Performing ‘resistance’ – the far right’s master narrative

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ABSTRACT:
This paper draws on ethnographic fieldwork to analyse the ‘master narrative of resistance’ that is governing the activities of the German far right. The ‘resistance narrative’ came into effect during the 2018 Chemnitz riots. Yet the topos is being appropriated by a variety of actors on the far right. The paper exemplifies the significance of far-right political narratives and affects on current developments and tendencies of German far-right groups, among them far-right initiatives such as Pro Chemnitz, far-right protest movements such as PEGIDA, and the German spin-off of the French yellow vests’ movement. When analysing these groups’ uses of narrative and affective elements in terms of the ‘resistance topos,’ the paper elaborates the semantics, performances, and functions of a narrative that seems to constitute a common denominator of distinct groups and agents of the far right. In 2018 and 2019, we followed in particular the developments in the wake of the Chemnitz racist riots using ethnographic methods and conducted participant observations and conversations with various agents of the far right that share the ideological aspects of nationalism, xenophobia, authoritarianism, and welfare chauvinism. A constant practising, performing, and narrating of the ‘resistance topos’ enables activists on the far right to frame their cause, collective actions, and their (individual and group) identities in a particular manner. We argue that the ‘resistance narrative’ has to be understood as a part of the far right’s politics of affective attachment, attunement, and belonging that aims at furthering their social acceptability.

KEYWORDS:
far right, resistance, ethnography, affective politics, narrative, rage, German politics, Chemnitz, riots, PEGIDA, yellow vests

INTRODUCTION: “THE NATIONAL RESISTANCE IS MARCHING”

Thousands of people took to the streets to protest the murder of a young man in Chemnitz in August 2018. The fact that the accused were asylum seekers sparked public outbursts of racism, rage and hatred. Mobilised by the *Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)*, local hooligans and the far-right initiative *Pro Chemnitz*, the participants claimed they were “reconquering their city” (apabiz 2018) while violent outbreaks in the aftermath of the demonstrations were legitimised as “self-defence” (Burschel 2018). During the month after the murder, Chemnitz was in a constant state of emergency. Weekly protests took place, where we observed participants waving banners reading, “Germany for Germans” and “The national resistance is marching,” and the protests frequently turned violent. Videos of these events showed men and women dressed in clothes with codes of the far right, waving flags and exhibiting gestures of rage and aggression. Residents and eyewitnesses reported that overall, a hostile atmosphere was manifesting in the protesters’ provocations and threats against bystanders, journalists, and counter-protesters.

The 2018 racist riots in Chemnitz have to be considered as significant events in the context of the recent rise of nationalism and the surge of far-right movements in Europe. For these events succeeded in assembling decidedly heterogeneous groups and people, among them militant neo-Nazis and hooligans, far-right martial arts fighters, members of far-right political parties, as well as thousands of unaffiliated, ‘ordinary citizens’ who joined the far right’s marches and protests in Chemnitz and walked (and rioted) side by side with well-known racist activists. The Chemnitz racist riots demonstrated first the potential for uniting various and heterogeneous agents, activists, and subcultural groups of the German far right (Miller-Idriss 2018b), and second, the normalization of expressing far-right ideas and beliefs in public without fearing consequential social sanctioning. What renders both of these developments possible, we argue in this paper, is a powerful and affectively charged narrative to which all of these diverse agents, activists, and groups refer. Despite their contextual, organisational and ideological differences, all those groups assembling in the Chemnitz riots shared a sense of revolution and resistance.

This narrative – as we will show, the current ‘master narrative’ of the far right in Germany – took effect in an unsettling manner during the 2018 Chemnitz riots, culminating in the protesters’ chants of “Resistance! Resistance!” and waving banners reading “The national resistance is marching.” Yet the narrative topos of ‘resistance’ is not just being conjured by protesters in Chemnitz. Rather, the ‘resistance’ topos is being appropriated by a variety of actors on the far right, including *the Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident* (PEGIDA) movement, and agents of the so-called New Right such as the *Identitarian Movement* (Korsch 2016). In this paper, we investigate the semantics and performative properties of that topos and analyse the significance of disseminating

the 'resistance' narrative of the far right and its implications for the current rise of far-right groups all over Europe. With Cas Mudde (2000), we understand the far right as those political agents and organisations that share the ideological aspects of nationalism, xenophobia, authoritarianism, and welfare chauvinism.

