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**Article — Published Version**

## From scandalization to normalization: conceptualizing the mainstreaming of far-right contestations in participatory processes

European Planning Studies

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*Suggested Citation:* Nettelblatt, Gala (2022) : From scandalization to normalization: conceptualizing the mainstreaming of far-right contestations in participatory processes, European Planning Studies, ISSN 1469-5944, Taylor & Francis, London, Iss. Latest Articles, pp. 1-19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2022.2072682>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/268201>

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To cite this article: Gala Nettelblatt (2022): From scandalization to normalization: conceptualizing the mainstreaming of far-right contestations in participatory processes, European Planning Studies, DOI: [10.1080/09654313.2022.2072682](https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2022.2072682)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2022.2072682>



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Published online: 10 May 2022.



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# From scandalization to normalization: conceptualizing the mainstreaming of far-right contestations in participatory processes

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with how the rise of far-right politics is normalized in local participatory processes. Starting with the observation that emerging accounts in planning scholarship scandalize the far right as an extrinsic threat to planning paradigms, I set out to challenge this line of thought, arguing that planning is no neutral safeguard of liberal democracy. I do so by drawing on social sciences literature on the issue of normalization, which captures how far-right ideologies are subsumed into the mainstream, i.e. how formerly tabooed topics of far-right discourse become 'normal', shifting the boundaries of the 'sayable'. To understand how normalization occurs within participatory processes, I mobilize the work of political theorist Olson, who theorizes how racism is ingrained in liberal democracy through the idea of 'white democracy' – thus potentially enabling the legitimization of far-right contestations. Engaging a conversation with conceptual models of participation in planning, I analyse how 'white democracy' manifests in two of the most central approaches to participation, communicative and agonistic planning perspectives. This is illustrated through the case of local citizens dialogues in Germany. Concluding this literature-based analysis, I propose three analytical and practical shifts to challenge the normalization of far-right contestations.

## ARTICLE HISTORY


Received 10 May 2021  
Revised 8 April 2022  
Accepted 21 April 2022

## KEYWORDS

Agonistic planning;  
communicative planning; far  
right; local democracy;  
normalization; structural  
racism

## 1. Introduction

Contesting key tenets of liberal democracy, the contemporary far-right moment is of increasing concern to urban studies scholars. Emerging publications deal with the urban conditions of the rise of far-right politics and its implications for city-making practices and planning (Förtner, Belina, and Naumann 2020; Kipfer and Saberi 2016; Mullis 2019; Rossi 2018; Uitermark and Duyvendak 2008). Within planning scholarship specifically, the resurgence of authoritarian and racist tendencies is often analysed as a new 'dilemma' for urban practitioners, who are confronted with planning for open cities and social cohesion on one hand, and assuaging alleged fears about migration among

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native populations on the other (Khakee 2020). Commonly, the rise of the far right is portrayed as ‘political idea challenging the planning ideals of liberal democracies’ (Sager 2020, 81), which ‘stands in opposition’ (Sager 2020, 99) to established planning paradigms. These paradigms have long been used by scholars and practitioners for defining both the activity and normative purpose of planning, encompassing well-defined typological traditions to conceptually organize grand themes of planning. Planning paradigms are linked to evolving debates within social and political sciences and have been under the particular influence of democratic theory (Zakhour 2020). Since the mid-twentieth century, they have included, among others, rational/comprehensive perspectives, communicative approaches associated with critical theorist Jürgen Habermas, ‘just city planning’ taking a Rawlsian perspective on justice, agonistic articulations inspired by the work of political theorist Chantal Mouffe, or decolonial approaches inspired by thinkers such as Walter D. Mignolo and Cedric Robinson.

However, rather than concurring with the idea that far-right contestations pose an extrinsic threat to planning paradigms, I want to argue that they are already embedded in and potentially fostered by Western planning models. This argument starts with the observation that existing accounts of the relation between the rise of the far right and planning paradigms misleadingly create a binary distinction between the planning of liberal democracies and far-right contestations. Following this liberal logic, planning positions itself against any kind of authoritarian or racist politics, upholding the promises of freedom and equality for all. I contend that such narratives not only ignore planning institutions’ responsibilities for the rise of far-right contestations but distract from their own failures. By suggesting an analytical shift from such scandalization of far-right contestations to the issue of normalization, I propose that planning scholarship should move beyond solely denouncing the motives and actions of far-right actors and ideology. Rather, it ought to engage with the role of mainstream planning models and practitioners (including planners, but also policy makers, community organizers or advocates) in the ‘normalization’ of far-right discourses, which denotes how far-right ideologies are subsumed into the mainstream, i.e. how formerly tabooed topics of far-right discourse become ‘normal’, shifting and eroding the boundaries of the ‘sayable’ (Wodak 2021).

I advance this argument by focussing on the field of participation in local governance processes. For decades, promoting people’s participation has been a key issue in planning and governance literatures, seen as a crucial mechanism to shape the future trajectories of urban communities in a more inclusive and democratic way by recognizing people’s voices. Today, in times of far-right contestations, it is particularly relevant to speak of participation because local democratic deliberation is often proposed as an effective tool to ‘bring back’ far-right agitators into the democratic realm (Rivero et al. 2020). Yet, rather than reiterating calls for greater deliberation, this paper examines how such deliberative processes are not immune to the normalization of far-right ideology: Taking communicative and agonistic approaches to participation as examples of two prominent planning models, I explore how normalization is enabled through structural racism, which, as I will argue, neither approach can escape.

