

Politics of demarcation and the radical right in post-war Europe: Defining what is right

Workshop at the Hamburg Institute for Social Research, February 26–28, 2025. Deadline: September 15, 2024

Discrimination – in its literal sense of drawing distinctions – is at the core of right-wing politics. The demarcation of people along imagined and uneven, hierarchical lines may be its key feature, yet one particular demarcation has so far escaped scholarly attention: The inner right's self-definition, not as a nation, race, or *Volk*, but as a political movement and a coherent political thought, and its answer to the question of who is part of it and who is not. This process, though largely overlooked, can be seen as a particularly fraught one – at least for the right-wing movements of post-war Europe, which were not only faced with the tasks of shedding the devastating legacy of fascism, rearranging ideological fragments, and creating new self-attributions, agendas, and alliances. They also did so under the watchful eye of post-war societies and institutional actors, who themselves had strong motivations for defining what is (radically) right.

Post-war Europe's political landscapes were time and again shaped by attempts to create unambiguous demarcations towards right-wing ideologies and actors. These could be either metaphorical, like the epidemiological expression "*cordon sanitaire*" or the German equivalent "*Brandmauer*" (firewall), both alluding to the idea of a society that needs spatial protection from the radical right's contagious or spreading qualities; or actionable, like the concept of extremism, as used by institutions of state security. To be sure, these demarcations were not always as unambiguous as they seemed: They also left the door open to those actors from the right-wing spectrum (and their ideas), who formally renounced their radical ties. This, in turn, created a discursive environment in which the radical right could either choose to cater to these new definitions – or reject them.

Our workshop aims to map and discuss these "politics of demarcation". We are interested in the radical right's own demarcation as a distinct political movement and particularly the interplay of self-positionings on the one hand and external attributions directed at them on the other: How, when, and why did demarcations emerge, change, and vanish? Which functions did they fulfill? What were the reactions of those entrenched in symbolic cordons? Did external demarcations even matter to right-wing actors, or were they more preoccupied with demarcating internal positions within the movement?

Similarly, was proclaiming a firewall genuinely intended to contain a spreading hazard, or did it serve other political purposes?

We want to reflect upon the empirical phenomenon of demarcation in and around the radical right and, furthermore, upon the analytical consequences of historicizing the concept of right-wing radicalism. We assume that the answers to these questions are dependent on historical contingencies and national movements' idiosyncrasies (for example, the Italian far-right's usage of the term "post-fascism" is highly successful as a self-denomination, something that is hardly imaginable in most other European countries). Therefore, we welcome conceptual as well as historical contributions that acknowledge these dynamics – in post-war Europe or beyond – and that allude to the following or connected research questions:

- *Self-positioning*: What labels and self-attributions are used by the radical right, and what boundaries do they imply? Do they identify with the (depending on national/linguistic context) disgraced term "right", "radical right", or "extreme right"? What are alternative self-labels that nonetheless signal a clear right-wing positioning (conservative, nationalist, identitarian, *enraciné*, etc.?), and what – and *who* – do they encompass?
- *External attribution*: Which political goals do demarcations towards the radical right serve? Who are the relevant actors in creating borders and how do they relate to each other? Which concepts and terms are used? Are they aimed at discursive or legal intervention? And, finally, how is it defined what is "radical" and what is "just right"?
- *Strategy vs. ideology*: To what degree are these politics of demarcation a process of strategy to gain power in a given set of political coordinates – and when are they born out of ideological convictions? Does it make sense to sharply distinguish between the two, or are strategy and ideology connected through a fluid, oscillating interplay where one has the ability to transform the other? What fights about positioning and ideology are fought within the respective right-wing movements and how do the factions relate to each other?
- *Integration or exclusion*: In turn, one can also ask what political strategy is born out of which demarcation. How do the respective actors envision their own role – or that of the others – in society or state mid- and long-term? For example, does the radical right seek "secession" from society, or do they aim for "cultural hegemony" through metapolitical strategies to achieve a new, right-wing (conservative/identitarian) mainstream ("reconquista")? In turn, what is the vision for demarcated right-wing parts of society – re-integration or exclusion from democratic consensus in the spirit of militant democracy?

The workshop will take place from February 26 to 28, 2025 at the Hamburg Institute for Social Research and is organized by Alexander Hobe, Pablo Schmelzer and Laura Wolters. We invite contributions from social sciences, historical research, and all related fields. **Please send proposals (500-to-700-word abstracts) by September 15 to Laura Wolters (laura.wolters@his-online.de).** We will send out invitations by the beginning of October.

The HIS will cover all invited speakers' travel expenses. To make academia more compatible with family life, we also offer on-site childcare if needed.