

'Left behind places': a geographical etymology

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## 'Left behind places': a geographical etymology

Andy Pike<sup>a</sup> , Vincent Béal<sup>b</sup> , Nicolas Cauchi-Duval<sup>b</sup> , Rachel Franklin<sup>a</sup> ,  
Nadir Kinossian<sup>c</sup> , Thilo Lang<sup>c</sup> , Tim Leibert<sup>c</sup>, Danny MacKinnon<sup>a</sup> ,  
Max Rousseau<sup>d</sup> , Jeroen Royer<sup>c</sup>, Loris Servillo<sup>e</sup> , John Tomaney<sup>f</sup>  and  
Sanne Velthuis<sup>a</sup> 

### ABSTRACT

'Left behind places' has become the leitmotif of geographical inequalities since the 2008 crisis. Yet, the term's origins, definition and implications are poorly specified and risk obscuring the differentiated problems and pathways of different kinds of areas. This paper explicates the geographical etymology and spatial imaginary of 'left behind places'. It argues that the appellation and its spatial expression have modified how geographical inequalities are understood and addressed by recovering a more relational understanding of multiple 'left behind' conditions, widening the analytical frame beyond only economic concerns, and opening up interpretations of the 'development' of 'left behind places' and their predicaments and prospects. While renewing interest in fundamental urban and regional concerns, what needs to endure from the ascendance of the 'left behind places' label is the terminology and spatial imaginary of reducing geographical inequalities and enhancing social and spatial justice.

### KEYWORDS

left behind places; geographical etymology; spatial imaginary; geographical inequalities; urban and regional studies; spatial justice

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## 1. INTRODUCTION: THE RISE OF 'LEFT BEHIND PLACES'

'Left behind places' has become the leitmotif of geographical inequalities since the 2008 crisis. The term has grown in prominence and been widely used in urban and regional studies in the Global North to capture the plight of especially former industrial and rural places negatively affected by austerity, globalization, economic and technological change (Görmär et al., 2019; Hendrickson et al., 2018). The label is deployed in explanations and political articulations of the resulting geography of discontent and rise of economic nationalism and populism (De Ruyter et al., 2021; Dijkstra et al., 2020; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). 'Left behind places' has become a politically and economically resonant shorthand for academics, commentators, communities, politicians and policymakers internationally, used and interpreted in various settings and certain times, but generally lacking an explicit definition. Due to its pliable

meaning, the term has been used and popularized by a range of actors, reaching into a widening array of economic, political, social and cultural circles. The frequency of its use increased dramatically since the 2008 crash (Figure 1).

In expressing and renewing longstanding and periodically revisited concerns with geographical inequalities, 'left behind places' has facilitated the refashioning of the language, narrative, geographies and referents for debate. The term and its spatial imaginary have been used variously not only to draw attention to previously neglected issues and places, but also to oversimplify, reify, and stoke division and stigmatize. Whether, how, in what ways, and to what extent this terminology and geographical expression have changed the ways in which such longstanding problems are understood, articulated and addressed in different scalar settings internationally is the central question for this paper.

Amidst the rapid and widespread diffusion of 'left behind places', especially in Anglo-American discourses,

**CONTACT** Andy Pike  andy.pike@ncl.ac.uk

<sup>a</sup>Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies (CURDS), Newcastle, UK

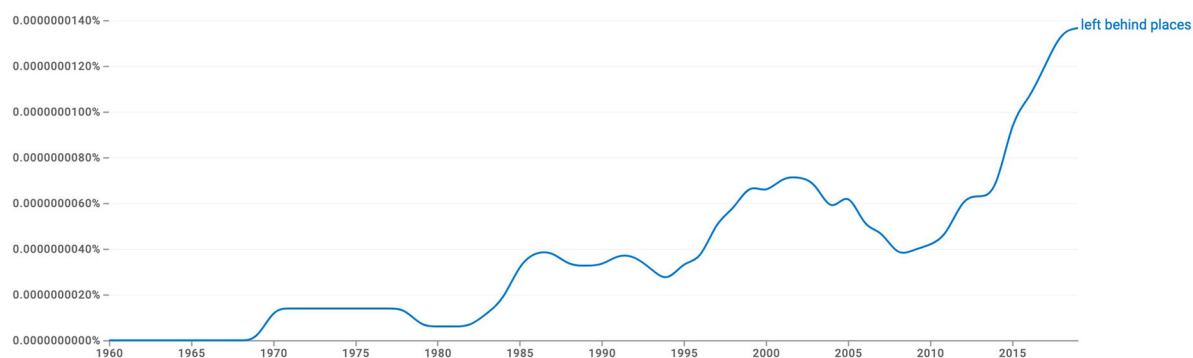
<sup>b</sup>University of Strasbourg, Strasbourg, France

<sup>c</sup>Leibniz-Institute for Regional Geography, Leipzig, Germany

<sup>d</sup>Centre for International Co-operation in Agronomic Research for Development, Montpellier, France

<sup>e</sup>Politecnico di Torino, Turin, Italy

<sup>f</sup>University College London, London, UK



**Figure 1.** 'Left behind places' term frequency of use, 1890–2021.

Source: Google Ngram.

concerns have emerged about its often instrumental, unquestioned and unreflective usage. Over time, the phrase has become a looser, almost catch-all, signifier. The origins, histories, geographies, definitions, meanings and implications of the term are under-specified. No agreed, clear definition or criteria to identify 'left behind places' exist (Martin et al., 2021). While 'left behind places' is an expression of post-2008 forms of spatial inequalities, relations, continuities, and differences with fundamental and longstanding concerns about geographically uneven development in urban and regional studies are underdeveloped. Variegations in language and geographical expression are evident in different national contexts, especially beyond the Anglo-American sphere. The term and its spatial articulation provide a convenient and evocative frame for grouping together different phenomena, but risk generalizing and obscuring the differentiated problems and potentials of the different kinds of 'left behind places', the multiple causes of their predicaments, and their varying geographical, temporal and political dimensions (Kinossian, 2019). While they share many characteristics and issues, their particular configurations in 'left behind places' warrant greater recognition and the reappraisal of institutions and policies seeking to address their plight.

