Organizing with tenants and fighting rightist resentments –
A case study from East Germany

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Abstract
Through two neighborhood case studies in the rapidly upgrading East German city of Leipzig we discuss political implications of urban restructuring. Scrutinizing tenants' rightist and racist reactions to the housing question, we argue that residential alienation affects people's sense of place in a divisive manner, which in turn impacts both their interpretations of urban change and their respective practices. Based on our analyses of scapegoating and territorial stigma, we critically discuss the potential of activist intervention, drawing from two qualitative and ethnographic research projects, as well as activist experience in neighborhood organizing.

Keywords
Racism, East Germany, intervention, housing commodification, residential alienation

1. Introduction

How is the commodification of housing interrelated with the surge of racism and authoritarianism witnessed in many countries over the past years? Instead of trying to choose sides within a heated debate in (German) academia about the primacy of intensifying class contradictions versus the primacy of historically and culturally deep seated racism (eg. Dowling *et al.*, 2017; Jörke & Nachtwey, 2017, 2020; Lengfeld & Ordemann, 2017; van Dyk & Graefe, 2019), we aim to empirically trace the complexity of this linkage and reflect the

political challenges it poses. Through two neighborhood case studies in the rapidly upgrading East German city of Leipzig, we scrutinize tenants' racist reactions to the housing question and critically discuss the potential of activist intervention. Our analyses and reflections are guided by the central hypothesis that residential alienation affects people's sense of place in a divisive manner, which in turn impacts both their interpretations of urban change and their respective practices.

One of the ten major cities of Germany, and until recently the fastest growing one, Leipzig has a very dynamic past not least influenced by the political-economic aftermaths of German reunification (Intelmann, 2020). Whereas one could attest a post-political tendency especially towards the peripheries of the city that is marked by a lack of open political debate and coupled with increasing assent to right populist parties, a dynamic landscape of social movements and struggles still shapes the city's core. In the heart of Saxony, which has gained media attention in the past years through both high turnouts for the right-populist AfD (Alternative for Germany) and the establishment of the far-right protest movement PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the Occident), Leipzig is a stronghold of antifascist and left-wing movements. Their development within the city parallels urban restructuring, strategic neglect and targeted upgrading, with our neighborhoods of study being both spaces of incipient gentrification and recently emerging movement-political action. After introducing these case studies in the second subchapter, we seek answers to the political implications of urban and housing commodification through our analysis of qualitative research with long-term tenants in Leipzig.

For this aim, we make use of the concept of residential alienation (Madden & Marcuse, 2016). With capitalist urbanization catching up with the post-socialist city of Leipzig, residential alienation is a productive concept to capture the link between structural processes of housing commodification and financialization, and consequential psychosocial experiences in people's daily lives (Bayırbağ & Penpecioğlu, 2017). Scrutinizing this link, we specifically interrogate its relational and political consequences. We unpack the conceptual background and empirical manifestations of residential alienation in section three, to examine it at different scales that we have found to be empirically relevant for tenants' sense of belonging and place (May, 2011).

Concerning the latter, we focus on racist interpretations of urban change, and their interdependence with residential alienation in section four. Tracing tenants' interpretations of their changing surroundings, we find mechanisms of scapegoating resembling Adorno and Horkheimer's (2003, pp. 367–368) classic definition of authoritarianism, where the 'recognition of that which is established and in power and the irrational emphasis on traditional conventions' is enmeshed with 'condemning the one who does not belong, or who one considers as below oneself'. Unpacking racist redefinitions of problems in the individual rent-relation in the subchapter *scapegoating at home*, we then turn to the neighborhood level to analyze tenants' references to *racist territorial stigma* (Wacquant, 2007). Both processes are contingent on an interpretation of urban restructuring that blames immigrants for the experienced downsides of the process, instead of addressing structural faults in capitalist urbanization.

In our empirical material, racism is partly accompanied by anti-elite populism, which tends to parallel the inside-outside exclusion of rightist populism, differentiating the "good people" from the "bad elite" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Whilst mentioning anti-elitist articulations in passing, we focus here on the explicitly racist moments of this populist notion, which aims to reinstate an imagined traditionalistic and homogenous 'volk' as political sovereign instead of engaging with the complexities of democratic struggle.

In contrast, radical attempts at transformative community organizing (TCO) (Mann, 2011; Maruschke, 2014) aim to repoliticize exploitation and domination, through encouraging and supporting self-organized, democratic struggle. This is what we turn to in the last part of our article, reflecting on an activist intervention that one of the authors, Peter, has been part of since 2019. In reaction to a large-scale housing privatization, an activist group has started an organizing process against Germany's largest corporate landlord, Vonovia. Co-founded by Peter, the group formed in a residential estate in Leipzig's inner East, which also happens to be an area marked by slightly above average AfD support. Based on our study of residential alienation, we analyze this intervention regarding its potential of transformative praxis that counters alienation through self-determined action. Thus, we reflect on strategies and experiences of the group, critically discussing whether its approach can be classified as doubly transformative in collectively empowering tenants whilst simultaneously challenging the racialization of the housing question.

Whilst not refined to the housing question, Didier Eribon's (2016a) autobiographic novel "Returning to Reims" where formerly left-wing voters turned to the far right RN (Rassemblement/Front National) has informed the European discussion about political implications of economic restructuring, self-reflectively criticizing the failure of the political left to challenge social decline. In this vein, recent studies predominantly focused on the role of biographical trajectories of social decline in right-wing voting behavior (Mullis & Zschocke, 2020; Nachtwey & Heumann, 2019), taking into account, yet hardly scrutinizing the spatio-temporality of these experiences. This is where we step in, to not just analyze the interconnection of residential alienation and racist articulations, but also to discuss the potential of local political intervention. Especially in light of the heated discussions of whether 'talking to right-wingers' is politically or academically promising, necessary or off-limits (Bernet *et al.*, 2019; Eribon, 2016b; Weiß, 2018), we take a step back to reflect both racist exclamations in relation to the housing question and an attempt at activist intervention.

