



Territorial subjectivities. The missing link between political subjectivity and territorialization

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Abstract

Political subjectivity and territorialization often appear disconnected in recent debates. We propose a fresh approach based on Latin American scholarship to understand subjects and territories as relational: Subjects are (de)stabilized in processes of territorialization, while territories are (de)stabilized in processes of subject formation. We introduce the concept of territorial subjectivities and use examples from the literature to show how these emerge in Berlin, Buenos Aires, and Dresden. Placing an analytical focus on becoming rather than being, the contingency of territorial subjectivities is key to this novel conceptual link that supports a differentiated reading of socio-territorial struggles in diverse geographical contexts.

Keywords

territorialization, territorial subjectivities, political subjectivity, intersectionality, futurity, geographies of the far-right, urban grassroots movements

1 Introduction

The concept of territorial subjectivities can help to focus on the relationship between territorialization and subject formation to develop a more differentiated reading of socio-territorial struggles. In this paper, we discuss territories and subjects as relational and open—that is, contingent and unstable, with occasional moments of fixity. We propose this concept as a tool for conceptualizing the co-constitutive processes of territorialization and subject formation and for addressing an inherent tension between stabilization and destabilization in diverse geographical and

political contexts. We are particularly interested in shedding light on territorial strategies mobilized by far-right actors as well as progressive social movements. Intuitively and intellectually, we know and understand that spaces produced by these groups differ fundamentally in character. The practices of territorialization that are involved—such as occupation and

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appropriation of public space, walking, sitting, speaking, and bodily presence in space—are, however, quite similar at times. How, then, to conceptualize the fundamental differences between such powerful place-making practices?

We identify two major conceptual debates in the field of human geography that make substantial contributions towards our endeavor to scrutinize far-right geographies as well as progressive urban grassroots movements: debates on political subjectivity and on territorialization. Both are key geographical concepts, and a broad body of the literature already builds on prominent contributions on space and the politics of place-based identities such as Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1983), David Sibley's "purification of space" (Sibley, 1988), and Doreen Massey's "global sense of place" (Massey, 1991). While these contributions highlight certain important facets of territorial subjectivity, they do not account for the formation of subjects *through* territorialization. Thus, we argue in this paper, they fall short to explain critical aspects of territorial subjectivity and equally to answer key questions on subject positions in the production of territory.

Assuming that "space matters in processes of subjectivation" (Miggelbrink, 2020), we suggest that the concept of territorial subjectivity helps to clarify *how exactly* geography matters in the process of subject formation. We therefore propose to link these two subfields within human geography, which have clear parallels but have hitherto not been systematically brought together. We do this by drawing on the notion of territorial subjectivity and posing the following key questions: How are territories stabilized and destabilized, and how does that process of territorialization become relevant to subject formation? In short, how are territorial subjectivities formed?

In what follows, we first elaborate on the dialectical relation between subject formation and territorialization. We then introduce the concept of territorial subjectivity as defined by Latin American scholars and continue with three empirical examples from the literature to illustrate how territorial subjectivities work. The first two examples show how urban contestations in Buenos Aires and Berlin are able to spawn new subjects and territories through

collective organizing, rather than relying on a naturalization of spaces and bodies. This is contrasted by a third example from Dresden that pinpoints how attempts to engender far-right subjectivities reflect ongoing struggles to open up and close down territories. In the last section, we discuss making and unmaking territorial subjectivities as a promising strategy for developing a deeper critical understanding of contested territories. We conclude by outlining links to other current debates in the wider field of human geography.

II The dialectics of subject formation and territorialization

Subject formation has typically been analyzed in human geography by means of concepts such as agency and political subjectivity. These concepts are crucial for understanding how new subjects emerge. In current debates on geographies of political agency, scholars move beyond "assumption[s] about a political actor who has agency and who is located in the city" (Hoffman, 2014: 1576) to invoke more complex conceptualizations of a situated social subject (see also Holloway et al., 2018; Kuus, 2019; Loftus, 2020; Pile, 2008). Furthermore, many studies in human geography and beyond (e.g., Dawney, 2013; Jakobson, 2022) are inspired by Michel Foucault's writings on biopolitics and governmentality (Foucault, 1987, 2006). They focus mostly on power and subjects, less on spatial questions. Drawing from this literature, we understand political subjectivity as being deeply embedded in socially constructed systems of power and meaning. Crucially, subject formation is also a highly geographical process (Hoffmann, 2014: 1577). The work of Walter Nicholls, for instance, looks at the ways in which relational approaches to place inform the creation of new political subjectivities and, in turn, how place-based social movements build coalitions and mobilize collective action (e.g., Nicholls et al., 2013). However, in spite of numerous publications on diverse aspects of political subjectivity, a precise spatially informed understanding of the ways in which subjectivities actually emerge and unfold in specific spaces remains remarkably elusive.

