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# Agonistic failures: Following policy conflicts in Berlin's urban cultural politics

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## Abstract

The paper intervenes in critical policy studies to challenge the ‘success bias’ lingering in public policy accounts of collaborative governance. I suggest conflict, rather than consensus, is a productive resource to navigate collaborations between state and civic stakeholders. By developing a conflict-oriented framework that foregrounds political decisions as always-already failing – regardless of whether promoted as success or failure – I argue that the recognition of nuanced conflicts contributes to new understandings on what counts as success or failure to whom. To substantiate the conflict-oriented framework of policy failure, I present empirical insights into Berlin's urban cultural politics, shedding light on a new funding instrument for artists. Unpacking artists' and administrators' understandings about what constitutes a failure, and how to proceed from there, I propose ‘policyfailing’ as ongoing failure. Conceptualising failure along the lines of operational conflicts (i.e. concrete, procedural disagreements) and meta conflicts (i.e. overarching, ideological differences), two scenarios of policy failure emerge: absolute policy failure, pointing to unsolvable conflicts between state and civic stakeholders; and agonistic policy failure, referring to wider-ranging disagreements about the purpose of policy issues, which are however transferred into temporary policy solutions. Following one such agonistic policy failure in Berlin over time, I show how new opportunities for both absolute and agonistic policy failure unfold. Ultimately, I outline the practical, political and analytical potential of an agonistic framework to understand policies as inherently contested and, to some degree, always failing.

## Keywords

agonism, culture/arts/creativity, governance, policy, policy failure, politics, theory

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## 摘要

本文针对关键性的政策研究，挑战在合作治理的公共政策论述中挥之不去的“成功偏见”。我认为冲突，而不是共识，是引导国家和公民利益相关者之间合作的有效资源。我建立了一个以冲突为导向的框架，以凸显政治决策无一例外的失败（不管其被宣传为成功还是失败）。藉此，我提出，对微妙冲突的认识有助于我们形成新的知识，了解对于不同的群体而言，什么算作成功，什么算作失败。为了证实凸显政策失败的冲突导向框架，我对柏林的城市文化政治提出了经验性的见解，为艺术家提供了新的资助工具。我分析了艺术家和管理者对什么构成失败以及如何从失败中继续前进的理解，提出“政策失败”是持续的失败。当我们循着操作冲突（即具体的、程序上的分歧）和元冲突（即总体的、意识形态上的分歧）的思路将失败概念化，便出现了两种政策失败的情况：绝对的政策失败，指的是国家和公民利益相关者之间无法解决的冲突；和争夺性政策失败，指的是关于政策目的问题的、广泛的分歧（但是，这些分歧被转化为临时的政策解决方案）。我在长期中追踪了柏林的这样一个争夺性政策失败，从而展示了绝对的和争夺性的政策失败如何带来新的机遇。最后，我概述了一个争夺性框架的实务、政治和分析潜力，其能帮助我们理解：政策本身就是争夺性的，并且在某种程度上总是失败的。

## 关键词

争夺、文化/艺术/创意、治理、政策、政策失败、政治、理论

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## Destabilising ‘success bias’ in urban policy studies

This paper intervenes in ongoing debates in critical policy studies over conceptualisations of policy successes and failures to theoretically re-position the alleged binary between ‘success’ and ‘failure’ of policies (Bovens and t’ Hart, 1998; McConnell, 2011, 2015; Zittoun, 2015). Situated within conceptual advancements made by studies of policy mobilities (Baker and Temenos, 2015; McCann, 2011, 2017; McCann and Ward, 2012, 2015; Peck, 2011; Peck and Theodore, 2001), as well as critical approaches to policy evaluation, I argue that ‘success bias’ (Stein et al., 2015: 1), or what Baker and McCann (2018: 4) call ‘successist’ tendencies in policy literatures, risks obscuring the generally contested nature of any policy design, implementation or assessment.<sup>1</sup> The assumption that success is clear, knowable, defined by and achieved through consensus amongst all key interests might both undermine our

analyses of the politics of urban policy-making and limit innovative, creative, interactive or experimental approaches to collaborative governance, policy and planning (Lauermaun, 2016). Instead, I propose to focus on policies that have ‘failed’ to diversify empirical and conceptual knowledge about the merits of failures (Malone, 2018). In contemporary policymaking, consensus might be assumed to ‘automatically’ lead to political or policy-related success, just as success is frequently viewed to derive from agreement on the legitimate solution of a problem. In this paper, I foreground the role of conflict in the politics of urban policy-making. I argue that success and consensus are similarly problematic presuppositions for the study of urban politics. I will also suggest that, rather than being a detriment to the process of creating urban policies and driving institutional change, conflict constructively makes room for legitimate yet contested pluralities of political opinions, values and voices.

My intention is to keep ‘the political’ open when examining the emergence of new policy solutions. By attending to the constitutively conflictual and contingent origins of political decisions and institutions, we are reminded that the latter are results of political processes of exclusion and inclusion, and are thus always disputable and open to change. This conception resonates with Wells’ (2019) consideration of the practice and politics of policy-making as ‘policyfailing’. Wells (2014: 475) conceptualises policy-failing as ‘moments in which policies are defeated, stopped, or stalled ... not policy failure as a singular or completed event but the on-going and incomplete process of how a policy comes to fail’. Following Wells, I take failure not as a negative or debilitating aspect or outcome of policy-making but as a continuous, systemic, unavoidable and potentially even productive dimension of the policy process constituted by conflict. To build out this conflict-oriented policyfailing framework, I offer the analytic of agonism to unpack what ‘success’ and ‘failure’ in policy-making means, and *to whom* (Landau, 2019). In agonistic policy encounters, political adversaries negotiate different views and approaches to reach always imperfect, temporary and, thus, failing policy results. Ultimately, I argue that an agonistic approach to policyfailing contributes to a more nuanced understanding of failure (and success, respectively) and helps not only to address, but also concretely navigate challenges that are inherent in attempts to make urban policy-making more collaborative.