2. Two studies from below on Leipzig's East

Our empirical material is drawn from two distinct case studies in eastern neighborhoods of Leipzig. In the heart of East Germany, Leipzig was studied by urban scholars mainly as a prominent international example of urban shrinkage (Bernt, 2009; Haase *et al.*, 2016) due to the political economic developments after German reunification in 1989. Politically, in the 90s, the myth of 'red Connewitz' in Leipzig's south, emerged not just from the squatting movement and street battles with neo-Nazis, but also the radical left's critique of the hegemonic patriotic hype in the wake of reunification (Holm & Kuhn, 2016). Yet

simultaneously, many residents of the city enthusiastically celebrated this hype and either applauded or failed to intervene with fascist attacks from within and outside of the city, targeting immigrant shelters and anyone in their way (AlertaSachsen, 2012).

Antifascist struggles have shaped the city until today, and much in contrast to many surrounding Saxon towns and villages, left-wing movements dominate Leipzig's movement-political landscape. However, this neither prevents regular far right demonstrations and attacks, nor does it hold true for many districts on the fringes of the city. The differences between these and the inner-city neighborhoods manifest inter alia, in the recent election results, with the turnouts of the right populist AfD increasing towards the peripheries. In contrast, traditional and emerging left-wing neighborhoods closer to the center earn Leipzig the reputation as "a stronghold of left wing extremism" among conservative politicians and journalists (Lutz, 2019). It happens to be these "left-wing" inner-city neighborhoods, which have undergone major upgrading and restructuring processes in the last years and have been the locus of struggles against them. Just in the last year (2020), excavators were set on fire on several construction sites and the eviction of a squat in the inner East triggered riots throughout the city.

The processes of restructuring at the heart of these struggles also earned Leipzig renewed attention as a model for successful post-socialist reurbanization (Haase *et al.*, 2004). Its development as the fastest growing city in Germany in the second half of the 2010s has caused many nicknames, such as 'phoenix city', (Haase & Rink, 2015) or simply 'Hypezig', or 'the new Berlin' in popular discourse. After a long period of stagnation, the historical trade city, which is in a geo-strategically central location in East Germany, has become an economic competitor to Dresden, and has surpassed it in population growth. Hand in hand with massive scale housing commodification after reunification (Bernt & Holm, 2020), this

Figure 1

AfD results in the Saxon state election 2019. Light blue: Eisenbahnstraße neighbourhood; dark blue: neighbourhood area around Schönefelder Höfe. **Source: own calculation.**
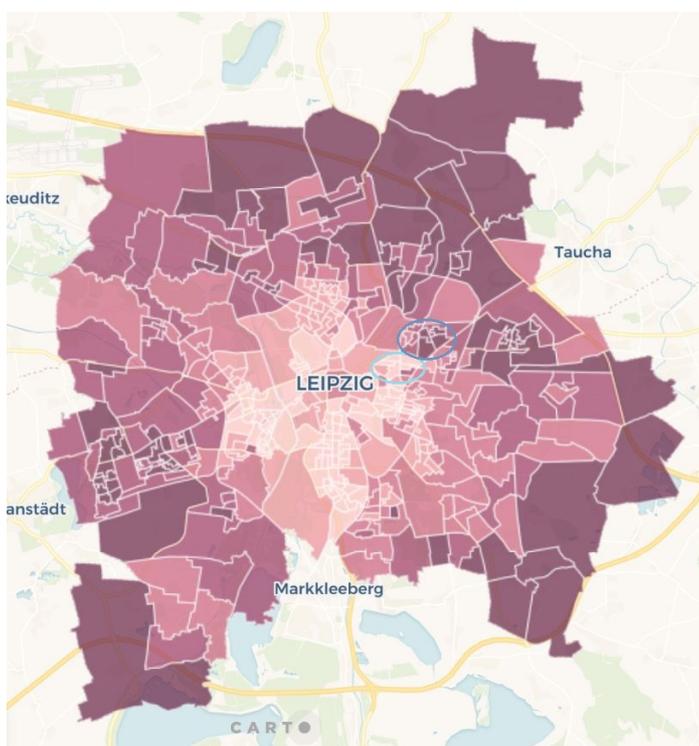
growth has triggered rent gaps, struggles around them and their closure around the city at different times, predominantly in the historical Wilhelminian districts of the city. The inner East, where our studies are set, has been the straggler in these developments.

Here, Leon has witnessed tenants' daily lives in a "doorstep-ethnography" (Hall, 2018) in the area around *Eisenbahnstraße* (railway street). In the adjacent neighborhood across the train rails and a bit further from the city center, Peter has engaged in activist research in a tenants' initiative in the residential estate *Schönefelder Höfe* (Schönefeld courtyards).

Considering the built environment, these neighborhoods share the history of decay of the historical housing stock during state socialism, with a large portion torn down and replaced by prefabricated *Plattenbau*. Equally, both areas have undergone different waves of ownership transfers following the enforced housing commodification after German reunification (Bernt & Holm, 2020). Whereas ownership is more fragmented around *Eisenbahnstraße,* the *Schönefelder Höfe* were privatized in 2005-2006 and taken over by Vonovia, Germany's largest profit seeking real estate company in 2017. Subject of multiple tenant struggles over the country, Vonovia is known for perfidious profit-extracting strategies at the cost of tenants' expenses and housing quality.
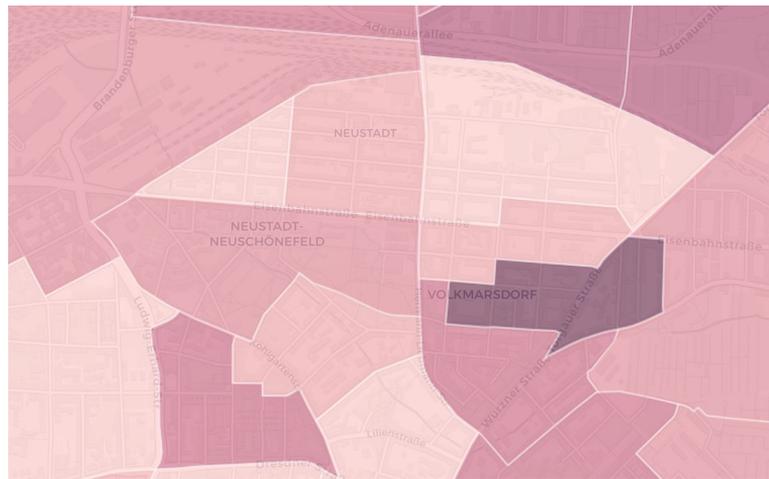
These strategies, as well as continuous rent increases paralleled by neglect around *Eisenbahnstraße*, are strongly palpable to the relatively poor population, mostly constituted by students, immigrant tenants and (working) poor, GDR-socialized, and relatively old tenants. It is the latter that we focus our attention on in this article, as they are both the long-term witnesses of urban restructuring, and the main advocates of its racist interpretation. According to an interviewee: 'they are the ones left, that didn't manage to leave'. Linking this to their stories gathered in 15 interviews and many informal conversations, we find their different positionality from other interviews (students, immigrant tenants) to manifest especially in their perception of temporality—contingent on their post-reunification experiences marked by job losses, stigma and decay, and current material situation in precarious jobs or unemployment, they are oriented more towards the past than the future.

