Mapping out Europe's Spatiality

Using the Concept of Spatial Figures to Deconstruct European Spatial Arrangements

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Towards Decolonizing Social-Science Theory

In recent decades, scholars have made an argument for decolonizing the social sciences. This argument has been made so often that the necessity for taking postcolonial perspectives into account has become common knowledge in the social sciences. Today, the question is no longer *if*, but *how* should this be done? As I have argued in Baur (2021), this would mean changing social-science research practice and does not only have implications on social-science methodology and methods (Baur 2021; Baur et al. 2021) but also on theory (Amelina et al. 2021). When reflecting on the relationship of social-science theory and methodology, the distinction between social theories (*Sozialtheorien*), middle-range theories (*Theorien begenzter Reichweite*) and theories of societies (*Gesellschaftstheorien*) has proven useful (Baur 2009, p. 10).

a) *Social Theories* include Martina Löw's (2016) "sociology of space," Hubert Knoblauch's (2019) "theory of communicative constructionism," or Norbert Elias' (1978) "figuration sociology." They contain general concepts about what society is, which concepts are central to analysis (for example, actions, interactions, communication), what the nature of reality is, what assumptions must be made in order to grasp this reality (which in turn is a prerequisite for empirical social research), and how theory and data can be linked.
b) *Middle-range theories* concentrate on a specific thematic field, a historical period, and a geographical region. For example, in Baur and Kulke (2023), we have shown that since industrialization, European cities such as Berlin have been characterized by horizontal hierarchical territorialization: People typically live in core families of the same social class, and the social classes are typically segregated into different neighborhoods. Both people's homes and shops for everyday

needs are nested within these neighborhoods which, in turn, are nested within the city which is physically and institutionally demarcated from rural areas and linked internally by transport infrastructure for commuters between home and work (Kulke and Baur 2021). In turn this effects, for example, how food markets are organized: For food retailers, competition is limited to other retailers in the neighborhood, all market segments can be found in all neighborhoods, and the same retailing company will offer a different product range in different neighborhoods (Baur and Kulke 2023, pp. 187–188; Baur 2023). This theoretical model is only valid for food markets (thematic field) since industrialization (historical period) in European cities (geographical region).

c) *Theories of societies* characterize complete societies by integrating results from various studies to a larger theoretical picture. In other words, they build on middle-range theories and further abstract them. For example, Löw (2022) has suggested to investigate processes of spatial reordering and restructuring of society since the 1960s as "refiguration of spaces."

Note that the distinction between social theories, middle-range theories and theories of societies is somewhat fluent. For example, Löw herself sometimes uses the concept of "refiguration of spaces" as a social theory. In this case, as part of her spatial theory, she discusses how social processes can be understood via space (Löw 2023). In other writings, Löw synthesizes the results of the diverse projects of the Collaborative Research Center "Re-Figuration of Spaces" (CRC 1265 2023), which themselves have the status of middle-range theories, such as the aforementioned theory on markets (Baur and Kulke 2023; Baur 2023). When synthesizing, Löw (2022) uses "refiguration of spaces" as a theory of society in order to diagnose how the intertwined processes of translocalization, mediatization and polycontexturalization have driven social change since the 1960s (Knoblauch and Löw 2020). This is a typical example, of how advancing social theories, middle-range theories and theories of societies is often an iterative cycle and closely linked to social research; theory building thus resembles the research process suggested by grounded theory (Marguin and Knoblauch 2021).

Regardless, when thinking about *how* to decolonize sociological theory, most scholars have written about social theory. Nevertheless, this seems to be the lesser challenge: Most social theories seem to work quite well in various spatial contexts. Rather, the real challenge are *middle-range theories* and the theories of societies deduced from them. Over the last two hundred years, the vast majority of social-science research has been conducted by scholars from the Global North who have mostly focused on their own countries as case studies in their empirical work. This means that most middle-range theories are theories about Anglo-Saxon and European societies (Amelina et al. 2021). Regardless, most social-science debates assume that these societies are the "norm" and middle-range theories developed

for these societies can be transferred – with no or only slight modifications – to the rest of the world (Baur 2021, pp.205–206). In contrast, my own field experience in over sixty countries points to the contrary: The more I travel, the more I believe that the "rest of the world" is the "norm" and Anglo-Saxon and European societies are the exception (Baur 2021, pp. 213–214).

If I am right, this would imply that we are at the beginning of an enormous endeavor because it would mean that we would have to redo most of our middle-range theories and theories of society. A first step would be to purposefully select more diverse social contexts, to deconstruct them and to construct middle-range theories for these specific social contexts. This would include a reflection about which social fields, historical times and geographical regions these middle-range theories could be generalized to.

By comparing spatial arrangements of food markets in Berlin, Singapore and Nairobi, we have shown in Baur and Kulke (2023) how fruitful but also how important such an endeavor is: The whole spatial arrangement of the cities differed so much, that comparing these spatial arrangements was only possible on a theoretical and qualitative level; in contrast, on a quantitative level, the cities are incommensurable. This is important, as the spatial arrangement did affect how the food market was organized. However, our analysis also revealed that one of the obstacles against doing more of this type of analyses, is that Anglo-Saxon and European concepts are deeply engrained into social-science thinking about the social, and especially about space. In this, most scholars are not even aware that they are using culturally specific concepts. Moreover, many of these concepts are so deeply rooted in and prestructured by European history and embedded in everyday knowledge and social routines, that for Europeans and Anglo-Saxons, they are so hard to tackle that they become blind spots. In contrast, for non-Europeans, they are hard to tackle because these historical cultural roots are rarely made explicit; this ironically means that, in order to decolonize, we also need to take European and Anglo-Saxon contexts more seriously as *specific* contexts and to deconstruct them in order to make them comparable with social contexts of other world regions.

