is deeper insight into the reproduction, variety and experience of group-based power structures in cities.

To illustrate this let us take a detour into a subject that at first glance appears to be unrelated. The car industry places great import on the status and prestige of its products. A driver who sees the characteristic flashy front of a Ferrari in his rear-view mirror is more willing to move out of the way to allow it to overtake than one who sees a Smart or a Mini.<sup>18</sup> Such situational rankings occur not only on the motorways but wherever people's everyday paths cross, with habitus playing the role of the car's radiator grille and headlights. In everyday encounters in social space, lifestyle attributes, dialects, extreme deference, ostentatious reference to a full diary, allusion to one's own superior reputation woven into a compliment to the other, and finally being made to wait (for example in a waiting room) can all serve as effective expressions of status and prestige and cause others to change or even abandon their spatial and temporal intentions.

Analogies from road transport could lead to the misconception that situational ranking primarily concerns pedestrian precincts and urban road networks. A different example shows that this is not the case. Goffman cites it to show that avoidance activity can place interaction partners in the role of non-persons, especially if

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of what pedestrians and other actors must accomplish, day in day out, simply in order to move through a space of encounters.

18 About 29% of German car drives would give way to a Ferrari instead of 3% for a Mini or a Smart. (Result of a survey study performed by the Marketing Company GEWIS, published in the Lifestyle Magazine *Men's Car*, 31th of 2005.)

they are given no chance to feign indifference. “When two unacquainted couples are required to share the same booth in a restaurant, and they elect to forego trying to maintain an inclusive face engagement, one couple may tacitly give way to the louder interaction of the other. In these situations, the submissive couple may attempt to show independence and civil inattention by beginning a talk on their own. But while it may appear convincing to the other couple, this weaker talk is not likely to convince its own participants, who in carrying it on, will be admitting to each other not only that they have been upstaged but that they are willing to try to pretend that they have not. It may be added that strength in these cases derives not from muscle, but, typically, from social class” (Goffman 1963, 158).

These everyday interactions of situational ranking play out without symbolically generalized communication media such as money or organizational power having to come into play, for “social right of way” does not derive mechanically from a person’s position in the social structure. Whereas on the motorway the Mercedes driver tends to possess higher social status, in the street-corner milieu a socio-structurally inferior corner boy can force the luxury-car-driving businessman to detour around him. Hierarchies change depending on the milieu in which people meet.

The interaction sequences of ranking activity, as already mentioned, almost always conclude with a spontaneous act of making way. But sometimes this normally brief sequence gets drawn out, for example by reciprocal irritation or even unexpected resistance that can in turn lead to confrontation and conflict. In the latter case the originally intended direction of motion of the avoidance activity may be changed or even reversed. If a singular exception to a previously ingrained interaction is subsequently emulated and an established pattern replaced by a new one, power relations that had until recently been regarded as timeless and permanent may be transformed. If I am no longer able to presume that my opposite number will avoid me in the way I am familiar with – or if she/he even deliberately challenges me, ignoring the prospect of collision – then the ingrained power hierarchies and intergroup relations of the lifeworld could be called into question.

Hierarchy-altering changes in the interaction of social groups may be unspectacular, but nonetheless have profound consequences for the everyday experiences of those affected. As an example I cite an observation from 1997 that shows how established residents in the Duisburg district of Marxloh experience the refusal of the former “guest workers” and their descendants to remain on the social margins in work and housing and their ensuing claims to space in new areas.



**Kebab**

Around midday I land by chance in a respectable bar on Wiesenstrasse, about 500 metres from Schwelgern Stadium. Three older men, all around sixty, are sitting at the long bar drinking beer. The topic of discussion is the death of a friend a day or two ago.

A great many wreaths have been donated: by the Social Democratic Party, by relatives, by the miners' welfare society, and so on. "There might be about twenty wreaths or so coming." It turns out that the deceased ran a bar that will now have to be sold. They wonder who will take it over. A "pretty and hardworking barmaid" is discussed as successor. And then, with clear aversion: "Or a Turk – after all, they already run almost all the businesses round here. They'll probably turn it into a café." "Another café? There are already four or five round the corner. How do they make their money?" To which the first responds with a wry smile: "With café [coffee]!" Everyone laughs. "Yes they've already got all the take-aways with their kebab, or whatever you call it." The second confirms: "Kebab". The third chimes in: "And the barbers! The barbers are already all Turks!"

As I have spelt out in greater detail elsewhere (Hüttermann 2000a), from the perspective of older established Duisburg residents, migrant incomers invade the spaces of the residential public sphere and transgress unspoken status divisions in the use of space. The symbolism of identity-affirming space, which determines the experience of the older generation of established (autochthonous) residents in the residential public sphere, is overwritten as the symbols of the migrant incomers develop and expand. Established residents feel forced to avoid incomers, whom they perceive as illegitimate, socially encroaching invaders – for example, by avoiding particular tram stops, and ultimately by withdrawing into the remaining identity-affirming spaces of the district. From the perspective of the established residents, their own formerly central residential environment becomes the periphery. This visible upheaval in the residential public sphere – with the established becoming outsiders and outsiders becoming the established – reconfigures the distinctive nature of the space. With every Turkish shop and café that erects its own symbols and sets its own boundary markers (in the form of Turkish advertising texts, displays, or clientele), the accustomed status system of the established residents is further undermined.

Situational ranking is not just about figurations in urban communities that receive immigrants. Avoidance and place taking activity also constitutes, reproduces and transforms gender, generation and class figurations – as well as, for example, the relationships of fan and lifestyle groups whose demarcation behaviour is of constitutive significance (as in football). And as Bourdieu shows, figurations are at work in fields where actors mark out terrain by making fine distinctions designed to maintain

distance (Bourdieu 1984). By the time the imitating, simulating parvenus have moved into a previously exclusive field of cultural consumption, the elites have long since moved elsewhere, in order to uphold the usual power differential.

The social phenomenon of situational ranking is not restricted to the pavement or the residential environment, but affects the widest variety of figuration fields. Let us consider a historical anecdote that Gabriel Tarde cites to illustrate his sociology of imitation, which concerns neither the housing estate nor the shopping centre, but the figurative field of the theatre. According to Tarde the French Revolution really began in the years before 1789, when the bourgeois audience in Paris stopped obediently applauding the plays that always premiered at Versailles (2003, 223). The refusal to applaud means more than simply not clapping; it is the expression in body language of the rising Parisian bourgeoisie's refusal to continue bowing to the right of the Versailles aristocracy to set artistic trends. Instead of obediently clapping (and thus accepting and endorsing the elite's claim to predominance), the rising bourgeoisie drew a line of resistance against the ruling social group in the figurative field of the theatre. It staked a claim to the terrain of high culture.

## 2.2 *Situational Ranking in Urban Life*

Interactions of situational ranking perform at least three functions in everyday life:<sup>19</sup> First, intergroup relations are generally shaped in passing through the execution of avoidance activity, in the process establishing power balances that survive far longer than any limited interaction episode. Second, the same process reveals intergroup relations to the participants. Third, interactions of situational stratification objectify, change and endorse these relations depending on whether space-claiming activity is answered with giving ground, holding firm or active resistance. Valuable data can be obtained from both defensive avoidance activity (avoiding collisions and conflicts by deviating from the intended course) and offensive space claiming (maintaining the original course despite danger of collision, while assuming the other will give way). The analysis of this data supplies us with negative patterns that – with adequate illumination – map local conflict constellations and dynamics and also document the everyday experience of group-based power differentials and figuration processes in the urban community.

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<sup>19</sup> Section 2.2 as a whole draws heavily on Goffman's work on the "territories of the self" (1971, 28 ff.).



Urban situational ranking is, as we have said, initiated by space-claiming acts. If we observe the sequence of a single episode of situational ranking in everyday life at least two sub-sequences can be identified: the claim, and its affirmation or negation. Requests to enter or occupy spaces that conform to the formal or informal norms of everyday life are normally granted. The generally casual request is followed by the expected consent, ratified by change of motion. In a situation of unfocused interaction among physically present individuals, the granting of consent is announced in advance by a fleeting change in eye or body movement. But a claim to space can also be answered with hesitation or delay, and reciprocally considerate avoidance manoeuvres can themselves lead to collision. Apologies communicated in the form of a reciprocal smile (a quasi-incidental declaration of non-aggression) mostly defuse and end such episodes quickly and inconspicuously.

Sometimes those interactions are anything but comical. Both parties can keep to their original course despite perceiving a danger of collision, and this marking out of their motion corridors, and even more so the determined and ostentatious (doubt-excluding) movement of the approaching bodies (or vehicles) communicate that a claim to space is being made and will be pursued by all means – with one goal the incidental clarification of the balance of power on which the avoidance interaction is based.