Conflict is already inherent in collaborative policymaking and governance (Ansell and Gash, 2007). To empirically study and theoretically grasp the formation of new political networks, alliances and outcomes beyond consensus-focused urban policies, the paper discusses the conceptual and practical potential of conflicts in urban governance and politics to push back against the

announcement of the ‘end of politics’, proclaimed as ‘post-politics’ (Deas, 2013; Swyngedouw, 2009). I argue that limitations arising from a framework of success can be circumvented by shifting attention to parameters of failure. This resonates with Davidson’s (2019) discussion of the epistemological differences between public policy and urban geography approaches to failure: while the former might be concerned with evidence-based explanations of particular exercises in policy implementation, the latter might be more interested in the theoretical ramifications of what constitutes failure. To illustrate the implications of a conflict-oriented framework for the study of urban policy and politics, I analyse recent attempts at collaborative policymaking in Berlin’s urban cultural politics. This case demonstrates that – despite a strong desire to create ‘consensus’ about the importance of arts and culture in so-called ‘creative’ cities – political consensus ‘on the ground’ (i.e. in everyday bureaucratic, process-oriented political encounters) is multiply contested, and brings either no policy outcomes or compromised ones. Beyond the empirical case of Berlin’s cultural politics, the paper’s conflict-attuned analytic is applicable to other geographic and political contexts to help identify where conflicts originate and to disentangle what kind of conflicts cause policy-making to stall.

After unpacking dimensions of failure as previously discussed in policy studies and governance theory, I sketch a conflict-oriented analytical framework of policy failure, and failure more generally. To substantiate these conceptual suggestions, I subsequently present empirical insights on artist advocacy in Berlin (Landau, 2019). These insights stem from 25 qualitative German-speaking individual and group interviews with the spokespersons from artist advocacy organisation Koalition der Freien Szene (Coalition of the Independent Scene; hereafter: Koalition) and cultural

administrators, which I conducted in person between December 2013 and October 2019, fully transcribed and coded along the lines of conflict and consensus, developing a two-fold matrix of meta and operational conflicts. Complementing this empirical data, with the help of policy and media document analysis, I created a multi-level, qualitative coding scheme, from which two conceptual conditions of policy failure were abstracted. Subsequently, I discuss the transformations of policy failures in Berlin's recent cultural funding schemes. The paper concludes by summarising the practical and political potentials of a conflict-oriented framework to navigate collaborative policy design *despite* conflicts.

### **Conceptual framework: Failure is not a problem per se**

What *is* failure? Why and how should we attend to failed or failing policies? Who determines when policies have ultimately failed (Kassens-Noor and Lauermann, 2018)? These questions seek to delineate the conceptual potential of failure in a conflict-oriented framework, which points out that these questions cannot be resolved once and for all. A widely used definition of policy success is provided by McConnell (2010: 351): 'A policy is successful if it achieves the goals that proponents set out to achieve and attracts no criticism of any significance and/or support is virtually universal', and considers failure as the 'mirror image of success' (pp. 356–357). At least three aspects in this definition are problematic. First, the reference to 'the goals' implies the existence of unitary, shared or uncontroversial objectives and neglects that the latter are socio-politically constructed and, thus, necessarily contested. Second, the assumed possibility of 'virtually universal support', consensus or success perpetuates the teleological assumption that 'full' consensus is achievable. Equally uncaring, the attraction of 'no

criticism of any significance' not only dismisses minoritarian voices as unimportant, but also surfaces the consensus-centric assumption that views heterogeneity as a hindrance or problem rather than an asset to democratic pluralism and multi-stakeholder governance. Third, understanding failure as a 'mirror image' of success defines failure as merely derivative of success, and gives failure no political momentum in its own right. McConnell's later definitional modifications (2015: 230) only reinforce his positivist epistemology: 'A policy fails, even if it is successful in some minimal respects, if it does not fundamentally achieve the goals that proponents set out to achieve, and opposition is great and/or support is virtually non-existent'.

Despite mentioning incremental successes *within* failure ('in some minimal respects'), McConnell's notion of 'partial successes' does not transcend a success-biased framework. Even Bovens et al.'s (2001: 596) allusion to 'non-failure' as a third option nestled within or beyond the success–failure binary falls back onto an epistemology of success because the double negation of non-failure relies on the assumption that there *could* be an ideal condition of non-failure or non-conflict. While McConnell's (2016: 674) reference to 'chronic implementation failures' could provide a helpful entry point into a more nuanced notion of failure, his semantics continue to connote the persistence of failure as negative. While distinctions such as Howlett's (2012) between 'magnitude' and 'salience' of policy failure provide a navigational aid to assess the complexity of real-life policy failures, as well as later differentiations between 'technical', 'institutional' and 'subjective' failure (Howlett et al., 2015), these frameworks remain constricted within epistemologies of 'improvement' with the motivation to solve or eliminate problems, thus implying that full or whole consensus/success is possible. Peters' (2015: 272)

argument that ‘failure may not always be negative’ continues to circle around a teleology of success (i.e. prevention/elimination of all unfavourable factors equals success). Beyond dichotomous, unnecessarily self-limiting success-oriented policy frameworks, this paper complements scarce studies that have conceptualised ontological dimensions of success and failure (e.g. Marsh and McConnell, 2010) to examine the generative potential of (policy) failure. In the following, I substantiate policy failures, or policyfailing, with help of theories of conflict and antagonism.