Addressing these gaps, this paper explicates the geographical etymology and spatial imaginary of 'left behind places'. Language and its geographical expressions are critical in understanding, explaining and responding to geographically uneven development (O'Neill, 2011). How spatial labels and their underlying imaginaries are constructed, articulated, presented, mobilized, and by whom matters to the framing and interpretation of geographical inequalities and political, institutional and policy responses. Longstanding and more recent terminology and spatial imaginaries of geographical 'disparities', 'divides', 'gaps', 'imbalances' and 'inequalities', and their responses of 'reducing inequalities', 'closing the gap', 'catching-up', 'convergence', 'spatial rebalancing' and 'levelling up' all have political-economic roots, meanings, geographical and temporal dimensions, and institutional and policy corollaries. The contemporary political-economic conjuncture and use of 'left behind places' by various actors are situated in this light, revealing the continuities as well as the changes that the term and its spatial imaginary

indicate. We seek neither to celebrate and promote the term nor to bury or replace it. Instead, the aim is to better understand and explain its definitions, uses, and implications for urban and regional studies.

The paper argues that 'left behind places' modifies how geographical inequalities are understood and addressed since 2008. As a resonant label and spatial imaginary, the term foments important differences as well as reinforcing continuities with existing understandings. It helps to recover a more relational and agency-sensitive understanding of geographically uneven development when framed in terms of broader processes of peripheralization and metropolitanization (Lang et al., 2015) and underlines the longstanding and challenging nature of spatial inequalities. 'Left behind places', second, widens the framing of geographical inequalities beyond solely economic concerns to recognize their multiple, interrelated social, political, environmental and cultural dimensions. Last, the appellation reinforces how terminology and spatial imaginary can be used to question and open up the frame for definitions and meanings of 'development' and institutions and policies for such places beyond the conventions of existing approaches. It can counter irreversible designations of people and/or places as 'left behind' or not in perpetuity, and their consignment to further neglect, abandonment or managed decline. Distinguishing different kinds and degrees of 'left behind' conditions in places across economic, social, environmental, and political dimensions offers the prospect of interpreting their predicaments and potentials in new ways. The renewed attention to fundamental urban and regional concerns brought by 'left behind places' is welcome, but what needs to endure is the terminology and spatial imaginary of reducing geographical inequalities and enhancing social and spatial justice.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section explains the importance of geographical etymology and spatial imaginaries in urban and regional studies. Informed by these ideas, the origins and evolution of 'left behind places' are examined in the third section. The fourth section considers the 'what', 'where', 'when' and 'how' of 'left behind places'. Institutional and policy corollaries of the construction and articulation of the term and its spatial imaginary are outlined in the

penultimate section. The arguments and their wider and future implications are set out in the conclusions.

## 2. GEOGRAPHICAL ETYMOLOGY AND SPATIAL IMAGINARIES IN URBAN AND REGIONAL STUDIES

The continued importance of 'language consciousness' is often overlooked in urban and regional studies (O'Neill, 2011, p. 552), but engagement with its discursive and material relations is critical. Inspired by Williams' (1983, p. 15) treatment of 'keywords', the aim here is to address a key term and its related spatial imaginary: a 'meaning system' used by actors in their attempts to identify, privilege, stabilize, and legitimate specific geographical entities, relations, and directions of change (Jessop, 2012, p. 6). Such terms and their spatial imaginaries express concepts and encode their meaning into useable forms. Sensitivity to language and its geographical implications opens analysis to political contestation and debate about imposing terminologies, characterizing current conditions and imagining possibilities for change (Barnes, 2001a). Situating the knowledges expressed and communicated by language and providing greater transparency about their histories, geographies, politics, biases, and predispositions is a longstanding critical agenda being recovered in geographical and related (sub-)disciplines (e.g., Gray & Pollard, 2018; Metcalfe & Bern, 1994; Werner et al., 2017). Such concerns are cross-cut by the implications of the dominance of the English language in academic and policy circles and the need for more language-specific scrutiny of ideas and their expression in different geographical settings (Hassink et al., 2019).

Etymology is defined as revealing the origin of a word and the historical development of its meaning, going beyond basic toponymy. A *geographical* etymology is an account of the origins and evolving meanings of words sensitive to their histories and geographies, recognizing knowledges are socially *and* spatially constructed and situated (Peck, 1998). It is critical to understand the language used by actors to capture and convey the meaning of words and their linkages and uses in terms for a geographical category and its label. Language provides multiple devices for stabilizing sets of words with widely agreed meanings (O'Neill, 2011). What language is used in (re)framing phenomena is integral and formative in how issues are rendered. Discursive *and* material relations, processes, and expressions are inextricably bound together (Peck, 1998). How things are thought, spoken, and written about is integral to the substance of how they are conceived and acted upon or with. Language construction by actors with interests does not happen in a clear, straightforward and deterministic fashion. It is a messy, contested and indeterminate process (O'Neill, 2011).

Informed by the 'geopolitical etymology' of 'workfare' (Peck, 1998, p. 133) and scrutiny of urban geography language (Gray & Duncan, 1978), the purpose here is to situate and contextualize the selected term and interpret the intertwined economic, social, cultural, environmental,

and political dimensions involved. Language is used and contested by different kinds of actors in constructing and naming specific spatial categories and discourses, the multifaceted 'problems' they represent, and whether (or not) they require responses (Beauregard, 1993; Tissot, 2018). Actors deploy interests, agency, and differential power in their formulation, articulation, and adaptation of discursive spatial labels and imaginaries through narratives, projects, strategies and tactics (MacKinnon, 2021; Metcalfe & Bern, 1994; Valler et al., 2021).

Spatial terms and labels acquire meaning in particular contexts through the articulation of spatial imaginaries by actors. Selectively incorporating semiotic (signs and symbols) and extra-semiotic (material) characteristics, spatial imaginaries enable actors to make sense of and guide 'collective calculation' of the complex, changing world (Jessop, 2012, p. 6). Rather than providing a simple depiction of space as a 'representational discourse', spatial imaginaries are performative and help to construct the spaces in question through a set of embodied and contested material practices (Watkins, 2015, p. 508).

