

The Spatial Politics of Far-right Populism: VOX, Anti-fascism and Neighbourhood Solidarity in Madrid City

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Abstract

This article explores the spatial politics of the Spanish far-right party VOX, deepening discussions around the spaces of xenophobic populism and anti-fascist politics. The paper foregrounds the need of moving beyond the nation-centred, institutional and descriptive approaches that characterise the literature on far-right politics, to focus on the quotidian grounds of far-right mobilisations. Through an analysis of VOX's politics of hate at the neighbourhood level, I explore the co-constitutive relationship between 'institutional politics' and the 'politics of the street'. Focusing in Hortaleza – a Madrilenian district targeted by VOX's mobilisation – I analyse the ways the party attempts to exploit situated inequalities linked to the urbanisation of border regimes and how neighbourhood movements are challenging VOX through constructing alternative anti-racist politics of belonging. The paper argues that the centrality of the neighbourhood as the lived space of political socialisation makes it a key scale of articulation of anti-fascist politics and grassroots solidarities.

Keywords

VOX, xenophobic populism, far-right, anti-fascism, neighbourhood solidarity, racism, urban border

Introduction

Under a triumphant rhetoric of 'reconquest' and seeking to liberate Spain from all the enemies of the nation – migrants, feminists or separatists – the xenophobic populist party VOX has become the third political force in the Spanish Parliament after the 2019 national elections. Thus, halfway between the ghost of Francoism and the global rise of anti-establishment right-wing populisms, the Spanish far-right has taken off its mask. The rise of VOX has taken place in a conjuncture of crisis

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of the traditional right – represented by the *Partido Popular* – and escalating authoritarianism in the face of increasing political upheavals over the last years, shaped by the conflict in Catalonia, the feminist movements and the post-*indignados* politics. The discursive strategies of VOX draw on three overlapping mainstays: ultranationalism, racism and anti-feminism. While national pride and xenophobia are recreated through imperial nostalgia, the historical racist myth of the Christian war against the Muslim or the nationalist enemy within (Catalonia), a neocolonial anti-feminist language attempts to protect the Spanish traditional family against the challenges raised by powerful contemporary feminist movements.

Through a spatial analysis of VOX's far-right politics in Spain, I aim to contribute to ongoing discussions on the spaces of xenophobic populism and anti-fascism. The first section situates some of the key theoretical debates crisscrossing my argument. Engaging with different literature on populism and the far-right, I discuss inputs that a spatial perspective can bring to current debates. Then, I analyse VOX's far-right populism in Spain, disclosing the key elements of its discourse and situating them in relation to the long-term histories of the Spanish Civil War, Francoism and the 'transition to democracy'. The last sections of the paper situate everyday politics related to xenophobic populism, both in terms of political reproduction and contestation. I explore VOX's everyday politics of hate focusing on Hortaleza, a neighbourhood in the outskirts of Madrid, discussing how VOX exploits spatial inequalities linked to the urban dimension of border regimes, institutional racism and spaces of precarity. I argue that xenophobic populisms cannot be understood separately from the institutional architectures that induce fascism to grow and from the situated grievances that the far-right attempts to mobilise. Second, learning from neighbours' anti-racist responses in Hortaleza, I address the neighbourhood as a key scale of articulation of anti-fascist politics. I finish with a discussion of silences and limitations of left-wing populism in building anti-fascist politics in the Spanish context. My argument draws on interviews and informal conversations with migrant activists in Madrid and participants of neighbourhood movements and grassroots associations between December 2019 and June 2020 in Hortaleza, as well as discourse analyses of publicly available statements of VOX's representatives and the party's political programme.

Spaces of Far-right Populism

The significant advance of the far-right during the last years has attracted a growing scholarly and popular attention. A vast literature has emerged exploring the rise of populist anti-establishment discourses in mainstreaming politics across the globe. Most of this academic work focuses on the nation-state and institutional politics as the *natural* objects of political analysis. Interest is placed in electoral processes yet missing the everyday spaces of sociopolitical reproduction. Such a perspective overlooks the generative role of space in producing political positions and feelings and the quotidian conditions, consequences and processes underpinning the politics of hate.

Addressed under different nomenclatures ('post-fascism', 'radical populist right', 'xenophobic populism', etc.), analyses of today's far-right underline its heterogeneity and its populist, anti-establishment and nativist dimensions (Mudde, 2019; Rydgren, 2007; Traverso, 2018). Indeed, 'populism' has become one of the most resounding buzzwords addressing a wide range of political phenomenon in the current conjuncture. Intellectual debates have discussed some of its key features: the politicisation of an antagonism between the 'people' and the 'elite' (De Cleen et al., 2020), its anti-establishment character (Mudde, 2019), its performative and mediatic dimensions (Moffit, 2016) or the political role of affect and emotions in political discourse (Laclau, 2005). However, the spatial and grounded dimensions of populist politics remain largely unexplored.

