

Positioning antagonistic discourses in the (de)bounded spaces of power”

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Abstract

Scholarship has often underlined how radical right-wing populism (RRWP) emphasizes border control aiming to protect the “people”. Although increasing attention is being paid to the discursive dimensions of border construction, the complexity of the phenomenon suggests the need for further analysis in an interdisciplinary perspective and with an emphasis on the geometry of spatial powers (Massey 2005; 2007). Understanding power dynamics in space is all the more important now that radical right-wing populism (RRWP) is becoming a key political phenomenon in multiple public arenas. The use of the border in right-wing populist narratives draws on the representation of power struggles in space concerning the management of flows (people, goods, services, capital, ideas, values, etc.). The scope of the introduction to this special issue is to address the connection between right-wing populism, borders, and spaces of power, and to present the research articles investigating this link through a series of different case studies.

Keywords: Radical right-wing populism – borders – power geometries – discourse analysis – liberal hegemony and illiberal counter-hegemony

Defining actors and antagonism in spatial struggles

Radical right-wing populism (or RRWP) has been a major phenomenon challenging Western democracies for more than two decades (e.g. Wodak and Krzyżanowski 2017). It has been defined from an academic perspective as a political strategy based on the direct relationship between a leader and the masses (Weyland 2017), as a “thin” ideology (Mudde 2017), or as a discursive style allowing political actors to signal them as belonging to the people (Ostiguy 2017). RRWP is based on three ideological pillars, which are circulated or mitigated depending on political and interactional contexts: nativism, populism, and authoritarianism (Lamour 2024; Mudde 2017; Wodak 2015). The RRWP parties and leaders put forwards the idea of an exclusionary and territorially-embedded native in-group, with fixed cultural, civilizational, and national traits (Heinisch, Massetti and Mazzoleni 2020; Kuyper and Moffitt 2020). This in-group constituting the “people” is then contrasted with two out-groups (for instance the liberal “elite” and the “others” including migrants) whose actions and interests are signaled as a danger to the people (Pajnik and Fabijan. 2023; Ruzza 2018; Steger 2019). Last, the RRWP parties and leaders support the authoritarian use of state power against communities they will represent as the enemies of the people (Krzyżanowski and Ekström 2022). From a discursive perspective, RRWP can be defined as an antagonistic vision of society, characterized by tensions between irreconcilable communities and the clashes of hegemonies and counter-hegemonies; with populist counter-hegemonies becoming progressively normalized in public debates (Krzyżanowski and Ekström 2022; Wodak and Rheindorf 2022). Nevertheless, there is a lack of research concerning the power dynamics in space enunciated by RRWP politicians when they represent the tensions between the people, the elite, and others (Lamour 2022a, 2023). Hence the motive for this special issue, focusing on the specific use of the border in the framing of populist-driven power dynamics. This topic

is particularly timely in European countries and the United States, where RRWP parties and leaders are becoming dominant and are focusing their political manifesto on border securitization (Schain 2019; Mazzoleni et al. 2023).

The struggle between the powerless “people,” the powerful “elite,” and the empowered “others” is consequently both vertical (people-elite) and horizontal (people-others) (Brubaker 2019; De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017). Furthermore, it is the articulation between the opposed groups rather than the clear and stable definition of these groups that matters to secure a permanent climate of antagonism in society enacted by populist forces (Laclau 2005). Each group — especially “the people” — can be ill-defined, ambiguous, broad enough, and sometimes even contradicted from one discourse to the next, to create a sense of frustration among the majority of the population opposed to the coalesced elite and the undifferentiated “others” (Biancalana and Mazzoleni 2020). This articulation supposes a tension in terms of hegemony; that is, the sets of accepted ideas that secure the reproduction of social practices (Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