Territory, territoriality, and territorialization are key concepts for analyzing the spatiality and spatialization of power relations. Whether territory is a political technology (Elden, 2010) or a territorial form of bounded political space (Antonsich, 2009) has been prominently discussed in this journal, along with more recent contributions such as those of Mark Usher (2020) on more-than-human territories and Alistair Sisson (2021) on territorial stigmatization. Based on Latin American scholarship, we define territory for the purpose of this paper as a fragile and contested spatial configuration that results from ongoing political (re)negotiations between multiple social actors and is, as such, characterized by power asymmetries (see Porto Gonçalves, 2001; Santos, 2000, 2021; Saquet and Sposito, 2009). This is by no means inspired by an area-study mindset: Rather than essentializing the production of knowledge in and from Latin America, we suggest engaging with these approaches for their usefulness in grasping territories in the process of their social production. Crucially, such a decentered notion of territory is as much about relational space as it is about relational power insofar as it reveals “the spatial dimension of power relations” (Haesbaert, 2011: 281; see also Raffestin, 1980, 1986; Dell’Agnese, 2013). In Walter Carlos Porto Gonçalves’ words, “territories would not exist if not for the social relations and power relations that form them” (Porto Gonçalves, 2006: 179; authors’ translation). Therefore, he argues, it is important to scrutinize the relations that shape these territories. From this vantage point, a territory is much more than a local policy arena, as it clearly affects those involved in its ongoing construction and deconstruction. A decentered socio-territorial approach (e.g., Clare et al., 2017; Haesbaert, 2011), then, enables us to closely investigate the spatial dimension of power relations, inequalities, and hierarchies on multiple scales. Studies of urbanization and contested urban transformations (e.g., Echeverría and Rincón, 2000; Zibechi, 2012) including our own work (Schwarz and Streule, 2016, 2022) show how analytically useful such a socio-territorial conceptual angle can be. Through this lens, integral aspects of territories—their materiality, the regulation of socio-territorial relations, and everyday practices—reveal themselves to be profoundly

shaped by unequal power relations. Hence, contestation and negotiation form an integral part of processes of territorialization (Paasi, 2003: 110). As such, territories are continually produced and altered “when subjects struggle over the practices, meanings, and tenures of urban space” (Schwarz and Streule, 2016: 1000). This also calls for an understanding of the intrinsic fragility of any territory in contemporary societies that accounts for its processual character as well as the multiplicity of involved actors. However, a strict focus on territorialization often fails to fully explain subject positions, so that it remains unclear from which social position actors take part in contested processes of de- and reterritorialization and what is ultimately at stake for them in these struggles.

We propose to address the two gaps outlined here by conceptualizing the dialectical relation between subject formation and territorialization. To do this, we draw on the notion of territorial subjectivity as coined by Alicia Lindón (2002) in her study of peripheral neighborhoods in Mexico City. We understand territorial subjectivities not as one-time events but as the product of a recurrent process in which territorial ideas, meanings, imaginaries, and practices provide a strong framework of reference for the becoming of subjects (Lindón, 2002: 33; see also Vommaro, 2012; Moreno et al., 2015). Accordingly, territorial subjectivity is useful for deepening notions of agency in relational conceptualizations of territory. Engaging with the formation of territorial subjectivities, we argue, supports a more differentiated understanding of the complex and open-ended character of both the formation of subjects and the production of territories.

III Outlining territorial subjectivities

It is their co-constitutive character—to borrow Doreen Massey’s expression (1991)—that makes socio-territorial processes so powerful. In the present paper, our reflection on the co-constitution of subjects and territories yields the following dialectic: Subjects are (de)stabilized in processes of territorialization, while territories are (de)stabilized in processes of subject formation. As a result of this dialectic, the analytical focus of the term territorial

subjectivity is always on *becoming* rather than on being. Lindón's work on peripheral ways of life in Mexico City is key for our conceptual outline of territorial subjectivities. In her 2002 study, she argues that subject formation through territorialization is an open-ended collective process intimately associated with everyday activities, practices, and representations:

“the social construction of territory is a perspective that seeks to understand the subject's point of view; it is a view that recognizes society and territory as being in constant construction and reconstruction by people. This construction of society and territory is an unfinished creative process of a social subjectivity, which contains ideas, meanings, and images that refer specifically to territory” (Lindón, 2002: 33, authors' translation).

The basis of our analytical framework is the understanding that both territories and subjects are relational and continually produced rather than given. If subjects are the starting point for our territorial analysis, it follows that the making of territories in specific locales always has a dynamic, intersubjective character. In Lindón's study, the popular urbanization of Mexico City's peripheries

“impl[ies] an emptying of signifiers and the subsequent convergence of a multiplicity of subjectivities ... who initiated new intersubjective processes in spite of their heterogeneity, interweaving ideas through ordinary neighborly interactions. ... This shows the importance of neighborhood interaction in the ... social construction of a territorial subjectivity” (Lindón, 2002: 36, authors' translation).

