Right-wing sentiment, discourse and action has an ongoing presence in Germany. In the early 1990s, it surfaced violently through often-fatal attacks on ethnic minorities, refugees and their residences in Hoyerswerda, Rostock, Mölln, Solingen and other cities. The fact that the federal states of the former GDR have seen a particularly high prevalence of attacks and murders has begged for an explanation. The debate on right-wing extremism in the states of the former GDR intensified again in the context of the 2006 FIFA World Cup, when various public media published maps on so-called ‘no-go areas’ to warn international visitors. Most recently, the murders committed by the National Socialist Underground (NSU) between 2000 and 2007 spurred the debate, as the terrorists came from the East German city of Jena.

Most consistently, the causes of violence have been attributed to the groups of young neo-Nazis that have proliferated since the 1990s, especially—although by no means exclusively—in Germany’s East. In addition, the failures of public institutions were denounced in the wake of the three-day riots in front of a refugee shelter in the Lichtenhagen area of Rostock in 1992. There was even good reason to assume a political will behind the failure of police and other institutions, as simultaneously a populist debate around migrants’ exploitation of the German economy was taking place. The often-heard expression Überfremdung, ‘over-alienisation’ or ‘over-foreignisation’, was voted the Unwort of the year 1993, declaring it the most ghastly neologism. Institutional complicity in racism appeared on the public agenda again in 2011, when a series of flaws became known in the public investigations of the NSU. The parliamentary investigation

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committee judged the state’s activities to be an ‘historically unprecedented disaster’\(^1\). Calls have ensued for improved information exchange between different intelligence services, and the federal states are currently taking legal action against the right-wing National Democratic Party (NPD). Yet neither of these responses tackle racism’s wider societal conditions. They are, rather, in line with the generic framing of racism as exceptional, a result of particular institutional failures in combination with the NPD’s propaganda. What is more, the fact that the NSU terrorists came from the city of Jena served to localise the exception, stabilising a stereotypical image of East Germany as an economic, political and social failure.

Attempts to explain the high prevalence of right-wing extremism in the former GDR have long tended to culturalise East German xenophobia. After 1990, we have been told by politicians and researchers, right-wing ideologies fell on fertile ground in the states of the former GDR, as the socialist regime had impeded any critical engagement with East German involvement in National Socialism. No wonder that the East German youth, who suffered from a wrecked economy and deficient institutions, would look for ‘foreigners’ to blame and fall for non-establishment redemption stories. While this reasoning has some pertinence, it eclipses a shared legacy of Nazism and the racism persisting all over Germany; it elides West German involvement in East German immiseration; and it presents perpetrators of violence as socio-economic victims, directing attention away from the victimisation of alternative youths, leftists, queers, migrants, and especially refugees and people of colour, who are most intensely affected by right-wing violence. What is more, the focus on East German youth as victims of GDR ideology and economic decline impedes an engagement with the ongoing reproduction of the conditions of racism at the levels of politics, institutions and the

\(^1\) This and all subsequent translations are mine.
everyday. It is precisely this reproduction that Tom Bürk addresses in *Gefahrenzone, Angstraum, Feindesland?*, thus offering a timely and nuanced intervention into the debate on right-wing extremism in the federal states of the former GDR.

Drawing on ethnographic research in two anonymised small towns in the state of Brandenburg, Bürk interrogates conformist versions of the small town Öffentlichkeit (‘public sphere’/publics/publicness). He argues that it is in particular the normalisation of right-wing attitudes in daily life and the establishment of a hegemonic ‘common sense’ (after Gramsci) that provide the conditions for persistent racist violence. In the public spaces of streets, stations, markets and squares, right-wing aesthetics and activities are tolerated or have even become the norm. Local politicians, professionals and civil society associations mobilise in the wake of racist attacks and murders; yet, striving to deflect the stigmatisation of their cities as neo-Nazi strongholds, they tend to frame such incidents as exceptions and ignore that, since the 1990s, a “differentiated web of right-wing citizens of various ages” (p.347) has formed in the two places of investigation. What emerges from Bürk’s investigation are the contours of an intricate ‘power geometry’ (Massey 1994) that has nothing to do with essentialist understandings of cities’ ‘habitus’ (Lindner 2003) or their ‘intrinsic logic’ (*Eigenlogik* - Berking and Löw 2008) - concepts that have pervaded recent German urban studies.

