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The neoliberal roots of regional embitterment: reproducing 'left behind' places through inter-place competition

Michael Miessner [a], Andreas Kallert [b], Matthias Naumann [c] and Bernd Belina [d]

ABSTRACT

Neoliberal regional policies, inscribed in material spatial structures and state apparatuses, foster embitterment in 'left behind' places, even when they aim to address regional disparities and past frustrations. As a contribution to the prevalence of far-right movements and parties in 'left behind' places, we propose to include emotions in cultural political economic analyses in a more systematic manner. Rooted in critical theory and drawing on the empirical example of the competition for the location of the 'Future Centre for European Transformation and German Unity' in Germany, this paper argues that inhabitants of 'left behind' places experience geographical unevenness and disadvantages through neoliberal policies such as inter-place competitions.

KEYWORDS
Regional development; regional governance; political geography; neoliberalism; democracy

1. INTRODUCTION

For the 30th anniversary of German reunification in 2020, the German federal government decided to establish a 'Future Centre for European Transformation and German Unity' (hereafter: Future Centre) (German Federal Government, 2020).[1] This decision followed intensive and continuing debates (e.g., Köpping, 2018; Mau, 2019; Oschmann, 2023) about the economic, demographic, social and psychological turmoil East Germans experienced in the 1990s, and the persistent differences in wealth, power and recognition that exist between East and West Germany (for an overview: Becker & Naumann, 2020) that have resulted in emotions of 'disappointment and embitterment' (German Federal Government, 2020, p. iv) in East Germany. In this context, the prospective Future Centre, consisting of a museum and a research centre, is intended to be a touristic and architectural landmark as well as 'a central place to honour the lifetime achievements of East Germans' (German Federal Government, 2023). With an initial

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investment of about 200 million euros, it is the largest building project of the German federal government in the current decade (Deutschlandfunk Kultur, 2023). It will have a projected annual budget of about 40 million euros, 200 employees, and an anticipated one million visitors per year. Furthermore, the Future Centre is also intended to contribute to regional development (German Federal Government, 2020, p. 15). As such, it is part of a renewed debate about regional disparities between, as well as within, East and West Germany. The 'creation of equivalent living conditions in the federal territory' (GG Art. 72, Abs. 2) stated in the German constitution, is back on the agenda (Haffert, 2022), mainly as a reaction to the rise of the far-right party, the Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD), particularly in East Germany. As a result, some unsuccessful attempts to strengthen regional development policies in 'left behind' places (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018) have recently been observed (e.g., Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community, 2019; Tautz, 2019). However, as critics point out, these attempts are dissimilar from the efforts undertaken under Spatial Keynesianism, which focused on integrating less developed regions within West Germany through infrastructural and industrial policies in the 1970s and 1980s (Brenner, 2004; Miessner, 2020). These recent efforts rely on a neoliberal logic, with competition as the preferred mode and unevenness as the necessary prerequisite and outcome of politics in general (Brown, 2015; Foucault, 2009), and from a regional perspective, in particular (Kallert et al., 2021).

In line with this neoliberal logic, the location for the Future Centre was identified via a federal competition. According to the briefing on the rules of the competition, '[s]maller municipalities that have had to undergo drastic transformation experiences should therefore also feel invited to show what positive and exemplary contribution the Future Centre could make to development in their region' (German Bundestag, 2022, p. 5). In 2022, seven cities or pairs of cities submitted bids, and in early 2023 the city of Halle (Saale) was declared the winner.

Based on a document analysis, interviews with representatives from all applicant cities and a focus group with some of them, we utilised a cultural political economy framework. We argue that this kind of neoliberal regional policy that utilises competition not only results in a more pronounced imbalance of spatial development and a waste of resources but also fosters feelings of being 'left behind' and regional embitterment. Thus, drawing on the case of the Future Centre, we argue that the continuing neoliberal mode of regional policies, inscribed in material spatial structures and state apparatuses, fosters embitterment in 'left behind' places, even when, on the surface, they aim to address regional disparities and past frustrations. As a contribution to the discussion on the prevalence of far-right movements and parties in 'left behind' places, this paper proposes to emphasise the emotional component into the political economic analyses of regional development.

Following this introduction, the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 situates our case study in the literature on the neoliberalisation of space, the emotional dimensions of far-right mobilisations, and the cultural political economy of urban and regional development. Section 3 introduces the competition for the location of the Future Centre. In Section 4, we describe our research methods. In Section 5, we discuss our empirical results and show how the competition for the Future Centre deepened regional disparities, wasted resources and led to frustrations that have the potential to foster regional embitterment. Section 6 concludes the paper with final remarks on the need for future research.

2. 'LEFT BEHIND' PLACES: NEOLIBERALISING SPACE, THE EMOTIONAL DIMENSION OF FAR-RIGHT SUCCESS, AND CULTURAL POLITICAL ECONOMY

Quite recently, in urban and regional studies, political geography as well as in this journal, there is a growing body of literature on 'left behind' places (MacKinnon et al., 2022; Pike et al., 2024;

Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Urso et al., 2023; Welsh & Heley, 2023). The observation that 'people in 'left behind' places feel neglected and unrepresented by dominant political and economic actors and institutions' (MacKinnon et al., 2022, p. 44) is often seen as a key to understanding the success of the far right in such places.

Dissecting the etymology of the term 'left behind' places, and the change it signals in our understanding of geographical inequalities, Pike et al. emphasise that '[t]he term and its spatial imaginary broaden interpretations beyond only economic issues to incorporate multiple, inter-related social, political, environmental, and cultural dimensions' (2024, p. 1177). Expanding on this line of observation, but going beyond it and inspired by the Frankfurt School of critical theory, we argue for a more systematic inclusion of the emotions that come into play in such locations when trying to understand 'left behind' places.

Two aspects are especially important in this regard. First, in contrast to all simplifications that connect spatial political economy and emotions directly, we depart from the Adornoian position of a 'universally mediated world' (Adorno, 1973[1964], p. 99). In an Adorno-inspired approach on crisis theory, Jaeggi (2014, p. 388; emphasis in the original) argues: 'Even a contradiction, and thus, as it were, the 'objective side' of a crisis, must first be actualised in a conflict – i.e., *made* into a crisis' (see also, Fraser & Jaeggi, 2023).

Based on empirical research in East Germany, Hannemann et al. (2024) argue similarly when pro-posing a phase model of how 'embitterment' in 'left behind' places in which widely shared emotions can evolve out of geographical development that is economically and infrastructurally uneven. Starting with a 'main trigger event' – in their empirical case study, German reunification – they emphasise the importance of 'the emotional evaluation of the governance of the event at the regional or local level through the affected population groups' (Hannemann et al. 2024, p. 4). Thus, not uneven geographi-cal development per se, but together with the ways in which it is dealt with in discourse, politics and conflicts is crucial to understanding regional embitterment.

Second, and in alignment with the Frankfurt School of critical theory, we need to better understand the concrete mechanisms through which people with negative emotions turn to right-wing, authoritarian positions. We argue that in the present conjuncture, geographical unevenness is brought to the attention of, and felt by, inhabitants of 'left behind' places also, and especially through the form of inter-place competition. Thus, we suggest that spatialised emotions result from how spatial unevenness is established and deepened through neoliberal spatial policies in the form of competitions.