In particular, the topos of resistance seems to unite the far right in its grand variety and heterogeneity. It is a common trope expressed in demonstrations and protests, and it is composing an underlying master narrative in far-right media and social media. 'Resistance' provides a frame for social and political (and sometimes, violent) action, while simultaneously legitimizing these actions. The far right has cultivated the resistance narrative for years. It acts as a "bridging narrative," as Meiering et al. (2018: 22–25) argued, that can be adapted in different ways while sharing essential features in regard to structure, content, and function. In this manner, the resistance narrative drives different sub-groups and sub-cultures of the far right – the far right is not a homogeneous entity, neither in different regions in Germany nor in different countries in Europe. In Chemnitz, when the resistance narrative came into effect, it turned into action and acts of violence against people read as 'non-German,' and it was played out by a heterogeneity of far-right groups that united – despite their differences – and marched together in the streets of Chemnitz in late August and early September 2018.

In this paper, we argue that it is important to analyse and understand the narratives that drive social action within the far right. As Jerome Bruner argued, social agents organise their experiences and memories mainly in the form of narratives, which ultimately are "a version of reality whose acceptability is governed by convention and 'narrative necessity' rather than by empirical verification and logical requiredness" (Bruner 1991: 4; see also Ewing & Silbey 1995; Somers 1994). As narratives are significant for building and organizing realities, they also provide a frame for social action. In case of the German far right, the 'resistance' narrative is a central driver of collective action and stimulates a sense of community and solidarity among people who do not have that much in common per se, while the outcome of that social action is in turn – as we witnessed in the Chemnitz riots – powerful effective expressions of rage and hatred. Katherine J. Cramer (2016) and Arlie R. Hochschild (2016) have shown in their work how right-wing politics is emotionally driven and how support for far-right parties and movements is mainly an emotional response. In her work on racist activism, Kathleen M. Blee argued in favour of greater focus on "the mobilization of emotions in the process of becoming a movement participant and the emotional culture, rituals, work, and rules of social movements" (Blee 2018: 23) and Hilary Pilkington (2016: 279–280) emphasised the notion of "affective practices" to grasp the "emotional as it appears in social life and concrete activities" of the far right. In addition, we argue, there are certain narrative framings in which affective responses, expressions and practices can thrive.

The growth of far-right political commitment and ultimately violence, we argue in this paper, are intertwined with material, emotional, and narrative (sub-) cultural arrangements of the contemporary far right – and significantly, the use of narrative forms to present the movements as a far-right 'counter-culture' vis-à-vis the 'mainstream.' As the (sub-)cultural forms of the far right have become a focus of scholarly attention – especially with regard to the far right's music and concert culture (Johnson 2019; Botsch et al. 2019; Kreter 2018; Schulze 2017), the physical and material embodiments in contemporary far-right youth culture (Miller-Idriss 2018a), and the 'cultural imaginaries' of the far right (Kølvraa & Forchtner 2019) – we propose an analysis of the current far right's 'master narrative of resistance' to further an understanding of the growth of far-right political engagement on the one hand, and of the normalization of far-right tropes and attitudes in 'mainstream culture' on the other. For the 'cultural imaginaries' of the far right can be approached, as Richardson (2019: 251) argued, "as a way of examining their political imaginaries and political projects." Following this argument, we do not necessarily understand culture as a set of phenomena, but rather as the performative capacities of cultural texts and grammars – that are intertwined with affects and realise in the form of, for example, narratives. According to Kølvraa and Forchtner (2019: 227), such an approach is able to generate "insights into [the far right's] self-understanding and potential success in communicating their message to audiences."