In order to both elaborate this point but also to provide a first step towards developing a basis for decolonizing social-science concepts, in this paper, I will argue (with a special empirical focus on Germany) that our current thinking about the relationship between the economy and space is strongly rooted in the spatial arrangement of Continental Europe in the Middle Ages and early modern era (before industrialization). I will show that with the concept of "topological spatial figures," which Martina Löw (2020) has introduced as part of her social theory, she has provided a powerful analytical tool for deconstructing spatial arrangements. Note that I argue ideal-typically. In other words, while I am well aware that "Europe" itself is not homogenous but rather, there are Multiple Europes (Boatcă 2015), I will oversimplify by

ignoring within-European variation and non-linear historical processes, as in this paper, I aim at comparing Europe's spatiality with that of other world regions.

Topological Spatial Figures and their Spatial Logic

As soon one includes "space" into sociological analysis, it becomes obvious that social interactions always take place *somewhere*. In other words, each social context has a specific extension in physical space: its *spatial arrangement* (*Raumanordnung*) which is organized according to a specific *spatial logic* (*Raumlogik*), creating a specific *topological spatial figure* (*topologische Raumfigur*) (Baur 2023). In order to keep up interactions along the chain of interdependence, actors have to accommodate to these respective spatial logics (Löw 2020; Baur 2023). As part of her social theory, Löw (2020) has introduced four spatial figures: the space of place, territorial space, network space and the space of routes (also trajectory space, space of pathways), all of which are needed for grasping the specifics of Europe's spatiality and each of which describes a different aspect of this spatiality which is important, at least for untangling economic processes.

Space of Place: Logic of Intersection

Spaces of place (*Ortsräume*) follow a logic of intersection (*Logik der Überlappung*) (Löw 2020, Baur 2023). Typical examples are *public spaces* – like market squares – or the *home* (Kibel et al. 2024). In most of Europe, the "home" is so conceptually entangled with the "household" and "family" that it is even hard to distinguish them verbally. For example, in German language, "family" (*Familie*) and "household" (*Haushalt*, literally: "holding and running a house") are typically used synonymously. Likewise, (*Wohnort*, literally: "place of living") can either be used synonymously with *Haushalt* or with (*Wohn-)Gemeinde* (literally: "community one is living in"). Likewise, the *Haushalt* resides in its "home" which can be translated either as *Heim* or as *Zuhause* or as *Haus* (which in turn can also be translated as "house"). This not only underlines the importance of the space of place of the home for European everyday life but also points to the fact that the physical representation of this space of place was always a house in which household members' everyday lives intersected.

However, one has to keep in mind that up to industrialization, households were structured very differently than today: Both in rural and urban areas, the household was both a family and business unit, which on the one hand, aimed at producing legitimate offspring, on the other hand, aimed to ensure the family's economic livelihood (Ernst 1996); a goal that household members pursued jointly. Within these units of reproduction, all classes cohabitated, and therefore, their lives intersected.

The household and family business was headed by the male *Hausherr* ("homeowner", "lord of the house", "patriarch") who ruled over and protected his wife, children, servants, and serfs (Kibel et al. 2024). Both genders worked, but if work involved traveling – such as long-distance trade – this was typically a male job, while women mostly took over the kitchen, housekeeping, and other domestic work (Baur et al. 2019).

While household members might have different tasks and accordingly, traverse space in very different ways, their everyday lives all intersected at the *home*. Within the home, two rooms were especially important spaces of place: The *sales room*, where family members were doing business with customers (that is, non-household members) but have since been also used as a place for socializing, gossiping and the like (Hering 2022), and the *kitchen*, which was the heart of any home, symbolized with the "stove" (*Herd*) being another synonym for the home. The kitchen was typically not only the place for cooking and for eating, but it was also a place for conducting other household tasks that could be done inside, for watching the children, for playing, for resting, for exchanging news, for building and reinforcing community, for warming yourself up – both emotionally and (in winter) physically at the stove – and so on.

Territorial Space: Logic of Demarcation

Methodological and Theoretical Implications of Territorial Thinking

Territorial spaces (*Territorialräume*) follow a logic of demarcation (*Logik der Grenzziehung*) (Löw 2020; Baur 2023), and demarcation is often enforced by powerful actors (Boatcă 2010). Many sociologists of space have argued that territorial spaces are so typical for Europe that Europeans have a hard time to think of space as other than territorial, especially on the scale of nation-states. This has been often termed as "methodological nationalism" (Weiß 2017; Manderscheid 2021). But the logic of demarcation is not limited to the nation-state; on the contrary, it starts on the much lower scale of individual rooms. In other words, one can definitively say that in Europe, *spaces of place* like the home, shops and public spaces are typically *embedded into territorial spaces* which are in turn marked by physical boundaries, and in physical space, the *distinction between spaces of place and territorial spaces often becomes fluid*. For example, in a European home, the kitchen is not only a space of place but also a *room* and therefore a territory with physical boundaries (walls, doors, windows) demarking it from other territories (that is rooms).

