

Intervention Symposium
“Worldbuilding and Worldbreaking:
New Spatialities of the Far-Right”

For a Non-Exceptionalist Spatial Theory of Far-Right Mobilizations

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In societies across the globe, there is a disturbing yet familiar trend to frame and respond to ongoing planetary crises in nationalistic, paranoid, exclusionary, and authoritarian ways. What Alexander Reid Ross (2017) once called a “fascist creep” has by now accelerated into a march that appears to flourish under conditions of protracted political crisis and widening social inequalities. From a spatially informed point of view, the daily reproduction and political regulation of far-right mobilizations happens not in a void but in concrete spaces and, as such, continues to produce far-right geographies. Amid conditions of acute uncertainty for many, the socio-spatial imaginaries, practices, and affects that constitute, stabilize, or fail to undo such far-right geographies deserve special attention. In this contribution to the Symposium on far-right world-building and world-breaking, we therefore propose to approach these contemporary phenomena through the lens of territorialization. If one seeks to deconstruct the geographies of regressive politics, and foster emancipatory platforms and antifascist world-building, it is beneficial to do so from an explicitly territorial perspective—one that is informed by Latin American and Anglophone debates, as our forthcoming book illustrates (Autor*innenkollektiv Terra-R 2025).

Such an approach towards the spatialities of authoritarian, racist, antifeminist, transphobic, and other exclusionary politics would, we argue, help to avoid a major fallacy in both public and academic analyses that revolve around what we might call a socially engrained spatial exceptionalism: the ideological idea of a societal “center” as the stronghold of invincible democratic values pitted against a supposedly extremist “lunatic fringe” (Adorno 2019:41). In this context, a sense of *the rural* as a generic term for “places that don’t matter” (Rodríguez-Pose 2018), “populated by ‘losers’ and as hijacked by populist forces” (Kasabov 2020:144) should sound all-too familiar. But even if zoned differently, for instance along the former Iron Curtain in Germany, an analysis based on spatial exceptionalism falls short and

often eclipses everyday processes of far-right mobilization. Situated dynamics, including the historical and contemporary political-economic, social, and cultural conditions upon which mobilizations are based, often remain hidden.

Moreover, conceiving of the far-right as something at the fringes obscures a recurrent strategy that supports its very rise and consists in concerted forms of simulation and blending-in. In many cases, the far-right turns out adept not only at trivializing its authoritarian, racist, and anti-democratic agendas and personnel by pointing the finger at ruling actors, appealing to the interests of “the people”, and picking up on wider racist, anti-migrant, anti-queer, and patriarchal tendencies in society. In more closely-knit communities, from online forums to family and neighborhood relations, far-right actors also adopt spatial strategies of mimicry to build semblances of internal harmony or compensate for phenomena of deprivation. For example, this is the case with seemingly apolitical spatial planning decisions that allow local far-right activists and politicians to merge into the center of public discourse (Nettelblatt 2023). This can be observed in overt conflicts, such as contestations around energy-transition policies, but also—even more dangerously—in the context of mundane issues such as communal traffic planning, thus helping the far-right settle into the local political mainstream (Domann 2024). Paradoxically, then, what often is conveniently projected onto an alleged lunatic fringe located at the peripheries becomes normalized at the very heart of a community. Our focus on territorialization, as outlined in what follows, therefore seeks to intervene into debates on far-right spatialization that revolve around polarization and externalization, and instead addresses the complexities and formative processes of politically contested socio-spatial configurations.

Territorialization *by and of* the Far-Right

To address far-right socio-spatial imaginaries and practices we deploy a refined notion of territorialization. This notion places the focus on social practices and processes, rather than given delimited entities. Specifically, this approach allows for a power-critical perspective on how far-right geographies emerge from situated processes of de- and re-territorialization—whether violent and eventful or banal and mundane. To flesh out this approach conceptually and mark the far-right as both an actor and an object of territorialization, we draw on debates that have employed different angles on territorialization and territory. While the Latin American debate on *território* (Portuguese) and *territorio* (Spanish) (e.g. Haesbaert and

