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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003346777-13>

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-235024>

Book Section

Published Version



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Originally published at:

Ege, Moritz; Neumann, Christoph K; Prutsch, Ursula (2023). Conclusion: Urban Ethics as Research Agenda. In: Acosta, Raúl; Dürr, Eveline; Ege, Moritz; Prutsch, Ursula; van Loyen, Ulrich; Winder, Gordon M. Urban Ethics as Research Agenda. Outlooks and Tensions on Multidisciplinary Debates. Abingdon: Routledge, 213-221.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003346777-13>

Conclusion

Urban ethics as research agenda

Moritz Ege, Christoph K. Neumann and Ursula Prutsch

The chapters of this book have proven urban ethics to be a timely concern on different levels. We situate the publication within a wave of recent publications that document an interest in the intersections between ethical normativity and urban life – that is, in the terminology we suggest, in urban ethics (Mostafavi 2017; Sennett 2018; Kaltsa 2019; Koutsoumpos 2019; Moraitis and Rassia 2019; Nieswand 2021; Lange and Dieterich 2022). The contributions in this volume build on this interest and also continue the work documented in previous publications from this research group (including Ege 2018; Moser 2018; Schulz 2018; Habit 2019; Moser and Egger 2019; Ott 2019; Reznikova and Ege 2019; Strutz 2019; Dürr et al. 2020; Fischer 2020; Fischer and Dürr 2020; Ege and Moser 2021; Reznikova 2022). They reflect lively discussions on different aspects of urban ethics in changing city structures: urban politics and moral economies, the ethics of space and urban planning, subjectivation processes, social creativity and forms of disputes and conflicts. The contributions analyze ethics and social creativity in urban social movements, conceptions of justice and intersectional differences, as well as the meanings and implications of a suspected ‘ethical turn.’ In addition to this multitude of approaches, urgent existential menaces, such as environmental catastrophes and the COVID-19 pandemic, were taken into consideration.

We will not attempt to summarize the individual results of the chapters or this broader body of work in this conclusion, we instead want to point out some shared concerns, conceptual reference frames and diagnoses as well as different approaches to cities as laboratories of sociality.

Social creativity and moral economies in urban spaces

The concept of social creativity provides a useful starting point for thinking through the ethical projects and initiatives in cities discussed in the chapters: through such projects, individuals gathered in collectives within cities are able to create new social relationships and institutions (Graeber 2005; Dürr et al. 2020). By doing so, they potentially set examples that inspire others – through their inventiveness, resistance, endurance and reflexivity. Social creativity on a larger scale can challenge the status quo of urban governance and lead to broader demands for more ethical *valence* and change in structures of urban life. Such discourses and acts

tend to have much more room in democratic settings than in highly hierarchical, authoritarian or even totalitarian ones. But even under such regimes, negotiations on the urban scale – especially those centered on notions of a *good* or *better* life in the city or the *good* city – are not always resolved entirely in a top-down manner and their outcomes are far from fully predictable. This may be the case because it often remains unclear how *political* such projects are and to what extent they can or will question the overall distribution of power. Thus, there may well be more room for experimentation in this field of urban ethics than expected, and it can become a particularly important arena for societal negotiations. As Diane Davis showed in her chapter of this volume, the urban scale now carries the hopes of many avowed political progressives in many formally fully democratic contexts – including the USA. If cities – seen in contrast to nation states that are more likely to have conservative political majorities – can be made ‘more ethical,’ then urban ethics are much more likely to also be seen as pertinent and realistic strategies for political change in those contexts.