Not only the spatial context is crucial for being 'left behind' but also its political form. To develop this argument, we draw on three often unrelated strands of literature that focus on: (i) the neoliberalisation of space, (ii) emotions in far-right mobilisations and (iii) cultural political economy of urban and regional development. In the remainder of this section, we illustrate how we draw on these literatures by relating key arguments to uneven geographical development in Germany.

2.1. Neoliberalisation of space

In short, neoliberalism is 'all about the maintenance, reconstruction, and restoration of elite class power' (Harvey, 2005, p. 188). It uses competition as the preferred mode of governance, depo-liticises underlying structural relations and thus presumes and re-/produces unevenness (Brown, 2015; Foucault, 2009). In a spatial perspective, 'neoliberalising space' (Peck & Tickell, 2002), implies inter-place competition on all spatial scales within neoliberal global 'rule regimes' (Brenner et al., 2010). As in other parts of Western Europe, in West Germany, a neoliberalisa-tion of space followed the post-war phase of Spatial Keynesianism (Brenner, 2004). During that Keynesian period, state interventions aimed at addressing uneven geographical development in a way to bring about 'regional equity' (Martin, 1989, p. 27). The state centralised territorial gov-ernance and applied compensatory regional politics (Brenner, 2004, p. 135f.).

This changed significantly with the crisis of Fordism in the 1970s. Since then, processes of rescaling in the name of neoliberalisation have gained in importance, encouraging competition between regions and places (Brenner, 2003). In the German case, this general trend towards 'governing through competition' (Öjehag-Pettersson, 2024, p. 211) is overlapped by the large differences that have existed between East and West Germany since unification in 1990.

In the West, the federal government revoked redistributive policies addressing spatial disparities and replaced them with competitive elements (Heeg, 2001, p. 158). In the early 1990s, West Germany sent large amounts of public investments and subsidies for private enterprises to the eastern part of Germany, which lead to a brief return to Spatial Keynesianism (Miessner, 2017, p. 224). From the mid-1990s, though, public investments were concentrated in East German urban centres that investors and state officials had identified as economically promising.

As a result, competitive elements were introduced in slightly different ways in different parts of the country (Heeg, 2001, p. 147; Miessner, 2017, p. 212). For inhabitants of 'left behind' places in East Germany, this resulted in a twofold peripheralisation: as East Germans, they felt left behind by West Germany, and within East Germany, they saw how only cities such as Potsdam, Jena, Leipzig and Halle (Saale) began to grow again starting in the 2000s, profiting from significant state investments and subsidies. In this situation, most participants in the competition for the Future Centre from 'left behind' places believed in the promise that this time 'also smaller communities' (German Bundestag, 2022, p. 5) should profit and, therefore, placed high hopes on being successful with their applications.

2.2. Emotions in far-right mobilisations

Emotions have only become relevant in human geography in recent decades. While the term 'affect' as used in phenomenological and more-than-representational theorisations refers to the pre-cognitive sphere of apparently direct, bodily and unmediated sensations, the term 'emotion' addresses the socially mediated and conscious side of feelings (cf. Ho, 2024; Pile, 2010). Many geographers lean towards an understanding that bridges this opposition as proposed by Sara Ahmed, who argues that 'even seemingly direct responses actually evoke past histories, and that this process bypasses consciousness, through bodily memories. Sensations may not be about conscious recognition and naming, but this does not mean they are 'direct' in the sense of immediate. Further, emotions clearly involve sensations: this analytic distinction between sensation or affect and emotion risks cutting emotions off from the lived experiences of being and having a body' (2004a, p. 40). In this respect, emotions 'are effects rather than origins' (2004a, p. 196). It is thus necessary 'to consider how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective' (Ahmed, 2004b, p. 119). Such concrete analysis necessarily includes the spatial, since 'emotions are central to the production of space' (Ho, 2024, p. 97).

This understanding of emotions is compatible with Adorno, who emphasises time and again that in the aforementioned 'universally mediated world everything experienced in primary terms is culturally preformed' (Adorno, 1973[1964], p. 99) – and still searches for ways to incorporate the seemingly immediate and the bodily into critical theory (cf. Philo, 2021). Thus, and even though emotions 'remain […], by and large, undertheorized by Adorno himself' (Parkinson, 2014 p. 48), they are integral to a critical understanding of society and politics for him, particularly with respect to democracy versus right-wing extremism (Adorno, 2005a[1959]; 2005b[1966]; 2020[1967]; Parkinson, 2017; Zembylas, 2021). In particular, and similar to Ahmed's formulation, 'Adorno helps us reimagine critical self-reflection as an affective, spatial and embodied process' (Zembylas, 2021, p. 818).

With regard to the dialectic between the individual and society that is at the heart of democracy, where, according to Adorno (2005a[1959], p. 93), 'people […] see themselves as subjects of the political process' in 'a union of the individual and the collective interests', neoliberalism has

pushed towards extreme individualisation. By creating all-out competition among citizens, capitalists have been able to profit immensely from the resulting lower wages, taxes and social and environmental standards (Harvey, 2005). This has changed the context in which emotions are produced and how they become effective.

As Nachtwey (2018) argues, for Germany, the precarity resulting from neoliberalisation has led to widespread emotions of social decline, which yielded both progressive and regressive political movements in the 2010s. In a detailed study of the 'libertarian authoritarianism' of AfD activists and Corona deniers, Amlinger and Nachtwey (2022, p. 178) show how, in this situation, some individuals develop a reified understanding of 'freedom' that turns authoritarian, in that it gives rise to resentments against everything they purport restricts their own freedom, in particular, societal institutions, norms and 'subordinate groups (women, transgender, migrants, Jews, etc.)'. Drawing on the subtype of the 'rebel' as identified in *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al., 2019 [1950]), they conclude: 'Libertarian authoritarians rebelliously defy any external authority. They are only conformist insofar as they have internalised the norms of the competitive society' (Amlinger & Nachtwey, 2022, p. 178). This is an example of how critical theory, following both Adorno and Ahmed, should reconstruct how and why objective societal developments result in emotions that encourage individuals to turn to authoritarian positions. Going beyond a general understanding of the rise of right-wing populism as an 'emotional reflex to an era of disruption' (Koppetsch, 2019, p. 25), critical theory-inspired positions need to qualify the concrete socio-psychological mechanisms or forms that connect perceived crises and problems to emotions and far-right positions. We argue that neoliberal governing through competition is precisely such a form.

In the discussion of our case study below, we argue that inter-place competition is the form in which spatialised negative emotions of embitterment are produced through the neoliberalisation of space, which can be used by far-right and right-wing populist propaganda.

2.3. Cultural political economy of urban and regional development

Cultural political economy (CPE) provides a helpful processal model for politicisation. CPE is a 'post-disciplinary approach that highlights the contribution of the cultural turn (a concern with semiosis or meaning-making) to the analysis of the articulation between the economic and the political and their embedding in broader sets of social relations' (Jessop, 2010, p. 336) to examine hegemonic configurations (Jessop & Oosterlynck, 2008). CPE argues that the realisation of different economic, political and social interests as practical action depends not only on material resources but also on the ability to articulate interests in a specific way. It is thus crucial to focus on this 'interplay' between semiosis and materialities (Dannestam, 2008, p. 360).

