



Transcript Ep.73: The Far-Right and the City

[Intro] *This is the Urban Political. The podcast on urban theory, research and activism.*

[Felicitas Kübler] Hello, and welcome to another episode of the Urban Political Podcast on the far-right in German cities. In recent years, the far-right has globally gained traction, which poses the question: what does the far-right have to do with cities? And why should it be discussed on this podcast? Of course, the contemporary far-right seems to relate on the city as a stage for their politics. Whether it's weekly demonstrations by the far-right movement of Pegida in the German city of Dresden, or far-right groups storming the capital in Washington, cities provide a pivotal backdrop for far-right symbolic politics. Moreover, the urban way of life - and especially cosmopolitanism - serves as discursive bogeyman for the far-right. Thus, on today's Urban Political Podcast, we're going to discuss the far-right authoritarian urbanism and possible future trajectories for geographical research on far-right extremism.

My name is Felicitas Kübler. At the moment, I'm doing a PhD at the University of Klagenfurt. My work focuses on anti-fascist geographies and conflicts relating to the commemoration of National Socialism in Germany.

[Anke Schwarz] Hey, my name is Anke Schwarz and I'm currently working as Interim Associate Professor of Human Geography at Heidelberg University. My research tackles the far-right in the context of theories of territorialization and parochial imaginations. I am one of the founding members of the Terra-R Research Network dedicated to territorializations by and of the far-right, Territorialisierung der radikalen Rechten in German. And actually all hosts of today's podcast are part of this network. So we are very happy to welcome our guests, and we will start with a quick introduction.

First, we have Valentin Domann, who is a PhD student at the Geography Department of Humbolt University in Berlin, and he has worked extensively on the far-right in small towns and rural settings in particular, focusing on the hinterland of Berlin. His work centres on localism through scale-sensitive approaches, as well as activist perspectives.

[Felicitas Kübler] We're also very happy to have Gala Nettelbladt with us. She works at the Federal Institute for Research on Housing, Urban Affairs, and Spatial Development in Cottbus. Her research covers the structural change in East Germany, promoting democracy and participation as well as issues of governance. Thank you for being here.

[Anke Schwarz] Next up, we have Daniel Mullis from the Peace Research Institute in Frankfurt am Main, who has published several works on the far-right in the city of Frankfurt in particular. Together with Judith Miggelbrink, he has been responsible for a special issue as well as an edited volume that outlines the current geographical debate on the far-right in Germany.

[Felicitas Kübler] We also have Antonie Schmitz with us, she's Professor of Human Geography at Freie Universität Berlin. As all of our guests, she's a member of the research network Terra-R (Territorialisierung der extremen Rechten). Her research centres on migration in urban context. Thank you for being here with us.

All right, we're going to start today's podcast with the discussion of the far-right and the city and discussing the far-right as a current and pressing issue in Germany. And at the moment, the AfD (Alternative for Germany), experienced unbroken public approval, as well as electoral success, despite being obviously far-right and [despite the fact that] parts of their youth organization are even observed by German intelligence services at the moment. Daniel, would you argue that we're experiencing a catching up moment right now? That what has been a long standing political reality in many other countries now has also become true for Germany?

[Daniel Mullis] Yes, thank you Felicitas. So, I mean, on the one hand, it is certainly clear that in Germany, in the last 10 years, the AfD has a very strong background now, and that they, especially after the summer of migration (2015, 2016), they have won substantially votes and this situation actually was deepened during the pandemic and now in the course of the whole situation on the energy crisis that is occurring, and the whole questions of social ecological transformation... So there is this shift towards the rise of the far-right party that was actually, there were substantial far-right parties in Germany before the AfD, but none of them actually managed to gain ground on all political scales at the same time to be elected on the level of the State, the central State, as well as the European Union.

So, yeah, there is this rise, certainly, and when you look at the full situation at the moment where in Germany in total, the AfD is at around 20% plus... And in the Eastern German parts where they have around 35%, this is a tremendous success. And it is not quite clear in which direction this will lead. Also we had the elections in the States of Hesse and Bavaria this autumn, where we also could see that, - especially in Hesse, where the AfD gained 18.4 percent of the vote and now is the second strongest party in parliament from January on, - we really can see that this rise of the far-right and of the AfD has become a dominant situation in all of the country. And this was something that actually 10 years before nobody really could believe that something like this could happen and that the far-right party would be able to get such a stronghold.

