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Stefan Kirchner, Nina Baur

**Spatially bound regimes between
convergence and space dependence**

A varieties-of-refiguration perspective on
social change around the world

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Abstract

Spatial arrangements increasingly shape and reflect social changes in an interconnected world, acting as both foundations and drivers of change. This paper explores the perspective of the *varieties of refiguration* to analyze the dynamic interplay between spatial arrangements and social change, emphasizing convergent and divergent trends across societies. Drawing on the theoretical framework of four spatial figures—place, territorial space, route, and network space—these spatial logics are presented as action-oriented constructs that underpin social interactions and institutional regimes. We introduce the notion of *spatially bound regimes* to highlight how actor groups contest and maintain spatial arrangements within cultural-political power dynamics. Additionally, we propose *space dependence* as a mechanism for understanding persistent spatial arrangements, thereby extending the concept of path dependence to describe the resistance to change rooted in spatial infrastructures, distances, and increasing returns. Four vectors—states, individuals, organizations, and technologies—serve as empirical dimensions for capturing convergence and divergence and elucidating the interconnected forces of transnationalization, digitalization, individualization, and hyper-organization. While global trends often push toward homogenization, divergent dynamics emerge through countermovements, contesting spatial arrangements and figurations. This paper concludes that spatial arrangements are essential for understanding the diverse trajectories of social change. By integrating spatial logics, spatially bound regimes, and salient vectors as dimensions of empirical investigation, our perspective provides ways of examining the complexities of convergence and divergence in social change. Our concepts enrich the varieties-of-refiguration perspective, offering nuanced insights into the multifaceted interrelations between spatial and societal change.

Keywords: *Refiguration of Space, Regimes, Space Dependence, Convergence and Divergence, Spatial Figures, Global Social Change, Countermovements, Hyper-Organization*

1. Introduction

The ways in which societies organize and relate to space in an increasingly interconnected and dynamic world are undergoing profound changes. From the rapid expansion of digital platforms to the challenges to national borders, these shifts reflect broader social changes concerning how states govern their domains, individuals go about their lives, organizations conduct their operations, and technologies provide their functionalities. These changes are not uniform; while figurations across some spaces adapt and evolve rapidly, others remain deeply rooted in historical patterns and resist change despite external pressures. We have yet to fully understand how spatial arrangements shape social changes around the world and how they are shaped by social changes.

We draw from the refiguration-of-space approach (Löw & Knoblauch, 2019; Knoblauch & Löw, 2024) that puts the “where in the world” question (Löw & Weidenhaus, 2017) to pressing concerns

across societies as a conceptual foundation for our investigation. This approach seeks to capture ongoing social change around the world through a spatial lens that encompasses two modes of inquiry: (a) On the one hand, the refiguration approach offers a spatially informed perspective to better describe and analyze ongoing social changes. By taking the spatial tethers of figurations as *baselines for an investigation of social changes*, this approach allows for a grounded reconstruction. Because (most) figurations need to relate to physical space, spatial relations offer a pathway toward unpacking salient shifts. (b) On the other hand, the refiguration approach additionally assumes that spatial changes do not just indicate social changes; major shifts in *spatial arrangements can act as drivers of social changes* themselves. In this work, novel forms of spatial patterns enable and underlie emerging figurations that transform societies around the world.

In this respect, the refiguration concept offers a framework for understanding the complexities of spatial arrangements as refiguration in different societies and across various contexts. It allows for a more nuanced analysis of how different spatial arrangements influence and are influenced by social changes. This approach underscores the importance of recognizing and analyzing the spatial dynamics at play in different cultural and social settings, thereby enriching our understanding of global social phenomena. Knoblauch and Löw (2021) coined the term “varieties of refiguration” to capture the empirically uncovered ways in which spatial arrangements and social changes occur across different contexts, societies, and regions. The varieties-of-refiguration perspective recognizes and investigates the diverse societal challenges and contexts that influence how social changes occur in accordance with spatial arrangements. This line of inquiry has produced ample and varied empirical examples that underline the general benefits of taking on a spatial lens (e.g., Baur et al., 2020; Waldherr et al., 2021; Löw et al., 2021; Christmann et al., 2022; Castillo Ulloa et al., 2023).

The current conceptualization of the refiguration approach faces a crucial challenge: The investigated phenomena span a large variety of social changes that move along varied trajectories. In some social changes, spatial arrangements seem to shift easily and with ongoing reinterpretation and flexible refiguration taking place. In other situations, however, social changes face persistent spatial arrangements even in the face of substantial pressures to change. This persistence is sometimes rooted firmly in history, reproducing spatial patterns that date back decades or, in some cases, centuries. While the refiguration approach emphasizes the importance of embracing both convergences and divergences, the challenge remains to conceptualize the observation that in some situations social changes and spatial arrangements converge, whereas other examples exhibit substantial divergence, with figurations resisting global pressures to change.

