3. A structural field of contention approach to urban struggles

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INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen a rise in research on urban movements and activism, reflecting the prevalence and importance of this kind of activism in cities across the globe. While addressing locally specific problems, urban activists simultaneously politicize transnational processes, such as the globalization of the economy and the financialization of housing. Relations between global structural processes and their local institutionalization and politics have constituted a growing interest of study (e.g. Harvey 2012; Celik 2020). But next to relations between multiple scales of movements’ engagement, the question of relations between different, intensifying local movements has also been addressed. To capture the often dense relationships between urban activist groups operating on the ground in a specific local context, there has been a rising research interest in using field models in the study of urban activism (e.g. Domaradzka and Wijkström 2016, 2019; Diani et al. 2018; Lang and Mullins 2020).

The present chapter adds to these efforts by contributing an original analytical approach to urban struggles, conceptualized as a ‘structural field of contention’ approach (developed more fully in Florea et al., 2022). Earlier field approaches to social/urban movements have noted the need to address the multiplicity of actors involved in a certain type of contention, and the fact that not all field relations can be described as intentional forms of alliances and conflict. The structural field of contention adds a further dimension, by including multi-level structural and political factors as part of the field of contentious relations. Structural factors are conceived as elements of the field of contention that (1) produce the social tensions around which contention arises, (2) influence conditions of contention including relationship-making among actors (for instance, different class positions and social positionality may affect the prospects for collaboration among actors), and (3) are addressed and acted upon by movements. Additionally, in contrast to most field approaches, the structural field of contention approach puts an emphasis on incorporating silences into the assessment of a field – meaning the lack of politicization or mobilization in face of structural tensions, on behalf of social groups whose structural positions do not get to be represented through a collective voice. A historically informed structural understanding of the field of contention can help make sense of both the mobilization and the lack thereof in a given context.
In this chapter, we turn our attention to struggles around housing, in the period following the 2008 financial crisis. We illustrate the gains of the structural field of contention approach by bringing examples from a comparative study of housing contention in two cities in Central Eastern Europe (CEE): Bucharest and Budapest. Our insights follow from a comparative study conducted between 2017 and 2020, where we investigated structural, political, social and movement levels of housing-related conflicts.

The chapter is structured as follows: it first presents the structural field of contention approach, arguing for its advantages in the analysis of social (and urban) movements, and illustrating its original contribution to field approaches with which it is related. The next four sections show some of the specific gains this approach brings, exemplifying the aspects it reveals in the cases of the field of housing contention in Bucharest and Budapest: how similar macro-level conditions, but different political fields, relate to different conjunctures of movement politics; the embedding in multiple scales and the unreflected contradictions in housing conflicts; the coexistence of alliances, conflicts, parallelisms, silences and unreflected contradictions in the structural field of contention; and how aspects of contention change with transformations of the field. In the concluding section, we summarize the gains of a structural field of contention approach in understanding the complexity of current urban mobilizations and enabling cross-contextual comparisons relative to broad structural processes.

THE STRUCTURAL FIELD OF CONTENTION APPROACH

When speaking about relations between different local movements, and their relation to broader structural aspects of the conflicts they address, the politics of inter-movement relations has been an important question. Several approaches have linked inter-movement politics to actors’ own structural positions and their changes through time. Moreover, cross-class alliances have been analyzed as a key feature of urban movements (e.g. Castells 1983; Mayer 2013). However, social movement studies have also identified impeding factors in achieving successful collaborations across social groups, such as different social positionality of activists, different movement cultures or ideologies, or different social interests given different class positions (e.g. Lichterman 1995; Rose 2000), which applies also to urban movements (e.g. Florea 2016; Mayer 2013).

When speaking of inter-movement politics, if we look at the field of housing, it is notable that studies of the post-2008 housing contention wave so far have tended to focus on politically progressive, solidaristic movements, which often addressed the outcomes of the crisis in the same analytical framework as academic analysis did: in terms of the neoliberalization of the global economy and local urban development (e.g. Mayer et al. 2016; Grazioli and Caciagli 2018). However, responses to such structural processes are more ideologically diverse than the bulk of the urban movement literature acknowledges. The analytical approach offered in this chapter aims
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to account for the structural and ideological complexity of contemporary housing struggles and movements.

