

## 13. Driving change?

### 'Doing' conflict in traffic experiments

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Melis Günay

The mood and the public debate on all channels can be said to be very charged. It is as charged as if it were a question of to be or not to be.

*Dietlind Grabe-Bolz, former mayor of Giessen<sup>1</sup> (Stadtverordnetenbüro Gießen, 2021: 3)*

### Reallocating street space: Changes prone to conflict

In the face of climate change, the German government has recognized the urgent need to reduce emissions from private motorized transport. Despite an agreement on statutory climate targets,<sup>2</sup> little progress has been made: Although CO<sub>2</sub> emissions per kilometre have fallen since 1995 as a result of improved technologies and fuels, these improvements have been offset by an increase in mileage of motorized transport and a trend towards purchasing larger and heavier vehicles, such as SUVs and off-road vehicles (Umweltbundesamt, 2023; 2024). These figures show that technological solutions alone are not enough. With the aim of reducing car traffic, German cities are increasingly introducing initiatives that redistribute street space. More specifically, space for cars is being reduced and reallocated to active forms of mobility such as walking or cycling. In some cases, the space freed up is also used for other activities, such as resting and playing, or is turned into green spaces.

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1 Freely translated from German by the author.

2 Bundes-Klimaschutzgesetz, 2019. Bundesrepublik Deutschland.

Road reallocations are often designed as experiments. The German Road Traffic Regulations (Straßenverkehrs-Ordnung, StVO) provide the legal framework for such traffic interventions. These regulations are strict when it comes to introducing changes that affect car traffic. Yet in some cases, the experimental clause in the StVO<sup>3</sup> allows more flexibility for introducing measures. In addition, political and scientific motives may also explain the growing number of traffic experiments: While urban experiments are limited in time and space, they hold the promise of catalysing more profound transformations (Sengers et al., 2021). As a result, urban experimentation is also gaining popularity outside the transport sector and has become a common tool for urban governance in times of uncertainty (Caprotti and Cowley, 2017).

Although street reallocation initiatives are often promoted by civil society actors and purport merely to ‘test’ changes, many of them are met with resistance (e.g. Jarras et al., 2021; Verlinghieri et al., 2023). The deep roots of the significance, including the emotional significance, of the automobile in German society might offer an explanation as to why changes in policies, prices, and road structures aimed at reducing automobility are prone to conflict: Historically, the car has become an object that embodies the modern narrative of a successful life in Western countries. The economic success associated with the German car industry in the 20th century is linked to this narrative. To this day, the car is perceived by many as a symbol of freedom and social status. Years of planning for car-oriented cities have shaped urban landscapes, policies, and regulations in ways that encourage the production and use of cars (Manderscheid, 2021). This anchoring of the car shapes the current social order and is constitutive of and reinforced by people’s practices and emotions (Manderscheid, 2022). As a result, changes in mobility can be particularly challenging and cause much conflict.

In urban planning, the role of conflict remains debated: Simply put, communicative planning theory views conflict as an impediment to decision-making; this deliberative approach instead promotes communication between all parties involved in order to mediate conflict and reach consensus on how to move forward (Healey, 1992). By contrast, agonistic planning theory perceives conflict and dissensus as key to negotiating urban change. However, both approaches show limitations when it comes to applying them in practice (e.g. Kühn and Sommer, 2023; Mäntysalo et al., 2023). A closer empirical examination of conflict can therefore help to unravel its role for transformation pro-

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3 §45 Abs. 1 Satz 2 Nr. 6 Straßenverkehrs-Ordnung, 2013. Bundesrepublik Deutschland.

cesses and its relationship to deeper societal challenges. Therefore, this chapter follows calls for a better consideration of conflict in planning processes (Hesse and Kühn, 2023).

Thus far, a handful of publications have focused on conflict in mobility experiments conducted in European cities. Previous research has identified different types of conflict (Vitale Brovarone et al., 2023; Klaever et al., 2024) and discussed participatory processes and conflict in regard to their democratic character (Van Wymeersch et al., 2019; Verlinghieri et al., 2023). Rather than classifying conflicts or discussing the implications of different ontological perspectives on conflict, this chapter contributes a new perspective by asking *how conflict becomes productive and for whom*. It addresses these questions by foregrounding actions, looking at how conflict is 'done' in the case of the traffic experiment *Verkehrsversuch am Anlagenring* (traffic experiment on the *Anlagenring*) in the German city of Giessen. Here, two lanes of a four-lane ring road for cars were to be repurposed for cycling as part of a year-long traffic experiment. The project led to conflicts and was eventually cancelled prematurely.

The multiple and complex conflict dynamics of this Giessen traffic experiment make it a particularly relevant and exciting case for discussing the role of conflict for mobility transformations. The findings I present in this chapter are based on qualitative data and are part of a case study analysis embedded in a larger research project that started in 2022 and is still ongoing. I reconstructed the case development starting with newspaper articles and websites, which were reviewed using information from official press releases and the meeting minutes of political bodies and participatory forums. In addition to these sources, I conducted interviews with two activists, two critics from the retail sector, one politician from the opposition, one journalist reporting for a local newspaper, and three city employees. The interviews helped to clarify the actions taken and, in some cases, also the intentions behind those actions, and provided different perspectives on the development and outcomes of the conflicts observed in the case study.