Both historical working-class neighborhoods are characterized by high unemployment levels and a median income below that of the city. Yet in their population development, they have diverging histories. *Eisenbahnstraße* is a historical 'neighborhood of arrival' (Schröder et al., 2018), originally home to railway workers and subsequently different generations of immigrant workers. Together with its decay and population exodus after German reunification, this made it easy prey for a historically bad reputation and racist territorial stigma (Wacquant, 2007), but also, more recently, popular among students for its cheap rents. Especially the first 'adventurous generations' (interview) of students moving there from 2010 on, shaped its movement-political landscape. With many small social centers in vacant houses and shops, and several emerging *Hausprojekte*, a leftish alternative subculture emerged. Regular protests initiated by them are partly concerned with the row of (luxury) refurbishments, landlord harassments and massively increasing rents that have paralleled the

population influx. Meanwhile, the GDR-housing blocks in the neighborhood's center are still owned by the city's housing association and have faced little fluctuation. Inhabited by many immigrants and long-term GDR socialized tenants, they now remain the only bastion of rents affordable with social transfer incomes. These diverging developments *within* the neighborhood and the respective political segregation and polarization, are mirrored in astonishing small-scale electoral variation. In the 2017 German parliament election, the percentage of AfD voters has varied up to a good 20% between the GDR housing estates (29,52%) and the Wilhelminian district across the central street (8,77%).

The second study is set in the *Schönefelder Höfe* across the train rails. The historically rather white German neighborhood witnessed an influx of students and immigrants, mostly refugees, since 2014, and is now starting to show first signs of gentrification. Described as a "brown nest" by a former resident, its rather right-wing image was amplified by the initiation of far-right protests against planned refugee shelters in 2015. Both geographically and in terms of voter turnouts, the area is closer to the abovementioned fringes of the city, with the large central parties losing voters to the AfD over the last years. In the communal elections in 2019, the results of the latter have surpassed the city's average (17,1% vs 14,9%). Along with the takeover by Vonovia, this (post-) political climate marks the context of the tenants' initiative founded in 2019.

With both of our research projects guided by social concerns and aimed 'at producing critical knowledge to enable social emancipation' (Belfrage & Hauf, 2017, p. 4), we have evaluated our material in constant dialogue inspired by critical grounded theory (ibid.). The emergent analysis is part of an ongoing reflection, intended to encourage discussion and inform potential intervention, instead of providing a complete, distinct explanation of social reality.

3. Alienated sense of place

In a Marxist sense, alienation stems from the capitalist mode of production in which the worker has no control over the means of production (Marx, 1968). As a result, she is alienated from her work, her product, nature, all others and finally herself (ibid.). David

Madden and Peter Marcuse (2016, p. 76) transfer this understanding to the sphere of housing, building on the structural hypothesis that living 'in someone else's house is to live in alienated housing, in the straightforward legal sense as well as in the psychosocial sense'. Drawing from a range of philosophical traditions, Rahel Jaeggi (2014, p. 1) has revived the concept of alienation, defining it as a 'deficient' relation or a 'relation of relationlessness', implying a loss of sense and power to appropriate the world, a form of unfamiliarity and unrelatedness. From a spatial perspective, this resonates with definitions of belonging and sense(making) of place as dynamic processes of relational identification and prerequisites for socially significant interaction (Duyvendak, 2011; Frost & Catney, 2020; May, 2011). In that sense, we conceive residential alienation as a disturbance to relational identification with place.

Combining these structural and psychosocial approaches, we seek to expand the definition of residential alienation beyond the life of *someone else's four walls*. Having found it empirically relevant for residents' sense of place, we incorporate the *neighborhood* level. Additionally, we consider the temporality of urban restructuring in our research context. In our conversations with elderly, GDR-socialized tenants, this centrally involves their past in socialist Germany and their experiences of the *Wende* (German reunification in 1989) and post-Wende years, which often serves as a nostalgic point of comparison for recent developments.

a. Residential alienation in someone else's four walls

Whereas our two case studies entail different kinds of rent-relations, we will use this section to explore common nodes of residential alienation that concern tenants' sense of place in their flat or building of residence. With Leon conducting research in tenancies with mostly individual landlords, and Peter focusing explicitly on tenants of one large, profit-seeking real estate company, Vonovia, tenants in both studies nevertheless experienced similar downsides of living in for-profit rental housing. These resulted from neglect or profit seeking through increasing auxiliary costs (gas, water, energy) and rent, and led to displacement anxieties, difficult communication with the landlord and the loss of community within the house.

Neglect of the building, the delay in repairs and deficient maintenance of in- and outdoor communal spaces affected tenants' quality of life and sense of place. For tenants of a private landlord on Eisenbahnstraße, this meant having to survive half of German winter without heating. In the case of Vonovia, tenants missed repairs while observing unnecessary investments and complaining about their lack of control over allocation practices. Having no say in the choice of new tenants, they subtly accused Vonovia of purposefully matching 'unfitting neighbors' to harass long-term tenants. We will explore the racist notion of this assumption in the following chapter.