*Gefahrenzone, Angstraum, Feindesland?* does not seek to plough too deeply through the discourse on right-wing extremism as it has burgeoned since the early 1990s in social pedagogy and political science. This discourse, the author contents, “still has a strong tendency towards perpetrator-oriented, mostly gender-neutral sociological research on youth deviancy and the research on right-wing subcultures” (p.27). Instead, the book

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2 ‘Danger Zone, Anxiety Space, Enemy Country? Urban-Cultural Explorations on Xenophobia and Right-Wing Radicalism in East German Small Towns’.
develops a re-politicised approach to cities and space in order to intervene into culturalist approaches to right-wing radicalism. It thereby also makes a valuable contribution to discussions on power, agency and publicness in urban studies and critical geography. The first part discusses the concepts of urban culture, space and Öffentlichkeit. The second part—confusingly grouped in the table of contents under Part I—contextualises the investigated towns historically and maps out the main local subjects and debates around right-wing extremism. The third part (or ‘Part II’) examines the reproduction and contestation of a hegemonic common sense by focusing on public media, urban policy and the quotidian formation of hegemonies and counter-hegemonies.

The background to the book’s title is a multifarious spatial vocabulary that has shaped the articulations and contestations around right-wing radicalism, in particular with respect to the states of the former GDR since the early 1990s. Used by the German New Right since the 1990s, national befreite Zone (‘national liberated zone’) became Unwort of the year in 2000. No-go-area, Gefahrenzone (‘danger zone’), Angstraum (‘anxiety space’), and Feindesland (‘enemy country’) are further terms that oscillate between public media discourse, daily enunciations and political debate. In the third part of the book, Bürk heuristically maps the terms Gefahrenzone, Angstraum, and Feindesland onto Henri Lefebvre’s threefold analysis of ‘conceived’, ‘perceived’ and ‘lived space’, dedicating a chapter to each couplet. While this structure offers some tentative grouping of the material at hand, neither the coupling of the respective terms nor the focus on the different spatial constituents is elaborated in a consistent way. A discussion of the terms Gefahrenzone and Feindesland is entirely missing. I read this framing in the context of German-language social and cultural geography, where references to what Edward Soja (2000) called Lefebvre’s ‘trialectics’ have mushroomed since the mid-2000s. While this referencing has fostered an integration of materialist and representational analyses, it has
often boiled down to a mere naming of different spatial registers, serving as convenient stand-in for theoretical elaborations. Bürk’s account exceeds such name- or concept-dropping by articulating Lefebvre with the historical work of Braudel, Anglophone social geography, and other traditions of enquiry. The invocation of Lefebvre as a father figure is, however, debatable, in particular when Bürk claims that the discussion around the construction of social space is really a “reception history” of Lefèbvre’s œuvre (p.73). This claim risks reducing the heterodox fields of urban studies and spatial theory. Meanwhile, one of Bürk’s most central concepts, power geometry, has done just fine so far without much reception of Lefebvre.

Investigating how the above-mentioned terms operate, Bürk shows how the New Right’s use of national befreite Zone reifies a nationalist, yet anti-state territorial imagination of liberation—despite the fact that many regions referenced by the term have long had a small share of non-German and ethnic minority citizens. Drawing on Lefebvre’s ‘spaces of representation’, the focus is on dynamics among such reterritorialisation, subsequent stigmatisation in the national press, and endeavours to deflect stigmatisations on the part of local newspaper editors. Still within this conceptual framework, the author goes on to investigate how the debate on ‘no-go areas’, by contrast, hailed from anti-racist efforts to raise public attention and to warn people of colour of particularly racist places in the context of the 2006 FIFA World Cup. The term, however, subsequently nurtured culturalist accounts of East German xenophobia. Even worse, it ended up being instrumentalised in neo-Nazi propaganda, as it oddly mirrored the spatial imagination of national befreite Zonen. After activists from the Africa Council of Berlin and Brandenburg⁢ pointed out that identifying individual areas erroneously

⁢See http://www.afrika-rat.org/
represents other spaces as safe for people of colour, the magazine Konkret published a cover image of a map designating the whole of Germany a no-go area.

At the level of urban governance, the slowly growing awareness of ethnic minorities’ vulnerability to racist attacks lead to including their concerns in policies around the fear of crime and Angsträume since around the year 2000. Bürk refracts this observation through Lefèbvre’s ‘representation of space’. Railway stations have counted among the most notorious Angsträume, not least due to media and activists’ reports on beatings and murders committed by right-wing groups. Bürk offers a new angle on the spatiality of German small town railway stations by delineating their transformation from often lively public spaces to mostly deserted locations in the wake of Deutsche Bahn’s privatisation. While the company has turned some metropolitan stations into spaces of consumption, most stations in small towns no longer feature snack bars or even furnished waiting areas. Migrants and people of colour have tended to avoid these spaces in the towns studied.