Therefore, in this paper, we ask: *How do varieties of refiguration come about and, more specifically, how can we conceptualize situations of divergence and convergence of social changes rooted and realized in spatial arrangements?* We pose three sub-questions to answer the above main question: *What are the relevant conceptual building blocks? What are the salient vectors of empirical inquiry? What characterizes situations in which some social changes and spatial arrangements change (easily), whereas in other situations figurations and spatial arrangements persist?*

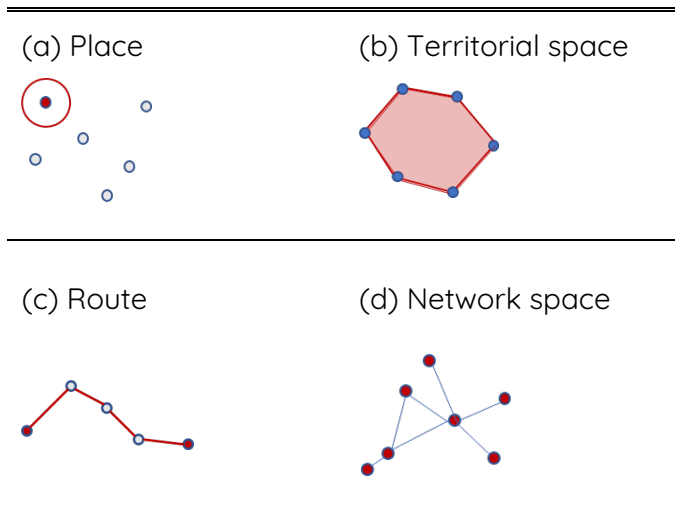
To answer these questions, we introduce four spatial figures as action logics and conceptual building blocks of spatially bound regimes. We consider states, individuals, organizations, and technologies as four vectors of convergence and divergence to describe salient dimensions of empirical inquiry. The four vectors capture major empirical dimensions of social change, accounting for major convergent or divergent dynamics around the world in which states govern, individuals conduct their lives, organizations operate, and technologies afford their functions. We conclude our argument by outlining the circumstances of convergence and divergence as being described by the cultural-political dynamics of spatially bound regimes that, in certain situations, exhibit space dependency.

2. Four spatial figures of refiguration, action logics, and spatially bound regimes (place, territorial space, route, and network space)

In their seminal contribution, Löw and Knoblauch (2017; 2021; 2024; Löw et al., 2021; also Baur, 2023) proposed understanding the fundamental relevance of physical space for social relationships in terms of a “figuration of spaces” alongside its ongoing social changes as “refiguration of spaces”. To capture the complex interdependencies of progressively globalized societies and spatial arrangements, the refiguration approach identified four basic spatial figures: *place*, *territorial space*, *route*, and *network space*.

As ideal typical, analytic construction, each of the four spatial figures follows from a distinct underlying logic. Löw and Knoblauch qualitatively described the logics as follows: Place comes about through a logic of intersection (“Logik der Überlappung”), while territorial space follows from a logic of demarcation (“Logik der Grenzziehung”). The spatial figure of a route (sometimes called a trajectory, trajectorial space, pathway, or line) exhibits a logic of transit (“Logik der Durchquerung”), and network space builds on a logic of association (“Logik der Assoziation”). Löw and Knoblauch argued that spatial figures can coexist and conflict with shifting dominance. Actions and their consequences (including the built environment) can be described according to spatial figures and their logics. Hence, the perspective of the refiguration of space demands that attention be paid to the diverse socially embedded spatial arrangements that enable or embody figurations and change.

To generally apply the spatial figures, we build on the work of Hecht and Kirchner (2023) and propose a formalized modeling of the four spatial figures. Formally defined, a logic denotes relevant elements and expresses principles how relevant elements interrelate. The elements of a spatial logic are made up of physical locations. The ways in which actors interrelate locations is thus derived from the underlying spatial logics that describe and bring about spatial figures. Graphical representations of the figures (e.g., in diagrams, geographical maps, or GIS datasets) are ways of engaging with complex spatial figures. Such representations offer a means to formally describe the figures as well as to capture their empirical occurrences—for example, the ways someone would explain the reference to physical locations in a specific situation. This also allows us to formulate principles that underlie the composition of each geometric modeling to describe abstract features for each spatial figure (Figure 1).

Fig. I: Geometric mapping of the four spatial figures

Note: Own depiction adapted from Hecht and Kirchner (2023).

Put simply and extending from graphical depictions, our modeling takes its starting point from the basic possibilities¹ of relating scattered points across a geometric space (see Hecht and Kirchner, 2023). A *place* involves an unconnected single point that relates to other points all placed across a given space. In our modeling, a place describes a physical location with rich meanings that distinguish it from other locations. *Territorial space* or territory requires points to connect in a looped line that encloses an area inside. A territorial space, therefore, delineates a defined physical inside area and a border that separates it from everything outside the border. A *route* connects points in a finite line running from a starting point to an ending point and describes a line of physical locations forming a continuous string from start to end with waypoints in between. In a *network*, connected points form a graph of direct and intermediate relationships. Our modeling of a network space describes a graph of physical locations specified by their direct and intermediate relationships.

Formalization in our version does not capture the logic of action of the spatial figures in its entirety (e.g., of everyday enactment and communicative reference): To become part of spatial figures, spatial relations must bear relevance for social actions and figurations. Moreover, in escaping the neat completeness of plain geometry, spatial figures in empirical research can involve states of incompleteness, blurring, ambiguity, or fragmentation, as actors can refer very differently to spatial figures. Our modeling provides a formalized version of the underlying logics to distinguish the spatial figures analytically as well as relate them empirically, for example, to observable states and material manifestations, such as recorded narrative references, patterns of circulation, or outlines of built infrastructures.

¹ The geometrical mapping of the four spatial figures represents the four basic ways of connecting points with each other: no direct connection of points, points as uninterrupted outlines of an area, lines with a start and end, and a network from directly and indirectly connected points.

The abstract logics of spatial figures (place, territorial space, route, and network space) must impact actors' perceptions and actions in order to take effect across society. While societal relations to physical space are often taken for granted, they become especially salient during conflicts or unsettling events. Actors must discern whether their actions align with the logics of place, territorial space, route, or network space, as these can interrelate in synergy or markedly conflict. For instance, acting according to the logic of place may not make sense if relevant others perceive the location as part of a route.