It is noteworthy that Lindón does not eschew potential tensions and contradictions inherent in such intersubjective processes. She also raises the question of belonging, arguing that a sense of belonging tends to emerge directly from collective processes of territorialization. In her view, the territorial subjectivities emerging in Mexico City's peripheries are organized along a spectrum from non-belonging to belonging and thus become relevant for processes of

identification (Lindón, 2002: 37). In societal terms, as Lindón writes in a more recent paper, territory expresses subjects' adherence to social groups and is therefore linked to collective identities, wielding influence over social relationships (Lindón, 2019: 31).

At this point, it is instructive to recall the well-established concept of social difference in feminist and post- and decolonial theory, in which social difference is characterized not only as emanating from the present but also as historically embodied. Such decentered perspectives draw on relational conceptualizations of power to study subject formation. From this perspective, subject formation is integral to the emergence of historical difference (e.g., Chakrabarty, 2000) through a complex, variable, and often contradictory process in which “positions, identities, and difference are made and unmade, claimed and rejected” (Valentine, 2007: 14). In this process, intersubjectivity emerges as a power-infused space through and between subjects, as Jessica Benjamin (1988, 2010) and the feminist school of relational psychoanalysis have established. In more geographical terms, different bodies are not only assigned different geographies but are also, as Kathryn McKittrick and Linda Peake remind us, “actively experiencing and producing space” (2005: 41).

Here, we define territorial subjectivity as a dynamic, relational, and emergent construct that is embodied and constantly being made and unmade. Emerging territorial subjectivities are therefore not merely *marked* by class or socio-spatial peripheralization—territorialization *produces* gendered, racialized, and classed subjects (Arias and Restrepo, 2010; Lugones, 2010; Quijano, 2000; Schiwy, 2007). A careful distinction between subjectivities (read: internal perspective, perspective of self) and subject positions (read: structural perspective), both of which are relevant to processes of territorialization, is central to what we refer to as territorial subjectivities. The social position from which someone territorializes is relevant, yet we are equally interested in the reverse side of that process—namely, in the various, fluid, and at times contradictory subjectivities that emerge from processes of territorialization.

What is the point of applying these perspectives more comprehensively to research in human geography? Any research on territorial subjectivities that is interested in the open-ended process of becoming-rather-than-being must necessarily consider the emergence of multiple, contingent subjects and territories infused with unequal power relations. We assume that territory matters for subject formation, because it may serve to either support or undermine alternative, even utopian ideas and ways of being in the world—in particular, alternative selves and collective subjects (see also Bulle, 2020). Taking a cue from Julie MacLeavy and colleagues (MacLeavy et al., 2021: 1573), we think of these as territorial subjects-in-formation. We hence propose an approach that is explicitly centered on subjects involved in and emerging from the making of territory. Not only do subjects operate from specific social positions while engaging in processes of territorialization, but the continuously produced and contingent territories that emerge from these processes also call on, encourage, and frame specific territorial subjectivities.

To work out the ways in which territorial subjectivities are contingent and to explore the dynamics and logics of the co-constitution of territories and subjects, human geographers could include a fresh range of questions into their research programs: Who makes territory? What kinds of territories do people create intentionally and unintentionally, and from which intersecting social position(s) do they operate? Which territorial subjectivities emerge from these specific processes of territorialization? And what kinds of collective and individual subjectivities are created, transformed, or dismantled in this manner? In the next section, we seek to address some of these questions by tracing three emerging territorial subjectivities from Berlin, Buenos Aires, and Dresden.

IV How territorial subjectivities “work” in Berlin, Buenos Aires, and Dresden

To unpack territorial subjectivities and show how new territories and subjects emerge in concert, we

refer to studies on the *piquetero* movement in Buenos Aires and the *Kotti & Co* housing rights initiative in Berlin to pinpoint emancipatory territorial subject formations. Contrast is provided by an example from Dresden, which mobilizes regressive subjectivities in the arena of reconstructive architecture. Although our examples are situated in rather distinct regional contexts in Latin America and Western Europe, and contribute to different scholarly debates, they all serve to illustrate how the production of territories is relevant for processes of subject formation.

I Emancipatory subjects-in-formation

The first two cases we selected, from Buenos Aires and Berlin, exemplify socio-territorial struggles that spawn new subjects and territories through collective organizing rather than through a naturalization of spaces and bodies. This is key, because we believe that the emergence of territorial subjectivities that do not primarily rely on identity-based organizing strategies could be a hopeful endeavor for building more emancipatory futures. By revealing how alternative futures are already possible in the here and now, these specific territorializations work towards a provisional stabilization of alternative ideas and “other” —or alternative—selves.