### *A conflict-oriented framework of failure*

Considering policy paradigms as constitutively prone to failure (Brenner et al., 2010; Prince, 2012), I understand the ‘social ontology’ of policies (Peck, 2011: 784) as one of antagonism or conflict. This conceptual leap from consensus to conflict resonates with Peck’s (2011) request to de-naturalise and de-universalise the (implicit) ontology of rationalism of some policy and governance studies. My conflict-oriented framework derives from ontological antagonism, and its variant of agonism (Mouffe, 2005), which result in an understanding of (policy) collaboration as negotiations between legitimate adversaries, rather than hostile enemies (Hillier, 2003). Accordingly, I conceptualise policy design, implementation and evaluation processes as based on necessarily and legitimately divergent political or ideological values, whose insurmountable conflicts lead to seemingly failed results (or do not).

Antagonism, and agonism, are based on an ontology of radical negativity. This means that there *is* no foundation or ground to politics, policies or power but, rather, that the place of power is constitutively empty. From this emptiness, any construction of power, knowledge or patterns of meaning and regulation are revealed as precarious

articulations of contingency rather than expressions of Necessity or Truth (Landau et al., 2021). The *absence* of foundation or essence reveals any process of decision-making as lacking a final justification or foundation (Marchart, 2007). This negative ontology does not mark a fatalist resignation to passivity but instead might uncover new realms of political action, decision and emancipation in processes of policyfailing. The negative potential of failure can radicalise politics and thus contribute to ongoing discussions of the post-political condition (Temenos, 2017). Taking contingency and conflict as constitutive dimensions of politics and power, then, means that it is impossible to overcome antagonism once and for all. Politics can only exist and be decided upon in the face of contested conditions of power and meaning. While antagonism relies on a confrontational logic of political encounter, derived from Carl Schmitt’s friend–enemy dialectic, assuming that enemies aim to annihilate one another, Mouffe (2005, 2013) has converted this absolutist framework into a more contingent logic of agonism, in which political stakeholders are *adversaries* rather than *enemies*. Based on the acceptance of minimum parameters such as ‘liberty’ and ‘equality of all’ (political ideals which themselves remain contested), agonism is presented as the ‘tamed’ version of antagonism. In agonistic encounters, such as debates over what policies are best for cities, adversaries engage in *legitimate* struggles over hegemonic interests, meanings and values.

To sketch the conceptual premises of an ontology of antagonism and conflict for the analysis of urban policy-making or policy-failing, I draw on empirical fieldwork in Berlin’s cultural political context to discuss how cultural administrators and self-organised civic stakeholders reshuffled existing governance arrangements from antagonistic to more agonistic modes of exchange. The term agonism unpacks multiple ‘levels’<sup>2</sup>

of conflict amongst state and non-state stakeholders who coordinate and prioritise different policy objectives, juggling diverging values or expectations as well as unequal material and personnel resources. Drawing on my inductive analysis, I advocate positioning conflict rather than consensus as the ontological point of departure to understand the making and unmaking of policies. I conceive of conflicts along the axes of *meta* conflict and consensus (i.e. value-related, normative or ideological assumptions about political meaning and power) and *operational* conflict and consensus (i.e. procedural, technocratic and everyday concerns of political decision-making; Landau, 2019: 80 ff.). I assume meta consensus as the theoretical rather than empirical counterpiece to meta conflict, which is impossible to detect in real-life political encounters. In light of the oft-assumed overlap between success and consensus, and failure and conflict, respectively, the heuristic lens of meta and operational conflict enables understanding of different formations of conflict as always-already failing, yet producing significantly different policy results (i.e. no outcome or an agonistic one). These complicated encounters might lead to temporary consensus or success, similar to Mouffe's (2005) notion of 'conflictual consensus'. Ultimately, by opening the 'black box' of policy-making via an ontology of multi-layered conflicts, the case of Berlin illustrates how the acknowledgement of conflict can arise as a crucial driver for political and institutional transformation and help to re-position what 'success' means to different policy stakeholders.

### **Berlin's urban cultural politics: A conflictual terrain**

After laying out the conceptual framework of failure as productive and necessary to collaborative governance, the following section aims to ground these theoretical

propositions in real-life processes of political negotiation and collaboration. Looking at artist activists' and cultural policymaker's concrete struggles over what success and failure means to whom, and situating these misunderstandings, experiences of frustration and conflict in the analytical framework of failure, I aim to offer critical policy studies an analytical lens to identify and problematise conditions that lead to stalling of multi-stakeholder collaboration. While urban activism in Berlin, mainly related to housing and anti-gentrification struggles, has been well-documented (Bernt et al., 2013), the role of artists and cultural workers in these geographies of activism has been little studied (Landau, 2019). Notably, despite Berlin's international image as a vibrant hotspot for underground culture, ranging from contemporary art to graffiti and clubs, local artists have struggled to live, work and obtain sufficient funding in the growing creative scene (Landau, 2016). Around 50,000 artists and more than 300,000 creative industries workers live in Berlin. The city is arguably Germany's most creative city, by this quantitative definition. As Germany's largest city, federal capital and historically unique marker of inner-German division, the City of Berlin is perceived as a distinctive place of artistic production and presentation. In turn, the city government administers a variety of federal and local cultural funding programmes and institutions.