Hence, spatial figures offer general but distinct logics of action that guide actors on relevant elements and their interrelatedness. Similar to societal-level institutional logics (Friedland and Alford, 1991) or top-level conventions (Diaz-Bone, 2014), spatial logics serve as references for actors to organize and justify their actions in relation to others across society. Spatial logics are also performed in actions and institutionalized in figurations. Figures, as action logics, assist in understanding and facilitating coordination, relying on societal constructions of *where in the world* activities occur. As a result, single and multiple logics of spatial figures enable spatially bound regimes. Following the broad notion of regimes in which actors enacted established rules according to distinct logics of action (Streeck & Thelen, 2005), we understand spatially bound regimes as comprising institutionalized rules and procedures tied to particular spatial arrangements determined by political, economic, or legal regulations as well as by the design and use of technology and infrastructures (cf. Biaback Anong et al., forthcoming).

Combined with the four spatial figures as action logics, the regime concept allows us to account for the political cultural processes of maintenance, domination, and contestation that underlie and enable spatial arrangements and figurations of interest. Considering spatial arrangements as tethered to a regime enables us to reveal the enforcement activities and power relations that actors expend to establish, maintain, and change figurations in the various ways they tie to spaces and spatial arrangements.

3. Vectors of convergence and divergence (states, organizations, individuals, and technologies)

The ways in which social changes and spatial arrangements currently develop are subject to worldwide dynamics that many scholars understand as being part of broad globalization processes that emanate from and across societal levels. While these processes date far back in history, the current globalization waves are usually met with an initial expectation of a linear progression and worldwide convergence (Knoblauch & Löw, 2024). Put very simply, increasing connections and networked exchange between different parts of the world should lead to more homogenized figurations (e.g., in statehood, the economy, education, culture, and civil society). While this holds true for salient aspects of societies around the world, other research has also highlighted substantially diverging trajectories in the globalization process. These observed divergencies pose a crucial question: How can we consistently conceptualize vectors of global convergence alongside diverging developments?

We first turn to the foundations for expectations of worldwide convergence. In our conceptualization, we follow the foundations laid out by Knoblauch and Löw (2021; 2024) as

they named globalization and mediatization as two main aspects influencing the refiguration of spaces. Globalization alters the role of states in societies. National states can no longer be described only as “containers” that seal off national societies from an external global environment. Furthermore, mediatization, as part of a broader digitalization (or digital transformation) process, has been proven to be integral to refiguration processes, as technologies diffuse globally (Knoblauch & Löw, 2024). From our perspective, states and technologies act as vectors of convergence and divergence, constituting several key dimensions for empirical inquiry into social change at and across societal levels.

At the same time, sociological research observes social change at and across various levels often called “micro,” “meso,” and “macro” levels of societies. From this perspective, vectors of convergence and divergence indicate salient social spheres emanating from and across particular levels of analysis fostering pertinent spatial arrangements to unfold, and relevant figurations to play out. Following the micro, meso, macro distinctions, we further introduce two important levels by adding two additional vectors: individuals and organizations.² This allows us to capture convergent and divergent dynamics at the micro level by considering individuals, at the meso level by including organizations, and at the macro level by focusing on states. Technologies, in contrast, can be considered vectors that span across micro, meso, and macro levels.

Developing our argument from the micro-meso-macro-levels conception, we argue that around the world, states, organizations, individuals, and technologies establish and maintain distinct relationships with societies. Current research has used terms such as transnationalization, digitalization, individualization, and hyper-organization to describe these ongoing worldwide shifts that typically conjure notions of converging trends:

(a) Society and states (“transnationalization”): After several historical developments (Held et al., 1999; Fligstein & McAdam, 2012) modern societies have become conceptualized as being contained within nation states and claim their territories as domains. Trailing the decline of empires and decolonization, nation states have proliferated, and global relations have shifted to an “infrastructural control” (Held et al., 1999, p. 43) of cross-national exchange routes and networks. Although the economy has always operated transnationally throughout history, recent globalization waves have certainly accelerated the speed and multiplied the scale of cross-border exchanges (Held et al., 1999). Through the transnationalization of information, people, capital, goods, and services progressively travel across national borders. The role states play in societies transforms as activities increasingly grow transnational, thereby breaking up national containment (Giddens, 1990; Beck, 2000).³ Conversely, this places pressure on nation states’ ability to govern sovereignly across its territorial space, eroding their control over economic and democratic structures (Streeck, 2021).

² Three of our four vectors describe changes pertaining to key actors or core societal levels that world society theories have identified: states, individuals, and organizations.

³ Besides international economy, modern states always comprise a military complex, which in Europe has decreased in significance following the fall of the Iron Curtain.

(b) Society and individuals (“individualization”): Norbert Elias (1987) theorized the process of individualization as intertwined historic development of modern European societies and the construction of the modern individual. Conceptualized by Beck (1983) for example, sociology understands the current phase of individualization as a process that began in the middle of the 20th century (Beck, 1995; Schroer, 2008). In this process, education expands, lifestyles and consumption pluralize, work forms differentiate, the constraints of societal institutions erode, and individuals increasingly strive for self-realization and individual meaning in life. Contemporary individualization processes intensify and, for example, surface in the increased awareness of diversity and struggles for equal rights of certain societal groups (Mau et al., 2023). For Reckwitz (2021), society escalates individualization processes even further through a process of “singularization,” valuing the unique and devaluing the non-exceptional. In the processes of individualization or even “hyper-individualization,” the relationship between society and individuals transmutes eroding collective forms, such as institutions or traditional group memberships, into idiosyncratic experience, conducts, and aspirations.