So, yeah, on the one hand, there is a catching up moment when we look at what had happened in other countries, but on the other hand, I think it's important to see that the AfD has not actually created a new situation. Far-right violence, far-right attitudes have a very long history. They never were absent in Germany and especially in the time in the 1990s and 2000s, there was a very strong far-right mobilization. So yeah, this party is something new, but it manifests something that has been around for long. And one thing to end my first answer would be that I think it's important also to realize that the far-right, looking at the situation in Europe, is changing entirely. So, it must be asked: catching up to what? and I would really argue that we are witnessing a new situation with dynamics towards the rise of a new phase of fascism. And so catching up, yes, but there's also new things going on.

[Felicitas Kübler] Thank you. Toni, after what Daniel just said, which other political circumstances influenced the current shift to an anti-migrant cultural climate? Which actors, instruments, and policies play an important role there?

[Antonie Schmiz] Yes, we currently see a very heated and emotionalized debate on migration and especially on asylum law. So this climate is very much fuelled by right-wing discourses that feed widespread anxieties within the German society. And in this discourse, German municipalities played a major role. So not only, but also due to the limited resources for basic services for asylum seekers and also for refugees, an outcry of German municipalities led to one of the most regressive national political responses of the last years, and a new law that facilitates deportations that extremely dehumanizes the actual procedure of deportations, and a further cut and control of social transfer payments to asylum seekers are the outcome. And from a geographical perspective, we can observe this development as a scalar shift from the municipal to the national and also to the EU level, where the invention of the restrictive common European asylum system is connected to plans to remove procedures for granting the right of asylum outside the European Union, and with the first deal being in preparation between the post-fascist Italian government and Albania, this externalization leads to a complete spatial reconfiguration of the European asylum system, and this is mainly pushed by right wing governments. And if we look at the most prominent cases of anti-immigrant attacks by the far-right that are remembered in German history after 1919 in Solingen, Rostock and Mölln, we see that they took place in times of highly emotionalized and sometimes aggressive discussions in politics and medias on the topic of migration and also refugees and asylum law. And we can see many similarities to this hostile political and social to this hostile and societal climate of today.

[Felicita Kübler] Thank you. Valentin, for your PhD research, you did a longitudinal study of the AfD in Brandenburg, the State surrounding Berlin. Based on your research, but also your personal impressions and experiences, which actors and issues should also be considered as relevant for the current success of this far-right party?

[Valentin Domann] Sure, I can provide some impressions for my studies on far-right local politics in Brandenburg. And first of all, I have to mention, of course, that focusing on the local scale, the situation differs quite a lot from the national debate. And interestingly, the AfD has been less successful in local elections compared to State or national ones, at least in the State of Brandenburg, but also yeah, in other States as well. So a “mainstreaming” of far-right ideas however, which is now discussed on a more societal level, has been established at the very heart of mainstream local politics way before here in many places. So we have to remember right after the AfD was established, mainstream parties proclaimed a kind of *cordon sanitaire* to not collaborate with that new party. And the first challenge to this guideline actually occurred at the local political arenas for good reasons. And after local politicians of those established parties in Brandenburg crossed this line and started to collaborate with the AfD, they faced kind of high social costs within their parties.

But there were also these independent lists, which I would consider an important factor here. We have politicians who do not have to face such risks, and they were the 1st to really collaborate with AfD representatives in municipal matters and at the everyday level. So these local parties are very influential in local politics in Brandenburg, but also in many other regions. And I guess they are primarily composed of kind of well-trusted individuals or groups, such as, I don't know, the firefighters associations, for example, who claim to somehow represent the homogeneous will of the local community in a kind of nonpolitical, at least non-partisan way. As important as those independent lists are for this kind of far-right normalization, they are only a very specific expression of the kind of widely shared, more broad beliefs that local political decisions are inherently like, yeah, they do not conform to the “left/right paradigm” and so on. And so this assumption stems from kind of parochial ideologies

that tend to homogenize the desires of the community. But it's also linked quite closely to the last years of austerity causing local politics to prioritize these very strict regulations and budget cuts and debt repayments and so on. So the depoliticization of issues has aided, I guess, in bringing their successful national topics to the local level posing as the only rational expression of the local world against this kind of ideology against the ideologies of the so-called elites. And here, local actors who support the idea of this kind of unfractured destiny of a local community play a crucial role in enabling those populist tactics.