Building on a literature-based conceptual analysis, I scrutinize how both approaches have contributed to the stabilization of what political theorist Olson terms ‘white democracy’ (Olson 2004). ‘White democracy’ refers to the idea that attempts of democratic repair through new institutional designs advocating more participation fail because

they misconstrue racial oppression as a problem of exclusion (for which the solution is inclusion) rather than a problem of white privilege. I thus intervene in emerging debates on the far right in planning scholarship as I believe what is missing is an engagement with the idea that structural racism forms a constitutive element of the contemporary far-right moment. I illustrate this with empirical references to the contemporary German context, where many municipalities have initiated public deliberative dialogues according to the above-mentioned planning models to respond to local far-right contestations, which have unintentionally led to their normalization. It follows that any effort to confront the practical question of how to deal with far-right contestations must address the white privilege inherent to deliberative processes. Practitioners committed to creating a democratic polity must confront this entanglement between far-right contestations and participation to effectively deal with it.

The paper is structured as follows: First, it illuminates the social sciences literature on far-right politics to map a working definition of far-right contestations and explores the idea of normalization of far-right ideology and its relationship with structural racism in liberal democracy. This section also introduces the notion of ‘white democracy’ to understand the implications of such entanglements for participatory processes. Second, drawing on literature-based references to local citizens dialogues in Germany, it analyses how normalization occurs through communicative and agonistic planning models of participation. Lastly, it asks how the normalization of far-right contestations can be challenged, suggesting three analytical shifts and their respective practical implications: These include (1) viewing urban practitioners as ‘transmission actors’ in the ambivalent position of being able to normalize racism or uphold democratic values, (2) suggesting anti-racism as new policy field and (3) showing how the potential of cities to counter the far-right threat might lie beyond state-led participatory processes, i.e. in crafting local democratic cultures that enable new democratic experimentation.

## 2. The far right: contestations, normalization, ‘white democracy’

Analyses of the resurgence of white nationalist, authoritarian politics are characterized by disagreement on how to name this new political force. Is it populism (Müller 2016), authoritarianism (Heitmeyer 2018), illiberal democracy (Zakaria 1997), fascism (Traverso 2019) or a new kind of nationalism (Brown 2017)? While it would go beyond the scope of this paper to engage in a detailed terminological debate, it is intrusive to point out that the inability to wholly understand or effectively challenge this resurgence has been linked to a/ misconstrued assumptions about the perduring Western values and institutions upholding liberal democracy (Brown 2019) and b/ the ‘complex heterogeneity’ of far-right politics at large (Mudde 2016, 618). Before I address the former, which will be crucial for my argument about planning’s complicity with the rise of the far right, I subsequently focus on the latter, formulating a definition of far-right contestations that will guide this article.

### 2.1. Defining far-right contestations

To define far-right contestations I follow political scientist Cas Mudde who construes the far right as those right-wing politics who are ‘anti-system’, i.e. those who contest key

tenets of liberal democracies (Mudde 2019, 7). The far right serves as an umbrella term to assemble a heterogeneous set of ideologies, actors and practices. Thus, Mudde distinguishes between two broader subgroups: First, the ‘extreme right’, which dismisses the essential characteristics of democracy, i.e. popular sovereignty and majority rule. Second, the ‘radical right’, which operates within the realms of democracy, but rejects key elements of ‘liberal’ democracies, i.e. the separation of powers, rule of law and minority rights. Concerning the variety of actors and practices, an emerging literature in political sciences combines insights from party politics and social movement studies to account for the interconnection between the success of far-right parties in elections and the mobilization of far-right movements on the streets (Froio et al. 2020; Pirro and Gattinara 2018), also blurring the line between the ‘extreme right’ and ‘the radical right’.

What unites these varieties of far-right politics are three ideological core elements: their relationship with democracy, nativism/racism and authoritarianism. The latter two constitute two key beliefs of the far right, meaning respectively that nation-states shall be inhabited by an imagined homogenous group of native people, and that societies must be strictly ordered and infringement severely sanctioned (Mudde 2007, 18–23). Today, these ideological traits culminate into different articulations, encompassing anti-Semitic, racist, anti-feminist\*, anti-urban, anti-media and anti-climate expressions that carry harmful (emotional and physical) consequences for their targets. Finally, the far-right moment is reactionary, as it adheres to a kind of sovereignty of nation-states as it was – so its supporters imagine – before processes of globalization and European integration began (Fraser and Sunkara 2019). While all these aspects are crucial, in this paper I focus on the issue of racism and white supremacy to advance my argument about the normalization of far-right contestations in participatory planning processes. To this end, it is intrusive to now examine the idea of normalization in more detail.

## 2.2. Normalizing the far right

The idea of normalization starts with the observation that no far-right political force comes into power without the help of (conservative) collaborators from the establishment. ‘Wherever conservatives and Christian democrats [in North America or Western Europe] decide against supporting right-wing populists, they have not been able to succeed’. (Müller 2018; cited in Wodak 2021). That is because far-right agendas (and the related discourses and practices) have already been mainstreamed in many places, meaning that the contemporary far right has achieved to push formerly tabooed topics into the political mainstream, thus shifting and eroding the boundaries of the ‘sayable’. Political scientists Ruth Wodak captures the transgression of these boundaries as ‘shameless normalisation’, accentuating the process of how ‘traditional norms and rules of political culture, or negotiation and deliberation, are violated by continuous provocations, disseminated via the media, supported by mainstream conservatives, and thus normalised’ (Wodak 2021, 6). In other words,

normalisation describes how ideologies are incorporated into the mainstream – through recontextualisations and semiotic reinterpretations, usually moving from offstage to onstage, and across fields as well as genres. (Rheindorf and Wodak 2019, 307)

Thus, the far right sets the agenda of the political mainstream by way of (1) provocation (i.e. violating conventional rules of politeness and intentionally breaking taboos), (2) scandalization (i.e. building up tension to generate support for their party through decrying tragedies that would supposedly happen to the community if it were to be robbed of its defences) and (3) symbolic politics (often advanced by charismatic leaders who present themselves as saviour or crisis manager across different genres).