To achieve this, it is necessary to move beyond the focus on strategic and intentional alliance-making that is characteristic of the studies on coalition building processes in movements and recognize that relationships among actors engaged in social/housing struggles may take a variety of forms. Apart from intentional collaboration or outspoken conflict, we may also observe parallel forms of activism taking place around the same structural conflict but hardly interacting; we may observe actors of opposing political agendas supporting similar issues; conflicts arising from unintended consequences of other actors’ actions; relations between local movement groups being governed by processes stemming from national-level politics; as well as structural processes that can become voiced collectively into the political sphere only at a later stage, after a long phase of political silence. We argue for the need for an analytical approach which can conceptualize the variety of these relationships and connections – allowing for capturing a wider spectrum of scenarios, such as the formation of cross-group solidarities, the failure of such attempts, but also the parallel mobilization of ideologically different groups in the same social-structural context, as well as the ways broader economic or political processes impact on actors’ relationships.

For such an integrated analysis of a varied social topology and patterns of alliance, conflict, as well as parallelism, we acknowledge the usefulness of field models, which have seen a surge in research interest lately. Barman (2016) identified three major field approaches: Bourdieu’s theory, the neo-institutional organizational field approach (DiMaggio and Powell 1991) and the Strategic Action Field (SAF) approach (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 2012). Our understanding of a field differs from these approaches.

A key aspect that the SAF approach has in common with other Bourdieu-inspired field approaches to collective action is the notion of shared rules of the game, which we see runs the risk of reifying the field. Moreover, even more than Bourdieu’s theory, the SAF approach implies a high degree of reflexivity among field actors regarding these shared rules of the game. It is stressed that actors seek “fashioning a shared template” (Fligstein and McAdam 2012: 294) or even “fashion agreement” regarding the defining goal of the field and the rules of the field (Fligstein and McAdam 2012: 295, 300). Moreover, Fligstein and McAdam’s exclusive focus is on strategic action, stressing that collective actors are constantly seeking “control” (e.g. Fligstein and McAdam 2012: 291, 306). “Incumbents” compete with “challengers” who are “jockeying for position” (Fligstein and McAdam 2011: 5). Furthermore, while Fligstein and McAdam recognize the role of the “broader field environment or ‘context,’ as well as the role of ‘exogeneous shocks’” (2011: 2) occasionally disrupting the field, structural factors are by and large absent from their analysis of field interactions. Actors’ success is explained by the ‘social skills’ of actors. The authors write: “Our goal in emphasizing social skill is to suggest that people are always acting strategically” (Fligstein and McAdam 2011: 7). We do not share the
emphasis on strategic action on which this approach is premised, nor the ontology of a distinct field logic.

Nevertheless, we consider it useful to approach housing mobilizations in terms of a field understood as a social space of collective actors who share a stake in matters of housing, while acting from different structural positions and who stand in specific relations to each other. We conceptualize this as a field because actors’ frameworks and capacity to act bear defining relationships with each other and with broader political and structural processes they act within. However, we move away from a conception of the field as an autonomous structure with an inherent, coherent logic and shared views of matters at stake. Instead, we conceive the field as a heuristic tool for making visible the complex relations between actors and their broader context, in the politicization of structural tensions around a certain issue – in this case, housing. The field notion can help grasp actual connections between movement actors and their contexts, without having to harmonize empirical findings with a projected inner logic of the field or limit their scope to intra-field ‘rules of the game’.