And so these actors, they have a broad range so they can arrange from kind of the head of a soccer club to mayors, former mayors, and even doc trainers who would meet all the inhabitants on a weekly basis and so on. And they're all important stakeholders who either support or can challenge these kind of assumptions. And I think this is kind of very relevant to explain the success of the AfD in non-metropolitan local politics across Germany. But for the case of Brandenburg, I guess it also ties in this kind of collective memories of lost battles during the 90s against these violent threats of neo-Nazis.

And furthermore, some kind of uneven development has resulted in specific patterns where people are highly dependent on, for example, their own cars as only means of transportation, especially in comparison to the nearby capital. And in this particular context, it was for me kind of fascinating and also scary to see how easily local AfD politicians were able to scale down the national agenda and translate it into kind of local car-centric protests and politics. And initially, these regional resentments were like simply an expression of shared concerns, but it was very easy for the AfD to link their anti-green, anti-urban, and even anti-migrant agenda here. So when these two dimensions of an imagined depoliticized local political arena and manifest regional resentment meet or combine, this provides, I guess, a great kind of scalar or spatial opportunity structure for far-right mobilization, as we can see from Brandenburg.

[Felicitas Kübler] Thank you for these insights from Brandenburg. We keep to East Germany: when we talk about the far-right in Germany, we have several specific distinguishing current developments from other countries. And one of the specific is that the success of the far-right is mostly attributed to East Germany, the former GDR. Gala, how could we, as urban scholars, address the spatial pattern without reproducing simplistic patterns of stigmatization between East and West?

[Gala Nettelblatt] Thanks, Felicitas. Yeah, I guess it's very true that if we look at the national electoral geography of Germany as a whole, it appears that it's a significant higher vote to turn out for the AfD in the Eastern parts of the nation. This is, I think, due to historical and political contingencies that I won't be going into now. However, what I think is poignant for our discussion today is that this electoral geography at the national level has led to many stereotypes in public discourse and debate about the so-called "Brown East" - brown being a symbolic colour in Germany for Nazi politics and actors - . And while, as I said, this is a statistical fact, this narrative has also, I think, induced a sort of externalizing gesture of some commentators and also political elites in the West, declaring that the rise of the far-right in Germany is a problem of the East or a problem that can be linked to historical developments in the former GDR. And in my work, I try to break with this view because I think it does not... I think it stipulates a very binary thinking between the two parts of the country, which does not suffice to explain the political developments we see. I want to raise three points that I think are important to take a more nuanced view.

Firstly, studies that point to historical developments after the fall of the Berlin Wall, point towards very close networks between Nazi actors, both in the West and the East, establishing very specific organizational structures in Eastern Germany. Sometimes even triggered by Western Nazi elites. I think this is important. Secondly, however, if we look at the spatial patterns, which I guess we are mostly interested in here, and this I think links to what Valentin said earlier, is that if we zoom into local specificities, that reveals a much more complex picture. So we have clusters of AfD voters and voter turnouts that are very high in the Western parts of the country. And then some clusters in areas where there is very little support for AfD politicians in the Eastern parts. And so I think it's worth highlighting these differences at the local scale. And thirdly, I think this binary view of the Brown East also negates work of local anti-fascist and pro-democracy activists in the Eastern parts of the country that fight very hard for migration rights on the local scale against tightening asylum restrictions, and also against the rising threat from more far-right extremists.

And so in my own work, I have tried to shed light on these anti-fascist struggles in parts of Eastern Germany, where there's already a very high support for far-right politics and trying to really illuminate how there's pro-democracy tactics that are very efficient and very... very effective in stopping some of the developments we see. And I think to conclude, I would just like to also point to research that is being done at the *German Centre for Integration and Migration Research* which might be unfamiliar to some of the international audience. They're doing fantastic work on sort of looking at Eastern German developments in the far-right. And I think for people further interested in the topic, that could be very interesting.

[Anke Schwarz] Thank you, Gala. We will now dive a bit more into the urban dimensions of the far-right in Germany. So this is probably also, yeah, an important part of this episode of the Urban Political Podcast to look a bit more into the urban questions. So if you stick to spatial patterns we also need to pay attention to urban rural divides and related attributions. Daniel, as you worked on the far-right tendencies in the city of Frankfurt, this question is probably primarily for you. So where and how did you come across the far-right and authoritarian conceptions of the city in your research on urban peripheralization, and which kinds of urban issues have become topics adopted also by the far-right?