German sociologist Wilhelm Heitmeyer outlines the importance of actors from the elite and media in this process. He does so by developing the notion of ‘*rohe Bürgerlichkeit*’ (‘coarse civility’), describing the idea that beneath a thin layer of civilized and polite manners, authoritarian attitudes have become increasingly noticeable (Heitmeyer 2018, 310). According to Heitmeyer, so-called ‘transmission actors’ in public life have the ability to maintain and strengthen ‘basic fundamental values’ of liberal democracies, even in uncertain times, but they also have the power to contribute to a shift in these values through, for example, ‘the placement of terms or catchy formulas’ (Heitmeyer 2018, 294). For instance, by slowly taking on previously tabooed positions, Western (national) conservative parties present themselves as the soft alternative to the far right. One example of this strategy is the Austrian case, where former conservative chancellor Kurz (ÖVP) justified cutting support for the poorest in society by claiming that it was ‘only the children who get up in the morning to go to school’, or to condemn the saving of lives in the Mediterranean as ‘NGO madness’ (Wodak 2021, 254). It is in these instances of ‘coarse civility’ that the interconnectedness of positions and policies between neoliberal, neoconservative and far-right ideologies come to the fore (Wodak 2021). It does not, however, mean that the majority of a democracy is adopting these views. Instead, they become accepted as ‘the new normal’ which also entails that the explicitly violent extreme right continues to be denounced through scandalization, and held accountable, e.g. by way of prosecution under criminal law as ‘quasi legitimization’ (Wodak 2021, 253). However, in this article, I am not interested in the issue of scandalization. Rather, the following sections aim to trace the role of normalization in planning processes.

What the above discussion shows is that normalization is not only achieved by far-right actors, but crucially also happens through public debate or through actors from the political establishment, who play a crucial role in mainstreaming and legitimizing racist discourses and practices ‘within’ liberal states that define themselves ‘in opposition’ to racist and discriminatory ideology. Indeed, having explored the mechanisms of normalization we can begin to see how participatory processes in local governance cannot be immune to them. In this light, I want to use this article to explore planning as one of the social fields where the normalization of far-right contestations occurs. But before, I will illuminate the relationship between racism and liberal democracies. This will help to better comprehend the role of local participatory processes – and the possibilities of counter-strategies therein – in light of the current far-right moment.

### 2.3. *‘White democracy’: racism and participation in liberal democracies*

Contrary to the widely held belief that racial discrimination has no place in democratic societies, critical race scholars are concerned with the ways in which racism permeates all aspects of social life and the power relations, and possibilities of countering them, this



entails (Bojadžijev 2016). This account stems from a conjunctural analysis of racism, which refers to the idea that racism, as one form of social conflict, is not a stable concept and its 'logics of operation' (Benjamin 2016) are constantly in flux, adapting to the social conditions of place and time.

Balibar (Balibar and Wallerstein 1988) diagnoses a shift from 'biological racism' to what he terms an emerging 'neo racism' in post-WW II Europe, which steers its modes of expression away from a focus on biological categories to those principally driven by cultural enunciations. Today, Mbembe refers to contemporary formations of racism as 'nanoracism', or 'pocketknife racism' (Mbembe 2019, 58) that come into being via detours. They can appear through supposedly universal values such as freedom or tolerance, which some have to 'earn' first, as their religious or cultural upbringings are viewed as 'risks' to Western civilization. Goldberg (2015) traces how historical landmarks in the US, such as the abolition of slavery, the 1964 Civil Rights Act or the election of Barack Obama as president are used as evidence in public discourse to deny the continuous existence of systemic racism. Contrarily, however, he argues that post-raciality is the new incarnation of racism, with racial discrimination still being very much alive in income, work opportunities, housing, policing, education, etc. The contemporary conjuncture of racism in a 'colour-blind' society might be more subtle or less overt, but this society is still characterized by white privilege, i.e. the unearned advantages whites mobilize to better or maintain their social position, even as they keep up the ideals of political equality and equal opportunity (Olson 2004, 10).

Now, to interrogate the consequences of this argument for thinking about participation in local governance, I draw on the notion of 'white democracy' as put forward by Joel Olson (2004). This term is used to scrutinize attempts of democratic repair (such as participatory initiatives in planning processes) and how they fail because they misconstrue racial oppression as a problem of exclusion (for which the solution is inclusion), rather than a problem of white privilege (Süß and Kolioulis 2020). Participation in itself is insufficient to resolve 'white democracy', as it perpetuates white domination when in the hands of a white majority (Olson 2002, 387). Whiteness, for Olson, serves as a significant social-political category that is defined as 'cross-class alliance' between the capitalist class and one section of the working class (Olson 2004, 16). Accordingly, most of the working class forms an alliance with capital that is based on race, rather than class. While all others remain 'non-white', this group is considered 'white'. 'White' allies enjoy the benefits of an 'exclusive club', i.e. the right to fraternize with other members, belittling those who are denied membership. Crucially, then, whiteness is not construed as biological or cultural identity, but as political relationship. It is

the dominant category in a hierarchical order. It represents both an interest in and an expectation of favoured treatment. This enjoyment or expectation of the 'systematic conferral of benefit and advantage' defines what it means to be white rather than skin colour, ethnicity, or culture. Whiteness is the paradoxical condition of racial privilege in a society that declares all men created equal. (Olson 2002, 389)