With reference to evolutionary theories, CPE proposes a processal model for politicisation. Figure 1 illustrates a crisis as the starting point where the interpretation or construal is being discussed in the political sphere. In the first phase of variation, semiosis is more important than materiality in a still unstructured complexity: multiple ideas and visions circulate in the discourse to describe and manage the crisis.

In the second phase of selection, the ideas are confronted with realities as they are inscribed in structures such as state apparatuses, institutions, laws and hegemonic discourses. Therefore, in the political discourse, the numerous construals are reduced to just a few.

In the third phase, retention, what remains is only a dispute over which of the few remaining ideas and visions will prevail and materialise. In this phase, existing extra-semiotic materialities such as access to government apparatuses and the media; financial, human, and organisational resources; etc. 'matter most in the retention of some strategic responses' (Jessop, 2013, p. 237). Through the process of politicisation, the interplay of semiotic and extra-semiotic factors consolidates and the initially unstructured complexity is ordered into a more structured one.
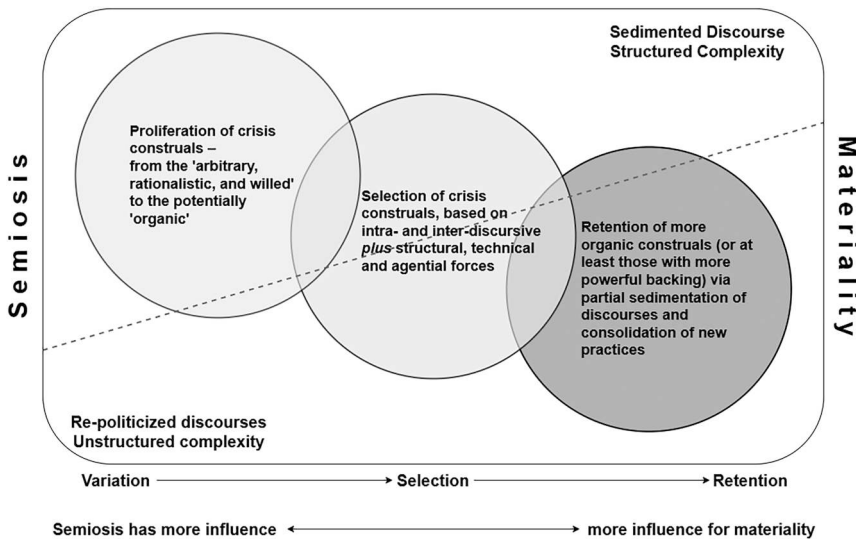
Figure 1. A model of politicisation: Variation, selection, and retention of crisis interpretations. Source: According to Sum/Jessop, 2013, p. 238.

Within these evolutionary processes of variation, selection and retention, economic imaginaries play an important role. They provide an orientation for individual and collective actors in decision-making and strategy building, especially in unstructured and complex situations (Jessop, 2004; Sum & Jessop, 2013).

Current CPE inspired research in urban and regional studies has primarily focused on economic imaginaries and evolutionary mechanisms in moments of crisis. Accordingly, the role of economic and spatial imaginaries in the emergence of post-crisis responses is analysed (Grubbauer, 2014; Kallert et al., 2021; O`Brien, 2025; Planey, 2021; Sum, 2019). Using the example of four European cities, González et al. (2018) show how the global financial crisis of 2007/2008 was interpreted as something external, instead of as a crisis of the cities' own urban growth models. Oosterlynck and González (2013) draw on CPE to illustrate how quickly the discursive window for post-neoliberal regulation has closed in the aftermath of the financial crisis.

For our case study, we draw on the processual model for politicisation of CPE to better understand the competition for the Future Centre in two connected ways. First, the competition narrowed down its initial open criteria to a winning candidate with clear material advantages. Second, we characterise the economic imaginary based on which the competition was started, as one that tried to combine neoliberal-competitive elements with Keynesian-cohesive ones, and show how the former prevailed due to the logic of competition.

3. THE COMPETITION FOR THE LOCATION OF THE 'FUTURE CENTRE FOR EUROPEAN TRANSFORMATION AND GERMAN UNITY'

In July 2022, the German federal government announced a competition that would determine the location of the new Future Centre in East Germany. The idea for the centre had been developed by a commission entitled '30 Years of Peaceful Revolution and German Unification' (German Federal Government, 2020).

Seven applications were submitted from East German cities or pairs of cities (see Figure 2), two of them in partnership with a city from West Germany. Table 1 shows that the applications

Table 1. Structural data of the cities which applied for the Future Centre; Grey: data on county level.

	Halle (Saale)	Eisenach	Frankfurt (Oder)	Jena	Leipzig/Plauen		Mühlhausen/Eschwege		Sonneberg/Neustadt b. Coburg	
					Leipzig	Plauen	Mühlhausen	Eschwege	Sonneberg	Neustadt b. C.
GDP per capita in 1000 Euros in 2021 (2015-2021 in %)	34.2 (+18.2)	32.4 (+7.1)	40.8 (+16.6)	48.4 (+22.7)	39.6 (+14.5)	28.1 (+20.4)	26.7 (+19.0)	26.7 (+12.4)	28.3 (+15.5)	29.1 (+13.6)
Unemployment rate in 2021 (2015-2021 in %-points)	9.1 (−2.3)	5.3 (−0.8)	7.9 (−3.4)	5.6 (−1.3)	7.3 (−2.3)	5.0 (−2.2)	7.1 (−2.7)	5.3 (−1.1)	4.5 (−+0.2)	3.6 (−0.3)
Sleeping accommodation in tourist accommodation in 2021	3166	6057	1016	2307	22,088	815	752	1122	341	953
Inhabitants in 2022 (2010-2022 in %)	242,083 (+3.9)	42,408 (−0.8)	58,230 (−3.5)	111,191 (+5.8)	616,093 (+17.8)	64,763 (−2.0)	36,226 (−7.4)	19,472 (−2.1)	23,507 (−4.9)	15,064 (−4.7)
Students enrolled at universities in 2021	21,984	470	5,210	21,879	39,483	0	0	0	0	0
InterCityExpress train station	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	no	no	no	no	no
Average car travel time to next airport in minutes in 2021	22.0	42.1	49.1	43.0	20.2	92.5	53.8	71.4	78.7	77.5

