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Infrastructure and Resentment: Re-/Considering the Role of Narratives of "The State" in Right-Wing Populist Success

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Introduction

The number of academic studies on populism has over the past decades been increasing in direct proportion to the electoral success of (right-wing) populist parties and movements. The explanatory approaches to these successes appear just as diverse as the cases themselves, and so far there is no undisputed or universally accepted definition of populism, right-wing or otherwise. Merely one modal-descriptive aspect seems to have gained broad consensus: populists claim to represent "the people" against "the establishment", which they see as controlled and represented by "the elite" (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). While most recent studies and other scholarly inquiries, looking for explanations for right-wing populism's (RWP) electoral success, see the phenomenon resulting from complex, multi-causal dynamics, it is this red thread of populism, the people-vs-elite opposition, that often finds special consideration. Studies focusing on this opposition in the context of right-wing populism and populism in general range from inquiries into the histories and genealogies of the opposition to linguistic accounts on how it is instrumentalized in populist campaigns and rhetoric. And while most of these accounts include characterizations of what is in their specific cases framed as "the elite" or "the establishment", it is somewhat surprising that the role of "the state" as crucial protagonist in populist narratives, often featuring at the center of these framings, is only seldom addressed. Often neglected as a second-tier phenomenon or as an empty container in research on RWP, "the state" features as an un- or only poorly defined,

yet important factor in RWP supporters' everyday experience. Left unaddressed by and large by researchers and "the Left", the "the state" is prone to become a crucial element of RWPs' efforts in what Essex, Gallaher, and Luger in the introduction to this Symposium call "worldbuilding": in their efforts to re-make social, economic, and political realities to suit their ideologies, needs, and narratives, RWPs occupy the sovereignty of interpretation over what their (potential) supporters experience as "the state" in their everyday lives. This intervention therefore calls for a re-/consideration of the role of "the state" in research on right-wing populist electoral success.

"The State"?

"The state" as used in RWP argumentation persistently evades a clear definition in scholarly terms. RWP actors use of the term is often intentionally ambivalent. And while "the state" often prominently features in narratives of RWP supporters and voters, it stays elusive as it is ascribed to a broad variety of protagonists, institutions, scales, ideals, etc. It might be an example of what Ludwig Wittgenstein (2009) had in mind when he wrote about "family resemblance": "the state", as it features in RWP narratives, summarizes overlapping characteristics diverging across the instances of its manifestation and terminological use rather than a clearly definable phenomenon. While "the state" thus presents itself as an "essentially contested concept" (Gallie 1955), embodying perspectives that are inherently open to interpretation, the ways in which it features in the narratives constructed by RWP supporters and voters suggests to treat it rather as a denominator for the sum of what individuals and groups identify as "the state" within their respective lifeworlds; to treat "the state" as an element of a contextually emerging narrative rather than to rely on normative-deductive preconceptions.

A big part about the confusion of the role of "the state" in RWP contexts derives from the circumstance, that the term is not consistently used by RWPs themselves. As straightforward as some political formations appear to be identifiable as populist and especially as right-wing populist, as difficult it is to find not only a universally accepted definition of populism itself, but also for the concepts that populists most often draw on. "The people", as used by populists, for example, has been just as hard to analytically pin down as "the elite" or "the establishment". The definitions for these terms used by populists vary to such a large degree, that the linguists Ruth Wodak and Jakob Engel concluded that the

variations in the terms used by RWPs must be intended. Engel and Wodak (2013) therefore speak of "calculated ambivalence" as a rhetorical tactic of RWPs, employed by keeping a term's or concept's meaning sharp enough for potential supporters to feel understood and addressed, yet vague enough to be able to twist it according to needs and contexts. Also, "the state" cannot consistently be found as part of RWP's constructing of "the elite" or "the establishment". "The state" stays ambivalent and thus elusive.