Olson argues that this is because the democratic theory has relied too strongly on a politics of inclusion to resolve problems of race and difference. Such a politics grasps racial discrimination as a form of exclusion from the public sphere, to which the solution is, naturally, inclusion. However, as long as the politics of inclusion lacks an analysis of



racial privilege, it cannot tackle the full scope of whiteness. On one hand, he delineates how quests for inclusion often do not expand participation since its goal is to attain standing, rather than empowerment. On the other, he shows how participation is equally insufficient, as, when in the hands of a white majority, greater deliberation in decision-making processes among citizens cannot be secured. This leads to what Olson theorizes as the ‘participation-inclusion dilemma’ (Olson 2002, 393): While a strategy of inclusion aims at the entry of a person into the polity, a strategy of participation aims to expand participation within this very polity. And even though both projects should normatively be compatible in liberal democracies, Olson shows how this is practically not the case. Inclusion potentially undermines overt racial discrimination, but it hardly undermines whiteness as a norm. Expanding participation does not solve the whiteness problem either. Contrarily, in a white-dominated polity, participation may actually reinforce the power of the dominant race. Olson reasons that the only way to resolve this dilemma is through the abolition of whiteness.

I use the conceptualization of ‘white democracy’ in the remainder of this article to dissect how participatory processes are susceptible to the normalization of far-right contestations. Viewed from this perspective, it becomes clear that calls for greater and more inclusive deliberation to counter the far-right threat appear less effective and promising for confronting the challenge of increasingly overt racist and xenophobic dynamics. Such calls divert from the issue of existing structural racism, which (implicitly or explicitly) legitimizes far-right agendas as an inherent aspect of participation in liberal democracies. Consequently, I argue that planning scholarship’s conceptualization of participation in the face of far-right politics has a double task: First, it needs to take seriously and call out the far right’s dangerous attacks on hard won civil rights and the intense conflicts that they give rise to. Second, however, it needs to confront and account for the ways in which its own understanding of participation is not free from the multifarious dynamics of racialization. Without also accounting for the latter, that is focussing also on the issue of normalization, the far-right threat cannot be properly addressed. In the following two sections, I explore how this occurs through communicative and agonistic approaches to participation in planning.

### 3. Normalization in participatory processes

‘Communicative’ and ‘agonistic’ notions of participation are two approaches that have figured prominently in planning discussions about the conceptualization of people’s involvement in local planning and governance processes, lending insights into their democratic nature over the last decades. Each is inspired by different strands in social theory, the former building on ‘communicative theory’ advanced by Jürgen Habermas, the latter referencing ‘agonistic pluralism’ as put forward by Chantal Mouffe. Both theoretical camps are motivated by the normative aim of inclusive planning, advocating more citizens’ involvement and highlighting the importance of citizens’ participation in urban decision-making and negotiation processes. In this sense, they represent a general trend in planning theory, which over the last decades has mostly been concerned with ‘what ought to be’ rather than ‘what is’ (Holgersen 2020, 803). In the following I want to turn the focus on ‘what is’, sketching out key characteristics of both camps and,

via scrutinizing the arguments of their critics, outlining how normalization occurs through them.

### 3.1. *Communicative participation*

Communicative approaches<sup>1</sup> have been a central framework in planning scholarship since the 1980s (Allmendinger 2009; Forester 1989; Healey 1992; Innes and Booher 2004). Communicative participation assumes that the most suitable and democratic tool of decision-making in planning and governance processes is debate between the appropriate stakeholders oriented towards agreement. Its discussion arena is inclusive and power imbalances are diminished by working towards the conditions of the Habermasian ideal speech situation, which views the central objective of language in reaching common understanding with others through reasoning (Habermas 1984). Ultimately, such mutual understanding is the goal of communication. Communicative practices are successful if consensus between parties or intersubjectively shared argument is reached (Sager 2019, 93). And even though Habermas acknowledges that the ideal speech situation underlying his discourse ethic is an ideal, he holds that it still provides a model which practice should strive to achieve (Bond 2011). Thus, to reach consensus, participatory processes are to be designed in such a way that they foster the best collaborative engagement possible.

However, critics have convincingly argued that this ideal speech act can never undo the power asymmetries inherent to unequal urban contexts (e.g. Flyvbjerg 1996; Huxley and Yiftachel 2000; Purcell 2009). They show for instance how communicative participation provides a foundation for neoliberalism and ‘an extremely attractive way for neoliberals to maintain hegemony while ensuring political stability’ (Purcell 2009, 140). This builds on the idea that the communicative emphasis on undistorted speech acts in the decision-making processes overlooks how every form of communication is always already infused with power relations. Power is inherent in discursive negotiations, communication can never happen in a neutral, power-free setting (Reuter 2000). Specifically, the consensus approached is accused for having been used as a tool for silencing people, facilitating the domination of local elites who strengthen established neoliberal agendas by giving them a democratic look, whereby disagreement is not heard but circumvented (Özdemir and Tasan-Kok 2019). Consequently, allegedly ‘neutral’, or rational, consensus-building efforts in participatory processes are criticized for excluding contention, giving them a democratic look while actually legitimizing the agenda of urban elites (Swyngedouw 2005).