came from very different sized cities. Smaller cities with less than 50,000 inhabitants (Sonneberg/ Neustadt b. Coburg, Mühlhausen/Eschwege and Eisenach), medium-sized cities (Jena and Frankfurt (Oder)) as well as cities with more than 200,000 inhabitants (Halle (Saale) and Leipzig/Plauen) applied for the Future Centre. From these applications, the five biggest cities and joint cities made it to the final stage of the competition: Eisenach, Frankfurt (Oder), Halle (Saale), Jena and Leipzig/Plauen. Additionally, these cities are characterised by the highest gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, the presence of universities, good accessibility by high-speed trains (except Frankfurt (Oder)) and, with the exception of Plauen (teaming up
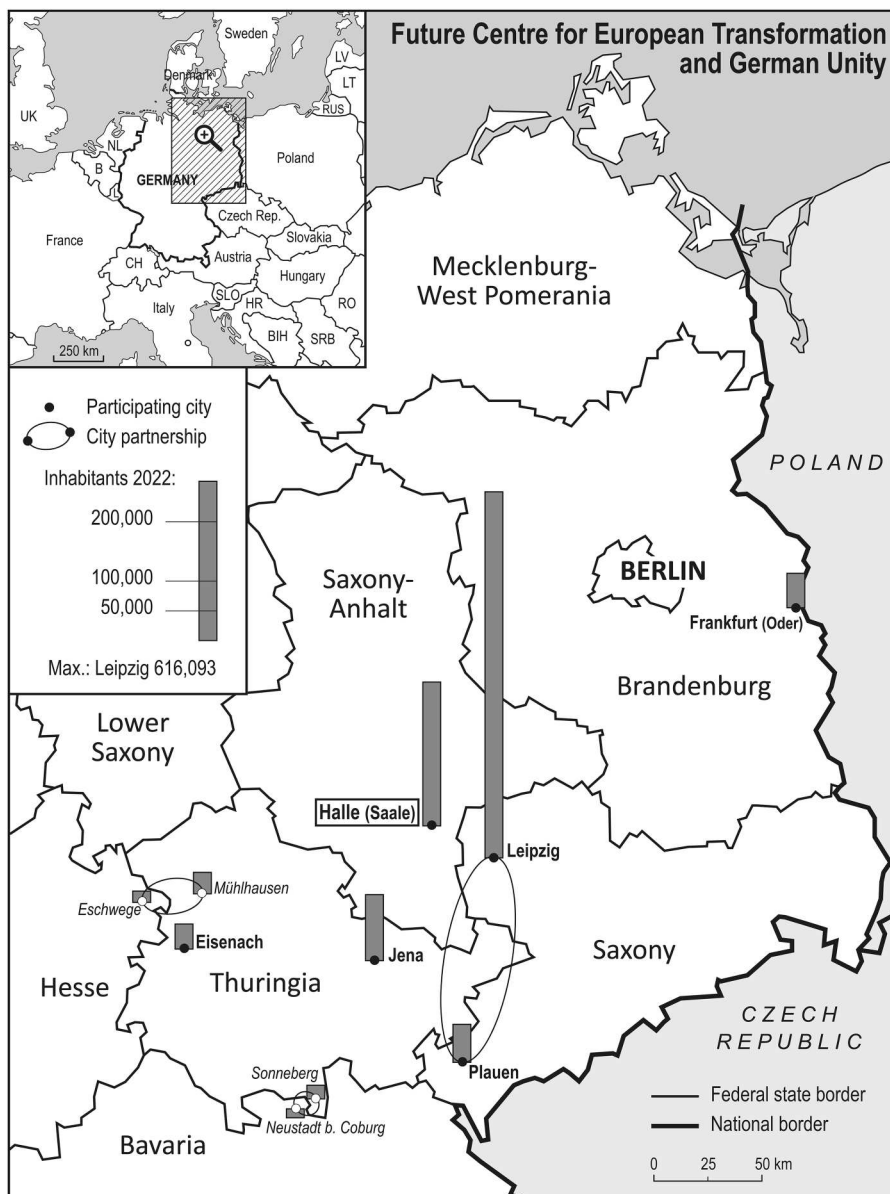

Figure 2. Cities which applied for the Future Centre.
Source: Own presentation.

with Leipzig), with the shortest car travel time to the next airport. A jury of 15 representatives from federal and state governments, academia, culture and civil society evaluated all submissions and conducted site visits to the cities that reached the final stage of competition (Figure 2).

The competition received broad public attention in Germany. For example, just a few days before the final decision, the German national newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* published an article that called the centre 'A Guggenheim of German Unification' and reported Frankfurt (Oder) as the favourite candidate (Mayer, 2023). However, despite this premature speculation, in February 2023, the jury recommended that the centre be located in the city of Halle (Saale) (Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning, 2023). An international architectural competition will follow, with the expected completion of the Future Centre by 2030 (Federal Ministry of Housing, Urban Development and Building, 2024).

As we discuss in detail below, the competition was introduced with mixed messages. According to the former Federal Government Commissioner for East Germany, Carsten Schneider, the centre 'is one of the most important projects for consolidating German unity and cohesion in Europe in the coming years. It is a symbol for a unified Germany and the people living here' (cited in: German Federal Government, 2022, n.p.). Additionally, the establishment of the centre has been connected with at least three more purposes (German Federal Government, 2020; Working Group Future Centre, 2021). First, it shall become a place of science and culture in remembrance of the peaceful revolution in East Germany, as well as for a dialogue between East and West Germany. Second, with 200 employees, an annual budget of 40 million euros, and 'an architectural language that can at least compete with the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao' (quoted in: Deutschlandfunk Kultur, 2023), as one member of the jury put it, the centre shall contribute to regional development in East Germany and attract up to one million visitors per year (Mayer, 2023). Third, the establishment of the centre is seen as a 'contribution to strengthening representative democracy and cohesion in Europe' (German Federal Government, 2020, p. 2), especially in regions where the far right has gained increasing support recently.

The Future Centre working group, established in 2020, compiled a list of thirteen criteria for the location of the Future Centre (Working Group Future Centre, 2021, p. 25f.). These included among others the locations having a particular structural and regional economic need, good public transport accessibility, proximity to a university, support from the federal state for the application, readily available land for the centre and accommodation for up to 3000 visitors per day, along with the need to provide additional leisure activity options for employees and visitors (Working Group Future Centre 2021, p. 25f., Appendix 3).

The stated purposes of the centre and the criteria for selection include a fundamental contradiction in that they encouraged applications from peripheralised 'left behind' places to apply, while at the same time included aspects that only economically successful cities with a high degree of centrality could meet. This led to the aforementioned fact that only the biggest and economically strongest cities made it to the final stage of competition. As we argue below, this contradiction contained the seeds of embitterment for the non-successful applicant cities. Before we further explore this, we will briefly describe our methodological approach and the context of our case study.

4. METHODS AND CASE STUDY

Our study proceeded in three steps. First, we analysed the context of the competition for the Future Centre by conducting a document and media analysis of the coverage surrounding the competition and the final decision. Second, we carried out semi-structured interviews with decision-makers from all seven participating cities.[2] Finally, an opt-in informant consultation in the form of an online focus group discussion was carried out with representatives from two participating cities.

The initial context analysis involved collecting and assessing all publicly available documents related to the competition's selection process. This included, among others, the final report of the commission '30 Years of Peaceful Revolution and German Unity' (December 2020), the report of the 'Working Group Future Centre' (July 2021), the briefing of the German parliament by the federal government (May 2022), the competition's tender documents (July 2022) and the FAQ (September 2022) provided by the Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development. We particularly focussed on the objectives of, and criteria for, the establishment of the Future Centre. Following the jury's decision to select the city of Halle (Saale), we collected German-language press reports from radio, TV and newspapers. The evaluation of the press reports supplemented the context analysis and contributed to preparing for expert interviews.