(c) Society and organizations (“hyper-organization”): Building on the general insights for organizational sociology, modern societies have evolved alongside a massive and continuing growth in formal organizations. Some researchers have argued that modern society constitutes in fact an organization society (Coleman, 1982; Perrow, 1991; Schimank, 2005; Kirchner, 2022). Extending from the ideal type of bureaucracy by Weber (1972), formal organizations expand into society particularly through administration and the economy placing most of the society within domains of formal organizations (Perrow, 1991). The continuing growth of organizations in society is derived from the success of (economic) organizations and its negative effects, which give rise to of even more organizations (e.g., state agencies or trade unions). Recently, some scholars have noted a decline of traditional organizational forms (e.g., Davis, 2016). Others have argued that the expansion of organizations and its role in society continuous. Bromley and Meyer (2015) posited that with hyper-organization, non-profit actors in particular are increasingly covering social arenas that used to be domains of communities in a society that had existed without formal organizations before. Given hyper-organization, established organizations increasingly face demands to comply with societal values and expectations that often lie beyond their organization’s core activities.

(d) Society and technologies (“digitalization”): The usage of technology in modern societies is interrelated with globalization processes (Giddens, 1990, p. 84 pp.) comprising various technologies such as machines or communication technologies. Technologies change throughout time; for example, steamships replacing sailing ships (Geels, 2002) transformed how cargo travels around the globe. Micro electronics, computers, and the internet serve as protagonists of the so-called “information technology revolution” (Castells, 1996). The increased use of technology, also known as “digitalization,” currently comprises a wide array of aspects, including transnationally operating and privately owned tech firms, such as Alphabet, Apple, Amazon, Alibaba, or Tencent (van Dijck et al., 2018; Gawer and Srnicek, 2021); the rise of data centers; and the increased usage of digital tools in many areas of private and professional life. Attention has recently shifted to computer systems that use artificial intelligence (AI)—promising a technological revolution that has spread across societies around the world (Makridakis, 2017).

We additionally argue that the four vectors of convergence and divergence are interrelated: In dynamic societies, social changes often co-occur. Processes such as transnationalization, digitalization, individualization, and hyper-organization intensify each other. For example, transnationalization, and individualization are intertwined as orientations and life-courses increasingly transcend national boundaries through mass media, consumption, and transnational mobility (Giddens, 1990; Held et al., 1999; Beck, 2000). While states have already fostered the proliferation of organizations (Perrow, 1991), globalization has caused their numbers to increase manifold around the world (Held et al., 1999; Bromley and Meyer, 2015). The process of digitalization occurs alongside changes in organizational patterns (Castells, 1996; Davis, 2016; Kirchner, 2022), and the worldwide usage of digital technology advances exchanges across national borders.

Organizations around the world develop, use, and diffuse technologies, thereby creating new digital business models (Kirchner & Schüßler, 2019) or establishing technological standards (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000). Platform technology has allowed organizations expand into individual spheres that had previously been unreachable (e.g., by social media) (van Dijck et al., 2018). In turn, social media enables and intensifies individualization (Reckwitz, 2021). Hyper-organization (Bromley & Meyer, 2015) infuses established organizations with external pressures partly brought about by individualization processes (e.g., pertaining to claims on equality, diversity, and global climate). These interrelated social changes across states, technologies, individuals, and organizations are ignited by globalization processes and fuel them.

Drawing from spatially oriented approaches to globalization (Castells, 1996), we can assume a worldwide prevalence of the network space as dominant spatial logic of action of global change processes. Hence, given transnationalization, digitalization, individualization, and hyper-organization, we posit that instead of national territories, network spaces increasingly govern relationships across states, individuals, organizations, and technologies. Extending on the insights of Castells (1996), places, territories, and routes are subject to their positionings within networks and fade in their relevance to the governance of the everyday conduct of states, individuals, organizations, and technologies.

A simplified understanding of globalization would assume that the dominance of global network spaces creates strong pressures for social change and eventually shapes convergent figurations around the world. The logics of places, territories, and routes remain relevant for states, individuals, organizations, and technologies. However, their logics increasingly serve as conduits, vessels, or knots for network spaces that enable and govern societal relationships. For example, social changes undermine the ability of nation states to regulate activities within their national territory. Individuals increasingly pursue life courses across national borders and adhere to cultural orientations and practices that travel across global networks and transcend the confines of national territories or places. Similarly, organizations and technologies enable and establish network connections that reach across many countries and places.

If this simplified understanding was indeed true, we should observe a strong convergence of social changes regardless of where inquiries are conducted throughout the world.

4. Divergent dynamics across vectors through countermovements

Thus far, the four vectors of convergence and divergence introduced above have provided us with ample material to assume a strong convergence trend with social changes around the world. In contrast, and for our argument, we posit that divergent dynamics arise from countermovements as integral parts of any social change process. Extending our argument on the involvement of the four vectors in convergence, we additionally assume that the vectors provide resources and attack angles for countermovements that accompany major social changes.

For a better understanding of the role of countermovements, we draw on the work of Elias (1987) and build on the research of Knoblauch and Löw (2021) by assuming that developments of societies do not progress in a linear or uniform fashion. Developments proceed through conflict and the interaction of opposing tendencies, with established groups seeking to maintain their positions as emerging or subordinate groups push for change. This perspective is linked to our regime concept, as a given regime usually harbors multiple actor groups. The pertinent literature has identified established actors and outsiders (Elias & Scotson, 1994); incumbents and challengers (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012); or insurrectionaries, symbionts, subversives, and opportunists (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009). The power imbalances between such actor groups, as their divergent orientations fuel a dynamic process that underlies the long-term trajectories of social changes. We assume that divergent orientations particularly pertain to spatial arrangements and that groups' divergent orientations are made salient through spatial arrangements.