Spatial imaginaries have specific characteristics ascendant in particular geographical and temporal settings. The logic encapsulated in the spatial imaginary is closely related to conceptions of what is deemed appropriate or possible to do in political, institutional and policy terms in response to the issues they raise (Jessop, 2012). In this way, spatial imaginaries shape material practices. As socially and spatially constructed and situated entities, such imaginaries can also open up 'discussions of alternative spatial futures' and disturb existing institutional and policy approaches (Hoole & Hincks, 2020, p. 1584). Language is central to imagining different conditions and, normatively and politically, in choosing alternative spatial imaginaries (O'Neill, 2011). Explicating the geographical etymology of key terms and their spatial imaginaries – in this case 'left behind places' – is a vital technique for enabling language consciousness of wider value for urban and regional studies.

## 3. 'LEFT BEHIND PLACES': ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

The idea of 'left behind' has its origins in longstanding social and political discourses seeking to articulate a collective, moral responsibility for disadvantaged groups (Martin et al., 2021). An early formulation is 'no man left behind', historically part of US armed forces' practices as a motto and then codified in military protocol (Dais, 2020). This gendered term expressed the need to account for and respect comrades-in-arms post-battle, identifying those lost as 'left behind', and cemented in US public consciousness from the Vietnam War in the 1960s.

In the United States of the late 1960s, a Presidential National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty was termed 'The People Left Behind' (Breathitt, 1967). It focused on geographical concentrations of the rural poor, their risk of poverty and potential policy responses (Weber, 2018). The term 'the places left behind' was



first coined in academic rural poverty research in the early 1970s (Fuguitt, 1971, p. 449). By the 1980s and 1990s, the decline of inner cities in the United States was articulated as the ‘cities left behind’ by the intensification of economic decline, poverty and racial segregation related to suburbanization (Thomas, 1991, p. 218).

The No Child Left Behind Act 2001 explicitly used ‘left behind’ language for US federal government policy targeting public assistance to improve educational attainment for children from economically and socially disadvantaged families (Martin et al., 2021), deeming specific children and families ‘left behind’ and focused attention on removing barriers to social mobility. Such usage embodies a sense of obligation and need for intervention actively to address the ‘left behind’ situation for specific people, contrasting *laissez faire* notions of abandoning people to their fates.

More recent research in the United States using the ‘left behind’ idea focused on (im)mobility. It addressed the kinds of people staying – or being trapped – in place by age, poor health and/or limited education; while others including the young, healthy, and qualified are able and motivated to move in search of opportunities (Partridge et al., 2020). This selective out-migration compounds the disadvantages in the places ‘left behind’ by these movers. Rural areas and small towns suffering from declining population, low skills and poverty are then interpreted as ‘left behind’ (Ulrich-Schad & Duncan, 2018; Wuthnow, 2019).

‘Left behind’ ideas and terminology are evident in European Union (EU) policymaking, recognized in people and place relations at different scales. Reflecting the use of English as the dominant working language in European institutions, ‘left behind’ is evident in EU-wide Cohesion Policy and in relation to rural areas and industrial transition regions (European Commission, 2022). Echoing earlier US work on urban disadvantage and poverty, ‘left behind’ people and places remain in research focused on communities and neighbourhoods, especially in the UK, other parts of Europe and the United States (McKay, 2019).

Internationally, geographical concentration of economic activity in urban centres increased ‘the sense of deprivation as the economic distance between prosperous areas and those left behind widens’ (World Bank, 2009, p. 47). ‘Left behind places’ in this understanding are less agglomerated, dense and integrated, and therefore disadvantaged. They are deemed less worthy of support and allocation of scarce public resources due to their lack of potential, reinforcing their neglect. Formerly industrial, rural, and/or smaller cities and towns lack the attributes to benefit or agency and capacity to adapt and react to this shifting economic geography (Hendrickson et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2021). Echoing longstanding relational thinking (Massey, 1995), productive places are able to ‘pull ahead’ leaving behind those unable to compete. In this spatial imaginary, ‘left behind places’ are positioned as passive residuals of metropolitan growth processes happening elsewhere.

As such, ‘left behind places’ is distinctive in articulating a negative spatial imaginary of decline or stagnation

(Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). This expression echoes long-standing ghetto imaginaries at the neighbourhood level (Watkins, 2015), although ‘left behind places’ are associated with larger scales including the town, locality and region. This ‘left behind’ imaginary contrasts the positive associations of the ‘competitive global city-region’ and ‘learning region’ prominent in urban and regional studies (Watkins, 2015). Before the interest in ‘left behind places’, economically lagging and declining towns and regions were outside these city-centric discourses on global competitiveness and learning (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). The growth of the ‘left behind places’ imaginary is significant in rendering the problems of such places visible to researchers and policymakers in relation to processes of geographical divergence and polarization that have become too acute to ignore (Coquard, 2019; Hendrickson et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2021).

Politically, ‘left behind places’ has altered discussions of geographical inequalities in its use as a signifier of a globalized political-economic system governed by distant and self-interested metropolitan elites that have failed some people and places, rendering them ‘left behind’ (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Spatial and other policies are considered to have provided insufficient recognition or support to ameliorate or reduce such inequalities. Discontent, neglect, effective disenfranchisement through disengagement and low voter turnout, limited powers and resources, and lack of voice express the politics of ‘left behind places’ (De Ruyter et al., 2021). Populist politicians across the spectrum have used the concept in articulating and mobilizing division and grievance, even for relatively prosperous areas (McKay, 2019).

Overall, the use of ‘left behind places’ in urban and regional studies in the last decade has grown, become more prominent, and broadened in its reach. Use of the term has created a powerful and resonant appellation and spatial imaginary of declining and marginal places. It contains compelling elements of clear and convincing logic that have gained traction and visibility, resonating at ‘multiple sites and scales’ and, in its particular geographical and temporal moment, sometimes supplanting existing names and ideas (Hoole & Hincks, 2020, p. 1587). The appellation has renewed, even replaced in some settings, the vocabulary and geographical expressions of ‘disparities’, ‘divides’, ‘gaps’, ‘imbalances’ and ‘inequalities’ (Dunford, 2010).

As a term and spatial imaginary, ‘left behind places’ includes numerous, typically related, characteristics: relative economic decline and lower productivity, employment and wages; lower levels of educational attainment and skills; higher levels of disadvantage and poverty; population shrinkage, outmigration, and ageing; poor health and wellbeing; limited social and economic assets, infrastructure, and underinvestment; lower public and private goods and services provision; and political neglect, disengagement and discontent (Davenport & Zaranko, 2020; Hendrickson et al., 2018).