Through a spatial perspective, I suggest a hybrid understanding of populism as a political practice, which has demonstrated itself to be very effective in shaping and responding to the political

cartographies of the crisis. This hybrid character entails a triple intervention in current debates. Firstly, I move beyond the excessive stress on discourse that characterises the previous literature to emphasise the material practices of far-right populist politics. Second, this understanding allows shifting the focus from institutional and electoral politics to foreground their intertwining with the multiple spaces of the political. Finally, through this hybridity, I highlight the ways populism is not exclusive to ‘populist actors’. It has rather become a resource used by many political agents, from traditional parties to other movements in their fight for hegemony. This challenges the rigid and formalist understandings of populisms through stressing its nuanced reality as a practice. Mobilised in multiple contexts in a conjuncture of the crisis of the hegemonic party consensus, established political parties and media are making use of a wide range of populist strategies. Populism emerges, accordingly, as a generalised and effective political practice in a conjuncture of political and ideological crisis – a situation that is not new, as evidenced by Stuart Hall’s analyses of the 1980s crisis and the politics of Thatcherism (Hall, 1982). This hybrid, mixed and heterogeneous nature of populism as a practice partly underlies the ambiguity with which this term is often used.

Valluvan (2019) argues that an excessive focus on ‘populism’ in current literature is obscuring the racist and nationalist dimensions of the European far-right. For Featherstone and Karaliotas (2019), the ‘formalist account of the political’ that characterises most of the discussions on populism overlooks the ‘histories and geographies that shape political activity’. From this perspective, more interest should be placed in the ‘content’ of the particular articulations mobilised through populist politics and how these respond to particular idealised constructions of place. Indeed, nationalism, xenophobia and anti-feminism – at the core of contemporary far-right populisms worldwide – never appear framed in abstract and universalist terms. Rather, their articulation is deeply contextual and subjected to historical and geographical specificity.

A comprehensive analysis of the spaces of xenophobic populisms demands moving beyond nation-centred and institutional accounts paying particular attention to ‘the everyday spaces and political infrastructures that make populism possible’ (Featherstone and Karaliotas, 2019). Some leftist approaches to populism have certainly sought to overcome methodological nationalism by exploring transnational populist articulations (De Cleen et al., 2020) or the local experiences of municipalism (García Agustín, 2020). However, the ways in which populism builds its success through the politicisation of everyday inequalities and the construction of situated imaginaries of the crisis remain unexplored. More interest needs to be placed in addressing how the ‘interpellation’ of the populist practice targets situated subjects and the ways in which it politicises lived spaces of hardship. From neoliberalised urban spaces to deprived neighbourhoods or forgotten rural areas, deeply embedded injustices are materialised in spaces; these become people’s subjective levels of experience of the crisis. It is precisely the situatedness of the articulation of xenophobia, nationalism and anti-feminism that allows its subsequent abstraction as a structure of meaning that integrates the differently situated far-right stories of the crisis.

As the core element of far-right ideologies, hate is the driving force of its discourses, actions and strategies. A spatial approach on the politics of hate brings attention to the grounded and material dimensions of hatred discourses, highlighting the ways in which these are spatially framed and practised. This allows foregrounding the relations between the abstract dimension of fascism and xenophobia as ‘abstract’ ideologies or discourses and the politics of the everyday life. Further, I argue a spatial approach sheds light on the question of how to challenge the ‘politics of hate’ from the lived spaces in which these are practised.

Moreover, this spatial approach needs to grasp the intertwining of far-right narratives of place and the institutional architectures that induce racism and xenophobia to grow. Space is not an innocent backdrop: it cannot be dealt with as if it were merely a passive, abstract arena on which things happen. Through the materialisation of politics and ideology, relations of power and discipline are

inscribed – and negotiated – into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life (Soja, 1989). Work on anarchist geographies highlights how ‘imposed demarcations of space can buttress a shift towards fascism’. The epistemic dominance of sovereign powers ‘blinds us to inherent authoritarianism and capacity for fascism’ (Ince, 2011). In this sense, the paper discusses how the spatial inequalities mobilised by right-wing populism are shaped by institutional racism and the direct production of everyday xenophobia and exclusion by sovereign powers. The urbanisation of border regimes operates as a main trigger for racism reproducing the ontologies of postcolonial geographies. The emergence of the far-right is directly linked to institutional hegemonic practices and discourses inscribed in everyday spaces.

Finally, the extensive literature on xenophobic populism is essentially descriptive and depoliticising, avoiding the question of anti-fascism. The last section of the paper discusses the implications of the previous analyses for anti-fascist politics, challenging positions that opt for a left-wing populist strategy (Mouffe, 2018). A crisis of identity linked to processes like globalisation or post-Fordism (Kinnvall, 2015) interplaying with long-term histories of racialisation and nationalist politics (Valluvan, 2019) stands at the core of far-right politics. In his analyses of fascism, Eric Fromm exposed how in circumstances of risk and uncertainty, the individual seeks subjection to overarching imposed identities and authority in the exercise of their ‘negative freedom’, or freedom from previous stable social arrangements. In this conjuncture, I draw upon geographical work (Arampatzi, 2017; Featherstone, 2012) to evidence the potential of everyday solidarities in generating alternative projects of belonging to those defined by the state and the far-right building spaces of ‘positive freedom’ (Fromm, 2001). I argue that situating the neighbourhood as a key scale for intervention of anti-fascist politics becomes crucial particularly in a moment in which left-wing populisms and electoral initiatives are failing on this endeavour (Ince, 2011).