Mobilising the notion of ‘lived space’, the last chapter of this third part discusses the practical engagements of politically-minded citizens; ‘heterotopic’ places, such as an alternative commune and a Stadtcafé (‘city café’) used as a community centre; and, importantly, the experiences of refugees, migrants and people of colour. Bürk’s reflections on his own positioning in the field as a white man situate the discussion. What is particularly striking is how part of the local activist elite repeatedly attempted to interpellate him into a discourse of exceptionalism and appeasement, framing racist incidents as isolated cases and denying any reason for political outrage. Bürk’s evaluation of action committees as manifestations of an elitist strategy of local governance counts among the book’s most provocative claims. “The practice of the ‘action committee’ [Aktionsbündnis]”, Bürk suggests, “has the character of an information and delegation
apparatus. Its primary function is to install in front of the important people at the level of urban politics a group of nodal local persons” (p.345). The effect is the consolidation of a partly professionalized monopoly on civil society. Frequently, the professed representatives of the citizens’ voice turn out to be deeply invested in the apparent normalcy of whiteness, reproducing views of migration as an issue of ‘integration’, and blaming violence against anti-fascist youth on their own confrontational behaviour. Concerted racism is represented as always already an issue of the past.

By contrast, the experiences of refugees living in precarious situations–including people awaiting decisions regarding their asylum claims–highlight ongoing exclusion and threats of violence. This is particularly pertinent to one of the towns studied, where many migrants live in an accommodation centre for refugees. Several of Bürk’s interviewees are haunted by the memories of attacked and lost friends. Furthermore, refugees of colour from African countries often became subject to racism when they first encountered German public institutions. Their subjective geographies are–much more than those of alternative youth–reterritorialized on few places of perceived safety and respect, and those awaiting state decisions are subject to the Residenzpflicht, a radical restriction of their mobility. One interviewee reports deciding not to visit cafés anymore due to harassment experienced at the hands of an owner. The ‘city café’ counts among the few sites where minoritarian and politically-minded subjects have created a safe space for anti-racist organising–or, rather, a ‘safer space’, since the café has been subject to recurrent acts of vandalism.

In the second town, the visibility of migrant and non-white subjects is largely limited to the presence of snack bar owners and staff. These subjects are not represented, however, on local boards or in action committees. Instead, rumours circulate about mafia-like structures supposedly connecting their establishments. Bürk’s account of such myths
and their anchorage within civil society is uncanny against the backdrop of the NSU murders, which the public press inappropriately labelled ‘Döner murders’ (referencing the Turkish doner kebab) at the time.

His discussion of the experiences of different minoritarian subjects goes to the heart of the question of how a racist status quo is reproduced and challenged through daily practice. Bürk usefully contextualises these experiences with reference to the GDR’s particular production of space, which geographically isolated migrant ‘contract workers’ and so-called ‘anti-social’ subjects. This discussion would have benefited from a deeper engagement with studies of migrants, ethnic minority groups and people of colour in the GDR; and with how state-sponsored and gendered forms of exoticisation structured migration regimes, constituting a “socialism of difference” (Piesche 2002: 39). On the other hand, tying current racisms too closely to the GDR would have entailed the risk of falling into the culturalist trap outlined earlier. What Peggy Piesche stated in the early 2000s in her discussion of East German adolescents before 1989 still rings true today: “future scholarship must look more closely, not only at the differences between East and West German policies regarding foreigners and migration, but also at a shared legacy of colonial and Nazi vintage” (p.56).

Positioning himself as a German from the former West with an early interest in the GDR and its socio-political developments, Bürk goes some way toward elaborating on shared and dividing features of East and West. What is particularly fruitful in this regard is his contextualisation of the study within the post-unification transition from Ost-Fordismus (‘Eastern-Fordism’) to globalised neoliberalism. More than just adding a further particularity, this section urges us to renounce a simple transfer of concepts like racism and xenophobia, say, from the UK to the (East) German context, and to consider the role played by economic and political shifts. What comes into view are thus what
researcher-activist Manuela Bojadžijev (2006: np) calls “conjunctures of racism” that emerge from contingent regimes of capitalist accumulation and labour mobility in connection with the struggles and resistances enacted by migrant, racialised and minoritarian subjects. Moving towards such an analysis, one of the most productive questions for future geographic research instigated by Gefahrenzone, Angstraum, Feindesland? is how the GDR’s segregational production of space and ‘socialism of difference’ not only continue to impact current structures of feeling, but are being recomposed in the context of a privatised, globalised and contested capitalist economy.

References


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