‘Left behind places’ has done more than just add another term to the lineage deployed to express

geographically uneven development. It has gained credibility and traction through the 'claim-making of actors' (Hoole & Hincks, 2020, p. 1584), bringing concerns with geographical inequalities back into academic, public and political attention in different national contexts. 'Left behind places' has provided a live and novel vocabulary for a longstanding problem, challenging pre-existing language and formulations, and opening-up space for new ideas, their expression and deliberation (Barnes, 2001b). A more active and relational conception has been recovered by actors of specific kinds of people and/or places being somehow disconnected and 'left behind' by other actors, relations, and processes in the mainstream and/or 'successful' economy, society and polity.

'Left behind places' is an 'idealized spaces' type of spatial imaginary referring to a distinct and generalized spatial category constructed and contested by actors in different spatial and temporal settings (Watkins, 2015, p. 512). Crucially, it contains negative associations and the implication of decline and stagnation to become 'left behind'. In contrast to fixed or fuzzy spatial imaginaries with specific purposes which focus on particular territories such as city-regions and regions (Valler et al., 2021), 'left behind places' subsumes a multiplicity of geographical areas under this overarching label. The term is not only associated with the efforts of local political and business actors to attract investment and resources in competition with other places but has been used by multiple actors in the public, private and civic sectors for different purposes.

However, despite the increased attention, 'left behind places' and its spatial imaginary have lacked clearly specified definitions and meanings in the hands of different actors. To what is being referred and for what purposes are pliable. Their geographies are multiple, and their temporality is variable. Causation, diagnosis, and political, institutional, and policy responses discussed are often narrow and particular to their study focus. Further specification of the definitions and meanings of the 'left behind places' term and its spatial imaginary is needed.

#### 4. 'LEFT BEHIND PLACES': DEFINITIONS AND MEANINGS

The term 'left behind places' reflects the different views and uses by actors across the political spectrum and in different geographical and temporal settings. Identifying and specifying definitions and meanings of the term and its spatial imaginary requires consideration of the objects and subjects of 'left behind' conditions, its geographies and scales, temporalities, and causes and explanations. Considering each element reveals the differences and similarities 'left behind places' contributes in relation to existing approaches to geographical inequalities.

##### 4.1. Who or what is 'left behind' what?

A first question concerns the objects and subjects at stake. The conventional answer is either people or places are 'left behind'. This response reprises longstanding debate (Bolton, 1992), and international policy dialogue (Barca,

2019). On the people side, advocates argue that individuals being 'left behind' are experiencing interpersonal inequalities in income and wealth and spatial disparities in access to economic opportunities and services (Overman, 2019). Labour mobility from economically weaker to stronger areas is seen as the key adjustment device to overcome this 'left behind' situation (Leunig & Swaffield, 2008). Policy responses are people-focused, spatially blind, and supply-side oriented towards skills and transport.

From the place perspective, it is geographical areas at varying scales that are left behind by spatially differentiated economic change (Martin et al., 2021). Inextricable relations between people *in* places render individuals relatively immobile. Since people are seen to be embedded in 'left behind places' and their knowledge and agency are shaped by places, the response is to address their issues *in situ* through demand and supply-side spatial policies including business creation and inward investment.

Recent work has built upon these longstanding arguments for the inseparable interrelation of people *and* place. 'Left behind' conditions have served to further this interpretation of people in places. Policies are formulated to combine place-based and people-centred dimensions, encompassing supply as well as demand-side orientations, and tailored to local circumstances by institutions with appropriate powers and resources (Garcilazo et al., 2010). Even former people-focused advocates now recognize that the entrenched nature of contemporary geographical inequalities require more spatially targeted policies (Austin et al., 2018). Echoing longstanding ideas, 'left behind places' has helped emphasize how people and place are best conceptualized as interrelated.

Marking out the formulation and use of 'left behind places' from previous and more economically oriented understandings of geographical inequalities since 2008, multiple *and* interconnected dimensions have been invoked: economic, social, environmental, health, political, institutional and governance, cultural and infrastructural (Table 1). Potential characteristics are configured in particular ways in certain places at specific times rather than being wholly generalizable features of all 'left behind places'. This wider view has introduced breadth and flexibility in defining and articulating the term and its spatial imaginary, bedevilling analysis but proving useful for some actors.

What characterizes places as 'left behind' cannot simply be expressed in a single or small number of indicators. Each dimension is not always evident or ranked highly in every 'left behind place'. Key indicators do not always correlate and may not identify the same areas as 'left behind' (Martin et al., 2021). Moreover, places do not reside in an absolute and irreversible state of being 'left behind'. Their particular configurations of 'left behind' conditions vary and change over time and space, requiring consideration of their causation, geography, and temporality.

Importantly, addressing 'who or what is 'left behind' what?' demonstrates continuity with longstanding urban and regional studies ideas and recovers a relational

**Table 1.** Potential dimensions of ‘left behind places’.

Dimension	Examples
Economic	Falling real wages Limited and/or poor-quality opportunities for training and/or employment Limited wealth
Social	Lack of social and/or spatial mobility Limited bridging social capital (but high levels of bonding social capital) High levels of attachment and belonging to place Low levels of civic participation
Environmental	Degraded physical environments Poor air quality
Political	Neglect by mainstream political parties and politicians Disengagement from representative democracy Populist, nativist and/or nationalist beliefs and views
Institutional and governance	Absent or weak local leadership Limited decentralized powers, resources, and/or capacity Lack of political voice
Cultural	Inferior, subordinate, common, proletarian, or plebeian worldviews Disconnection from and/or rejection of dominant attitudes/values Backward-looking, behind the zeitgeist outlooks
Infrastructural	Lack of public investment Limited and/or uneven access to public services Unequal provision of infrastructure systems and services

Source: Authors’ research.

approach to the dimensions involved (Massey, 1995). Connections are evident with the wider frame of the ‘Beyond GDP’ agenda (Stiglitz et al., 2008) and the EU’s vision and policies for social *and* economic cohesion and balanced socio-economic development throughout its territory (European Commission, 2022). Yet such linkages have been largely ignored by those only focused on the economic dimensions of ‘left behind places’ and unable to conceive of their wider determinants. Diagnosing the problem as economic ‘underperformance’, the ‘solutions’ are framed in conventional terms of encouraging labour mobility and increasing productivity, employment rates, wages, and living standards through skills and infrastructure investments (Overman, 2019). Adjusting more rapidly to the processes of globalization, industrial, and

technological change is the aim. Such approaches narrowly focused on the economic domain are based on conventional rationales that the benefits will then ‘spill-over’ or ‘trickle down’ to people and places, reducing geographical inequalities and, thus, discontent. Through this adjustment mechanism, people and places will then no longer be ‘left behind’ but will ‘catch up’, converging with the rest.