Mason-Deese 2020; Porto Gonçalves 2006; Santos 2000) is particularly apt for elucidating situated practices involved in the making of territories and subjectivities (Schwarz and Streule 2024), the Anglophone debate on *territory* (e.g. Elden 2010; Painter 2010; Sack 1983) is well suited for interrogated how spatial abstraction operates and thus also how debates about the far-right can obscure its actual effects on spaces, subjects, and social relations.²

How, then, do these different approaches help us understand situated spatial practices of the far-right as well as enabling (or impeding) dynamics of political and spatial formation? Using “territory”, on the one hand, we are concerned with territorializations that occur in relation to the far-right (territorializations *of*)—a perspective that prioritizes representations of social, discursive, political-economic, and affective environments. Examples are the ways in which electoral strongholds of right-wing parties, as well as attendant demonstrations and campaigns, are portrayed. On the other hand, drawing on the notion of *territorio*,³ we explore territorializations as spatial practices enacted by the far-right (territorializations *by*)—i.e. situated practices of spatial appropriation, control, contestation, or transformation. Examples from Germany include the systematic acquisition of real estate and escapist attempts by *völkisch* settlers to materialize white-supremacist niches in peripheral regions (Varco 2024), as well as the violent creation of “spaces of fear” and the associated displacement of democratic civil society in cities and municipalities. This also includes the construction of a right-wing “culture of remembrance” and associated myth-making practices. While somewhat schematic and not representative of our wider research engagement *per se*, this plain, dual perspective on territorialization has proven particularly useful for connecting an analysis of (violent) practices of spatial appropriation by far-right actors with discussions on far-right spatialities of success and failure, as we will now briefly outline.

Far-Right Geographies through the Lens of *Territorio*

In studying multiple dimensions of far-right geographies, we use the notion of *territorio* to emphasize the social production of spaces with a special focus on power asymmetries. It is important to note that the mostly Latin-America-based debate on *territorio* is diverse and heterogenous (Clare et al. 2018; Haesbaert and Mason-Deese 2020; Sandoval et al. 2017). However, a major strand defines *territorios* as emerging through socio-territorial practices including powerful processes of ongoing, dynamic, multi-layered, multi-voiced negotiations, and thus also constant conflicts with relatively open outcomes. This also means that

territorios are always just as stable (or fleeting) as the constellations of power from which they emerge (Porto-Gonçalves 2006). In that manner, the concept draws attention to the establishment, stabilization, and destabilization of positions of power in and through space (Haesbaert 2013; Schwarz and Streule 2016). Territorialization highlights the semiotic, material, and affective conditions of spatial differentiation: the symbols, rules, and aesthetics through which spaces are appropriated and segmented, associated everyday experiences and structures of feeling, as well as the built environments and property relations that are at stake. While these discursive, affective, practical, and material dimensions of territorialization can be thought of in a multilayered dialectic, their political negotiation is best described in terms of simultaneous processes of de- and re-territorialization (Haesbaert 2013; Hutta 2019). In this dynamic understanding, specific practices of territorialization are always based on or react to their spatial context, and thereby may also serve as preconditions for future territorializations.

Applied to the contemporary far-right, the concept of *territorio* prompts us to examine the infrastructures, practices, imaginations, and affects of their political mobilizations, the acts of societal or state regulation which enable them, and various moments of emancipatory opposition and resistance to these forms of far-right world-breaking and world-building across scales (Autor*innenkollektiv Terra-R 2025). As outlined elsewhere with respect to the territorial strategies employed by urban social movements (Schwarz and Streule 2024), three sets of questions are helpful to structure and guide a critical analysis of specific far-right territorializations. First, which ideas and practices of belonging structure bodies and spaces? Who is seen as an ally, who is not? Who is (actively) forced out, and who can expect to receive a warm welcome? These questions point towards material arrangements, the networks and conflicts of acting subjects, and take us beyond everyday mimicry. A second set of questions is concerned with everyday practices of (violent) exclusion or inclusion through territorial arrangements. How are identities constituted or questioned in and through space? How are everyday experiences of violence or fear linked with spaces of insecurity and loss for some subjects, but affirmation and comfort for others? Through a lens of spatial experience, we can focus on the violent everydayness of far-right territorializations: for example, as far-right groups and their allies appropriate spaces, marking them, imposing norms, histories, and aesthetics, making them comfortable for themselves and uncomfortable for others, they may alter subjects' capacities to think, act, and feel along racialized and gendered lines of social and political positioning. Finally, shifting the focus from *territorio* to *territory*, a third set of