Hegemony and counter-hegemony in the current global era

Populist claim appears at a specific time in history in the Western world public sphere, when a proportion of the political actors believe there is an electoral opportunity to propose a counter-hegemony. One can think for instance of Viktor Orbán in Hungary. Having lost control of the Hungarian government at the turn of the century, the then liberal and pro-EU leader of the 1990s felt the resentment in Hungarian society concerning the European Union integration process. He then later affirmed himself as the champion and uncontested leader of an illiberal Hungary based on an RRWP agenda and the rejection of the EU Commission (Lendvai 2017; Waterbury 2006). The liberal Nicolas Sarkozy in France followed the same trajectory of mobilizing the themes and discourse of the RRWP without being able to secure his presidential re-election (Mondon 2013). The counter-hegemony circulated by these political stakeholders is presented as beneficial to or claimed by the “people,” while hegemonic discourse has entered a phase of partial dislocation due to a structural crisis (Laclau 1977). The hegemony to be fought against to protect the people, according to the current RRWP, is a global liberal order combining international/multilateral political governance institutions and the liberal democratic norms notably securing the protection of individual and minority rights. The counter-hegemony to be promoted to secure the integrity of the people can be defined as a state (il)liberal order. This order mixes a claimed “nation-first” organization of neoliberal capitalism, welfare-chauvinism, and the returned primacy of sovereign state or unilateralism in international affairs.

Depending on the parties and the society in which they project themselves, it can also include a series of illiberal democratic and cultural norms: a reduction, contestation, or rejection of minority and individual rights, an authoritarian approach to the state power, the negation or criticism of mainstream media, the contestation of free elections results, and the progressive collapse of the separation between the executive, legislative, and judiciary state powers (Kauth and King 2021; Mazzoleni and Voerman 2020). The implementation of this state (il)liberalism, especially its democratic norms, is based on a discourse that circulates a sense of structural crisis. RRWP parties do not initiate the overlapping economic, humanitarian, environmental, and health issues that are not easily managed by liberal democratic states. However, they can inflate, contextualize, and connect these issues to boost a sense of an overall structural crisis of a global liberal order, and the necessity of its replacement by simplistic and radical policies, in order to address complex situations (Biancalana et al. 2023; Lamour and Carls, Moffitt 2015; Forchtner and Özvatan 2022; Yerly 2022; Zappettini and Bennett 2022).

By formulating this performance, RRWP spreads an implicit or explicit reference to the border of the fixed territorial state as a material and symbolic barrier, separating the people from the elites and others (Demata 2023; Thiele et al. 2023; Wodak 2015). The material state border, securing the safety of the people, is dismantled by the elite, leading to the mass arrival of external flows (e.g. migrants) endangering the people. The symbolic state border, defining the people as a sovereign political group or an exclusionary cultural community, is both negated by the elite delegating political power to international organizations (e.g. the European Commission) and overcome by alien communities bringing with them threatening societal values (e.g. Islam) incompatible with the integrity of the people. Each time the border is included in RRWP discourse, one must consider not just its use to contrast the people, the elite, and others, but also the geographical scale at which the border is used to articulate this opposition (Casaglia et al. 2020; Scott 2020; Szalai and Kopper 2020). This scale approach allows us to see that the articulation of tensions is not simply between groups in space, but also between the bordered spatial locations of the threatened “people” (e.g. the country, the heartland, etc.) and the borderless spatial locations of the threatening elite and others (e.g. Schengen Europe, Asia, Africa, the Arab-Muslim world, etc.).

The use of a border differentiating the space of the people and the space of the elite/others is expressed in populist discourse, but also enhanced by other, spectacularized content (for example, music, lighting, cheering, flags, photos, videos, etc.) enriching the narratives during media events (or social media events), as illustrated by the public performances of Donald Trump. Some of these events take place at a border, to increase the symbolic effect of the border-hardening discourse (Lamour 2022b). For example, as shown by Matteo Salvini and Marion Maréchal Le Pen visiting external EU borders characterized by tensions and securitization (AFP 2023; Lopapa 2019). In parallel, the border as a spatial object included in populist narratives and/or as a location for a discursive performance can also constitute — for RRWP parties and leaders — a line of interactions to implement a return to material and symbolic containment. An example is the phrasing used by Orbán, whose border securitization against migrants was presented as a matter of rescuing European civilization (Lendvai 2017).

