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Authoritarian space-time

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For freedom to be realized, Simon de Beauvoir (1949, p. 82) once argued, it must "emerge into an open future." In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, she explains that freedom "interested only in denying freedom" is not freedom. "And," she continues, "it is not true that the recognition of the freedom of others limits my own freedom: to be free is not to have the power to do anything you like; it is to be able to surpass the given toward an open future; the existence of others as a freedom defines my situation and is even the condition of my own freedom. I am oppressed if I am thrown into prison, but not if I am kept from throwing my neighbor into prison" (de Beauvoir 1949, p. 91).

Oppressors, to use de Beauvoir's preferred term, have always sought control by limiting the possibility of others to access an open future. This was what the Soviet five-year plans or state-controlled labor obligations sought to do, for example. And it is what any genocidal program seeks to do, such as the more recent case of the governments of China and Myanmar attacking their Uighur and Rohingya minorities respectively.

Controlling space, in addition to time, is likewise integral to authoritarian efforts to oppress others. The spatial tactic of the prison is noted in de Beauvoir's example, and which Michel Foucault (1975) memorably detailed in *Discipline and Punish.* Both authors incisively trace how space and time are simultaneously target, medium, and product of authoritarian visions of control in the Western political tradition. As Foucault writes, "space itself has a history in Western experience and it is not possible to disregard the fatal intersection of time with space" (1986, p. 22). In geography, Doreen Massey (1992) famously advanced a similar argument: "Space is not static, nor time spaceless. Of course, spatiality and temporality are different from each other but neither can be conceptualized as the absence of the other" (p. 80).

What, then, might we consider *authoritarian* space-time? Authoritarianism is a political relationship defined by univocality and subordination of difference to a central authority or vision. Authoritarian space-time thus works through singularity; it collapses the multiplicity of time, space, voice, authority, and social imagination into one acceptable vision. Yet for all its orientation toward singularity, authoritarian space-time cannot be understood only through this impulse. Authoritarian political relations cut across space, time, scale, and bodies in ways that are both unexpected and predictable. They can be as durable as they are fleeting. They can draw their discursive strength from nostalgic longing for a lost past or instead play on the theater of the future.

The impulse to singularity that underpins authoritarian space-time does not guarantee its achievement, of course. Yet this does not deter actors who reach for univocal control or seek to colonize the open futures of other people and places. The creative energies that these actors employ to realize their authoritarian visions are staggering – not just for their diversity, but also because they seem to spring eternal. As many of us look on with shock and horror at the violence that Russian president Vladimir Putin has unleashed on the people of Ukraine, recalling the Nazi regime's thirst for territory and an ethnonationalist vision of *Blut und Boden*, we face a sober reminder that authoritarian pasts are just as likely to be authoritarian presents and futures.

Political geographers today continue to focus on such questions of territory, sovereignty, and identity politics, but remain surprisingly silent on the broader issue of authoritarianism – which Putin, Xi Jinping, and the Myanmar State Administrative Council all remind us intersect with these topics. Political science still dominates scholarship on authoritarianism. But as I have argued elsewhere, the field needs more – and more critical – geographic perspectives to move beyond the

territorial trap and simplistic Western approaches of mapping Good and Evil onto Democracy and Authoritarianism (Koch 2019, 2022).

Geographers are especially well equipped to address the unevenness of authoritarianism – to parse the many spaces, scales, presents, pasts, and futures in authoritarian politics and governmentalities. In this, we can readily build from the long disciplinary history of interrogating space and time together as "space-time" or "timespace" (e.g. Buttimer 1976; Hägerstrand 1970; Harvey 1989, 1990; Kellerman 1989; May and Thrift 2001; Massey 1992).

Taking authoritarian space-time seriously would open up many new questions – both for geography and the wider scholarship on authoritarianism. For example, how do authoritarian practices define, shape, or result from specific spatial and temporal configurations? How is authoritarian space-time expressed, experienced, and embodied? At and across what scales? How do certain actors conjure or resist forms of authoritarian space-time? To what extent do authoritarian relations unfold through the imagined spaces of fiction, nationalist mythologies, utopias and dystopias, and aspirational or anticipatory politics? How and when does the materiality of authoritarian space-time matter? How do pasts, presents, and futures merge with one another in authoritarian visions and practices, and how do they touch down upon diverse spaces and bodies? And how are they undone?