Studies of the *piquetero* social movement of unemployed workers in Buenos Aires illuminate how subject formation through territorialization works. In fact, to understand territorialization in Buenos Aires and the emerging “*piquetero* subjectivity” in the wake of the 2001 economic crisis, scholars commonly draw on the concept of territorial subjectivity with a focus on gender and class (e.g., Ramos Ávila, 2003; Avalle, 2009; Vommaro, 2012). The literature unfolds subject-making processes, describing ways in which growing unemployment and social exclusion turned territories of Buenos Aires into a space where actors such as the unemployed developed new meanings, social relations, and forms of action. Raúl Zibechi argues that

“current movements are promoting a new pattern of organizing geographic space, where new practices and social relations arise. ... Territory is the space in which a

new social organization is collectively built, where the new subjects establish themselves, establishing their space, appropriating it materially and symbolically” (Zibechi, 2003: 187, authors’ translation).

In this case, everyday practices generating territorial subjectivities included disruptive forms of direct action, in particular pickets and roadblocks to protest and call attention to the devastating effects of the austerity regime on common workers, namely, massive unemployment, soaring personal debt, and cut-to-the-bone government welfare subsidies. Many scholars agree that it is mostly women who have put their bodies on the line in the roadblocks and mobilizations that ultimately gave rise to the piquetero movement (e.g., Ramos Ávila, 2003; Andújar, 2005). In the early 2000s, the protests expanded to blockades of supermarkets and, in some instances, unemployed workers blocked and occupied government buildings. The piquetero movement also established co-operatives in recovered factories, set up barter markets called *treques* for goods and services, and collectively organized neighborhood gardens and soup kitchens. When these practices materialized in space, they engendered new territories. As Vommaro (2012: 69) points out in his empirical study of the piquetero movement in Buenos Aires, it is “languages, knowledges, values and affections that are built from these individual and collective practices and participation in a territorial and community-based organization.” Joining the movement, he concludes, thus transforms individual and collective subjectivities (2012: 70).

Territorial subjectivities, as we frame them in this paper, are not stable but in constant transformation. The piquetero subjectivity, for instance, is characterized by tensions, discontinuities, disputes, antagonisms, and ruptures. The making and unmaking of territorial subjectivities is evidently a complex, unstable, and often contradictory process in which there are no predetermined positions or outcomes. Studies of subsequent socio-territorial struggles in Buenos Aires show how later movements differ from—but also build upon—the 2001 protests (Cavallero and Gago, 2021; Svampa and Pereyra, 2005). Even after the piquetero movement had ceased to exist, Mari-stella Svampa and Sebastián Pereyra (2005: 110) detected its ongoing impact in the emergence of various new urban social movements in peripheral

neighborhoods in and beyond Buenos Aires. Day by day, these movements continue to enact novel and disruptive socio-territorial practices and, crucially, create spaces through which new subjects and social relations are engendered.

The Kotti & Co housing rights initiative in Berlin is another example of a socio-territorial struggle that mobilizes a collective subjectivity: “being Kotti.” The initiative centers on one of the social housing complexes at Kottbusser Tor in the highly diverse and increasingly gentrified neighborhood of Kreuzberg. Various studies of this case show how collective place-based subjectivities arose from organizing around affordable housing and migration rights (Hamann and Türkmen 2020; Hamann and Vollmer, 2019; Heidsieck, 2018). Since 2012, a broad spectrum of actors such as social housing tenants, tenant associations, and activists have been protesting against the drastic rent increases that threaten to displace the residents of Kottbusser Tor. In the context of the financialization of housing markets, scholars analyze this case of displacement by focusing on the interlocking mechanisms of class oppression and racism.

Despite the differences across and beyond its members, the Kotti & Co initiative seeks to find a common set of political demands and social practices that enabled them to connect struggles for citywide affordable housing and migrant rights. Studies show that agency, action repertoire, and organizing strategies of members of such highly diverse groups are heterogeneous, and the city as a whole is a space of politicization and contestation for all tenants (Hamann and Türkmen, 2020: 516; see also Nicholls, 2008). Although diversity is not unlikely to create tensions between actors involved in urban struggles, one of the main socio-territorial practices of Kotti & Co is to work productively with and across difference. Engaging in social practices of care (i.e., drinking tea together and bringing flowers) as well as political actions such as protest parades was key to bridging differences, and thus, to sustaining the movement (Hamann and Türkmen, 2020: 521). These efforts and practices materialize at the corner of Skalitzer Strasse and Admiralstrasse in the Gecekondu,¹ a protest house and meeting point:

“In the beginning, it was just a sitting area made of euro pallets, without a roof and with an unclear future. It

became our front garden, our living room, the starting point of countless noise demonstrations and the place where we still meet today, plan our work, and celebrate our victories, from social rent freezes to re-municipalization” (Kotti and Co, 2022, authors’ translation).