Read against the backdrop of the critical race theories I explored earlier; it appears that the communicative strategy of inclusion would not resolve Olson’s participation-inclusion dilemma. Indeed, critical planning scholars have long argued for the need to question racial power relations within democratic participation processes, stipulating that the participatory ‘efforts of planners are undermined if we do not interrogate the basis for the understanding of ethnic difference’ (Beebejaun 2012, 545). For example, studying the attempted inclusion of ethnic minorities in communicative participatory formats in English cities, Beebejaun shows that the logics underpinning these inclusionary efforts rest on the assumption that minorities can only be accommodated in a predominantly white population to a certain point (Beebejaun 2012 see also Wilder 2020).

On one hand, she analyses how planners articulate ethnic minorities as particularly ‘hard-to-reach’ and intransigent population, thus solidifying the impression that ethnic difference is a problem that a white majority faces, allegedly threatened or even diluted by the presence of the other. On the other hand, highlighting a narrower policy angle, she shows how the initial participatory discussions including ethnic minorities and their concrete views do not link up with policy or built environment implications (Beebejaun 2012, 546). Thus, she distils the racializing effects of communicative participation, imploring that ‘participation does not offer a panacea for embedded racial and ethnic inequalities. These inequalities are interwoven into the fabric of our societies’ (Beebejaun 2006).

What, then, do these insights bring for understanding communicative participation in times of far-right contestations? Aligned with communicative participation, many municipalities in Germany have organized so-called ‘citizens’ forums’ to respond to far-right contestations in their cities. A prominent example is the city of Dresden, where the far-right movement PEGIDA (‘Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes’) has been protesting against immigration since 2015. One strategy the municipality implemented in order to deal with and counter PEGIDA’s successful effort to mobilize the local population, was to launch citizens’ forums, aimed to re-engage those ‘disenchanted with politics and democracy’ (Landeshauptstadt Dresden 2017, 36) into democratic dialogue. Other cities (e.g. Cottbus, Dortmund, Freiburg, Hamburg to name but a few) have implemented similar strategies. These forums usually take place in neighbourhoods and are organized by local authorities. Evidently, they all differ in implementation to various degrees. However, they all share the objective of fostering democratic deliberation – ultimately aimed at diminishing the support for far-right movements.

In a study of such forums in the city of Cottbus, which were initiated to counter local anti-immigration rallies, Radvan and Raab (2020 also see Nettelbladt 2021) interrogate to what extent these forums achieve their democratization goals. They find that (1) the events (taking place five times across different neighbourhoods) were mainly attended by those sympathetic to the anti-immigrant protests. Many participants’ contributions proclaimed racist and Islamophobic positions. Those countering them were rare. (2) The planners/municipal officials in charge of moderating the event did not oppose such contributions. Rather, the citizens’ forums were portrayed as a neutral space, where everyone was allowed a position and racist contributions were accepted as a rational argument. (3) municipal officials legitimized racist contributions as in many replies to the audience they portrayed migration as the source of many problems in the city. These observations were also made in other German cities (DIFU 2019; Gese-mann and Freudenberg 2021).

Connecting these empirical observations with the idea of normalization explored earlier, it appears that far-right contestations can indeed happen and be fostered ‘within’ communicative processes of participation in local governance. This is because ‘white democracy’ prevails in the effort of local authorities to create deliberation in neighbourhood-based citizens forums, aimed at re-engaging those who took part in far-right, anti-immigration rallies. Focussing heavily on those sympathetic to far-right ideologies, the migrants targeted by such far-right agitations are denied entry to the polity. Consequently, communicative participation turns out not to be the ideal speech situation which

resolves racialized power dynamics. On the contrary, in the case of citizens forums in German cities aimed at countering the far right, participation reinforces the power of whiteness, i.e. the paradoxical condition of racial privilege in a participatory setting that declares all participants equal. In addition to the neglected inclusion of migrants, 'white democracy' is manifested within these participatory forums by the planners/representatives of local authorities who act as 'transmission actors', legitimizing far-right patterns of interpretation of migration in cities, ultimately validating the contestations of a plural, democratic polity.

### 3.2. *Agonistic participation*

Agonistic approaches to participation present a second prominent angle in discussions of participatory processes (Bäcklund and Mäntysalo 2010; Beaumont and Nicholls 2008; Gualini 2015; Pløger 2021). Inspired by post-structural thinkers, their starting point is an understanding of the political, which places the question of power and antagonism at its very centre. An important theoretical mediator for this approach has been political philosopher Chantal Mouffe. The backdrop for her conceptualization of agonism is the perceived depoliticization or neutralization of the political, meaning that late capitalism has given rise to 'post-political' politics (Mouffe 2005a). This insinuates that the consensus-driven, liberal order of deliberative democracy has eliminated conflict from the political sphere, lending itself to neoliberal instrumentalization and asymmetrical power relations that lead to exclusionary practices (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2015).

To overcome this situation, according to Mouffe, what needs to be put to work is not the democratic pursuit seeking rational consensus, but a foregrounding of conflict, which can ultimately be turned into a relation between conflicting partners that recognize the legitimacy of their opponents. Consequently, she holds that the question in democratic politics is not how to overcome us/them divide, as this is impossible, but rather how to establish us/them recognition in a way that is compatible with pluralist democracy (2000, 101). To achieve this, the democratic task at hand is to transform antagonism (a conflict between enemies) into agonism (a conflict between adversaries) (Mouffe 2000, 103), thus defusing antagonisms in human relations.