While artist advocacy bodies have been active in Berlin since the 1950s, I started following artist-led discontent and mobilisation in the 2010s, when discontent over funding priorities and cuts was publicly voiced in open letters and protests (Landau, 2016). In early 2012, independent artists and cultural workers came together and founded the Koalition, a self-identified 'action platform' for and by independent artists and existing genre-specific arts advocacy organisations, gathering previously dispersed, heterogeneous interests

amongst Berlin's artists. With a detailed *Ten-Point-Plan* (more recently *Eleven Points*; Koalition der Freien Szene, 2017), the group collectively demands more easily accessible, individual, short-term and project-oriented funding opportunities for independent cultural workers and requests a say in co-developing funding and granting policies. Overall, as a somewhat representative voice of independent cultural workers in Berlin, the Koalition aims to decrease scepticism and resentment between artist activists, who rely on public funding to sustain their creative practice in oft-precarious livelihoods, and cultural administrators, who hold the power to decide which artists and which kind of art deserves funding.

By tracing the Koalition's various interventions in the city's cultural policy-making, I sketch perceptions and narratives about successes and failures of Berlin's cultural governance arrangement, consisting of administrative and artistic stakeholders, which brought forth new funding opportunities for independent local artists. Organisationally, the Koalition encompasses all artistic genres pertaining to the 'independent scene' (i.e. visual and performing arts, contemporary dance, music, jazz, literature, poetry and artist-run project spaces). While their independence is not explicitly defined in relation to the state (to whom they direct their funding-related claims), the Koalition refers to independent conditions of artistic production (e.g. artists working in both self-organised and collective, contract-based settings, with temporary third-party support, in transitory spatial settings, with changing authorship and collective responsibility models, etc.).

Dissatisfied artists and cultural organisers gathered after contentious cultural political decisions, which had generously funded prestigious institutions over the myriad of independent cultural projects, who often do not succeed to acquire smaller sums of

funding. Out of this discontent, the Koalition formed an executive organ called the *Round of Spokespeople*, including up to 15 speakers, delegated from long-established as well as just-emerging genre-specific professional artist organisations. In addition to existing artist advocacy associations, politically engaged individuals have taken on roles as Koalition spokespeople. Overall, in their *Ten- or Eleven-Point-Plan*, the group has articulated a variety of monetary and space-related claims to improve living and working conditions for artists in Berlin, including requests for more individual artist funding, more rehearsal and studio space, as well as structural financial support for artist advocacy (e.g. offices or financial support to professionalise self-organised advocacy associations, who often depend wholly on volunteer labour). In sum, their various claims demand more substantial consultation and engagement of artists in local cultural policy- and decision-making.

About four times a year, the Koalition presents and discusses urgent issues in so-called *plenum* sessions, self-organised in cultural spaces across the city. These meetings, usually attended by 20 to 100 artists from various disciplinary and ethnic backgrounds, present progress accomplished by the *Round of Spokespeople* in conversations with the cultural administration, *Senatsverwaltung für Kultur und Europa* (Senate Department for Culture and Europe)<sup>3</sup> and other cultural political protagonists such as politicians, directors of cultural institutions, etc. Discussions range from the development and adaptation of funding instruments to the acquisition of long-term spaces for independent cultural use and budgetary requests in favour of the independent scene.

By problematising the stark funding imbalance between cultural 'institutions' (e.g. state-funded theatres, museums, operas, libraries, etc.) and the independent scene, the Koalition publicised that about 95% of



the annual cultural budget (approximately 400 million Euros p.a.) go to ‘the institutions’ while an estimated 40,000 to 50,000 independent artists struggle over the remaining 5% of available resources divided into grants, prizes and short- to mid-term operational funding (SenKult, 2015b). One spokesperson stated (13 February 2015): ‘the Koalition does not work against the institutions but has this strong claim to speak for the independent artists in cooperation with the institutions in the city and to keep an eye on the overall landscape’. With regards to the challenges lingering in the current funding landscape, the Koalition did not use the apparent funding inequality as a means to foment outright antagonism against better-off cultural institutions. Instead, the artist activists acknowledged the distribution of scarce resources from an agonistic angle, fighting a legitimate struggle ‘in cooperation’ rather than ‘against’ institutions.

Focusing on the mobilisation of public attention around ‘fresh money’, to be leveraged from a new City Tax, a 5% levy on tourist overnight stays introduced in 2014, the Koalition sought to revitalise the debate around new funding opportunities for the independent scene. The discourse around this new revenue or ‘fresh money’ aimed to reinforce the non-confrontational advocacy to leverage public support and simultaneously highlight the contribution of local artists to Berlin’s image as a tourist-attracting hotspot. The new income was demanded to be allocated to independent arts and culture. Besides claiming a potentially new funding source, the Koalition was active in budgetary negotiations. Focusing on budget item-line specific funding requests, the group presented itself as the collectivised voice of local artists to announce artist-producers’ views and requests for a more equitable cultural budget. Centring the symbolic and material lack of support for independent cultural production in the ‘creative’ city of Berlin, the

Koalition not only subtly highlighted existing shortcomings or failures of cultural funding and decision-making procedures but also proactively suggested to address these failures collectively.