From analysing the Giessen traffic experiment, I derive five ways of 'doing' conflict: identifying conflict, provoking conflict, avoiding conflict, resolving conflict, and ending conflict. The analysis infers that these different ways of 'doing' conflict follow different logics in struggles over power. How conflict is done is thus not only constituted by power relations but also constitutive of them. My focus on action in this chapter also implies a processual understanding of agency, which emerges through (inter)action. In this respect, I argue that the discussion of 'professional' agency should not be limited to planning

professionals but should be broadened to include other actors who also exhibit professional agency. Overall, the findings of the analysis contribute to the discourse on conflict in planning theory by shifting focus from normative ascriptions to conflict to the enactment of conflict, thereby helping to unravel the logics that shape conflicts and explain how certain patterns and dynamics of conflict emerge.

Drawing on existing research on conflict in traffic experiments and findings from mobilities research, the first section of this chapter establishes the relevance of conflict to ‘making’ mobility. With reference to existing debates on the role of conflict in planning theory, it argues that a focus on ‘doing’ conflicts can contribute to these debates and also outlines the theoretical implications that foregrounding action has for understanding power and agency. The second section presents the actors and actions involved in the main developments of the Giessen traffic experiment. The third section uses the case to illustrate five ways of ‘doing’ conflict and discusses their implications for emerging power relations and the agency of the actors involved. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the findings and their relevance to wider debates and future research.

## **The relevance of ‘doing’ conflict over (auto)mobility**

Conflicts around (auto)mobility are particularly visible in urban areas, where traffic and its challenges are concentrated (Haas and Jürgens, 2020). In particular, urban experiments seem to be a focal point of conflict, as suggested by the growing number of publications specifically addressing conflicts in traffic experiments that reduce street space for cars (e.g. Klaever et al., 2024; Vitale Brovarone et al., 2023). The existing research also highlights the relevance of studying conflicts around mobility changes, for example, in order to better understand their governance (Verlinghieri et al., 2023; Vitale Brovarone et al., 2023). Moreover, linking mobilities studies to practice theories suggests that conflict is relevant to introducing changes in mobility habits: Proponents of the ‘new mobilities paradigm’ (Sheller and Urry, 2006) challenge the ways in which people’s choices are often conceptualized as rational in transport research. They argue that mobilities, used in the plural to point out the interconnectedness of different forms of physical and virtual movements of people, goods, ideas, data, etc., affect the routines of people’s everyday lives (e.g. Freudendal-Pedersen, 2022; Manderscheid, 2022). Means of transport

therefore move people not only physically but also emotionally: ‘Car cultures have social, material and above all affective dimensions that are overlooked in current strategies to influence car-driving decisions’ (Sheller, 2004: 222). This makes an integration of everyday practice, policies, and planning crucial when it comes to introducing more sustainable mobility changes (Freudental-Pedersen, 2022). As conflicts are not only a result of routinized practices but also shape these practices (Nicolini, 2012), they should be made central to research on mobility transformation.

The role of conflict in urban change is discussed by proponents both of communicative and of agonistic approaches to planning. The idea of communicative planning draws on Habermas’s theories of deliberative democracy and communicative action. These theories suggest that rational consensus can be reached in a debate among free equals if all participants affected by the decision at hand can present their arguments without coercion. This would imply that, in planning processes, ‘the transformative potential of communicative action lies in the power embodied in the “better argument”’ (Healey, 1992: 155). In contrast to communicative approaches, proponents of agonistic planning theory see conflict as the very essence of democracy and do not believe that power relations can be challenged through deliberation. They build on Mouffe’s theory of ‘agonistic pluralism’ that views consensus ‘as a temporary result of provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power’ that ‘always entails some form of exclusion’ (Mouffe, 2000: 17). Rather than seeking to eliminate power and emotion, agonistic planning approaches see conflict as an integral part of pluralist societies and key to negotiating urban change (Kühn, 2021).

Despite irreconcilable ontological differences, agonistic and communicative theories share some common ground (Bond, 2011). For example, proponents of each of the two approaches pursue similar goals in understanding politics and democracy and apply similar ethical values in doing so (*ibid.*). Moreover, they discuss the role of conflict and how to reach agreement, which is crucial to planning processes (Kühn, 2021). Interestingly, both planning approaches are also found to have limitations with regard to how they address democratic institutions: Communicative planning approaches mostly disregard this institutional dimension and perceive it as an impediment to conflict resolution (Mäntysalo et al., 2023). Agonistic planning theory, on the other hand, considers the role of democratic institutions but ‘does so in an overly critical manner’ (*ibid.*: 445) and without offering suggestions on how institutions can work with conflict productively and in ways that allow for democratically legitimate decisions (*ibid.*). Because of the practical limita-

tions of both approaches, Kühn and Sommer (2023) call for contributions that bring theory and practice closer together. More generally, 'the role of public planning for conflict regulation is limited' in practice (Kühn, 2021: 154). This implies that actors other than planners have more agency in dealing with planning conflicts, which has so far been underexplored.