To develop such a field approach, Crossley’s notion of a ‘field of contention’ serves as our starting point. Crossley proposed an understanding of social movements in terms of fields of contention, emphasizing two key aspects:

Firstly, departing from traditional models of movements, which tend to view them as unified “things”, it draws our attention to the numerous groups and agents who interact within the internal space of a “movement” and to the relations, alliances and conflicts between those various groups/agents as they unfold through time. Secondly, it draws our attention to the embedding of social movement struggles within multiple differentiated contexts of struggle, each of which affords different opportunities for struggle but each of which makes different demands upon activists if struggle is to prove effective. (Crossley 2006a: 552)

Crossley’s approach here has the advantage of recognizing emergent properties and field dynamics without making strong assumptions about common understandings of the rules of the game. It also has the advantage of being interested in the unintended or unreflected consequences of field dynamics as much as in the conscious actor strategies. More strongly than Crossley, we stress the structural factors that constitute the conditions of group formation and struggle. We differ from him in that we conceive the structural factors as part of the field of contention, which both produce the conflicts around which contention arises, and influence relationship-making among actors. In tracing these connections, we propose to pay attention to how broader dynamics of global economic transformations affect movements’ local conditions, as well as to the way local social hierarchies, institutions and politics condition actors’ relations and forms of contention. This enables an analysis of interdependencies of housing-related movement activity, without losing sight of the ways housing contention is embedded in broader socio-historical relations, or the ways tensions resulting from the same structural process remain politically silent/unpoliticiized. It helps to make visible those factors of contention that are beyond individual movement actors’ explicit aims and intentional actions. Consequently, analyzing the structural and his-
torical context quite closely is required in the structural field of contention approach. This kind of fine-grained analysis of structural transformations is an essential part of our field concept. We suggest that this approach is particularly suited to trace how certain structural tensions generated by broader crisis processes come to be politicized by diverse interconnected actors in a given context.

The structural field of contention approach can be summarized as follows: First, agreeing with previous literature on fields of contention (notably Crossley’s works), it emphasizes that instead of homogeneous actors, movements need to be seen as made up by a multiplicity of actors whose mutual relations and structural embeddedness are part of the factors that shape movement dynamics. Second, in accordance with Crossley (2006a, 2006b, 2013), it goes beyond intentional action and conscious movement frameworks to include unintended effects and unrecognized interdependencies as part of the field. Third, beyond highly visible moments of mobilization, low-visibility phases of organizing, and political silence (over issues otherwise voiced by movement actors in other contexts or in other times) are also taken into consideration. Fourth, like Crossley, we think of the field of contention as one in constant change, with relations between actors being made and remade over time. Then, in several respects, we move beyond previous applications of the field concept, in our field of contention approach. First of all, we conceive of structural processes as part of field relations, in line with a recent turn in social movement studies from internal movement dynamics to movement-context relations. Second, this implies a break with the structuralist concept of the field, and defines the field not as an objective, autonomous structure made up by internal rules, but as a dynamic field of empirical relationships between actors and their context. Our approach also places a stronger emphasis on the transformations of the field as a whole, which can shift actors’ own positions and understanding, even if groups’ internal characteristics remain the same. Finally, as an approach designed to grasp how the global crisis comes to be politicized within local contexts, the structural field of contention concept puts a high emphasis on the multiple scales of relationships through which broader processes affect local actors and in which local forms of contention are developed.

In the following, we illustrate some specific gains of this approach in analyzing the case of the field of housing contention in Bucharest and Budapest.

SIMILAR MACRO-LEVEL CONDITIONS, DIFFERENT POLITICAL FIELDS, AND CONJUNCTURES OF MOVEMENT POLITICS

In the period before and after the 2008 crisis, macro-level conditions of housing in Hungary and Romania were similar to most other post-socialist cases. The privatization of state housing after 1989 generated a super-homeownership system, which meant informal and unregulated rental markets, a minimal social and public housing stock, pushing middle and lower-income households towards mortgages and other forms of debt as a route to housing access. The super-homeownership system did
not come with adequate living conditions for the majority. In the context of massive privatization and state disinvestment, it meant that multi-generational households came to own one home as their only resource, and that the levels of overcrowding and severe housing deprivation – including lack of/disconnection from utilities, lack of access to infrastructure, lack for resources for basic repairs etc. – were and still are among the highest in the EU (46.3 percent of the Romanian population lived in overcrowded homes even in 2018, a year marked by high GDP growth, according to Eurostat).