Prior to the formation of the Koalition, there had been various failed efforts at initiating a dialogue between independent arts stakeholders and the cultural administration (Landau, 2016). Accordingly, the Koalition sought to reconfigure these tensions around issues such as artists’ autonomy to administer funding or manage juries from more top-down, antagonistic modes into more equitable, agonistic ones. In other words, the unique constellation of existing, partially cooperative and partially more suspicious, hostile relations between individual genre-specific organisations and the cultural administration, were striated by different forms of conflict. Respectively, the Koalition’s notable engagement in the process of co-designing and distributing unique working and research grants<sup>4</sup> for artists can be considered as the temporary formation of ‘conflictual consensus’ (Landau, 2017). However imperfect and systemically insufficient these artist grants were, they brought forth operational consensus (i.e. agreement on a unique grant distribution scheme) despite persisting meta conflicts (i.e. sustained disagreement about the extent and purpose of public funding for the arts). Concurrent with the conflict-oriented framework of policyfailing, the following empirical narratives mark the persistent ideological, norm- or value-related discrepancies between stakeholders (i.e. meta conflict), which have variously been transformed into collaborative governance solutions (i.e. operational consensus). Overall, the subsequent accounts illustrate the ongoing failures in policy-making arrangements, unpacking antagonistic or *absolute policy failures* on the one hand, and more *agonistic policy failures* on the other.

### *All or nothing: Absolute policy failure*

Some artist advocacy associations, who are part of the Koalition, have had long-standing but complicated relations with the cultural administration. For example, various Koalition spokespersons perceive that the artist advocacy group for visual artists, an outspoken voice of Berlin's professional visual artists since 1950, does not tolerate deviances from their own, genre-specific claims in political negotiations. The request for small-scale artist grants called *Zeitstipendien* (Time Grants) was dismissed by cultural administrators as not selective enough, which would lead to fund artists 'with a watering can' (20 October 2015), implying that too many artists would be receiving funding. As part of the controversy around artist grants, the claim for introducing guaranteed minimum artist payment in publicly funded exhibitions caused disagreement between the cultural administration and the Koalition but also within the latter. One Koalition speaker states (7 September 2015):

They [visual arts association] are inflexible in their demands. They present everything but a complete fulfillment of their requests as a total failure. Psychologically, that is really difficult because now that they did achieve these artist fees – which is a big step – this achievement doesn't appear in the discourse at all.

The notion of 'total failure' illustrates disagreements at both meta and operational levels and reflects different bargaining styles within the heterogeneous entity of the Koalition. For one, Koalition speakers did not agree on *whether* a proposed imperfect solution would constitute a success (i.e. indicating meta conflict). In addition, the visual arts association's harsh communication style caused controversy in the overall process of negotiation (i.e. illustrating operational conflict). Put differently, proposing that

anything *but* complete fulfilment of their claims constitutes a failure reveals an absolutist conception of success and failure, on the part of these artists. This radical failure neither acknowledges the partialness nor the generative effects of failure. With regards to the critique captured in the term 'success bias', the understanding of both failure and success assumes that there is such a thing as complete or total success. As the concerned interviewees note, this attitude complicates rather than facilitates the bargaining process with different opinions and mindsets around the table.

Cultural administrators found this radical notion of policy success/failure similarly problematic. Echoing less agonistically inclined Koalition speakers, a cultural administrator argues (25 October 2015):

Participation is when we [Koalition] tell you [cultural administration] what we want and if you deviate 5% from that, then, the participatory process has failed.

The administrator reiterates the uneasy feeling that some Koalition members have a strict, rather limited understanding of achieving success, and are unwilling to accept deviances. In contrast, both the previous Koalition speaker and the cultural administrator underline that success and failure can never be achieved for good and emphasise that an absolutist understanding of success and failure, in the worst case, leads to stalled policy negotiation and reform. If there is no room for partial agreement (i.e. meta conflict), the debate hits a dead-end for future collaboration (i.e. operational conflict). Put differently, if meta level divergences are not acknowledged, tolerated or incorporated into ongoing processes, multi-stakeholder negotiations cannot even make it to the operational realm of policy debate. This condition which I describe as *absolute policy failure* thus

combines meta conflict with operational conflict, creating an impasse to proceed in collaborative policy design. Briefly, because neither ideological nor more mundane disagreement can be tamed, the overall governance process comes to fail absolutely.

Notably, the request for artist fees was just arising in 2015, thus depicting the initial controversy or absolute policy failures around this issue. However, when artist fees were implemented in 2018, providing a fund with 300,000 to 400,000 Euros annually, the visual arts advocacy association had moved on to consider this partial achievement in less dismissive and less absolute terms. They state that while ‘from an artist’s perspective, one cannot get rich with these honorariums (i.e. artist fees)’, they should be considered more than a symbolic gesture, namely ‘a sign for the explicit recognition of artistic labour by representatives of the public’ (berufsverband bildender künstler\*innen berlin, 2018). This rhetorical turn might be indicative of a growing awareness that partial acknowledgement of conflict or the concession that not all of one’s claims can be met, are indispensable to collaborative governance projects. Moreover, since the absolutist understanding of success and failure of one genre-specific advocacy organisation sat uncomfortably with the trans-disciplinary collective body of the Koalition at large, the antagonistic communication style of one association, in this instance, might have been incorporated into the overall more agonistic communication of the Koalition, establishing the public perception that the achieved artist fees constituted a generative side effect of what was previously perceived as a failure (Baker and McCann, 2018).