Moreover, *territories of smaller scale are typically nested into territories of larger scale*, resembling smaller boxes fitting into larger boxes like Russian dolls. For example, a room is part of a flat or house, which is part of a village or city, which is part of a region, which is part of a national state, which is part of Europe. This might be

one of the reasons, why – in contrast to Anglo-Saxons and Non-Europeans – many Continental Europeans have layered identities – *Zuhause* (home) might be both your own room or your house or your home village or town, but also your home region or Germany or Europe.

In social-science research practice, *territorial thinking reflects in (especially quantitative) methodology*. For example, in Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) – a common quantitative method for *data analysis* often used in spatial analysis – cases (such as people or goods) are assigned to a location (place) which is nested in territories of different scales, but a prerequisite of the method is that each case can only be assigned to one location and each location/territory of smaller scale is embedded in one – and only one – territory of larger scale (Pötschke 2006). Similarly, both the institutions and infrastructure for *data collection* in survey research (Baur 2014) and for public administrative data (Manderscheid 2021) are organized along the lines of neighborhoods, cities, region and/or the nation-state. Likewise, the whole strategy of *random sampling* builds on the principles of territorialization – random samples are *always* drawn from a clearly demarcated population. While this would not be necessary, the population is typically assumed to consist of immobile cases within a (spatially, temporarily and substantially) demarcated territory (Baur and Christmann 2024). This has far-reaching consequences for sociological theory. First, the whole strategy of *generalization* in quantitative research builds on random sampling: Inferential statistics always generalize results of the population the random sample was drawn from (Baur and Christmann 2024). Secondly, any variables used for the definition of the population – such as space – cannot be used for explanations in the sense of *causal analysis* (Ragin 2000; Baur 2018).

Immobility within the Home Territory

In a European context, this way of thinking about people actually makes sense for many research questions: *Historically, the majority of Europeans stayed put* – most people were born in and typically either married within their own community or – if they were women – sometimes moved to the neighboring community, and this is where they died. Even today, 60 percent of Germans have never left their home community and another four percent live within half an hour commuting time to their mother's home at the age of 35 (Marquardt 2018).

There are several reasons for Europeans being so closely tied to home, which was also their territory. Firstly, in medieval Europe, travelling was actually extremely dangerous – imagine medieval Europe being mostly wild forests void of ordinary people but with many lingering dangers, such as predators or robbers. Moving around increased the danger of getting killed quite considerably (Duby 1985, pp. 11–12).

Secondly, agricultural production techniques weren't very advanced yet, so a lot of the land couldn't be cultivated. Accordingly, around 1500, productivity was so low that 90 percent of the population were needed for agricultural production (Hirschfelder 2018, p. 5). Therefore, once you were living on fertile land, there was a strong incentive to stay put.

Third, due to the manifold outside dangers, communities needed to defend themselves which gave a strong incentive to demarcate one's territory by drawing both symbolic and physical boundaries. Once a distinct warrior class – the nobles – were introduced for defending these boundaries, they increased these physical dangers by not only defending their communities from outside dangers but also by waging wars against each other in order to increase their respective territories, thus starting the process of nation-building. In the course of European history, feudal lords were not only conquering more and more lands, but also defending and fighting over the territories. So, one of the key logics in the European process of refiguration has always been how to defend and fortify one's territory (Elias 2000 [1939]). Likewise, from an economic angle, cities were centers for ensuring business interests (Hammel-Kiesow et al. 2021, pp. 40–52), and accordingly, artisan crafts (*Zünfte*) and merchant guilds (*Gilden*) (Pirenne 1937 [1933], pp. 167–188; Planitz 1997, pp. 283–295) demarcated and protected their markets both from outside competitors and noble lords (Hammel-Kiesow et al. 2021, pp. 70–90), thus reinforcing territorial logics.

In addition, Simmel (1996 [1901]) has argued, that territory, politics (the state, its institutions and military) and the economy are intrinsically linked and mutually reinforce each other over time: In order to defend and/or expand their territory, European feudal lords needed to keep up a military. In order to pay for the military, they had to keep up or – if possible – increase economic productivity. In order to keep up economic interactions, people need to trust into them. This trust is usually higher within a territorial state with stable institutions. Therefore, according to Simmel (1996), historically, economic spaces of production are always limited to and embedded into the political (territorial) spaces. For this reason, feudal lords considered their citizens as a resource which is why they did everything to keep their population in place – in most rural areas, until the Prussian Reforms in 1806/07, people were serfs bound to the land and were not allowed to leave their homelands (Pirenne 1937, pp. 57–85), and the feudal lords could reinforce people's immobility both legally and physically, as they were the only ones trained in fighting.

Rural-Urban-Divides

All these factors contributed to the majority of the medieval European population to remain immobile within their home territory. Another characteristic of Europe's territorial spaces are the enormous *urban-rural differences*: As a result of this rein-

forced immobility and low productivity, before industrialization, most of Europe consisted of *rural territories* ruled by feudal lords (living in castles or monasteries) and inhabited by peasants (living in villages) doing subsistence farming.