Many of the points raised about the hegemony of neoliberalism, which is upheld by rational consensus seeking, seem convincing. However, it is questionable that Mouffe's project of taming antagonism into agonism provides answers to the contemporary far-right moment. She has argued that the rise of authoritarian and racist tendencies is the consequence of the post-political consensus. Accordingly, in many countries it is the lack of an effective democratic debate about possible alternatives that has led to the success of far-right political parties claiming to be the 'voice of the people' (Mouffe 2005b, 55). In other words, she argues that the post-political situation has led to the rise of authoritarian forces, giving expression to the antagonisms that have been erased from democratic negotiations. Again, while this diagnosis seems convincing, it does not account for the nexus of whiteness/liberal democracy. The normalization of far-right contestations can happen in agonistic participation, too. This is for the following reasons:

First, Mouffe's emphasis on the recognition of adversaries focuses on difference, rather than whiteness as a norm. But, as Süß & Kolioulis argue, if 'we treat identities as largely

static and unchanging, we risk constructing a ‘normal individual’ against ‘abnormal’ identities. In a white polity, the ‘normal individual’ is the white citizen, constructed against a backdrop of ‘Black subordination’ (Süß and Kolioulis 2020). This can also be explained when considering that the origins of Mouffe’s thinking about us/them distinction lie in German philosopher Carl Schmitt’s concept of the friend-enemy dichotomy. Without going into too much detail, it is useful to mention that Mouffe’s us/them distinction has been critiqued for underestimating Carl Schmitt’s Nazi heritage. Roskamm shows that Schmitt’s theory stems from the differentiation between ‘the other’ and ‘the stranger’ and corresponds with historical developments in Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century. They constitute fundamental categories of ‘völkisch’, nationalist and racist approaches in the early 1930s in Germany, which led to the election of the Nazi-party NSDAP in 1933. Second, Roskamm delineates that Schmitt often emphasized that the concept of the enemy is closely linked to the concept of war; highlighting that war was a ‘leading presupposition’ of the political, rendering Schmitt’s theory very attractive for Nazi militarization (Schmitt 1932 in Roskamm 2015, 387). Today, in planning discourses, this us/them distinction is often used to draw alleged ‘cultural borders’ through ethicized narratives, yet often not openly racist bias.

Second, writing from a perspective of radical antagonism, Roskamm is critical of Mouffe’s proposal to tame ‘antagonism’ (‘the enemy’) into ‘agonism’ (‘the adversary’), arguing that Mouffe’s tamed agonism is no longer antagonistic by way of underlining the impossibility of taming antagonism in the first place and that – while the domestication of antagonism is very attractive for planning and governance processes, it stands in tension with antagonism theory (Roskamm 2015, 397). In this vein, others have questioned to what extent this taming really entails such a deep contrast between agonistic and communicative approaches, as the former also presupposes a certain degree of consensus (Bond 2011; Sager 2019, 101). Thus, I argue that normalization continues to occur even in the poststructuralist, radical democratic idea of Mouffe that proposes to sublimate antagonism into agonism. It does not solve the ‘participation-inclusion dilemma’ (Olson 2002).

This can again be illustrated by the way municipal administrations negotiate far-right contestations through the format of public, neighbourhood-based citizens’ dialogues in Germany. In addition to the emphasis on deliberation already explored above, this municipal strategy is sometimes also aimed at fostering productive conflict, where participants are encouraged to ‘let off steam’ and articulate their anger freely (DIFU 2019). However, in a polity dominated by whiteness, this only serves to reinforce the narrative about ‘normal whites’ against the ‘abnormal others’. This is because the anger of far-right supporters is almost always aimed at migrants (and anyone else with marginalized identities), who are stigmatized as dirty or noise foreigners (Reichle and Bescherer 2021). Thus, what is thought to be transformed from an antagonistic conflict into agonism becomes a platform for the normalization of far-right ideas, whereby municipal officials can cease to uphold the liberal-democratic ‘cordon sanitaire’ and echo far-right claims, as I explored in the previous section.

However, even though communicative and agonistic planning models of participation can be complicit with the reproduction of ‘white democracy’ and hence facilitate the normalization of the far right, this does not mean that there are no spaces within the planning of liberal democracies that also enable countermoves against the contemporary far-right moment. To

attend to this contradiction, in the next section I concentrate on these possibilities by suggesting three analytical shifts and the practical consequences they entail.

#### **4. Challenging normalization in participation: three analytical shifts and practical implications**

I have thus far explored how normalization occurs through both communicative and agonistic approaches to participation in planning scholarship. I developed this argument in a twofold manner: First, I carved out the entanglements between the contemporary far-right moment and the conjunctures of systemic racism that shape liberal democracies in Europe and North America today. In a second step, and crucially, this analysis offered a lens through which to grasp the failure of prominent discussions in planning studies on participatory processes to account for the issue of ‘white democracy’.

In doing so, I demonstrated how neither communicative nor agonistic participation addresses the problem of ‘white democracy’ and instead reproduce the ‘participation-inclusion dilemma’: On one hand, communicative strategies of inclusion do not account for the problem of systemic racism as their emphasis on discourse and rational debate is blind to the power asymmetries upholding racial oppression. On the other hand, I showed how structural racism prevails through agonistic approaches as their emphasis on the recognition of an adversarial position escapes a focus on whiteness. Mouffe’s project of taming antagonism into agonism loses a focus on antagonistic racialized hierarchies along the way. Having observed both approaches through Olson’s lens of ‘white democracy’ it is striking to note that they are equally caught in the ‘participation-inclusion dilemma’ of a white polity, and consequently prone to normalize far-right contestations. I have illustrated these conceptual findings with reference to public citizens’ dialogues municipalities have launched across Germany to counter contemporary authoritarian and racist dynamics. So, how to challenge whiteness as a norm? I subsequently propose three shifts in the analytical approaches to participatory processes with respective implications for practice.