The Gecekondu is, as Ulrike Hamann and Ceren Türkmen argue, a symbol of both the location and the cause as well as an important platform for protest and neighborhood organizing (2020: 516). As such, it is vital for the formation of a “community of struggle” (Hamann and Türkmen, 2020: 516), offering a space of co-habitation across socioeconomic differences based on class, gender, race, and ethnicity. With the collective and individual self-description of “being Kotti,” new territorial subjectivities were forged as a variety of actors with different social positions began working together to transgress traditional forms of belonging. Kotti & Co reflects an affinity for a place that has been home to many of the protesters for decades. The Kotti & Co protesters, many of whom are first- and second-generation immigrants from Turkey, deliberately identify with this place because of their migration history and experience with open racism. As such, the territorial subjectivity of “being Kotti” became one of the group’s main organizing tools (Hamann and Türkmen, 2020: 527). Much like other progressive movements (e.g., Featherstone et al., 2012; Della Porta, 2005), Kotti & Co valorizes the diversity and inclusiveness of a new territorial subjectivity rather than reflecting a particular ideological or organizational tradition. This example also shows that the formation of territorial subjectivities is a highly contingent process. On a local scale, “being Kotti” solidifies emergent ties between neighbors and their allies. Beyond the local, it relates to struggles against eviction and organizing towards an expropriation and re-municipalization of corporate housing stock across scales, in Berlin and other cities around the world (Card, 2022; Coquelin et al., 2022; Vollmer and Gutiérrez, 2022).

2 Revanchist subjects-in-formation

In contrast to the two previous cases, the political subjects-in-formation present on most Monday nights at Dresden’s Altmarkt are of a different nature.

Since 2014, downtown Dresden serves as a stage for public assemblies of the far-right *Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West* (PEGIDA), a xeno- and islamophobic populist movement that attracts between dozens and thousands of attendees each week, and initially inspired similar (but far less successful) mobilizations in other German cities and towns (Virchow, 2016). In light of the character of these rallies, we argue that it is no coincidence that regressive ideologies are mobilized in close proximity to the Church of Our Lady and Neumarkt, the reconstructed “historical” facades of which attract numerous tourists. The socio-territorial character of the nativist collective subjectivity on offer is expressed precisely by the locale where these rallies take place. Along with Humboldt Forum in Berlin and Neue Altstadt in Frankfurt/Main, Dresden’s reconstructed city center is a prime example of the historicizing logic of a particular brand of anti-modernist urbanism and architecture seen across Germany and other European countries over the past two decades (Trüby, 2020). The pseudo-historical aesthetics of Dresden’s reconstructed baroque architecture serves as a stage to mobilize a specific kind of territorial subjectivity: one that draws on exclusive and exclusionary imaginaries of collective belonging (Kübler et al., 2022). Its exclusionary character manifests through nativist claims of authenticity and through a kind of aesthetic revanchism. Such nativist subjectivities draw on a logic of Othering and inward homogenization that is rooted in essentializing ideas of territory and body, where subjects are determined by nationality and bloodline (with a veneer of religion). This logic is not only racialized but also classed: Dresden’s re-imagined “baroque” facades speak to an ideal bourgeois citizen as much as the resurrected Prussian Imperial Palace and other pseudo-historical real estate projects in Berlin. Moreover, the aesthetics of such “retrospective architecture” (Hartbaum, 2019) tend to gesture towards an imagined victimhood of Germans—one that requires a healing of Dresden’s urban textures ruptured by Allied bombardment in 1945 and seems linked, in psychoanalytic terms, to a selective repression of memory by reducing German fascism to a mere historical episode. In terms of present-day far-right subjectivities, the appeal of such a sanitized past

appears to lie in the defense of an imagined Occident, and “in the possibility of exchanging culpability for innocence and trauma for wholeness, rather than constructing a narrative that refuses such totalized alternatives in favor of a less satisfying, more ambivalent memory” (James 2006: 265). Such a tendency to pit an imagined “people” against some foreign invader or influence, stoking fear of an ‘Other’, is typical for right-wing populist discourses (e.g., Agnew and Shin, 2017; Wodak, 2015). In a nutshell, the Dresden example provides a glimpse of a revanchist subjectivity that is based on the promise of an allegedly “natural” hegemonic position based in ancestry firmly rooted in German “soil” or territory. As such, it promises to provide release from historical responsibilities through a material manifestation of homogenized, invented traditions (Hobsbawm, 1983). Despite these attempts at stabilization, the emerging territorial subjectivities are every bit as contradictory and contingent as the collective place-based subjectivities from Buenos Aires and Berlin. The notion of territory, territorial imaginations, and violent processes of de- and re-territorialization, however, appear to sit rather comfortably with far-right mobilizations. Given the essentializations of bodies and territories that lie at the heart of racist, identitarian, and ethno-nationalist ideologies, this is hardly surprising. An overtly geographical imagination feeds into a form of territorial subject formation that includes the nation (state) yet also cuts across scales, as the example from downtown Dresden shows. Proclaiming a threatened “authentic community” is often the key to far-right territorial mobilizations:

“Linked to increasing social, economic and cultural insecurity surrounding the multiplicity of territorialisations taking place as part of globalised capitalism, the deployment of claims to authenticity can be a powerful political device for neo-fascist politics” (Ince, 2011: 23).

