



Introduction to the special issue “Contested urban territories: decolonized perspectives”

Anke Schwarz¹ and Monika Streule²

¹Institute of Geography, TU Dresden, Dresden, Germany

²Department of Architecture, ETH Zürich, Zurich, Switzerland

Correspondence: Anke Schwarz (anke.schwarz@tu-dresden.de) and Monika Streule (streule@arch.ethz.ch)

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Abstract. This paper serves as an introduction to the “Contested urban territories: decolonized perspectives” special issue. The idea for this issue emerged during our reflections on a socioterritorial perspective, preeminent in the current Latin American analysis of contemporary urban struggles (Schwarz and Streule, 2016). It aims to contribute to these ongoing debates about a specific understanding of urban territories from a postcolonial and decolonized perspective by combining contributions from two paper sessions we organized at the 2017 meeting of the American Association of Geographers in Boston with additional papers by scholars who could not participate in the conference. All seven contributions tackle the question of what a relational and dynamic conceptualization of territory may contribute to current debates in the urban studies field. Put more precisely, to which extent are socioterritorial approaches of value for a further decentering and pluralizing of urban theory? What is their significance to research on urban social movements? And, finally, how does such a socioterritorial perspective nurture and complement an analysis of the social production of space? The present special issue invites the reader to get familiar with new concepts and engage in a critical reflection on the conditions of knowledge production in urban geography and beyond.

Kurzfassung.

Dieser Artikel ist der Auftakt zum Themenheft “Contested urban territories: decolonized perspectives”. Die Idee zu diesem Heft entstand in Auseinandersetzung mit einer sozioterritorialen Perspektive, welche zeitgenössische lateinamerikanische Analysen aktueller urbaner Kämpfe prägt (Schwarz und Streule, 2016). Mit dem Ziel, diese laufenden Debatten rund um ein spezifisches Verständnis von urbanen Territorien aus einer post- bzw. dekolonialen Perspektive weiterzuführen, versammeln wir im Themenheft Beiträge aus zwei Veranstaltungen auf der Jahrestagung der American Association of Geographers 2017 in Boston, und ergänzen diese mit weiteren Artikeln von Autorinnen und Autoren, die nicht an dieser Konferenz teilnehmen konnten. Die sieben Beiträge befassen sich mit der Frage, was eine relationale und dynamische Konzeptualisierung von Territorium zu aktuellen Debatten in der Stadtforschung beitragen kann. Genauer: Inwieweit sind sozioterritoriale Ansätze für die Dezentrierung und Pluralisierung von Stadttheorie von Nutzen? Welche Relevanz haben sie für eine Analyse städtischer sozialer Bewegungen? Wie nährt und ergänzt eine sozioterritoriale Perspektive nicht zuletzt eine Analyse der sozialen Produktion von Raum? Das Heft lädt somit ein, neue Begrifflichkeiten kennenzulernen und kritisch über Wissensproduktion nachzudenken – für die Stadtgeographie und darüber hinaus.

“Territories do not exist if not for the social relations and power relations that form them.” (Porto Gonçalves, 2006:179)¹

This special issue is an invitation to discuss and critically engage with a relational understanding of territory (as in Raffestin, 1980; Santos, 2000; Haesbaert, 2009; dell’Agnese, 2012; Giraut, 2013; Schmid, 2015; among others). As a core concept in both analytical and political debates, we perceive territory as helpful to further an understanding of urban transformations and entrenched sociospatial conflicts, particularly in the field of urban studies (e.g. Echeverría and Rincón, 2000; Zibechi, 2012; Schwarz and Streule, 2016; Streule, 2018). The point of departure for the present special issue is a reflection on disputed processes of territorialization in urban contexts, specifically the stark controversy over a large infrastructure project in Mexico City (Schwarz and Streule, 2016). Inspired by ongoing debates among Latin America-based scholars and activists, we organized two paper sessions entitled “Contested Urban Territories: Concepts and Movements” at the American Association of Geographers’ Annual Meeting 2017 in Boston. These sessions brought together a wide range of scholars concerned with socioterritorial perspectives based in Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, Mexico, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Russia, the UK and the US. The papers presented in Boston provided the ground for a debate across diverse case studies. Hereby, they imparted a multifaceted view on what rethinking urban territories – as put to the fore by our two invited discussants, Rogério Haesbaert and Christian Schmid – may entail. In this special issue, selected contributions from those sessions are joined by others from renowned and emerging scholars proficient in the field of socioterritorial urban research. In this way, the special issue offers a platform for multiple perspectives and strives to overcome barriers posed by academic funding and language barriers. As researchers and editors, we are interested in more dialogical means of knowledge production across regional academic debates.