### *Failing forever: Agonistic policy failure*

Beyond the impasses which emerge from absolute notions of success and failure, the conflictual collectivity of the Koalition and

the cultural administration co-produced an agonistic policy outcome: artist working and research grants (Landau, 2017). This result came about through a multi-stage negotiation, involving Koalition speakers in both formalised meetings and informal exchanges with then-Secretary of State for Culture, Tim Renner, as well as other high-ranking cultural administrators and politicians. Meetings were often spearheaded by Christophe Knoch, who performed an intermediary role between representatives of genre-specific art associations, cultural politicians and bureaucrats. In these negotiations, which remain somewhat opaque, selected Koalition speakers expressed requests, which were discussed, modified, bargained over and eyed with scepticism. In *plenum* sessions, parts of these messy interactions were communicated to attending artists, offering partial insights into the micro-political, operational aspects of the conflictual negotiation about artist grants (e.g. exact wording of the grant application sheets) and wider-ranging disagreements (e.g. exact number of grants per genre).

After receiving much less of the requested 50% of City Tax income, leaving approximately 1.38 million out of the 30 million Euros collected to independent arts and culture, the Koalition criticised what it called a ‘City Tax Lie’ (Wildermann, 2013). Expressing anger and disappointment, the Koalition pointed out that their initial requests were not considered in the final budget draft. In light of this apparent material underachievement – or grander failure – apparent to both artistic and administrative stakeholders, who had supported the Koalition’s general claims, cultural administrators were keen to keep ‘reputational damage’ for involved politicians and the Secretary of State for Culture ‘at a minimum’ (16 July 2015). According to another cultural bureaucrat, the remainder of the City Tax distribution process was geared to

prioritise artist stakeholders' inclusion, because the latter had 'fought so hard' for the City Tax (20 October 2015). This approach implicitly follows the logic of policyfailing, which integrates new advances to produce policy outcomes within a broader framework of already-failing policies.

A Koalition speaker remembers that 'failure was not an option' (7 January 2016) for the cultural administration because this would have meant both a personal failure for Renner as a new politician and a failure of the whole collaborative governance project. Highlighting that policymakers wanted to avoid further failure at all costs, those further steps that were taken to realise the artist grant scheme together with the Koalition remain entrenched in prior failure and can be articulated from the recognition that some conflicts cannot be overcome. Briefly, the remaining yet highly fragile collaborative ties were not to be tampered with at risk of further operational conflict but were focused on creating temporary consensus *despite* deep-seated disagreements how the City Tax should generally be spent. For the cultural administration, the procedural collaboration with the Koalition was not only a means to create a temporary alliance of shared frustration about the incremental City Tax 'success', but also a strategic investment to circumvent further conflicts (and failures) in the operational realm. Administrators were, in their own opinion, 'at least willing to take risks' (16 July 2015) to collaborate with artist stakeholders in the process of deciding how the City Tax income should be distributed. In this mindset, policymakers embraced the unforeseeable outcomes of the conflict-laden collaborative setting and, with it, the systemic contestability of political successes and failures of *any* policy. In the end, administrators' openness and engagement to coordinate the distribution of funds together with the quasi-representative Koalition led to a preliminary conflictual consensus. A

press release from the cultural administration confirms the sentiment of being caught up in conflicts, but searching for preliminary grounds for conflictual consensus to be able to keep moving forward:

Of course, this was not an easy path. The negotiation was certainly sometimes bogged down. All three parties (i.e., Koalition, administration, cultural politicians) had to approach each other. However, the policy outcome is about more than that. The city needs a new deal for the independent scene. (SenKult, 2015a, author's translation)

While all parties continued to disagree on the general purpose, extent or necessity of this 'new deal' for the independent scene (i.e. persisting meta conflict), they arranged temporary agreements about the procedural concerns of the City Tax distribution (i.e. preliminary operational consensus). This qualifies the working and research grants as material outcome of an *agonistic policy failure*. While disagreements remain inscribed in this collaborative experience, the artist grants also constitute a discursive advance towards 'conflictual collaboration' – a governance setting which creates political and institutional change despite insurmountable conflicts about cultural political values or priorities.

In sum, the notion of agonistic policy failure not only acknowledges that deep-seated meta conflict is inevitable for the fabrication of always-temporary, always-partial results wrought in messy operational procedures. It ultimately underscores the discontinuous and systemic interpenetration of meta and operational conflicts. In agonistic policy failure, seemingly banal concerns gain the upper hand to ignite political action with real-life consequences. Both failures and successes constitutively emerge from conflict, yet the assessment or naming of both remains contingent and can be contested by different stakeholders. Beyond incremental singular

policies, agonistic policy failure positions conflict as a precondition to enable a political space where stakeholders can come together to build collective solutions, which nevertheless bear traces of conflict. Since the first distribution of City Tax artist grants in the summer of 2015, significant funding increases for independent cultural production in many artistic disciplines have been realised. In the next section, I scrutinise subsequent funding instruments developed out of the City Tax grants to capture the longer-term effects of this agonistic policy failure before concluding with a summary of the main conceptual advances offered by an agonistic approach.