The claim to be allowed to occupy a motion corridor marked by direction of gaze and movement is answered with a corresponding counter-claim. In a situation of looming collision, whoever hesitates first loses this episodic fight – unless the one who stops first transposes the physical “conflict before the conflict” onto a different plane through motion and facial expression (possibly also gestures). If stopping is not to be understood as losing, the conflict must be continued with different “weapons”. In this version of the game of chicken, whoever stops (body or vehicle) inevitably also gives up their corridor, because the corridor exists only as long as it is being claimed through motion or communication of direction of motion. If the motion stops, the claim to the corridor collapses, along with the corridor itself. If the one who stops wants to prevent this collapse, she must directly enter the space of verbal communication (or gesticulation) and occupy it assertively with her claim. Otherwise she would appear deferential.

Personal spaces are as insecure as corridors. They are fragile because an attack on personal space is immediately understood as a possible attack on personal – if not indeed physical – integrity. Because they are sacrosanct, the boundaries of personal space are especially vulnerable in conflict escalation. Personal spaces are also

vulnerable because they expand or contract depending on the social situation and power differential (Goffman 1982, 70). Misjudging a social situation, and thus also the extent of personal space claimed by another person, can also give occasion for conflict. As the saying goes, we may feel someone has “trodden on our toes”.

We draw the bounds of our personal space closer in the crush of a packed lift than in a half-empty tram. Celebrities pursued by paparazzi or VIPs with bodyguards define their personal space more expansively than other city-dwellers. Powerful cliques in the street-corner milieu claim a larger territory than subordinate cliques. A person who enters an otherwise empty tram carriage and sits down directly beside a lone traveller is generally regarded as intrusive – even if permission is asked – unless there is some acquaintance or friendship between the two. Sometimes non-place-bound transitional spaces, like the aforementioned motion corridors, are experienced as personal space extending in the direction of motion (otherwise many conflict escalations in the streets would be incomprehensible). But in general the norm of respecting personal space is ratified over and over again through situational rankings in everyday urban life.

Not all spaces are as fragile as personal spaces or those corridors in which dense flows of urban actors wind their way past, and sometimes jostle against, each other. Some spaces have boundaries (in some cases, legally established) that allow them to be relatively stable. The territories marked by inter-subjectively binding boundaries or symbols include spaces in religious buildings, government offices or cinemas, or a garden or plot of land. Fences, walls, gates, doors, façades, architectural forms, visual, acoustic and olfactory symbols serve (naturally not exclusively) purposes of demarcation. Bounded territories may be fixed or mobile (such as caravans, railway compartments or lift cabins). They may be occupied temporarily or permanently (legitimately and/or legally). Interim territories – such as an occupied park bench, the reserved table at a restaurant, a parking space, bus seats reserved for disabled people or the deck-chair by the pool – are marked not at their boundaries but from the centre outward, through either actual physical occupancy or reservation by means of placeholders that give a symbolic presence to the temporarily absent claimant (such as the notorious towel on the deck-chair or jacket over the chair back).

Fundamentally, the claim for access to and possession of territory can have legal or merely customary authorization. Legal authorization seldom plays a role in everyday situational ranking, because even when conflicts occur in the flow of urban interactions they are almost always resolved by one party simply moving on. They remain brief episodes that pass without legal intervention, or are long since done and gone

by the time the police arrive. The legal institutionalization of boundaries, passages and territorial expansion is less important for research into intergroup figurations in urban life than the inner social logic of the avoidance interactions themselves. In order to reveal that we first have to discover how everyday space-claiming acts – the opening acts of the situational ranking – play out.

The way in which one claims a territory is often partly conditioned by the permeability of the bounds, which in turn is preordained by an underlying more or less variable social order. In principle, hermetically closed spaces that exclude all claims on the territory in question by any actor outside its bounds do not exist in modern open (urban) societies. If no space is outside the law in a modern democracy, someone will always have a right of access – ultimately the state, empowered with the monopoly on use of violence and its police force. So urban spaces are not absolutely exclusive. But nor are they absolutely open. Every supposedly open space has a boundary that is set by other more or less exclusive spaces; this space cannot be claimed without taking into account social boundaries and the danger of collision. Even at the edge of the largest square we come to fences, pavements or road markings. And there are also other actors on this very square, moving to claim their own personal territory or corridor. All the time we are being forced to reassess our situation and recalculate our course. Considering the underlying order of power (or its situative expression), territories are only relatively exclusive or – viewed from the other side – only relatively open.

If urban actors cannot act without space-claiming motion, they also cannot avoid claiming space offensively or defensively. Urban space is claimed in many and diverse ways, depending on what kind of spaces are at issue. Mobile, relatively transient spaces include a motion corridor or the space a photographer claims from a third party when she takes a photograph in a public place or, to take another example, when people discuss over the head of a third party or, finally, the space a person monopolizes by conducting intimate conversations on a mobile phone in the presence of others. Relatively closed spaces are what Goffman refers to as “stall” (1971, 32 ff.). In the first kind of space the claim is conveyed by means of language and non-verbal communication (such as gestures and movements) indicating to the other where, when and how. When a person is standing, a slight a shift of weight or a glance in the direction of movement can suffice to express the corresponding claim (Hirschauer 1999). With relatively closed spaces, access routes and ingrained lifeworld rights are to be observed and (formal and informal) border guards and controls are to be expected. There may be a need to conduct rituals of authorization,

invitation and greeting, which often allow the entry-seeker only conditional access, and only after exhaustive social interaction. Gaining access to closed spaces can be as difficult as passing through a decompression chamber. Talk about the weather and other probing varieties of small-talk serve to equalize the pressure, so to speak – to coordinate the two sides. If our own symbolic capital is insufficient for admission, then references and supporters need to be deployed as well.

The form in which space is claimed also depends on whether space-claiming encounters take place in the *corporate* or in the *corporeal* public sphere of the urban community:<sup>20</sup> The corporate local public sphere is an interaction forum whose actors draw on a corporate habitus and corresponding function and audience roles, and interact with one another in a more or less formally organized and locally accredited social formation. Corporate actors act not as individuals but as expressions of membership roles.<sup>21</sup> Internally, corporate actors exhibit different degrees of differentiation (departments, committees, etc.) and professionalization. Internally and externally – for example, towards other corporate actors – such actors present their corporate identity through letterheads, brochures, programmes, exhibitions, logos, websites, the exchange of business cards, and different types of subject and sector jargon. Dress codes and specific forms of affect control and politeness disclosing the typical corporate “aura” also transport the collective super-individual habitus of corporate actors. All these aspects serve to accelerate processes of opening up that falter in the corporeal world, where they are initiated through eye contact and body posture.<sup>22</sup> In the corporate public sphere, claims to space in the urban community are a matter of bureaucratic procedure involving administrative, political and legal instances (sometimes all at the same time).

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20 The theoretical distinction between corporate and corporeal sphere draws on the concepts of the “*korporativen*” and the “*leibhaftigen Welt*” developed by Fridrik Hallsson (1997).

21 That does not mean that formal membership is always a precondition. Social protest movements, for example, often recognize their own on the basis of external habitus elements, which can then serve as functional equivalents of membership roles.

22 Georg Simmel expresses the delicacy of the initiation of interaction through eye contact: “Of the special sense-organs, the eye has a uniquely sociological function. The union and interaction of individuals is based upon mutual glances. This is perhaps the most direct and purest reciprocity which exists anywhere. This highest psychic reaction, however, in which the glances of eye to eye unite men, crystallizes into no objective structure; the unity which momentarily arises between two persons is present in the occasion and is dissolved in the function. So tenacious and subtle is this union that it can only be maintained by the shortest and straightest line between the eyes, and the smallest deviation from it, the slightest glance aside, completely destroys the unique character of this union” (Simmel 1969b, 358).

Like almost everywhere urban actors meet, in the corporate public sphere interactions tend to be inconspicuous and casual – not only because in an urban community crucial encounters take place behind the scenes (Schabert 1991),<sup>23</sup> but also because such encounters are often hidden behind a screen of time-consuming formal process. The long time spans of the formal procedures that govern corporate interactions often disguise their dynamics. The inconspicuousness of corporate situational ranking is often increased by the way important sequences of activity occur in the corporate shadows, in ill-defined grey area between corporate and corporeal local public spheres. Because this grey area is a neutral place (or a secret space) that comes into existence only through an understanding between corporate actors, there is good reason to count it part of the corporate public sphere. That formal procedure is consciously suspended for defined periods in these agreed contexts only confirms this interpretation.