Thus, to explain the recent rise of the right in the Global North from Chemnitz to Charlottesville, we argue for the need to examine the intertwined narratives and affects of these self-proclaimed 'oppositional subcultures' and 'resistance movements' of the far right. To explain their successes, their capacities to mobilise people for their cause, and the progressing shift of mainstream political discourse to the right, we propose an analysis of the 'resistance topos' that constitutes the current 'master narrative' of the far right. We will exemplify the significance of far-right political narratives and affects in highlighting current developments and tendencies of German far-right groups including far-right initiatives such as *Pro Chemnitz*, far-right protest movements such as PEGIDA, and the German spin-off of the French yellow vests' movement. In analysing these groups' uses of narrative and affective elements in reference to the 'resistance topos,' this paper elaborates the semantics, performances, and functions of a narrative that seems to constitute a common denominator of decidedly diverse groups and agents of the far right.

A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

The research on which this work is based is part of the research project "Strangers in their own land? On the malleability of national narratives using Political Laboratories (PoliLab)" (2018–2021) funded by the German Ministry of Education and Research. This project aims to study how people in Germany define what the 'German people' should be, who belongs to the 'German people,' and who does not, and why – with a focus on the logics of national exclusion (Pates & Futh 2018) and the role of affective articulations of national identity (Leser et al. 2019). The study is based on group interviews with different people and members ofthe civic society in Germany – covering different regions, genders, ages, religious beliefs, professions and national minorities. In addition, we conducted ethnographic research into the practices, articulations, and affective politics of the 'German people' – with a focus on agents and networks of the far right, including parties and non-party organisations, protest movements, and subcultures, and explored different spaces across the streets, online communities, club meetings, and one-on-one conversations. An ethnographic lens, and an analytic focus on the affective politics of far-right agents and networks, we argue, can further an understanding of the recent surge of the far right in Europe. Why do people join and support the far right? How does the

far right mobilise their members? What strategies and affects play a role? How is rage being disseminated? And how do they succeed in positioning themselves as a counterculture, a 'resistance movement,' and toward what ends?

In 2018 and 2019, we followed in particular the developments after the Chemnitz racist riots using ethnographic methods. We observed protests and demonstrations in Chemnitz and other East German cities, attended party meetings of the AfD in rural regions and urban centres in Saxony and Thuringia, and followed far-right groups such as the 'yellow vests' in their online and offline communities. In addition, we organised meetings and interviews with various agents that have been active in far-right organisations such as the AfD, THÜGIDA, and PEGIDA. In these participant observations and conversations, we managed to "glean the meanings that the people under study attribute to their social and political reality" (Schatz 2009: 5). While the method of political ethnography can generate crucial insights, practical challenges prevail in the context of studying "distasteful groups" (Pilkington 2016: 13) such as far-right organisations: Blee (2018: 11) has emphasised the emotional toll for the researcher, and yet concluded that "talking to racist activists face-to-face, visiting their homes, and watching them conduct rallies […] can reveal aspects of white supremacism that would never be known otherwise."

Our observations have been documented in field protocols, and the interviews we conducted have been recorded and transcribed. The analysis of these materials followed the premises of the grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss 1967) – a method that is characterised by generating theory from empirical data through sorting, coding, and grouping emergent concepts into categories, hypotheses, and theories. The knowledge produced in ethnographic methods is always situated and embedded in temporal, spatial and contextual relations, and shaped by the researchers' experiences. Profound, intimate insights into particular social phenomena can be gained through ethnography although little can be said "about what are called 'macro-structures', unless those macro-structures are approached only in their local manifestation" (Rock 2001: 31).