questions focuses on conflicting representations in processes of de- and re-territorialization. Which symbolic practices are used to communicate or question far-right territorializations, and what attempts to gain interpretative sovereignty are made in this process? These questions highlight *territorio* as a political arena of symbolic and imaginative conflicts. By intertwining these dimensions of de- and re-territorialization, we seek to grasp far-right territorialization as a temporal process that is embedded in local traditions, social conflicts, and societal dynamics. We thereby acknowledge the drastic consequences of far-right territorializations as well as their fragility, which holds the possibility of change in the political currents of society.



Symbolic deterritorializations—Examples of partially destroyed Antifa and Fridays-for-Future stickers in Berlin and Leipzig, Germany (source: Terra-R, 2020 and 2023)

Territorial everyday practices for the representation and production of power are evident in the affixing and removal of political stickers. Altered slogans and semi-destroyed stickers are a common sight in politically contested spaces, and often give testimony of clashing attempts to (re)gain some form of territorial dominance. One of many, the partially dismantled Fridays-for-Future sticker in Leipzig speaks to tensions between hooligans and neo-Nazis training in one of the local hypermasculinist, far-right-aligned MMA gyms and emancipatory, leftist subcultures in the neighborhood. Partially destroyed Antifa stickers in one of Berlin's outer boroughs are artifacts of everyday struggles for territorialization with a long and violent legacy in the neighborhood. After a massive dominance of neo-Nazis in the more than 20 years after Germany's unification, a broad alliance of activists, civil society, and politicians

succeeded in depriving them of their bar- and shop-based social and commercial infrastructure. After this defeat, many far-right activists moved away, while others continue to live in the neighborhood. Though activities of the persisting neo-Nazis have shifted to less localized struggles, the traces they leave in ordinary public spaces remain a warning to political opponents and all those targeted by their anti-democratic politics.

Crucially, this palimpsestic territorial practice—understood as a powerful reconfiguration of coeval spatial presences, rather than a straightforward historical layering (see Massey 2005:110)—appears to make a point of demonstrating dominance by leaving traces of the original content rather than rendering progressive and antifascist messages entirely invisible. In contrast to professional graffiti removal, which would (at times quite hopelessly) aim for a “clean slate”, partial destruction is an overt attempt at emphasizing the power of visual deterritorialization (Schwarz and Streule 2022).

Far-Right Geographies through the Lens of *Territory*

The second perspective of our two-pronged approach focuses on the assumption that certain territories are more or less prone to far-right (electoral) success. Hereby, we shed light on the social processes undergirding these assumptions. To interrogate these, the approach to territoriality developed in Anglophone radical geography helps understand how capitalist modes of production and thought have paved the way for practices of abstraction, parceling, and demarcation that transform terrain into commodified and controlled territory. This imposition of an abstract understanding of a discrete, bordered territory is only possible on the basis of an abstract conception of space: “boundaries only become possible in their modern sense through a notion of space, rather than the other way around”, as Elden (2009:xxvii) notes. Territory becomes a concrete abstraction, in other words, once the initially purely mental abstraction of “territory” is turned into the foundation of an actual social practice. In the modern (Western) world, this logic is arguably pervasive: “Territoriality occurs at all scales, from the room to the nation-state. Territoriality is not an object but a relationship. A room may be a territory at one time and not at another” (Sack 1983:56).

Following these debates, we understand territorialization as a strategy of classification that facilitates specific ways of exercising power (Paasi 2003:111). Classifying by territories then means that different types of practices, people, or groups are distinguished solely on the basis of their position in space, a space typically ruled by a hegemonic order. Applied to

contemporary far-right mobilizations, the concept of territory leads us to question specific modes of spatial exceptionalism. In particular, spatial exceptionalism becomes discernable as a strategy to avoid uncomfortable topics: when the far-right is territorialized as a peripheral phenomenon, a phenomenon that can be associated with rurality, for instance, the need for a more complex theorization and critical analysis of far-right ideologies and practices no longer forms part of the debate. The social complexity of territorializations by the far-right would then remain hidden behind and fixed by a simplifying spatial pattern. Additionally, the territory lens enables us to critique the rationalities that render certain spatial narratives attractive for a specific mode of societal reproduction. We are able to see the discursive closures in media coverage and political speech, in the often-simplifying cartographic representations of far-right (electoral) success, or in narrative patterns of liberal self-assurance that deflect blame onto “othered” subjects and spaces.