The boom of housing financialization in the 2000s and respectively the subordinated financialization of CEE markets (Becker and Jaeger 2010; Ban and Bohle 2021) exacerbated the situation. In Hungary, demand for housing mortgages was channeled towards foreign currency-denominated (forex) mortgages introduced by foreign banks dominating the banking sector after the ban on foreign currency lending was lifted as part of EU accession requirements. The following risk-based competition between banks to maintain and expand their market shares led to the distribution of a large amount of risky, foreign currency denominated loans to households with low amounts of savings. Between 2008 and 2009, installments of CHF loans grew by 70–80 percent. As household incomes dropped together with the prices of collateral (as housing markets froze due to the crash), the situation resulted in hundreds of thousands of families going into arrears or outright debt spirals.

In Romania, due to the fact that this process was slower, the middle income categories accessed bank credits which, although incurring exchange rate changes and variable interest rates as risks, were more regulated/protected than the types of debt absorbed by lower income households. The latter were hire purchase credit, consumer credits from non-financial institutions, and debt on utility bills (which affected about 15–30 percent of the entire population across the years since the 2008 crisis, while mortgage arrears affect less than 1 percent). Thus, despite similar macro-level conditions, debtors’ struggles in Romania and Hungary after the 2008 crisis differ in both constituency and forms of mobilization, including movement politics. Another aspect of housing commodification was related to urban rehabilitation programs, as market priorities in urban rehabilitation remained an important driver of housing tensions, from the destruction of historical heritage buildings to the marginalization or outright eviction of poorer dwellers.

Comparing the two cases, we found that similar macro-structural conditions generated what we called similar structural tensions in the two cases, which became the target of different forms of housing contention across time. One main type of tensions that followed from this structural environment was the production of severe forms of housing poverty at the bottom of the housing system. The most severe and publicly visible aspect of this was homelessness, which remained a lasting characteristic of post-socialist housing. Another, less visible form of housing poverty, which also existed during socialism, but was reinforced and expanded after 1990, was informal housing in peri-urban areas, and squatting or semi-legal occupations of empty apartments. After 1990, evictions became a typical conflict that made housing poverty publicly visible, and, in some cases, politicized. Next to class, ethnic division lines
constituted an important aspect of such conflicts, with ethnic discrimination against the Roma population becoming a frequent characteristic of conflicts around evictions and gentrification. Another type of tension generated by urban rehabilitation programs revolved around the destruction of built heritage. These conflicts involved better-off strata, such as educated activists, architects, tourism entrepreneurs, and other allies interested in maintaining and restoring built heritage. Their resistance provided a specific element of housing contention, which sometimes converged with social claims, and other times worked against them (Florea 2016).

Along with severe forms of housing poverty, another main area of structural tensions had to do with the situation of low- to middle-income groups who had relatively stable incomes, but could not afford to buy a home. The manifestations of this type of tension were different according to structural and political contexts. One interface through which this category’s housing access problem manifested was the issue of secure and available rental housing, which could have provided a solution to the problem, and was recurrently addressed by different forms of housing activism. We saw examples of housing activism engaging with the issue of rental housing at the time of the decline of state housing in Hungary, as well as in reaction to spikes in housing costs in the second half of the 2010s. Another interface was the issue of household debt, due to low- to middle-income households with low savings levels needing to use loans to buy or repair a home, or to cover housing costs. These were different types of debt in the two contexts – mostly bank mortgages in Hungary, and mostly consumer loans from diverse types of creditors, and also debt on utility bills in Romania. In the period leading to 2008, a major volume of social risk was built up through this channel. Although this problem burst into the open after the 2008 crash, solutions proposed by state and market actors did not solve the structural gap that promotes the accumulation of household credit risk, and it remained a constant characteristic of the two housing systems ever since. Other channels for the politicization of the housing access problem of low- to middle-income groups have included struggles against low wages, and struggles over access to (very limited) social housing.

Despite the similarity of the macro-level conditions of housing conflicts, the actual politicization of housing issues in the two countries differed significantly. One important aspect of these differences is related to the different polarization of post-socialist national level politics in the two countries, which implied different entry points and alliance opportunities for housing movements.