In the corporeal public sphere, a different sociologic applies to space-claiming avoidance action. Here corporeal actors meet in real time, whether as individuals or as groups (if they are socially delineated). They interact in the medium of their characteristic “made-to-measure” habitus, which must prove its worth anew in every interaction. The “regulation” of encounters and diverging interests here is not accomplished through formal process or negotiation, or through automatic assumptions about going with, after, or round one another. Whenever and wherever the comparably complex and polycontextual lifeworld script of the corporeal public sphere fails and collisions occur, one obvious option is to call on the corporate public sphere to bring about a resolution

### *2.2.1 Situational Ranking in the Corporeal Public Sphere*

An example of a non-centred situational ranking is the typically casual, politely framed encounter on the street or pavement, of which Goffmann writes: “Where the courtesy is performed between two persons passing on in street, civil inattention may take to the special form of eyeing the other up to approximately eight feet, during which time sides of the street are apportioned by gesture, and then casting the eyes down as the other passes – a kind of dimming of lights. In any case we have here perhaps the slightest of interpersonal rituals, yet on that constantly regulates the social intercourse of persons in our society” (2009, 98). Goffman’s described encounter has the drawback of positing symmetrical power between the actors. When men and women or members of different

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23 The space behind the scenes belongs to the local public sphere just as much as the prominent local stages do – for what is “behind” a story is often revealed to the public through gossip, betrayal, journalistic “revelations” and so on.

status groups meet in such situations, it is interesting to observe who lowers their eyes first and who takes the biggest detour around whom. In my view, even in casual encounters, equal status is by no means the rule.<sup>24</sup>

An example of a powerful figuration-building situational ranking in the corporeal public sphere is a brief episode I recorded in 1997, while performing field research in Duisburg city centre. The incident shows how situational rankings bring forth social groups and can contribute to their figuration. In a departure from conventional ethnographic method, I intervene at the end of the observed interaction when I see an opportunity to conduct an experiment.

### **A space-claiming character contest**

Coming into Dellstrasse on the way back from the women's centre, I cross Königsstrasse, Duisburg's pedestrian-zoned shopping thoroughfare. It is a gorgeous, sunny day and lots of people are strolling along the street or sitting at tables in front of cafés and ice cream parlours. Many teenagers sitting on the benches between the court building and the Merkator hall, and people are sitting alone or in groups on the odd chairs with triangular seats and backrests that are distributed on the adjoining piece of grass. Most of the people enjoying the spring sunshine are of the older generation. Between the benches on the boulevard – where a number of adolescents dominate the space – roller-skaters are skating back and forth. I am walking past here at a slow pace when suddenly the loud voice of one of the adolescents startles me. He is wearing sporty clothes in hip-hop style (shiny black track-suit trousers and white trainers with very high soles) and his accent reveals his Turkish roots. Another similarly dressed youth wearing knee and elbow protectors is standing opposite him on roller skates. The former yells at the skater again and again: "I'm going to beat you up, man!" or "Man, I'm going to beat you up!" or "Come here, man, I'm going to beat you up!" At first I do not know whether the threat is meant seriously. After each shouted threat Skater turns away from Yeller, does a round on his skates and completes a little trick – skating down the steps or doing a jump – and turns back to the slowly and threateningly advancing Yeller. After completing each of his rounds, Skater always ends facing his adversary, smiles at him appeasingly and skates backwards while Yeller advances a couple of steps. The pair attract the attention of all the passers-by and the older citizens sitting in the adjacent park. Pedestrians make a big detour round this space-claiming performance. I linger in the vicinity of an underground station entrance to take a closer look at the show – and to reassure myself that this is not the start of a real fight but a public show that the adolescents, at least, are greatly enjoying.

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24 Goffman himself supplies examples where apparently unfocused avoidance interactions consistently weed out unwanted social groups and thus establish group hierarchies and figurations, such as established residents refusing to extend the customary ritual greeting of a nod to newcomers and thus turning them into "non-persons" (1963, 134). But he does not systematically pursue this connection between casual interaction and intergroup figuration.



Then I intervene. I want to know if the youths are consciously occupying the space and deliberately excluding passers-by from it, so I take up a position in the middle of their space. Indeed, within a few seconds Skater comes towards me at high speed, only to brake at the last moment and come to a stop just in front of me. He plainly wants to make me leave the claimed space. When I do not, he repeats the action three times. Now, after each threat from Yeller, he finishes his obligatory circuit with a risky braking manoeuvre at my feet (where I potentially function as a buffer) instead of jumping over the steps. All the while he never looks at me directly but pretends to be completely immersed in his conflict with Yeller. But after this ritual has been repeated fifteen times and more without Yeller giving any sign of actually carrying out his threats and without me retreating, it is clear beyond doubt that this was just a space-claiming show-fight. Perhaps the ritual also served to impress the young ladies sitting on the bench.

Apart from impressing the girls, this scene is essentially a playful variation on the macho character contest (see Goffman 1967, 239ff.). Such character contests were commonplace in public spaces in the rather proletarian northern districts of Duisburg in the 1990s, where they often followed a less playful pattern. Participants in these scenes practise escalation and de-escalation, along with standing firm, holding their gaze, remaining cool, going on the offensive, and so on. They find ample motivation in the fun of acting out habitus elements. The macho virtues trained through such practices are greatly significant for the constitution of gender identity and youth-specific hierarchies in school, peer groups, and home neighbourhoods.

In the present context, however—namely, exploring modes of casual formation of urban intergroup figurations—other aspects of the described episode are more pertinent. The incident shows how an intergroup relationship between a protagonist group and an audience group arises and develops through interaction, and also how a very immediate interaction process brings forth gender groups: “real men” and “admiring girls”. Furthermore, the space-claiming interaction examined here also distances the anonymous mass of bystanders and passers-by by making them afraid and leading them to detour around the scene, thus creating triangular intergroup relationship among protagonists, audience members, and passers-by. This figuration has far-reaching consequences for the urban community. As I have demonstrated elsewhere (Hüttermann 2000a, 2000b, 2000c), these everyday situational rankings between migrant adolescents and older established residents in street-corner milieus are by no means always playful. They can supply material to feed established residents’ ethnicized anti-immigrant gossip, which in turn serves to block the social advancement and deny the space-demanding claims of subsequent generations and keep

them at arm's length socially. Although the described interaction sequence is apparently completely innocuous, in conjunction with many similar interaction sequences it represents both a moment in the figuration process of all migration-based groups in the urban community and an element of the force that drives that process. The example shows how situational rankings not only bring forth intergroup figurations but can also lend them a particular quality: the situation is experienced as oppressive by established residents, who feel confronted with advancing foreign occupiers.

To illustrate another facet of the figuration impact of situational rankings, we can examine the interaction of an established Duisburg woman with potential trespassers and neighbours. It comes from the same field research context as the episode described above: a formerly middle-class district of Duisburg that now has a more proletarian character, and in the eyes of many established residents has been occupied by Turks and gone downhill socially and economically. The woman lived in a house with a garden, and at the time of my field research persons unknown had repeatedly climbed over her fence at night and trampled her garden. Hoping to prevent further incidents, she attached a sign to the fence bearing the words "Attention! Painted with pig fat".

This case is not a self-contained interaction, because nobody knows who was actually involved in the trampling. In terms of figuration sociology, it represents the intended opening sequence of a situational ranking. There are two important points to note here: First, the lady addresses her message to vandals she believes have a Muslim background, presuming that their religious convictions would deter them from touching pig fat, and certainly from clambering over a fence coated with it. Second, this opening sequence of an situational ranking acquires figuration-building impact at the point when the Turkish neighbours notice it, understand that the message on the sign places them under blanket suspicion, and finally draw from this curious incident their own conclusions about the ways of their "Christian" neighbours. All in all this situational ranking, however incomplete, is grist to the mill of malicious gossip on both sides in the process of figuration-building between the two population groups in a neighbourhood.

### *2.2.2 Situational Ranking in the Corporate Public Sphere*

When actors in an urban community address their local interaction partners with manifestations such as letterheads, brochures, programmes, exhibitions, logos, websites, the exchange of business cards and through different types of jargon they are operating in the corporate public sphere, another arena where we can observe figu-



ration-building avoidance (and displacement) behaviour. While the idea that pedestrians are involved in constant avoidance interaction is immediately clear to anyone who reflects on their casual course corrections as they navigate their way along a pavement or across a public square, it is not so obvious that local institutions, associations, parties and businesses are also connected through interactions of situational ranking. How do corporate actors move? And in what medium or space do they meet?

Indeed, in my field research on corporate actors and their interactions in different urban communities, I have never come across actors who lack clear ideas about the spatial aspects of their situation. Rather, coordinates that span up and down, near and far, centre and periphery provide contours for the thicket of the local urban lifeworld, without which these actors would not be able to coordinate plans with or against one another. Even if actors communicate only in virtual space, they make assumptions about shared and diverging “starting points”, they look through “windows”, they “climb levels”, they overcome “firewalls” or are repelled by them, they enter or leave “chat rooms” and they find “leaks”, they interact online before meeting up in “real space”. They draw on underlying assumptions about “common ground”. The underlying spatial dimension is always a correlate of every interaction. Without taking for granted the reciprocity of lifeworld-ingrained spatial perspectives presupposed in routine activities, interaction could not take place at all. Indeed actors holding “mistaken” assumptions about the boundaries, centres, positions, edges and hierarchies of their common space can cause conflicts. But the simple fact that those conflicts do not occur in every moment of interaction confirms the rule that in everyday life these assumptions are taken for granted (Schütz 1973, 7ff.).