We conducted expert interviews with representatives from all participating cities or city pairs in the summer of 2023. All interviews, except for a written response from the city of Halle (Saale), were conducted online via Zoom, recorded and then transcribed. The interviews were conducted with press spokespersons (Frankfurt (Oder)), marketing managers or heads of the mayors' offices (Halle (Saale), Eisenach, and Plauen), mayors (Sonneberg and Mühlhausen) and the coordinators of applications for the Future Centre (Leipzig and Jena). In total, we conducted nine semi-structured interviews, each lasting one to two hours.

The interviews covered expectations from the Future Centre; the application process, including the resources invested; and an evaluation of the application with a review of the criteria and decision-making process. As suggested by CPE (Kutter & Jessop, 2015), we conducted a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013) of the nine interviews using the software MAXQDA. The analysis was based on an inductively developed coding system that made it possible to identify and group statements on the application process, internal city procedures, the competition, and structural and funding policies. Additionally, the statements from the interviews were coded using a phased model.

The results of the coding of all interviews have been condensed into thematic groups such as the objectives of the Future Centre, emotions and resources throughout the competition, and possible alternatives to competitive regional policies. To validate our interpretations, we conducted an online focus group discussion with representatives from two applicant cities, in which we presented interim results. We used their feedback to further develop the findings and conclusions.

The following section presents the key findings of our empirical analysis.

5. DISCUSSION: THE DESTRUCTIVE POWER OF INTER-PLACE COMPETITION

Based on the analysis of our empirical data, we have identified three key issues. First, while the idea for the Future Centre was originally politically ambitious and entailed conflicting economic imaginaries, including a strengthening of disadvantaged small towns and rural regions, the result will strengthen one of the already economically successful larger cities (see Table 1). We discuss this narrowing of initially potential Keynesian elements of spatial politics in Section 5.1. Second, the competition consumed significant financial and personal resources, as well as voluntary civil and social commitments in many of the applicant cities, which have ultimately been wasted. In Section 5.2, we interpret this not only as a confirmation of critical literature on neoliberal modes of governance, but also as one supporting piece of evidence for our final conclusion. Thirdly, the competition turned out to become an emotional disappointment for all participants but one, the winner Halle (Saale),[3] and will very likely result in further regional embitterment among both professionals and voluntary civil-society activists in the applicant cities (Section 5.3). Finally, we conclude in 5.4 with a suggestion to include emotions in the cultural-political economic analysis of regional development.

5.1. Contradictory objectives and the exacerbation of uneven regional development

Right from the beginning, the tender for the location was contradictory in terms of its regional policy objectives. In the language of CPE: It combined elements of a neoliberal-competitive economic imaginary with contradictory ones of a Keynesian economic imaginary of spatial cohesion. Although the tender addressed, among other topics, the reduction of regional disparities, it also contains criteria that can only be met by economically and infrastructurally strong cities. The Future Centre competition aims 'to address the discourse on social transformation and its far-reaching consequences' (German Bundestag, 2022, p. 2), as well as uneven regional development in East Germany. Hence, the Future Centre should be located in a municipality that has 'a special structural and regional economic need' (German Bundestag, 2022, p. 4) in order to 'contribute to the creation of equivalent living conditions' (German Bundestag, 2022, p. 4) in Germany. Additionally, the municipality should have 'experience with the topics of transformation and German Unity' (German Bundestag, 2022, p. 4).

This stands in contradiction to the name of the 'Future' Centre, one participant in the focus group discussion emphasised, as the focus of the centre is not on the future at all, but on remembering the past. Furthermore, as the same participant explained, one objective of the Future Centre was to address the dissatisfaction of East German citizens with the reunification process to develop a more positive interpretation of German reunification.

In its briefing for the German Bundestag, the federal government stated: 'The multiplicity and diversity of criteria […] deliberately leave space for different applications' (German Bundestag, 2022, p. 5). Thus, on the one hand, the commission invited small municipalities with challenging experiences during the transformation to apply and, on the other hand, put bigger cities at a clear advantage by expecting the existence of high-speed train connections, academic institutions and large hotel capacities (German Bundestag, 2022). Accordingly, in the phase of variation, very heterogeneous cities felt qualified according to the broadness of the rhetoric in the tender and this raised their hopes of receiving the funding:

> And that's what I see as the positive thing about this competition, that you really gave everyone the chance. Anyone who wanted to, could apply and could throw their hat into the ring. (Interview #2: Plauen)

However, the applicant cities noticed rhetorical contradictions among the 13 criteria. One interviewee stated that the government was looking for 'an egg-laying wool-milk sow' (Interview #3: Leipzig) that is underprivileged and at the same time has excellent academic and cultural facilities, which is a rare combination.

The Keynesian economic imaginary of cohesion policy, represented by the objective of reducing uneven regional development in the criteria of the Future Centre, was the reason why economically weak small-sized cities like Sonneberg/Neustadt bei Coburg, and Mühlhausen/Eschwege participated in the competition, as well as medium-sized cities like Frankfurt (Oder) or Eisenach and Plauen (together with the big city Leipzig). As one interviewee argued:

> When you look at the briefing from the parliament that this commission made, it was urgently stated that this [competition] should be an explicit attempt to promote and strengthen rural areas, and it was precisely this point that got lost [during the competition]. (Interview #4: Sonneberg)

To meet this requirement, economically stronger cities such as Halle (Saale), Leipzig/Plauen and Jena strategically highlighted their economic challenges in their applications. For instance, Halle (Saale) emphasised the economic distress of its surrounding areas:

> The loss of Buna-Leuna, the chemical industry, meant that we had a hundred thousand fewer jobs in one fell swoop in 1990. […] And Mansfeld-Südharz, if you look at the entire mining industry, which collapsed in one day, I think 45,000 people [lost their job] out of 150,000 who used to work there. And that can still be felt. And above all, yes, there are winners in my city after reunification, but there are an incredible number of losers. […] And we also represent precisely these losers in interviews and statements [as part of the proposal]. (Interview #8: Halle (Saale))

One of the most dynamically growing cities in East Germany, Leipzig, strategically joined forces with the economically disadvantaged and peripheral, medium-sized city of Plauen. They highlighted this strategy as a way to meet the contradictory criteria of both reducing regional disparities, as well as the existence of required infrastructures:

> And because we built this bridge in our concept, namely the bridge from the metropolis to the medium-sized city to the rural area. Actually, that is what the Future Centre is also about and what these disparate tender criteria actually wanted. (Interview #3: Leipzig)

Furthermore, Leipzig, one of the economically strongest cities in East Germany, emphasised its structural disadvantages by comparing itself not to the rest of East Germany, but to West German metropolises:

> At the same time, we regarded the Future Centre as a building block for developing Leipzig's economic structure, because in comparison to the major cities in West Germany, Leipzig is of course still far behind. Just in terms of the company headquarters factor, for example, things look very bleak in Leipzig compared to Hamburg, Stuttgart, Munich and so on. (Interview #3: Leipzig)