Sprinkled between these vast rural areas were a small number of *cities* which were intrinsically linked to the rural areas, as they needed to be fed by the surrounding villages and in turn provided goods the villages could not produce themselves – either by producing them themselves or by trading them with other cities. Most importantly, cities were a completely different type of territory: They were a distinct political entity with their own social, economic and, political and administrative system with their own legislation, defense system and institutions (Pirenne 1937, pp. 49–56; Planitz 1997, pp. 295–503), including citizens being free to move around Europe freely (Planitz 1997, pp. 51–282). Economically, cities had different functions than rural areas, both serving as trade nodes and commercial production centers. This double function was reflected in urban dwellers' typical professions – as either merchants (*Kaufleute, Händler*) or artisans (*Handwerker*) – and their respective institutional representation – guilds and crafts (Pirenne 1937, pp. 167–188; Planitz 1997, pp. 283–295).

Figure 1: Dinkelsbühl as an Example for Rural-Urban Divides and Cities as a Distinct Territory

Urban and rural areas are clearly demarcated by town walls and the river and at the same time related to each other as well as linked by bridges and city gates.

Cities' distinctiveness reflected in their physical form, as Dinkelsbühl in Southern Germany exemplifies: As Figure 1 illustrates, the *borders* to the surrounding rural areas were marked by buildings (town) being surrounded by fields and forests in the countryside (rural areas). Cities had to be easily defensible, by being located on a hill and/or surrounded by a river and/or moat, which was complemented by a town wall (Planitz 1997, pp. 184–204, pp. 220–250). As can be seen when looking at any map of

current Dinkelsbühl (for example Google Maps), this historic urban structure can be seen, even today in European cities unharmed by war, because since industrialization, new urban structures have been typically only added outside these historical territorial boundaries.

Medieval cities were not only distinct from the outside, they also had a very specific *internal structure*. The town center typically consisted of the market square – the center of commerce and trade (Planitz 1997, pp. 184–204, pp. 220–250) – which originally also served as burial ground (before it was moved outside of town) (Ariès (1991 [1977]), and was surrounded by the town hall, church, guild halls and patricians' houses. The homes (businesses) of all members of a craft were typically assigned to the same street which was pragmatically named for that craft. The more prestigious a craft was, the closer its street was typically to the market place.

Network Space: Logic of Linkage

This doesn't mean that people didn't move around in space. In contrast to common belief, mobility was almost higher in the Middle Ages than today (Duby 1985, pp. 17–23), and in moving around, they linked places and thus spanned a network space (*Netzwerkraum*) (Löw 2020; Baur 2023). As most people were so strongly tied to their home (space of place) within their community (territorial space), two types of network spaces can be distinguished in European everyday life at least since the Middle Ages, and these are so self-evident even today, that they are reflected in disciplinary divide within Sociology.

Local Mobility within Territorial Spaces

Mobility studies, sociology of transport, sociology of work and related fields focus – if at all – on *everyday commuting of the resident population within their community*, for example when during daytime, consumers leave their home to go shopping in their city and – in doing so – link different spaces of place at different locations, such as bakers, butchers, vegetable stores, tailors, shoemakers, smiths etc. on the market square or in different shops (Baur 2023). In the evenings, urban men would also go to their guild or craft hall and especially unmarried apprentices and journeymen might visit an inn (*Gasthof*, *Gasthaus*) or brewery (*Brauhaus*) (Schindler et al. 2013, pp. 112, 170) in order to drink, eat, socialize, exchange information, gossip and do politics. In the villages, commuting would be reserved to market days – when they had to go to the next town to sell goods and buy necessities, they couldn't self-produce – or fair days, when wandering folk would come to the villages (Pirenne 1937, pp. 96–101). What only was introduced during industrialization was additional commuting between home and work (Baur 2023). Note that network spaces, spaces of place, and territo-

ries are linked in European everyday practice: While borders might be important for demarcating the external boundaries of territorial spaces, the network spaces created by people in their everyday mobility are important for connecting and linking places and creating a joint identity within these territories. Everyday mobility also contributed to linking different territories, for example when on market days, farmers commuted to town to exchange their produce for goods, thus partly overcoming and dissolving the rural-urban divides.

Translocal Mobility between Territorial Spaces

Sociology of migration focuses on *long-distance mobility between territorial spaces*. While in the Middle Ages and early modern times, most of the European population never left their home villages or towns, there were actually very specific strata of the population who basically led a *temporarily or permanent nomadic life* (Duby 1985, pp. 17–23). While ethnic groups with a permanently nomadic lifestyle – the so-called traveling folk such as the Sinti and Roma – typically travelled with their whole community (including women and children) and were constructed as outside of society and located at the bottom of the social ladder, medieval mobility was otherwise highly *gendered*: Women of other social and ethnic groups typically only moved between territories when they married, but more often than not only to the next neighboring village. The majority of the longer-distance travelers typically were *male elite travelers*. Male mobility was reinforced by the fact that until the Prussian reforms (1806/07), men were only allowed to marry, if they had a full position enabling to them to provide a family income. Due to low productivity, there were only two ways of gaining a full position: Either your father died – then typically, the eldest son or – if there wasn't a son – the "Altgeselle" (eldest, that is most experienced journeyman) would inherit the deceased's position. Alternatively, younger sons needed to conquer new territories – either militarily (nobles) or economically (merchants) and thus create their own positions before they could marry, thus driving the refiguration of spaces in the sense of both nation-building and expanding "Europe," eventually to the point of colonization.