Bordering and networking for a new order

The cooperation of RRWP political groups and leaders shows that the territorial state border can also be a line to access key resources, securing the implementation of radical right-wing hegemonies within bordered states. Crossing the state border is then used to access technical, financial, and political resources not available within the sovereign nation state (Caiani 2018). The technical resources are the sum of the expertise to access public executive office delivered by invited foreign speakers or parties that have succeeded in controlling and maintaining executive power. For example, one can think of Steve Banon, the ex-adviser of US President Donald Trump, touring European nation states to circulate his know-how about the successful access to executive power and the struggle between the globalist liberal hegemony and the radical right-wing counter-hegemony (Beiner 2019; Steger and James 2019; Steger 2019). Also, more locally in Europe, the support of pro-Orbán Hungarian media networks in Slovenia for the radical right Janez Jansa in election campaigns (Walker 2020). The access to financial resources has been made evident in the case of the French National Rally of Marine Le Pen, whose last presidential campaign was aided by Hungarian capital and behind that, the most sustained right-wing populist executive in power over the past two decades, Viktor Orbán (Geoffroy and Vaudano 2022; Guédé 2022).

Access to government and the increasing power of RWP forces in international affairs are characterized by the strategic positioning and/or coalition of populist executives to prevent international decisions being passed that are detrimental to their power and that of their allies. One

can think of the alliance of RRWP parties in the European parliament (Brack 2015), the alliance of the Polish and the Hungarian leaders to avoid EU retaliation against their respective illiberal policies at home (Pech and Scheppele 2017), and the more recent multi-faceted strategy of Orbán developing a series of perceivably Putin-friendly strategies in relation to the war in Ukraine. First, his constant veto threat regarding EU decisions supporting Ukraine and condemning Russia. Second, his refusal to allow military supplies for Ukrainian forces to pass through Hungary. Third, his alliance with Turkey on the delayed integration of Finland and the longer-term rejection of Swedish integration in NATO, on the pretext that Sweden has criticized internal Hungarian policies (Bayer 2023, 2024). All these RRWP strategies can be backed by the production of a trans-national populist discourse displaying a narrative about the people and their attributes that draws from beyond nation-state borders (e.g. the “Europeans,” the “European people,” or “our” Christian civilization) (Lamour 2023). These attributes are defined generally based on traditional values and opposed to the decadent liberal values of the global elite or to the retrograde and inassimilable civilizational values of the alien others, for example, Islam (De Cleen 2017; Kuyper and Moffitt 2020; Moffitt 2017; Möller 2021). The organization of the populist right alliance across borders at different scales shows the continued relevance of the relational spaces of power and the existing struggles within them.

Relational spaces and power geometries

The RRWP discourse, including state borders as collapsed/hardened barriers or constant/partial lines of interactions, circulates representations of “power geometries.” Power-geometries is a concept defined by Massey in the 1990s to criticize among Marxist economic geographers the perceived time-space compression; more precisely, the accelerated annihilation of space by time, by global and post-Fordist capitalism (Massey 1993). Power geometries are defined to reaffirm the enduring importance of geographical space as a frame of power struggles over the management of mobility exercised by individuals, groups, and institutions, as well as places that do not have the same ability to initiate, orientate, densify, control, limit, and access a multiplicity of flows in space (Massey 2005; 2007). Furthermore, as suggested by Massey, this struggle is not just about the control of economic capital, but also the control of multiple values fixing a societal order and practices at a given time, such as the relations to gender and ethnicity. Power geometries concern the control of mobility and the shaping of space in which mobility occurs, defined by different nodes of powers in tension. These nodes are located somewhere (e.g. in places) and the struggles over the management of mobility in these locations have a differentiated levels of extension in space (e.g. places, regions, states, world regions, and the world), depending on the holders of power, their capacity to connect, and their ability to make their authority felt through different channels of communication across scales, as expressed by populist stakeholders.

