The social and spatial forms of the Far Right across Europe

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The European Far-Right[1] galaxy appears at first glance to be not just extensive and growing, but also well-connected and relatively coherent in its positions. Yet although Far-Right groups and parties have long-standing transnational connections, they remain profoundly marked by their distinct national political contexts and histories. In order to better understand the ways such parties mobilize voters around the sort of 'reactionary politics of place' that Belina outlines in his essay we must, first of all, place them within these distinct contexts. This is also crucial in order to better appreciate how such parties work in concert with other, not-so-Far-Right forces, bringing their politics of violent exclusion increasingly into the mainstream. In what follows, I will thus try to raise three notes of caution for political geographers attempting to understand the forms that the Far-Right is taking across Europe. First, we need to appreciate the specific contexts within which these groups and parties emerge, taking into account not simply their national political genealogies but also the distinct local circumstances within which they find rooting and success. Secondly, we need to be more critical of the apparent coherence of the Far-Right universe, which is, in fact, much less coherent in terms of organization, orientations and platforms than is commonly assumed. Finally, we need to be cognizant of what I will argue is the most elusive danger posed by such movements: their role in normalizing nativist and revanchist discourses (and, increasingly, actions), taken up in 'lite' fashion by more respectable political forces.

First, then, the question of context. The emergence of right-populist forces across Europe has been highly variegated (Caiani & Graziano, 2019). While the electoral success of many of these forces can certainly be directly linked to the on-going effects of the 'Great Recession' (Hernandez & Kriesi, 2016, among others), there are considerable national differences in right-populist parties' platforms and agendas, as well as in the closeness of their ties to the farther-Right. Studies such as the one by Lisi et al. (2019), examining the impacts of the economic crisis on parties' electoral platforms in Greece, Portugal and Spain, have shown how national ideological legacies, as well as the historical structuring of the party systems, have been crucial in shaping discursive framings and party agendas. Certainly, some general patterns can be observed: as

Belina notes 'European right wing populist parties tend to be more neoliberal in their economic and social policies in the economic core countries of the European Union and more ethno-nationalist in more peripheral countries'. While this may be generally the case, there is considerable variation: should Italy be considered a 'core' country in this respect? And how about Poland, whose economic performance in the past decade would not, in a purely economistic interpretation, 'justify' a right-populist surge?

Other commentators have tried to join an examination of the economic 'roots' of right-populism with an analysis of a wider 'politics of insecurity' that possesses also 'cultural' aspects. Most such analyses are deeply problematic, however, adopting a highly essentialist understanding of the notion of 'cultural insecurity' that, in many ways, feeds into precisely the sort of nativist imaginations of territory and belonging adopted by the Far Right (e.g. Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018). And while more nuanced studies have attempted to understand how growing economic insecurity and precarity can indeed often be entangled with cultural isolation and loss of social status (e.g. Gidron & Hall, 2017), they still rely on quantitative analyses that seek to identify broad-based correlations. Yet it is only by examining the effects of such entanglements *on specific populations in specific places* that we can make any sort of inference on the impact of various forms of 'insecurity' on support for the Far Right. In this sense, it is crucial not just to take into account the distinct national forms that neo-liberal capitalism takes across Europe, as Belina argues, but also their even more localized variations.

The most recent neighbourhood level studies have, indeed, indicated that changing population composition and economic fortunes are not a clear determinant of support for the populist Right. Survey data from The Netherlands on support for the Right-populist PVV has uncovered no effects for the local ethnic composition or economic conditions after controlling for individual characteristics (van Wijk et al., 2019). This and other recent studies have argued, rather, that to appreciate the role that 'local context' plays in shaping people's political orientations we cannot simply look at changing population and economic data. 'Contextual effects' also include what electoral scholars term 'the local

normative and ideational context' (Johnston & Pattie, 2006) that influences how people form their opinions and preferences. Such local normative contexts are crucial in influencing whether certain orientations – such as anti-migrant attitudes, or support for the Far-Right more broadly – are seen as socially acceptable.

What is more, a nuanced appreciation of the role of the local contexts of the political action of (and support for) the Far Right can allow us to move beyond what are often highly simplified economistic, culturalist, and historicist interpretations *not just of people but also of places*. One of the problems of some of the recent literature on Right-populisms is that it frequently ascribes support for anti-migrant and Right-populist political forces to the economic or cultural fortunes, and various degrees of 'insecurity', not just of individuals but also of particular places. I refer here to the idea of 'places left behind', which, like the idea of the 'people left behind', has become such a prominent part not just of media discourse, but also scholarly narratives. Political geographers should be particularly well placed to dispute such facile characterizations.