A new concern brought by ‘left behind places’ is linking longstanding economic concerns to issues of attachment and belonging as well as relational conditions and situations (Abreu & Öner, 2020; Coquard, 2019; Sandbu, 2020). Critical is recognition that residents feel ‘left behind’ and express this in terms of abandonment or neglect, fuelling discontent and dissatisfaction with the unfairness of the prevailing economic, social, and political situation and its implied severing of deeply held local attachments (Tomaney, 2015). Feelings of being ignored, neglected, and overlooked by distant liberal, cosmopolitan, and metropolitan elites have generated discontent. Populist politicians have successfully used ‘left behind places’ to stoke such feelings, foster division and grievance, and convey the sense that only they are listening to the concerns of the ‘left behind’ and able to address their interests. Such actors have framed debates as the ‘left behind’ people against the ‘elites’, identified and mobilized their political supporters, drawn dividing lines with political opponents, and articulated and sold their political agendas as the only solution to the predicament of people in ‘left behind places’ (Coquard, 2019; Cramer, 2016; De Ruyter et al., 2021; Deppisch, 2021; Dijkstra et al., 2020).

Such articulations are especially sharp in relation to socially and/or spatially close neighbours that are perceived to have ‘got ahead’, amplifying feelings of being ‘left behind’. A key problem is the negative effects of the potential stigmatizing of the residents of ‘left behind places’ by typically external actors as passive, immobile and impoverished. In this framing, they are typically seen as at least partly to blame for their ‘left behind’ predicament and undeserving of state support. Populist articulation of the problems and solutions for ‘left behind places’ can backfire too, however, when raised expectations of political support, the return of previous industrial activities, promised public investment, and the improvement of living standards fail to materialize (Rodrik, 2018).

The multiple and relational dimensions raised by the question of ‘who or what is ‘left behind’ what?’ connect to issues of indicators and referents. How is being ‘left behind’ measured and progress or otherwise in ameliorating it assessed? What is the appropriate scale at which ‘left behind’ is examined and its determinants identified? What are the relevant timescales for measuring ‘left behind’? Given its multifaceted nature, numerous individual and composite indicators have been used to reflect the dimensions involved (Davenport & Zaranko, 2020).

Once indicators are agreed what are the yardsticks against which such places are assessed as being ‘left behind’? This issue relates to whether the aim is for absolute change for all places or relative shifts between them. For absolute shifts, this is usually measured in relation to



a fixed datum, such as a minimum standard, or a moving referent, like national averages. When a reference point is identified, in what position does a place have to sit to qualify as 'left behind'? In some cases, it has been narrowly framed in relation to places with relatively higher levels of economic prosperity.

The gaps in existing work make it more helpful to frame 'left behind' not as an absolute state but as a relative condition with multiple, interrelated facets that are configured in particular ways in certain places at specific times. Some studies consider 'left behind places' in this way, including Furlong's (2019) notion of 'left-behindedness'. Moving in this direction does, however, encounter similar complexities to 'social exclusion' debates in the 2000s (Daly & Silver, 2008): what is considered the mainstream, 'normal', or expected position from which others are assessed as being 'left behind' from and on what grounds?

#### 4.2. 'Left behind' where and when?

A second question concerns the geographical and temporal configurations of the multiple dimensions of 'left behind places'. In common with other loosely bounded and flexible spatial imaginaries (Jessop, 2012), existing studies are marked by numerous geographical scales of the 'places' considered 'left behind'. They span communities, neighbourhoods, localities, towns, cities, city-regions and regions (Bolton et al., 2020; Jennings & Stoker, 2019; Kemeny & Storper, 2020). This range contrasts with the use of language in historical approaches in urban and regional studies. In existing approaches specific terminologies tended to relate to certain geographies. 'Lagging' or 'less favoured' were typically applied to regions (Dunford, 2010). Whereas 'deprived', 'disadvantaged', 'excluded' and 'abandoned' were often used for smaller scale, often urban, communities and neighbourhoods (Bolton et al., 2020).

The varying geographical specification of 'left behind places' and its spatial imaginary have often been muddled up with considerations of geographical inequalities between and/or within places. Neglecting their relational construction (Massey, 1979), interrelations and interdependences between 'left behind' and other places have been relatively neglected. Specific scales have been privileged and the relations between scales have conflated problems and causes at one scale with those at larger and/or smaller scales (Martin et al., 2021). This situation is especially the case where specific spatial units or settlement types have been prioritized for policy intervention. The use of 'left behind places' by political actors has emphasized the pliability of the term's spatial imaginary in specific settings as geographically selective diagnoses of problems and solutions are articulated. Political calculation and expediency have, for instance, recognized and led to policies focused on small and medium-sized cities and rural areas in France (*Action coeur de ville*, *Petites villes de demain*) (Béal et al., 2021) and towns in the UK (Towns Fund and Deals) (Jennings & Stoker, 2019). Even in Germany's more stable institutional setting, new policies have been introduced for town centres (federal programme *Lebendige Zentren*) and regions affected by the phasing out of lignite

mining (Structural Strengthening Act Coal Regions) (Kersten et al., 2019). Spatial and other policies supporting larger cities often remain, sometimes in uneasy relations with other geographies of 'left behind places'.

The construction of 'left behind places' as a spatial imaginary has tended to homogenize the kinds of places in question, obscuring their differing combinations of dimensions, predicaments, and potentials (Kinossian, 2019). The label and its geographical expression have been used as a catch-all category, lacking specificity and particularity. It puts 'left behind places' at risk of joining the world of 'decontextualized "placeless knowledges"' (Peck, 1998, p. 137). Context and the particular configurations of dimensions in places 'left behind' in certain spatial and temporal settings remain relatively unexplored.