But let us return to the corporate urban community and the (however tenuous) reciprocity of spatial concepts to which the performative stance of interacting corporate actors refers. This reciprocity is constituted by marking, placing, and defending relevant positions, boundaries and distances and by coordinates defining up and down, inside and outside, and so on. Some examples that highlight the casual constitution of these relational spatial: In “typical” German urban communities, local sport clubs cooperate and compete with other local societies, as well as with the council sport department and with the “distant” “higher” ruling bodies of their sport, distancing groups whose behaviour or characteristics they do not accept and submitting to local constraints set by the municipal administration or local politics. Allotment associations approach the police if they are affected by vandalism. Pressure groups campaign against mosques that seek to put their religious symbols in the local public

sphere. Planning departments and local politicians also step onto the public stage in such conflicts. Here negotiating positions are adopted and set in relation to one another so as to produce a place-related negotiating space. The negotiating partners “stake out territory”, “advance” or “retreat”, “side-step”, meet on “neutral ground”, “rebuff”, go “a step further” (or refuse to), “end up where they started”, generate an “overlapping consensus” (Rawls 1993, 133ff.), define a “bottom line” and perhaps sometimes even arrive at a “finish line” somewhere between their minimum and maximum goals.<sup>25</sup> But sometimes negotiating partners feel they have been “led up the garden path”, “let down”, “stood up”, had their options “narrowed”, and so on. They find a “golden mean” after they have finally “broken cover”.

All these negotiating, coordinating, and cooperating interactions could not be described, still less understood in sociological terms, without the spatial connotations and coordinates that participants themselves always supply for their actions. Spokespersons in the corporate local public sphere know very well what “limits” they operate within. They are aware of where “banana-skins” are lurking in this meaning-laden relational interaction space. They know which “gatekeepers” to speak to, which “doors” are opened by support, flattery or ritual gifts, and where leverage can be gained. Fundamentally, corporate “spacemaps” are just as accessible to sociological understanding as those of corporeal actors. Whether we are thinking of a local politician, pressure-group spokesperson, police officer, or the press officer of a major local employer, all corporate actors in the urban community construct everyday definitions that operate within meaningful figurative space and all describe their actions as movement in reciprocally presupposed space.

These spatial ideas of corporate actors are not necessarily further divorced from the spatial coordinates of physical urban geography than the spatial concepts woven into the routines of the corporeal pedestrians in the precinct. Actors on the corporeal local public sphere are responding not to the immediate spatial substrate, but instead orientating exclusively to meaning-laden, signified spaces. Therefore the determination of what spaces corporate actors move in – how they displace, catch, retreat from, stop, go around or rush towards their opposite number – is exactly the same for a local councillor electioneering as for a pedestrian undertaking a shopping trip. As actors in the urban community, both move in the largely unconsciously apprehended meaningful relational space of their local everyday surroundings.

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25 Negotiation, coordination and cooperation discourses are so laden with spatial semantics that the list could be continued endlessly. That the same applies to love discourses and lyrical language is reason enough to call for a “spatial turn” in the cultural and social sciences (Döring and Thielmann 2009).

Let us examine an example of situational ranking in the corporate public sphere of the urban community, again taken from the author's field research. On May Day 1997 the German Trade Union Federation (DGB) planned a rally in Duisburg, to be preceded by a demonstration drawing attention to the dire situation of miners and steelworkers. But when the day arrived, the trade union officials watched powerlessly as most of their members deviated from the agreed route and formed their own march – led by far-left groups aligned with Turkish revolutionary communist parties, whose local leaders occupied only low-ranking positions in the trade union. Certainly the local DGB branch had foreseen no other role for these Turkish comrades than that of obedient marchers. Although this did not result in public conflict, a “new” autonomous corporate actor had nonetheless entered Duisburg's corporate public sphere, signalling that it would no longer comply with the accustomed trade union hierarchy of established “guides” and marginal “protégés”. The distressed “guides” of the “old guard” avoided open conflict. Instead they had to take a step back and treat the new interaction partner more seriously, with an eye to maintaining unity in future labour disputes. Here we observe the emergence of a hierarchy shift in the relationship between longer-established Duisburg residents and the migrant community, one whose repercussions would grow and reverberate far beyond the trade union arena (Hüttermann 2000a).

Another example of a situational ranking in the corporate public sphere that did not lead to open conflict either is the following: During field research in Espelkamp, a small town in North Rhine-Westphalia, my attention was drawn to the local mosque, a “back-yard mosque” run under the auspices of DİTİB.<sup>26</sup> The mosque building is relatively central, in a setting of provisional wartime and post-war buildings from the period when first wartime slave labourers and then post-war refugees were housed in barracks in the town. If not for a number of Turkish-language signs and texts, the mosque building could be an example of perfect architectural assimilation of a corporate actor. When immigrant Mennonites from the former Soviet Union (ethnic German “Aussiedler”) moved into Espelkamp en masse at the beginning of the 1990s and began erecting conspicuous churches, the local mosque decided to follow suit and build its own structure with the striking stylistic characteristics of Ottoman architecture. The council directed

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26 DİTİB (Diyanet İşleri Türk-İslam Birliği or Turkish Islamic Union for Religious Affairs) was founded in 1984 as an umbrella organization of German mosques. It can be regarded as a foreign arm of the Ankara-based DİB (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, or Presidency of Religious Affairs). As a government agency DİB is answerable to the Turkish prime minister (Tezcan 2003a, 62ff.). In 2010 DİTİB represented 896 mosques (<http://www.ditib.de/default.php?id=5&lang=de>), making it the largest umbrella organization of German mosques. On the ground the mosques operate largely independently (Lemmen 2002, 35).

the mosque-builders towards a site far removed from the town centre, but after purchasing it they quickly discovered that planning permission was not to be forthcoming, despite previous promises. The then-mayor later told the author with pride how he had deliberately led the mosque up the garden path. In this example we see how corporate actors move in the public space of the urban community, not just in the aforementioned relational spaces of negotiation and cooperation in local public discourse but also in the relational spaces of real urban geography. This case involves not just taking a rhetorical, argumentative position, but actual architectural visualization and siting. Banks, state offices, branches of big companies, sport clubs or religious buildings – what they all have in common is that their architecture embodies the corporate actor and at the same time situates it in hierarchized local space, where it adopts (and generally competes for) particular positions. Even businesses and associations that tend to keep a low profile, and therefore seek to occupy spatially peripheral positions, confirm by their placing strategy the fundamental configuration of urban geographical space.

The situational ranking around the mosque siting is especially interesting because the mayor adopts two different strategies at the same time: sending the other party on a wild goose chase and banishing it to the back of beyond. Through his combination of the two tactics, the mayor determines the situational ranking interaction. He defends and consolidates not only the power differential between town and mosque but also the ingrained urban hierarchy between the established residents and the Turkish migrant community without provoking open conflict.

### 2.3 *Conflict in Urban Life*

Interpersonal and intergroup relations in the urban community range from mutual indifference to the reciprocal attention of significant others. Interactions shift among different points on this spectrum. The same interaction partner will sometimes be closer to one extreme, mere co-presence, and sometimes nearer to the other, personal attachment. A single interaction sequence can switch from reciprocal equanimity to emotional rejection, influenced by conflicts and other events (catastrophes, accidents, lucky coincidences, and so on). In the extreme case, an anonymous mass can become a community of like-minded souls, or even an angry mob.

The variable intensity of relationship becomes clear in interactions between dealer and drug user, between case manager and unemployed person or between confident established residents and uncertain incomers. In these relations, those involved com-

municate sometimes with and sometimes without respect to individuals, but these and other equally power-laden interactions cannot be conceived of in terms of utter indifference. For here, with aspects of his person manifested in his interaction role, the other enters a social relationship. Thus drug users speak of “my” dealer, patients of “my” doctor and customers of “my” shopkeeper. These relationships may be pre-ordained by functional differentiation but they are by no means stamped by indifference: in an atmosphere of utter social indifference they would not exist. Such relationships are sometimes taken personally by urban actors, transgressing the boundary between intimacy and role mandate by urban casualness.

Impersonal contractual relations conceived for conflict avoidance often cause very personal side-effects. A tenancy contract, an employment arrangement or a casual purchase agreement can give rise to a personal relationship that is a great deal more intimate than the contracting partners intended or perhaps are happy with. Conflict can escalate to the point of verbal injury, showing how personal the relationship actually was. The greater the escalation, the stronger the intention to hurt the social counterpart. And the greater the possibility to exploit personal or biographical characteristics of the adversary, the more injurious the attacks.

The relationship between social groups can fluctuate between interest and dis-interest in the same way. Triggers for these fluctuations can include episodes of local or global conflict and other events that resonate in an urban community. Even those who have not participated directly in conflict events in the communal hallway or on the pavement or in the tram are involved second-hand (for example, through informal gossip or media reporting) and form group-based oppositions that may represent triggerable conflict constellations.

Researchers of rioting have coined the concept of limited “precipitating events” that trigger intergroup conflicts (Horowitz 2001, 4). A precondition for such an event is that bystanders are able to identify with one of the sides originally involved. This presupposes that their experiences in the urban community are spontaneously comparable to the trigger event or can be connected to it. That witnesses fall back on group categories to place themselves in existing local (or global) conflict constellations need not be separately emphasized. But in urban communities, intergroup conflicts far below the riot threshold are also precipitated by individual events. Even in absolutely run-of-the-mill everyday routine, spatially and temporally limited conflict episodes heard and retold serve to enrich an existing conflict constellation with motifs of rejection or debasing of opponents and of solidarity and recognition for

“our side”. Coverage by local informal and formal media transforms occurrences into local events, creating the excitable themes of the urban community.