Organizing claims of a homogeneous collective identity around the naturalization of a specific place or territory beyond the national scale appears to be a rather effective strategy in this context. Such parochialisms—centered on the interests of one’s

own, “natural” place-based collective rather than a systemic interconnectedness of places across the globe (Schwarz, 2022)—reveal the successful mobilization of a spatial logic in revanchist subject formations. Operating at the fault lines of neoliberal urban governance and austerity politics (Beveridge and Koch, 2021; Förtner et al., 2021; Mullis, 2021), such territorializations seek to amplify and cement authoritarian, nativist, and white supremacist ideologies (Dinas et al., 2013; Ellinas and Lamprinou, 2017; Rosellini, 2019; Skenderovic, 2007; Whiteley et al., 2021) while also establishing locales that serve to reinforce collective far-right subjectivities (for a further discussion, see Autor:innenkollektiv Terra-R, 2024). Previous research on everyday geographies of the far-right has shown how imagined territorialized collectives are engendered in practices of territorial domination, for example, in attempts to violently curtail the presence of “Others” in urban spaces (e.g., Brink Pinto and Pries, 2019; Gassner, 2022; Schwarz, 2022). These “spaces of fear” are the most prominent example of such territorial spring-boards for revanchist subject formation. Recent studies point to the relevance of MMA gyms as places of training and worship of a hyper-masculinist body culture (Luger, 2022), as well as the regressive and racist futurities and essentializing territorial phantasies that *völkisch* settlers seek to materialize in Germany (Varco, 2023). All of these could be analyzed further as examples of far-right territorial subject formation through the conceptual lens proposed here.

The three examples from Berlin, Buenos Aires, and Dresden illustrate how a temporal stabilization of new territories is crucial for the formation of territorial subjectivities. They also show how emerging subjectivities create, claim, and hold new territories through collective socio-territorial practices. From a broader perspective, these studies of urban mobilizations demonstrate the utility of the concept of territorial subjectivities as an analytical tool for studying the co-constitutive processes of territorialization and subject formation. To be clear, the concept of territory is intrinsically political. The examples from Berlin and Buenos Aires present a specific form of territorial subjectivity—namely, one that addresses differences, tensions, and contradictions within movements that seek to solidify

territories and political subjectivities while also enabling an open and progressive approach (see also Briata et al., 2020; Bulle, 2020; Escobar, 2008; Featherstone et al., 2012). Moreover, we argue that a better understanding of the ways in which relational power works through territory and territorialization necessarily involves intersectional perspectives on emerging territorial subjectivities. Literature analyzing the case studies reflects this by focusing on gender and class in the case of Buenos Aires and on ethnicity, race, and class in the cases of Berlin and Dresden. As an analytical lens, the concept of territorial subjectivities serves to expose the spatiality of power asymmetries and explores their effect on subject formation, as we will show in the following section.

V Towards a non-essentialist politics of space and subjects

What is striking about the examples introduced in the previous section is the character of the emerging territorial subjectivities. Far-right subjectivities tend to provide and draw on a “classical” territorialized imaginary, one that gestures towards an imagined community of an authentic, territorially rooted German *Volk* liberated from historical responsibilities, whose injuries need to be healed, not least in the urban fabric. But contrary to what might be expected, neither the piquetero subjectivity nor the subjectivity of “being Kotti” appear to rely on an essentialization of bodies or spaces. Instead, the territorial subjectivities that emerge from these cases are characterized by their openness and inclusiveness. What exactly makes the difference? Taking inspiration from Doreen Massey’s groundbreaking work on the politics of spatiality (Massey, 1991; 1999), we now explore the making and unmaking of territorial subjectivities as a promising strategy for developing a more sustained and critical understanding of contested territories. This brings us back to our initial set of questions regarding the ways in which territories are stabilized and destabilized and how the process of territorialization relates to subject formation. To answer these questions, we need to (i) pay attention to unequal power relations in the formation

of subjects and (ii) take care to deconstruct claims of authentic subjects and territories, exposing them as relational and open-ended.