While staying a vague term in RWPs' rhetoric, "the state" is, however, often much more directly addressed in the narratives of those who RWPs claim to represent—narratives, which are co-produced as well as instrumentalized by RWPs. In her account of the affective dimension of politics among Tea Party supporters in the US state of Louisiana, Arlie Hochschild (2018), for example, draws a very figurative picture of what she calls the "grand narrative" that these people re-/produce to justify their support for RWPs. In that picture, supporters of the populist right-wing Tea Party movement find themselves waiting in line at the bottom of a hill, while at its top looms what they see as the well-earned reward for their (and their ancestors') lifetimes' efforts, that is, the fulfillment of the "American Dream". The waiting line does not move, however: the Tea Party supporters, at the back of the line, feel blocked by those in front of them, by "the elite", who won't move on and even beckon in "line-cutters", such as migrants and other marginalized groups. Voicing their frustration from the back of the line, the narrative continues, Tea Party supporters are only met with disgust about their "racism" and "backwardness" from those further in front. From the point of view of those back in the line, the latter speak from an advanced position, further up the hill, from a position grounded in being established "up there", representing an all-controlling state. Building on Hochschild's account, the German sociologists Klaus Dörre and Livia Schubert find similar narratives in their research on Germany and Austria (Dörre 2020; Schubert 2020). Instead of the American Dream, however, the reward looming at the top of the hill is there represented by welfare state benefits, such as a pension that facilitates good living conditions after wage labor, or free and well-equipped health care, childcare, etc. From the point of view of RWP supporters in Hochschild's, Dörre's, and Schubert's studies, "the state" thus features as a very real component in their grand narratives, although it stays undefined and thus somewhat elusive in conceptual terms: it appears as a container and identity marker when constructing "the people" based on a nationalistic understanding of "the state" (which is, in such narratives, being hijacked by a variety of anti-people groups or forces); it stands for a

bureaucratic apparatus, tax collector, and provider of public services; or it stands for those institutions, which have the function to protect minority rights from majority rule in liberal democracies (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). Framings of what "the state" is are connected to everyday experiences of RWP supporters rather than to a consistent ideological or conceptual definition, arguably warranting a closer look at the role of "the state" in the everyday experiences of these people.

A crucial moment of connection between the grand narratives and RWP supporters' everyday experiences is represented by the resentment that people in the back of the line feel confronted with, when their outrage is met with disgust by "the elite", to stick with the picture painted by Hochschild. The resentment turns against those in the line's front too, however, when people in the back react with anger and rage. One of the roots of this opposition between "the people" and "the elite" thus seems to start at this point of mutual resentment of two groups, which are in liberal democracies not separate pro forma, but emerge as such per actiones. The question, if people in the back of the line are de facto disenfranchised or not, thus becomes merely rhetoric at this point, as the feeling of disenfranchisement moves to the fore, instigated by resentments and resulting in an opposition that RWPs can capitalize on for their political mobilization. "The state's" role in fueling or mitigating feelings of disenfranchisement and mutual resentment therefore seems a fruitful starting point for better understanding "the state's" role in RWP electoral success in general.

Infrastructure…

So how can we, as geographers, address "the state" in research on RWP, if it features as such an elusive trope in the narratives of RWP supporters? From a geographical perspective, a potentially fruitful starting point might be to look at the way in which "the state" manifests in the everyday through its infrastructure. Many scholars, as the British economist Colin Turner (2020) pointed out recently, see an intricate connection between formation and functioning of nation-states and infrastructure, highlighting the central role of the latter: infrastructure takes on a strong political dimension in encounters between "the people" and "the state". It is thus not surprising, that infrastructure has also increasingly been featuring in RWP politics, resulting in what the German geographer Matthias Naumann (2021) calls "infrastructural populism". Drawing on a very broad definition of infrastructure, which includes technical, social, and structural infrastructure, Naumann distinguishes between infrastructure as political

subject matter of RWPs, as instrument of RWPs, and as explanation of RWP success. The crucial momentum in the relation between RWP politics and infrastructure, however, is not simply the quality and quantity of infrastructure, Naumann points out, but also its type and the specific form of its realization—and whether the latter correspond with the population's everyday needs and demands. Or, in other words, infrastructure can in its political dimension be read as mediating encounters between people and state on an everyday scale, thereby shaping the relationship between the two.