Conflicts between social groups and individuals can transform friends into enemies or allies into adversaries. But this division is by no means a logical step on the road to indifference and apathy. Often the opposite transpires: the divided parties eye each other suspiciously, each following the other’s every move with great interest in order to be prepared for future confrontation. Each interpersonal or intergroup conflict in urban space can potentially overturn the reciprocal indifference of individual actors and local groups, for in conflict adversaries step forth from the faceless stream of others. Especially in the fear-filled prelude to violent escalation, the flow of passers-by reveals possible rivals, opponents, adversaries and competitors as well as potential allies, supporters and sympathizers – which we identify, casually but by no means indifferently, by their habitus (Eckert and Willems 2002, 1467 f.). Of course this sorting of friends and enemies in the context of looming conflict does not reveal all to everyone; but it is clear that under conditions of ongoing urban conflict, an absolute absence of relationships between social groups cannot be expected.

### *2.3.1 Conflicts in the Corporeal Public Sphere*

Conflicts always arise in the urban community when at least two actors simultaneously seek to occupy a position in a particular interactively constituted geographical or social space in such a way as to exclude or displace the other from this position. If the conflict is institutionalized in a form more sophisticated than an exchange of physical blows, interaction sequences of urban conflicts can themselves take the form of situational rankings.

The following interview excerpt illustrates this with respect to the corporeal public sphere of the urban community. It again originates from field research conducted by the author between 1996 and 1998 in Duisburg North (Hüttermann 2000a). Like the previous examples, the episode related here is to be read against the background of a shift in the balance of power between established and immigrant populations during the 1990s in certain disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

The interview is with a woman who belongs to the autonomous women’s movement. She is involved in integration issues and does legal and social support work in the voluntary sector for adolescents (both established residents and immigrants, especially female) who are affected or threatened by sexual violence. In the interview she attempts to persuade the author that the problems of coexistence between different migration-related groups in Duisburg North are not as dramatic as the autoch-



thorous sector of the local public would have it – as long as a person (especially a woman) knows how to behave appropriately in a given situation. She attempts but fails to play down the problems of casual violence, making her an involuntary “approver” for the kind of figuration-relevant conflicts that affect primarily women and girls of the established population who have to move through the street-corner environment.

**“If they touch me there’ll be hell to pay!”**

(Interview with resident)

Resident (R): Well the way they [immigrants] treat me is not the worst. I can deal with hassle, I really can. I can get angry too.

Interviewer (I): Can you give me an example?

R: Yes, main station, the underground part. I’m standing on the platform, the train comes in. I have my bag with me. I’m turned away slightly to the left. The train comes in past me and stops, I turn to the side and bump into a lad, just a little bit. He had squeezed his way through, and I hadn’t noticed him at all. He turns round and looks at me, right in my face. We stare at each other. He really has a violent look about him. So I look at him and say: “Something up? You got anything to say to me?” Then he goes in without a word, goes in and sits down. Some of the other kids want to jump in. “That’s our friend, our mate.” So I say, “He can speak for himself, can’t he? If he’s got something to say, then he should say it to my face, he should stand up and say it to me.”

Well, was I scared? I wasn’t scared, not a bit. I was just furious because his eyes were daggers, yes. I say ... then I get furious too. ... And I have no problem about making a big fuss. That’s clear from the start. And they often aren’t used to that, how loud I can get.

I have sometimes experienced situations that were pretty tricky. One time they got out with me and went very close in front of me, they were all as old as my son and daughter. All born in ’77, ’76, ’75, maybe ’76, I don’t know, at any rate that age group, that kind of size.

So I saw, one walked in front of me and one behind me and me in-between. And I tell you, I already had a biro in my hand. That’s something I’ve learned, self-defence, with regular refresher courses. I told myself: “If they touch me there’ll be hell to pay!”

I: And they didn’t say a word?

R: No, there were three of them and you know what, they were more than a head taller than me. One walked behind me and the other two walked calmly alongside, I was properly boxed in and thank God I had no bag with me that day, thank God no bag.

I just wanted to say with my body language: “You’ve got no chance.” And I wanted to watch how they react to fear, to body language. And I was so angry, I wasn’t scared, I was just waiting for something or other to happen, like an animal. Pretty strong stuff isn’t it?

The interview subject's assertive reaction to a threatening conflict situation is the exception that proves the rule: Because actors from the street-corner milieu possess the ability to mobilize spontaneous superior power in the event of conflict, they generally appear to the autochthonous population as an overpowering united force. Resistance appears futile. In the first conflict, the interview subject asserts herself by cleverly interrupting the solidarity forming among the adolescents and implicitly pointing out to her adversaries that it would be dishonourable to fall back on the group in a conflict with an individual. Here she hits the raw nerve of the adolescents' subculture, where the source of (gender) honour and status is rule-violating demonstrations of power towards members of the public, especially females and established residents. When the interview subject says she was not scared, she contradicts the youths' inherent belief that women should be frightened by young men's space-claiming demonstrations of power. That it takes an exceptionally assertive woman who is not prepared to let herself be humiliated (itself a provocation to her opponents) highlights the impact these ostentatious expressions of power and widespread threatening encounters in deviant street-corner society (which neighbours perceive as Turkish) have on the quality of life of residents, especially female residents. Only by virtue of her exceptional vocal and rhetorical abilities and regularly renewed self-defence training is the interview subject in a position to spoil the adolescents' macho power games and defuse their threats. Her account gives us an idea of how other female residents must have experienced such combative situations towards the end of the 1990s.<sup>27</sup>

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27 While the deviant Marxloh street-corner society is often perceived as Turkish by the established residents, I would warn against a cultural interpretation. Although lifeworld honour concepts like *namus* and *sherif* play a special role both in the Turkish society of origin and in Turkish migrant populations (Strobl 1998, 95ff.), before jumping to the conclusion that ethnic cultural concepts of honour on their own bring forth a fear-inspiring street-corner society, we should note that the sociology of deviancy has long known that relative deprivation, spatial marginalization, adolescence and membership in the underclass are often associated with macho posturing and sub-cultural struggles for status, honour and power (Miller 1958). What at first sight appears ethnic and cultural is, following Miller, in fact an interaction of conditions of class and culture, community, and development psychology (constitution of male gender identity), and not unconnected with failure of labour market integration (Foster 1974, 179ff.; Eckstein 1984, 31ff.; Anderson 1998, 66ff.). It thus becomes apparent that the macho and fear-inspiring street-corner society is an expression of the spatialization of social inequality – a question that no discussion of ethnic cultural mentalities of particular population groups can get around.



The local malicious gossip portrays adolescents as a group of encroaching pariahs occupying the local space, against which the established population possesses no effective leverage. There are quite tangible reasons for this perception: Contrary to the belief of large parts of the corporate urban community in Duisburg (including the police), figurative power in the local public sphere in certain districts is based not on the law or a monopoly of violence guaranteed by the police, but on a completely different sociologic. Where it is exercised and socially reproduced on the streets and pavements of a residential neighbourhood, power is based instead on the ability to rapidly mobilize and demobilize superior force in episodes of conflict. When conflict situations arise (mostly spontaneously and below the threshold of criminal activity), the police are usually not even called, as everyone knows that by the time they arrive the aggressors will have left the scene.

Thus every individual conflict with the street-corner society challenges the spatialized and established urban hierarchy just as much as the advance of migrants into new market segments (in the 1990s catering, clothing, hairdressing and travel agents).

### *2.3.2 Conflicts in the Corporate Public Sphere*

To examine the figuration impact of conflicts in the corporate public sphere I once again draw on examples from my field research in Duisburg. Part of that research investigated the everyday police work and the everyday life of the neighbourhoods, in pursuit of the socio-ecological question whether and how everyday police practice is affected by the social structure of different districts. The following example deals with the interaction of the Duisburg police with members of the local PKK section in the second half of the 1990s. The PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, or Kurdish Workers' Party) is an internationally active revolutionary cadre party whose armed wing has been fighting since the late 1970s for a Kurdish nation-state independent of Turkey. It has many supporters, especially in Duisburg South.<sup>28</sup>

Before outlining the conflict episode itself, I will first present a few thoughts concerning the particular logic of the police as an institution. These are based on ethnographic field research which I conducted in 1998 within the police department of

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<sup>28</sup> The PKK was the only political force organizing violent intergroup conflict in the urban community during this period. The conflict, which escalated in 1995, was structurally conditioned by its trans-national aspect, namely, the civil war between the PKK and the Turkish army in parts of eastern Turkey. But incidents were also triggered locally. For example, spontaneous public celebrations by Turkish football fans following a European Championship qualifying match between Turkey and Sweden gave rise to Kurdish counter-demonstrations that ended in street fighting and barricade-building.