The second point that I would like to make relates to the lack of coherence in the platforms of Far-Right parties across Europe. As Belina notes for the AfD, the Far-Right platform 'combines anti-elitism with an economic and social policy that predominantly benefits the elites', creating a potent mix of 'neoliberalism, national conservatism and anti-elitism'. This ability to re-combine economic and cultural narratives in new formations – in the case of the AfD, aspects of neoliberal utilitarianism and meritocracy with exclusionary cultural nationalism – is also characteristic of other Far-Right and Right-populist forces in Europe. Indeed, such parties very often combine neo-liberal agendas with welfare-populism, if not directly welfare chauvinism. Two illustrative examples are offered by the Austrian FPÖ and the Lega in Italy——examples relevant also because both parties have close ties to the AfD and have worked towards a common platform. Both the FPÖ and the Lega appeal to an imagination of an embattled national community to be protected from globalizing forces, economic as well as cultural. Both elevate the small business-owner and the small farmer as ideal national subjects, under threat from the vagaries of international capital and irresponsible national and European elites. At the same time, however, both 'wink' at big business and either explicitly or implicitly favour the privatization of state resources such as water.[2] Such ideological fluidity is, in part, a calculated attempt to appeal to different economic and geographic constituencies. But it is also a distinguishing characteristic of a 'thin ideology' (Mudde, 2004), that 'responds to its need to be adaptable' (Ruzza & Fella, 2009).

This adaptability also allows Right-populist parties to re-combine political alliances, just as they re-combine ideological positions on a variety of issues. The point raised by Belina regarding the AfD's positioning as 'protectors' of women's and LGBTQI rights 'against violent foreigners' is a telling example. The capture of discourses of sexual and women's rights by the Right and Far-Right is part of an increasingly exclusionary 'femonationalism' identified by Farris (2017) and a form of what Mulinari and Neergaard (2014) have referred to as 'care racism'. Such capture allows parties like the AfD to combine admittedly liberal (if not 'progressive') orientations with exclusionary and racialized appeals against the 'foreigners' who do not share 'our' European values. At the same time, Far-Right appeals to the protection of sexual and gender rights speak to a more broad-based instrumentalization of sexual politics across a number of EU states, with gender equality and LGBTQI rights inscribed into citizenship regimes as a litmus test for the selection and integration of (mainly Muslim) migrants (see Farris, 2017).

This brings me to my third and final point, drawing attention to the continuities between the Far- and Centre-Right parties, who increasingly

finding themselves as lead and junior coalition partners in a number of EU states. As Belina notes for the AfD, we must be aware of the continuities between their ideological positions and those of more 'respectable' Centre-Right parties (in the German context, the CDU/CSU), which cover a variety of similarly 'nationalist, racist and sexist positions'. An appreciation of this sort of 'roving authoritarianism' that Belina highlights is important to understand the full import of Far-Right ideologies in today's Europe, where 'outright Nazism, AfD supporters and "regular" conservatives' come together around particular issues (like migration). Indeed, recent work on Right-populism and the Far Right suggests that Far-Right orientations should be conceptualized 'in a continuous mode, as a "gradational property"'(see the review in Caiani & Graziano, 2019, p. 1142).

In bridging the diverse parts of the Far- and not-so-Far Right, spatial tactics matter a great deal. As Ernesto Laclau (2005) has argued, the impetus of Right-populist movements has been to re-politicise crises in contemporary societies, drawing attention to fundamental societal divisions and contradictions. This re-politicisation has appealed to different symbolic and ideological repertoires in different national contexts – whether the AfD's calls to redeem the 'hard-working native classes', or more state-welfarist appeals seen in Italy and Poland. Along with a figurative and symbolic re-politicisation of crisis, however, such parties have also been enormously successful in re-spatializing and, specifically, in *locating crisis*. Arguably, the 'failure stories' (Moffitt, 2016) these parties tell would be nowhere nearly as successful without a grounding in specific places, real as well as imagined.

The spatial 'revanchism' of the AfD described by Belina thus finds parallels in many other European contexts, operating at a variety of scales, whether through calls to reclaim the national territory, or to retake the spaces of cities. Narratives of the 'selling-out' of the national economy and of the 'abandonment' (or 'take-over', by migrant others) of city centres are woven into a single revanchist discourse for the reclaiming of what is rightfully national, native, local. And here, again, the working in concert of the Far and Centre-Right becomes crucial. It is the violent actions of Far-Right parties – whether street protests or attacks against foreigners – that draw the public gaze to a spatial order 'gone wrong', and the need to re-claim it, to 'put it right' (Bialasiewicz & Stallone, 2019).

While parties like the AfD may be the ones bringing black-clad angry young men into the streets (and, increasingly, women – Dietze and Roth 2020), their calls for the restoration of a 'proper' relationship between rights and territory create the openings for the take-up of very similar agendas, in a lite-Right version, by mainstream parties. The ways in which such reactionary agendas enter the mainstream will differ from country to country based on different structures of political opportunity; what we as political geographers can add to the analyses of this 'roving authoritarianism' is precisely an understanding of their spatialities.

Declaration of competing interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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[2] For both parties, the term Kleptocratic-Right might be more apt than Far-Right, given the series of scandals (including payoffs and promises to real – and fake – Russian oligarchs) that brought down the leadership of the FPÖ in Austria, and that has contributed to undermining support for the Lega in Italy.

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