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OPEN SECTION / BOOK REVIEW

Demirsu I. (2024), *The Hostile City of Love and Antibodies of Hate: Urban Contestations of Identity and Belonging*, Leiden: Brill.

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ABSTRACT: This book review examines *The Hostile City of Love and Antibodies of Hate* by Ipek Demirsu, situating the volume within contemporary debates on the rise of the far right, movement-countermovement dynamics and the spatial turn in social movement studies. Building on this turn, the book advances a socio-spatial perspective that conceptualizes space as an active constituent of collective identity and collective action. Based on a multi-method qualitative study of Verona, it compares two antagonistic sets of actors active in the city: the local alliance of far-right, populist right and ultra-Catholic groups, and the antifascist, anti-racist and antisexist assemblage of actors that resists them from the Veronetta neighborhood. It shows how their competing place-based identities sustain contending forms of "city-zenship", linking micro-level conflicts over belonging to the macro-level political forces reshaping Europe and beyond. The review highlights the book's theoretical and methodological contributions, while also opening up a broader reflection on positionality and power dynamics in ethnographic research.

KEYWORDS: Antifascism, Collective identity, Far right, Movement-countermovement dynamics, Urban belonging

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Over the last decade, nativist and populist far-right actors have gained ground across Europe and beyond, promoting reactionary measures on immigration and on the rights of women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ+) people. In Italy, this tendency accelerated with the 2022 electoral victory of Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy), whose appeal to "sovereignty" couples taking back control of the homeland with the defense of traditional, white and Christian values. As Demirsu notes, demographic anxiety is a recurring theme in the propaganda of the Italian right. Echoing the "Great Replacement" theory, according to which white populations risk being replaced through immigration, it calls for a twofold response: on the one

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hand, severe restrictions on immigration; on the other, pro-life policies presented as a way to encourage Italian women to give birth to "true" Italians. Verona offers a paradigmatic case study of how these global dynamics take root at the local level: a stronghold of a far right institutionalized through its alliance with the populist right, the city has become a privileged laboratory of exclusionary localist pride and of identitarian, supremacist and xenophobic tendencies. Yet, through what the author calls the "antibodies of hate"—an assemblage of social and political actors active in the Veronetta neighborhood—it also offers glimpses of bottom-up community-building practices and everyday struggles that challenge this image and open up a democratic and inclusive space within a hostile setting.

It is from this tension that Demirsu's study takes its cue. Conceived as "an inquiry into the relationship between identity politics, social movements, and urban spaces, seeking to illustrate the spatiality of global themes in everyday movement-countermovement dynamics across urban landscapes" (Demirsu 2024, 4), the book addresses two interrelated questions. Why has the far right gained so much power in a city like Verona? And what kind of resistance is possible in such a context? In answering them, the book speaks to the literature on spatiality and belonging in social movements, shifting the focus to spatial identities and practices of territorialization. Three aspects stand out. First, by following two opposing movements as they evolve side by side in the same urban space, it brings to light the interactive and relational dynamics of their conflict, showing how local spatial politics echoes wider global struggles. Second, it offers a systematic investigation of contentious collective action in urban settings that moves beyond resource mobilization theory. Third, by combining ethnography with online research and visual methods, it captures the continuity between the digital and the urban spaces of collective action.

The book's theoretical ambition is to bring space, long a blind spot of the field, back into the study of social movements, not merely as the backdrop of mobilization but as a force that both shapes and is shaped by it. Following Lefebvre's (1991) insight that social relations exist only in and through space, and Massey's (2005, 9) conception of space as a sphere of "coexisting heterogeneity" that is never fixed and always in the making, Demirsu builds an interdisciplinary framework at the crossroads of urban sociology, critical geography and social movement studies. By proposing a constructivist understanding of urban space and social movements, she places a spatialized conception of collective identity (Polletta and Jasper 2001; Della Porta and Diani 2006) at the center of her analysis. To this end, the author develops two paired concepts: *identity of place* refers to the material and immaterial features through which a space becomes a meaningful place; *place-based identities*, to the shared outlook and values that emerge from inhabiting it. The relation runs both ways, since people shape the identity of the places they inhabit and are in turn defined by them. Such identities, however, are never neutral, because defining a place also means defining who belongs to it. This is where territory comes in. Understood not as a physical surface but as a relational process, territory presupposes ownership and draws hierarchies of belonging, which rival actors enact and contest through everyday practices of territorialization, deterritorialization and reterritorialization.