In the field of Latin American urban studies, scholars increasingly draw on relational conceptualizations of territory to understand ongoing social struggles in cities like Buenos Aires, Medellín, or Mexico City (see e.g., Echeverría and Rincón, 2000; Hiernaux et al., 2000; Zibechi, 2012; Portal, 2017). As Echeverría and Rincón (2000) note, a relational approach to urban territory foregrounds diverse actors and subjects, with memories, imaginaries, interests, capitals, and powers that are involved in the making of territories through everyday practices and collective action. However, “although all actors simultaneously mark the territory, some achieve greater or lesser degrees of expression, consolidation, and definition of territorial practices and spatial relations” (Echeverría and Rincón, 2000:12–13). Social struggles are thus at the very core of such processes

of deterritorialization and re-territorialization, as the title of this special issue indicates. By deterritorialization and re-territorialization, we refer to ongoing contestations over the appropriation of space. Territories, we argue elsewhere, are produced and altered “when subjects struggle over the practices, meanings, and tenures of urban space” (Schwarz and Streule, 2016:1000). Urban territory is, in other words, not a preexisting entity or form but conceptualized as a dynamic social process inevitably imbued with relations of power and space. As such, territory is both the site and stake of everyday social struggle. Along with such an actor- and subject-centered perspective, the focus on urban transformation processes in particular sets this approach apart from a predominantly Anglophone debate, where territory is often conceptualized in a statist manner as a political entity – mostly on the national scale – over which a political institution exerts power and control (e.g., Sack, 1986; Painter, 2010; Elden, 2013). Relational territory is thus, as Porto Gonçalves (2002) puts it, a “thick category” that sheds light on the process of appropriation of geographic space, i.e., territorialization, and the emanating sociospatial relations that are “inscribed in processes which are dynamic and changeable, materializing at any given moment a certain order, a certain territorial configuration” (Porto Gonçalves, 2002:230). Such a relational understanding of territory has also been widely debated by Francophone geographers (e.g., Gottmann, 1973; Raffestin, 1980; Debarbieux, 2006; Moine, 2006; Giraut, 2008, 2013; Vanier, 2009). By extension, the socioterritorial approach around which this special issue revolves (and on which we will expand below) draws mainly on the writings of Latin America-based scholars involved in theoretically framing the social production of territory, with a particular emphasis on relational power (e.g., Becker, 1985; Santos, 2000; Porto Gonçalves, 2001, 2006; Saquet and Sposito, 2009; Haesbaert, 2011; for an overview of the Brazilian debate, see Fuini, 2016). Interestingly, only a limited amount of the substantial literature so far deals with questions of territory from an explicitly urban perspective. We are convinced that territory provides a useful analytical lens to scrutinize the dynamics and contentions of the urban in the Global South and Global North, as it helps unveil the intimate relations between space and power.