[Daniel Mullis] Yeah, thank you Anke. I think what I first want to highlight is for sure that the rise of the far-right is an urban phenomenon also in large cities and metropolises, so that it's not something that is actually bound to Eastern Germany or to the rural and that to actually see this point is also a matter of telling a counter-story to this debate that "it is a rural problem" or "that is a problem of Eastern Germany". So when you look at cities actually, they all share a geography of a division between centre and periphery, and you have this peripheralized rise of the far-right in cities. This counts for West German cities, at the same time also for East German and large cities, and even though if that is the case in Eastern Germany, the election results for the far-right are far higher than in Western metropolises. But when you look at Frankfurt, where in the last election that was in autumn in Hesse, for the first time, the far-right actually got over 10% in the total of the city, that is very much, and it has never happened before, not even with the NPD or die Republikaner, which were former far-right parties, they managed to get such an electoral result.

So you can see that they are getting strongholds and in some neighbourhoods, they had 20 percent plus. So this is a number. But at the same time, what is striking is that when you have, like, large Western German cities, the far-right actually has no structures. They have no electoral offices, they have no background there, they don't meet there, there's nothing actually where they can go to. So there's a

mobilization that happens [to be] absent from far-right structures. And this is something that is different in eastern German large cities. And when you look at what they are doing, if there is something like a far-right urban politics, what actually seldom is, it is rather rarely... Beshar and Alec have made the study and they have showed that if they're doing politics in the urban, they actually circle around law and order, housing with a special focus on immigrants that actually are blamed for taking away the housing places for the German people, and urban reconstructions. This is that's what you actually are doing, but they're not really rooted in urban politics, but they are gaining votes.

[Anke Schwarz] Okay, thank you. I'd like to also bounce this question back to Gala. So you already mentioned that there's a need to situate and maybe situate rather than universalize. So how does this maybe differ and also relate to political fields of action of the far-right and somewhat smaller cities such as Cottbus in East Germany?

[Gala Nettelbladt] Right. Thank you, Anke. I think I would second what Daniel said about sort of issues the far-right is trying to address. I think in my own empirical fieldwork in the city of Cottbus, which is a city with around 100, 000 inhabitants in the State of Brandenburg, you see issues like housing for Germans only, cause for law and order, politics, etc. So I think that's quite similar to the situation Daniel was referring to. However, I would kind of try and caution yet again against generalizations about small cities in comparison to larger cities. So a lot of situating done from my side today. What I have however observed and analysed in my work on Cottbus, is that (and I think this is a specific, or is maybe emblematic both for the case of Eastern Germany, but also for smaller cities in comparison to the structures that are missing in larger metropolises like Frankfurt am Main) is that Cottbus is declared or depicted by many fascist actors in the region as *Musterstadt*, a so-called model city for far-right organizing and the sort of building of structures and network. And how, and this takes place through very deliberate organizing that goes far beyond party politics by the AfD, but also right into civil society where there is a lot of mobilizing done with by, you know, by the founding of different, *Vereine*, groups which is into even the business sector.

So there's strong ties between the party civil society, but also businesses that support civil society groups and parties financially. And there is strong ties with State institutions. And I think this is what I want to really stress and underline for our discussion that what we see in this example of the small city is that the rise of the far-right has really reached state institutions and this is done in a very deliberate way. So, for example, you have a simple administrative personnel that is openly sympathetic of AfD politics, for example, in the *Ausländerbehörde* (the immigration office) but also in local police stations, for example.

[Anke Schwarz] Thank you, Gala. So now if we compare some aspects of the far-right in perhaps more rural and more urban settings and how far can we actually explain far-right dynamics along this binary of an urban/rural divide... This question is for Valentin. So in particular, what are the limits and maybe also challenges of such an approach, perhaps with view to your own research in Brandenburg?

[Valentin Domann] Yeah, I guess my response would connect very much to what Gala said earlier on Eastern Germany and the binaries created there. So, instead of a kind of "brown East", we are talking here about explanation of a supposed revenge of the village or the regressive anger of so-called "places

that don't matter". And so these binary explanations have similar pitfalls as like East/West explanations. Like its exceptionalism, containerization and so on and so forth. I do not have to repeat that here, I guess. But there are, of course, critical scholars trying to deconstruct this kind of binary view. You could name Larissa Deppish and her colleagues, but also a lot of interventions from critical geography. So, and I can maybe give us a short example from my fieldwork where I really try to apply these insights a little bit. And surprisingly, my Brandenburg case studies revealed kind of unexpected results in this regard.