The four vectors of convergence and divergence allow us to highlight the potential for countermovement dynamics within and across these vectors:

In terms of the relationship between societies and states, we highlight that transnational social changes increasingly face nationalism and protectionism countermovements. The period of assumed ever-growing cross-border exchanges appear to be succeeded by a phase of a *resurrection of national territory*. Nation states are rooted in claims of responsibility, sovereignty, and integrity of their territories, which are increasingly pressured by cross-border network spaces and routes. Alongside by sub-national fights for independent statehood (e.g., Catalonia, Scotland, and Tibet), many countries exhibit struggles involving their apparent inability to govern increasingly globalized issues, giving rise to territorially-bound populism (Streeck, 2021). Attempts to resurrect the conception of the national state as a container underlies many current initiatives for migration control, border closures, deportation, and tariffs, in some cases even serving as fuel to the proponents of illiberal and autocratic rule.

The way in which societies and individuals relate to individualization gives rise to conflict-laden dynamics between groupings that could be roughly understood to range across a progressive to conservative continuum. Individualization processes involving increased awareness of idiosyncratic characteristics and aspirations towards societal recognition surface, particularly in ongoing *contestations of places*. The richness of the meanings of places resonates with the meanings that fuel personal and collective identities. Group-based activism, which some understand as "identity politics," often involves conscientiously claiming places (e.g., occupying

public places or establishing “safe spaces” for their groups). Many contested places exemplify what some (Mau et al., 2023) have described as the ongoing struggles throughout societies to moderate and negotiate claims toward more progressive inclusion that are subject to reluctance and even rejection from parts of the population.

As to the relation between societies and organizations, the observed hyper-organization around the world is highlighted by mixed trends involving the founding of more organizations to counter other organizations as well as the obstruction of established organizations. Actor groups foster a *hyper-organization or de-organization of spaces*. The domains organizations seek to control expand across places, network spaces, routes, or territories and pit them against rivaling claims, especially of the nation state’s dominance. Above all, countermovements often require groups to establish their own social movement organizations (Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2008) or introduce alternative organizations for their purposes. Consequently, progressive organizations face conservative counterparts fighting across issues and spaces. Conversely, other countermovements attempt to de-organize places, routes, territories, and network spaces across societies (e.g., by anti-corporate movements, the banning of NGOs as foreign agents, or initiatives to de-bureaucratize societal sectors). Whereas the former two processes attempt to limit the power exerted by international organizations described by the hyper-organization perspective, the latter process restrains organizations (often endowed by the nation state) from governing their respective societal sectors.

Lastly, countermovements impact how societies and technologies interrelate. The momentum of digitalization faces attempts to regulate internet companies, establish alternatives, or disconnection. The spatial patterns that groups produce pertaining to this vector could be described as *interrupted network spaces*. Network spaces expand by allowing more and more locations to connect that adhere to network standards, which in some cases challenges standard-setting domains (e.g., those of other organizations or nation states). Facing the rise of internet companies, official bodies in many countries are called to regulate the activities of ever-expanding digital network spaces, especially those enabled and governed by transnational digital platforms. While national and sub-national regulatory bodies have attempted to reassert their territories as domains (Kirchner & Pohl, 2025), countries such as China and Russia have disrupted and territorially contained internet access, thereby establishing a “splinternet” (Knoblauch & Löw, 2024). Further initiatives advocated for alternative technologies (e.g., democratic ownership structures such as platform cooperatives) (Scholz, 2016), to disrupt the power exerted by large tech firms. Lastly, some de-networking practices attempt to re-instate the precedence of offline interactions (e.g., by engaging in digital detox as conscious abstinence), whereas other practices exclude actors from digital networks (e.g., via systematic de-platforming).

These examples make it clear that countermovements can interrelate and mutually reinforce the dynamics of several vectors. States seek to reassert control over their territories by setting up counter-organizations and alternative technologies or by regulating individuals, organizations, and technologies. Groups that drive countermovements in the realm of individualization usually operate through formal organizations (e.g., foundations, lobby groups, thinktanks, and social movement organizations). These groups utilize digital technology (particularly social media platforms) to pursue their goals and lobby to alter relationships

between states and societies. Hence, in situations in which countermovements can create momentum within or across vectors, the spatial patterns across a society should exhibit a substantial divergence in the face of globally convergent trends.

In these and many other examples, we can assume that forceful, worldwide social changes face substantial countermovements giving rise to conflicts between focal groupings to fight over the spatial arrangements underlying the respective regimes, which we conceptualized more specifically as spatially bound regimes. The extant literature from the field of comparative political economy has termed ambiguous dynamics of worldwide developments as “converging divergences” (Katz and Darbishire, 2000), “divergent paths,” or distinct “trajectories of change” (Thelen, 2012). This stream of cross-national research observed a growing internal diversity because of common global trends. However, this also gives rise to a segmented convergence into certain subtypes. Hence, even in the face of general social changes all around the world, the assumed convergence must engage with almost-certain divergent tendencies due to countering forces, such as countermovements.

In keeping with the refiguration approach, we argue that all these social changes involve distinct spatial dimensions that allow us to observe and conceptualize convergence, divergence, and countermovements across spaces and societies. Indeed, contributions to transnationalization, digitalization, individualization, and hyper-organization often conjure notions of worldwide convergence following the patterns of network spaces. Our conceptualization follows that of Knoblauch (2022) and understands empirical cases as means of rapprochement. Rather than simply looking for fully fledged, convergent realizations of transnationalization, digitalization, individualization, and hyper-organization, we let these vectors serve as empirical dimensions to search across spaces for the variety of transformed relationships between societies and states, technologies, individuals, and organizations. While this comprises convergence, the cases could also substantially diverge as they move along idiosyncratic trajectories. In consideration of the strong convergent forces unfolding along vectors, we anticipate countermovements that mobilize against global trends, moderating, translating, deflecting, or even reversing social changes that involve states, individuals, organizations, and technologies.