### **Following agonistic policy failures: Differentiations and dissolutions of conflict**

Picking up on Stein et al.'s (2015: 11) suggestion to 'follow the failure', and Lovell's (2019) appeal to examine the mobility of persistent failures in collaborative policy design, this section traces how the unique experimental distribution of individual artists' working and research grants from 2015 morphed into more differentiated funding instruments, and newly developed funding instruments supporting independent cultural production. In accordance with policy mobilities frameworks, these gradual shifts indicate mutations of a one-time collaborative governance encounter into longer-term and better equipped funding envelopes. While the City Tax supplied artists from specific genres (i.e. visual and performing arts, literature, jazz, project spaces and sound art) with small grants, the cultural budget of 2016/2017 prominently highlights 'trans-disciplinary' funding. Together with the term 'discipline-open' funding – notably not a common term in German and seemingly specific to the local cultural political context of Berlin – the latter two terminologies transcend the

logic of genre-specific funding. Where did the original idea to provide small-scale funding to as many artists as possible travel? Where did the conflicts go? Do they keep on failing? Which role does the Coalition play in post-City Tax debates about funding? Ultimately, how did the agonistic policy failure, triggered by the City Tax collaboration, unfold over time?

Changing terminologies in cultural budget documents are indicative of gradual transformations of policy definitions and priorities. The genre-specific logic of artist funding, which was most prominent in the City Tax grants, was often translated into trans-disciplinary funding instruments. In the cultural budget 2016/2017, artist grants, officially termed working and research grants, bearing no visible connection to the City Tax, were qualified as 'inter-disciplinary' grants (1.5 million Euros). In addition to genre-specific grants for visual and performing arts, literature, dance, jazz, serious music (559,000 Euros; SenKultEu, 2016: 79), there are female artist (96,680 Euros) and international travel grants (213,320 Euros), resulting in 2.4 million Euros for individual artists. A trans-disciplinary funding envelope was introduced with a volume of 3.5 million Euros, to strengthen the 'self-image of Berlin as a cosmopolitan, creative and history-conscious metropolis' (SenKultEu, 2019a). Two-thirds of these trans-disciplinary funds are dedicated to 'independent projects and initiatives' (e.g. event series, Berlin-based festivals or those who support the visibility of Berlin-based artists internationally, thematic series, co-productions with cultural institutions), one-third is designated to 'institutions' in collaboration with the independent scene (2.7 million Euros). 100,000 Euros fund contemporary historical and memory-related projects. Together with jury fees, administrative costs and a 'political reserve', retained for executive funding decisions, a total of 6.8 million Euros was allocated to

the independent scene in 2016, showing a large increase in comparison with 2015. While the above language around ‘trans-disciplinary’ funding objectives was co-created with the Koalition, it is explicitly couched in city marketing language promoting diversity and global competitiveness. This output-oriented funding rationale might have resulted from the ‘forced marriage’ between arts and culture, sports- and tourism-related projects, which were initially funded from City Tax income. Only in the cultural budget 2018/2019 was this unlikely trio divorced. In sum, the introduction of trans-disciplinary funding marks the transition from genre-specific, individual-oriented artist grants, previously characterised as agonistic policy failure, to more broadly defined, genre-overarching, trans-disciplinary efforts for project funding, which was also requested by the Koalition in their catalogue of demands. In the context of re-positioning funding objectives, touching on meta concerns with regards to cultural funding (which might possibly evoke meta conflicts), the focus on trans-disciplinarity epitomises remarkable funding increases for the independent scene. While not all stakeholders were satisfied with the dissolution of genre-specific funding rationales, the overall budgetary increase was considered another variation of agonistic policy failure for the independent scene. The somewhat shape-shifting, trans-disciplinary funding now maintains both meta conflict and operational consensus, and thus further inscribes agonism into Berlin’s cultural political context.

In the cultural budget 2018/2019, the artist grant scheme became even more differentiated. Some grants were converted into prizes, others turned into new grants (e.g. literature working grants now offer comic and graphic novels as well non-German-language grants). A total of 2.1 million Euros was allocated to working and research grants. In addition, trans-disciplinary

funding was rephrased as ‘discipline-open funding’, receiving an increase from 3.5 to 4.5 million Euros. In addition, another funding envelope of 3.5 million Euros was dedicated exclusively to larger festivals that are ‘of relevance for the City of Berlin’ (SenKultEu, 2019b). This further differentiation of trans-disciplinary funding results from cultural administrators’ insights that previous trans-disciplinary funding should have distinguished between existing festivals organised by independent scene stakeholders, which need longer-term support, and newer, smaller and more experimental festival formats (16 October 2019). To avoid ‘clogging’ the independent scene component of discipline-open funding, administrators suggested creating yet another festival fund. In sum, in 2018, a total of 10.2 million Euros was dedicated to the independent scene, including the above-mentioned working grants (2.1 million), discipline-open funding (4.5 million), larger festivals (3.5 million), other projects, the ‘political reserve’ for executive decisions, increased administrative staff costs to manage the funds and a doubling of funding for contemporary historical and memorial projects. While there has been a significant shift away from small-sum, individual artist grants to larger volumes of project funding and newly developed, politically supported formats such as festivals, other funding areas remain underfunded (e.g. the recently piloted grants for artistic research) or unfunded (e.g. no funds for artist advocacy work). However, cultural administrators consider the ‘continuity’ to maintain newly established funding programmes to be ‘a product of the Koalition’ (16 October 2019). While larger, recurring cultural festivals, which received significant budgetary increase, were generally appreciated, a cultural administrator (16 October 2019) cautions that ‘festivals mostly reproduce and represent culture that has already been there. Out of the discipline-