##### ***4.1. A focus on power relations, rather than strategies of inclusion: urban practitioners as ‘transmission actors’***

First, shifting the analytical lens from merely scandalizing far-right contestations as an extrinsic threat to participatory processes mandates thinking about the racialized power relations that enable their normalization. Consequently, if urban practitioners are to create more effective participatory processes when handling far-right contestations, attending to these power relations requires planning not to ignore ‘what is’ in its pursuit to theorize ‘what ought’, but are forced to discuss both at once (Holgersen 2020, 810). Conceptually, this insight demands critical reflections about the epistemological conditions that underpin the interconnectedness between racism and urban negotiation processes (Keith 2005). Such a perspective enables an understanding of the, often implicit, racialized logics through which inclusion in participatory processes is conceptualized. When viewed through the lens of ‘white democracy’, participation without systemic racism challenges the idea of rational consensus seeking through inclusion.



Further, turning from strategies of inclusion to a focus on power relations would also require a conflict that is not tamed into agonism.

Practically, this implies that urban practitioners (which includes a wide range of actors such as planners, policy makers, organizers, or advocates) committed to creating and strengthening a democratic local polity always act as so-called ‘transmission actors’ (Heitmeyer 2018, 249) when negotiating far-right contestations in participatory processes such as the citizens’ forums discussed in this article. They often function as a part of the urban elite because they oversee municipal resources, design public plans, can speak on behalf of their respective communities or represent the interests of activist groups. The fact that this turns them into transmission actors in the context of the far-right means they have an ambivalent position:

This article has focused on how this position was employed by representatives of local authorities in citizens’ forums responding to far-right contestations to normalize far-right interpretations of migration. However, transmission actors also have the ability to uphold and strengthen democratic values. Thus, in a situation where they are faced with far-right agitators, they could use their position to stand up against ‘coarse civility’ (for instance in defence of local migrant communities) – and thus not jump on the far-right bandwagon or be intimidated by the far-right agitators. This is not to romanticize the responsibility of urban practitioners. But it shows how their awareness of the racialized power relations in ‘white democracy’ is crucial if they are to successfully combat the far-right threat. Sometimes, then, this means enduring antagonistic situations with far-right actors and allowing confrontation in the name of democracy.

Concretely, this can be achieved through outrightly disclosing far-right ideology, which can be more easily recognized if urban practitioners familiarize themselves with far-right strategies before public debates. Crucially, this also means that the perspective of far-right victims must be taken into account already at the planning stage of such events. Ultimately, this means that the proposed predicament between caring for an increasingly diverse population while at the same time assuaging alleged fears about migration among the native population (cited at the beginning of this article as one new planning dilemma, which planning scholars have attributed to the rise of the far right) is not actually dilemmatic. Increasing international migration does not justify racist attitudes or far-right activities.

#### ***4.2. The problem of privilege, rather than diversity: anti-racism as new policy field***

This leads to a second analytical shift implicated in the change of perspective from scandalization to normalization. My analysis has shown that challenging whiteness in participatory planning necessitates a focus on privilege, rather than diversity. Conceptually, this demands studying how racism can be covered up by the institutionalization of diversity, which can serve as supposed evidence for the idea that white privilege does not exist: ‘diversity becomes about changing perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of organisations’ (Ahmed 2012, 34). Indeed, European planning policies have long been occupied with increasing socio-cultural diversity in the face of international migration, with many municipalities promoting the idea of inclusive diversity as a marker of modernization and tolerance (Raco and Tasan-Kok 2019). However, as



explored earlier, the focus on diversity often distracts from, not diminishes, racial order and white privilege. Reorientating planning's conceptual toolbox to account for the prevalence of white privilege ingrained in these strategies would allow to develop a more holistic anti-racist methodology for addressing the relationship between the normalization of the current far-right moment and planning paradigms for liberal democracy. To begin such orientation would require planning scholarship to problematize the relationship between systemic racism and normalization in urban development as a proper area of scholarly concern.

Practically, this entails addressing broader policy fields, not just participatory formats in the narrow sense. In the context of the German planning system, where discussions about systemic racism are in their infancy (as opposed to e.g. the US context (Ha 2014)), this could include establishing anti-racism as a policy field in its own right. This would allow addressing the issue of white privilege in an integral manner, addressing the issues across sectors such as housing, policing in public space, or everyday social work on the neighbourhood level. This could be supported by following three practical recommendations for preventing the normalization of structural racism: (1) Developing a municipal concept on how to deal with structural racism to prevent the normalization of far-right ideology. This could be done with the help of external partners knowledgeable in political education concerning far-right ideology and who can offer a toolkit for raising awareness of the topic among municipal staff from different sectors. (2) Organizing internal workshops for municipal staff members, which offers training for recognizing and calling out far-right patterns of interpretation. Such workshops could also provide a confidential learning space, where staff share insecurities or concerns about the topic. (3) Outlining instructions of how to handle situations in everyday institutional life where the normalization of far-right discourses is happening that can be made publicly available (Amadeu Antonio Stiftung 2019). Such measures need to be strengthened with appropriate personnel and financial resources.