Such change must necessarily be a negotiated one. From the outset, the discursive character of ethics has led our research group to concentrate on processes of implicit or explicit negotiations about the *good life* in the city. The term ‘moral economy’ has been proven to be useful and inspiring but also challenging in analyzing such debates. While it is difficult to assign a definite meaning to the concept after its long career in various fields of studies (Dürr et al. 2020), its very ambiguity is apt to adequately reflect the plurality of situational definitions and understandings inherent in many complex urban conflicts. On the one hand, moral economies are deeply conservative. They take recourse to traditional rules, practices or principles, often enshrined in what is understood as a long past. On the other hand, moral economies refer to rights and customs that challenge the implementation of juridical stipulations supporting the interests of those in power. Moral economies are extralegal in a basic sense. They, consequently, allow one to identify instances where law is little more than an instrument for exercising power. Taken from this angle, they have a radical and, at times, even revolutionary potential. They may even invert neoliberal forms of ethicization when a *crowd* (however it constitutes itself) tries to enforce a strict moral stance on members of the elite, their ‘adversaries.’ However, when the material (economic, technological, legal, social) basis of such demands has eroded, they can appear merely moralistic and compensatory.

Throughout the chapters, perhaps most explicitly in John Clarke’s, it has become clear that the reflexivity inherent in the usage of these concepts and labels is crucial for understanding dynamics of urban ethics today: terms such as morality, moralization and ethics are not merely descriptive or analytical, they are used, commented upon and redefined by all sorts of actors and have explicitly or implicitly become intertwined with classification struggles. Relatively privileged urban groups tending toward social and economic liberalism often present themselves and their preferred discursive/social form as more progressive and contemporary – and *ethical* – than those of others whom they depict as old-fashioned, vestigial and stuck in an unenlightened past and a *moralistic* worldview. At the same time, in many constellations, authoritarian politicians and conservative culture warriors

present themselves as defenders of *true* popular morality against anti-traditionalist ‘moralizers’ from the political left and their universalistic, cosmopolitan ethics (Brown 2020; Ege 2022). While the terminology of ‘moralizing’ is messy, the contentions around urban ethics provide a key to understanding several contemporary sociocultural conflicts better, including the much-debated cultural and political cleavage between ‘progressive cities’ and ‘conservative peripheries.’

Tensions: ethical normativity, theoretical divergences and analytical pragmatism

The view of cities and urban ethics taken by the authors in this book has not been that of a bird’s eye on a macroscale of urban planners. The chapters examine decision-making within living ecosystems by actors who seek to be included in negotiation processes of urban life and governance. As the introduction outlined, we believe this is an important intervention in a discursive field that is often characterized by top-down perspectives.

While this approach unites the chapters and provides common ground, the contributions also contain some divergences. They concern the ambiguities of ethical normativity in research and its transfer to urban life, and the relationship that pertains between (meta-)theoretical reflections on the place of ethics and pragmatic approaches toward studying it. Explaining such tensions offers room for reflections on questions of theory and methodology and can also – hopefully – prepare the ground for future discussions. Two divergent theoretical approaches to the field of urban ethics can be distinguished, at least as ideal types, to situate the first tension: an openly normative one and a primarily ethically detached approach in either a descriptive or analytical mode. While the proponents of normative debates, who are prominent in parts of urban planning, geography, political science and, of course, philosophical ethics, tend to want to give reliable answers to definitions and necessities of the *good* life in the city, or *good* and successful urbanity (Sennett 2018), the self-avowed descriptive and analytical approach, which is more prominent in the field of sociocultural anthropology, history and sociology, takes ethical and moral statements and negotiations primarily as indicators for processes that should ultimately be investigated in nonnormative terms, such as struggles over power or social distinction (e.g. Nieswand, 2021). The word ‘ethical’ tends to be used both as designator of a specific – and highly valued – field of debates and an evaluative term in studies in the straightforwardly normative vein. Statements such as ‘this is ethical’ tend to mean ‘this is good/right’ or ‘this should be solved through (ethical) debate.’ In studies in the descriptive and analytical vein, ‘this is ethical’ means primarily “this is part of ethics, a specific sociocultural form of discourse/knowledge/ideology.”