VOX and the Rearticulation of the Far-right in Spanish Politics: Ultrnationalism, Racism and Anti-feminism as Mainstays of a Xenophobic Populism

The emergence of the far-right party VOX in Spain has been addressed as the end of the ‘Spanish exceptionalism’, whereby Spain remained one of the few European countries without any powerful far-right-wing movement (Urbán, 2019). Furthermore, it has been argued that the eruption of *Podemos*-left-wing populist party that emerged after the *Indignados* uprisings in the context of the post2008 financial crisis-left no space within the political arena for a Spanish version of the populist neofascist organisations that were appearing across Europe (Traverso, 2018). However, as Rubio-Pueyo (2019) evidences, a deeper genealogy of the Spanish far-right attests to the frailty of this narrative. The far-right has always been a constitutive element of the political regime that resulted from the ‘Spanish transition to democracy’ (1978) and the roots of VOX are found in the continuities of many elements of the dictatorship, in the 1978 regime and the persistence of a strong ‘sociological Francoism’. This term refers to the continuation of many features of Francoist society after the dictatorship, from the normalisation of authoritarianism to the politics of fear and the enormous influence of Catholic morality.

Forty years after the death of the dictator, Spain is the second country in the world with the largest number of mass graves and missing people that remain in ditches.¹ The Spanish ‘transition to democracy’ was a top-down process driven by the Francoist elites, who remained positioned within the different levels of the state administration and the security forces. They founded their own party – *Alianza Popular*, which later became the *Partido Popular* – so they never left the institutions. The 1977 Amnesty Law, known as the ‘Pact of Oblivion’, set the legal ground for an absolute

immunity, meaning the denial of any process of reparation to the victims of Francoism. Since then, the ubiquitous existence of a conservative far-right in the streets and the institutions has been a sort of taboo; no one was allowed to 'open old wounds'. This is what has changed with the arrival of VOX, a party that has sought to break what is considered 'politically correct' from an anti-establishment discourse.

The discursive strategies of VOX draw on three overlapping mainstays: ultranationalism, racism and anti-feminism. Recreating the Spanish Civil War with a 'national force' facing what they frame as 'anti-Spain', the construction of VOX is rooted in the historical development of Spanish authoritarian politics. The historical enemy, *los rojos* (the reds), is now represented by a heterogeneous amalgam of subjects and movements that are risking the unity of the nation and the purity of the Spanish Catholic family (the feminists, the migrants, the Catalans, the Muslims, the '*podemitas*' – a derogatory word used by the right to refer to the supporters of the left-wing populist party *Podemos*).

As the 15M Indignados Movement was the political ground for the emergence of *Podemos* in 2014 (García Agustín, 2018), analysts situate the origins of VOX in what is popularly known as *la España de los Balcones* – 'the Spain of the balconies' (Urbán, 2019). Against the democratic independent movement in Catalonia and in the middle of an anti-Catalan campaign in the media, people began to hang Spanish flags in their balconies. This created a public landscape that contributed to the mobilisation of centralist, authoritarian and reactionary positions in the public opinion and buttressed the authoritarian reaction to the Catalan movement, shaping ideas of the Spanish nation in particularly antagonistic ways. The conservative and colonial connotations of the Spanish flag, heir of 40 years of cultural and ideological monopoly of the idea of the Nation by Franco's regime, set the perfect ground for VOX's populism to flourish giving political shape to the anti-Catalan discontent. In the age of the armistice of the separatist armed organization ETA and the decrease of the conflict in the Basque Country, the right had lost its 'enemy within'. Spanish nationalism was disoriented, and corruption plunged the traditional right into a crisis. The national question is intrinsic to Spanish politics where separatists are the classic resource used to reproduce nationalism and the militarisation of the State, and to divert public attention from social problems.

VOX capitalised on the politics of hate towards Catalonia to build a broader national project recreating an *imagined* history of Spanish greatness (Anderson, 2006). The national pride appears constantly adorned with nostalgic recreations of the colonial past and the time when the northern Catholic Kingdoms struck down Muslims in *Al Andalus* (Rubio-Pueyo, 2019). After the Andalusian regional elections, VOX spread a public message: "The Reconquest started in Andalusia". Neocolonialism and the recreation of imperial power are indeed common elements structuring the proliferation of nationalisms in today's European politics (Valluvan, 2019; Virdee and McGeever, 2018)

With its roots in this ultranationalism, VOX aims to appear as the Spanish people's advocate. Appealing to *el Español que madruga* ('the Spaniard who wakes up early'), VOX's xenophobic populism seeks to reach not only the upper classes but also the national working classes. Despite their programme being deeply neoliberal (with privatisations, deregulation and 'fiscal revolution'), their discourse is often focused on what they call the 'everyday Spaniard', sometimes combined with traditionalism and nostalgia. Pucciarelli (2019) signals a common trend within recent far-right nationalist movements and leaders attempting to 'talk to the stomachs and the hearts of the people' in promoting nativist representations of the community. In particular, anti-immigration and racism have been core instruments mobilised by VOX to expand their influence amongst popular classes. *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al., 2013) demonstrates how racism is mobilised by the conservative elites to preserve hegemony in contexts of crisis and win consent for shifts to the right. VOX's racist discourse combines two elements. First, a rhetoric that directly targets the material conditions

of the national popular classes and seeks to convince the workers that immigrants are the reason of their social agony (unemployment, precarity, crime. . .). Second, a supremacist colonial discourse that pretends to essentialise the cultural and ideological basis of Spain and Europe in a context in which Islamophobia is a common constitutive element to European nationalisms.

Under the language of ‘order’, the wall becomes a central idiom in today’s xenophobic populisms. The basic proposal in VOX’s ‘immigration, borders and security policy’ is the construction of an ‘unbreakable concrete wall’ in Ceuta and Melilla. Despite studies confirming that VOX’s voters belong mainly to upper classes, the electoral map shows that the ‘populism of the wall’ (Urbán, 2019) has reached border areas (Ceuta, Andalusia) as well as working-class villages where migrant exploitation in the agricultural industry is a daily reality (e.g. El Ejido). A similar ‘populism of the ports’ has become the signature policy of Salvini’s anti-immigration crusade in Italy (Pucciarelli, 2019).