Adding to these debates, existing research on conflict in traffic experiments shows that neither conflict nor consensus is productive per se: Verlinghieri et al. (2023) analyse an experiment in Turin, Italy, which reallocated street space by introducing pedestrianized streets, a new cycle lane, and speed reduction zones. Using the framework of agonistic theory, the authors classify the conflicts that arose in this case as a consequence of post-political planning, which limits public debate in order to accommodate a consensus-oriented agenda. Such experiments, they argue, 'are, at best, likely to achieve a localised change in the dominant automobility regime' (ibid.: 17). Van Wymeersch et al. (2019) examine the case of a 'living street' experiment in Ghent, Belgium, which followed a deliberative approach. In their study of the conflictual participation process, the authors observe that different actors demonstrate 'different understandings of democratic politics' (ibid.: 377). While the experiment produced some collaborative results, it also led to 'unexpected and unwanted polarisation around the issue of car usage' (ibid.: 376).

Both challenging and contributing to the outlined debates on the role of conflict in planning theory, as well as elaborating on existing research on conflict around (auto)mobility, this contribution introduces a different angle on conflict by examining *how* conflict is 'done'. Understanding conflict as a process, conflict does not 'just' exist. Rather, it emerges and develops, and therefore 'doing' conflict goes beyond reacting to or dealing with conflict. An approach that focuses on actions<sup>4</sup> and takes actors' justifications into account is in line with considerations of pragmatic sociology (e.g. Barthe et al., 2013). Serving as inspiration for this contribution, pragmatic sociology presumes that it is not actors' 'arguments, justifications, and critiques [...], as such, [that are] able to transform the state of social relations', but 'the *actions* consisting in arguing, justifying, and criticizing' (ibid.: xi; emphasis in original). Even

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4 By referring to 'actions' or "doing" conflict' rather than 'conflict practices', this analysis privileges intentional over routinized practices. Nevertheless, it is recognized that these actions are informed by and shape social practices (Nicolini, 2012). As such, focusing on action allows for conclusions to be drawn about the agency of the various actors who 'do' conflict.

though this chapter does not primarily employ the framework of pragmatist sociology, acknowledging it has relevant implications for understanding power relations: The chapter ‘focuses on actions themselves, observable as they *produce* power relations. [...] Power structures are no longer considered as causes, but as resulting from what is observed’ (ibid.: xviii; emphasis in original). In the same way, agency, conceived here as an actor’s ability ‘to “act otherwise”’ (Giddens, 1984: 14), is understood as enacted, relational, and situational, meaning that agency emerges through and is shaped by (inter)actions in a given situation.

In summary, foregrounding actions can help to unravel the logics behind conflict and explain how certain conflict dynamics and patterns emerge. Looking at how and for whom conflict is productive provides insights into how existing power relations emerge and enable, lead to, or hinder certain actions, and the extent to which actions can challenge power relations. From this, conclusions can be drawn about actors’ agency and its enactment through and in conflict. In order to understand how conflict is done, this contribution analyses the case of the Giessen traffic experiment.

## The Giessen traffic experiment: Actors, actions, and outcomes

Giessen<sup>5</sup> is a city in the German federal state of Hesse, with a growing population of around 93,500 (Stadt Gießen, 2023). Due to its two major universities, it is the city with the youngest population in the federal state (ibid.). Moreover, Giessen is one of three regional centres in central Hesse, which means that the city provides key infrastructures and functions for its surrounding area. In 2019, Giessen’s city council<sup>6</sup> resolved to achieve climate neutrality by 2035. In accordance with this goal, the city aims to reduce the modal share of motorized individual transport from 40% (2018) to 25% by 2035 (Bexen et al., 2021). In order to follow the complex development of the Giessen traffic experiment, this section provides a chronological overview of the most relevant

5 The name ‘Giessen’ refers not only to the city itself but also to the eponymous administrative district (*Landkreis*) comprising several municipalities around the city. At the state level, the district of Giessen includes two constituencies for the state parliament of Hesse. In the following, ‘Giessen’ refers to the city of Giessen unless otherwise stated.

6 The city of Giessen is governed by the city council, which is elected by the citizens of Giessen.

actions, outcomes, actors, and political and legal instruments associated with it. The reconstructed actions and interviews serve as the basis for deducting and discussing the five ways of 'doing' conflict presented in the next section.

The Giessen traffic experiment originated from ideas of the *Verkehrswende* (traffic transition) initiatives, a loose group of activists who are either part of one or more civil society organizations or who are individually committed to a *Verkehrswende* in Giessen. The activists campaign for a *Verkehrswende* to reduce car use and promote more sustainable forms of transport. They drafted a car-reducing plan for Giessen's transport system, which they have been advocating for since 2018 with organized activities, mainly demonstrations, to build public pressure for its implementation. The plan includes a number of measures, ranging from the implementation of new cycle lanes to free public transport. In September 2020, the initiatives then decided to move forward with the project by launching a citizens' petition that demanded an implementation of cycle lanes. The petition called for converting two lanes of a four-lane ring road for cars around Giessen's city centre into cycle lanes, and for two additional cycle lanes to run through the city centre. The citizens' petition is an instrument of direct democracy at the local (here: city) level in Hesse. If a quorum of at least 1% of the population is reached, the city council is obliged to discuss the matter at a council meeting in order to approve or reject the petition. In January 2021, the petition to repurpose two lanes of the ring road had reached this quorum.