The mobile Europeans linked and connected places and territories and, in doing so, transferred knowledge and fostered constant cultural exchange between these places and territories and helped in constructing – despite all local and regional variation – a cultural homogeneity (Duby 1985, pp. 17–23) that spanned from Tromsø in the North to Limassol in the South and from Lisboa in the West to Tiflis in the East. This cultural homogeneity is one of the characteristics of the spatiality of "Europe" and distinguishes it from other world regions. More precisely, three different trans-European network spaces were loosely interlinked and created by different types of people.

The *rural areas* were firstly linked by the *travelling folk* who typically wandered from village to village for market days and village fairs, providing villagers with news, entertainment and smaller services – such as shoemaking or healthcare – and goods that could not be self-produced. In addition, rulers and higher-rank clergy (both of which were typically *nobles*) moved from domain to domain with their retinues. Either they were waging war and trying to conquer other territories, or in times of peace, the rulers of larger territories *had* to move because food production was not high enough to feed their retinues for more than a couple of days (Duby 1985). Resembling today's superrich global elite, medieval European nobles created a kind of superstructure reinforcing Europe's cultural unity (Duby 1977, p. 7). Until the eleventh century, all the important political (secular or spiritual) positions were in the hands of a small group of nobles who all belonged to an even smaller set of families and therefore shared the same upbringing, met regularly and felt bound together by tradition, family ties and shared work (Duby 1985, pp. 17–23), language (French) and highbrow culture (Elias 2000). This network space was mostly a *network space of politics and power*.

The higher-rank clergy not only contributed to linking rural areas but also to creating the *network space of religion and academic knowledge*: Not only higher-rank but also lower-rank priests and monks traveled between the *monasteries* and thus served as carriers of knowledge, preserving knowledge from ancient Rome through the Middle Ages and laying the foundation of modern academic thought, as European universities originally evolved from monasteries (for example, Immanuel Kant's and Alexander von Humboldt's aim at abolishing church indoctrination and introducing modern philosophy and universities as new ways of knowledge production). Likewise, *pilgrims* from all social classes both from the rural and urban areas stepped out of their everyday routines and either travelled for a couple of days to local or regional pilgrimage sites, or went on several-month long-distance pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Rome or Santiago, and along the way, were hosted by monasteries.

When on the move, nobility also often passed or even owned cities, thus contributing to linking cities. However, the *network space of the economy and applied knowledge* was mostly created by artisans and merchants: Once *artisans* had finished their apprenticeship, they became journeymen (*Gesellen*) and, since the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, travelling for one to four years (*Wanderjahre*) was mandatory in order to ensure knowledge transfer between cities (Schindler et al. 2013, p. 112). While artisans eventually tried to settle down, being constantly on the move in order to transport goods along commodity chains was part of merchants' lifestyles (Hammel-Kiesow et al. 2021, pp. 20–29, pp. 91–109).

Space of Routes: Logic of Transit

In addition to the classical spatial figures – place, territory, network – Martina Löw (2020) introduced a fourth spatial figure: *Bahnenraum* ("the space of routes", "space of pathways", "trajectory space") (Baur 2023). While "place" and "territory" are both associated with immobility and linked to each other (as discussed above), "network" and "route" are both associated with mobility and also linked to each other. Note that – as the concept of "space of routes" is still new – it in itself as well as its relationship to and distinction from the other spatial figures still need to be fleshed out in future research. Regardless, the spatial figure has proved helpful especially for grasping economic processes (Baur 2023), as there are some structural differences between networks and routes: Network spaces follow a logic of linking and connecting. It doesn't so much matter where mobility starts and ends – it is more important, which places are linked and that in connecting, an identity is created between these places. So in the terminology of the quantitative method of social network analysis (SNA) (Hanneman and Riddle 2005), network space focusses on nodes (such as cities), and bridges and paths (such as roads) do only matter because they link nodes.