Alongside separatists and migrants, the third key enemy in VOX’s antagonistic discourse are feminists. Indeed, misogyny and homophobia constitute an axis of the new reactionary far-right worldwide, combined with neocolonialist and Islamophobic elements (Farris, 2012). In recent years, feminist mobilisations in the streets have gathered millions of people in Spain. With its roots in everyday emancipation and mutual care, it draws in a global network of action (Cabezas González and Brochner, 2019). Notwithstanding the heterogeneity of the movement, it is politicising a wide sector of society and articulating a potential force for social change and transformation. This is particularly challenging considering the weight of the Catholic Church and the traditional family as basic social structures – both legacies of sociological Francoism and constitutive elements of the national imaginary. Against the subversive potential of feminist and LGBTQI movements in the streets, VOX has sought to reverse feminist discourse as a way to promote racism and misogyny: ‘Feminism is a cancer. Supremacist feminism wants to put a burka on all women’ (Rocio Monasterio, head of VOX Madrid, 20 November 2019).

VOX’s anti-feminism emerges in a conjuncture where traditional conceptions of masculinity are deeply damaged in the wake of the precariousness generated by austerity politics in Spain after the 2008 financial crisis. Women’s empowerment in both the streets and their private lives eroded the role of the *pater familias* as the head of the traditional family. In the course of massive mobilisations energetically contesting violence against women, VOX’s most famous slogan is that ‘Violence has no gender’. It rather ‘has race’, as most of the efforts have been focused in stressing that sexist violence is foreign to Western culture and comes with the ‘waves’ of black and brown migrants.

Hence, VOX has sought to capitalise arenas of political rupture to promote a far-right xenophobic populism that binds neoliberalism, colonialism and a nostalgic traditionalism. What so far was a neoconservative trend within the *Partido Popular* now emerges as an anti-establishment party that aims to liberate the nation from separatists, migrants and ‘feminazis’. In what follows, I demonstrate how the politicisation of these elements is grounded in everyday life. A spatial approach enables an engagement with lived spaces as a terrain of dispute, where racism needs to be challenged from the grassroots on a daily basis.

VOX and the Everyday Politics of Hate

Most of the discussion around the rise of xenophobic populisms in Europe and beyond has focused in the nation state and electoral politics, missing the everyday spaces of sociopolitical reproduction (Mudde, 2019; Traverso, 2018). Looking at Hortaleza – a neighbourhood in the Northeast of Madrid – this section aims to fill this gap exploring the dialectics between everyday politics of hate, institutional racism and VOX’s xenophobic populism. I engage with some of the ways

far-right populisms exploit specific narratives on space and place in generating political positions and feelings. This move situates everyday politics at the core of far-right politics, both in terms of political reproduction and contestation.

Some weeks after the Spanish national elections in November 2019 – after which VOX became the third national political force – an explosive device was found at the door of a centre of reception of *migrant minors not accompanied by parents or guardians* (*MENAS*) in Hortaleza. Not by chance, these centres have been key spaces of political mobilisation within VOX's electoral campaign. In Madrid and other cities, VOX – alongside neo-Nazi groups like *Hogar Social Madrid* – orchestrated demonstrations in these facilities arguing that they promote a 'pull effect' and the 'degradation of the neighbourhood and its inhabitants'. Rather than mobilising racism in abstract terms, the electoral strategies of the party focus on everyday spaces and 'ordinary people'. In the words of Rocío Monasterio (head of VOX in Madrid, November 2019):²

VOX has the responsibility to protect the ordinary Spaniards that desire freedom and security in their neighbourhood. Especially in the case of women of all ages that do not dare to walk alone during the night in certain neighbourhoods (. . .) We came here to talk to the everyday Spanish people, who have the right to walk peacefully in their neighbourhood without being assaulted by a *herd of MENAS*

The effects – and roots – of this mobilisation strategy go far beyond the electoral success of the party. The attacks in *MENAS* reception centres have been widespread not only in Hortaleza but also in different localities where VOX has achieved electoral success (Andalusia, Murcia). Neighbours highlight that the explosive attack was the culmination of years of invisible unpunished violence against migrant children and teenagers. Although racist terrorism is not a new phenomenon, now it finds the coverage and legitimation of political discourses and the media (García López, 2019).³ Since Hortaleza is in the spotlight of VOX's discourse, neighbours account a worrying normalisation of everyday racism in the different spaces of the neighbourhood:

What happens is that since the arrival of *VOX*, people feel legitimized to speak in the language of racism. It feels like you are entitled to say all those stupidities and an extremely brutal discourse becomes normalised. In practice, that legitimation means: 'alright, anything goes', and from there they go huge and become organised and then is when we have the big problem: The discourse becomes facts and physical aggressions. What happens is that these people come to Hortaleza, give their speech and then return to their houses, leaving people here killing each other. And the ones who are actually killing each other are the last one against the second last. (Interview with Julio, neighbour and member of *Raíces*, a grassroots association working against hate in Hortaleza, 4 June 2020)

The relationship between racist terrorism and the rise of xenophobic populism is complex and embedded in the spatial conditions of institutional racism. Indeed, the grounds where xenophobic populism thrives are produced through structural racism, as the urbanisation of a social, economic and political system of racial exploitation. Hence, institutions play a key role in the reproduction of racist conflicts in the neighbourhood, the urbanisation of border regimes and the intertwining between political parties, neo-Nazi groups, neighbours and the police in the politicisation of everyday inequalities.