The tender included criteria that contradict the reduction of uneven regional development and explicitly require structural strength. For instance, the municipality 'should be easily accessible in terms of transportation, also for international guests' (German Bundestag, 2022, p. 4). Later, when assessing the applications, the commission interpreted this requirement as the need for a high-speed train stop (in German: *InterCityExpress, ICE*). Furthermore, a full university or a university of applied sciences must be located 'in the town or its immediate surroundings' (German Bundestag, 2022, p. 5). Both criteria are hard to meet for small or medium-sized cities in the periphery (see Table 1). The commission's interpretation of the criteria regarding the need for good infrastructural facilities in terms of a high-speed train stop and a full university or a university of applied sciences and at the same time having structural weakness lead to feelings of frustration in applicant cities:

> Basically, the procedure was just unfair. And well, they really worked their way through the criteria of the tender because they probably didn't want to be attacked, so the ICE stop […] and hotels and all sorts of things, that was only made clear then. (Interview #6: Mühlhausen)

The winning city of Halle (Saale) sees its good train connection as one main reason why the city was selected by the state government of Saxony-Anhalt as the only participant from that federal state:

> According to the criteria, this can only be Halle, because if you only see the issue of ICE connections, then Magdeburg, Dessau, and Wittenberg are of course out. They are not connected. (Interview #8: Halle (Saale))

Smaller applicant cities attempted to meet the criteria through regional cooperation with universities in neighbouring cities (Eisenach and Sonneberg/Neustadt b. Coburg) or through a network

of cooperating higher academic institutions (Eschwege/Mühlhausen). In the face of these efforts, these smaller cities have been disappointed that this criterion disadvantaged their application. For example, Eisenach, which only has a small dual university with low student enrolment, located at two campuses (Gera and Eisenach), argues as follows:

> [A]nd one of these criteria was, for example, that smaller cities are also explicitly allowed to participate. They don't need to have a university. They don't need to be a university town. They just have to co-operate with a university. Now I have to say, the choice fell on a city, at least according to what I know, whose advantage was its university. This means that we, as a city without a university, were at a disadvantage from the outset […]. (Interview #7: Eisenach)

Another applicant complained in a similar style:

> The invitation to tender states that this also applies to rural areas […]. If they would have said straight away, okay, the condition is an ICE connection, a motorway connection, and a city with more than 100,000 inhabitants, with an administrative capacity of at least X, and an overnight accommodation capacity of a minimum of Y, that would have been fair. (Interview #4: Sonneberg)

At the end of the competition, the good infrastructural conditions such as a high-speed train connection, the existence of a (full) university and facilities to accommodate tourists could only be met by economically strong cities. Additionally, a participant of the online focus group discussion explained that the international recognition of the Future Centre became an increasingly important criterion during the competition, pushing the aim of regional cohesion into the background. This led to frustration as the mayor of Sonneberg stated in the interview:

> And this shows that exactly what I said at the beginning has actually happened again, that things are stated in political speeches and also in expert contributions at conferences, and then we go home and do something completely different. Namely what is opportune. (Interview #4: Sonneberg)

According to the interviewees, the potentially available resources of shrinking cities, namely free plots of land for the Future Centre, have even turned into an obstacle: '[T]he potential plots that we have were interpreted negatively, as there is nothing going on here' (Interview #1: Frankfurt (Oder)). In the end, the initial vague wording of the tender reduced everything to, as one interviewee put it, 'a question who can sell the most beautiful plot of land to the federal government, and bring a few more framework conditions for a million tourists' (Interview #3: Leipzig).

In the end, Halle (Saale), a major city that has the fourth highest GDP per capita of the application cities, recently experienced significant economic growth and the second highest reduction of unemployment (see Figure 1) and has more financial and human resources than many of the other applicant cities, was chosen because it was able to meet the contradictory bidding criteria. On the one hand, Halle is structurally strong (university, high-speed train connection) and, at the same time, structurally weak by way of strategically encompassing the surrounding region.

In line with the processual model for politicisation from CPE, this empirical example illustrates how an initial openness in the discourse for addressing the needs of disadvantaged cities and regions in East Germany diminished when it came to the materialisation of the Future Centre. The original intention of developing structurally weak regions has changed considerably during the process of the competition, to the extent that structural strength has become a crucial factor in determining success. Hence, within the evolutionary process of politicisation, an economic imaginary oriented on neoliberal competition and the promotion of already existing clusters or regional growth succeeded. In contrast, the Keynesian economic imaginary of spatial cohesion

lost importance in the selection process, as the materiality of strong infrastructures and financial strength trumped semiosis.

5.2. Wasted financial and personal resources

All applicant cities hoped that the investments associated with the Future Centre would have a positive impact on their regional economy. This applies not only to small and medium-sized cities, for which the investments would have been a 'huge boost' (Interview #2: Plauen) or a nucleus for the development of the surrounding rural region (Interview #4: Sonneberg), but also to Leipzig and its long-term prospects for becoming competitive with other urban agglomerations in Germany and in Europe (Interview #3: Leipzig).

The efforts made by the applicant cities were enormous. On the one hand, this applies to the financial resources invested of over 1.78 million euros in total for all applications, including 380,000 euros in state subsidies (see Table 2), and, on the other hand, to the great civic commitment (see Section 5.3) that was mobilised in the bidding cities. Despite tight budget situations in all cities, with Frankfurt (Oder) even undergoing a rigorous budget consolidation, the financial resources were willingly made available by the local parliaments. Other expenses included, for example, the organisation of a 'future train' between Leipzig and Plauen, a conference of European cities in Frankfurt (Oder), and a comprehensive tour of 15 European countries organised by the city of Jena.

Furthermore, there was a considerable investment of human resources, for example, with ten full-time staff employed for a period of 1.5 years in Halle (Saale) and extensive, predominantly voluntary work in Eisenach. Other tasks were postponed or taken over by others in the administration, especially in smaller cities (e.g., Mühlhausen, Sonneberg, Plauen).

Generally, larger cities such as Halle (Saale), Jena, and Leipzig were able to invest more resources into their applications. In addition to meeting the contradictory criteria, Halle (Saale) was also able to allocate more resources to the application process than other cities. The effort required was disproportionately high, particularly for smaller cities such as Frankfurt (Oder) and Mühlhausen/Eschwege. Additionally, smaller cities reported that despite their broad

Table 2. Financial investments in the application process by applicant cities according to interviewee estimates.

Applicant	Estimation of financial investments in Euros
Halle (Saale)	200,000 (city of Halle (Saale))
	50,000 (state of Saxony-Anhalt)
Eisenach	50,000 (state of Thuringia)
Frankfurt (Oder)	400,000 (city of Frankfurt (Oder))
Jena	500,000 (city of Jena)
	50,000 (state of Thuringia)
Leipzig/Plauen	200,000 (cities of Leipzig and Plauen)
	130,000 (state of Saxony)
Mühlhausen/Eschwege	50,000 (state of Thuringia)
	50,000 (city of Mühlhausen)
	50,000 (city of Eschwege)
Sonneberg/Neustadt bei Coburg	50,000 (state of Thuringia)

Notes: The financial investments of the seven applications in the competition for the Future Centre is shown on the basis of estimates from our interviewees.
Source: Own compilation based on the interviews.

experience with other competitions (e.g., European Territorial Cooperation ('Interreg' projects)), the complex application for the Future Centre had actually 'overwhelmed us' (Interview #6: Mühlhausen).