Rethinking the notion of territory from a decolonized perspective strongly calls for a recognition of different but always entangled epistemes of knowledge production (Coronil, 1996; Porto Gonçalves, 2001; Escobar, 2007; Maia, 2011). As such, the special issue speaks to wider concerns in the urban studies field and aims to facilitate and deepen a situated, empirically grounded engagement with a relational understanding of urban territories. Hereby, we endeavor to contribute to the ongoing debate on provincializing critical urban theory (e.g., Edensor and Jayne, 2012; Leitner and Sheppard, 2016; Robinson and Roy, 2016) and decolonizing geographical knowledge production (e.g., Rivera Cusicanqui, 2012; Radcliffe, 2017; Streule, 2017, 2020). In striving to decenter

¹All translations from Portuguese and Spanish have been performed by the authors.

and reframe urban theory, we build on what Bhambra terms “unsettling and reconstituting standard processes of knowledge production” (2014:115). Such reflections are informed by, yet by no means limited to, a historical review of geography as an academic discipline and its role in the colonial project (e.g., Harley, 1988; Gräbel, 2015). In the German- and English-speaking realm, a critical debate has been ongoing in the field of development geography in particular (e.g., Lossau, 2002; Radcliffe, 2005), as demonstrated in a 2012 special issue on post-development in this very journal (see Neuburger and Schmitt, 2012). We believe that relational perspectives on urban territory are one important element to further this debate beyond the confines of development geography.

This introduction is organized as follows: we first reflect on the intersection of territory, contestation, and the urban through what we have termed a socioterritorial approach. Next, we give an overview on the contributions to the special issue, which explore different perspectives of relevance for (urban) geography. We conclude by reflecting on the editorial tasks of assembling and translating an increasingly multilingual debate on urban territories.

1 A socioterritorial approach

Resting on a solid base of mainly Latin American scholarship (e.g., Santos, 1994, 2000; Porto Gonçalves, 2001, 2006; Giménez, 2005; Fernandes, 2009; Saquet and Sposito, 2009; Haesbaert, 2011; Ther Ríos, 2012), this special issue takes the social production of territory into focus. Crucially, a de-centered notion of territory is as much about relational space as it is about relational power, aiming to unveil “the spatial dimension of power relations” (Haesbaert, 2011:281). Reviewing the important literature, we found these considerations thought-inspiring in our work as urban researchers and have proposed a transposition of the concept of territory to the urban scale (Schwarz and Streule, 2016). Rather than essentializing the production of urban knowledge in and from Latin America, we suggest engaging with these approaches for their ability to grasp urban territories in the process of their social production. Our proposal for a more de-centered socioterritorial approach, which forms the base of this special issue, is built around two main features.

First, we put a focus on urbanization. By shifting attention away from the nation state, and from state actors more generally, we propose concentrating on the workings of power in and through what Santos (2000) calls the “banal spaces of the everyday”. Such an everyday perspective on territories will allow us to dissect territorialities in order to acknowledge, on the one hand, a pluralism of spatialities and, on the other hand, a multiplicity of temporalities (Raffestin, 1986; Zambrano, 2001; Haesbaert, 2011). Urban territory is, in other words, produced by multiple actors and comprises concomitant multiple territorialities. This refers to Haesbaert’s (2012)

“multi-territoriality”: “(r)ecognising [...] the simultaneous existence of a ‘multiplicity of territories’ (different types or species of ‘extensive’ territories) as well as *the* ‘multiplicity of territory’ (territories, in and of themselves, characterised by strong internal differentiation or intensive, continuous multiplicity)” (Haesbaert, 2012:150; emphasis in original)². In this sense, urban territory is more than mere abstract governmental space. In the Anglophone urban studies literature, such relational socioterritorial perspectives on the urban sphere are an emergent topic (e.g., Painter, 2010; McCann and Ward, 2010; Klauser, 2012; Sassen, 2013). For instance, Elden (2019) highlights the persistent problems Anglophone scholars in particular encounter with respect to the relation between territory and the urban. He postulates that it is crucial to conceive of territory “as political calculative space, a technology; as a process rather than as an outcome; and as something continually being made and remade” (Elden, 2019:2174). We found that this echoes decentered socioterritorial approaches long since developed by Latin American scholars that have, however, not yet fully reached the Anglophone debate. Several contributions in this special issue draw on such perspectives, offering fresh ways of understanding urban territories in a dynamic and open-ended sense.