Hortaleza materialises the urbanisation of some of the ways public authorities generate and reproduce exclusion, racism and social marginality in connection with border regimes. The neighbourhood hosts two 'reception centres' for unaccompanied minors, generally children from the Maghreb that migrate alone. These centres are overcrowded, doubling their capacity, and children there are subjected to abuse, police beatings, threats of deportation and deprivation of liberty by the authorities. The result is that very often, the same children that jumped the Melilla fence decide to

jump the wall of these centres and sleep in the park in between them, where institutions push them to marginality and exclusion. Once these children ‘escape’ outside the centre, they lose their place within it and if they want food or a bed, the only way is to go through police custody again. The soil of the *Claruji* – a popular name given to the park – has become home to migrants between 10 and 17 years old; at the same time, it is an area of racist assaults by young gangs and fascist demonstrations. Paradoxically, the same public institutions that are the legal guardians of these children – *Comunidad de Madrid* – are the ones giving public permit to neo-Nazi groups like *Hogar Social Madrid* to demonstrate against them in the park where they live. Further, police dawn raids are used to beat the children sleeping in the park in the early mornings, taking away their blankets and belongings ‘as they are not supposed to be there’ (Rubio Gómez, 2018). Neighbours also denounce that sometimes it is the police themselves who encourage people to act against the Moroccan children:

The police continuously sow hatred. The police hate the kids of the centre. They hit them and do all they can do against them up to the limit of not trespassing public opinion. The problem is that the police are generating a conflict in the neighbourhood saying that they cannot do anything because they are protected under the minors law, and if they arrest them, tomorrow they will be on the street (which is not true). They launch an indirect message that the neighbourhood needs to become organised against them. (Julio, 4 June 2020)

Through these dynamics, these minors have become the target of racist discourses that situate all the problems and fears of the neighbourhood in the park and the reception centres. In addition to mainstream media, such representations are very often reproduced through digital spaces (Facebook groups, Twitter, etc.). Racialisation here functions as a powerful mechanism for displacing social responsibility and containing social anxieties in a working-class neighbourhood that is experiencing the problems of the neoliberal transformations in the post-crisis Madrid: young people without expectations, commodification of the urban space, lack of affordable housing, progressive gentrification of the neighbourhood, unemployment, distrust of the authorities, etc. Anti-Moroccan racism in the neighbourhood, embedded in long-term colonial relations and imaginaries, is much more nuanced than a simple conflict between fascists and the Moroccan. Under a ‘feeling of belonging’ to the neighbourhood, deprived groups and young gangs have been involved in beatings against the boys of the centre. These are not only groups of ‘white Spaniards’ but also other groups and ethnic minorities living in the neighbourhood. Through mechanisms of ‘differential racialization’ (Brah, 1996) children of the centre are often presented as ‘racialised outsiders’ (Virdee, 2014), aiming to perpetuate the material and symbolic privileges of the insiders (Oliveri, 2018):

In Hortaleza there is a strong consciousness of ‘the neighbourhood’. The neighbourhood is something really important. And what people are doing is repeating ‘they have nothing to do with the neighbourhood, they don’t belong to the neighbourhood, they don’t belong to the neighborhood’ (. . .) A speech of ‘the neighbourhood against the centre is behind the attacks. (Aitor, Hortaleza, 9 January 2020)

Of course, this is not the only – or the main – way in which ‘politics of belonging’ to the neighbourhood are mobilised, as the following section evidences. However, it shows how racialisation operates as a key dividing force in everyday contexts and the ways it can be mobilised in multiple ways beyond the nation state.

All these tensions that spatialise embedded injustices, entangled with the urbanisation of borders in the neighbourhood, become the veins to spread VOX’s propaganda. Therefore, xenophobic

populisms can neither be understood apart from the everyday institutional production of the fertile ground where racism emerges, nor can they be separated from the situated grievances that the far-right discourse attempts to mobilise. Talking in the language of *barrios* and *vecinos* (neighbours and neighbourhoods), VOX's strategy is deeply spatial. The case of Hortaleza evidences the dialectics between the 'politics of the street' and 'institutional politics'. The next section engages with some of the ways Hortaleza's neighbours have effectively contested VOX's far-right politics. From there, I discuss some of the contributions that a spatial analysis of the far-right can bring to anti-fascist politics in connection to the potentialities and limitations of the left politics that emerged in the aftermath of the crisis in Spain.

On the Spatial Politics of Anti-fascism: Neighbourhood Movements, Migrant Activism and the Limitations of Left-wing Populism

A key emerging question that arises in the face of a conjuncture of proliferation of xenophobic populisms is how to build anti-fascism in practice. However, most of the analyses on far-right populisms are merely descriptive: either they do not bring any proposal on anti-fascism or they do it in a vague and ambiguous way (see Mudde, 2019; Rydgren, 2007; Traverso, 2018). Debates on anti-fascism, nevertheless, are crucial for politics on the ground. This section focuses on some of the contributions that a spatial analysis of the far-right can bring to anti-fascist politics. I draw on Anthony Ince's work on 'anti-fascist geographies', which addresses the struggle against the far-right as a struggle over the spatial articulation. Insofar 'communities are constituted and discursively contested through spatial practice', he advocates for an anti-fascist politics articulated at the heart of the community that challenges the deterritorialisation of anti-fascism that characterises some forms of recent left-wing electoral strategies. I look at the neighbourhood movement in Hortaleza to explore the essential role of neighbour solidarity in pushing forward anti-fascist politics from the grassroots. Navigating the tensions around the spaces of the political, I engage with migrant political movements in Madrid to discuss the shortcomings of *Unidas Podemos*' left-wing populism and *Ahora Madrid*'s municipalism in regard to anti-fascism and anti-racism, which never was a priority for these coalitions.