In the meantime, Vonovia's increasing auxiliary costs were not transparent to tenants, and private landlords on Eisenbahnstraße raised rents continuously. Even for tenants experiencing no direct increase in housing costs, exclusionary displacement (Marcuse, 1985) and the respective anxieties were present. Several tenants described being "stuck" in their

rent-relation, hence unable to find alternative housing when necessary. Their displacement anxiety (Watt, 2018) was reinforced by *KDU segregation*. KDU stands for *Kosten der Unterkunft* (costs of housing) and defines the costs of housing officially permitted for people receiving social transfer incomes. *KDU segregation* describes the disappearance of housing supported by welfare regulations in inner city neighborhoods and linked forms of displacement. Tenants aptly described this process, 'these rents are not for poor people, or for jobcenter rents (laughs)!' Reporting about the rent raise of a neighbor, a widowed tenant said, 'I didn't understand it, sometimes I'm scared that they forgot me and that then one day I'll get a huge bill, you never know!' And a social worker on Eisenbahnstraße reported, 'the subtle fear [of being displaced] is always present [...] or simply a rent raise "will I be able to afford it?"'

For many elderly tenants in both areas, residential alienation also materializes in the individualization that comes with the loss of community within the building. This explicitly relational experience is closely interwoven with nostalgic, and sometimes retro-normative interpretations, which will be central for our analysis of racist articulations. Yet simultaneously, it is a prominent example of the structural effects of housing and infrastructural commodification.

In contrast to the mutual help of GDR times, the fluctuation that comes with landlords renting to students for the highest gain implies anonymization, 'I don't know my young neighbors, I think some of them must use their flat as a second home, considering all that movement.' This is reinforced by the commodification of caretaking duties, resulting in the loss of a DIY-spirit which they remember with regards to gardening, collective cleaning of staircases and the overall self-organization of maintenance. For tenants, this manifests in both a loss of *community as urban practice* (Blokland, 2017) and increasing neglect through inhabitants and caretakers, 'I come from the cleaning industry myself, I know they only have five minutes for a house' complained a tenant from Eisenbahnstraße. Another from the Schönefelder Höfe remembers, 'We did everything together. It worked. And that also created community.'

Especially in the Vonovia estates, tenants have nowhere to address their complaints. The responsible administration is difficult to reach. Tenants report that they almost never get a proper answer to their complaint letters and constantly get lost in the customer hotline. Even when reaching a call center employee there seems to be no coordination between different departments. Similarly, tenants on Eisenbahnstraße who lost their heating in winter were unsuccessful in having their complaints met, leaving them with a sensation of despair.

These different experiences of neglect, anxiety, anonymization and powerlessness in the personal flat or building, resonate with the central implication of residential alienation, where an actual loss of control over one's housing situation, owed to structural housing commodification, affects people's sense of place and home and results in unfamiliarity.

b. Residential alienation in the neighborhood

Residential alienation not only concerns rent and housing but also occurs at the neighborhood level. Highlighting the social *significance of neighborhood*, Kearns and Parkinson

(2001, p. 2104) differentiate between a 'home area', important for identity and belonging; a wider 'locality', impacting social status and residential activities; and the 'urban district or region', constituting a 'landscape of social and economic opportunities'. We understand these scales as overlapping and coalescing. Taken together, they contribute to people's sense of place which is central to interpreting urban change against the background of everyday experience. These interpretations influence the relations to, and perceptions of others. Thus, they also determine whether immigrants are considered a threat, an asset, or an ordinary part of urban life (Belina, 2017).

Though again marked by different developments, our case studies unveil commonalities of residential alienation at a neighborhood level. Centrally, tenants are alienated by neglect predating upgrading, coupled with a general transformation of the neighborhood, especially in terms of infrastructure and spaces of encounter. Relationally, like inside the building, the loss of community parallels the perceived population changes and results in withdrawal. At a neighborhood level, displacement anxiety implies simultaneously being stuck and losing identification. The mixture of having nowhere else to go whilst perceiving no future in their own neighborhood, invites restorative nostalgia (Boym, 2001), craving for a skewed and unrestorable past and making tenants prone to retro-normative, defensive and exclusive attitudes.

In their nearby "home area", tenants of the Schönefeld courtyards bemoan the decline of green spaces since the change of ownership, 'Vonovia fails to take care of the lawns. In the past, the supervisor checked the lawn and cleaned it – if there was anything to clean at all.' To some extent, residents trace this back to structural shortcomings like the closing of a nearby recycling station or the commercialization of communal services, 'I pay for it, why should I take care of it myself then? I pay for what, in the past, was part of the cooperative.' Similar to cleaning the stairs or the courtyards, for tenants on Eisenbahnstraße taking care of the lawns back then was 'a matter of collective responsibility.' Everything in the cooperative was 'more social.' The residents came together in yard-festivities that 'were not affected by the logic of profit.' However, ideas of a neat and clean neighborhood are also racialized, 'It's striking that garbage piles are growing since immigrants live here. It wasn't a problem in the past, it just wasn't.'

Regarding the wider area, the most problematic change for residents of both neighborhoods concerns the local retailers, restaurants and bars. On Eisenbahnstraße, a group of elderly men sitting on a bar terrace complain that 'this is the only place we have left to meet', and then go into lengthy stories about all the bars, cinemas, and small restaurants that disappeared after reunification. For many, the current infrastructure is marked not by undersupply but a deficit 'coming from the whole setting.' What the quoted resident from Schönefeld means is best described as culturalism, accompanied by subtle distinctions: "Well, there's a lack of German cuisine. […] I mean, Russian goods, okay, fine. But not pizza at every corner and, above all, kebab!" The disapproval about the neighborhood development concurs with both displacement pressure and exclusive displacement (Marcuse, 1985). An agitated man around Eisenbahnstraße vents his anxiety and anger, 'All of my friends have

moved away to where the rents are cheaper […] But where should I go if my rent goes up? I have nowhere else to go!'