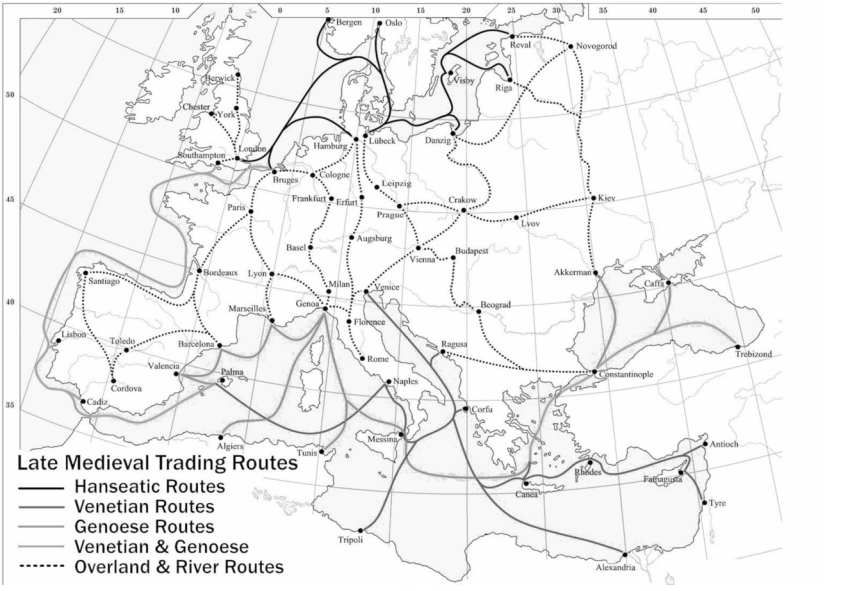
In contrast, spaces of routes follow a logic of transit (*Logik der Durchquerung*) (Löw 2020): Actors aim at traversing space in order to get from a point of origin to a destination as fast and efficiently as possible. For example, while travelers might have spanned a medieval European network of elite culture, common cultures were still locally distinct. Likewise, Europe was divided into manifold economic regions which all had their specific specialties. Even then, qualified workers and their knowledge of specific production techniques gave regions a competitive advantage for producing specific kinds of product, resulting in it being worthwhile to first transport raw materials to these localities and then to transport processed goods to consumer markers (Hammel-Kiesow 2014), thus driving economic growth (Duby 1977, pp. 11–12). Merchants organized transportation of goods along *commodity chains*, following a logic of transit (Löw 2020; Baur 2023): For commodity chains to function, it didn't matter so much of *how* the goods got their destination and which places they passed on the way, as long they *got* there, and in order to get there, the path itself didn't matter as long as it fulfilled its function. In the terminology of the quantitative method of social network analysis (SNA) (Hanneman and Riddle 2005), the space of routes focusses on bridges and routes. Nodes (such as cities) do only matter, if they are needed to link and synthetize otherwise separate specific bridges (such as roads) to a route.

While network space has a potentially random nature – travelers might pass space any way they want to and link any place with any other on a whim – the space of routes isn't arbitrary at all. Rather the space of routes resembles a trodden path (Hecht and Kirchner 2023). The necessity of such a fixed route becomes immediately apparent when looking at medieval Europe: As most of Europe was wilderness, trav-

eling was dangerous and slow. Therefore, it was always faster and safer to travel on known sea passages, rivers and canals and, if necessary, on land roads (Hammel-Kiesow et al. 2021, pp.110–135; Kenzler and Möllers w. y., pp. 16–24; Pirenne 1937, pp. 86–95). While for merchants, the cities on the route were not important in themselves, it was important that there *were* cities in between because they needed to rest and restock at some time. In addition, there were political obstacles such as tolls, which needed to be circumvented as much as possible. Therefore, merchants typically traded goods along very specific set *trade routes*.

In order to share information, protect themselves physically and politically and to negotiate favorable terms with nobles and cities, merchants typically *organized* themselves, resulting in the Medieval space of routes being subdivided into several *sub-segments*, each of which was organized and protected by a different association (Figure 2), amongst them the merchant organization of Hansa (*Hanse*) (Hammel-Kiesow 2014; Hammel-Kiesow et al. 2021), the towns of Venice and Genoa as well as the trading families of Welsers and Fuggers (Häberlein 2016). At the Borders of Europe's spatiality, they linked to other *transnational trade routes*, such as the silk road.

Figure 2: Spaces of Routes: Interlinked Medieval Trade Routes



Map showing the main trade routes of late medieval Europe. The black lines show the routes of the Hanseatic League, the dark grey Venetian and the Southern light grey Genoese routes. Western light grey lines are routes used by both the Venetians and the Genoese. Overland and river routes are stippled.

In other words, while network spaces point to knowledge transfer and building joint identities, the space of routes points to the challenge of keeping up long and complex chains of interdependence with many involved actors (Elias 2012 [1971]) despite actors' lack of knowledge about the overall route (Baur 2023). Although this theoretical and empirical work has yet to be done in research, the space of routes can likely be conceived as a socio-technological system (Bijker et al. 1987, Bijker 1995) with interlinked infrastructures (Bowker and Leigh Star 2006), institutions, and organizations which allows for distributed action (Schulz-Schaeffer and Rammert 2019). Once in place, spaces of route are often quite enduring. For example, some trade routes important for current global economy have been in place for centuries, or even millennia.

Conflicts between Spatial Figures and Multiple Spatialities

Spatial Figures and Spatial Conflicts

As can be seen from the above discussion, the four topological spatial figures Martina Löw introduced as part of her social theory follow different logics of action (*Handlungslogiken*) and therefore might put conflicting demands on people. In every economic situation between producers (such as farmers or artisans), intermediaries (such as merchants), and consumers, typically several spatial figures are relevant simultaneously. In markets, spatial knowledge is therefore by default polycontextural (Baur 2023), and if spatial figures put conflicting demands on actors, cognitive dissonances arise which must be resolved for them to be able to act.

In ongoing empirical research, together with other researchers, I have been analyzing for current food commodity chains, which topological spatial figures are relevant to whom, when, how, why and with what consequences in specific economic situations, how different spatial figures entwine, conflict, and how these conflicts are resolved. The cases I have studied in my own field work range from Berlin to Singapore, Nairobi (Kenya), Gaborone (Botswana), Windhoek (Namibia) and Pretoria (South Africa). Elmar Kulke (2023) has contrasted Berlin, Singapore, and Nairobi with small island economies in the Caribbean (Antigua, Dominica, Grenada, St. Lucia, St. Vincent) and South Pacific (Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Vanuatu). Both of us can also compare the cases we have analyzed in more detail concerning food commodity chains with many more contexts from all world regions which we have travelled to and ethnographically explored over the last decades, thus allowing being quite confident when we have reached theoretical saturation and when we will need more field work. We also have conducted joint field work and discussed findings with colleagues from various world regions.