The centrality of the neighbourhood as the lived space of political socialisation makes it a key scale of articulation of anti-fascist politics. This is strengthened by the 'neighbourhood culture' that characterises Spanish popular life, where 'el barrio' is a strong source of territorial identity. Indeed, this 'neighbourhood culture' has shown to be a ground for alternative projects of belonging, particularly strong in working-class areas (Narotzky, 2014). Capturing this, Pedro Limón López (2015) uses the concept of *barrionalism* to refer to the 'cognitive framework shaping collective identifications amid the ideological element of the *barrio*'. He evidences the ways – in Hortaleza and in other working-class areas – *barrionalism* operates as a 'primary political imaginary' constructed through 'common practices of protest and contestation' that draw on a historical memory of solidarity and collective struggle assumed as 'patrimony' of the neighbourhood. It is therefore in the streets of the neighbourhood where the relationship between institutional racism and xenophobic populism could be most effectively contested. The *barrio* entails a potential to subvert the schemes of belonging and exclusion defined by the state and the different forms of structurally grounded exploitation. *Barrionalism* portrays the tension and negotiation between semi-autonomous *barrio* identities and institutional power. In Hortaleza, it inspires the creation of horizontal forms of identification and solidarity based on a common strong sense of place and origin, residency and quotidian practice (Limón López, 2015).

Linked to Featherstone et al.'s (2012) notion of 'progressive localisms', *barrionalisms* and the anti-fascist identities constructed at a neighbourhood level are not 'merely defensive' or contestational. Rather, they are 'expansive in their geographical reach' and productive of new relations between places and social groups reconfiguring existing communities. In a discussion of his memories of neighbour solidarity in Hortaleza, Julio Rubio Gómez – community activist – charts the progressive articulation of networks with places beyond the neighbourhood. For example, he tells how the struggles against injustice in the neighbourhood led to the construction of strong chains of support with Melilla. Rally cries like 'Africa and Europe united in Hortaleza' also exemplify the potentially expansive character of political identities constructed at the level of the *barrio*. After the explosive was found at the door of the reception centre, over a thousand of neighbours came down warning 'These kids are our brothers and if you touch them, you will find us in the street'. Ahead of the latest neo-Nazi demonstrations, 'what some people from the *Barrio* did was going to the park and staying with the kids' (Aitor and Miguel, 9 January 2020). Furthermore, a *barrio* *solidarity* or solidarity can also be witnessed across different working-class areas in Madrid.

Hortaleza exemplifies the relevance of the construction of anti-fascism in the neighbourhood. The mechanisms of 'differential racialisation' mentioned in the previous section evidence the 'processual, often contradictory, constitution' of neighbourhood communities (Arampatzi, 2017) and the importance of recognising grassroots activity as central to anti-fascism and as an alternative to state power (Ince, 2019). This means that the potential of the *barrio* for the construction of alternative and progressive political identities and projects of belongings cannot be taken for granted. Rather, political identities are constructed through everyday relations (Featherstone, 2012). In Hortaleza, despite the efforts of VOX and neo-Nazi groups to mobilise racism and exclusionary imaginaries of the neighbourhood, a number of individuals, neighbour associations, community projects, political organisations and NGOs have put together a 'platform for the coexistence' to articulate a collective response to racism in the neighbourhood, contest the mediatic image of violence and fear and demand institutional responsibility on the situation in the centre.

The Platform publicly arises after Abascal [leader of VOX] mentions the centre in Hortaleza in the electoral debate five days before the national elections. The situation was becoming very serious and neighbours didn't want Hortaleza to be associated with VOX. Before that, in times of the municipal elections, Javier Ortega Smith [VOX general Secretary] also visited the centre. Until that moment, any political party had ever directly used the centre for their political propaganda. That day, we organized a 'escrache'⁴ blocking the entrance to the centre. He couldn't pass, which was his intention. He took a photo and he left. We were a lot of neighbours there. . . and this was just the first time this was being used as an electoral strategy. (Juan, one of the promoters of the platform, 4 June 2020)

Despite the platform emerging in light of the most recent events, anti-fascist grassroots work dates back to the times when Hortaleza was not in the news:

When all this wasn't in the media, the kids were sleeping in the park, but people weren't aware about what was going on. In that time, we got organised to both give material support to the children and to publicly denounce the situation. All the neighbourhood associations in the district signed together a Manifesto (Juan, 4 June 2020)

In addition to the awareness-raising and political work, community projects like Hortaleza Boxing Club emerged, seeking to build bonds among the youth in the neighbourhood. Through the creation of common spaces, initiatives like this have broken with racist stereotypes allowing everyday encounters and the construction of an 'emotional cityzenry' (Askins, 2016). This exemplifies the ways the *barrio* is a 'struggling community', a term coined by Arampatzi (2017) to re-centre

grassroots forms of everyday solidarity and social reproduction as a key site of struggle and a potential for building new spatial imaginaries.