The work on urban ethics in this book primarily takes up analytical tools from the latter side of this divergence: ethics and ethicization are analyzed in their pragmatic contexts, rather than being situated in an imagined sphere of non-interested, rational discourse. At the same time, most of the authors here also refrain from being fully distanced from the ethical normativity of the actors ‘on the ground,’

from treating them as mere objects of study and from presenting research on urban ethics as completely disconnected from normative evaluations. Such a choice is programmatic and reflects ambiguities inherent in the role and responsibility of academic intellectual work. There is also a practical side to it, especially in politically fraught fields of (urban) research: scholars often seek out ‘ethical projects’ for their studies of which they are broadly supportive. They often hope that these projects will initiate political change. Such change can be seen as positive, be it in relation to ecological sustainability, questions of social justice or other matters. Such approaches can open up new insights and perspectives – even if they imply obvious risks of partiality and bias. In order to deal with the latter, the authors of this volume focused not only on the ethical ambitions of such projects but also on changes, unintended consequences and implications.

Tensions between metatheoretical positions also play into different conceptualizations of urban ethics and their potential scope. Authors who adhere to Actor-Network Theory (ANT), Post-ANT and Deleuzian ‘assemblage thinking,’ for example, often see ethics as *immanent* in socio-semiotic-material worlds (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). Regarding cities and other objects of research, they tend to reject notions of fixed social structures, distinctions between depth and surface phenomena and between scalar levels. Instead, they describe the urban world through a networked heterogeneity of assemblages where there is a constant emergence of the new. From the vantage point of more structuralist-oriented perspectives, this can come close to (problematic) ethical voluntarism, i.e. the belief that ethical impulses can trigger urban change irrespective of ‘structural’ conditions. In the latter vein, Bourdieu’s theory of practice and neo-Marxist critical realism tend to assume that ethical discourses and initiatives are limited and, at least, partly determined by such conditions (Bourdieu 2011 [1972]). Researchers working in this tradition are, therefore, more likely to stress the limitations of (urban) ethical impulses and their ideological aspects. While this is obviously no exhaustive list of possible (meta-) theoretical approaches, the point here is that such positions often have a strong influence on how researchers evaluate the potential and implications of projects to improve urban life through ethics, and on their views of strategies for urban social transformation. This is an important background in order to understand the evaluations of urban-ethical projects in recent literature. This book has tried to avoid presenting these divergences in the form of theoretical polemics. Instead, authors have shown different ways for navigating through these force fields.

In doing so, despite and perhaps through these divergences, the authors, nevertheless, suggest a specific approach to the field of urban ethics. It is characterized by a double strategy: ethics was presented in all chapters both as an ‘ordinary,’ immanent practice, an experience, an aspect of world-building *and* type of discourse, apparatus/*dispositif* and regime – or, rather, a series of types. Thus, a range of relevant theories was brought into a pragmatic frame of research. They were treated as potential tools in geographically, socially and politically divergent urban contexts. The advantage of a near-global perspective was that all contributions shared common ground through this double take, however, the respective micro studies sought to move in new directions and (collaboratively) modify the

conceptual and analytical tools within their respective local contexts. They did not adapt a scientifically normative approach in a strong sense of that term. The resulting variety of analyses, therefore, reflects not only (meta-)theoretical divergences but also different (local) discourses on ethics and a *good* life in concrete cities, depending on numerous needs and opportunities. Therefore, historical contexts, political transitions, architectural and infrastructural layers, as well as historically shaped ethnic and cultural inequalities had to be taken into consideration. Doing so required careful empirical research with sources such as policy documents and public representations *and* within the lifeworlds and intersubjective dynamics of and among all sorts of actors, individuals and collective ones – be it through ethnography, policy research or historical analysis.