For the ongoing joint research, one analytical strategy was to follow the commodity chain and to ask: How are the contexts of production, sales and consumption intertwined in different social contexts? In Kulke et al. (2022), we have focused on spatial logics of agricultural production in Nairobi. In Baur and Kulke (2023), we have analyzed how the context of sales (territorial space) and the commodity chain (space of routes) are linked in Berlin, Nairobi, and Singapore. In Kibel et al. (2024), we showed how the home (space of place) and the context of sales (territorial space) are linked differently in Nairobi and Berlin and how class and gender intersect differently.

Our empirical analyses underline that Martina Löw's social theory of space and her concept of "topological spatial figures" is a powerful tool for decolonizing middle-range theories: For all social contexts studied, we could show that all spatial figures suggested by Martina Löw are relevant and important for understanding specific aspects of food commodity chains. In all social contexts, there were spatial conflicts between these spatial figures, namely between territorial space (neighborhood), space of routes (commodity chain), space of place (home or place of sales) and network space (paths which individual consumers and vendors take in order to link the different spaces). We could also confirm earlier findings (Baur 2023) that actors resolve conflicts between different spatial figures through non-knowledge. Despite this non-knowledge, chains of interdependence are upheld by symbols, social institutions and material infrastructure (objectifications).

Multiple Spatialities: Different Ways of Resolving Social Conflicts

However – and this is a new insight – different social contexts such as cities differ in *how* the spatial figures are entwined and conflict as well as how conflicts between different spatial figures are resolved, resulting in very specific spatial arrangements in each of these multiple spatialities. The *social-theoretical concept* of "multiple spatialities" (Knoblauch and Löw 2021, Knoblauch 2022) stresses that "various spaces studied cannot be regarded as isolatable units. Rather, they are interrelated and interwoven in multiple ways" (CRC 1265 2023, p. 27); they are entangled and interconnected. The concept of multiple spatialities stresses this relational interconnectivity, focuses on the differences, divergences, and what is distributed across spaces as asynchronicity of social and cultural developments which take place in space simultaneously (Knoblauch 2022; CRC 1265 2023, p. 29). "Methodologically, multiple spatialities allow us to ask about the cultural and social convergences and divergences of spatial refiguration on different scales without presupposing spaces as separate and independent units. With the concept of multiple spatialities, we instead assume their relational interdependence but also take into account the potentially conflictual diversity of spatial knowledge, spatial action, and spatial regimes, in order to adequately describe and ultimately understand them" (CRC 1265 2023, p. 4).

By using these social-theoretical concepts for identifying, describing and synthetizing the key properties of these spatialities, we were able to construct *middle-range theories about specific spatialities*, which properties can be condensed to what Silke Steets calls topographic spatial figures (topographische Raumfiguren). For example, *Berlin* – and most likely most other cities in both in Europe and North America – resolve conflicts between different topological spatial figures by arranging space in the topographic spatial figure of *horizontal hierarchical territorialization*. The shops (territory 1a and simultaneously space of place) and the home (territory 1b and simultaneously space of place) are nested into neighborhoods (territory 2, characterized by a typical social class) which are nested in the city (territory 3) which is physically and institutionally demarcated from rural areas and linked internally by transport infrastructure for commuters between home and work (space of routes). In contrast, *Singapore* – and most likely many other major East-Asian cities – also follows this logic of nested territoriality, but is characterized by *vertical hierarchical territorialization*, with each housing block being a neighborhood and the hawker market (which is closely attached to a transport hub) the center of the quarter. *Nairobi* – and most likely many other Sub-Saharan-African cities – is a *(fragmented) multinodal urban arrangement* with various multilayered spaces. Facing outside, the boundaries between the urban and rural space become blurred, as each urban node is strongly connected to ancestral homes (in rural communities with a specific ethnicity, which then influence which ethnic group dominates a specific node), resulting in a space of routes, as people commute back and forth. Facing inside the city, each node consists of a center – a (typically gated) upper- or upper-middle-class neighborhood – with typically a slum (serving the center) and urban gardening attached (Baur and Kulke 2023).

Resolving Spatial Conflicts within the Spatiality of "Europe"

Likewise, in medieval Europe, conflicts between the topological spatial figures had to be resolved somehow for commodity chains to work – and like in current cities, manifold social institutions and material infrastructures (objectifications) permanently resolved these spatial conflicts. However in doing so, they solidified the overall spatial arrangement, gave the spatiality of "Europe" its specific form and decelerated refiguration. For example, when transporting goods along the space of routes and trading them, merchants passed multiple cities which were not only local production centers (territories) but served as transport nodes (network space) for linking long-distance trade between cities to urban-rural trade (Pirenne 1937, pp. 167–188). In order for a city to be successful, it therefore also needed to be located at a waterway. Favorable locations were geographical and economical border areas and transport nodes where sea-to-river-trade or where two rivers met (Mehlhorn 2012, pp. 19–20). Medieval cities thus had to resolve spatial conflicts between space

of routes, network space and territorial space in order to properly perform these functions. In order to resolve these spatial conflicts, European cities bristled both with institutions and physical structures which served the purpose for resolving spatial conflicts.