When the petition was issued in 2021, a coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Green Party, and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) governed the city. The petition was presented by its initiators and discussed by the participants of a public online town hall meeting. The SPD and the Greens, who were generally in favour of the petition, argued that the measures should be introduced as an experiment. CDU representatives warned against quick fixes that could pre-empt the new transport development plan that was being drawn up at the time. These arguments were taken up in the relevant parliamentary committee. With the support of the SPD, the Greens, and the Left Party, the committee approved the proposal to convert two lanes of the ring road as part of a one-year experiment. The original citizens' petition and the amendment tabled by the Greens and the SPD were discussed at the city council meeting in March 2021, a few days before the council elections. Politicians from the SPD, the Greens, the Left Party, and the Pirate Party voted in favour of the amended petition, outnumbering the negative votes of the CDU, the Free Democratic Party, the Free Voters, and the Alternative for Germany party. In the city council elections that same month, the Greens won a majority of the votes on Giessen's

council for the first time. The Greens eventually formed a coalition with the SPD and the Left Party.

While the *Verkehrswende* initiatives organized demonstrations to accompany the debates before the election, representatives of the retail sector began to mobilize against the proposed changes. Much of Giessen's inner-city retail sector is organized into four business improvement districts (BIDs), which are legally defined registered associations that organize all property owners in a defined area of the city. In their appeals, the BIDs and some other retail associations argued in favour of a *Verkehrswende* that reduces car traffic but against the rapid conversion of the ring road. They explained that their refusal was due to the expected loss of customers, especially from the surrounding area of Giessen, as well as the traffic chaos and congestion they expected to result from the experiment. In opposition to the resolution, representatives of the retail sector then launched another citizens' petition, which reached the required quorum by June 2021. Giessen's local chamber of skilled crafts, local chamber of commerce and industry, and local medical association officially supported the petition. It called for the rapid implementation of the new transport development plan, the improvement of public transport, and clear evaluation criteria that would determine when the traffic experiment should end. When the petition was discussed at the city council meeting, the coalition parties made amendments to it which accepted the request for an accelerated implementation of the transport development plan but did not include the request for criteria to evaluate or end the traffic experiment. The amended motion was adopted by the coalition.

Although the experiment was due to start within six months of March 2021, in mid-September, the city only presented an update to the public. In this update, a number of officials and city staff showed the results of a review of a scenario that introduced one cycle lane in each direction of the ring road. The *Verkehrswende* initiatives, which had proposed two cycle lanes on the inner ring road, criticized the city's scenario as being dangerous for cyclists. Therefore, the initiatives presented what they considered to be the better scenario in an online meeting of the Local Agenda 21 group Sustainable Mobility (Nachhaltige Mobilität). The group is one of eight thematic Agenda 21 participatory groups in which interested citizens come together to discuss ideas for sustainable urban development in Giessen. Following the presentation of the initiatives' scenario, the Sustainable Mobility group drafted a motion for the city council, calling for the examination of various alternative scenarios for the redesign of the ring road by the spring of 2022. The motion was passed by consensus and sub-

sequently submitted to the Agenda Council, a forum in which the spokespersons of all eight Agenda 21 groups meet with representatives of the city council and the city administration to vote on motions. The Agenda Council also adopted the motion proposed by the Sustainable Mobility group by consensus. As a consequence, it was forwarded to the city council as a draft resolution and led the city to commission two planning offices to study various scenarios.

As the city had not communicated any progress on the plans to the public by the beginning of 2022, the *Verkehrswende* initiatives organized several demonstrations and issued an ‘ultimatum’ to the city, announcing a large demonstration on the ring road for mid-May. A few days after the demonstration, the transport planners commissioned to study the different scenarios presented their report to a meeting of the parliamentary committee, recommending one of five scenarios studied. Although the review concluded that it was possible to convert the two inner lanes of the ring road without causing traffic chaos, the plans and cost of the complex conversion remained controversial. Critics from the retail sector continued to call for clear criteria for evaluating and possibly ending the experiment. In parallel, background discussions on the plans were held over the following months with various stakeholders, including the police, fire and ambulance services, city and regional bus operators, advocates from two large pro-cycling NGOs, and representatives from the retail sector.

In April 2023, the city finally took the first steps towards implementation: It launched a public communication campaign including online participation, several residents’ meetings, and a digital information event about the planned experiment. Moreover, the city provided information through its website, flyers, and an app. Just before the street conversion was about to start, the city notified the regional authority in June 2023, as required by law. The city of Giessen ordered the experiment on the basis of a so-called ‘basic risk situation’, which is one of the grounds for approving a traffic experiment under the German Road Traffic Regulations (StVO). The ring road was to be converted in four phases, starting in June 2023. The experiment was to start at the end of September 2023 and last for a year. As the conversion began, two representatives of the CDU launched an online petition that gathered more than 13,500 signatures within a month. The CDU also demanded clear evaluation criteria for the experiment. The governing parties argued that such criteria existed, but that the criteria did not allow for an objective measurement of the experiment’s failure.