The competition for the location of the Future Centre corresponds with insights from the literature on neoliberal modes of urban and regional governance. These modes favour a regional competition with highly unequal opportunities and clear advantages for 'well-off' places and regions (Bristow, 2005). Furthermore, the competition required enormous resources, which were hard to mobilise for underprivileged cities and regions. To use scarce resources for yet another non-successful application is even more of a financial loss in smaller places, as this further hampers future activities. Beyond the financial aspect of the rejected applications, there is also an emotional dimension of disappointed hopes and frustration that we turn to in the following section.

5.3. The role of emotions: local embitterment and regional politics

The analysis of the interviews revealed a surprisingly high level of emotional involvement among the participants. We used MAXQDA's artificial intelligence (AI) tool to cluster words signalling emotions in the different stages of the competition. The application phase was predominantly associated with positive emotions (26 positive, nine negative). These statements span all cities and range from 'great time that I will never forget' (Frankfurt (Oder)), 'very glad' (Plauen) and 'fantastic' (Sonneberg) to 'pride' (Jena, Eisenach, Halle (Saale)) and 'joy' (Eisenach). In contrast, negative emotions (33 negative, seven positive) dominate the selection process with the visit by the jury and the final decision in favour of Halle (Saale). Only the winner, Halle (Saale), expresses above all 'joy' and 'happiness', while the other cities use terms such as 'frustration' (Jena, Sonneberg, Leipzig, Plauen, Frankfurt (Oder)), 'shock' (Eisenach), 'disappointment' (Plauen, Frankfurt (Oder), Leipzig, Mühlhausen), 'resignation' (Jena), 'fear' (Eisenach), 'horror' (Sonneberg) or 'pain' (Frankfurt (Oder)). It is noteworthy that these emotions, both negative and positive, not only apply to the individual stakeholders interviewed, but are also described by them as collective emotions (Huebner, 2011) for civil society as a whole. This high level of collective emotional involvement relates to the fact that the competition for the Future Centre, as required by the federal government (German Bundestag, 2022, p. 5), succeeded in activating the civil society in the applicant cities. Our interviews reveal different modes of including civil society. While Eisenach chose a bottom-up approach, activating numerous groups in the process and resulting in what they termed a 'citizens' application', other cities, such as Sonneberg, chose the more traditional way to ask relevant actors for letters of intent. In addition to the hopes for large investments and the expected resulting economic development, this can also be explained by referring to the goal of the Future Centre 'to create a hub for scientific and cultural debate on the far-reaching and all-encompassing transformation experience in connection with the reunification of Germany' (German Bundestag, 2022, p. 1). In doing so, the competition addressed the experiences of people living in peripheralised East German areas, in particular. An interviewee from a small city explained this experience as follows:

> [The topic of the centre is] transformation in Germany, and we have made this experience here in East Germany, in particular. If you think about it, 19 out of 20 people here in East Germany had to reorient (professionally). […] (Our) citizens have these experiences due to the German East–West transformation in the 1990s. After reunification we gained experience, and now, we basically […] actually wanted to score points. (Interview #6: Mühlhausen)

Residents of Leipzig and Plauen, for example, shared their experiences with transformation via social media and the Plauen City website during the application process (Interview #2: Plauen). Due to the fact that the Future Centre addressed specific East German experiences with the

transformation, many people were willing to get involved on a voluntary basis in the application process of their city. In contrast to many other competitions in the sphere of regional policies, in this case, not only professionals were involved, but dozens of individuals and organisations that invested time, energy, and emotions into the process.

This statement illustrates the strong civic engagement:

> There were a lot of citizens who got involved, for example, from the handball club – that now plays in the first national league – who said that we find this so exciting, we want to get involved; we are collecting signatures. There was a tennis club that plays a big role in our town. They drummed up support for us. They distributed flyers, there were individual campaigners who got in touch with us and said, 'Gosh, that's a sign of hope, we want to get involved'. Ultimately, this led to us working with stakeholders from business, politics, the hospital, housing companies, transport companies. I don't even know who to name, each of them got involved when we needed them. (Interview #6: Eisenach)

This engagement included a lot of non-paid work:

> Yes, all the representatives from urban civil society did this on a voluntary basis. The entire advisory board did this on a voluntary basis, […] just in support, and, yes, this alone shows the high level of acceptance such a centre would have had in the city and how quickly it would have been supported from the very beginning. (Interview #5: Jena)

This extensive engagement of civil society has been – with the exception of Halle (Saale) – not successful and 'without the slightest benefit' (Interview #1: Frankfurt (Oder)). While it has been clear from the very beginning, that there would only be one successful applicant, the process of the competition, in particular, has led to embitterment:

> In that respect, it's disappointing. As far as the jury visit in particular is concerned, we did a lot of preparation, of course, a lot of effort and coordinated a hundred times with the Federal Office, and at the end of the day, the jury cancelled programme items and sent away the people sitting there and school classes who were sitting there and had prepared something. We found that difficult. (Interview #3: Leipzig)

This disappointment shows the emotional dimension of the political process and connects to the academic debate on emotions in 'left behind' places, and the frustration with established political institutions, which can be instrumentalised by the far right. One informant reported a persistent 'hangover mood' in the city since the competition (Interview #1: Frankfurt (Oder)). Another interviewee formulated a fundamental critique:

> I really ended up in a hole myself, after this rejection. We received a letter. It was exactly five sentences […], really undignified, without even explaining why. […] So, basically, I thought it was really undignified and disrespectful for the effort we had put in, for the energy we had invested, to receive such a letter, I just have to say that clearly, and after that I really didn't feel like working on the topic anymore. (Interview #6: Mühlhausen)

The frustration connects to already existing feelings of embitterment: '[T]hat also caused a lot of frustration […], so the people who worked on it really told me that it was the same as always' (Interview #6: Mühlhausen). However, there is not only frustration in Mühlhausen, but also a sense of shame about the early elimination from the competition, which became clear in the online focus group discussion. The frustration also entails moments of empathy between losing cities:

[A]nd we also feel with our colleagues in Eisenach. Whatever prospects they may have had, they have thrown themselves into it with intense effort and they have done and developed a great deal, without receiving the slightest benefit from it. (Interview #1: Frankfurt (Oder))

Other interviewees raise the question of how other regions in East Germany will benefit from an investment of 40 million euros annually in one location (Interview #5: Jena) that was chosen based upon 'a political decision' (Interview #7: Eisenach). The decision to place the centre in Halle (Saale) has been met with criticism:

If you only let the big metropolises and large urban centres benefit, then the rural areas and smaller towns will fall further behind. And I don't know whether it's feasible in the end to say, okay, we support everything where there's actually a lot and let the others fall further and further behind. Yes, that's probably also a fundamental problem. (Interview #2: Plauen)

Our study is an example of how competitions necessarily produce many losers whose material and emotional commitment to the competition turns out to be wasted and worthless. However, as long as the losers do not question the competitive form, as such, and instead believe in the norms of neoliberal competitive society, they will blame the organisers of the competition and develop negative emotions against them, when the organisers are identifiable.