I Exposing unequal power relations in the formation of subjects

Re-imagining territory is an endeavor that seeks to advance the debate about new forms of emancipatory politics with respect to the spatialities of the self. To put it differently, a focus on processes of territorial subject formation enables us to decipher the asymmetry of social relationships and of the geographies of difference that these relationships bring forth. A decentered socio-territorial approach unveils the shape of relational power in processes of territorialization, unearthing what Massey calls “the power-geometry of it all” (1991: 25). Relational power is, of course, paramount to socio-territorial perspectives to begin with. From a decolonial perspective, which has been prominently employed by Latin American scholars, relational power addresses historical difference through what Anibal Quijano (2000) has termed the “coloniality of power.” A naturalization of social difference in the form of racialized, classed, and gendered hierarchies, combined with a linear conceptualization of time wherein the non-European is conceived of as the past of the European, reifies hegemonic power relations in a capitalist world system. Furthermore, as María Lugones (2010) points out, social difference is also embodied in the colonial subject. The coloniality of power hence has a deeply socio-temporal character and addresses subjectivities, too. By extension, a focus on social difference in subject formation enables us to expose how asymmetrical power relations are at play in processes of de- and reterritorialization at multiple scales. Such a focus contributes to an emerging debate regarding dominance, subordination, and the empowering potential in processes of territorialization (see, e.g., Ulloa, 2016; Vela-Almeida et al., 2020).

It is in the realm of territorial representation that we can most directly grasp the political character of socio-territorial practices. As Gurminder K. Bhambra (2017) reminds us, examining the trajectories of such

collective identities necessarily involves a critical reflection on the ways in which they are linked to positions of historically mediated dominance. Whether one is doing research on progressive or on revanchist territorial subjectivities, the task at hand is the same from a critical perspective: namely, to scrutinize the social and collective imaginaries contested in each case while exposing unequal power relations in the territorial formation of these subjects. Such an approach significantly complicates any idea of clear-cut hegemonic versus counter-hegemonic territorial practices. Territorial strategies are therefore never emancipatory of their own accord but are rather open to a wide array of political projects, including those that draw on far-right and related reactionary ideologies. We believe that keeping this complication in mind is crucial for studies of dominant and non-hegemonic processes of territorial subject formation alike.

2 Deconstructing “authentic” subjects and territories

The idea of an open-endedness of territories and subjects resonates strongly with the work of MacLeavy and colleagues, who propose to “position feminist theory and politics ... as that which has the vitality to animate social change through open-ended invention and the desire to bring a different future into existence” (2021: 1573). In contrast, territorial subjectivities that seek to essentialize bodies or spaces tend to draw on exclusive and exclusionary imaginaries, as the Dresden example illustrates. The concept of territorial subjectivities helps to critically analyze such processes of territorialization and identify the various kinds of subjectivities that (may) emerge. It could thus make a valuable contribution to wider debates in human geography, particularly in the realm of political geography and in research on far-right geographies. A decentered socio-territorial approach, such as the one proposed in this paper, marks a shift away from deterministic conceptions of territorialization and subject formation and is particularly useful for unraveling claims of authentic subjects and territories. Thus, it speaks to the field of anti-fascist action studies, which also builds on a

transversal understanding of territory and reaches beyond state-centered modes of territoriality (e.g., Braskén et al., 2021; Ince, 2022). From this vantage point, territories emerge from the complex, continuous, and open-ended territorial practices of multiple actors. They are truly multiple in a spatial and temporal sense, exemplifying what Rogério Haesbaert (2011, 2013) calls multi-territorialities.

Moreover, there is an urgent need for further critical reflection on the historical “baggage” of territorial concepts in the colonial and imperial past and present. In other words, as traveling concepts, territory and territorial subjectivities are not without significant colonial and nationalist “bulky luggage” (Schwarz and Streule, 2023). In the German-speaking field of political geography in particular, the bio- and geo-determinism at the roots of terms such as *Lebensraum* can hardly be understood without tackling the discipline’s own relationship to historical geopolitics and fascist ideology (Barnes and Minca, 2013; Michel, 2018). Without doubt, further reflections on the spatialities of subject formation are necessary to reach beyond the essentialization of bodies and territories. Against this backdrop, a subject-oriented socio-territorial research agenda can help to broaden and decenter our understanding of territories and subjects. To that end, there is strong potential in post- and decolonial as well as feminist and intersectional perspectives on urbanization and urban spaces that deal with subjectivities, subject positions, historical difference, and broader questions of space and power (e.g., Duplan et al., 2021; Kinkaid, 2021). We see productive connections between our approach and longstanding research on geographies of difference (e.g., Bondi, 1990; McDowell, 1993; McKittrick and Peake, 2005), post- and decolonial (e.g., Merrill, 2014), intersectional Black feminist (e.g., Noxolo, 2023) and queer/trans-feminist (e.g., Brice, 2023; Giesecking, 2016; Kinkaid et al., 2022), as well as anti-racist approaches (e.g., Lombard et al., 2021; Zavala Guillen, 2022). Territorial subjectivities, in the sense of the term presented here, invite a critical reflection on the essentializing politics of space and subjects.

In summary, territorialization is an open-ended process driven by various subjects, who themselves

are in an ongoing process of becoming. A subject-centered socio-territorial approach is concerned not only with the active production and constant becoming of territorial subjectivities and multi-territorialities but also with the co-constitution of subject formation and territorialization. Consequently, we understand territorial subjectivities as a social product that is permeated by unequal power relations and is continuously made and unmade, engendering specific socio-territorial experiences across diverse geographies.