Duisburg (Hüttermann 2003). Although certain changes may have occurred since then through the recruitment of women and members of ethnic minorities, I believe that the observations from that time reveal fundamental traits of the interaction of corporate actors in widely differing sectors of the urban community. In principle it is irrelevant whether we are dealing with sociological research institutes, social work organizations, clubs and societies, or religious institutions; what all these actors have in common is that their interactions with other actors are shaped not solely by typical formal or sectoral measures and decisions but also through habitus practices that become “second nature.” Such practices are never reflected on consciously, or only in exceptional cases. Habitus describes the internal and above all externally effective enactment and symbolic reproduction of competence, reputation, power and (official) charisma – sometimes also charm – for the purpose of treating the opposite person instrumentally.

Corporate habitus builds on a broad spectrum of strategies and tactics, incorporated through training or acquired informally and combined and configured for the specific branch, setting and milieu. We have already spoken of business cards and logos. But they only hint at the sheer inexhaustible reservoir of corporate habitus techniques.

When we think of the police, what springs to mind first is the uniform. We know that the uniform serves an ideal-typical function in incorporating the individual body and the individual person into a superordinate corpus or corporate identity. Wearing a uniform, the individual actor incorporates the habitus of the entire corporation for which it stands, and in the same way, through the uniform the super-individual corporation incorporates the body of the individual actor. The meaning of the uniform for the constitution of the corporation and its interaction with other actors in the urban community is, however, greatly overestimated – at least as far as the police are concerned. Similarly, the associated paradigm of *uniforming*, according to which the individual encounters the corpus and incorporates its ethos (or camaraderie), through training, drill and the uniform itself, is outdated. The process depends much more on the more or less subtle practices that clothe the corporate actor such that everything of importance has already been said before anyone opens their mouth.

The outward habitus of a typical uniformed police officer is characterized by unapproachability. This starts with the voice, which the officer tries to keep as deep and serious-sounding as possible and to enhance with patriarchal overtones. An upright posture, a firm gaze and a decisive, space-claiming gait dispel any indication of shakiness or shakability. The instrumental objective of this manifestation is

to maintain a certain equidistance from all citizens and thus to exclude any kind of attempt to curry favour. Rhetorical escalation or insults can thus be met with routine equanimity.

**Thick-skinned**

On patrol in Duisburg-Hüttenheim I am conducting an interview with a policeman. We drive past a young man who grins at us mockingly. The officer remarks, "Fatty there used to provoke me by his behaviour. But routine makes you thick-skinned."

Another general aspect of the corporate habitus of a typical uniformed police officer is his efforts to leave those he deals with in the dark about his intentions and to cultivate a certain aura of impenetrability. He does this by minimizing facial expression and maximizing reserve. This also helps him to remain calm in the face of potentially insulting or provoking expressions, because if you do not show your face you cannot lose it. Contrary to common prejudice, the police are better equipped than the average citizen to deal with tricky situations as members of civil society, without conflict escalation and above all without violence.

The maintenance of impenetrability creates a sense of insecurity in others that a police officer trained in his habitus work knows exactly how to deploy and exploit. Sowing insecurity is the first and most subtle means of repressing or preventing conflict, one the typical police officer is capable of applying long before the option of public order measures or legal penalties come into the (interaction) game, still less the exercise of the use of force. Insecurity about the officer's intent can also be generated through economical sequences of quickly spoken short sentences and instructions conveying different degrees of annoyance. This tactical exasperation is designed to tell the "customer" that the police have many more important things to deal with than the current situation, and evokes guilt for keeping the police from addressing their real responsibilities. Furthermore, it immediately warns anyone who has dealings with the police to forget about trying on charm or humour, still less "unnecessary" critical remarks. This corporate facial and vocal armour crushes any casual lifeworld interjection. The generally successful corporate stance is that the citizen's first duty is to obey.

Another means to keep the "subject" at a distance and demonstrate both unapproachability and the immutability of procedure is always to retain the initiative in communication. For example, if a driving licence or other documents are missing

at a vehicle check, the typical police response is to ask a quick succession of precise questions demanding the personal details of the person being checked (number plate, destination, names of neighbours, other identity documents, and so on). The questions and instructions often follow so quickly that the citizen – especially if reticent or uncooperative – hardly gets a pause for breath. If he or she tries to pause or cannot answer a question, the immobile expression of the officer offers no reaction and certainly no sympathy. Only when the details and identity papers, however incomplete, have been verified over the radio, and the subject has been left to wonder about his or her fate for a short interval, are the papers handed over with the welcome words “Drive carefully!”

The core components of the typical police habitus also include a quasi-educational strictness, especially towards actors from deviant milieus, migrant communities and the social underclass. The strict manner is accentuated by a quasi-fatherly helpfulness and courtesy towards “deserving” citizens, especially women, children and old people, rounding it off to create a patriarchal whole.

The special language of the police is a supplementary element of their corporate habitus. General and local abbreviations, codes and jargon naturally serve to accelerate and standardize the flow of information, ensuring that the communication and response of the police force as a whole is as rapid as possible (which is sometimes a matter of life and death).<sup>29</sup> But it should not be overlooked that the special jargon also ensures that others are aware of the corporate membership of each individual police actor. In that sense, the special language also functions as a kind of acoustic skin of the corporate body, reminding it of its unity and announcing it as a super-individual unit towards outside actors.

The use of force distinguishes the corporate police organization and the incorporated individual from other corporate actors.<sup>30</sup> In everyday police work, the immediate use of physical force – especially the professional ability to apply it in moderation as a “flexible response” – is seldom crucial. Much more important than the imme-

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29 The police use jargon, phrases and codes that outsiders are meant to hear but generally not to understand. Here is a small selection of British examples from a huge field: 100-yard hero, ASNT, Black Rover, blues and twos, BONGO, brief, chink-chink, Code 99, D&D, FATAc, GBH, gravel rash: G.T.P., hobbit, ice-cream, JAFLO, jumper, MOP, NFA, NonDe, obbo, RTA, RTC, SKELL, TDA.

30 The latter must resort to functional equivalents, which may include sporting spirit, team morale, the hunting or angling ethos, the local touch of the politician, corporate charm (in the form of a sales-boosting smile), reference to social capital, showing off expertise, bluff, and many more.

mediate use of force is its mediated auratic function. The possibility of force is a well-established component of the police habitus and a significant resource for their habitus work. The corporate habitus of the individual police officer feeds on the general, normally latent, possibility of the use of force. The components of the characteristic corporate habitus – the strategic unapproachability, the ostentatious immutability of initiated police measures, the patriarchal stance, the calculated intimidation of the subject, and routine reference to the labyrinthine decision-making structures of superordinate authorities – would not join together to form the typical whole without the aura of potential use of force that can be escalated at will. The charisma of office is thus based on the officer's ability to unleash superior force in a conflict situation and, if necessary, to mobilize the superior response of the corpus as a whole to deliver many times the power of the individual actor.

The reproduction and application of outward habitus is ultimately expressed through the fastest possible public deployment of superior corporate forces. The police must never lose a battle on the local public stage, unless they wish to lose their most important capital, namely, the nimbus of a public show of superior force. At no time is this clearer than when an officer in trouble requests urgent help on the radio. Any upstart who might temporarily gain the upper hand must quickly be taught that the power of the whole corpus stands behind the individual officer; only under that precondition can individual habitus work be conducted successfully. Speed is one way to convey this message. The author has never seen police grab their equipment more hastily, run faster or drive more recklessly than in situations where a colleague is in trouble. It is as if the police corpus had received a jolt of adrenaline and responded with all available resources. In such a situation of exceptional tension, anxiety and concentration the individual bodies of the officers (and of the participant observer) merge more closely than ever with the corporate ethos. Even in dangerous overtaking manoeuvres on a busy motorway at 190 km/h, the officers feel no need to put a seatbelt on. In these moments the individual's own body – self-protection orders and training notwithstanding – counts for nothing. It has (from the observer perspective) been completely substituted by an almost completely autonomous corporate body and (from the participant perspective) by an overall ethos that absorbs all individual conscious acts. Such a substitution is not an end in itself, but a means to figuration-building police habitus work.

Let us return to the story of the Duisburg police and the PKK. In Duisburg South in the mid-1990s there was a wave of accusations of anti-Kurdish prejudice on the part of the local police. It was widely alleged that the police were systematically anti-

Kurdish even in issuing on-the-spot fines and other comparatively trivial matters. In fact, even with the worst will in the world the police had no means to distinguish between Turks and Kurds. After consultation between the officers directly affected and their local superiors the following procedure was agreed upon: A Kurd who responded to an on-the-spot fine with a charge of discrimination would be regarded as having disputed the charge (on the grounds that the objection signalled rejection of the charge for which the penalty was actually imposed). The officer would then write out a summons with a response form. "Then he can decide whether to pay. If he doesn't, it goes to court." As a rule, the recipient balked at risking the unpredictable consequences: for him this opened up an unpredictable perspective drawing him into the labyrinthine workings of the corporate process (in this case, the justice system). For members of the PKK, the situation was exacerbated by the ban on their organization imposed in November 1993. Because it was operating illegally, the group had to avoid any conflicts with the law that might have led to broader investigations of their activities.