So I conducted interviews in two municipalities. One is a very typical suburban settlement, bordering Berlin. The second case study takes place in a municipality located in a very remote area of Brandenburg, just 20 minutes away from the Polish border and while I was expecting that rurality would have a kind of significant impact on the mainstreaming of far-right tropes in the latter place, it was in fact the suburban case study where the rural was mobilized much more effectively to support the AfD claims. And it was not agricultural topics or remoteness or infrastructure or anything that is like typically associated with the rural and rural areas. So that did not play a role here. But the AfD found it relatively easy to connect the tropes to kind of nostalgic narratives of being a former village that was like redeveloped by Berlin and the growth of Berlin and the fears of change, the fears of like a change in identity of the place and so on. And this "village imaginary" was a very useful source for channelling anger towards incomers, newcomers, and so on. So my argument, I guess, would be that it's not only essential to understand how processes of urbanization on the one end and peripheralization on the other creates a specific spatial opportunity structures for far-right mobilization, but also, and maybe more importantly, how these imaginaries of the urban or of the rural are filled with a specific meaning and specific local contexts.

[Anke Schwarz] Great. Thank you, Valentin. When we talk about the far-right, we also need, obviously, to talk about racism and xenophobic attacks on migrants. So, Toni, which geographical differences, especially between major cities, small towns and rural areas, do you find noteworthy? Especially based on your longstanding research in this field?

[Antonie Schmiz] Yeah, thanks for this question. Well coming back to the anti-immigrant attacks in Rostock, Solingen and Mölln, we see that these attacks were committed on migrant and refugee accommodations in bigger and in smaller cities. And as Daniel already said, in the West and East of Germany alike. So this supports many arguments already made today. And a slightly different pattern can be observed for the series of murders by the German neo Nazi group *the National Socialist Underground*, with attacks took place in urban contexts and most of them in bigger cities. And if we look at Berlin, we see that a series of right-wing attacks could go on for several years without being stopped in one of Berlin's most diverse districts, Neukölln.

And although we have this very long history of anti-immigrant attacks in Germany, geographic research only recently focused on this field from the perspective of geographic migration research. For example Mert Perkson's mapping of far-right attacks and racial violence shows that the reporting of far-right attacks says more about the political awareness and the location of anti-racism groups that register these attacks than on the actual geographies of these attacks. But it also shows that these attacks are not only happening in Eastern Germany, but increasingly since 2014, also in the West of Germany. And to conclude on this point, the geographies of these attacks show us where migrant populations operate their shops, where they live, and they show where localities of accommodation centres are to be found. And referring to the work of Andreas Pott, he wrote that racism is reproduced in places and through

specific places. Yeah, and I think what's also important to say is that we observe in German cities that violence against racialized groups is not only committed by far-right groups, but the widespread racially motivated practice of racial profiling by the police makes racialized groups feel unsafe in public space as well.

[Felicitas Kübler] Thank you. I think for another point, let's maybe move away from the field a bit and let's talk about ourselves and talk about activist perspectives and ethical responsibilities when researching in such a field. So all of us have worked on the far-right and we all are very familiar with grappling with ethical issues. And it's very much common, I think, in this field to distance oneself from the far-right and taking a pro-democratic or even openly anti-fascist stance. And as one of the members of the research network Terra-R since 2020, (we're financially supported by the German Research Federation, yay) how could our research support actors in civil society and anti-fascist groups, Valentin?

[Valentin Domann] Okay, so that is a very difficult question, and I don't have a very short answer here. And actually, I also cannot really speak for the whole network, as it's like always a very individual decision, how much risk and exposure one is willing to take. And I mean, it's helpful that there are like writings about antifascist geographies on a more general level. And it's definitely helpful to generate some common ground within the scientific community. But those discussions are... like a bit, a bit limited in their ability to guide you through this kind of very messy process of actually conducting fieldwork, working together with these pro-democratic and anti-fascist forces in the field. So I guess much more literature on participatory and action research within urban studies can be a valuable resource in this regard. And here perhaps the most fundamental principle of carefully listening to the needs of the communities you're working with can also be seen as a very basic rule. And like, yeah, the collaboration with those groups standing up against the far-right mobilization. And so this can mean different things! So sometimes this can mean to use just your privileges as a university based scholar by delivering speeches at townhall meetings, publishing in local newspapers and just supporting the agenda setting of the local groups, for example.