By focusing on the interlocking spatial and temporal underpinnings of authoritarian practices and governmentalities, these questions can stretch our thinking in line with recent scholarship on *authoritarian practices* (e.g. Glasius 2018; Jens and Schuetze 2021; Koch 2018, 2022; Wedeen 2019). This "practice turn" research aims to move beyond reductive statist frames in studies on authoritarianism, largely inspired by Foucauldian scholarship on governmentality. Foucault's writing on governmentality explicitly engages the intersection between practices, space, and time, but the very labeling of the new "authoritarian practices" literature as such makes clear that it analytically privileges political agency over space-time/timespaces. Further, since the authoritarian practices research is largely positioned as a corrective to the territorially-trapped approach to authoritarianism, it can be easy to fall into an aspatial and atemporal mode of thinking about how illiberal or authoritarian practices operate – similar to the way that early writing on globalization seemed to imply that space, states, and territory didn't matter (Agnew 2018).

By investigating authoritarian space-time, scholars might avoid this trap and instead deepen our understanding of authoritarian practices as cutting across myriad space-times, scales, bodies, and geographies both imagined and real. This research could center on traditionally understood authoritarian regimes, bound by the borders of a territorial state like North Korea or Turkmenistan, or take the form of less conventional analysis of authoritarianism in classrooms, homes, virtual gaming environments, or of individuals who dutifully perform their liberal subjectivity.

An authoritarian space-time lens could also open new perspectives on (settler) colonialism, since authoritarianism has always worked through colonizing the ways that people relate to pasts and futures, as much as it has through colonizing space and territory. Similarly, colonialism has always worked through the authoritarian control of space, time, and agency (Allen 2008; Buck-Morss 2000; Estes 2019; Harvey 2000; Mitchell 1988; Rifkin 2017; Stites 1989; Wolfe 2006). There are good reasons for the separate academic literatures on authoritarianism and (settler) colonialism, but authoritarian space-time could offer new ways to think them together.

Authoritarian space-time might also suggest a way beyond the typical framing of authoritarianism as an "other" (Koch 2017, 2019). This othering practice is exemplified in Foucault's description of fascism and Stalinism as "pathological", but about which he elaborates:

> One of the numerous reasons why they are, for us, so puzzling is that in spite of their historical uniqueness they are not quite original. They used and extended mechanisms already present in most other societies. More than that: in spite of their own internal madness, they used to a large extent the ideas and the devices of our political rationality. (Foucault 1982, p. 779)

Most social scientists today remain committed to the idea that they are part of the liberal "we" that Foucault invokes here. But are "we" always and everywhere so liberal? Or do we comfortably narrow our gaze to the aspirational story of progress moving toward a utopian "dreamworld" that unites liberal and illiberal political systems (Buck-Morss 2000, p. 188)? What space-times are implicated in our own projects built on authoritarian univocality and singularity?

I don't have any easy answers to these questions, but as Andrew Curley and Sara Smith (2020) forcefully ague, "Geographers need to grapple with the legacies of our institutions as well as the ongoing colonial projects in which we are engaged" (p. 38). And, they write, we need to move beyond the continual privileging of settler-colonial visions of sovereignty – and I would add, time. As Reinhart Koselleck (1985) has argued, the very idea of time moving toward an open, borderless future is a modern Western imaginary. This raises even more critical questions about the particularly Western conceptions of freedom that Simon de Beauvoir posited in the quote above. Do our dreams of "true" freedom echo de Beauvoir's dream of an open future – even when our freedom is built on the past and present of colonial dispossession, and liberal conceptions of time itself?

By reflecting on the multiplicity of authoritarian space-time, political geographers might find new ways to identify our unnoticed assumptions about freedom and agency, space and time, victims and villains. This is especially important in the midst of the current geopolitical fervor in Eastern Europe, filled with loud demands for a clear border between good and evil. But the uncanny diversity of ways that authoritarian space-time is expressed on bodies, places, minds, and lives reminds us that a clear border will always prove elusive. Ukrainians and Russians already know this – and so do members of over 700 Native American tribes of the United States, and countless other groups across history who have experienced the theft of their lands and futures by states indexed as authoritarian and democratic alike.

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