Control and Conflict in Cities: Political Economy, Power, and Resistance

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In the summer of 2014, the streets of Ferguson, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis, erupted in protest following the fatal shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager, by a white police officer.[1] The unrest that followed laid bare the deep fissures of racial tension, economic inequality, and political disenfranchisement simmering beneath the surface of a seemingly ordinary American suburb. This event was not an anomaly[2] but a stark illustration of the

[1] Josh Sanburn, "Ferguson Grand Jury Nearing 'End of the Road,'" *TIME*, November 13, 2014 <https://time.com/3584083/ferguson-grand-jury-testimony/>.

[2] Birmingham race riot in 1963 sparked by police actions against Black residents, the Watts riots in Los Angeles in 1965 following incidents of police brutality, the 1967 Detroit uprising triggered by tensions with law enforcement, the 1992 Los Angeles riots after the Rodney King beating, siurce: Keecee DeVenny, "Police and Protests: The Inequity of Police Responses to Racial Justice Demonstrations," *The Thurgood Marshall Institute at LDF*, May 5, 2025 <https://tminstituteldf.org/police-and-protests-the-inequity-of-police-responses-to-racialjustices-demonstrations/>.

fundamental forces that shape urban life: control and conflict. Nancy Kleniewski and Alexander R. Thomas's *Cities, Change, and Conflict: A Political Economy of Urban Life*[3] provides a critical lens for understanding such moments, situating them within the broader scholarship of urban political economy. This essay will argue that control and conflict are central, dialectical processes in urban development, continually shaped by politicaleconomic structures, the spatial organization of cities, and the persistent struggles over resources and rights.

The political economy paradigm, which forms the bedrock of Kleniewski and Thomas's analysis, traces its intellectual lineage to Karl Marx and Max Weber. This perspective posits that the city is not a neutral container for social life but an active force in the capitalist mode of production. As Kleniewski and Thomas (2019) state a view that "[the] cities are influenced by the mode of production" and mode of production includes "includes the machinery, money, markets, and also the norms, laws, and social relations that accompany different economic system."[4] This framework views urban space as a vehicle for capital accumulation, where conflict between classes drives urban change.

More critical theories of power and space deepen this analysis.

Henri Lefebvre, in *The Production of Space*[5], argues that space is a social product, actively created and controlled by the dominant mode of production. He asserts that under capitalism, "(social) space is a (social) product"[6]. This product is not neutral; it is the site of struggle. The

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[3] Nancy Kleniewski and Alexander R. Thomas, Cities, Change, and Conflict: A Political Economy of Urban Life, 5th edn (London: Routledge, 2019).

[4] Kleniewski and Thomas, *Cities, Change, and Conflict*, p. 37.

[5] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) [6] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 26.

dominant form of this space, which he calls abstract space, is imposed upon the lived, social space of inhabitants. "The dominant form of space, that of the centres of wealth and power," Lefebvre writes, "endeavours to mould the spaces it dominates...and it seeks, often by violent means, to reduce the obstacles and resistance it encounters there"[6]. Lefebvre's crucial concept of "the right to the city" emerges from this conflict, representing not merely a right of access, but a demand for inhabitants to reclaim control over the production of their own spaces.

David Harvey[7] extends these ideas.

He argues that capitalism resolves its inherent crises of over-accumulation by producing new spaces, a process he terms a "spatial fix."[9] In *Rebel Cities*, Harvey describes how "accumulation by dispossession"[10], one of his most influential contributions, operates within the urban realm, dispossessing marginalized populations of their assets and rights to make way for more profitable land uses. This process is relentless, as "predatory practices of the real estate entrepreneurs, the financiers and upper class consumers bereft of any urban social imagination"[8]. For Harvey, resistance to this logic is paramount, because the very act of living in a city shapes our identity. He writes;

“The right to the city is, therefore, far more than a right of individual or group access to the resources that the city embodies: it is a right to change and reinvent the city more after our hearts' desire. It is, moreover, a collective rather than an individual right, since reinventing the

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[6] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 49.
[7] David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London: Verso, 2012) [9] Raju J Das, “David Harvey’s Theory of Uneven Geographical Development: A Marxist Critique,” *Capital & Class*, 41.3 (2017), pp. 511–36, doi:10.1177/0309816816678584. [10] Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, p. 55.
[8] Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, p. 78. [12] Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, p. 4.

city inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power over the processes of urbanization"[12].