This kind of research on urban ethics renders visible the effects and implications of practices and discourses that social actors consider ethical. It highlights the power relationships that ‘ethical’ actors activate or challenge. It takes their grievances seriously and, if that is the case, their resistance to power and domination, as well as potential limitations, unintended consequences and complicities of interventions by urban actors through ethical arguments and framings. To return to the earlier point about normativity: in this process, researchers and their research partners ‘in the field’ usually also engaged in discussions about the desirability of the effects and implications of urban-ethical projects for the individuals, groups and larger parts of society involved. This is an almost inevitable aspect of research encounters framed by the methodological ideal of an equal footing between the investigator and the actors in the field. At the same time, the approach of a critical-analytical pragmatism was intended to avoid overly authoritative (e)valuations of urban ethical projects: researchers are themselves enmeshed in power relationships and many stem from ‘white,’ European, (urban) middle-class backgrounds.

This research also has a strong interdisciplinary character. The results presented here, to some extent, reflect theories and approaches from the fields of historiography, political science, social and cultural anthropology, European ethnology/cultural studies, geography, sociology, architecture and urban studies. At the same time, they are also influenced by individual methodical approaches and by self-reflections as scholars in the respective fields working in an interdisciplinary field and group.¹ This constant questioning of being aware of who one is in disciplinary terms, how to approach the research, what responsibilities are entailed by entering vulnerable fields or conflictive settings, helped researchers to move away from the preset meta-perspectives that often shape studies on urban life and governance.

Systemic ethicization in contemporary governance

Urban ethics are negotiated across various scales of socio-spatial life in cities. The chapters of this book have shown that the interest in urban ethics is connected to relational articulations and mediatizations that, despite their differences, exhibit some similar patterns. Building on the earlier work of this research group, we return to sociologist Alexander Bogner’s term (2011) ‘ethicization’: there have been increasing discursive thematizations of urban life in ethical terms and specific

ethical vocabularies, especially in governance contexts, in recent decades. The latter includes not only generic evaluations, such as ‘good’ and ‘ethical,’ but also more specific terms, such as ‘responsible,’ ‘sustainable’ or ‘participatory,’ which interpellate urban citizen-subjects that are (supposed to be) committed to and engaged in bringing about a better city in a nonantagonistic manner. Ethicization and its shifting vocabularies are intertwined with transposing techniques of governance (as they have been analyzed, most prominently, by the followers of Michel Foucault in ‘governmentality studies;’ see Burchell, Gordon and Miller 1991). This ethical governance paradigm in urban policies answers, to some extent, demands for participation by urban social movements, but it also gained attractivity through the work of global or transnational nongovernmental organizations (Moore 2021) and the global circulation of concepts and policies, actualized by heterogeneous configurations of ‘civil society’ – which do not follow a bottom-up paradigm. While a general periodization is difficult and contentious, this ethicization process has become increasingly prominent in many cities at least since the mid-2000s. Some of the chapters in this volume examine discursive and practical processes of ethicization on a ‘systemic’ level. These systemic forms of ethicization, however, must be seen as connected to what Bogner (2011) terms ‘lifeworld’ ethicizations and the realm of ‘ordinary ethics’ (see the introduction): i.e. the ‘subjective’ meanings (and practices) of *good* cities and *good* ways of being an (urban) subject, dweller, visitor or citizen. These tend to be much more varied and contradictory than standardized vocabularies and policy measures.

Studies of urban ethics as ethicization, including some of the chapters of this book, have shown how the ethical register can conceal forms of power. Current vocabularies of ethical governance have been shaped – among other forces – by decades of neoliberalism.² ‘Ethical’ urban governance beyond the state, as Swyngedouw (2005) has pointed out early on, fosters new arrangements of participation by private economic actors (capital), representatives of grassroots movements and other parts of civil society that are politically not legitimized through votes. Such networks and models of ethical urban subjecthood gain legitimacy against the backdrop of the perceived or real failures of previous or alternative forms of governance, for example, in the case of widespread corruption or authoritarian bureaucracy. Nevertheless, it remains important to point out that ethical rhetoric can also mask material interests, and ‘ethical’ forms of governance can have a fairly limited purview on the systemic level – most prominently often leaving out questions of economic justice. Powerful actors tend to position and limit ethics to the conduct of individuals’ lives in a self-responsible, self-optimizing often individualistic manner, and encourage members of societies to build consensual arrangements among themselves. Such strategies foster the ‘responsibilization’ of certain kinds of – often privileged – subjects and the abjections of ‘immoral’ others. They tend to hide the limits of supposedly ‘self-evident’ freedoms, and they can work against building collective or communitarian challenges from below.