Like in the building, also within the neighborhood, residents grapple with the disappearance of their neighbors, and with fluctuation more generally. In the past "tenancy was of long duration. In times of the cooperative, we knew each other very well." Now it's "young folks everywhere that we don't know." Additionally, neighborliness, mutual support and communication is hindered by the shame of falling behind, as a counselor for elderly tenants' reports, 'They won't say "I can't afford it" […]. Such things are left unspoken because it's like coming out and admitting financial problems.' However, in most cases, people perceive the population change in the neighborhood mainly in terms of migration and the arrival of refugees. It's their 'different mentality' German tenants fail to deal with, 'because of their families, because they don't wake up until the evening, when they wash their cars and turn up their music. It is imposed on us. […] What a noise if the children play! It's tremendous. That used to be different.' Many of the neighbors respond by withdrawing to closed social circuits. The nearby allotment gardens are a popular retreat. But even there, trouble seems inevitable: 'Everywhere you hear Romanian. For God's sake! For God's sake! In the allotments, yes […] If I compare this to GDR-times. We had foreigners as well, Vietnamese, the nicest people you can imagine.' Politicians and landlords are said to be longing for more cultural diversity in the district. The long-term neighbors, however, think of cultural diversity as alienation or even *Überfremdung*, 'She [immigrant neighbor] has to assimilate, not us!'

Feelings of unsafety are another expression of residential alienation. Meeting neighbors with the tenants' initiative in Schönefelder Höfe, we repeatedly noticed that they, despite short distances, came by car or, when walking, arrived in bigger groups. Particularly older women felt unsafe in public space. According to an older tenant who is talking to his wife, public transport is dangerous as well, 'I would be afraid of something happening to you.' And, once again, 'This would not have happened during GDR-times.'

Generally, the retro-normative interpretation of urban restructuring of most our elderly respondents can be described like this, 'The grass was greener, the food was better, public space more secure, and even the foreigners were more friendly.' (Bescherer & Reichle, forthcoming) This nostalgic sense of place is closely tied to the tenants' social position, defined by their age, the experience of decline and their perceived lack of a viable future, both within and without the neighborhood. Whereas the racist notion of their interpretations already shone through in this subchapter, we will scrutinize it thoroughly in the following section, to then reflect on the possibilities of intervention that come with tenants' alienating experiences and their interpretations of them.

4. Racist interpretations of the housing question

As we have illustrated, residential alienation can change the meaning tenants ascribe to 'their' spaces and thus impact the relation to their surroundings and to one another. Their affected sense of place mediates between social change and their daily life experiences, and

in turn impacts their reaction to urban restructuring. Therefore, both the pressure concerning tenants' individual rent-relation and changes in the neighborhood, are interpreted in a specific manner which is contingent on the dimensions of alienation elaborated in the previous subchapter. In the following, we scrutinize the racist dimensions of these interpretations. These centrally follow the logics of scapegoating, including different mechanisms of blaming immigrants, refugees or in a few cases, janitors or 'the politicians' for negative experiences that structurally result from housing and urban commodification. The concept of scapegoating has emerged inductively from our analysis, yet it stands in a long tradition of anthropological, sociological, and cultural theories on group conflict and enmity. Prominently, Lewis Coser (1956, p. 49) developed a sociological approach to scapegoating explaining its functionality of turning "realistic conflicts", which are referred to the 'frustration of specific demands', into 'unrealistic conflicts', which merely serve as a valve for aggression. Hence, when a conflict within the *actual`* problematic relation is difficult, shifting attention to a third and technically unrelated party can provide compensatory satisfaction. Although we disagree with Coser's functionalist logic, we find some of his analyses instructive for our findings. In line with Horkheimer and Adorno's (2003) initially cited definition of authoritarianism, tenants' way of shifting the responsibility to perceived outsiders instead of targeting the fundamental logic of commodified housing not only results in damnable racism, but also hinders collective political action that could challenge both the structures of residential alienation and the experience of "relationlessness" (Jaeggi, 2014).

Following the previous structure, we differentiate between *scapegoating at home*, where the central mechanism is blaming bad housing quality or raising costs on immigrants and *territorial stigmatization in the neighborhood*, where prevalent racialized media stigma is activated and leads to "lateral denigration" (Wacquant, 2007).

Scapegoating at home

Having experienced different forms of psychosocial consequences of housing commodification, our research participants often found it difficult to tackle these productively, leaving them with a sensation of powerlessness. In their reflections, tenants who turned towards racist interpretations ascribed the responsibility for their housing issues to a third party.

One way to do so was defining competition for resources as a central problem and blaming new competitors for the resulting shortage, 'Oh, sure, just let them all in, the Germans are under the bridge and the foreigners get the flat.' This perspective subtly implies that 'the foreigners' are considered both illegitimate and (thus, unfairly) privileged. The following statement exemplifies that tenants felt they were in competition not just for housing but also for recognition and appreciation, 'Why is there free tenants' or social counselling for our immigrants, but not for us? They get everything stuffed up their ass and we need to take care of it ourselves.'

Tenants in both case studies experienced neglect coupled with increasing costs. A tenant on Eisenbahnstraße who was chronically unsuccessful in getting the administration to make

the repairs they were legally responsible for, concomitantly received a rent raise. She simply refused to pay 'because the quality of housing just sucks.' Yet elaborating on the miserable housing quality, she mainly blamed the neglect on her Romanian neighbors, 'because of the Romanians, it always stinks like cat piss.' In Schönefelder Höfe, an example of scapegoating immigrants for neglect comes with the rumor that Vonvoia systematically rents out flats to immigrants 'because they get rent from the state. […] Then they don't give a shit how dirty it looks, as long as they make money.' An intensified variation of this rumor is that renting out to immigrants is a strategic tool to harass and hence displace German tenants, aiming to subsequently rent out the flats for higher gain. Revealing the distorted perspectives of these rumors, a social worker reported that immigrant tenants were frequently in trouble after German neighbors filed complaints with Vonovia about them.