In June 2023, the same month that the conversion for the experiment had started, two residents affected by some of the street changes filed an urgent appeal. As part of the redevelopment for the experiment, the city turned a one-

way street into a two-way street, which also meant removing some parking spaces, changing the access to the local garages, and creating a temporary sidewalk. Around the corner, the city had simultaneously changed a two-way street into a one-way street and changed the direction of another one-way street. The changes to these three streets prompted the two affected residents to appeal against the new signage. In July 2023, the Giessen administrative court upheld the appeal and supported the plaintiffs' argument that the three traffic regulations introduced by the city were part of the planned traffic experiment, and for that experiment the city of Giessen had failed to provide plausible data to demonstrate a basic risk situation. Despite the appeal, the city went ahead with the redesign of the ring road and, after consulting lawyers, filed an objection to the appeal.

Just before the ring road conversion was due to be completed at the end of August 2023, the Hessian administrative court rejected the objection and declared the experiment unlawful. As a result, the city announced the end of the traffic experiment and the reconversion of the ring road back to its original state. In response, the *Verkehrswende* initiatives launched a new citizens' petition in favour of continuing the conversion. The petition reached the required quorum within hours and was brought to but rejected by the city council. The initiatives set up a protest camp for a few weeks. At the same time, the head of the transport department<sup>7</sup> was sued for misappropriation of taxpayers' money. The plaintiff accused the department head of having continued construction work, thereby having increased the costs for the (re)conversion, even though the Giessen administrative court had upheld the urgent appeal in the first instance. Despite opposition from campaigners, the ring road was almost completely restored to its original state by March 2024. However, the city has announced new plans to improve safety measures for cyclists, with a particular focus on overhauling the junctions along the ring road.

## Understanding conflict actions as a means to (em)power

In reconstructing the case of the Giessen traffic experiment and its conflicts, it becomes clear that conflict is not just a state to which actors react, but a complex process. As such, commonly used terms, such as conflict regulation

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7 The city administration (*Magistrat*) is divided into five departments (*Dezernate*), which are headed by political representatives, the department heads.

or management, describe only parts of conflict-related actions. Based on the analysis of the case presented, five ways of 'doing' conflict were derived from the qualitative data: *identifying*, *provoking*, *avoiding*, *resolving*, and *ending* conflict. In what follows, each action is defined, illustrated with empirical examples from the case study, and assessed for its relevance to the actors doing the action. As will be shown, 'doing' conflict allows for specific conclusions to be drawn about the agency of different actors and can be related to a 'conflict over power', i.e. the struggle of actors to increase their sphere of influence in order to assert their interests (Bornemann and Saretzki, 2018). It should be noted that the conflict actions outlined are not always clearly distinguishable and may be subject to more ambiguous interpretations of the observed actions, their outcomes, and their underlying intentions.

First, *identifying* conflict refers to the recognition and expression of one or more conflicts by an actor. In the case of the Giessen traffic experiment, different actors identified conflicts throughout the development. Two moments of conflict identification can serve to illustrate this: Against the backdrop of climate change and the city of Giessen's climate targets, the *Verkehrswende* initiatives found that policies did not give sufficient priority to more sustainable modes of transport. This 'conflict of values' (Bornemann and Saretzki, 2018) led to the drafting of the activists' *Verkehrswende* plan, campaigns, a citizens' petition, and, ultimately, the planning of the ring road traffic experiment. As one activist explained, the size and importance of the ring road made its transformation the key to wider change: 'We will focus on the most important street in Giessen. It has to fall. If it falls, then so will the other small roads, that's kind of logical then' (interview, 9 January 2023).<sup>8</sup> The importance of the ring road to Giessen's city centre was also the reason why retail representatives opposed its conversion. They feared that the conversion would lead to a loss of customers, especially from the surrounding area: 'One narrative has taken hold [in the surrounding communities], whether it is correct or not: You can't even get to Giessen anymore' (interview, retail representative, 21 July 2023). As a consequence, Giessen would then no longer fulfil the function of a regional centre (*ibid.*). Some retailers therefore identified a conflict between the conversion of the ring road and their economic interests, which they articulated in dialogues, through the press, and also by means of a citizens' petition.

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8 All interviews were conducted in German; non-English quotations freely translated by the author.

The examples illustrate that identifying conflicts is an important means of channelling resources, building networks, and developing visions with which others can identify. This can open up new scope for action: Instruments such as the citizens' petitions or motions passed in Agenda 21 groups are embedded in the democratic and legal structure of Giessen and subject to certain conditions, i.e. a quorum to be achieved or a consensus to be reached. By channelling resources, identifying a conflict can help to fulfil these conditions, in order to open up these 'invited spaces of citizenship' (Miraftab, 2004: 3) and refer the conflict directly to the political arena. In the case of Giessen, it becomes clear that such tools of direct democracy have the potential to shape actors' agency, i.e. by providing the initiating actors with tools that promise those mobilized by the identified conflict a way forward in asserting their interests. However, even in cases where these tools do not exist, the identification of a conflict can provide the basis to mobilizing and channelling people and resources. Social movements such as Fridays for Future are examples of how identifying conflict with the status quo has led to the mobilization of people and, by extension, to the building of public pressure and influence on policy.