open funding, extremely little money goes into the actual production of art'. Bearing in mind that festival funding was never directly requested by the Koalition, this transformation hints at possible meta conflict between artist activists and cultural administrators, which might spark off in light of the contested festivalisation of urban culture (Häußermann and Siebel, 1993). Although some of the current grant schemes have been developed in dialogue with genre-specific associations, the Koalition as an almost all-encompassing actor nowadays plays a comparatively less significant role in budgetary negotiations than when the City Tax was first introduced. A cultural administrator remarks: 'With regards to requesting new budgetary items or their increase, we [cultural administration] have basically taken over the lead to push for discipline-open funding' (16 October 2019). Hence, while meta conflicts about the priorities and rationales behind festival funding have always existed, and certainly persist in current debates, more recently, standing divergences seem prone to translate into various operational conflicts between administrators and artist advocates. On the one hand, this means that the possibility of absolute failure – as opposed to agonistic policy failure – is ever-present. On the other hand, it is important to bear in mind that future constructions of agonistic policy failures will crucially depend on the sustained commitment to continue agonistic debate. In short, the transition from antagonism to temporary agonism can, at no point, be taken for granted.

To draw the analysis of the twists and turns of agonistic policy failures to a close, the conflict-attuned collaboration between administration and artists, initiated by the agonistic policy failure of the City Tax grants, has morphed into diverse forms of long-term-oriented cultural funding. On the

one hand, the cultural administration has spearheaded the concerted effort to encourage the dissipation of discipline- or genre-specific funding logics (i.e. dissolution of conflicts). On the other hand, new and more fine-grained funding instruments have been introduced to prioritise formerly unfunded areas of cultural production and activity (i.e. differentiation of conflicts). While the Koalition's activism around the City Tax had opened a discursive entry point to reshuffle opportunities for collaborative governance, cultural administrators have recently assessed overall collaboration with the Koalition as less productive, less detail-specific and less frequent, claiming that Koalition-internal controversies and frequent changes of Koalition speakers make it more difficult to produce concrete results (16 October 2019). While it remains to be seen whether the agonistic collaborative arrangement can be stabilised through future processes of budget-making and policy design, the first agonistic policy failure continues to shape subsequent policy decisions, priorities and outcomes, which contribute to improve working conditions for Berlin's independent artists.

### **Conclusion: Failing forward**

By closely analysing the consequences of the 'success bias' in policy studies, I have identified a lingering blind spot in visions of urban politics and policy-making that privilege an ideal of consensus over conflict. Against the belief in 'pure' consensus, I foregrounded the analytical potential which emerges from a conflict-oriented understanding of policy collaboration and policyfailing. By giving insight into some of the conflictually charged, complex encounters between policy actors, interests and resources in Berlin's urban cultural politics and by developing the concept of agonistic policy failures, I

demonstrated that conflict and contingency are not exceptional or odd features of policy-making, but are common, central and indispensable for political debate and progress. From this empirically guided discussion, I have pushed for a conflict-oriented approach to policy failure.

With regards to the conceptual merits of the conflict-oriented study of policy failures, or policyfailing, two concluding points can be drawn from the empirical analysis. First, an agonistic approach to the study of collaborative governance and policy efforts can help develop a more nuanced understanding of the multiple, irreducible antagonisms underlying political life. A conflict-oriented framework, which cautiously differentiates between meta and operational conflicts without reifying or ever fully separating them, offers an analytical tool to intensify the explanatory power of failure, at work in constructions of both absolute and agonistic policy failures. This agonistic framework allows us to draw analytical attention to newly emerging political subjects, both within the cultural political field, where such activism has remained little studied, and in other political movements which request (cultural) equity and participation. By understanding self-organised actors' approaches to political representation and claims-making, policy practice might better reflect civic and intersectional positions within multi-stakeholder governance arrangements.

Second, the de-naturalisation of the seemingly intractable primate of consensus reactivates the necessarily contested origins of *any* political decision. Instead of stigmatising conflict as abject or bad, an agonistic framework points to the potency to conflict as necessary and generative resource for future political and institutional change, which are always-already somewhat failing. Attending to the productivity of agonistic failures allows stakeholders not only to learn from conflicts for political action and

collaboration to come, but also mobilises the inherently *political* nature of urban governance collaborations and choices. By foregrounding conflict as omnipresent and necessary, both the academic study and everyday activist labour to communicate political failures will mark the traces of conflict in any success and remind political stakeholders of the contingent origins of any position of power. While the emphasis on conflict might be perceived as inconvenient or discomfoting, agonism foregrounds conflict to strike back against technocratic incrementalism or post-political governance, which considers politics as merely bureaucratic options to which there are no 'real' alternatives. Ultimately, the paper has shown that a conflictual framework is both analytically and practically useful in transforming and politicising the ways in which policies emerge, which will always, to a necessary degree, continue to fail.

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### Notes

1. 'Success bias' refers to a complex, fuzzy and contested empirical and conceptual phenomenon which touches both on policy-makers' preference of success over failure (i.e. desire to narrate their political achievements in a positive light) as well as policy scholars' inclination to portray research positively (i.e.



presenting empirical findings that confirm one's own hypotheses as well as cases 'that work'; Malone, 2018).

2. The reference to 'levels' of conflicts does not intend to reify or spatialise immutable 'locations' of conflict but points to the ontic-ontological difference of politics (i.e. politics and the political, Marchart, 2007).
3. In 2015, during the main data collection period, the cultural administration was still a departmental unit in the Major's Office, called *Senatskanzlei für Kulturelle Angelegenheiten* (Senate Chancellery for Cultural Affairs).
4. The grants offered short-term funding for over 140 individual artists, providing 4000 to 6000 Euros in an easily accessible application procedure.

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