As the 'spatiality of... discourses' is important (Peck, 1998, p. 137), closer scrutiny within national settings reveals national variegations in the language, terminology, and spatial imaginary used and different kinds of 'left behind places' with differing combinations of 'left behind' conditions. Many such formulations intersect other well-established notions in urban and regional studies in the Global North, each encapsulating shared characteristics and elements of differentiation. These include the 'frost-belt', 'rustbelt' and 'snowbelt' (McQuarrie, 2017; Sawers & Tabb, 1984), and more recent 'legacy cities' (Ryberg-Webster & Tighe, 2019) and 'Trumpland' (Daniel & Whalan, 2021) in the United States and 'Brexitland' in the UK (Sobolewska & Ford, 2020). Reflecting the dominance of Anglo-American language and knowledges in urban and regional studies (Hassink et al., 2019), such differences in usage and substance are important and meaningful yet largely unexamined.

In France, rather than 'left behind places', the language and spatial imaginary of 'peripheral France' has been influential since 2010. Guilly's *Fractures françaises* (2010) and *La France périphérique* (2014) reframed and broadened debate beyond historical concerns about centralization, underdevelopment, and relations between Paris and the rest of France. 'Peripheral France' describes the growing opposition between the France of large dynamic cities, connected to globalization and ideologically progressive, and declining medium-sized cities and rural areas turning towards right-wing politics (Béal et al., 2021, p. 12).

In common with 'left behind places' in being 'often cited, [but] rarely defined' (Milbert, 2018, p. 2), *Abgehängte Regionen* (suspended regions) has become an influential formulation in Germany. The discourse and its spatial imaginary relate to continued geographical inequalities and places disconnected from prosperity, despite the constitutional commitment to equal living conditions across the country, and the political rise of the right-wing populist party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) (Deppisch, 2021). The term builds on urban/rural and East/West dichotomies with structurally weak rural areas in eastern Germany portrayed as the archetype of *abgehängte Regionen*. Diagnosis of causes centre on deindustrialization, state disinvestment in infrastructure, cultural

alienation, and political dissatisfaction with the democratic system and established political parties. Federal government policy has avoided the term and continued to use *strukturschwache Regionen* (structurally weak regions) and reiterated national commitment to *gleichwertige Lebensverhältnisse überall* (equal living conditions everywhere).

Beyond the scope of this contribution, a task for future research is examination of the geographical etymologies and spatial imaginaries of related and similar terms in other languages and national settings. These include *Aree Interne* (inner areas), Italy; *Krimpgebieden* (shrinking areas), the Netherlands; and *la España vaciada* (the emptied Spain).

Integral to the geographical issue of ‘left behind where?’ is the temporal question of ‘left behind when?’ This temporality of ‘left behind places’ has been treated unevenly in existing work. Numerous studies are based on static cross-sectional indicators (e.g., Davenport & Zaranko, 2020), while others address changes over time (e.g., Dijkstra et al., 2020). A neglected concern is the appropriate time scale and periods over which ‘left behind’ ought to be measured and expressed, with timescales ranging from one to multiple decades.

Timescale matters in defining ‘left behind places’ relative to periods of growth or decline. This temporal issue is further complicated because the multiple and connected dimensions generating the degrees and kinds of ‘left behind’ conditions for a place are dynamic and interrelate in varying ways over time and space. The histories and geographies of how configurations of ‘left behind’ conditions have evolved in a place are crucial to explaining its predicaments and prospects.

A further underspecified issue is whether being ‘left behind’ is a temporary or permanent situation. The specific language and tense of ‘left’ behind implies a degree of fixity, even rigidity, in the gap between the struggling places and those moving ahead and prospering. Continuity is evident with existing language in urban and regional studies that refers to ‘entrenched’, ‘persistent’ and ‘long-standing’ geographical inequalities. Indeed, many places designated ‘left behind’ in national settings across the world since 2008 have been similar over many decades, especially formerly industrial areas and inner cities (Martin et al., 2021). The change in language and spatial imaginary to call them ‘left behind places’ is important and meaningful in (re)focusing research and policy attention on their plight.

#### 4.3. ‘Left behind’ how and/or why?

A third question relates to causation. What explains the conditions of ‘left behind places’? Reflecting how the term has encouraged the recovery of relational thinking and a shift towards multifaceted conceptions, existing work has ranged across connected and multiple causes in providing explanatory accounts. Each has varying relations, echoes, and adaptations of longstanding concepts and theories in urban and regional studies. These accounts of causation have worked through into the

expression of the multiple dimensions of ‘left behind places’ explained above.

Demonstrating continuity with existing approaches, one main research strand locates explanation in the geographically differentiated effects and interactions of the macro-scale processes of globalization, metropolitanization, and skill-biased technological change preceding and following the 2008 crash that have actively rendered places ‘left behind’ (Kemeny & Storper, 2020). Critical are the compounding effects of such processes, reinforcing existing geographical inequalities by further enhancing those places well-equipped to prosper while simultaneously deepening the challenges for places less able to adapt. Such ideas have pervaded and dominated urban and regional policy, articulating a discourse and policy repertoire of city centrism (Pike, 2018). Politicians have used such abstract processes, often highly selectively, as part of their diagnoses of aspects of ‘left behind’ conditions and policy responses (Hendrickson et al., 2018). Such work and its influence on spatial policy demonstrates continuity with earlier urban and regional studies explaining and responding to changes wrought by liberalization, de-industrialization and transitions to service-based economies in the Global North from the 1970s and 1980s (Dunford, 2010).

A more recent strand sought to build upon and conceptualize the more active and relational understandings of how ‘left behind’ conditions are (re)produced in different kinds of places. Notable is peripheralization conceived as a process operating at different geographical scales through mechanisms of selective out-migration, disconnection from infrastructure and knowledge networks, increasing dependence upon larger cities for decision-making, funding and services, and discursive marginalization (Leibert & Golinski, 2016). Such understandings connect to political, social, and cultural understandings of places ‘left behind’ by the liberalism and cosmopolitanism of socially and spatially distant elites that prompted discontent and populist reaction after the 2008 crash (Sobolewska & Ford, 2020). Interrelated with metropolitanization, the peripheralization of places involves their weakening and decoupling from physical and knowledge networks that reduces the access and participation opportunities for people in certain places, generating and amplifying geographical inequalities (Lang et al., 2015). Peripheries are hence (re-)produced through their wider relations and the agency of actors (Nilsen et al., 2022).