Second, we are interested in the praxis of territory making. The social production of territory is a continuous and contested process of deterritorialization and re-territorialization shaped by asymmetrical power relations (e.g., Raffestin, 1980; Becker, 1985; Porto Gonçalves, 2001, 2006; Haesbaert, 2011). Bearing the relational character of power in mind is not only crucial to avoid a reification of territory and what Agnew (1994) called “the territorial trap” (see also Sassen, 2013; Elden, 2019). There is a need to unpack the complexities of what could be termed, in reference to Hepp and Couldry (2009), as “practiced territorial essentialism”. Fittingly, Porto Gonçalves suggests – as highlighted in the epigraph of this introduction – an analytical focus on social relations and power relations that shape territories “rather than idealizing any territoriality” (2006:179). From this perspective, relational territory strongly resonates with conceptualizations of relational space (Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 1994; dell’Agnese, 2012; Haesbaert, 2012). The urban understood as territory can be analyzed simultaneously in its material dimension, as everyday urban experiences, and as techniques of spatial regulation and representation, with a particular and explicit focus on unequal power relations. Not least the postcolonial writings of Mbembe (1992) and others instruct us to read contestation as a nonbinary, complex relationship, all the while being aware of hierarchies and unequal positions of power. We draw on postcolonial and decolonized perspectives to study the ways in which such

²Haesbaert’s distinction between “multiplicity of territories” [*territórios múltiplos*] and “multiplicity of territory” [*múltiplos territórios*] draws on a particular play of words in Romance languages like Brazilian Portuguese.

power asymmetries in the production of territory are rooted in historical differences (e.g., Quijano, 2000; Lugones, 2010; Dhawan and Castro Varela, 2016). This opens up important links to current debates on the right to territory involving subaltern activist perspectives on contested indigenous and afro-descendant territories (e.g., Offen, 2003; Escobar, 2008, 2015; Saquet and Sposito, 2009; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2012; Colectivo de Geografía Crítica del Ecuador, 2018; Zaragocin, 2018; Halvorsen et al., 2019; Radcliffe, 2019), which are intrinsically linked to questions of difference, affect, and relational power (Clare et al., 2018; Hutta, 2019). In other words, an emphasis on asymmetrical power relations and historical difference makes this approach a hugely promising contribution towards a more decentered perspective on processes of urbanization worldwide.

2 Overview on contributions

The contributions assembled in this special issue speak to a range of perspectives. Building on urban, decolonized, or activist approaches, they apply different methodological lenses and offer insights into empirical findings that cover a variety of urban experiences. Specifically, the special issue explores the following key questions to advance important ongoing debates in the field of human geography (rather than pretending to answer them comprehensively).

- *Urban perspectives.* What can a relational, non-statist concept of territory contribute to current debates in urban geography?
- *Decolonized perspectives.* To what extent can socioterritorial approaches be of value for decentering and pluralizing the field of urban geography?
- *Activist perspectives.* How relevant are socioterritorial approaches for an analysis of urban social movements, and how can current urban struggles be understood from such a perspective?
- *Territory vs. space.* How does a socioterritorial perspective nourish and complement an analysis of the social production of space?

Central to the ongoing debate on urban struggles in Latin American cities is a specific definition of territory. Saquet (2018, this issue) expands on such a relational notion of territory to make the concept useful for a situated analysis of territorial transformation, specifically his collaborative work with subaltern subjects in urban peripheries of Francisco Beltrão, a city in southern Brazil. Through this counter-hegemonic approach, Saquet demonstrates how a relational understanding of territory may serve to elucidate the multi-dimensional means of active participation in territorial development towards social justice.

To advance a decentering of urban theory, Lindón (2019, this issue) scrutinizes the links between territorialization and

urbanization and explores the relevance of the urban scale for a socioterritorial approach. She proposes the notion of “lived territory” to understand the urban as emerging from everyday spatial practices and urban imaginaries, as well as from affectivities. Drawing on her long-standing academic work and research experience on urban peripheries of Mexico City, Lindón (2019) develops a theoretical–methodological approach to the sociospatial construction of urban territory.