The RRWP discourse has consisted of representing globalization organized by power geometries in which the “people” — as a cohesive, exclusionary, and powerless majority — are struggling against multi-faceted and powerful elite and empowered minority of “others.” RRWP parties and leaders define themselves as the representative node of the powerless people victimized by the powerful elites (the media, judges, other parties, intellectuals, etc.) and the empowered aggressive others (Muslims, feminists, LGBTQ+, migrants, antifa, etc.). The antagonism circulated in these represented “power geometries” is as much about the types of material and ideational flows diffused in space as it is about the shape of the space in which this mobility and the struggle are or should be organized. The contested relational space of power by RRWP parties and leaders in their discourse is the topological one of the globalization architecture. Topological power is not about the qualification of actors that have become more or less dispersed and networked, but about the practices of proximity and reach, enabling those actors to make their leverage and presence felt, notably through the use of

technologies, thus creating a permanent and instantaneous spread of their perceived power (Allen 2009a; 2009b). This topological space of power is composed of states with borders that have been stretched and overlap with those of other states, while powerful agents in some states (e.g. economic corporations, social movements, etc.) have developed an extensive capacity to reach across distance, securing their increased or perceived dominance over control of the mobility of objects, people, and especially information and values.

The topological space of power is one in which RRWP stakeholders can position the building-up of global conspiracies, for example the “great replacement theory” (Bergmann 2018; Pirro and Taggart 2023). This conspiracy supposes a plotting and far-reaching liberal elite, eager to replace the vernacular white Europeans and their civilization by mass migrants from Africa and Asia through their financial empires (e.g. for Orbán, the financier George Soros) and their multilateral global organizations (e.g. the United Nations and its 2018 Marrakesh pact on migration signed by Western liberal governments). In addition, the international NGOs helping migrants and other minorities to infiltrate the bordered territory of the exclusionary people: the “army of Uncle George [Soros]” according to Orbán, whose nomination of Soros as “Uncle George” accompanied by his army expresses the threatening stretching of the US (Uncle Sam) liberal sphere of influence and its border within Hungary through the presence of NGOs (Hungarian Government 2021). The overall negatively-defined topological space of power in RRWP discourse is contrasted with the positively-presented territorial space of power of the sovereign states that is necessary for the people to “take back control,” as presented during the Brexit referendum (Osborne 2021). The definition of RRWP discourse includes simplified answers to complex global issues concerning the management of mobility, and demands an opposition of topological and territorial spaces of power, and consequently an antagonism between stretched state borders benefitting the liberal elite and others, and the fixed state borders protecting the people. However this phenomenon is still under-researched hence this special issue.

The articles in the special issue

As the complexity of the linkage between radical right-wing populism and borders, our special issue covers different perspectives in terms of discipline, selected case studies and contexts, type of (de)bordering discourses, spatial struggles on mobility control, and (counter-)hegemonies associated with bordering discourses. The six articles enable one to grasp the multi-faceted strategies of RRWP parties and leaders who must adapt their antagonistic vision of society in space to secure the performativity of their discourse. Devoted to Western and Central European countries, to the United States and to Israel, the articles reveal the diversity of RRWP discourses circulated in the public sphere and in spaces of power. These analyzed case studies in Western democracies of the Northern hemisphere should be seen as complementary to those considered to identify populism outside that world region and especially the global south (Rovira Kaltwasser and Zanotti, 2023). They reveal the specific discursive similarity and flexibility of RRWP parties and leaders when they have to address the issue of power in space and the reproduction of the state border.