Sometimes, anti-elite populism eclectically made its way into tenants' conspiracy theories, 'the politicians live in their dream-world. […] they should live in a flat with these people […] let's see what they would say.' In other instances, janitors were the targets of scapegoating, when blamed for their insufficient work ethic, 'they are too lazy to collect the trash.'

An *actual* strategy of increasing profits from Vonovia was their opaque billing of heating and auxiliary costs. In the Schönefelder Höfe, they did not calculate usage according to individual consumption, but rather, charged a lump sum per square meter. The tenants were understandably outraged about this, yet mainly when they could racialize the problem. A common anecdote is that 'we' pay, 'when the foreigners turn up the heating with their windows wide open.' Or, following culturalist stereotypes, 'when the foreigners constantly wash their carpets.'

Disagreeing with functionalist causalities like that of Coser (1956), we found *reasons* for these ideological fixations to be complex and manifold. In some extreme cases racism was driven by a longstanding, radical conviction. One tenant reported from conversations in a neighborhood bar, where several elderly men agreed that, 'one would just need to *do* something again, like in the 90s,' indirectly referencing Neo-Nazi violence in the years after reunification (AlertaSachsen, 2012). Whereas these same men complained lengthily about high rents, none of them considered to act upon this problem. Yet also, tenants' material experiences of decline and powerlessness shape their retro-normative perspective. Lastly, it is clear, that immigrants were perceived as easy targets, while the anger against landlords often found no concrete addressees.

Territorial stigma in the neighborhood

In his writing on stigmatized neighborhoods, Loïc Wacquant's (2007, pp. 67–68) concept of "*lateral denigration* and *mutual distanciation*" (emphasis in original) reads like a specific type of scapegoating:

> The acute sense of social indignity […] can be attenuated only by thrusting the stigma onto a faceless, demonized other – the downstairs neighbors, the immigrant family

dwelling in an adjacent building, the youths from across the street who 'do drugs' or are engaged in street 'hustling'...

Although, once again, we do not share the deterministic touch of his analysis, denigration and distanciation feature prominently in our research. The historically bad reputation of Eisenbahnstraße is continuously reproduced by media reports on 'the most dangerous street in Germany' (Beck *et al.*, 2017) and the recent introduction of a 'weapon prohibition zone', legitimizing racist police controls on the basis of a crime statistic that is lower than that of the inner city (Hurlin, 2019). The historical stigma accompanied and co-constituted the neglect of the area, which has recently turned into a new "frontier" of gentrification, has now become an exciting territory for adventurous students to explore and with a rent gap ready to be exploited by investors (Gray & Mooney, 2011).

The long-term tenants we interviewed, have lived through these phases of de- and revaluation, and we have discussed their alienating effects earlier on in the text. Their narratives frequently uncovered references to the racist territorial stigma. Perceived as the central problem of the neighborhood, immigrant tenants were characterized as loud, shady or dangerous. Yet, this assessment was hardly based on personal experience as tenants avoided the area to which they referred. 'No, I don't ever go there. It's too dangerous. I would never walk through there.' This only worked through reconstructing the neighborhood (Hwang, 2016) by arbitrarily drawing the borders around the *problematic* area, while excluding one's own place of residence and dwelling, 'over here it's nice and quiet, whereas over there…'

Tenants' stubborn fixation on 'foreigners' served to overshadow other problems in the neighborhood. Following a question about problematic changes in an area where rents have partly doubled in the last ten years (according to research participants), in a phone interview with an elderly tenant, her husband shouted from the background, 'FOREIGNERS!' Yet naming actual problems with foreigners was difficult. Instead, several tenants nostalgically lamented about the loss of communal and social infrastructures. Frequently, their loss was blamed on the dominance of international shops and kiosks, 'they occupied one shop after another.' Once more, competition was perceived as a central issue, but in this instance, it was competition for space in the neighborhood. Some tenants were even willing to accept the pressure of gentrification as a trade-off for the displacement of international infrastructure.

In public and political discourse, the Schönefelder Höfe are not part of the racially stigmatized inner East. But tenants here still claimed that their *proximity* to Eisenbahnstraße was responsible for many of their issues. Blurring their different concerns, tenants' central worry became that 'Eisenbahnstraße will […] spill over into our neighborhood.' Tenants were profoundly worried about the bad influences they associated with the adjacent area. In their view, refugees, immigrants in general, but also left-wing activists 'better stay in Eisenbahnstraße.'

Some tenants found it was too late for that worry and drew strange parallels between graffiti, insecurity and foreigners. One interviewee said, 'foreigners are already everywhere. You will see it when you leave the house. Also, at the opposite building, there was graffiti

four weeks ago.' Following yet another conspiratorial assumption due to Vonovia's diversity-orientation determining the population development, 'They want foreigners here for cultural diversity.' Tenants oppose this with culturalist racism. 'We' and 'they' are, for example, distinguished with references to garbage disposal in the entire area, 'Since more foreigners live here […] how much trash is lying around!'

Our analysis reveals that the third party at the center of tenants' accusations can also be a spatialized 'disturbance from the outside.' For Vonovia's tenants this crystallizes in the fear that Eisenbahnstraße and the associated problems like criminal foreigners, trash, noise etc. appear as an imminent threat. Tenants in Eisenbahnstraße need to create this inside/outside border, as they live in the stigmatized neighborhood themselves. They do so by creatively demarcating themselves from the 'noisy, dangerous, immigrant' part of the neighborhood.

The moment when the irrational perception of a false antagonism ('an unrealistic conflict' between German and migrant tenants) overtakes the real antagonism ('a realistic conflict' between tenants and landlords) is often hard to grasp, and therefore difficult to address or criticize. This analytical difficulty is exacerbated by the common tendency of withdrawal by most elderly, white GDR-socialized tenants. They typically withdraw into their allotment, their marriage or their flat, a social isolation often interrelated with feelings of deep disappointment or an emotional state of feeling overwhelmed by the social experiences they collected post-reunification, described by our research participants as competitive, isolating and not based on solidarity, 'after the Wende […] everything was different, everyone was just concerned with getting their own house, a job, a car. […] Some people had work, and some didn't. Some had a car, and some didn't. So, everyone just looked after themselves, suddenly, everyone was competing with one another.' This parallels the perceived lack of community through the changing neighborhoods and makes new encounters and emerging relations improbable. In the following section, we turn to the tenants' initiative that emerged with the aim of countering this individualization of tenants and their struggles.