In Hungary, an alliance between international lenders, Western capitalist lobbies, ex-socialist big company managers benefiting from privatization, and a political coalition between the Socialist and Liberal parties dominated post-socialist transformation until the late 2000s. A contender political bloc, favoring protectionist policies benefiting domestic capital, maintained a dominant position throughout these years. From the opposition, it has produced a language of right-wing anti-neoliberalism which, by the 2000s, became the vocabulary of popular protests. Actively penetrating these movements with its own political organizing, the conservative party Fidesz won a super-majority victory in 2010. In government, it used the delegitimization of the neoliberal growth model represented by the Socialist-Liberal coalition to engage
in a post-crisis reconstruction. This aimed to enable growth for state-backed domestic capital, to broaden the maneuvering space of economic policy by diversifying external financial dependence, and to support Western foreign direct investment (FDI) (primarily German) manufacturers in order to maintain export levels. After 2010, waves of political protest criticized the government for its centralization of power, rolling back of democratic institutions, and for its political rhetoric that heralded a turn away from previous uncritical lines of pro-Western, pro-European policies, and instead sought new alliances with Chinese or Russian investors. In the context of these mobilizations, groups who represented social grievances (like unions or housing movements) were embraced by opposition movements, but also integrated in a binary opposition between the government’s nationalist politics and a pro-market, pro-European, liberal direction, conceived as the sole alternative. The fact that larger opposition movements (unlike in the previous neoliberal phase of power) became open to social issues as a symbolic argument against the government, allowed housing groups to amplify their voices and enter into wider political coalitions. Electoral wins in the 2019 local elections demonstrated the gains of this strategy, by both symbolic and practical steps taken by some oppositional governments, including the new local government in Budapest. The national government’s infamous anti-homeless regulations were withdrawn in these local contexts, and several collaborations with progressive housing movements started, with a new project for a social rental agency involving both state and private apartments, standing out as an example. However, the same strategy also brought the issues addressed by housing groups into the force-field of big politics’ campaign period before the 2022 national elections. Thus, politically motivated attacks against local-scale social projects – like the plan for a homeless care shelter during the Covid-19 pandemic, or an NGO program to house a small number of homeless families in an outer district of Budapest – were illustrative of this aspect.

In Romania, as opposed to Hungary, Ceaușescu’s strongly centralized regime did not make space for the development of a pro-liberalizing fraction of the Socialist party in the 1980s. After 1989, the government composed of ex-socialist cadres tried to continue a politics of protectionism and delayed privatization, to keep strategic sectors in state hands and to support the formation of domestic capital. This direction was broken when contender liberal forces strengthened through external alliances during the EU and NATO accession process in the late 1990s (Ban 2016). In this process, neoliberal politics formed an alliance with liberal intellectuals, and applied liberal dissidents’ anti-communist discourses to the struggle against the Socialists’ power. The aftermath of the 2008 crisis saw the intensification of conflicts between liberal and socialist party lines, with the increasing dominance of the former. In this context, the most visible post-crisis protest waves, taking place in large cities with an increasingly uneven concentration of middle-to-high income groups, were channeled towards supporting liberal factions in their struggle against the Socialists. The latter were labeled by their opponents as a remainder of communism which blocks Western-type development, being upheld by a network of corruption and a political alliance with the uneducated poor. This framework explicitly dissociated
the middle-class disillusionment with post-socialist transformations, from the issue of labor rights and poverty, and thus combined pro-liberal statements with anti-poor stances. In this context, unlike in Hungary, progressive housing movements split from the generic line of opposition protests, and forged alternative networks tied to anti-racist and anti-capitalist standpoints.