José Javier Olivás Osuna investigates the Spanish RRWP bordering discourse, by considering it within the broader discursive output of all political parties in the Spanish Parliament following dramatic migratory incidents that took place at the Spanish-Moroccan border in Ceuta (May 2021) and Mellila (June 2022). The article considers the Vox party — one of the newest Western right-wing populist parties, and characterized by increasing electoral support among the citizenry. This was apparent during the 2023 Spanish communal elections. Based on quantitative and qualitative analyses, The author shows that such migratory incidents at the state territorial border can lead to diverse attitudes of political parties, in the circulation of populist and of bordering discourses. Non-populist parties use

de-bordering and re-bordering allusions, but in a more nuanced way and often not directly linked to populist language. What secures the distinction of Vox among the most important Spanish political parties is its use of almost only re-bordering messages, intertwined with populist discursive attributes. Other populist parties (left-wing and secessionist) promote de-bordering messages, but still use a populist logic of articulation in the context of the Spain-Morocco border. The article is particularly central to define a coding system helping scholars to approach (anti-)populist discourse and (de/re-)bordering narratives within the public sphere in relation to the management of international migration flows in space. It also shows the enduring relevance of specific places (here, the Spanish parliamentary assembly) in defining power geometries as central locations of contradictory and co-present discourses, defining the morality linked to the management of mobility at an upper scale and the relevance of the bordered nation state as the spatial frame of mobility organization.

Christian Lamour develops an analysis of RRWP and the representation of the fascist past in borderlands. The exclusionary definition of the people by radical right-wing populist parties not only supposes a contemporary definition of a stabilized community in space opposed to threatening foreign migrants and minorities, and a criticism or rejection of a cultural liberal order. It is also based on a cohesive and linear vision of the past, with the possible inclusion of past autocratic regimes into a romanticized and linear construction of the imagined community of the people in its bordered territories. The author investigates how the past frontier fascism is re-elaborated in Italian eastern borderlands, and more precisely in the city of Trieste during two commemorations linked to the public history of fascism in the area. The analysis focuses on the narratives and supported actions by the Mayor of Trieste, Roberto Dipiazza, whose executive power depends on the support of the populist right post-fascist party of Giorgia Meloni, Fratelli d'Italia. It shows that the re-elaboration of the frontier fascist past in Trieste is negotiated depending on the relational spaces of power in which the mayor wants to position himself and his City, within and across the border. The discourse produced is sufficiently coded and ambiguous for Dipiazza to secure the continuous support of the Italian post-fascist party in the Italian bordered space of representative politics, without jeopardizing his position in the European cross-border regional space of para-diplomacy. The mayor's discursive strategy shows that beyond the populist-defined representation of global power-geometries involving the dominated "people," political personnel need to position themselves in relational spaces of power where dominant populist forces and their counter-hegemony can orientate the content of some circulated narratives and actions.

Sonja Pietiläinen put forward one important and often forgotten aspect of the RRWP's argumentation justifying the presence of hardened borders to prevent the influx of migrants: the environment. Her research, based on interviews with members of the Finns Party in Finland, shows that bordering is not just about putting in place physical barriers at the state border to prevent the arrival of migrants. It is also about producing an image around an authentic, vernacular, natural, and fragile (in this case, Finnish) environment opposed to migrants whose negative nomination and predication put them in the realm of environmental threats to be kept "outside." Bordering discourse is then rooted into the language of biology, the animalization of human beings, and the use of climate change to justify the spatial exclusion of the migrant "others" for the overall safety of the true Finns in their true homelands. The "power geometries" of all this in the discourse of the Finns party is a represented struggle for survival taking place in a finite natural world, in which a global South on the move would signify the end of localized Finns on their land — hence the necessity for hardened borders.