5. Intervention

To clarify our positionalities from the beginning, the following section, much like this entire piece, emerged from an ongoing dialogue between the two authors. Whereas Peter was a co-founder of the tenant initiative, Leon remained an observer from 'across the bridge', asking questions, stirring reflections, listening. In the following, we share the story of the Vonovia tenants' community and our current state of reflection, concerning residential alienation and its racist interpretations. With this aim, we question to what extent the organizing process was transformative in a double sense, with regards to residential alienation and its racist interpretations.

As mentioned previously, the Schönefelder Höfe were bought by Vonovia in 2017. In 2019 a group of activists from different spectrums of Leipzig's social movements, including Peter, began to discuss potential interventions. The group of about ten people previously active in feminist initiatives, the climate justice movement, housing politics and anti-racist activism was diverse in terms of age, but largely shared an academic background coupled

with the political conviction of 'leaving the bubble'. Considering Leipzig's social movement history, which is very much determined by 'campaign and event orientation' and leftist and antifascist subculture, the step towards community organizing was their choice of 'breaking with the tradition of making politics mainly for the movement itself.' Starting to meet regularly in 2019, the group intensively discussed transformative community organizing (TCO) approaches (Mann, 2011; Maruschke, 2014) and aimed at a process of collective organization and empowerment with tenants. They explicitly chose the Vonovia settlement hoping to eventually link their grounded local initiative with national (or even global) housing struggles. As the largest corporate landlord in Germany, Vonovia has a model function for the international real estate industry. 'Vonovia is to the reproduction sector, what the car industry is to the production sector' said Peter in one of our conversations, remembering the group's initial thoughts.

Knowing the neighborhood and accompanying their conscious choice to organize beyond left-wing academic circles, the organizers were prepared to meet politically diverse inhabitants when they began their first door-knocking walks in April 2019. Yet 'nobody would say that our central aim was talking to right-wingers.' Instead, 'we wanted to initiate a collective organizing process against Vonovia *with* tenants from the neighborhood. Where we were *also* prepared to meet political opinions, we'd disagree with.' After the first conflictual encounters, the core group organized an anti-racism workshop for its core members and familiarized themselves with strategic communication in response to racist articulations.

In the course of 2019, regular meetings with tenants began, with an average of 30 attendants. In the first one, the tenants chose the name 'tenants' community' for the initiative. Initially, these meetings were characterized by a clear distinction between the core organizing group, preparing the meetings, and tenants who attended with erratic complaints and occasional outbursts of collective outrage. In a few cases, these took on racist dimensions, when tenants began to rant about immigrant neighbors. Some attendants were even irritated about the entire set up, 'Why do you build a tenant initiative? You need to do something against the foreigners!' Another came to the first meeting 'because we need a neighborhood militia.' Although neglect in some places, unnecessary upgrading in others and increasing rents and housing costs were also complained about, some tenants shifted their anger to immigrants. Despite being bothered by Vonovia, a few were reluctant to speak out against them, 'I want my peace, the foreigners are already enough for me.' Others appreciated the initiative, but only when it was kept racially exclusive, 'great summer party you have organized. But why have you invited the Arabs?!'

Organizers of the tenants' community struggled with this in different ways. When reacting to *Stammtisch* politics (a discussion one would expect in a bar) it proved crucial to thoroughly consider context and moment. 'Organizing basically means to engage with different opinions and so we try to trust in the solidarity of collective action.' Therefore, the activists initially did not expect racist prejudice to be a deep conviction and political agenda but an element of social discourse that found its way in a person's daily routine. If it occurred during assemblies, the chair tried to bring the discussion back to Vonovia. The person who

dropped a racist comment was not lectured, but neither did the comment get much attention. Instead, breaks or smaller discussions were used for talking through stereotypes. 'This is far from easy since two essential ideas of organizing clash with each other: open-mindedness in addressing people and clarity in developing a common political understanding.' However, such difficult arguments, like about the offensive nature of certain expressions or the discrimination that immigrants face on the job and in the housing-market were understood in several instances. In other instances, tenants stopped coming to the meetings when confronted with disagreement.

Regarding the aim of collective empowerment, the main success perceived by the activists was an incipient dissolution of the organizer/tenants-division in the first year. Most palpable to the organizers was the change in the tenants' transforming ability to articulate their struggles. Whereas early meetings had been dominated by eclectic rants, throughout the year tenants began to voice their experiences, criticisms, needs and concerns with Vonovia in a way that allowed collective discussion, and planning of concrete strategies. These merged into different working groups engaging in media communication, networking with other groups and political stakeholders, or campaigning against the irregularities of the cost of utilities.

Probably the most prominent event resulting from this was a neighborhood walk in November 2019, initiated by Vonovia following repeated complaints. The group collectively prepared the walk, and on that day, some 50 tenants showed up. A sensation of collective power became palpable, manifesting in tenants' direct confrontation of the Vonovia representatives. 'The guy from Vonovia, the local manager, tried to somehow *moderate away* the critiques and turn the tenants' community into some kind of *concern management agency* with which they could cooperate. But the tenants got that, and they didn't take it,' an activist remembered.

Encouraged and inspired by this experience, tenants wanted to organize similar events. The activists interpreted this as a transformation process, in which the tenants began to perceive themselves more and more as political actors, instead of victims of Vonovia. A group of three to five tenants began to seek regular contact with the core group and proposed ideas for further action. One outcome was a collective complaint against Vonovia's abovementioned way of calculating auxiliary costs, and an even more radical idea was raising the question of organizing in favor of Vonovia's dispossession. 'They do it in Berlin, isn't that something we should consider?' It became clear, that a few tenants had started to follow the political developments and very active housing movements in Berlin, in particular the campaign for dispossession of large housing companies and perceived themselves as part of a wider struggle.