Second, in the case of the Giessen traffic experiment, conflict is not only identified but also provoked. *Provoking* conflict goes beyond identifying conflict; instead, it exacerbates conflict in order to evoke a strong reaction. To initiate the traffic experiment, for instance, activists deliberately provoked conflict through protests. In an interview, one activist said that their bargaining chip was knowing how to implement 'campaigning that really hurts' (interview, 9 January 2023). For example, after issuing the 'ultimatum', some activists roped themselves down from traffic lights on the ring road, causing traffic jams and 'quite a lot of trouble with the city council. That's a good thing. The worst thing is always when they just stand by indifferently' (ibid.). In addition, the activists registered the big demonstration for mid-May. According to the interviewee, the city then contacted the initiatives. The timing of the CDU's online petition before the state elections may also be understood as a strategic provocation: The politicians deliberately chose the timing of launching the petition to coincide with the beginning of reconstruction work for the experiment – 'to attract maximum attention, so to speak' (interview, CDU politician, 13 September 2023). Moreover, the relevance of conflicts over automobility for election campaigns becomes evident in the hackneyed slogans of various parties. Before the city council elections in 2021, a Facebook post by the Alternative for Deutschland party read 'Free rides for free citizens' (Freie Fahrt für freie Bürger). During the Hesse-wide party campaigns two years later, a CDU poster

read 'Banning cars prohibited' (Auto verbieten verboten) and the Free Democratic Party announced 'Freedom rides FDP' (Freiheit fährt FDP).

The two examples illustrate that provoking conflict can prove to be a powerful tool to negotiate interests. Provoking conflict, e.g. through protests or careful timing, can generate (public) pressure that can lead to a gain in political capital. Furthermore, provoking conflict has the potential to intensify conflict and polarize both parties and citizens. Strategically, parties can benefit from polarization by gaining votes (Roose and Steinhilper, 2022). Thus, provoking conflict has the potential to shift power relations through asserting political power, either through generating public pressure or by fostering polarization, which can be employed to both promote and resist change. The examples also show that time (or timing) influences the agency of the actors involved: In addition to conflicts over time (over delays or the sequence of changes applied), there are times of conflict (around elections, or the start of conversion) when conflict is provoked to increase the chances of asserting one's own interests.

Third, throughout the development of the Giessen traffic experiment, some actors also anticipated conflict and took measures to avoid it. Accordingly, *avoiding* conflict describes taking preventive measures: If conflicts are avoided, they will not arise in the first place. For example, critical retail representatives changed their public narrative once the experiment was set in stone. They assumed that 'if you complain about a grievance, you might just make it worse in terms of consequences' (interview, retail representative, 21 July 2023). They therefore concealed their concerns so that customers would continue to come to Giessen's city centre (ibid.). In this way, they tried to avoid conflicts associated with the loss of customers from the surrounding area. The city also adjusted planning details to avoid conflicts in road use, e.g. by consulting with pro-cycling NGOs: 'The VCD [Verkehrsclub Deutschland e.V. (Traffic Club Germany)] and the ADFC [Allgemeine Deutsche Fahrrad-Club e.V. (German Cyclist's Association)] were also involved, simply because there is a lot of expertise involved. [...] And what if we plan something for one mode of transport and they can't use it at all, because it is maybe totally well thought out but ultimately does nothing for the cyclist' (interview, city employee, 23 January 2023).

The examples given here show that rather than seeking political or decision-making power, avoiding conflict can maintain an actor's position by anticipating and mitigating conflict. In the implementation of a traffic experiment, avoiding conflict could also lead to the experiment becoming a 'success' so that the political power of the governing parties is maintained for a longer

period, perhaps with the possibility of introducing further changes. One retail representative described conflict avoidance as a result of powerlessness: ‘This means that we are currently, to some extent, forced to put a good face on the bad game’ (interview, 21 July 2023). However, it also reflects the retailers’ agency in mitigating conflict with their business interests. Although this is not illustrated by the examples, avoiding conflict may also imply sustaining the status quo or allowing incremental changes to go ‘unnoticed’.

Fourth, the city of Giessen, and more specifically its transport department, resolved various conflicts. *Resolving* conflict describes a response to an existing conflict and requires one or both conflict parties to acknowledge the interests or concerns of the other party. This distinguishes resolving conflict from avoiding conflict: Avoiding conflict is a response to anticipated conflict and does not require both parties to be involved in the action. In practice, however, it is not always easy to distinguish between the two, because conflict is often anticipated as a response to an existing conflict, and resolving conflict may also prevent an anticipated conflict. In Giessen, conflicts were resolved through communication and by the city adjusting planning details. For example, according to one activist, city officials engaged with the *Verkehrswende* initiatives after their protests, which defused the conflict over delays and has had a positive effect on their relationship: ‘That actually led to a bit of a rapprochement’ (interview, 9 January 2023). In response to the retailers’ opposition, the city contacted them to discuss if there were details in the plan that could be made to accommodate their interests. The city incorporated some of the retailers’ suggestions, such as the introduction of road markers to make car parks easier for drivers to locate, into the plans. While this resolved minor usage conflicts, the extent to which these adjustments resolved broader lines of conflict between the two parties is perceived differently. One representative felt it was too little too late: ‘A few very tiny, tiny little things have been achieved’ (interview, 21 July 2023). Another representative, speaking of the city and the retail representatives, was more positive: ‘Yes, of course you had an additional channel of dialogue, and I think that one has moved on from that initial confrontation to actually working well together’ (interview, 28 September 2023). One city employee also confirmed that regular dialogue has led to rapprochement: ‘In the beginning, we were also rather insulted. But then we met up regularly, which resulted in a trusting working relationship’ (interview, 12 October 2023).