But in other circumstances no counselling or kind of advocacy from our side is actually necessary or needed. You have to remember that actually antifascist independent research has a highly effective and very professional tradition exceeding actually many of our academic research projects. However, you have to be very cautious when trying to apply other assumptions from the established participatory action research to this field, especially when it comes to privacy and security concerns, I guess, because it's just super crucial to keep in mind that public visibility in this field always goes hand in hand with yeah, violent far-right threats. For example, the orchestrated far-right attack on Leipzig Konowitz is just like a brutal example of this. 200 organized neo-Nazis gathered in 2016 and vandalized cars, shop windows, attack passersby in the central street of the district, just because it is often presented as a place of left wing anti-fascist subculture. So you can clearly see this territorial dimension to it when you expose this kind of communities in this field.

And also another threat comes not only from organized Nazis, but from the State apparatus, of course. So the fear of State persecution is deeply rooted in anti-fascist activism, and there's good reason for this. For example, as the latest verdict in the so called Anti Faust trial shows. So here, for example, a special law was applied that makes membership or support of a so-called criminal organization punishable, and police and prosecutors are usually very creative in constructing such organizations and networks, and all it takes sometimes is a meeting or a phone call with one of the alleged members to be considered part of this network. So it's very possible for researchers to be considered by the security forces to be part of this organization with which sets a specific setting to this kind of research

endeavours. And also speaking to an Urban studies audience here, some of you may recall how a law colleague who does great scholarship on gentrification was suspected to be a member of a so-called terrorist group responsible for militant anti-gentrification action. So this in turn allows the security forces to secretly monitor the most private aspects of his family's life.

So yeah, I guess what critical scholars could do when they want to support pro democratic or anti-fascist groups is, yeah... It's just to consider how very tense the situation of this community are, so like they're under pressure from several sides. And so this also can lead to dilemmas and intense world conflicts for us as researchers. So it comes often together with a huge emotional impact on us researchers. And I guess first thing we could do as a community to create those spaces to, I don't know, share how these emotional burden, how does it affect our research and so on. So I guess that it would be a first collective step.

[Felicitas Kübler] Thank you, Valentin for mapping out those very complex and challenging aspects of engaged research when it comes to that field. And Toni, I also have a question for you. And I want to ask you which possibilities and networks of solidarity for anti-racist actions have you encountered in your work?

[Antonie Schmiz] Well, in my own research on Vietnamese migrants, I came across the very important work done by migrant self-organizations in the beginning of the 1990s when the former Vietnamese contract workers were a major target of racist attacks committed by the far-right in the eastern part of Berlin. In this time, it was especially migrant organizations and migrant groups claiming a political reaction to these attacks, and we can see these patterns today in the investigation of the far-right Hanau shootings, where again, migrant led initiatives were founded. One initiative mainly was founded out of the victim families who organize themselves in order to make pressure on the State of Hesse. And from my understanding of critical research, this means to talk exactly to these initiatives and to win them for collaborative research projects and to use our privileged position as critical scholars for producing relevant knowledge for them and also together with them and to support their remembrance policies that play an important role right now.

Yeah, and this said, I understand it as an ongoing task to reflect on the knowledges we produce and also the way we produce them and thereby keeping in mind our positionality as researchers as well as the vulnerability of the research subjects in this field of migration. And yeah, I see an important task for critical migration scholars to research and communicate these patterns and path dependencies of anti-immigrant attacks and that are still too often seen as individual cases rather than as an outcome of racism as a structural societal relationship that is deeply rooted in capitalism. And also, yeah, well, to be sensitive for the very different forms of racisms within our society. I think this is a very important task for us as researchers.

[Felicitas Kübler] Thank you. And yeah, obviously it is very important that we challenge our own knowledges, that we acknowledge the privilege of our position. And Daniel, we know you as an outspoken supporter of activist perspectives and engaged critical geography, and maybe you could elaborate a bit on the issues and challenges you did encounter within the scientific community when it comes to such approaches to research on the far-right.