The boxing space has created a very healthy environment and through everyday interactions many children and teenagers in Hortaleza are starting to empathize with the kids of the park and understand the situation is terribly unjust. Many kids bring hatred discourses from home. But these discourses are theoretical, cognitive, it's something that is on peoples' minds. However, when you face this theory and get to know the other, the emotions and interactions radically change and that hatred discourse collapses from its own weight. (Julio, founder of Hortaleza Boxing Club, 4 June 2020)

The multiple practices of solidarity challenging the narrative mobilised by VOX on public media in Hortaleza were articulated through a fabric of historical neighbourhood forms of associationism, solidarity and struggle in connection with emerging youth anti-fascist movements. The *barrio* has been both the scenario and the collective subject of social and neighbour struggles over the years. Annexed to Madrid with the economic transformations of the 1950s, Hortaleza became the classic suburb that absorbed workers coming from rural exodus. The accelerated transformation of the original village and the lack of infrastructures accompanying a chaotic urban expansion led to a strong development of neighbourhood movements during the 1960s and the 1970s (Tienda et al., 2009). As the district grew, it became home to many migrants and inhabitants from slums areas in the outskirts of the city – mainly with Roma background – were rehoused in the neighbourhood, leading to a powerful culture of organising and to a particular multi-ethnic 'barrio' identity. The gentrification of the neighbourhood in the last years, with urban regeneration projects and middle class and wealthy people moving to new 'green residential areas' – including the leader of VOX – is attempting to destroy those identities. This is where the far-right is focusing its battle and where the construction of anti-fascisms becomes crucial.

Local Solidarities and the Shortcomings of Left Populism

This advocacy for a community-based anti-fascist politics counters a generalised position in current left-wing politics that frames the struggle against the far-right in terms of electoral politics (Ince, 2011). For Chantal Mouffe (2018), the 'populist moment' demands the construction of strong left-wing populisms able to win the struggle for hegemony. Voices like Mezzadra and Neuman (2019) or Enzo Traverso (2018) have argued that the emergence of *Podemos* avoided a strong European-style far-right populism in Spain. In the remainder of this section, I challenge this belief focusing on the silences, exclusions and shortcomings of the left-wing populist experience in Spain and its municipalist version in Madrid. To do so, I engage with the criticisms articulated by migrant political movements in the city and beyond.

In Madrid, the right-wing 'shift to the streets' (Ince, 2011) finds its origin in the neoconservative turn of the *Partido Popular*, which after the failure of José María Aznar was embodied in Esperanza Aguirre and the Madrilenian PP (Rubio-Pueyo, 2019). Madrid local and regional governments were used to launch and fund a strategy of right-wing and ultra-catholic social activism against the socialist government of Zapatero. In addition to this, neo-Nazi groups like *Hogar Social Madrid* squatted buildings and organised community support actions for Spanish people following the example of Casa Pound in Italy. Other fascist groups (*España 2000*, *Frente Nacional*, *Democracia Nacional*, *Fuerza Nueva*) were also focusing their action on the local scale in specific neighbourhoods. Certainly, the 'Madrilenian exceptionalism' – as the only big city where VOX achieved a significant electoral success – has much to do with this local entrenchment of conservative lobbies and neofascist groups. On the other hand, the left-wing 'shift to the institutions' finds its local expression with

Manuela Carmena's 'Council of Change'. The neoconservative experiment in Madrid was interrupted by the Indignados Movement in 2011, that was part of a local and nationwide cycle of urban protests and public occupations (Karaliotas and Swyngedouw, 2019) and gained particular force in the capital. The clearance of the squares led to an unprecedented local – and national – cycle of mobilisations of networked struggles named as 'mareas' -tydes- (public health, housing, education, feminism, etc.). *Podemos* emerged in this moment, capitalising on the mobilisation cycle towards the institutions from a populist left-wing strategy. In the capital, *Ahora Madrid* appeared as a coalition between *Podemos* and the social movements allowing the first electoral defeat of the right in 15 years.

For many, Madrid's Council of Change represented a moment of opportunity. However, the 'institutionalisation moment' led to a progressive relaxation of the movements in the streets, not only in Madrid but across the *indignados* geographies. Karaliotas (2019) analyses similar dynamics in Greece with the experience of Syriza after the 'politics of the square'. Nevertheless, anti-racism never was a priority for *Ahora Madrid*, who perpetuated institutional racism in the neighbourhoods. Neighbour associations and grassroots organisations in Hortaleza account how the Council umpteen times ignored their complaints about migrant children being made homeless by public institutions – alleging lack of power on this issue or implementing simple patch measures (Rubio Gómez, 2018). Further, against the demands of undocumented migrants in the city – organised in a Union of 'top-manta' workers, *Sindicato de Manteros y Lateros de Madrid* – the Council launched a public campaign of criminalisation of street trade in 2017. During this time, the death of Mame Mbaye, an undocumented migrant who was running away from an identity control of the police, also occurred. 'Stop and search' practices not only continued to take place under Carmena's government, but also the Mayor stepped forward to endorse the police's conduct as 'doing their work' after this tragedy.⁵

Broadly, the failures of *Podemos* as an alternative to xenophobic populism go beyond the example of *Ahora Madrid*. In general, the processes of institutionalisation had a clear effect on the weakening of urban movements, provoking a shift regarding the spaces of anti-fascist struggles (Karaliotas, 2019). The main strategy of the party against the rise of VOX took the shape of advocating 'voting against VOX' together with the Socialist Party (PSOE). Further, within this electoral strategy, *Podemos* has positioned itself as a guardian of the constitutional rule. With the 1978 Constitution on hand, the night of the electoral debate in November 2019, Pablo Iglesias defended the *supreme law* against the far and conservative right. This move, aligning the party with the 78 Regime, meant leaving all the 'anti-establishment' political space in the institutions to the far-right. This raises different questions regarding how long could left political parties present themselves as anti-establishment in their populist mode.