The PKK and its supporters did not do their standing in the local urban community any good through this and other conflict interactions. Instead, the asymmetry of corporate public power favouring the majority society was consolidated and reinforced, because such conflicts demonstrated how detached the judgement of the PKK section had become from local realities.

Conflicts with corporate actors whose members come from migrant minorities can of course turn out very differently. In 2000 and 2001 the author had the opportunity to observe a conflict over the construction and use of a minaret in Halle/Westfalen (Hüttermann 2006). The conflict ended with a compromise over the height of the minaret, agreeing on a "golden mean" between the height originally demanded by the Muslims and the maximum height the local pressure group had originally been willing to countenance. But the most important outcome of the conflict process, which lasted nearly two years, was a shift in the balance of power in the urban community between established residents and Muslims. In the course of the conflict, the established residents and the mayor himself had to let go of their familiar "guide" role and recognize that the ingrained lifeworld laws of hospitality were no longer adequate to deal with relations with the mosque's builders.

Both sides learned something. Whereas the first generation of migrants had obediently remained on the margins of the labour and housing markets and regarded the patronizing instructions of caretakers, police, foremen and neighbours – always introduced with the words "Here in Germany we ..." – as legitimate, or at least not



to be contradicted, later generations were no longer content to remain in the marginal position allocated to them. The mosque opponents learned that they could not treat the mosque members like the first wave of “guest workers”, and were forced to accept the painful truth that their counterparts were very well-informed about their rights, especially the applicable planning laws. Indeed, on the basis of legal advice from its umbrella organization, and to the surprise of many established residents, the mosque’s leadership even considered pursuing its rights through a legal complaint.

Guests do not complain, but accept the place allocated them by their host. Actors who participate in a public conflict of interests are propelling themselves towards the centre of the urban community rather than accepting a subordinate guest role. The ensuing loss of force of the laws of hospitality, with which the established residents vainly tried to repel the claims of the mosque, brought about a change in the local power differential between incomers and established residents. The mosque’s learning to rely on the all-inclusive law of the land rather than submitting to the restrictions of the laws of hospitality also contributed to the shift in the local balance of power.

It is as if the Muslims had immigrated to the urban community a second time. First they came as individuals and families who steered clear of conflicts at work and outside it, and followed the instructions and advice of their numerous “guides”. Later they moved into the urban community again as corporate actors, claiming architectural space and making themselves visible and audible. While the first arrival was relatively inconspicuous, the second brought visible local conflict. Following this conflict, the balance of power in the urban community has shifted towards the equal stature that the incomers – now appearing as visible corporate actors – have aspired to.

### 3 Situational Ranking and Conflict in the Boundary Zone

With their model of in- and out-groups, earlier sociologists reinforced the idea that the “we” of a social group is homologous with an enclosed space separate from the surrounding space (cf. Sumner 1940 [1907]). In this absolutely central concept of sociology, social spaces are understood as fundamentally binary: between them is nothing but a demarcation line that belongs to neither group and possesses no extent of its own. If we turn from the abstraction of the model to the concrete events of group interaction, however, we quickly find that actors are well aware that alongside



“our” spaces and “their” spaces there are also transitional spaces, neutral spaces, and in-between zones or interstices used by boundary-crossers. We discover that we must understand boundaries not as abstract lines but as spaces, often very complex layered spaces, if we are to have any hope of reconstructing the complex interactions of social groups.

### *3.1 Boundary Zones between Urban Groups*

Situational ranking becomes particularly complex where encounters do not occur directly face-to-face but are mediated through third parties (e.g., boundary crossers, gatekeepers, representatives or brokers), local social structures, symbolical structures, and material structures (e.g., local urban geography, architecture, infrastructure, and material boundaries like fences, sign posts, gates, etc.). Georg Simmel points out the social nature of supposedly spatial artefacts that influence social relations between individuals and groups. In spite of its often material manifestations it is particularly the boundary which seems to be spatial but is essentially a social fact: “The boundary is not a spatial fact with sociological effects, but a sociological reality that is formed spatially” (Simmel 2009 [1908], 551). Whosoever seeks to research the diverse forms of socialization in public space finds according to Simmel a suitable basis in the social boundary because: “If indeed at first it [the social boundary] had become a spatial-sensual formation that we write into nature independent of its sociological-practical sense, then it has strong repercussions for the consciousness of the relationship of parties” (2009 [1908], 551.). Where actions relate to a concept of a boundary between two social groups, this imagined boundary is objectified and itself acts – as an objectified social relationship – on intergroup relations.

For Simmel, it is clear that relationships between social groups manifest themselves at the social boundaries and in boundary interactions (to stick with Simmel’s terminology, in corresponding “reciprocal effects”). Social boundaries – whether they rest on a material substrate or not – are in turn inconceivable without at least two sides that meet and thus create the boundary as social fact. Boundaries not only determine the topographical structure of group-based social spaces (communities), but also can tell us about the groups’ social hierarchies and power differentials. If, as Simmel assumed, the boundary tells us about social relations between groups (being created by them), and if social boundaries are always artefacts of social practice, then social practice itself must be able to tell us about relations between social groups. The reconstruction of social boundary relationships must therefore begin with everyday

practices at the boundary: The figuration sociology of urban intergroup relations is first and foremost about actors and interactions that – whatever else they may be up to – act on the boundary, at the boundary.

At least five different types of actors and associated forms of practice are characteristic for activity in the boundary zones of modern urbanity (on the first four, see Zinnecker 2006).

1. Benjamin's *flaneur* (1983) moves in the boundaries of social circles on the central stages of urbanity. He basks in a boundless sea of incidental possibility, making sure never to get caught up in a situation. He floats above social spaces and their boundaries.

2. The *boundary crosser*, by contrast, commutes routinely from one side to the other. These figures are characterized by their oscillating movement and by their feeling at home on both sides of the boundary. Everyday boundary crossers include commuters, police on patrol, taxi drivers, doctors, delivery drivers, visitors, and so on. The ways they travel and the rites of passage they submit to (welcome, farewell, small-talk) constitute spatial and temporal transitional zones.

3. Unlike the commuter who goes to “the other side” temporarily, the *side changer* moves completely and permanently. Approvers, refugees and converts are typical side changers. Often the move is anticipated beforehand, in a kind of inner emigration where one is no longer still here and not yet quite there, but somewhere in-between. On the journey to the other side, this third place acquires attributes that concretise its abstract existence.

4. The *pioneer* overcomes the boundary without heed for resistance or risk. To one side pioneers are infiltrators, to the other explorers who shift and overcome an accepted boundary between known and unknown, thus expanding the territory.<sup>31</sup> (An example would be the first Turkish landlord to buy a rental property in Duisburg and thus encounter established tenants in the unfamiliar role of a landlord.) The resistance and difficulties pioneers experience on their passage delineate the extent of the social boundary zone and the permeability of the boundary.

5. The *urban conflict actor* defends “his” territory at a more or less fixed boundary line and repels space-claiming incursions into boundary zones and vulnerable in-

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31 The first four types described here were originally developed in the context of spatial boundaries, but they can be expanded to apply to the social boundaries of hierarchy or coexistence between social groups on the different figuration fields of the urban community. Or put another way, they serve as heuristic models for understanding urban intersubjectivity modes and intergroup relationships.

between spaces. Conversely, she also treats the existing boundary line as provisional and, given the opportunity, shifts it on her own initiative. This tug of war along highly charged boundaries, whose history permeates the boundary zones, transitions, hinterlands, and other in-between spaces, is naturally a source of conflict.

So what do these boundary actor types, and others yet to be identified empirically, tell us about the quality of urban intergroup relationships? First of all, they indicate where resistance and obstacles lurk on the paths through local relational space. If we succeed in tracing the everyday strategies of resistance, transgression, avoidance and repression of urban actors, we uncover something like a topography of the figurative fields or even – if we succeed in gaining an overview of the ensemble of figurative fields of the urban community – the broader inter-field topography of urban figurations. Furthermore, if it can be shown that one group of actors, drawing on symbolic, social, economic or cultural capital or deploying formal or informal border guards, overcomes resistance in a given figurative field while another group tends to give ground and retreat, this tells us something about the power differential in the relationship between these interacting groups in the urban community. Such an analysis would reveal, beyond surface events, the depth structure of urban intergroup figurations.

### 3.2 *Between Corporeal and Corporate Actors*

Spaces are claimed, defended, opened and closed not only within the corporeal sphere and within the corporate sphere but also in the zones in between these two sociological spheres, where interacting actors jostle against one another, advance and withdraw, and create boundary zones. Depending on how the actor feels about them, such boundary zones can be experienced as places of freedom, evasion, or fear-laden transition. I will describe here just one typical pattern of situational ranking in the boundary zone between corporate and corporeal sociologic in Germany: the interaction between the corporate welfare state, in the guise of the local branch of the employment agency, and corporeal actors of the urban community in the role of the unemployed.

The interaction between the local employment agency and persons falling within its authority generally begins with an “Invitation under paragraph 309 ...”. The point of the invitation, which informs recipients of their obligations and threatens monetary penalties if they are not met, is to bind corporeal individuals into the corporate world of systemic compulsion and procedural rules where they can be shifted and shunted around

and knocked into shape for the labour market (or persuaded to slot themselves in of their own volition). Even before any “face-to-face” encounter the underlying corporate habitus structure at work here is already clear, namely, the double-bind communication.