5. Circumstances of convergence and divergence (path and space dependence of regimes)

By extending the discussion on vectors of convergence and divergence that indicate the pertinent dimensions of empirical inquiry, this section develops our understanding of how social changes develop and translate into convergent or divergent spatial arrangements. We term this step of our argument the circumstances of convergence and divergence:

Extending the refiguration approach outlined by Knoblauch and Löw (2021), our focus on salient globalization processes and countermovements, introduced above, can capture a substantial array of empirical examples alongside their converging or diverging trajectories of social changes. For all these examples, we could argue that the struggles between groups shape the convergent or divergent figurations in the wake or as drivers of social changes around the world. Major sources of divergence include countermovements, which are comprised of cultural-

political processes in which actors confront each other and compete for dominance. Convergent and divergent developments oftentimes cooccur and interact with each other, creating interlaced processes of movement and countermovements. In many cases, the concept of spatially bound regimes provides a perspective with which to capture the cultural-political navigating the logics of spatial arrangements. The regime concept addresses how spatial arrangements for groups, issues, fields, regions, or states are established, maintained, and continually contested. Hence, we assume that the dynamic change of power relations often surfaces in changing spatial arrangements as, for example, dominant spatial figures and their interrelations are replaced or noticeably refigured—eventually describing convergent or divergent social change.

Instances in which the culturally embedded power relations of actors in a regime alone are insufficient for accounting for convergence or divergence are evident. In some situations, power relations shift or become heavily contested, while spatial arrangements remain stable. In other cases, contested power relations themselves are only stabilized through a heavy reliance on steady spatial arrangements, such as established territories, resilient network spaces, routine routes, or commonly known places. Hence, to answer the remaining question about an absence of change in the face of pressures to change, we require a conceptualization that expands cultural-political actor dynamics to situations of sustained persistence across time and across space.

To capture situations of sustained persistence, our perspective proposes refining the concept of path dependence as one primarily concerned with persistence across time and applied to spatial arrangements. This refinement allows us to conceptualize space dependence across locations as a relevant circumstance of convergence and divergence. We thus first briefly introduce the path dependence concept to then develop our own concept of space dependence.

The *path dependence* concept acknowledges that everyday routines often follow established knowledge and actions. While some figurations rapidly shift back and forth, others endure and sometimes persist over incredibly long periods of time. The concept of path dependence (David, 1985; Arthur, 1989; Beyer, 2006) is powerful explanation for why many figurations exhibit both openness and malleability (Nelson & Winter, 1982) beyond mere routines yet sometimes become hyper-rigid. Path dependence describes a situation in which consecutive actions gradually reduce multiple options, leading to a lock-in. Whereas many options were initially available, a lock-in cements one option that continues even if actors wish to change it.

We find that the four vectors we identified as part of globalization processes driving refiguration—states, individuals, organizations, and technologies—can all exhibit path dependency. This prominently includes path dependencies in technologies (Arrow, 2000; David, 1985); in states, through their policies and institutions (Pierson, 2000; Hall & Soskice, 2001; Streeck & Thelen, 2005) and within organizations (Schreyögg et al., 2003; Kirchner, 2012; Sydow et al., 2009); and in individuals, such as in their life-course trajectories (cf. Elder, 1998). Path dependencies across the four vectors can interrelate and mutually reinforce each other. Consequently, actors might find themselves in situations in which it proves extremely difficult to alter established processes or structures because prior actions have led to path dependence. We therefore observe *path-dependent regimes* involving states, technologies, organizations, or

even individuals across these four vectors. Inducing change is difficult in situations involving path dependency. Change often requires either exogenous shocks as path-breaking events or long-term, gradual endogenous shifts that eventually dissolve the path (Streeck & Thelen, 2005).

Our concept of *space dependence* refines insights from path dependence research and explicitly addresses systematic persistence of spatial relations across locations. Considering the persistence of spatial relations, we posit that all actions presuppose designated locations, constituting an often-taken-for-granted but nevertheless universal foundation of the social world. Actors need to regularly coordinate their actions across spaces by, for example, meeting at the right place, being within a delineated territorial space, or following the correct route. However, even under advanced globalization conditions, spatial proximity remains highly relevant for many figurations, as regional clustering persists through time and center-periphery patterns continue to reproduce often over decades and sometimes even centuries.

Against this background, we conceptualize situations of sustained persistence of spatial arrangements as *space dependence*. What does this mean? We consider situations in which spatially bound knowledge or actions become firmly tethered to a particular spatial arrangement as space dependent.⁴ In essence, we argue that in this situation path dependency extends to the spatial tethering of figurations. While there may initially be multiple spatial arrangements available to actors, over time, subsequent actions lead to a lock-in, with only one spatial arrangement remaining. Henceforth, actors cannot easily change spatial arrangements, even if they desire to do so. We draw a crucial distinction: “past dependence,” (Antonelli, 1997; Martin and Sunley, 2006) which denotes a general “history-matters” principle likely true for all spaces (e.g., denoting that something happened at a place and that a related event occurs at said place at a later time). In contrast, spatially bound path dependence, which we term “space dependence,” describes a systematic resilience to change brought about by mechanisms rooted in past actions and historical spatial arrangements.