Resolving conflict may lead to a rapprochement between the actors, but as the examples show, this is not necessarily the case. At the same time, rapprochement (e.g. through dialogue) is a sign of resolving affective conflict, al-

though this may be interpreted subjectively by the actors affected. In this case, resolving conflict between the city and retail representatives could be a means to avoid critical press and support the city's retail economy, also securing political power for the governing parties and allowing for change to occur. More generally, the conflict parties involved can benefit from conflict resolution if their respective interests are met at least to some extent. In order to resolve a conflict, the actors must have some decision-making power, which is why in this case study some conflicts were resolved by the city. In parallel, some of this power is transferred to the dissenters when their ideas are integrated into the development. Resolving conflict can therefore influence power relations in all sorts of ways, depending on which conflict is resolved and between whom.

Fifth, in Giessen, conflict is also ended. Here, *ending* a conflict means that a third party ends one or more conflicts. Although it is a form of conflict regulation (Bornemann and Saretzki, 2018), it is not the same as, for example, exiting a conflict, where one party leaves, or resolving a conflict, as explained above. In judicial conflict termination, a judge usually interprets the law to make final decisions. In the case of Giessen, the court ruled that the traffic experiment was unlawful, leading to a stalemate between the conflicting parties that came as a surprise to most of the interviewees. While some actors saw the ruling as more ambiguous and suggested continuing the conversion, the Giessen government regarded the court's decision as absolute. Even though the court has in this way ended one conflict, it has caused much disappointment and some new conflicts: The initiatives lost the project they had fought for, leading to a new petition and protests. Retailers faced months more of street conversions that could potentially damage their business. Finally, the coalition parties, especially the Greens, failed in their flagship project. According to media reports, the plaintiffs even received personal threats after the ruling (Pfeiffer, 2023). It is therefore likely that ultimately only the opposition parties benefited from the court's decision.

Looking at how conflict ends in the case of Giessen reflects the power of various actors. To a certain extent, the court ruling overpowered all attempts of the other actors involved and maintained the status quo. In fact, courts are often seen as 'an independent power' (Kühn, 2021: 153) and in many cases become 'a main actor for the resolution of planning conflict' (ibid.). Other examples in Germany, such as traffic experiments in Hamburg (Ottensen macht Platz) and Augsburg (Verkehrsversuch Maximilianstraße), confirm that Giessen is no exception. The end of the conflict also reflects the role of the plaintiffs. It shows that they had knowledge of the law and its procedures, and that they had the

necessary resources to file the appeal. This also highlights the tool of the urgent appeal: The plaintiffs' agency was influenced by the legal instrument of the official complaint, as it allowed them to transfer power to the court. This, in turn, took power over the traffic intervention away from the city government. Moreover, it is likely to cost the governing parties votes, and thus political power, in the next election, and it could also affect their political capital in negotiating other traffic changes in the city. Some actors reported that they had lost confidence in the government and administration as a result of the court ruling. Considering how conflict was ended also points to an interesting peculiarity of the Giessen case: Ultimately, it was not the front lines of the public contestations between experiment critics (retail representatives, opposition parties) and proponents (*Verkehrswende* initiatives, governing parties) that brought the traffic experiment to an end. Instead, the interests of two local residents, who were able to identify a conflict between the planned redesign and the law, led to the experiment's termination.

The discussion shows that the five ways of 'doing' conflict have different characteristics, which are summarized in the table below (Table 1). In addition to these descriptions, the table also summarizes the implication of each way of 'doing' conflict. First, each way relates to conflict differently: 'Doing' conflict can respond to conflict, but it can also generate or prevent conflict (conflict reference). Second, each conflict action can lead to specific outcomes (associated outcomes). Third, each action has implications for the power of the actors and those affected by the conflict. Thus, an underlying power intent is associated with the different types of conflict.

Table 1: Five ways of 'doing' conflict.

Way of 'doing' conflict	Description	Conflict reference	Associated outcome	Associated power intent
<b>Identifying conflict</b>	Actor recognizes and expresses conflict	Generating conflict	Mobilize people, channel resources	Gain power over sb./to do sth.
<b>Provoking conflict</b>	Actor exacerbates conflict to evoke strong reaction	Generating conflict	Build public pressure, shape/polarize public opinion	Gain power over sb./to do sth.
<b>Avoiding conflict</b>	Actor anticipates and circumvents or mitigates conflict	Preventing conflict	Avoid tensions, avoid attention	Maintain or gain power over sb./to do sth.
<b>Resolving conflict</b>	Actor solves conflict	Reacting to conflict	Dissolve tension, improve relationships	Maintain or gain power over sb./to do sth.
<b>Ending conflict</b>	Third-party actor terminates conflict	Reacting to conflict	Realize mandate, restore legal order	Enforce (judicial) power over sb./to do sth.