[Daniel Mullis] Yeah, thank you, Felicitas. I think the situation is ambivalent, because on the one hand, I think there is no research on the far-right in the German university system that is not somehow normative, that takes a standpoint for democracy, for pluralism, for basic rights. So, actually, there is a big common consensus that the researcher on the far-right is actually also aiming to push this growing force back to somewhere. So I think it is on the other hand a problem that people still believe, or a lot of people still believe actually coming from this very basic idea of extremism theory, that there is that the far-right, the same as the far-left, and they are actually problems of the boundaries of society, and they are not connected with us. And people believe that this whole rise of the far-right has nothing to do with us, that it is something that is happening out there that can be pushed back to a place somewhere that doesn't attach to us. And I think this is a big problem. I think people must realize as soon as possible that this rise of the far-right is something that affects us and it is something that is centred in the middle of society and it comes from the middle of society. So it also is part of our university system. It affects our students. This has to be acknowledged and I think we are not there yet.

And the second thing is regarding universities is that also universities are not something like a nice cozy place. They have become battlegrounds of political conflicts regarding, I mean... all these debates on cancel culture, they're strongly related to questions of universitarian produced knowledge. the attacks on gender studies, critical race theory. In all of this we see that the far-right is attacking universities and actually also critical theory that is produced in universities because it's the theory and knowledge that they don't like, that they want to push back, that they want to actually yeah, get rid of. And so I would say the Universities and also academia must realize that the rise of the far-right actually affects the way of the democratic understanding of knowledge production, the democratic understanding of universities, of self-management of universities, and this will become even more problematic in the future regarding funding amounts when the far-right might get in power in some parts. So I would say to come to an end there is a big understanding that far-right is a problem but it is somehow externalized and I think we must realize now that is not something that is externalized that it affects us and we are part of it.

[Felicitas Kübler] Thank you and let's stick to the structure of academic debates for a moment. Gala, when you look at the academic debate on the far-right in Germany, and maybe also in comparison with international debates, do you see any need for further discussions on research ethics when engaging with the far-right? And how might that also highlight needs for further research on the urban dimensions of the far-right?

[Gala Nettelbladt] Yeah, I mean, most of what I had wanted to say has obviously been said. I can only second Antonie's, Valentin's and Daniel's comments. What I find really crucial is to shift focus in our research from sort of reproducing the scandalizing gesture of this like small extremist groups at the fringes of society, and really start looking at the normalization processes that are already going on in universities, but also you know, in our in the empirical fields that we look at in local municipalities, in civil society and so on. And I think that demands both an empirical shift from research that is solely concerned with extreme far-right actors as such, and that moves towards sort of a wider range of actors, such as Valentin and I are trying to explore in our work looking at, you know, the very heterogeneous fields of civil society that are not always good and democratic and sort of good citizens but also that, you know, that can take very different forms that also offer such a big field for far-right mobilization.

And so I think that this look at civil society is important, but then what I also really want to stress is the role of the State and relations between the civil society and the State, and to really think through or ask ourselves again: What is the role of the State in this normalization that we're currently seeing with such high voter turnouts for the AfD? and I think... I find Ruth Rod's work on normalization very productive here, where she tries to map out or sort of find tools to understand this process of things that were formally taboo [that] are now being set again and the sort of famous *cordons sanitaires* slowly eroding. And I think in addition to this empirical work that needs to be done, I'd be very curious to also shift conceptual and analytical lenses that I think we need to develop account for and make sense of these developments, and I'd like to see more of that in the future. And just to also respond to the last point of your question, Feli, was I feel in comparison to international academic debates, say in the US or the UK context, I feel as though... You know, there's still a lot of work to be done in the German speaking world on studies on anti-racism on critical whiteness and so on, and I think there's a lot to learn from these other contexts, and I think it could be very fruitful to further this scholarship also in regards to the German situation.

[Anke Schwarz] Okay. Thank you very much. So for our final part, let's turn a bit to futures. We already heard that the far-right AfD has been very successful in recent elections in Bavaria and Hesse. And we also heard in this podcast that of course this all reaches far beyond parliamentary politics and also into the everyday in many, many aspects. So yeah. Obviously, next year, we will have the elections in the states of Saxony, Brandenburg, and Thuringia, and opinion polls already indicate that the AfD will play an important role in all three votes. And we would therefore like to close this episode by asking for kind of prognosis on your part. It's always hard to do prognosis, but maybe you have some kind of tendency that you would like to outline. So how do you think that these 2024 elections will change the political landscape in Germany? And in particular, what kind of effects could this have on critical academic engagement with the far-right? Perhaps in short, what can be done, what needs to be done by critical academia and progressive politics? I would like to start with Toni.