#### ***4.3. From equal recognition to participation without whiteness: crafting democratic cultures beyond formal participation***

Finally, moving from scandalizing the far-right threat to grappling with how it is normalized entails shifting the focus from equal recognition to participation without whiteness. This requires viewing racism not as an individual problem or adversarial position (instigated through stereotypes or fear) or as an agenda only advanced by far-right movements and parties. Rather, it is a social relation that differentiates and hierarchies people in the name of white supremacy. As I have shown, this means that state-led participatory processes are infused with this hierarchy. Thus, I argue that the revitalization of a democratic, participatory polity without whiteness might depend on the cultivation of local democratic cultures that go beyond formal state-led channels of participation. This approach recoils from the Habermasian ideal speech act, which has served as a guideline for communicative planning models. Equally, it departs from Mouffe's idea of agonism, which often functions as a counterargument to communicative participation in planning scholarship. This is not to say that state-led participatory processes cannot play a role in addressing local far-right dynamics if they effectively resist their normalization. However,

a more fundamental renewal of local democratic practices in times of far-right contestations lies in the potential of cities to enable democratic encounters and spaces for democratic experimentation (see also Purcell 2008; Roy 2019; Rivero et al. 2020).

In practical terms, this can take the form of migrant self-organizations that initiated neighbourhood-based encounters between newcomers and natives or new alliances between actors from the realms of civil society and the local state whose objective is to nurture democratic cultures. For example, municipalities in the German federal state of Brandenburg, which have experienced a particular high voter turnout for the German far-right party 'Alternative für Deutschland' (AfD), have come together to recognize and pay tribute to the many civil society initiatives that have been founded to practice solidarities and have published a collection portraying their work (BBE 2017). They include the renovation of an old, vacated train station by the local community, which now serves as a space for cultural activities and political education or an inter-faith group that organizes regular encounters where people can come together to engage in communal activities in the neighbourhood such as gardening or cooking. Such everyday activities are an important mechanism for nurturing democratic cultures, as they facilitate low-threshold encounters without potentially providing a platform for the normalization of far-right contestations.

What these examples have in common is that they all start with the question of how those whose fears and grief is delegitimized and repressed can be supported when far-right contestations are legitimized and normalized. It is this kind of initiatives and solidarities that need to be fostered and supported by local governments if the far-right threat is to be challenged in sustainable ways. Acknowledging such initiatives as an integral part of planning for open cities in times of far-right contestations offers promising avenues for crafting the tools needed to effectively counter authoritarian and racist tendencies effectively. The success of these strategies and their applicability in different context remain of course fortuitous. But they offer opportunities for conviviality and political experimentation, which could become starting points for thinking about possible urban futures.

## 5. Concluding thoughts

Paul Gilroy argues that effective anti-racist politics start with and require the intellectual work of crafting new epistemologies that overcome the racialized ways of knowing, which have shaped Western democratic thought for centuries. He terms this endeavour a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (Gilroy 2021) towards the inclusionary gestures of democratic institutions. Crucially, in the contemporary reactionary climate, such anti-racists politics mandate a multidimensional analysis, one that is alert to the ways in which the normalization of far-right discourses and practices takes place within the very democratic institutions they try to dismantle. This is what I have attempted to do in this article, thinking about 'what is' in order to propose 'what ought to be' in the context of contemporary far-right contestations. I have done so with empirical reference to German municipalities, where local voter turnout for the German far-right party 'Alternative für Deutschland' (AfD) has remained high and continues to mobilize significant parts of the population, as the latest protests against COVID-19 restrictions stoked by far-right

actors show (Connolly 2022) – despite the many deliberative dialogues launched across the country.

Thus, I have argued that any analysis concerned with the far-right threat to existing planning paradigms must take into account the issue of structural racism and its manifestations through these very paradigms. Read against the backdrop of critical race theory, I have shown how structural racism prevails in communicative participatory processes as their emphasis on rational deliberation does not attend to structures of racial oppression. Equally, agonistic pursuits to tame antagonisms into agonism fails to account for the hierarchical order of ‘white democracy’. I have attempted to suggest three analytical shifts through which the fact that racism is still a blind spot in conceptualizations of urban planning processes could be countered. Subsequently, I proposed three practical implications that follow these shifts. On one hand, this requires an engagement with the role of urban practitioners as ‘transmission actors’ in the normalization of far-right contestations, but who can also not shy away from confronting far-right actors by calling out their tactics. On the other, eradicating ‘white democracy’ necessitates thinking about anti-racism measures holistically, which could entail comprehending anti-racism as a policy field. Finally, I argue that the revitalization of a democratic participatory polity without whiteness might thus depend on the cultivation of local democratic cultures that go beyond formal governmental channels of participation in order to open up spaces for democratic experimentation.

## Note

1. The term ‘communicative approaches’ is applied here to adhere to a broad discourse in planning theory, including deliberative, argumentative or collaborative approaches.

## Acknowledgements

The author thanks both reviewers for taking the time to read previous versions of this article and is grateful for their valuable comments. The author would also like to thank her PhD supervisors Matthias Bernt and Laura Calbet i Elias as well as her colleagues Anna Oechslen and Sune Stoustrup for their encouragement and support in writing this article. Thank you also to the participants’ feedback of the session on Territorial Governance and Politics at the AESOP YA Conference 2021, where the author presented first ideas for this article.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by Studienstiftung des Deutschen Volkes.

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