'RESISTANCE' – A COLLECTIVE FRAME FOR SOCIAL ACTION

On the evening of August 26, 2018, shortly after a young man was murdered in Chemnitz during a city festival, about 800 people followed the call of local hooligans and members of the far-right group *Kaotic Chemnitz* for an unregistered demonstration (Young-Powell 2018). In the aftermath of that demonstration, eyewitnesses reported that protesters hunted down and attacked people marked as 'non-Germans' or 'migrants.' A video documenting these attacks (in German, *Hetzjagden*) sparked an immense public controversy in Germany in the following weeks.[1] On the following Monday, 5,000 people gathered at a rally organised by *Pro Chemnitz* – a far-right initiative and voter's association in Chemnitz[2] – in front of the Chemnitz' Karl Marx memorial and chanted slogans such as "We are the people" ("Wir sind das Volk"), "Migrants go home!" ("Ausländer raus!"), and "The national resistance rules here" ("Hier regiert der nationale Widerstand") (e.g. Grunert 2018). The police, outnumbered and insufficiently prepared, had difficulty separating the far-right demonstration from the counter-demonstration. The following Saturday, thousands of people marched through the streets in what they termed a 'silent protest' organised by AfD and PEGIDA.

The following month of September was marked by weekly demonstrations of far-right groups. Every Friday, *Pro Chemnitz* called on their followers to march through the city's streets. They were joined by members of the far-right populist party AfD, the national-socialist parties *Der III. Weg* ('The III. Path') and NPD (*Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, 'National Democratic Party of Germany'), the NPD's youth organisation JN (*Junge Nationalisten*, 'Young Nationalists'), the neo-nationalist party *Die Rechte* ('The Right'), and a kaleidoscope of other formal and informal far-right groups, among them hooligan organisations such as *Kaotic Chemnitz, New Society*, and *Blue Caps Leipzig*, anti-migration groups such as *Zukunft Heimat* ('Future Homeland'), martial arts clubs such as *Imperium Fight Team*, racist activist groups such as the *Identitarian Movement*, neo-Nazi groups such as *Blood & Honour*, banned far-right organisations such as *Nationale Sozialisten Chemnitz* ('National Socialists Chemnitz'), and far-right movement organisations such as PEGIDA.

The racist riots that were framed as 'silent marches' in remembrance of the murdered young man – who was neither a member nor a sympathiser of any of the protesting far-right groups – can be seen as "the outcome of long-term developments in Saxony" (Manthe 2018). For decades, the city of Chemnitz had been a breeding ground for the far-right scene and their subcultural structures (Burschel 2018; Intelmann 2019). Investigations into the far-right terrorist group *National Socialist Underground* (NSU) suggested that Chemnitz and Zwickau had been safe havens for the terrorists who found a network of supporters in those cities. While the riots in Chemnitz in 2018 were made visible in national and international media, racist riots have occurred throughout Saxony – in Freital, Bautzen, Heidenau and Claußnitz – increasingly since 2015, and new terrorist, sovereigntist organizations such as *Revolution Chemnitz* and *Gruppe Freital* had emerged. Against this background, the murder in August 2018 can be regarded as a trigger event that prompted an intertwined network of far-right groups to act, including hooligans, neo-Nazis, skinheads, and others. In close collaboration, they succeeded in mobilising their usual followers nationwide, and hundreds of non-affiliated local citizens in addition.

Notably, "so-called ordinary citizens" marched side by side with these far-right groups to express "their anger about the killing and Germany's asylum policy"

1 See, for example, https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2018-09/chemnitz--hans-georg-maassen-hetzjagd-beweise--horst-seehofer (retrieved June 25, 2019)

2 *Pro Chemnitz* was founded in 2009 by lawyer Martin Kohlmann who has been active in the far-right scene for 20 years. Today, *Pro Chemnitz* has about 30 active members. Nonetheless, they have been taking part in the communal elections and in 2019, they got 7.6 per cent of the votes, which equals 5 of 60 seats in the city council (Stadt Chemnitz 2019). On the outset of the 2018 Chemnitz riots, some of the *Pro Chemnitz* protesters formed a vigilante group, whose members were charged for founding a terrorist organisation, and for planning armed assaults on migrant and political dissidents later in 2018 (Locke 2018).