This right is fundamentally a collective one, exercised through struggle.

Kleniewski and Thomas thoroughly document how these theoretical forces manifest as concrete mechanisms of control and sources of conflict. They analyze how formal controls like policing are used to manage "problem populations" in ways that echo Lefebvre's theory of violent spatial dominance. The criminalization of homelessness, for instance, is a direct use of state power to control public space for the benefit of commercial interests. In recent years, many cities have made it a crime to panhandle, sleep on the sidewalk, or even sit on the sidewalk for an extended period of time.

As Kleniewski and Thomas note;

"Philadelphia, for example, passed a Sidewalk Behavior Ordinance that prohibits lying on public sidewalks…In Tucson, the city council not only passed a law against sitting or lying on the sidewalks, but also attempted to lease the sidewalks to adjacent businesses, thus making the sidewalks private property and allowing the businesses to control access to them"[9].

This is the abstract space of commerce and order violently erasing the lived social space of the unhoused.

Economic control is exercised primarily by what Kleniewski and Thomas, drawing on Logan and Molotch (2007), call the "pro-growth elites." They define this succinctly:

[9] Kleniewski and Thomas, *Cities, Change, and Conflict*, p. 16.

"economic growth is taken so much for granted as a desirable goal that local governments are often forced into either joining pro-growth coalitions as partners, helping to smooth the path for such coalitions' activities, or at the very least applying regulations to shape growth in ways beneficial to the community while not deterring it too greatly[10]. This coalition's work can be understood through David Harvey's framework as the institutionalization of exchange value over use value. For the pro-growth elites, land is a commodity for profit, not a place for living. Harvey argues this is a core contradiction in capitalism, where use values of the built environment are created, destroyed and re-created...but always in the context of the circulation of capital (Harvey, 1985). The result, as Kleniewski and Thomas describe, is gentrification, displacement, and a city shaped by profit motives rather than human needs.

These mechanisms of control inevitably breed social conflict. The book details how these struggles are articulated along the lines of race, class, and gender. Class-based

neighborhood struggles erupt over the impacts of the growth machine, demonstrating that urban space is never static; it is a constantly contested terrain.

The dynamics described by Kleniewski and Thomas are amplified in a globalized world. Saskia Sassen's work on "global cities" identifies them as command-and-control centers for the global economy, but also as sites of immense inequality. This creates new arenas for conflict, as marginalized populations struggle for their place in a city increasingly oriented toward global capital. Harvey captures the essence of this tension, stating that in the neoliberal city, "In the past decades, the neoliberal turn has restored class power to rich elites"[11].

[10] Kleniewski and Thomas, *Cities, Change, and Conflict*, p. 80.
[11] Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, p. 15.

It is in this context of inequality and privatization that urban social movements arise. Manuel Castells conceptualized these movements as contestations over "collective consumption"— the goods and services like housing, transport, and public space essential for social reproduction. When the state, pressured by growth-machine politics, fails to provide these, citizens mobilize. Kleniewski and Thomas provide a direct illustration of this, observing that "Many local governments experience fiscal distress stemming from the imbalance between revenues and expenses, and a few cities have experienced outright fiscal crises in which they fall seriously short of the income they need to provide the most basic city services"[12] and that "the business community has a collective sense of itself and its needs, and directly influences the plans prepared by government agencies"(p. 80)[17]. Such measurements by [local] governments have led to protest movements. These protests, from struggles for affordable housing to demands for better public transit, are the embodiment of the right to the city in action.

The city emerges as a crucible of power, a place where mechanisms of control—economic, political, and spatial—are constantly deployed to maintain a particular social and economic order. As Kleniewski, Thomas, Harvey, and Lefebvre all powerfully argue, this control is never absolute. It is perpetually met with resistance, friction, and open conflict from those whose lives and spaces are being devalued and dispossessed.

[12] Kleniewski and Thomas, *Cities, Change, and Conflict*, p. 277. [17] Kleniewski and Thomas, *Cities, Change, and Conflict*, p. 80.

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