Furthermore, Featherstone and Karaliotas (2019) criticise how *Podemos*' discourse equates 'the people' they seek to represent with the nation which is a central element in *Podemos*' discursive strategies. This exclusionary framing of 'the people', devoid of any colonial analysis, has material consequences that reinforce institutional racism. *Podemos*' migration discourses, for example, address migrants as 'people who are about to arrive' rather than as a constitutive part of the society:

Nobody talks about us as part of this society, but we are here, and we belong to this society. The Left needs to construct a very different imaginary. . . . One imaginary that emphasises how we also make the city, how we build society and create culture, how we stand to defend public health and struggle for housing rights for all. No one wants to assume the political task of building imaginaries that could effectively challenge the far right. We have a very colonial Left that is still not willing to undertake any process of decolonization. (Yeison García López, afrocolombian activist, 26 December 2019)

These exclusions silence the ways migrants have been building solidarities and quotidian resistances and networks against precariousness in Spanish neighbourhoods for years. In the course of the economic crisis, they played a key role in shaping oppositional cultures within Spain (Featherstone and Karaliotas, 2019). The Platform of those Affected by Mortgage (PAH) was founded by Ecuadorians, who were the first to suffer the consequences of the bursting of the housing bubble: ‘We were the first ones in denouncing the violence surrounding evictions, although the media did not arrive until Spanish nationals began to be evicted too’ (Bosaho et al., 2018).⁶ Migrants were also a key part of the movement advocating for a universal public health against the neoliberal logics of privatisation of the common. Further, migrant feminist struggles preceded the last cycle of mobilisation, with collectives such as *Territorio Doméstico* or *Migrantes Transgresores* working in the city from the intersection of transnational trajectories of migration, gender, class and sexuality (Santamarina and Cabezas, 2019). Broadly, although migrants were a generative force within the mobilisation cycle contesting the crisis, their role has often been overlooked and invisibilised, both by the media and the political left. Such exclusions have been perpetuated by the structures of *Podemos* as the lack of migrants in positions and spaces of power. Further, under VOX’s fascist threat, the party has not been able to situate anti-fascism as a priority. Yeison García López, Afrocolombian activist and member of *Podemos*, sent a clear message to the party after the explosive attack in Hortaleza: ‘the tweets with “antiracist flavouring” are useless if behind them there is no political work’.

Conclusion

In a global conjuncture of growing nationalisms and xenophobic populisms, debates on anti-fascism become crucial.

Contributing to ongoing discussions on ‘anti-fascist geographies’ (Ince, 2011), this paper has sought to deepen current debates on populism and far-right politics from a spatial perspective. Beyond traditional approaches that address the far-right through the lenses of the nation state and institutional politics, I looked at the operation of everyday politics of hate in urban environments to explore the socio-spatial context in which racism is grounded and reproduced. Focusing on a working-class area of Madrid (Hortaleza), I evidenced the ways VOX attempts to politicise situated inequalities that are deeply embedded in the institutional reproduction of racism. This perspective denies the position of ‘externality’ to the system that very often is granted to the far-right, situating it instead at the heart of its functioning. Furthermore, it shifts the comprehension of the extreme right from the ‘deviant individual’ to the quotidian workings of structural racism.

On the other hand, insofar the local scale becomes a main target of far-right production of political meanings, the paper has addressed the neighbourhood as a key site for the articulation of anti-fascist struggle and alternative politics of belonging. Drawing on neighbour solidarities in Hortaleza, I highlighted the potential of these to build alternative imaginaries of place and politics of belonging (Arampatzi, 2017; Featherstone et al., 2012). Emphasising the construction of transversal solidarities on a grassroots level, the paper has argued that the articulation of anti-fascist politics from below is now, and always a priority. Engaged with migrant’s political criticisms evidences the shortcomings of the left-wing populist strategy in Madrid and Spain in the endeavour of challenging the far-right. These experiences of neighbourhood movements in Hortaleza and migrant political activism in Spain shed light to crucial debates in the present political conjuncture that are relevant beyond the Spanish context.

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Notes

1. https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2019/06/28/inenglish/1561732798_239871.html Last access: 2 September 2020
2. <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/politica/20191104/voz-andalucia-manadas-menas-vecinos-desmienten-7714065> Last access: 2 September 2020
3. <https://www.elsaltodiario.com/racismo/hortaleza-antirracismo-instituciones>
4. An 'escrache' is a form of direct action that become very popular in the political repertory of the Indignados Movement. It consists on following public figures to public spaces or their own houses in order to make a public denouncement.
5. https://www.elplural.com/politica/manuela-carmena-defiende-la-gestion-correcta-del-ayuntamiento-tras-la-muerte-del-mantero_121794102 Last access: 2 September 2020
6. <https://www.elsaltodiario.com/tribuna/una-mirada-diferente-a-las-luchas-migrantes> Last access: 2 September 2020

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