The “invitation letter” addresses the corporeal individual ostensibly as a customer, but indirectly as a potential shirker who needs to be kept under the watchful eye of the employment agency and can be motivated only by threats of institutional penalties.<sup>32</sup> While addressing recipients as customers suggests that they are being given space to freely articulate wishes and needs, the warnings about duties and penalties uttered in the same breath suggest that they are actually some kind of suspect and are being placed under preventive supervision. The second message of the “invitation” robs the addressee of precisely those freedoms that would be constitutive for any posited customer role. The status of a customer and the status of a suspect are (socio)logically mutually exclusive. The local employment agency uses such double-bind communications to indirectly claim power over private or public space. Whoever can move individuals (literally in some cases) to use public or private space in particular ways (for example, through employment or training measures) also rules over the space itself.

But that is not yet the end of the interaction game in the boundary zone between the corporate and corporeal worlds, for those thus addressed do not automatically give up their individual claims to public and private space. As a rule they attempt to draw the habitus workers of the local welfare state into the world of the individual – who is corporeal, vulnerable and ultimately mortal, and can thus “count on” existential solidarity. In this counter-strategy, empathy for individual distress and difficulty is more important in the world of the vulnerable individual than in the world of procedural rules. A corporeal individual who has drawn a corporate official out of her function role has a chance to push her in the direction required to defend the individual’s corporeal interests. The scope for such situational rankings between corporate process and lifeworld strategy is naturally restricted by the institutional power differential. The institution’s powers of sanction in this situation (disposal of financial benefits and greater knowledge of procedural norms) place superior tools in the hands of corporate actors. But it would be naive to automatically regard their “opponents” as compliant and passive.

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32 Apart from three sentences and a short section formatted as a form for the recipient to tick the relevant answers (to facilitate speed of response), the invitation letter is composed largely of legal instructions and warnings and other notices of obligations. The first invitation letter also states periods for which benefits will be reduced or suspended if the recipient fails to comply.

In this boundary zone, conflict and situational rankings serve as the medium both of shared experience and of the social constitution of local group figuration processes. Thus members of an urban community who fall under unemployment benefits legislation are separated off socially in the described boundary zone in such a way that they perceive and designate themselves as a group. Both the degradation of the “customer” and the counter-degradation of the state appearing behind the mask of the corporate actor are furthered by narratives addressing interactions in the boundary zone.

A situation where the administrators of the local welfare state are mainly recruited from the established residents while their clientele is drawn largely from the migrant community can highlight and amplify the power gap in the relationship between the two groups and in their corresponding figuration. The significance of this issue is last but not least proved by the rise of diversity programs in western societies of immigration (see Vertovec 2012), which are designed to attenuate the negative effects of what is going on in the boundary zone between corporeal and corporate actors.

## 4 Reclaiming Space

We began by asking what methodological and conceptual basis an open-minded sociology of urbanity would require to uncover the interaction relationships of social groups and individual and corporate actors in the urban community. Our answer is that we need a sociology that takes seriously the effects and side-effects of casual everyday actions on space and power figurations. Such an approach is based essentially on the analysis of figuration-building situational rankings and conflicts in the figurative fields of the urban community, which involve both corporate and individual actors. This analysis would shed light on intergroup figuration processes that consolidate or change local power balances. The social process of stabilization or transformation of power balances is in turn of great importance for causal analysis of conflicts between groups and actors in the urban community. As found in modern conflict research, it is dynamic hierarchies and power balances of social groups that trigger conflict constellations, not stable ones.

Supplementary or functionally equivalent approaches for researching intergroup relations and conflict causes in the urban community are not excluded by the method proposed here. Nor can we exclude the possibility of interaction between urban

social groups shrivelling to such an extent that one could no longer talk of an urban community. But a forward-looking and open-minded urban sociology that takes its subject seriously can succeed only by observing the everyday reproduction and transformation of intergroup constellations without any hint of teleological prejudice.

At this point I would like to address briefly the connections and compatibility between the theories outlined above and the young interdisciplinary epistemological debate about space initiated by researchers who believe that the social and cultural sciences have neglected the spatial relevance of their subject matter. As has become clear, I share their concern. This neglect has been fostered by several successive and successively amplifying epistemological turns, each of which may in itself have marked an important epistemological advance and brought new insights but whose cumulative effect was an increasing marginalization of space.

First is the phenomenological revolution in philosophy which, following the big bang of relativity theory, finally robbed space of its Euclidean quality as something supposedly having an independent existence. Philosophical phenomenology conceives space in relation to the historically situated epistemological subject. This view is later augmented by the constructivist perspective inspired by Berger and Luckmann, which understands space as an artefact of social practice. The constructivist belief that what has been constructed may also be modified or deconstructed at will may have contributed to an underestimation of the inertia and shaping power of spatial structures. Finally, in the “linguistic turn” that transforms space into an appendix of discourses of power (Foucault) or rationality (Habermas), space also appears as an ontologically subordinate variable. Finally, completing the job, the barriers of space were epistemologically “overcome” by globalization theory and Luhmann’s system theory. With these latter two past their sell-by date, the question is: where to now?

The answer seems to be that the epistemological tide has turned. Space is making a comeback – along with space-filling and barrier-building material realities – in a way that leaves the global village in the dust. Thwarting the teleological perspective, space articulates itself as resistance, hindrance, opposition or counteraction. For example, we currently see the great cities of our world not only failing to transform into despacialized global cities, but in fact continuing to harbour historically persistent zones of old-fashioned poverty.<sup>33</sup> The spaces of individual nation-states still refuse to merge

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33 In a lecture in Bradford on 11 October 2009, Trevor Phillips (Chair of the British Commission for Racial Equality) showed that more than a century after Charles Booth’s *Life and Labour of the People in London* (published between 1886 and 1903), the socially disadvantaged of London still live in largely the same districts.



seamlessly into supranational units (and may never do so), the most recent example being the manifestations of the financial crisis in Greece, Spain and Italy (in spring 2013). The internet, for all the early visions of a spaceless community of equals it inspired (Schroer 2006, 264ff.), also sets new boundaries and shields exclusive spaces in intranets, behind firewalls, and through government censorship. And the “End of History” trumpeted at the beginning of the 1990s by Fukuyama (1992) looks a little premature as the global military machine of NATO becomes bogged down in the mountains of Afghanistan. So there is evidence aplenty to contradict the expectations raised by the epistemological despatialization of the social and cultural sciences. Spatial hindrances have not been overcome and cannot simply be swept aside, while avoiding them just confirms the existence of spaces of resistance.

In response to this mounting evidence a movement has emerged, explicitly calling for a “spatial turn” in the humanities (Döring and Thielmann 2008; Warf and Arias 2009) or implicitly advancing it without recourse to this label (Fischer and Delitz 2009; Berking 1998, 2006b; Schroer 2006). The challenge its proponents set out to tackle is to create a new research culture that takes space seriously as a social fact, without immediately equating it with extra-social natural space or falling into naive realism.

Martina Löw seems to have found an answer to that challenge, supplying a conceptual (and to that extent constructive) response in her “Sociology of Space”. Her concept of “relational space” – which she conceives always in relation to its heuristic opposite, the extra-social container space – emerges from three different social practices (2008, 50).<sup>34</sup> First, cognitive and/or discursive acts of synthesis (2001, 158ff., 224ff.) are about relationalizing the signs, symbols, images, feelings, memories and perceptions to which we implicitly or explicitly attribute positions, qualities and distances. Second, Löw names practices of placing or “Spacing” (2001, 158ff.) to describe the placing, marking and moving of social goods and people through building, arranging goods, drawing and measuring boundaries, and so on. And in third place, Löw refers to the “practice of naming” which stands for something like the autobiographical self-description of the city (2008, 50). Through this process a city examines itself in relation and comparison to other cities in order to attribute to itself individuality, a special reputation, rank or a singular historical destiny.

Whether or not she regards herself as part of the spatial turn, Löw’s model of the social construction of relational space provides it with a certain conceptual ground-

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34 It is rather suprising that Löw ignores Alfred Schütz’s phenomenological Sociology which already outlined the concept of relational space (see Schütz 1970, 169ff.).



ing. And indeed, the bottom up-approach developed here stressing on situational ranking and conflict fits into the framework she has established: the ranking and conflict interactions discussed above are part of the spacing of which Löw speaks, and the interactions examined here also require the everyday cognitive/discursive syntheses that Löw emphasizes. We have already shown how group identities are attributed by the medium of cognitive and discursive avoidance (e.g., through malicious gossip), and it is equally evident that practices of naming are ultimately also relevant for avoidance and conflict interaction.

This prospect of points of contact and expansion shows that my proposal to study situational rankings and conflict in order to understand urban intergroup relations and urban conflicts is no lonely endeavour. Instead, this bottom-up perspective on intergroup life has to learn from other epistemological and conceptual approaches, from those that respect space as well as from those that radically ignore space and consequently fail.

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