Concerning *institutions*, organizations like local merchant guilds (Ogilvie 2019) and translocal associations like the Hansa (Hammel-Kiesow 2014, Hammel-Kiesow et al. 2021) simultaneously addressed both the merchants' needs for traversing space and for locking into the local community. They provided infrastructure and supplied facilities for merchants, including stabling for draught and pack animals, inns, roadhouses and post stations, accommodation, food and drink, brief respite from exertion and opportunities to change and feed the draught animals and mounts. Typical spaces of places for these institutions were contors ("Kontore"), that is branch offices of merchants (Hammel-Kiesow et al. 2021, pp. 54–69) which provided short- and long-term accommodation, storage, administration and exchanging information for guild members. Likewise, inns ("Herberge") provided accommodation for all the business travelers of all social classes, offered food and drink both for resident and travelling unmarried men, and for guild members, served as meeting place, recreational and administrative centers (Schindler et al. 2013, p. 112, p. 170).

Especially waterways were important *objectified infrastructures* for resolving spatial conflicts. It is therefore unsurprising that, for a city to survive, it needed to be close to rivers, lakes or the sea and have waterways not prone to flooding which could be used for defense. It was also helpful, if the city was situated on an isle or half-isle, in a fjord or bay and/or on a hill (Mehlhorn 2012, p. 19). Especially *rivers* served multiple purposes and in doing so, revolved spatial conflicts: They were a main means of transport for goods along the space of routes (Gunzelmann 2009, pp. 16–22). They both demarcated borders between rural and urban areas (and this were part of a city's defensive structure) and linked them via bridges and furts (Gunzelmann 2009, p. 11; Menke 2009). Bridges linked long-distance travel routes (Gunzelmann 2009, p. 15). Harbors such as Hamburg's *Speicherstadt* ("storage town") linked water-based and land-based trade by allowing ships to land, load and unloading ships as well providing storage (Hammel-Kiesow et al. 2021, pp. 136–149; Lange 2019; Gunzelmann 2009, p. 15). Rivers were also important for linking the functions of the city both as space of place and as territory by upkeeping its internal function, amongst others by providing food (fishing) (Gunzelmann 2009, pp. 22–23), drinking water, energy (mills) (Dengler-Schreiber 2009), taking about waste of feces (Jessen 2009), cleaning (washing) and being resource for butchers, textile industry and other manufactories (Schramm 2009). Later on, they also provided options for recreation in and around the water (Gunzelmann 2009, pp. 33–40).

Why Deconstructing Spatialities Matters?

All in all, Martina Löw's (2020) concept of "spatial figures" is a useful theoretical tool for deconstructing a spatiality's properties, thus also pointing towards a spatiality's properties that are usually neglected in middle-range theories about space, such as the space of routes. While empirically, topological spatial figures can be found and while their logics conflict with each other in various social contexts, social contexts differ in *how* the spatial figures are entwined and conflict as well as how conflicts between different spatial figures are resolved, resulting in very specific spatial arrangements in *multiple spatialities* (Knoblauch 2022). Topological spatial figures are therefore helpful for *deconstructing spatial arrangements and describing the characteristics of specific spatialities* – like we have done by comparing current Berlin, Singapore and Nairobi as well as I have done in this paper by scrutinizing the properties of medieval Europe. Note that these deconstructions are not one-to-one descriptions of "objective" cities but middle-range theories, and similar deconstructions would have to be done for spatialities on various scales, for various historical periods and especially for Non-European and Non-Anglo-Saxon social contexts.

This does not matter on a solely political level for other social contexts be "seen" but is also important for *sociological modeling on the level of middle-range theories and the way we do causal explanations* (Baur 2018). For example, in Baur and Kulke (2023), we could show that *spatialities' properties had effect on how the food market was organized*. For example, in current Berlin, all retailer types can be found in all neighborhoods, but each retailing company (such as Edeka) offer different types of produce in different neighborhoods, with high-brow neighborhoods being offered more expensive but also better-quality produce, in Nairobi, the poorest have to pay most worst-quality food.

So before we even can think about causally explaining refiguration, we would need more context-sensitive middle-range theories. Consequently, the real task when pursuing a decolonization of the social sciences would be taking social context more seriously and change the way we do middle-range theories – and Martina Löw's work would be a good starting point for doing this, as her work provides helpful social theoretical tools for achieving this. Yet, this is work yet to be done, and it is a work to be done collectively by social scientists world-wide.

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Figures

Figure 1: Dinkelsbühl as an Example for Rural-Urban Divides and Cities as a Distinct Territory, Merian, Matthäus (1656 [1643]): Dünckelsbühel – Excerpt from Topographia Sueviae (Schwaben). Frankfurt a. M., online via: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/68/D%C3%BCnckelsb%C3%BChel.jpg, Wikimedia Commons (last called: August 13, 2024) | p. 266

Figure 2: Spaces of Routes: Interlinked Medieval Trade Routes, Lampman (2008): Late Medieval Trade Routes. online via: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e1/Late_Medieval_Trade_Routes.jpg, Wikimedia Commons (last called: August 13, 2024) | p. 271