Violent attacks on journalists covering far-right protests are attempts to establish absolute power over certain (temporal) territories, as this film still from Wurzen, Saxony shows (source: Kili Weber, 10 October 2022; reproduced here with permission)

Since 2020, the eastern German state of Saxony, widely regarded as a hotspot for far-right mobilizations, has experienced a new wave of protests dominated by right-wing actors. Agitating against public-health measures implemented to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, these protests soon developed into mass events, taking place not only in major cities, but also

in more than a hundred municipalities across Saxony. These mobilizations led to the development of temporary but recurring territorialities of far-right domination, where violent practices of exclusion were successfully established. One characteristic of this new wave of far-right mobilizations is a massive hostility against journalists, who were often framed as intruders from the cosmopolitan “urban” sphere, pursuing a “woke” media agenda and thus seeking to defame the entire population of Saxony as far-right extremists. This agitation led to a series of violent attacks against freelance journalists who tried to cover the protests, as seen in the film still above. Guided by misogynous ideologies, female journalists in particular were targeted for brutal attacks. Such acts of spatial exclusion can be analyzed as practices of a violent everydayness of far-right territorialization that seeks to exercise absolute power over access to certain spaces.

Conclusions

In our intervention on territorialization by and of the far-right we have presented a two-directional approach that examines both the everyday situatedness of de- and re-territorialization and strategies of a discursive production of meaning through territorialization. As already stated, our work draws on the Latin American *territorio* debate as a mode of thinking space as multidimensional, relational, and power-structured, on the one hand, and on the Anglo-American debate on *territory*, which aims to get behind the segmenting technologies and rationalities of power and space, on the other. Hence, *territorio* tends to foreground questions of contested everyday territorializations, while *territory* enables a focus on strategies of spatial abstraction that have emerged with capitalist political economy. By proposing to intertwine these perspectives, we aim to scrutinize different facets of territorialization: institutional assemblages, security policies, and authorities; organized and sudden forms of resistance; far-right networks and acting subjects; their infrastructures and routine practices; spatial imaginations, affects, and emotions; as well as the emergence and disappearance, fixing and undoing of spatial phenomena. We thus propose to shed light on both subtle and openly violent struggles around far-right presence in local as well as translocal arrangements. This includes, for example, marginalized people’s fear on suburban trains, affective enactments of power arising as far-right activists strive for territorial hegemony, institutional arrangements that enable or disable far-right territorializations, willed ignorance on the part of media outlets and local authorities, reluctance around remembrance

and the joy of oblivion, as well as societal dynamics that normalizing and legalizing misanthropy and de-humanization. We are convinced that, in all these respects, the concept of territorialization can sharpen our understanding of the ways in which identities are marked and forces bundled, how capacities for empowerment arise for some protagonists more than others, and how power asymmetries play out in moments and spaces of encounter and appropriation. Practices and dynamics of territorialization, we insist, are inherently political and contestable.

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¹ Founded in 2020, the research network *Territorializations of the Radical Right* (Terra-R) provides a platform for researchers from the field of geography and cognate disciplines working on far-right spatializations. A focus

on territorialization allows us to explore the ways in which authoritarian and exclusionary politics are not limited to so-called “fringes” but permeate a variety of social spheres. Moreover, in the current political situation, it is vital to move beyond descriptive conceptualizations, to position ourselves and contribute to activist perspectives, highlighting not only continuities but also tensions, contradictions, and ruptures in far-right geographies, ideologies, and everyday practices. In light of this more-than-academic endeavor, we have moved from co-authoring our contributions to collaborative writing under the name *Autor*innenkollektiv Terra-R (Terra-R Collective)*. Correspondence should be sent to info.terra-r@tu-dresden.de

² This dual perspective on *território/terrorio* and territory is not meant to deny the various interrelations between Latin American and Anglophone understandings, but rather to enable heuristic analytical foci.

³ While Brazilian geographers have been particularly prominent in elaborating this perspective, we have opted for the Spanish spelling in line with the bulk of other Anglophone engagements.