At the same time, as the chapters have shown, these forms of governance can also trigger new conflicts and provoke specific types of resistance.

They do so partly because ethicization introduces and legitimates specific values and virtues, such as accessibility, self-organization or transparency. Furthermore, the authors of the chapters have shown that, despite some similarities, systemic ‘ethicization’ can have remarkably different effects and implications, depending, among other factors, on the concrete political situation and background or conjuncture. Neoliberalism does not exist in ‘pure’ forms, it blends with other ideologies, with old-fashioned liberalism, with more straightforwardly authoritarian and revanchist-reactionary ideas, and, in other cases, with social-democratic or Christian-socialist traditions. These dynamics of ethicization should be observed without taking recourse to simple ideal types of ethical interpellations in the context of the neoliberal ‘as such.’ Counter-developments to the self-optimizing, self-responsible, individualistic understanding of ethics are present in many cases. Seemingly subaltern actors can, as some of the chapters show, put moral and political pressure on ‘ethicized,’ consensus-oriented forms of governance. The two-pronged analytical approach taken here makes it possible to understand the characteristic ambiguities of ethicization processes better. Ethical concerns are matters of public rhetoric and discourse, and they are also experienced in highly personal ways as inner dilemmas – as matters of ‘ordinary ethics’ (see introduction). They are often presented as beneficial for all city dwellers in public rhetoric, be it from the side of governments or specific interest groups, but they also diverge among (and within) social milieux and according to different backgrounds, positionalities, subjectivities and agendas.

Given this heterogeneity, ethicizations through ‘ethical’ rhetoric and governance in many cases depoliticize urban conflicts. However, they may also lead to radical challenges. In that regard, the perspectives and research results presented here diverge from some of the governmentality studies literature on ethics and ethical subjectivation. Where the latter tend to highlight the functionality of individualizing ethics in neoliberal contexts, the analyses in this volume highlight the connections, resonances (consonant or dissonant) and tensions between different aspects of urban ethics, between different strands of ethicizations. In contrast to overly unitary diagnoses, this research has also shown that the meanings and implications of ethicization can differ quite radically – be it because ethical reflections in real-life situations of contention and social differences can become much messier and more heterogeneous than expected, or in the context of broader shifting balances of power.

The chapters, thus, offered insights on a macro- and microlevel into a variety of configurations of urban ethics. They followed transformations and changes on the individual, societal and government levels regarding key arenas in cities: inhabiting urban space, the urban as a political arena, disputes and resolutions and solidarity in the city. By paying attention to ethics in practice and discourse, we put forth a new research agenda. We hope that these analyses help to inspire further research and actions. Ultimately, questions of urban ethics concern how individuals, groups and societies live – if they live in decent, respectful and supporting environments, in dignity, and protected against poverty, marginalization and exploitation.

Notes

- 1 While the urban ethics research group itself was interdisciplinary, it did not – for better or worse – comprise researchers with positivist and strictly normative approaches, such as most versions of economics, and philosophy and theology. In that sense, interdisciplinarity was moderate.
- 2 This vocabulary is also a mainstay of the “The New Leipzig Charter,” a declaration of the EU ministers responsible for urban matters in 2020. The charter sets aims such as the transformation of power for the common good, ‘the just city’ and ‘good urban governance’ (https://www.nationale-stadtentwicklungspolitik.de/NSPWeb/SharedDocs/Downloads/EN/the_new_leipzig_charter.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=4, accessed January 23, 2023).

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