Smirnova’s text (2019, this issue) is somewhat of an outlier in that it does not explicitly tackle urban territorializations. Rather, she interrogates the relation between urban and rural geographies, expanding the historical reach of this debate. Her paper delves into the archives, offering a decentered perspective on land commune and territorial practices of enclosure in the peripheries of the late Russian Empire. Smirnova brings a territorial dimension into Russian agrarian scholarship by positioning the imperial rural politics within the context of capitalist land enclosure, thereby providing complexity to the predominantly state-centric debate around territory in the Anglophone context.

With López’s (2019, this issue) contribution, we return to the urban realm, following peasants in current-day Colombia who were violently displaced from the countryside during the civil war. Based on her ethnographic work on and in Medellín, López (2019) proposes the term “double-displacement” to examine the emotional and political aspects of deterritorialization and re-territorialization by non-state actors on the urban scale. Her paper traces the complex and at times violent social production of territory in a context of urban transformation, witnessing stories of displaced leaders of socioterritorial movements currently under threat from paramilitaries and urban development plans alike.

Evaluating the relevance of a socioterritorial perspective for understanding contemporary urban struggles from an activist angle is the main concern of the paper by Mason-Deese et al. (2019, this issue). The authors analyze territorial organizing of two social movements in Greater Buenos Aires, Argentina. By showing how urban struggles produce territory as a key element of political practice of urban social movements, Mason-Deese et al. (2019) foreground an alternative to state-centric models of territorial politics: a territorial organizing that is relational, contested, and central to these movements’ praxis.

In an interview with Raúl Zibechi, the issue editors (Streule and Schwarz, 2019, this issue) expand on such activist, grassroots perspectives towards emancipatory territories and territorializations. Socioterritorial movements, the key concept around which much of Zibechi’s work revolves, are of particular interest for the special issue and are one of the contexts from which a relational concept of territory, as discussed widely in the Latin American context, has emerged. In the interview, we talk about current political mobilizations, counter-hegemonic perspectives, and revanchist backlashes in Brazil and Argentina, as well as the conditions

and challenges of decolonizing (academic) knowledge production.

Ultimately, the paper by Stienen (2020, this issue), provides a refreshing contrast, exploring the limits of a normative political programmatic conceptualization of territory. To complicate the understanding of territorial disputes, she scrutinizes what she terms a “hyper-territorialized perception” of space, unpacking parallels between past and current re-territorializations in Colombia across scales. “Territorial peace” – as in the 2016 peace treaty between the Colombian government and the FARC guerrillas – mirrors a re-imagining of the city, as in the urban renewal programs in 1990s Medellín. The paper thus adds scrutiny to what Zibechi calls “territories of emancipation”. Indeed, Stienen argues in the Colombian context that territorialization tends to be state-sanctioned, often idealizing and essentializing communities and identities. Counter-hegemonic territorialization is, in other words, not necessarily or automatically an emancipatory project. Calling for a clear distinction between “territory” as a political or an analytical category, Stienen challenges these conceptions, thus making a major contribution to the socioterritorial debate on the urban by highlighting its contradictions and complications.

Such complex, contextualized, and historicized perspectives on social urban struggles lay at the very roots of the territory concept in a wider Latin American debate, as we hope this special issue will demonstrate. We would argue that it is this openness to activist and everyday perspectives, attention to power relations, and willingness to elaborate on the empirical contradictions and analytical complications that this necessarily entails, which links socioterritorial epistemologies closely to a host of other postcolonial and decolonized approaches to the urban.