Encounters between people and state mediated through infrastructure strongly influence how people feel about their ability to benefit from "the state" and about their options to participate in decision-making. If infrastructure—including technical, social, and structural, but also institutional infrastructure, like the presence of state offices and the quality of services provided there—does not correspond with the population's needs and demands, the emergence of a general feeling of disenfranchisement becomes more likely. Non-corresponding, thus inadequate, infrastructure can consequently be read as resentment by those "in the back of the line", provoking resentment from the latter in return, feeding into narratives like those found by Hochschild in the US or Dörre and Schubert in Germany and Austria. If demands and concerns voiced are met by closed-off, unresponsive, and paternalizing state institutions, for example, or if peoples' dependence on individual transport meets infrastructure policies aiming at reducing the use of cars, as another instance, RWPs find fertile ground to mobilize voters against an inaccessible "elite" that does not understand the everyday needs of "the people". The specific characteristics of everyday encounters between people and state thus appear to play a crucial role in RWP's degree of success in political mobilization.

…and Resentment

The debate about the so-called rural–urban divide in Austrian election results illustrates how these dynamics contribute to voting behavior and how they are prone to be (mis-)read in analyses. Over roughly the past two decades, national-level election results in Austria appear to indicate a growing divide in voting outcomes between rural regions and cities: while conservative parties and RWPs gain more and more support in the countryside, progressive and left(ish) parties seem to be more successful in mobilizing voters in urban areas. While recent studies look for explanations for these differences within the interplay of a variety of

socio-economic, historic, and cultural dynamics (see e.g. Essletzbichler et al. 2021), a large number of analyses and commentaries with relatively high reach and strong presence in lower threshold media tend towards speaking of an almost unbridgeable divide, of "two countries in one" (Schaffer 2019), and put emphasis on a so-called rural mindset, or even so-called rural backwardness. The phenomenon of differing voting outcomes as well as the debate around it point at two crucial aspects: the neglect of the role of the state in analyzing these dynamics and the re-/production of fault lines along arguments of resentment. Especially the latter are in Austria readily picked up by RWPs in their campaigns and rhetoric, reinforcing mutual resentment between the so-created groups of "the people" (in the countryside) and "the elite" (in cities).

Considering the strong role that infrastructure increasingly plays in RWP politics, as Naumann (2021) points out, and the central role that infrastructure plays as a core function of the state, it becomes imperative to extend our analysis to consider the role of inadequate infrastructure not only in rural areas but also urban spaces. Recent research, as highlighted in a study on voting clusters in German cities (Dörr et al. 2023),[1] indicates that parts of cities are experiencing a similar disconnection between the state mediated through infrastructure and the everyday needs and demands of the population. This insight challenges the prevailing narrative of a clear rural–urban divide and underscores the necessity of a nuanced approach that accounts for the role of the state in both rural and urban settings. The quality and accessibility of public services, transportation systems, healthcare facilities, educational institutions, etc. play a crucial role in shaping peoples' perception of "the state's" accessibility, beyond the concrete service that specific forms of infrastructure (should) provide. In instances where these elements fall short of meeting the population's needs and demands, a sense of disenfranchisement can emerge, regardless of whether people live in rural or urban areas: neighborhoods with inadequate infrastructure tend to exhibit higher support for RWPs in elections. Adding to approaches that consider an interplay of a variety of factors in dynamics leading to RWP success, "the state's" accessibility thus comes in as a factor more crucial than simplified socio-economic and cultural explanations have offered.