Peripheralization makes an important contribution to establishing causation in its focus upon actors with agency and interests, their relations, and causal processes. These studies ask the question who or what has rendered these places ‘left behind’? This is where the term modifies existing approaches by encouraging a move beyond and connection of existing emphasis on more abstract, macro-scale relations and processes to agency and their concrete expressions in specific geographical and temporal settings. Approaching the explanation of ‘left behind’ conditions in this way provides a more critical and relational geographical political economy. It asks how places have

more actively been – knowingly or otherwise – excluded and/or marginalized from resources by someone or something: *how* and by *whom* have they been 'left behind'? Such accounts demonstrate continuities with historical and international dependency theory and their identification of subordinate relationships between cores and peripheries in urban and regional studies (Prebisch, 1950).

In a related vein, important attention has been given to the aspatial and even *counter*-regional policies pursued by national governments that have – intentionally or inadvertently – been increasing rather than ameliorating geographical inequalities (Martin et al., 2021). Such policies have been identified as contributory causes, further disadvantaging 'left behind places', by reinforcing dimensions of their conditions (Lang & Görmär, 2019). These public policies are implemented without sensitivity to their geographical impacts and implications including defence, education, health, infrastructure, science and technology, and welfare. Their potential importance is underlined by their relatively large-scale expenditures compared with spatial policies.

Such policies are seen as fuelling further discontent as national governments are interpreted as distant and uncaring about the differentiated spatial impacts of policies on people and places. Unequal geographical distributions of national public resources across national territories have been perceived as unjust, particularly when all citizens contribute, albeit differentially, to national tax revenues. Populist politicians have articulated this neglect and unfairness to castigate political opponents. Such policies have also been interpreted as deliberate attempts to socialize and redistribute the costs and risks of economic, social, environmental, and technological change in pursuit of national agendas and goals. One example is the fuel tax rise component of the Macron government's decarbonization transition policy in France disproportionately and negatively impacting low-income diesel vehicle drivers in rural areas, contributing to the emergence of the *gilets jaunes* (yellow vests) movement from 2018 (Colomb, 2020).

Having addressed issues of definitions and meanings, the next step is to address the institutional and policy responses. The language and spatial imaginary of 'left behind places' is critical to understanding the objects and subjects of its conditions, geographies and temporalities, and causes and explanations. Each relates to how the predicaments of 'left behind places' are diagnosed and what is considered by actors as appropriate to do about them.

## 5. 'LEFT BEHIND PLACES': INSTITUTIONAL AND POLICY COROLLARIES

Varying political-economic diagnoses and constructions of 'left behind places' and responses by actors are evident in different national settings. Language and spatial imaginary are central in such understandings and articulations of the problems, the formulation of rationales, and any institutional arrangements and policy instruments. Although the issue of geographical inequalities is

longstanding, the term 'left behind places' and its spatial imaginary have been mobilized by actors in settings markedly different from previous historical and geographical conjunctures. While the history of urban and regional change is marked by formative processes and shocks, the contemporary period is profoundly disruptive, uncertain, and volatile. Climate, demographic, geopolitical and technological shifts have been punctuated by the 2008 crash, COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, generating the return of inflation and concerns with the security of supply and affordability of food, energy, and raw materials. Such changes are rendering many dimensions of 'left behind' conditions in places even more acute, complex and challenging.

The way in which 'left behind places' has highlighted multiple, interconnected, geographically varied, and shifting dimensions has made the task of specifying the aims and goals of intervention more difficult and complicated. This new situation prompts questioning of institutional and policy corollaries that followed from existing and prevailing understandings of addressing geographical inequalities (MacKinnon et al., 2022). Classic spatial policy rationales are being mobilized by actors in mixed ways in different settings to address the multifaceted issues of 'left behind places': economic efficiency (increasing the economic contribution of 'left behind' areas); social equity (creating fairness in economic opportunities and access to services); social cohesion (defusing social and political discontent); climate change and the environment (ensuring socially and spatially just transition); and political engagement (securing or maintaining electoral support from specific places) (Martin et al., 2021).

The kind of change sought – absolute or relative – and its magnitude are largely avoided or fudged. Exactly what kind and scale of reduction in 'left behind' conditions are deemed appropriate or set as the goal(s) becomes a matter for political-economic debate and accommodation. 'Leapfrogging' or 'jumping the rails' to provide 'second winds' for such places are seldom discussed given the scarcity and particularity of turnaround cases (Krugman, 2003, p. 1; Power, 2016). Political (in)tolerance of geographical inequalities is integral to this issue. Making visible challenging policy targets against which initiatives can be measured and extending them beyond electoral cycles in recognition of the long-term nature of problems in 'left behind places' have proved difficult for politicians.

Structural problems require multi-generational and large-scale responses unsuited to the shorter term political cycles determining national and subnational government policies (Martin et al., 2021), whereas civic feelings and pride in a place may be more amenable to quicker and politically expedient fixes. Highly visible aesthetic interventions aim to improve the public realm of places and how people feel about them – such as Wolf's (2021, p. 1) advocacy of 'hanging baskets' as part of levelling up in the UK. Such measures can, however, been interpreted as largely superficial treatments for symptoms rather than causes of 'left behind' conditions.

Approaches to institutions and policies are struggling to resolve the geographical question of 'left behind' where? Shaped by the calculations of political actors in particular contexts, policies are being selectively focused on varying geographical scales, including cities and city-regions as well as small and medium-sized cities, towns and rural areas (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Differentiated situations in 'left behind places' are left largely unrecognized in more general 'one-size-fits-all', top-down and nationally designed policies focused on specific types of place. Use of 'left behind places' in this way obscures the causal role of multiple factors configured in particular ways in time and space.

A similar issue confronts responses to the temporal question of 'left behind' when? Whether 'left behind' conditions are temporary or more lasting – even permanent – shapes understandings of what can feasibly be achieved with implications for institutions and policies. If places are so far 'left behind' and for a prolonged period are they then deemed worthy of abandonment rather than ameliorative action given the scale and duration of intervention and resources required meaningfully to address their situation?