3 Advancing multilingual dialogues on territory

We believe that this special issue is a timely contribution to the broadening debate around territory, territorialization and territoriality, particularly in the context of German and Anglophone sociospatial theory. Both as an analytical and a political category, relational conceptualizations of territory based on Latin American scholarship are increasingly at the heart of these debates. Furthermore, the focus on urban questions of this special issue contributes to the emerging debate on socioterritorial perspectives in Latin American urban studies. As important as such decentered approaches are to the field of geography, assembling this special issue we encountered a number of obstacles: namely, a lack of funding for translations and fundamentally different academic writing styles, among others. Particularly, norms in Anglophone academic writing present a barrier for many non-English-speaking authors. This risks universalizing Euro-American knowledge production further proliferated by linguistic and institutional monopolization of international

publishing spaces (Paasi, 2005; Garcia-Ramon, 2012; Kong and Qian, 2019). While this is not new, it seems that not much has changed since Gutiérrez and López-Nieva noted almost two decades ago that “human geographers do not constitute a proper international scientific community or, rather, a global community that makes use of certain common media of expression (international journals) but are fragmented into national or regional (linguistic) communities” (2001:53). Academic gatekeeping, it would seem, is experienced when working across multiple geographies of knowledge production and in multilingual contexts, in particular. To coordinate a special issue embracing a less myopic, more global approach thus necessarily entails an intense engagement with questions of translation (see also Müller, 2007; Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2008; Houssay-Holzschuch and Milhaud, 2013, among others). From a decolonized perspective, it is critical to acknowledge that translation between languages involves unequal power relations (Orsini and Srivastava, 2013). Translation, in other words, is in itself a key practice to decolonize urban theory and to engage in more dialogical ways of knowledge production. This undoubtedly is a task to be taken up by academic publishers and journals, as they provide important platforms for scholarly exchange. They face the need to find ways to better support multilingual debates, while also being confronted with the recurrent untranslatability of concepts – as the at times Babelian discussion around concepts of territory exemplifies.

The ambiguity of such linguistic moves extends to the entire endeavor of shifting concepts from one historical and geographical context to another (see Masi de Casanova and Mose, 2017). As the ideologically fraught terrain of territorial thought in the European context demonstrates, a de-contextualization and de-historization of concepts can take most uncanny turns. Indeed, as Husseini de Araújo and Kersting state, the propositions of postcolonial theory – which includes to pluralizing and decentering geographical knowledge production – cannot be “transferred in practice without contradictions [...] (which) have the potential to create new knowledge and give voice to new perspectives” (2012:139). There is, for instance, both an urgent need and a considerable potential in rethinking and critically examining possible pitfalls, wrong turns and dead ends of inviting *territorio* to travel to the Global North. Particularly, applying socioterritorial approaches to urban research in the European context will need to be properly contextualized by closely examining historical baggage from the colonial past and present. At its core, a relational conceptualization of territory raises important questions on relational power, subjectivity, and difference that run counter to the essentializing identitarian territorial imaginations currently en vogue among nationalists and nativists around the globe (Mbembe, 2017; Bauman, 2017). Future geographical research on processes of urban deterritorialization and re-territorialization should thus embrace postcolonial and decolonized perspectives while grappling with the discipline’s legacy of reifying and essentializing space

and territory (Barnes and Minca, 2012; Minca and Rowan, 2016). More precisely, as the contributions to this special issue demonstrate, there is much to be gained when a situated socioterritorial lens is turned on the urban everyday and on the practices of non-state actors in particular.

Having introduced a relational stance towards territory – uncommon at the time – by publishing Raffestin’s (1986) paper “Territorialité: Concept ou paradigme de la géographie sociale?”, *Geographica Helvetica* provides an adequate platform to continue such rich and complex multilingual debates on the concept of territory, territorialization, and territoriality from a decolonized perspective. Equally important, the journal’s open-access policy based on a Creative Commons license allows unlimited access to the special issue to scholars and activists around the globe who are relevant actors when it comes to continuing the debate on contested urban territories. In this sense, our special issue is an invitation to advance such much-needed exchange between different geographies of knowledge production, acknowledging differences while reaching across the putative Global North–South divide and creating new grounds for dialogues to collaboratively decenter and pluralize urban theory.

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