In the narratives presented by Hochschild, Dörre, and Schubert, "the state", albeit conceptually ambivalent, emerges not just as an abstract entity but as a tangible force that either obstructs or facilitates the realization of aspirations. Or, in other words, the narratives highlight how infrastructure has a crucial part in shaping peoples' everyday experience of

"the state's" accessibility: everyday encounters, mediated by infrastructure, play a pivotal role in shaping feelings of disenfranchisement and, subsequently, mutual resentment. The quality, accessibility, and adequacy of infrastructure become key factors influencing the relationship between "the people" and "the establishment". When infrastructure aligns with the needs and demands of the population, it can foster a sense of inclusion and satisfaction. Conversely, inadequate infrastructure becomes a source for mutual resentment, creating a fertile environment for right-wing populists to mobilize frustrated voters against what RWPs then call "the elite".

A recent example of such dynamics can be found in the debate on the so-called "15-minute city" plans in the UK. Implemented as part of sustainable development schemes in urban planning, "15-minute city" concepts aim at reducing car traffic and transportation needs in general in UK towns and cities by implementing a number of infrastructural changes. RWPs, however, managed to mobilize a large number of protesters and activists by instrumentalizing the initiatives in framing them as part of a detached elite's plan to control the population. While some of this mobilization drew on conspiracy theories around "the Great Reset", a large part of RWPs' argumentation built on what has been framed as neglect of "the people's" infrastructural needs, concerns, and expectations. RWPs in this instance capitalize on the frustration of some groups of the population, who feel their needs neglected, without an option to participate in the decision-making process, and thus disenfranchised. RWPs, on behalf of "the people", denounce "the state's" plans, expressing resentment, which is, in turn, met with resentment from part of what RWPs frame as "the elite"—in this instance, state institutions, politicians across a wide range of the (non-populist) political spectrum, the media, and members of the academic community express resentment against the outrage of RWPs (Grainger 2023; Zetkin Collective 2024). This situation of mutual resentment, instigated by "the state" through infrastructure, results in fertile ground for sustainable political mobilization in favor of RWPs.

A Question of Access

"The state", while remaining a vague and ambivalent term in populist rhetoric, emerges as a significant protagonist in voters' narratives, as demonstrated by the accounts of Hochschild, Dörre, and Schubert. As the example of the rural–urban divide illustrates, considering the role of "the state"—for instance by looking at how infrastructure contributes to shaping peoples'

perspective on "the state's" accessibility—adds to a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics behind RWP electoral success. Mutual resentment, a central moment in the narrative of an opposition between "the people" and "the elite", seems inter alia strongly interconnected with encounters between people and the state, *mediated* through infrastructure. The feeling of disenfranchisement, whether real or perceived, becomes a powerful tool for right-wing populists to capitalize on for political mobilization and in the course of their breaking and building a world that can from the viewpoint of their supporters only be interpreted in their favor. "The state's" role in fueling or mitigating these feelings of disenfranchisement and mutual resentment thus becomes a crucial area for understanding the electoral success of right-wing populism.

This intervention thus calls for future research on right-wing populism to re-/consider the role of "the state" in the electoral success of right-wing populists. "The state's" accessibility, as mediated through infrastructure, represents a potentially fruitful starting point to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play, as it appears to play a crucial role in the processes from which mutual resentment emerges—resentment, that is part of the grounds from which RWPs skillfully construct the division between "the people" and "the elite" in the first place. Re-/considering "the state's" role in RWP dynamics might also work to counter a normative trap in research on the matter: being normatively critical—or resenting—of populists' policies and thus the narratives of their electorate seems to sometimes entice researchers to reductionist reasoning. Such dynamics, especially when taken up by RWPs, are prone to reinforce the narrative of an opposition between "the people" and an inaccessible "elite", detached from the everyday, which researchers might then be considered being part of.

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[1] See a detailed article in the German newspaper *Die Zeit* for a detailed visualisation of the results at https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2023-09/wahlverhalten-staedte-bundestagswahl-wahlkarte-analyse (last accessed 30 November 2023).