Attachment to place can thus point in opposite directions. It can nourish expansive place-based identities, as in the "transformative placemaking" (Bacchetta, El-Tayeb, and Haritaworn 2019) through which progressive actors reclaim urban spaces as sites of plural belonging, or it can harden into an exclusionary territorial identity, as in sovereignist and identitarian movements, where nativism and moral conservatism are mobilized to protect local history and "authentic" identities. The book's core claim follows: the conflict between opposing movements is, at bottom, a competition to represent a territory and to define who belongs to it. It is through this contest that antagonistic movements negotiate their idea of "city-zenship", understood by the author as "everyday acts of rewriting belonging and identity" (Demirsu 2024, 20) that ultimately feed into broader, national and transnational struggles for citizenship rights.

To explore how such struggles over city-zenship unfold on the ground, the book turns to Verona, approached through the extended case method (Burawoy 2009). One of the method's "extensions" consists precisely in

moving from micro-level dynamics to the macro-level forces that shape them: Verona thus becomes a window onto political trends unfolding on a national and global scale. This approach serves two purposes. It allows Demirsu to address how sovereignist rhetoric is translated into local practices and contributes to the making of hostile urban environments. At the same time, it makes it possible to follow social movements in their everyday practices, rather than only in the moments of protest and occupation on which studies of place-based mobilization have mostly focused. Accordingly, the research combines three years of ethnographic fieldwork, more than a year of online ethnography, semi-structured and ethnographic interviews, archival research and participant-generated photo-elicitation, reconstructing both the historical evolution of the two sets of actors and their ongoing interaction in urban space.

The empirical chapters show that the conflict between the two movements is rooted in two competing legacies of Verona's past. Chapter 3 traces how a selective memory—from the Scaliger golden age to the Italian Social Republic—has forged a sense of local pride, or *Veronesità*, that identitarian actors now claim as their own. Yet the city's history also holds another legacy: that of Veronetta, a historically multi-ethnic neighborhood and the custodian of an overlooked antifascist memory. Chapters 4 and 5 then follow, in mirror fashion, the movements that draw on these two legacies, tracing their historically unfolding alliances and showing how a group's attachment to a shared social space can become both the basis of its collective identity and a powerful motor of mobilization, one that resonates well beyond the city. On one side, a far right rooted in post-war neofascism gained institutional ground in the 2000s through its alliance with the Lega (League), which brought nativist and ultra-Catholic actors into local government. What binds them, Demirsu argues, is a "sovereignist identitarianism": the defense of a homeland tied to a white, Christian and traditional identity, in which anti-migrant politics goes hand in hand with attacks on women's and LGBTQ+ rights, as the 2018 "pro-life city" motion made plain.

On the other side, the "antibodies of hate", heirs to the antifascism of Verona's partisans as well as to decades of countercultural activism, and rooted in Veronetta since the 1990s, form a heterogeneous assemblage of collectives and community spaces. They are held together by an "indivisible" struggle against fascism, racism and sexism, and by the neighborhood itself—so much so that the author speaks of a "neighborhood as movement".