(Ecke 2018: n.p.). As Cynthia Miller-Idriss (2018b) noted, the closing of ranks between diverse far-right groups and 'ordinary citizens' might be regarded as a new development, yet has to be contextualised, especially in terms of post-reunification developments – politically, economically, socially – in East Germany (Intelmann 2019: 191). Until recently, two distinct types of far-right street protests had prevailed: first, marches by militant neo-Nazis, far-right hooligans, or New Right groups such as the *Identitarian Movement*, that were numerically small and occurred infrequently; and second, larger far-right anti-Islam PEGIDA marches that attracted thousands of 'ordinary people' in Germany since 2014 (Miller-Idriss 2018b). Triggered by the murder in Chemnitz, these two came together. Far-right militants and racist activists rioted in the streets, yet their rage was co-opted by 'ordinary' people joining the riots. In addition, a parliamentary actor, the far-right populist party AfD was involved in organising the demonstrations. Miller-Idris concluded:

> A third sector of the extreme right-wing—the leaders of right-wing political parties like the Alternative for Germany […]—and local elites added fuel to the fire by celebrating the Chemnitz protesters as revolutionaries, framing the riots as justifiable resistance that signalled the beginning of the end of a corrupt state. Extreme right-wing leaders even compared the riots to the youth- and citizen-led democratic protests of 1968 and 1989. This rhetoric further empowered ordinary citizens and legitimized the violence. (ibid.: n.p.)

Referencing the 1968[3] political uprisings and the 1989 peaceful revolution proved to be a powerful strategy for stirring up an atmosphere of revolution and resistance against a so-called authoritarian or totalitarian regime that fuelled the affective energies of the protests – ultimately expressed as anger and rage about the murder, and above all over the political decisions of 'the establishment' on immigration and asylum policies (Pfeifer 2018). As Jefferson Chase put it, the protestors "are convinced, official crime statistics to the contrary, that their lives are rapidly becoming more endangered and that the authorities are doing nothing to help" and that "politicians from the 'old parties' and the police [were] conspiring against them" (Chase 2018: n.p.).

During our ethnographic observations of the Chemnitz riots, the protesters' use of the resistance topos was striking. On November 9, 2018 – an important and controversial date in the recent history of Germany, as it commemorates both the November Pogroms in 1938 and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 – *Pro Chemnitz* chose to organise a demonstration, and once again, racist activists from a variety of organisations stood next to 'ordinary,' 'worried citizens,' chanting "Resistance!" in unison. People gathered in front of the Chemnitz Karl Marx memorial that evening, and families with children stood next to men wearing T-shirts with identifiable neo-Nazi codes and martial arts club logos. Many people seemed to know each other; the atmosphere was friendly, people were engaging in small talk, and expressing feelings of belonging and a shared community. The organisers thanked everyone for coming and encouraged the protesters to sing the German song "Die Gedanken sind frei" ("The thoughts are free"). The assembled crowd cheered and chanted, waved their flags – German flags and those of the different far-right groups' symbols. The organisers shouted: "No matter the colour of your flag, the important thing is that you are all here! Standing up for our homeland! We just have this one homeland!" The crowd cheered. "Only together we can fight! And only together we can win! Don't let them break you!" The crowd chanted: "Resistance! Resistance!" And the organisers shouted: "Together we can overthrow the government!" Different far-right speakers addressed the protesters, and their rallying cries resonated with the crowd: "The system is at its end! We are the turning point!" "Merkel has to go!" "Resistance! Resistance!" During the demonstration, the self-inflicted narrative of *Pro Chemnitz* and its supporters as a vigorous force in the fight against "corrupt and irresponsible politicians" (Pro Chemnitz 2019) seemed to be echoed by the decidedly heterogeneous crowd of protestors.

As Manthe (2018) has pointed out, it is important to understand the underlying narratives of the far right to understand the current events, especially the racist riots in Chemnitz. The common narrative that came into force during the protests and that seemed to unite a multitude of far-right groups and 'ordinary' citizens was told and recounted by the participants. Together they chanted the apparent cause of their rally: *resistance*. It was a "narrative of a 'people's uprising' in Eastern Germany," (2018: n.p.) noted, as these events "brought to light the fact that many far-right activists and sympathisers have some very concrete fantasies about a violent 'overthrow'."