Against the backdrop of right-wing populism 'that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the pure people and the corrupt elite' (Mudde, 2019, p. 15), losers would rather identify themselves with the former and the organisers of the competition with the latter. Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) discuss this logic, according to which individuals turn their resentments against the concrete personifications of the abstract principles, in detail in the chapter on anti-Semitism in *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*. In a spatial perspective, the same logic applies to places that are 'left behind', because they keep losing in the neoliberal 'governing through competition' process.

For the resulting emotions to be turned into resentment against elites (often in spatial perspective: elites elsewhere; cf. Domann & Nuissl, 2022), the organisers of the competition will be blamed as clearly identifiable persons, institutions and/or organisations. Furthermore, for negative emotions that arise from losing in competition to become a characteristic of a region, they need to be shared by inhabitants based on a common sense of place (Hannemann et al., 2024, p. 1212; MacKinnon et al., 2022, p. 44). One mechanism through which defeat in a concrete competition can spread regionally is activating the involvement of civil society, as in the neoliberal 'endogenous development' strategy of regional development (Heeg, 2001, p. 140f; Miessner, 2017, p. 223f.).

In Section 5.4, we conclude from our empirical findings that there is a need to include emotions more systematically in the CPE approach.

5.4. Synthesis: emotions and the cultural-political economic analysis of regional development

As our interviews and the online focus group discussion illustrated, there was initially hope, confidence and even pleasure about the possible Future Centre, which increasingly turned into frustration, humiliation, anger and embitterment over the course of the competition. In that sense, the statements align with insights from the literature: People in 'left behind' places 'feel neglected and unrepresented by dominant political and economic actors and institutions' (MacKinnon et al., 2022, p. 44). Other studies show how collective emotions can negatively affect regional identities (Sandbu, 2020). Moreover, in our case existing feelings have been reinforced by an initiative that explicitly aimed to address feelings of being 'left behind'. Based on these empirical insights, we propose the inclusion of emotions in the evolutionary process schema of CPE (see

	Variation	Selection	Retention
Timeline	2020: Commission "30 Years of Peaceful Revolution and German Unity"	2021: Working Group Future Centre 2022: Competition for the location of the Future Centre	2023: Final decision to establish the Future Centre in Halle (Saale)
Semiosis	Honouring the lifetime achievements of East Germans Addressing the problems of small and rural municipalities	(Inter)national appeal of Future Centre High civil society engagement in the participating cities	"Guggenheim Effect" Excellence of the Future Centre
Materiality	Particular structural and regional economic needs in East Germany Realizing equivalent living conditions	13 criteria (incl. accessibility, accommodation, proximity to university, etc.) Financial and personal resources	Access to high-speed train connections, university, tourism infrastructures, etc. Successful big city Metropolitan area
Emotions	Addressing "left behind" feelings Euphoria Pride Appreciation	Hope and joy Growing scepticism Participation	Producing feelings of being "left behind" Humiliation and frustration (Regional) embitterment Joy and confirmation for the winner Halle (Saale)
Spatial Imaginary	Keynesian spatial imaginary	Neoliberal-competitive spatial imaginary	Neoliberal-competitive spatial imaginary

Figure 3. The integration of emotions into the evolutionary phase-model of the Cultural Political Economy approach.
Source: Own presentation.

Figure 3), as an indispensable component that experiences variation, selection and retention, alongside semiosis and materiality, as shown in Section 2. In the final section of this paper, we discuss the need for future research gained from our empirical findings.

6. CONCLUSION: INTER-PLACE COMPETITION, REGIONAL EMBITTERMENT AND THE NEED FOR ALTERNATIVE REGIONAL POLICIES

In this paper, we have argued that the case of the competition for the location of the Future Centre goes beyond the story of one winning city and six non-successful applicants. First, the competition is another example of the struggle between different imaginaries of regional governance and the final dominance of the already prevailing imaginary of neoliberal regional policy. CPE allows us to observe how material factors gained importance in the process, and how the

initial discursive opening was closed in favour of structural strength. Second, our empirical findings show the material dimension of neoliberal competition: The waste of public resources for another flagship project. Finally, the investment of resources and civic engagement that did result in success reinforces frustrations and disappointment in already underprivileged cities and regions in East Germany.

In the case of the Future Centre, feelings of embitterment resulting from losing the competition have the potential to affect the whole region, since not only government employees and officials were involved, whose job it is in this neoliberal era to participate in, and frequently lose, competitions, but also many actors from civil society. This frustration is likely to spread and could further benefit the far right. People who became involved because they hoped that their transformation experiences would finally be recognised, had to learn that they ended up among the losers once again. This intensified the experiences of frustration and shows the emotional dimensions of political processes.

Inter-place competitions have self-defeating consequences, as well as emotional outcomes. Our research indicates that a regional policy that hopes to contribute to territorial cohesion using inter-place competition as a strategy is doomed to fail. On the contrary, the very form of such politics, namely competition, not only deepens uneven development but also intensifies frustrations and embitterment. In our research, the embitterment results from the fact that the Future Centre was meant to address East Germans' experiences of transformation. Hence, the competition for the Future Centre produced what it intended to reduce: the feelings of being 'left behind' and frustration.

In the present situation, in which the neoliberal form of regional policies prevails, geographical unevenness is brought to everyone's attention and felt by the inhabitants of the 'left behind' places mediated through the form of the inter-place competition. Therefore, spatialised emotions not only result from spatial unevenness per se, but also from how it is instilled and deepened through neoliberal spatial policies in the form of competitions.

We believe that this is politically devastating, since the resulting embitterment plays into the hands of the far right. Instead of competition and lighthouse projects, it is time for regional policy strategies that truly aim to reduce regional disparities. When we raised this idea in our online focus group discussion, all participants were convinced that large projects cannot be a solution to the problems of regional development in East Germany. They pleaded in favour of small- and medium-sized projects that focus on the needs of the cities and towns and enable the integration of all Eastern German regions (cf. Christe & Nell, 2023). From our perspective, this points towards the need for more equitable regional policies for the sake of people living in 'left behind' places as well as for the sake of democracy.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data not available due to confidentiality of interviewees.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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

ETHICS STATEMENT

A written statement confirmed that informed consent had been given by the research subjects. All quotations used were authorised by the interviewees.

NOTES

1.   In the following, all German quotations, both from the literature and from the interviews, have been translated into English by the authors.
2.   Full disclosure: In the first phase of the competition, two of the authors supported a letter of interest for the application of Mühlhausen/Eschwege.
3.   Since the report of the jury highlighted the enormous efforts undertaken in Eisenach to involve civil society on a small budget, the federal government developed the idea to build a 'Citizens Forum' in that city worth 30 million euros. As of the time of writing, no further steps have been taken to operationalise this.

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