'Left behind places' unsettles conventional ideas on institutions and policies for addressing geographical inequalities because of its recovery of relational understandings and emphasis upon the multidimensional character of 'left behind' conditions in the contemporary period. The formulation of the term poses critical questions of who is recognizing the problems of 'left behind places', determining their causes, and formulating institutional and policy responses? The answers to such questions cannot easily be read-off from deterministic presumptions about the political alignments and affiliations of people in 'left behind places'.

The identification of rural areas and towns as peripheral in France has made intervention more viable for conservative and right-wing political actors, especially against the claims of liberal and left leaning actors in cities (Béal et al., 2021). The current electoral success of the far-right AfD in Germany has repoliticized rural and regional development policy (Kallert et al., 2021), specifically interpretations of the constitutional mandate for equivalent living conditions in all parts of the country (Kersten et al., 2019). Debate is linked to different economic imaginaries, ranging from Keynesian, welfare-oriented 'strong state' ideas to an austerity and competition-fixated conception focussed on 'lean state', debt reduction, and high(er) tolerance for regional and social inequalities. Brexit, fear of the left populist manifesto of then-Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, and feelings of neglect led numerous so-called 'Red Wall' Labour seats in many 'left behind places' to switch to the Conservatives in the 2019 UK General Election. Change and complexity can, however, be seen as an opportunity for rethinking 'development' and urban and regional institutions and policies, especially in new and more inclusive, innovative and participatory ways (MacKinnon et al., 2022).

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Addressing the rise of 'left behind places' as a shorthand for geographical inequalities since the 2008 crisis, this paper aimed to move beyond the loosely specified and superficial uses of the term and its spatial expressions that have masked the differentiated issues and pathways for different kinds of places. While becoming meaningful and resonant, instrumental and unquestioned use by multiple actors has hindered clearer understanding of the problems and potential responses. Emphasizing how the terminology and geographical framing of issues shape actors' understanding and responses, the paper explicated the geographical etymology and spatial imaginary of 'left behind places'.

The origins and evolution of the term 'left behind places' were outlined, establishing its connections to long-standing ideas in urban and regional studies and situating its growing prominence in the post-2008 period. Constructing a clearer and stronger understanding of 'left behind' conditions, the vital but largely unanswered questions were articulated of who or what is 'left behind' what, where, when, and how? Drawing out its new contributions and continuities with previous approaches, this discussion brought more clearly to the fore definitions and meanings, geographies, temporalities, causes, and explanations of 'left behind places'. The institutional and policy analogies of prevailing definitions and meanings of 'left behind places' revealed the differentiated political-economic diagnoses and constructions of the term and its spatial imaginary and responses in different national settings. Issues of change, geographies, temporalities, and politics were addressed.

The argument is that the term 'left behind places' modifies the ways in which geographical inequalities have been interpreted and responded to since the 2008 crash. It represents a new idealized spatial imaginary with negative associations of decline and marginalization generated by the uneven effects of processes such as globalization and economic restructuring, counter-posed against the dynamism of 'superstar' cities (Kemeny & Storper, 2020). Reflecting increased spatial divergence and the growth of political discontent (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), this imaginary has drawn attention to the problems of 'left behind places' which were previously outside the orbit of the prevalent spatial imaginaries of the 'global city-region' and 'learning region' (Watkins, 2015). When framed by clearer understanding of causal relations and processes through the concepts of peripheralization and metropolitanization (Lang et al., 2015), 'left behind places' supports a relational and agency-sensitive understanding of geographically uneven development. The term and its spatial imaginary broaden interpretations beyond only economic issues to incorporate multiple, interrelated social, political, environmental, and cultural dimensions. 'Left behind' conditions are not solely economic in cause, expression, or solution. A wider, albeit more complex, explanatory frame and range of potential responses are required. The



definition and meaning given to 'left behind places' have fundamental implications for understanding 'development' for such places and formulating institutional and policy responses. This argument draws critical attention to language and spatial imaginaries in urban and regional studies and demonstrates the worth of a relational, multi-dimensional, and multi-scalar approach. Better understanding of the differentiated character and extent of 'left behind' conditions in places provides a way of interpreting their predicaments and deliberating their 'development' potentials in new ways.

Following its rapid ascendancy and spread since the 2008 crash, what's next for 'left behind places'? In some national settings concern with geographical inequalities and 'left behind places' may recede and descend the political and policy agenda as macroeconomic stability and economic growth return to dominate national government priorities in disrupted, uncertain, and volatile times. The electoral salience and visibility of actors in 'left behind places' may be reconfigured. The spatial focus and emphasis might revert to larger metropolitan areas with growth potential, away from small and medium-sized cities, towns, and rural areas.

Elsewhere, addressing geographical inequalities and the plight of 'left behind places' might remain or become increasingly important in responses to unresolved crises and shifting political-economic geographies, with the same, modified or new terminology and spatial imaginaries. Yet national government capacity to respond may be more conditional and limited due to resource constraints, indebtedness, and competing budgetary claims. 'Left behind places' may even be sought out by those pursuing alternative and 'post-growth' ideas (Lange et al., 2021). With ongoing shifts in geographical political economies, the terminology and spatial imaginary could continue its historical evolution and change again from 'left behind places'. Which actors may attempt to articulate any new linguistic, discursive, and spatial formulation, how it would be expressed, and whether it takes off in the same manner are harder to predict.

Instead, avoiding the pliability of such ascendant, even faddish terminology and its spatial imaginary as well as its appropriation in instrumental and sometimes divisive and regressive ways by specific actors means looking beyond 'left behind places'. It requires learning from what this appellation and idea have contributed and returning to longer standing, foundational concerns with clearer cut and more readily understandable terms and spatial imaginaries grounded in reducing geographical inequalities and enhancing social and spatial justice.

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## ORCID

Andy Pike  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9898-8330>  
 Vincent Béal  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5299-7653>  
 Nicolas Cauchi-Duval  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0050-2364>  
 Rachel Franklin  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2614-4665>  
 Nadir Kinossian  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5934-9210>  
 Thilo Lang  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6029-4432>  
 Danny MacKinnon  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2901-5081>  
 Max Rousseau  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9115-048X>  
 John Tomaney  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7648-2910>  
 Sanne Velthuis  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4523-3452>  
 Loris Servillo  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5819-4555>

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