Beyond differences caused by different political contexts and respective alliance opportunities, differences between local movements on the ground also developed due to specific conjunctures between local manifestations of structural tensions, and dynamics of mobilization potentials and movement-level alliance making. One illustrative case for this type of difference is that between forms of contention related to severe forms of housing poverty – as Hungarian left housing activism foregrounded homelessness, while similarly minded groups in Romania focused on evictions of poor families, and the racist, anti-Roma aspect of evictions and related social politics. This difference developed despite the fact that housing poverty, evictions and anti-Roma discrimination are widespread in Hungary, too, and homelessness has been a growing problem in Romanian cities. An important factor in the development of different foci of contention has been the pre-existing structural conditions that facilitated the condensation of movement activities around one issue or another. In Romania, evictions of primarily Roma and ethnically mixed families from inner-city houses that have been nationalized in the early 1950s, redistributed to workers’ families through state companies, and then since 1990 restituted to owners from the pre-communist era (and their heirs and/or buyers of property rights), have become a highly visible conflict since the 2000s. These conflicts attracted the attention of newly mobilizing (educated but still precarious) middle-class activists of the alter-globalist movement wave, who were initially involved in more generic social and cultural urban activism, but developed lasting alliances with affected groups throughout the process of resisting evictions. During the post-2008 protest wave and its politicization along the conflict between liberal and socialist party blocs, these groups in Bucharest conflicted with the liberal direction of the protests, and chose to build networks across cities with other groups with similar principles, including those working on interconnected issues such as feminism, left media, political art and labor rights. Meanwhile, political alliances with NGOs and charities working in homeless care hardly developed, with left housing groups remaining critical towards charity-based approaches, and only occasionally collaborating with several NGOs offering on the ground assistance.

In Hungary, homelessness was strongly politicized in the early 1990s, through alliances between homeless people’s own advocacy, social workers and social policy experts allied with the Liberal party. In the build-up of post-socialist homeless assistance institutions, and their political framing as a social issue, party political alliances remained strong, with the idea of urban homelessness remaining tied to liberals’ own social politics (Győri and Matern 1997). In the 2000s, a new generation of activists criticized established systems of homeless assistance and started to build new grassroots models of homelessness-related activism. The outcome of this process was the founding of The City is for All, an advocacy organization which rejected the idea
of middle-class activists representing the problems of homeless people, and instead forged an alliance with homeless activists, with specific measures to maintain horizontal relations between different participants. The City is for All became a paradigmatic organization for left housing activism for the coming decade. After 2019, some of its expert members entered local governments, while the group itself became even more visible through collaborations with opposition politics. Meanwhile – although mutual support with organizations of oppressed groups, including the Roma, has been part of the group’s politics – the ethnic discrimination as an aspect of housing problems had not become an explicit issue in housing activism.

A specific characteristic of housing movement conjunctures in the above contexts was the ideological polarization between different forms of activism targeting housing conflicts. In Romania, the emergent conflict between middle-class urban heritage protection groups who came to support the liberal line of large demonstrations, and left housing groups that forged alliances with subaltern groups threatened by liberal urban policies has been one example of such polarizations. In Hungary, a similar example includes the lack of collaboration and opposing political alliances between foreign currency mortgage debtors’ movements threatened by evictions after 2009, and leftist homeless advocacy activism. Although the issues targeted by different groups were tightly connected, right vs. left political alliances and vocabularies kept their activism separate from each other.

MULTIPLE SCALES AND UNREFLECTED CONTRADICTIONS IN HOUSING CONFLICTS

In both Bucharest and Budapest, the structural processes movements reacted to and the politics of their engagement involved multiple scales – from community or neighborhood level to local and national governance, international organizations, global financial flows, or geopolitics. But how movements’ own frameworks reflected the different scales of their engagement was far from evident. One example common to both countries has been the case of foreign-currency denominated mortgage debtors. The problem of hiking installments of mortgage loans taken in foreign currencies has been a spectacular case of how local households’ everyday needs were tied to hierarchies of global financialization, and to national-level institutions and policies mediating their flows. While debtors in both countries organized to protect their interests in a situation which they clearly saw as unfair, debtors’ advocacy in both countries focused solely on the national level of policy, trying to pressure governments for protection. This disassociation in debtors’ politics, preconditioned by different levels of global financial governance, allowed Hungarian debtors to ally with Fidesz’ program for domestically controlled financial circuits, only to realize later the differences of interest between the two.