Source: Author.

## Conclusion: Negotiating mobility through conflict

As the case of the Giessen traffic experiment has confirmed, changes in mobility, and traffic experiments in particular, are prone to conflict. Contrary to what the label 'experiment' suggests (i.e. 'this is just a test'), the accelerated procedures, the evaluation, and the decisions required regarding the perpetuation of such projects have the potential to generate conflict. These insights reinforce and add to existing research on conflict in mobility experimentation (e.g. Klaever et al., 2024). Even though they are often announced as temporary measures, the case of Giessen illustrates that experiments are rarely com-

pletely reversible: The changes experienced and the conflicts negotiated leave their mark.

The relevance of conflict is reflected in debates in planning theory about how and to what extent conflicts should be resolved. In particular, communicative and agonistic approaches to planning have come to the fore and are weighted against each other (Kühn, 2021). However, these debates are somewhat deadlocked because their applicability to practice in current democratic structures is limited (*ibid.*; Mäntysalo et al., 2023). Therefore, this analysis did not investigate whether and how conflict can become productive *per se*, but rather how, and for whom, conflict is productive. To this end, this chapter has derived five ways of ‘doing’ conflict from the analysis of the Giessen traffic experiment: identifying, provoking, avoiding, resolving, and ending conflict. Looking at how conflict is done shows that conflict can indeed be beneficial or detrimental to different actors at different moments.

The findings of this contribution add to the debate on the role of conflict in two ways: First, they stress that change requires the identification of conflict with the status quo. This is in line with agonistic planning approaches, which see conflict as the basis for negotiating change (e.g. Kühn, 2021). In turn, ideas about how to change the status quo may lead to the legitimate identification of new conflicts, which, however, may perpetuate the status quo. Second, the results on provoking and ending conflict in particular suggest that it is indeed how conflict is done that matters: The emotional disposition of automobility indicates that conflicts over mobility changes have great potential to fuel polarization dynamics (see also Van Wymeersch et al., 2019). At the same time, strong opinions about automobility could also be interpreted as a consequence of the increasing polarization of political views on climate change (see also Haas and Jürgens, 2020). While proponents of agonistic theory would argue that divisions in societies can be interpreted as a symptom of a system that places ‘too much emphasis on consensus and the refusal of confrontation’ (Mouffe, 2000: 16), the results suggest that confrontation, if provocatively sought, can lead to antagonism. More worryingly, developments since the end of the experiment suggest that the gap between the government and those governed is widening. This indicates that not all actors perceive ending a conflict through the law as a legitimate way to ‘resolve’ conflicts.

Analysing how conflict is ‘done’ allows conclusions to be drawn about the agency and roles of different actors: The findings point to the need to reflect and broaden our understanding of ‘professional agency’ – moving away from reducing it to traditional planning professionals to include a wider range of ac-

tors: As already pointed out in debates on the role of conflict in planning theory (e.g. Kühn, 2021), it is often not planners who have the mandate to make decisions regarding conflict navigation. Instead, key decisions are often shaped by civil society, influenced by private actors, lobbyists, and media, then finalized by political elites or courts. Indeed, in the case presented, planners were mainly involved in avoiding and resolving minor conflicts of use by adjusting planning details, whereas most other actors ‘did’ conflict, often more strategically, to assert their interests. Specifically, political and legal instruments, and timing of conflict actions, prove to be protentional for redistributing and shaping agency, re-emphasizing that agency should be understood as situational. This expanded understanding of who and what constitutes urban planning has the potential to bring planning theory and practice closer together and to provide new insights into how conflict shapes current and future urban mobility.

In addition to the five ways of ‘doing’ conflict presented, many more, and more subtle, ways of ‘doing’ conflict were not explored in this study. Further research could therefore direct attention to practices that often go unnoticed. Possible practices include enduring conflict, where the actor sees no room for manoeuvre; silencing conflict, where conflict is muted before it surfaces; or inviting conflict, where arenas of conflict are opened and dissent is welcomed. Since bottom-up movements have historically been powerful in challenging existing hegemonic orders, comparing the case of Giessen with a traffic experiment that was not only initiated but also implemented from the bottom up can therefore shed further light on the agency of civil society in relation to ‘making’ mobility.

Ultimately, conflicts over mobility are embedded in wider societal trends. Research on conflicts is therefore relevant to broader societal fault lines. Studying how conflict is done also gives insight into how future mobilities are negotiated. Power and struggles for influence shape conflict-related actions and practices. As this contribution has shown, actors can maintain, gain, or lose power by ‘doing’ conflict. Conflicts thus have the potential to challenge existing power relations. However, current structures, such as German traffic regulations and their enforcement through the power of the courts, limit this potential and can even reinforce existing hegemonies.

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