We expand the scope of the path dependence concept (David, 1985; Arthur, 1989; Beyer, 2006) and refine it for spatial patterns to describe several variants in which spatially bound regimes can enter into situations of space dependence:

(a) *Distances* serve as major sources of resistance to changes in spatially bound regimes. Substantial distance requires efforts to overcome it and often excludes viable alternatives. This applies even under the conditions of advanced globalized mobility and technology, which conserve regionalized patterns (Deutschmann, 2022). Indeed, regional developments also serve as major examples of persistence rooted in spatial arrangements (Martin & Sunley, 2006). Initially, small spatial distances drive intensive local interrelationships of organizations and individuals that allow regions to develop and grow. Once regional patterns have evolved, actors can experience space dependence. The regime of regional patterns cannot change because actors cannot easily reach out to more distant partners to pursue alternatives. This also pertains to individuals who, in their life course, increasingly face difficulties in changing their place of living and working. Past actions thus lead to particular spatial patterns that cannot be easily reversed due to the spatial distance of viable alternatives.

⁴ Space dependence is short for spatial path dependency.

(b) *Irreversible investments* of a regime in built structures or infrastructure constitute another source that systematically inhibits change. Efforts to build physical infrastructure represent sunk costs that cannot be spent on alternatives. Moreover, infrastructures often exhibit technical interrelatedness with other subsequent structures, which requires actors to modify or revise the interrelated structures as well. This source of persistence of regimes potentially comes about in all built structures or infrastructures that realize the spatial logics of a regime and require substantial efforts to erect them. Ample examples of this phenomenon exist: Marketplaces in cities are still visible in a city's road network centuries after their construction, representing imprints of earlier spatial patterns that cannot easily be changed. The ways in which countries set up their rail networks follow their initial political constitutions (Dobbin, 2006) exhibiting highly persistent spatial patterns that endure across centuries. In cases involving space dependence, regimes are tied to particular spatial arrangements because of past investments in specific built structures or infrastructure patterns that make it increasingly difficult to realize alternatives.

(c) *Increasing returns* that are derive from within the spatially bound regimes can also serve as a systematic barrier to change. In such cases, the resistance to change to spatial patterns stems from the figurations themselves. For example, the complementarities or network effects of a figuration create a lock-in situation that tethers the figuration to a physical space. For example, network effects in phenomena such as digital platforms bind social relationships to a network space with a particular organizational format (e.g., being operated by a particular for-profit company). This is even more prevalent in examples of national regulatory regimes with institutional elements exhibiting increased returns when they are coupled complementarily (e.g., Hall & Soskice, 2001). The established regime follows a distinctive path governing activities within a particular country as its domain. Increasing returns also extend to places of touristic value. Tourism as a regime draws from rich meanings attributed to places, such as Venice or Paris. The more a place acquires attributed meaning and is visited, the more appealing it is to be visited and experienced by others. Past actions lead to characteristics of the regime that exhibit space dependencies. This is the case because rules, organizational forms, or meanings exhibit increasing returns and systematically tie to a particular spatial arrangement, a platform's network space, a national regulatory approach, or a meaningful touristic place.

By developing our argument on spatially bound regimes that follow from actor groups fighting over dominance, we analyze highly resilient spatial arrangements and figurations from the perspective of space-dependent regimes, which consider situations in which cultural-political dynamics alone cannot account for the divergent persistence of spatial arrangements in the face of global social change processes. Spatially bound regimes and space dependence can jointly conceptually capture and explain why some spatial arrangements change swiftly and others persist enduringly. Thus, our perspective on the varieties of refiguration provides conceptual building blocks with which to analyze dynamic interplay of spatially bound, historical, and cultural-political patterns in the face of worldwide social changes.

6. Conclusion

This paper advanced the theoretical and empirical understanding of the refiguration of space by addressing the interplay of convergence and divergence in spatial arrangements in accordance with worldwide social change. Through the conceptual integration of spatial figures as action logics and the framework of spatially bound regimes, we demonstrated how spatial arrangements are both shaped by and constitute social change. The identified vectors of convergence and divergence—states, individuals, organizations, and technologies—serve as empirical dimensions through which global trends are mediated and contested. We built on general sociological conceptions that understand social change to involve distinct levels, often analytically described as micro, meso, and macro levels. The paper's discussion on the four vectors captured major dimensions of unfolding social change and described the convergent or divergent ways in which states govern (macro level), individuals conduct their lives (micro level), organizations operate (meso level), and technologies afford their functions (across levels) around the world. Furthermore, by introducing the notion of space dependence and refining established concepts of path dependence, we provided a nuanced explanation for spatially bound persistence in the face of global transformative pressures. These insights emphasized that spatial arrangements are not merely outcomes but themselves constitute drivers of social changes, highlighting the intricate interdependencies between spatial patterns and cultural-political dynamics.

In our paper we extended on the refiguration approach and argued that changing spatial arrangements are foundational to understanding social change, as they both reflect and drive broader shifts across societies. Through the conceptual lens of the four spatial figures—place, territorial space, network space, and route—we illustrated how spatial logics underpin actions and relationships in ways that shape and are shaped by social changes. Recognizing these figures as action logics allowed us to better analyze the interplay between spatial and social change and highlight how shifts in spatial arrangements can catalyze new figurations while maintaining or disrupting existing ones.

We added another conceptual layer by highlighting the fact that the four spatial figures form the foundation of spatially bound regimes. These regimes emerge through dynamic and contested processes that are shaped by actor groups vying for dominance. Spatial figures anchor specific social arrangements, while the regimes tied to them are actively maintained, negotiated, and challenged through political and cultural struggles. For example, some places are hotspots of competing meanings and identity formation. Territories embody domains of power and sovereignty and are often entangled in disputes over borders, which sometimes escalate into all-out war. While network spaces facilitate relational flows, they are sites of contention, as access and control over connections is pivotal in these spaces. Routes highlight struggles over movement from migration corridors to trade pathways. Such examples of spatially bound regimes underscore suggest that they are not static but are instead continually shaped by coordination and conflict among actors, reflecting the culturally embedded power dynamics at play.