The heart of the book lies in Chapter 6, where the two movements meet on the same ground and the pairing of identity of place and place-based identity shows its full analytical force. Here the river Adige marks more than a geographical divide, as two faces of Verona take shape on either side of it. The first is that of the historical center, an inward-looking touristscape, white, sanitized and steeped in the myth of a glorious past. Far-right groups and the city administration guard this space through a two-way process of boundary-drawing: from below, through daily acts of territorialization—aggression, stickers, street naming—and from above, through policies of urban décor. Together, they sustain the image of "Verona Vandea", the anti-modern bastion of Christian Europe, which travels across borders as a model for identitarian actors. The second is that of Veronetta, an outward-looking, intercultural neighborhood that, precisely for this reason, is targeted by a "revanchist reterritorialization" waged through night patrols and graffiti in the name of "ethnic resistance". The pressure does not come from the far right alone. As Demirsu shows, its campaign finds an unlikely ally in the gentrification, touristification and studentification of the neighborhood: different logics that converge on the same outcome, a whiter, more "decorous" and more profitable city, emptied of working-class residents, migrants and dissenters alike. Caught between these forces, the antibodies stand as a bulwark of resistance. They contest the exclusive image of the city in the center, through protests and sit-ins, and defend Veronetta through everyday practices of transformative placemaking—neighborhood festivals, intercultural spaces, stickers and "corrected" graffiti that inscribe the neighborhood's identity on its walls—refusing its depiction as a "no-go zone". In doing so, they keep alive the possibility of another Verona. Table 1 summarizes the comparison that structures the analysis.

Table 1 - Two Antagonistic Movements in Verona

	Sovereignist identitarian actors	*Antibodies of hate*
Identity of place	Historical center: an inward-looking space	Veronetta: an outward-looking space
Place-based identity	Exclusionary territorial identity	Expansive place-based identity
Collective identity	Sovereignist identitarianism	Antifascism, antiracism, antisexism
Collective action	Boundary-drawing from below (territorialization) and from above (décor policies)	Bottom-up community-building practices
Spatial practices	Territorialization of the center; revanchist reterritorialization of Veronetta	Deterritorialization of the center; transformative placemaking in Veronetta
Image of Verona	"Verona Vandea", model city of identitarianism	"The other Verona", an open and transfeminist city
City-zenship	Exclusive membership	Inclusive, pluralist membership

Source: Author's elaboration based on Demirsu (2024)

The book's most important contribution lies in the analytical value of its social space approach: the pairing of identity of place and place-based identity proves able to capture how different imaginings of the same space turn into competing forms of belonging and ideas of "city-zenship". Applied to Verona, this lens brings to light two main findings. On the one hand, amid the worldwide rise of populist politics driven by the extreme right, it shows how the far right has reinvented itself under the banner of "sovereignist identitarianism" for which exclusionary territorial identity works as a glue: it turns the defense of the local into a shared collective identity that resonates with like-minded actors elsewhere, making Verona a forerunner of what has been called the "Veronification" of Italian politics (Del Medico quoted in Torrisi 2019; Bernini 2022). On the other hand, through the case of the antibodies, it shows that there is still room for resistance, as the same attachment to place can sustain an open and plural form of belonging. A key strength of the book lies in its choice to privilege everyday practices over isolated moments of protest, a choice that further underscores the centrality of space as the ground on which belonging is built and contested.

The way the book handles the author's own positionality, however, deserves closer scrutiny. As a Turkish migrant woman, Demirsu gained access to the antibodies' network but, for safety reasons, could not carry out fieldwork among far-right groups, who are therefore studied mainly through non-participant observation, online ethnography and archival sources. She candidly presents this asymmetry as the main limitation of her research. Yet what appears as a limitation merely reveals the power dynamics that shape social relations. Even when they are welcomed, ethnographers are never neutral observers (Haraway 1988): however hard they try to remain detached, they affect and are affected by the context they study. Rather than dwelling on the access she was denied, the author could therefore have explored the relations set in motion by the access she gained: which interactions she had, which relationships she built, with whom and in what ways. Positionality is not only a matter of access to a space, but of what happens when one crosses it, which power dynamics are activated and how they are negotiated.

This missed opportunity, however, does not diminish the book's achievement. By bringing space back to the center of social movement studies, Demirsu provides analytical tools—identity of place and place-based identity—that can travel to any context where belonging is contested on the ground. As such, the book will speak to scholars of social movements, urban studies, the far right and gender politics. If the far right turns the defense of the local into a vehicle of nativist closure, the antibodies make the neighborhood a site from which to counter it, offering a model, and a reason for hope, to movements facing similar contexts elsewhere.

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