VI Conclusions

This paper has introduced and discussed territorial subjectivities to conceptualize subject formation through territorialization. As the examples of urban contestations in Berlin, Buenos Aires, and Dresden outlined in [section IV](#) have shown, a critical examination of territorial ideas, meanings, and imaginaries as well as territorial practices is crucial for a more differentiated understanding of the complex and open-ended character of both the formation of subjects and the production of territories. We have identified everyday practices and strategies for stabilizing and destabilizing territory such as demonstrating, community gardening, constructing a communal protest house, and reconstructing “historical” facades. We have also shown that these strategies are crucial not only for producing and securing territory but also for engendering new subjects. Reading the “being Kotti” subjectivity in Berlin alongside the piquetero subjectivity in Buenos Aires and contrasting them with far-right subjectivities nurtured by and co-created with reconstructive architecture in Dresden enabled us to understand territorialization and subject formation as co-constitutive processes. Examining the emergence of such territorial subjectivities in different contexts is helpful, we argue, for developing a more detailed and critical understanding of contested territories across scales.

A nuanced and contextualized examination of territorial subjectivities rests on a relational understanding of both territories and subjectivities. Within this conceptual framework, this paper has approached territorial subjectivities as a viable link

between conceptual debates on territorialization and political subjectivity. Any analysis that seeks to adopt this approach must critically examine it in context and remain wary of universal claims. To that end, it is paramount to understand from which social position subjects take part in contested processes of de- and reterritorialization and what is ultimately at stake for them in these struggles. The concept of territorial subjectivity offers an important tool for deepening conceptualizations of relational territory through a subject-centered perspective and differentiating the various modes and scales on which relational power works across territories. This strongly relates to a decentered socio-territorial approach that is interested in the ways in which different subjects implement diverse and overlapping territorial imaginations and practices ([Haesbaert, 2020](#); [Schwarz and Streule, 2022](#)). By paying closer attention to the becoming of territorial subjectivities, we can work towards a non-essentialist politics of space and subjects.

Territorial subjectivities have much to contribute to current debates in the wider human geography field and pose a number of questions for reflection in future research. A socio-territorial approach with an explicit focus on subject formation serves to question essentialist and normative values inscribed in many territorial imaginaries. It also challenges endeavors to create and define exclusive and exclusionary territories, which are often underpinned by violent tactics. It is worth paying attention to the ways in which new subject positions are encouraged in processes of territorialization and how open and inclusive these are. We can do that by asking who would be able to form part of the powerful and empowering territorial subjectivities that arise from specific processes of territorialization. Emancipatory subjectivities would be based on choice, solidarity, and participation, rather than on ideologies that draw on one’s place of birth, bloodline, or other essentialist concepts of “natural” bodies. Allowing the making and unmaking of territorial subjectivities to take center stage, as we propose in this paper, also serves to demystify fascist and nativist ideologies of “blood and soil” and similar autochthone reifications of an allegedly organic territorial rootedness.

It is precisely the contingent character of territorial subjectivities that allows them to serve as a potential source of momentum for a situated politics of relational territory and relational subjects. Territorial subjectivities provide the missing link between dynamics of territories-in-formation and subjects-in-formation. The very fluidity of territorial subjectivities is not a weakness but a necessary precondition for progressive politics—much as Pat Noxolo (2023) calls on intersectional approaches to “interrogate and challenge *both* oppression and collective identities” (2023: 4). Approaching socio-territorial struggles from this perspective offers a strategic opening for an empowering, collective “we” to emerge from a non-hegemonic, emancipatory position. While enabling the deconstruction of hegemonic collectives formed around bio-determinism, nativism, and white supremacy, such an approach allows for the recognition of an entirely different kind of collective involved in strategies of empowerment by claiming and producing territories from subaltern positions (Anzaldúa, 1987; Bhambra, 2017). Such a hope for emancipatory, intersubjective territory-making resonates with more recent feminist socio-territorial scholarship linking *cuero* (body) and *territorio* (e.g., *Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo*, 2017; Gago, 2020; Ulloa, 2016; Zaragocin and Caretta, 2021). Nevertheless, bringing the body into focus and postulating bodies as territories of resistance also raises complicated questions about normativity, strategic essentialism, and a much-needed subversion of the gender binary. We do believe, however, that territorial practices, being fluid and contingent, always hold the potential to open up—or foreclose—possible other worlds and futures. Territories are intersubjective: Much depends on the intentions upon which such multiple intersubjective territorialities are built, as well as by, with, and for whom they are being constructed.

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Note

1. *Gecekondu* is a common Turkish term for informal settlements. It literally translates as “put up over night,” referring to the swift land occupations seen in the peripheries of Turkish metropolis in the late twentieth century that occurred in a context of rapid urban growth, industrialization, and internal displacement due to conflict and rural marginalization.

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