Our arguments attempted to uncover the major dimensions of empirical inquiry by introducing vectors of convergence and divergence to the refiguration approach. We argued that global

social change exhibits a complex interplay of convergence and divergence unfolding through dynamic actions along key vectors of empirical inquiry: states, individuals, organizations, and technologies. While globalization and digitalization are often expected to drive instances of worldwide convergence—such as standardized practices in governance, communication, and the economy—divergence emerges through countermovements that challenge dominant trends. States may resist global pressures through nationalist policies or territorial reassertions, while individuals mobilize in groups to reclaim local identities or oppose homogenizing influences. Similarly, organizations, including platform organizations, both foster global connectivity and defend localized or sector-specific interests, whereas technologies simultaneously enable global integration and set up alternative systems or networks reshape following territorially rooted regulatory interventions. These interactions reveal that convergence is never absolute, as countervailing forces introduce divergence impulses, creating a dynamic process of negotiation and contestation across various societal aspects expressed and navigated in physical space.

We also engaged with the conundrum that, in some cases, the spatial tethers of social changes exhibit strong persistence, resulting in a hyperstability that stems from spatial arrangements resisting change. We termed this phenomenon, which occurs when figurations become locked into specific spatial arrangements, creating a persistence that opposes broader trends of convergence, “space dependence.” Space-dependent lock-ins can sustain established power structures while fostering countermovements as other actors challenge entrenched arrangements. By anchoring figurations in particular spaces, space dependence highlights the enduring influence of historical spatial patterns in shaping—and sometimes obstructing—social changes.

We conclude our study of the varieties-of-refiguration approach by stating that, globally, figurations transform through a dynamic interplay of convergence and divergence, shaped by processes of takeover, contestation, conflict, negotiation, and settlement. These interactions reflect the tension between counteracting social forces. Convergence emerges where dominant actors are able to impose global trends. Divergence arises from efforts to preserve established spatial arrangements that counter worldwide trends. As theorized by Knoblauch and Löw (2024), this dynamic is rarely linear; instead, overlapping processes create complex and sometimes contradictory outcomes. Social changes, therefore, are the product of ongoing struggles between actors with differing orientations, shaping the trajectory of social and spatial arrangements in their pursuit of dominance or their ability for resistance. This interplay underscores the multifaceted nature of global social changes driven by both unifying pressures and persistent divergences. In essence, the varieties-of-refiguration approach allows us to engage with and analyze the complex interplay of forces shaping spatial and societal changes.

Our examples demonstrate that spatial arrangements, represented by the four spatial figures—place, territorial space, network space, and route—serve as starting points for analyzing social changes and, in certain cases, as active drivers of these changes. The transformation of places, such as the creation of “safe spaces” or the capture of public areas, illustrates how spatial meanings and uses can shift, thus redefining social relationships and cultural identities. Similarly, the evolution of territories, seen in the redrawing of national borders or the assertion of regional autonomy, highlights how spatial demarcations underpin power struggles and societal shifts.

Network spaces, such as digital platforms, which have rapidly expanded, act as catalysts for social connectivity and the refiguration of economic and political relationships, often bypassing territorial boundaries. Meanwhile, changes in routes, such as the establishment of new migration corridors or trade pathways, actively shape patterns of mobility, exchange, and interaction. While spatial dimensions seem obvious for transnationalization, our argument underscores that other social changes, such as individualization, hyper-organization, and digitalization, exhibit a salient spatial tethering that current research in these fields does not adequately account for. Our examples suggest that spatial figures are not passive backdrops but are integral to understanding how social changes unfold, serving as both baselines for empirical analysis and as drivers that actively shape societal evolution.

Our perspective allowed us to develop the idea of spatially bound regimes further and highlight its applicability. Spatial arrangements imply regimes that enable and govern them, although typically, any given institutional regime exhibits spatial tethering. This spatial tethering usually denotes a regime's domain where rules, expectations, and action logics apply. This is expressed in common phrases such as "Here, in this country, we usually..." or "Back home, we...". Investigations of national regimes of welfare states or the economy constitute another example of this, their claims most obviously relying on the spatial figure of the territorial space. Hence, we argue that regimes or, more broadly speaking, institutions can exhibit some form of spatial tethering, be it based on place, network, route, or territory. In some regimes, spatial tethering acts as an explicit and constitutive pillar, e.g. national or regional regulatory regimes. In contrast, other institutional forms might only loosely or implicitly relate to spatial arrangements, which they nevertheless still imply and therefore encompass. It would be interesting to investigate conceivable examples that might operate without spatial tethering at all, as they would constitute a "spaceless regime," which would contrast and augment our conception of spatially bound regimes developed in this paper.

In summary, our paper contributes to the theoretical and empirical study of the refiguration of space by engaging with spatial arrangements to understand the diversity of global social changes. By integrating the conceptual framework of the four spatial figures—place, territorial space, network space, and route—with the dynamics of spatially bound regimes, we showed how spatial arrangements act as both foundations for analysis and active drivers of change. The identification of space dependence highlights how specific spatial arrangements persist, thereby shaping and constraining social changes while fostering countermovements that resist broader trends of convergence. These insights deepen our understanding of the interplay between spatial and societal dynamics and offer a nuanced perspective for analyzing the tensions between convergence and divergence. By illustrating the utility of spatial figures and spatially bound regimes, this paper advances the varieties-of-refiguration approach and demonstrates its capacity to unpack the complexities of global social changes. Ultimately, this work underscores the importance of spatial analysis in capturing the multifaceted and contested nature of social changes, thus enriching our grasp of the processes shaping the evolving social world.

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