[Antonie Schmiz] Yeah, thank you Anke for this question. So I can rather refer to the last part of your question and if we see the rise of the AfD and how it supports like a continuity that we can see since the first right wing attacks in Germany that German politics and criminal investigation offices as well as the police do not affect and oppose these crimes with a very severe effect for those parts of our society that are othered as migrants. So we see that large parts of our society neither feel safe nor represented by the German State and this culture of neglect of anti-immigrant forces is fuelled through the rise of the far-right. So I see this as a very important point for research. And if we observe in our research project on new localisms, that it is much harder to mobilize migrant support structures in remote areas than in urban context. This also means for us as researchers to do more activist research in these places and areas. And coming back to the new law and the regressive politics, deportation research is also needed on what this means for people living under the condition of deportability in urban as well as in many remote areas in the German East and also on how cities use their room to maneuver within this political context. So, whether they react rather as sanctuary cities or with authoritarian urban politics.

[Anke Schwarz] Thank you very much. I'd like to hand over to Gala.

[Gala Nettelbladt] Yeah, if I'm being very honest, I find it extremely hard to answer this question. I feel like the future looks very bleak. I mean current polls show the AfD as the second strongest political party after the CDU. I mean, given, you know, the sort of like very wide ranging success that cuts through all layers of society... I just hope for our work to continue and for research to really continue to shed light on these processes and to document them somewhat as well.

[Anke Schwarz] Thank you. Valentin?

[Valentin Domann] Yeah, I have to admit, I too cannot project or oversee the full picture of consequences of these elections. But to single out maybe one aspect I would go back to what I've said earlier about the current pressures and forms of repression, surveillance State persecutions that anti-fascist communities face nowadays. So I guess the trends that are well documented during the last decade or decades towards securitization, the dominance of anti-terror policies and so on, they have created and use fear and using a set of tools in the hands of today's security forces. And in a federal State like Germany where the State level plays a crucial role in security and law enforcement, it is kind of a very dark scenario to project that the AfD will take over the interior ministry, for example, in just one of these States and thus would become head of the police and security service here. So, yeah, I don't know. Like many of you I don't really want to think about this scenario. But yeah, it is definitely one that we should be prepared for, and yeah, maybe we should begin to organize ourselves a bit better within our research communities to start with, and to continue to build this kind of more accountable relationships and structures within the communities we work with in the field, hoping that these might survive those scary times that are maybe ahead of us.

[Anke Schwarz] Right. On this note, I would like to hand over to Daniel. What, what needs to be done? What can be done?

[Daniel Mullis] Yeah. I also can only say that I'm not so optimistic. I think we have witnessed the over tipping of authoritarian tipping points in the last months in several cases. Toni has talked about the migration politics, but also the counteraction against progressive social movements. We have seen dramatic increase of law enforcement. And I think there is a big possibility that in one of these elections, the AfD will get some sort of power. And when we look at the federal State, where it is not quite clear what the general government is going to last in the next years, there is also the European election. So it is a situation of great uncertainty in general, and I think we will witness a strengthening of the far-right. That will go on. And so I think I want to take up what Valentin just said, because I think what something we are all perhaps too much used to [is] working alone, to go follow our careers in isolated situations. But I think the future, our wellbeing will depend on how we can work together, create safe spaces where we can also recharge as academics in the field, but also as political people with a political position in this so that we can recharge and go out and be part of this counteracting against this tendencies. But this really relies on working together, find safe spaces, create networks of solidarity also in academia, otherwise we will drown in this situation. And I think this will be bad. So working together, come together, even in dark times, this, I think will be necessary.



[Anke Schwarz] Thank you all so much for this thought provoking and insightful discussion. I think this has been really great to, to exchange our views and really try to find some ways forward, even though the situation seems a bit bleak. Yeah, unfortunately our engagement with the far-right and urban authoritarianism does not and also cannot end on a bright note. Nevertheless, this highlights the need for further research and collaboration, especially from an engaged activist perspective, of which I think we heard quite some today from our wonderful guests. And we also hope, of course, to hear more about this and this kind of research in the future. So if you're interested in our research, the Terra-R network actually has a blog, which you can check out for further information on the TerraR-net, and you will also find this link.

[Felicitas Kübler] Thank you all for being here. Thank you for the discussion and also thank you to all the listeners. And this was the Urban Political Podcast on the far-right in the city. Thank you all so much for listening and goodbye.

[Outro] *Thanks to you for listening. For more information, visit our website, urbanpolitical.podigy.io. Please subscribe and follow us on Twitter.*