Another example is the case of the Tenants’ Association in Hungary, which formed in the 1980s as a response to the degradation of state housing, when state maintenance companies could not provide sufficient service, due to national budgets...
being redirected for public debt service. The Association was funded in the hope of exerting collective pressure on maintenance companies, yet pressure could not change the situation of lack of funds. With the progress of housing privatization and the right-to-buy, the Association’s richer members became interested in gaining better privatization deals, while the remaining poorer members were less capable of sustaining the organization through membership fees (Győri and Matern 1997).

The Tenants’ Association’s post-privatization story reflects changes of structural and institutional conditions that define the dynamics of the group’s politics, but are in a large part not reflected in its claims and positions: while struggling for a better position as tenants, the Association’s members (of different low- to middle-income categories) did not recognize the structural limits to their claims; when they met the structural polarizing effect of privatization, the Association fell prey to it without being able to devise a strategy that could promote the housing interests of low- to middle-income strata among the new conditions.

ALLIANCES, CONFLICTS, PARALLELISMS, SILENCES, AND UNREFLECTED CONTRADICTIONS

Besides connections between macro-structural, political and movement aspects, another type of field relations we identified through our research and which we revealed through the structural field of contention approach, has been the multi-faceted one between field actors. Alliances between movement actors, including cross-class alliances built by left housing groups in both countries, have constituted one type of relations: The City is for All in Budapest and The Common Front for Housing Rights in Bucharest, both emerging after the 2008 crisis, illustrate processes of building alliances between groups affected by homelessness, respectively evictions, activists faced with housing precarity and educated but lower-middle-class activists. Another case was that of conflicts: between movement groups and authorities, such as the case of anti-eviction political protests in both countries; or between different types of movement groups, such as the case of middle-class anti-corruption movements and left housing groups in Romania.

We also saw cases where different types of movements addressed similar issues without building out explicit relations of conflict or alliance. A significant example in both countries of this type of parallelism has been the relation between mortgage debtors’ advocacy after the 2008 crisis, and left housing activism. Mortgage debtors’ groups represented low- to middle-income groups in Hungary, and respectively middle-income groups in Romania, who took foreign-currency denominated mortgages during the 2000s lending boom, and then suffered from unfavorable changes of currency exchange rates and variable interest rates after the crisis. In Hungary, the debtors’ movement first allied with Fidesz’ 2010 election campaign, then slowly turned against the Orbán government as post-2010 debt management policies served to build domestic financial capital rather than help out lower-income debtors (Florea et al. 2018).
By the end of the 2010s, Hungarian debtors’ voices had already been politically silenced by the government. Although left and liberal experts and activists recognized the gravity of the debt crisis, no political alliance with debtors was built, as debtors’ advocacy groups were considered to belong to the political right. In Romania, only a small proportion of bank debtors had arrears – never more than 25 percent of them, including during the crisis years. They organized mostly through individual and collective court trials against banks, and media campaigns targeting state/National Bank intervention. Fearing exchange rate and asset prices instability, debtors without arrears supported the post-2008 austerity measures, which also affected the incomes of more vulnerable middle-income debtors; while CHF debtors only mobilized in 2015, with the high spike in the exchange rate. Thus, debtors’ groups and actions were rather fragmented and did not coagulate in a movement. For these reasons, and also because debtors were in a higher income category, having better access to lawyers and lobby channels, left housing groups have not addressed debt issues for a long time and have not engaged with debtors. After 2014, with the post-crisis GDP growth and the end of austerity, mortgage holders lobbied successfully for more legislative protection and access to public housing in case of default – marking a field transformation which placed them in direct competition over public housing with those organizing with the left housing groups.

The lack of political engagement with the ethnic aspect of housing poverty in Hungary, or with the issue of homelessness in Romania, by local left housing groups, is one illustration of what we call political silence. A broader case is that of housing peripheralization: the silent ‘trickling down’ of housing poverty to more peripheral locations at the urban outskirts, where households’ informal coping mechanisms – such as building without authorization on empty plots (in Romania) or using allotment gardens for housing (in Hungary) – substituted institutional levels of contestation.

**TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE FIELD**

Besides dynamics of relations between different actors, we found that broader transformations of field-level dynamics – which transformed each actor’s own position – also played a key role in how housing conflicts came to be politicized over time. One example at hand for field-level transformation is the 2008 crisis itself, which deepened social differences and sharpened housing tensions, especially in the areas of severe housing poverty, housing debt, and middle-income precarity. Even in 2018, after several years of post-2008 economic recovery, the rate of poverty and social exclusion (based on both indicators of income and severe material deprivation) was the EU’s highest in Romania according to Eurostat (around 32 percent), as well as the rate of in-work poverty (above 15 percent).

Another layer of the post-2008 field-level transformation involves the political aftermath of the crisis in both countries, which solidified different (neoliberal, in Romania, and nationalist authoritarian, in Hungary) regimes in the two cases, leading
to different types of opposition movements. These dynamics created different positions and alliance opportunities for local housing movements: they are illustrated by the case of left housing groups conflicting with liberal branches of post-2008 movements in Romania, but allying with them in Hungary; or by the case of debtors’ movements which in Hungary joined right-wing anti-neoliberal politics, but were more supportive of liberal austerity programs in Romania.

Another instance of field-level transformations is the Fidesz government’s anti-homeless and anti-NGO campaigns in post-2010 Hungary: the anti-homeless legislation became a main example of the conservative government’s punitive attitude towards poverty. In this context, the NGO-type of civil activism was seen as less and less able to contest ongoing trends. Thus, leftist housing activism – with its long-term critique of NGOs speaking in the name of those affected by homelessness and housing precarity, instead of the affected speaking for themselves – gained a central, symbolic role within oppositional politics. In Romania, a similar field-level transformation involved the mainstreaming of the liberal anti-corruption branch of post-2008 mobilizations within electoral politics, strengthening the neoliberal coalitions at the national political level, especially after 2014. This resulted in liberal middle-class mobilizations and politics having a strong anti-poor and anti-social spending stance, limiting the space for action for the housing struggle. In this context, leftist housing groups turned to alliances with the labor movement, as concerns over housing access and costs were increasingly expressed by lower-income groups through wage struggles.

**CONCLUSION**

This chapter has offered an original analytical approach to urban struggles. The ‘structural field of contention’ approach outlined here brings several benefits. First, it is flexible enough to lend itself to systematic comparative analysis of urban movements across diverse social contexts. Second, it incorporates the role of structural context into understanding movement dynamics in a systematic fashion, while also acknowledging the agency of local actors. Third, it enables the integration of the variety of relationships and connections among mobilizing actors, as well as between them and their structural and political context. Fourth, it enables accounting for contemporary urban mobilization in its complexity, including ideologically polarized mobilizations. Fifth, it allows for the analysis of intentional as well as the effects of unintentional actions and subsequent changes in field relations over time.

The structural field of contention approach is especially suitable for an empirically detailed understanding of local political responses to broader structural crisis processes, which we illustrated by looking at housing contention in two cities sharing similar structural backgrounds, yet displaying different patterns of mobilizations. While existing research on post-2008 housing tensions and their politicization tends to follow a linear connection between structurally induced tensions and their (progressive) political expression (e.g. Fields 2017) our cases demonstrate the capacity of...
the structural field of contention framework to grasp situations where no single overarching housing movement is formed, and structural tensions play out in differentiated, often parallel or contradictory ways in a multi-level, multi-actor space of crisis politicization. We intend this framework as a tool for a nuanced understanding of real-world crisis processes that can further inform emancipative engagement. In the cases we surveyed, our main conclusion in this respect is that housing movements’ efforts are fragmented along existing channels of political alliances and institutional interfaces (mainly: state redistribution and market financing), and movements hardly develop a broader organizational framework of their own that would allow them to set agendas with a relative autonomy from these circumstances. Even so, new efforts in this direction are noted in both cases, especially in coalitions that bridge between union-based, social housing and new cooperative initiatives, the outcomes of which are yet to be seen.

NOTE

1. Our research was funded by The Swedish Research Council FORMAS (contract 2016-00258_3). The authors’ names are in alphabetical order.

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