András Szalai analyses in detail the narratives produced by the Hungarian RRWP leader Viktor Orbán, based on an approach to right-wing populism as a perpetual discursive "performance on crisis." Orbán

did not create international economic crises or international migration problems. However, he has been mastering a discourse placing the Hungarian people and himself as part of the victimized and dominated community experiencing interconnected problems and evoking a sense of permanent crisis. As presented by the author, this crisis discourse is not simply about reassuring the Hungarian people through down-to-earth policies, such as erecting fences against extra-European migrants. It is about putting the Hungarian citizenry in a permanent state of ontological insecurity, with looming dangers and a bleak vision of the future. The standing populist message about crisis — implying the potential collapse of territorial, cultural, societal, and political borders protecting the Hungarian people — opens up a window of opportunity to implement illiberal policies for the Hungarians' own good. The bordering discourse of Viktor Orbán is the basis of his populist message, but also the foundation for his illiberal message, meaning the manipulation of voters with regard to the necessity of leaving behind liberalism step-by-step to create a sense of momentary relief. Orbán's strategy consists of presenting himself as the "struggler in chief" of the Hungarian exclusionary and dominated people in a global relational space of power, where dominant and threatening liberals are always searching to destroy the cohesive and finite community of Magyars through multiple flows of alien people, ideas, and NGOs. The illiberal hegemony that he is progressively putting in place in Hungary would be impossible without his constantly reproduced global and antagonistic power geometry narratives, involving the powerless people, the powerful liberal elite, and the empowered others.

James Wesley Scott investigates the bordering discourse produced by Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán — probably the two most famous leaders within RRWP and exercising state-national executive power in the Western world. They have secured part of their political legitimacy in their respective public sphere by the defense of their exclusionary "people" from external threats, through the installation of walls at territorial borders characterized by an influx of migrants from the Global South. However, as suggested by the author, their narratives show a multiple approach to bordering. The article illustrates that the combined use of an ontological security approach and critical border studies can help to investigate the multiple ways in which border-making processes are put in place and reproduced to exercise illiberal political power within the bounded state democracies of the United States and Hungary. The author insists on the differentiated ability of each RRWP leader to secure the spread of illiberalism in the organization of their respective country. Each of them is confronted by a specific political, institutional, and territorial context that determines the more or less facilitated circulation of an illiberal counter-hegemony in the liberal democracies of the West. The attitude of both leaders reveals that they are instrumental in defining power geometries in which the ultimate goal of bordering discourse at different spatial scales is to substitute the liberal cultural order and its circulated values by an illiberal one within the relational space of their respective bounded democracies.

Massimiliano Demata takes into consideration the bordering discourse of one of the longest-serving RRWP politicians in power worldwide: Benjamin Netanyahu. The executive leader of Israel has developed a policy of territorial border securitization based on a represented foreign threat coming from the Arab-Muslim world. He is in the forefront of the development of material walls against the "others" putting at risk the people in their territory, while also multiplying smart borders to control these threats. As the author shows, the presence of physical securitized borders in Israel is associated with the representation of antagonism in space, implying the metaphorical distancing of the "other," placed outside the world of human beings and civilization (the wild beast). Furthermore, the author shows that Netanyahu's narratives also consist of nominating the "other" in relation to a specific state of matter to justify the reinforcement of the Israeli material and protective border: the liquid state. The "others" from the external Arab-Muslim environment can penetrate the territory of Israel because they belong to the fluid world (the infiltrator). The scope is to prevent leaks in the porous territorial

border and stop the liquid threat entering the proximity space of Israelis. This article shows that critical metaphor analysis and proximization are two important frames to analyze the bordering discourse by RRWP. The discourse of Netanyahu shows that the populist right represents power geometries in which the struggle over mobility management and the shaping of space are determined by a specific negative nomination of migrating threats, putting the “other” in the parallel world of wilderness and dangerous liquids. The events of 7 October 2024 and the intense conflict in Gaza that followed them show the limits of border securitization: the state of permanent war in which Israel has been embroiled since its birth has not been averted by strong borders at all.

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