Thus, before the pandemic, the separation between the activist core group and tenants began to blur. As a result, a few tenants initiated additional working groups independently. Although this is good news in the logic of TCO, some of them, like a group dedicated to keeping the neighborhood clean, were perceived ambiguously by the activists. Touching back on the alienating loss of community highlighted above, this was a welcome chance for tenants to reconnect and gain a sense of collectivity. Yet simultaneously, for some the garbage-topic

was a welcome opportunity for racist outrage. Besides critically eying the exclusive sense of place coming with the 'totally overrated' garbage narratives, the activists feared cooptation of such initiatives by Vonovia, which could lead to a loss of the (trash) group's oppositional stance towards the company and turn them into service providers and 'complaint managers'.

When members of the initial core group openly challenged racist articulations in instances like this, a central limit was the conflict avoidance of tenants. 'Well, we just have different opinions on that', was the essence of a frequent response, with which tenants signaled that they stood with their racist convictions but were not willing to discuss them. Instead, they wanted to leave these 'disagreements' aside and keep the cooperation going.

Amid preparations for the European Housing Action Day at the end of March 2020, COVID-19 hit Leipzig. Trying to keep the tenants' community alive while facing lockdown and social distancing regulations, the core organizers published a neighborhood community newspaper, broadcasted a radio show and established a phone chain. Although this successfully 'held the initiative alive' until summer, it also reinforced the separation between organizers and tenants. This manifested, inter alia, in the effort to draft an open letter to Vonovia. The organizers' attempt to ask every group member for his or her opinion through the phone chain, triggered several debates about racism and populism. More than once, the discussion became heated when talking about the demand for providing homeless people with apartments. Tenants felt betrayed by the idea that people would get something without giving something in return, while they, hard-working and modest, paid high rents. In the eyes of an activist, these disputes ended in an unsatisfactory manner, 'Several tenants just decided that we should agree to disagree.' Hence, they ended the conflict without solving it and 'allowed' the final version of the letter, without actively agreeing to, or vetoing it. This experience increased the divisions between organizers and tenants, instead of blurring it.

After a few assemblies under COVID-conditions in summer, the second lockdown finally brought another hard blow to the initiative. The organizer's enthusiasm for the first lockdown was slowly giving away, 'I think because everyone just personally struggles with COVID and the lockdown.' Despite video calls in the organizing committee, maintaining contact with the tenants was increasingly difficult due to their age and lack of media affinity.

6 Conclusion

Aiming to contribute to the discussion on the conjunction of housing commodification and rightist resentments, we have shown in detailed analysis how racist coping with residential alienation depends on the mediation between everyday experience and wide-spread patterns of interpretation of social change. To pin this mediation down, we have employed the concept of residential alienation as a linkage between structural urban restructuring and daily life. Following our central hypothesis, we have illuminated how residential alienation impacted people's sense of place on different scales. Drawing from experiences in two adjacent yet quite distinct neighborhoods, we have demonstrated that daily experiences of residential alienation are similar – they imply a disturbance to tenants' attachment to place, be it through neglect and displacement pressure in their buildings,

disappearing spaces of encounter, or a changing population in their neighborhoods. Contextualizing our findings, we have argued that the interrelated withdrawal, individualization, and loss of community also has a temporal notion to it, with long term tenants interpreting urban changes with a sense of restorative nostalgia out of lack of a perceivable future. This ties back to alienation and isolation on yet another scale, tenants' post-GDR experiences and their respective retreat and feeling of loss. Our research reveals how residential alienation can bring about a *state of separation*, both between tenants and 'their' spaces, and between tenants within a building/neighborhood.

We have found this separation to frequently be interpreted in a racist manner among elderly, long-time residents. Through authoritarian mechanisms of scapegoating, tenants in our case studies have dumped the responsibility for their alienating experiences to perceived 'others', immigrants and refugees. Whilst their anger against landlords found no concrete addresses, their immigrant neighbors seemed easy targets. Yet this scapegoating of different kinds is no effective challenge to residential alienation, neither on a structural nor on a psychosocial level.

In contrast, several activists' initiation of transformative community organizing revived a sense of both community and political effectiveness among tenants. Dialoguing Peter's intimate involvement with Leon's outsider perspective, we have critically examined the transformative potential of the tenants' community as an attempt to collectively challenge residential alienation through common struggle. Whereas prior to the pandemic, the activists perceived a sense of transformation concerning tenants' collective empowerment, the development of relations of solidarity and the incipient dissolution of the differentiation between organizers and attendants, confrontations with racist attitudes among several tenants remained a continuous tightrope walk. With some tenants leaving the initiative and others silently enduring 'diverging views', the activists remained challenged by the contradicting requirements of building trust, remaining open-minded and developing a clear-cut, anti-racist collective political understanding.

Linking these experiences back to the initial debates on right wing populism and the potential of intervention, we would like to stress the activists' priority of organizing against local yet structural neglect in the wake of housing commodification, with the part of 'talking to right-wingers' being an almost unavoidable byproduct of 'leaving the bubble' in an East-German context. Paying tribute to both the slow temporality and messy realities on the ground, we consider our reflection to be a work in process that cannot tell 'right' from 'wrong' strategies. Instead, we must acknowledge uncomfortable difficulties and try to work our way through them collectively, whilst always staying alert to the potential threats scapegoating can imply.

Lastly, the ongoing pandemic reality has only exacerbated the context-dependency of local activism. Whereas COVID-19 issued a major blow to the tenants' initiative, we have tried to make use of this period as activists and academics to keep up our dialogue. Since the first lockdown in Leipzig, our collective reflection became part of a wider discussion forum with other community organizers and activists in Leipzig's inner East, where we regularly talk about our initiatives, share our experiences, critiques and questions and think about

common future strategies. This is a small yet relevant step within the ongoing delicate, ambiguous, non-linear and gradual process of contesting rightist resentment whilst organizing with tenants.

Acknowledgements

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