THE FAR RIGHT'S 'RESISTANCE:' SEMANTICS AND PERFORMANCES

The narrative that played out at the Chemnitz riots – that is, the performance of resistance – has been and still is being reproduced and renarrated in different contexts and events within the German far right, most notably at recurrent PEGIDA demonstrations in Dresden since 2014. As Fabian Virchow (2016: 552) analysed, PEGIDA maintained "a narrative of resistance and a mood of insurrection against a migration and asylum policy" over the course of several years. PEGIDA became known for its misappropriation of historical references, including the chorusing of "We are the people!" adopted from the Monday demonstrations that led to Germany's reunification in 1989. Julian Göpffarth (2018: n.p.) argued, "[c]omparisons of the current German political system with the late GDR or the EU with the Soviet Union ('EUDSSR') are widespread among PEGIDA participants." The protesters are attempting to position themselves and their cause, so it seems, in opposition to an authoritarian regime, and they use historical references to resistance movements fighting the former Soviet

3 See Thomas Wagner (2017) and Volker Weiß (2017) for the controversy about the New Right's linkage to the 1968s.

Union. PEGIDA is thus engaging in politics of memory, and as Göpffarth claimed, it does so successfully in terms of mobilising members and participants: "Framing today's political system in terms of GDR resistance has given far right activism a new political framework and boost in mobilization" (Göpffarth 2018: n.p.).

In addition, Sabine Volk (2019) analysed PEGIDA's use of historical memory and showed that the PEGIDA protesters use references to WW II and the NS regime to alter and intervene with 'mainstream' Holocaust memory practices. PEGIDA protesters, for example, use the so-called 'Wirmer' flag with a red and yellow cross on a red background. This flag is associated with NS resistance fighter Josef Wirmers (1901–1944) and is a symbol of the fight against the Hitler regime. Yet since 1999, the flag has been recurrently misappropriated by German far-right groups, including the *German Defence League, Hooligans against Salafism* (HOGESA), and PEGIDA. The far-right news portal *Politically Incorrect* (PI) stated that the Wirmer flag symbolised the act of resisting a 'foreign rule.'[4]

The use and appropriation of historical references seem arbitrary from this perspective. Christine Hentschel has shown that

> [in] the wild mélange of Hitler, Marx and Luther in the gatherings of Pegida, AfD and company, it is not clear at all to what degree their respective convictions or frameworks of thought are being incorporated into some kind of 'argument'. What seems clearer is how, as in/famous figures, they provide anchors for the presencing that is taking place here: Hitler and Goebbels for the pleasure of undoing taboos and celebrating 'German greatness', Marx for being the intellectual authorizer of the GDR, that […] remains a corner stone of East German identification, and Luther for his firmness against the establishment, his commitment to truth, and his rootedness in the region. (Hentschel 2018: 228–9)

The context and details of their historical references did not seem to be that significant for the far-right groups we interviewed. Even more significant were the underlying implications for the 'resistance' narrative they reproduced – reference figures such as Luther thus have a specific function. The functionality of historical resistance references became apparent in one of our conversations with a leading figure of the THÜGIDA (*Thuringia Against the Islamisation of the Occident*) movement. The THÜGIDA representative tried to explain that the categorisations of 'left' and 'right' would not be useful to him; what mattered instead was people who were 'system obedient' and who performed 'resistance.' Thus, he criticised far-right AfD politicians such as Björn Höcke and the founder of PEGIDA, Lutz Bachmann, as 'spineless,' 'brainwashed,' 'characterless,' and 'submissive.' To him, they were political enemies, just like the majority of Germans who were akin to 'sleeping sheep' and needed to wake up and see what was really going on, in his opinion. Then he explained what 'real' resistance meant to him:

> If I'm scratching the varnish of the system, it's normal that the authorities start observing you. You just need to look into some examples from history: It didn't bother the Scholl siblings that the Gestapo was observing them. They continued to fight, regardless if that was good or right. You can have different opinions about this. The protesters against the GDR regime weren't intimidated by the intelligence service's observation. What all of them have been lacking is spinelessness [in German, Rückgratlosigkeit].

He rejected the left/right categorisations in our conversation – known from the Third Position ideology associated with far-right organisations such as the Italian Terza Posizione and the French Troisième Voie. It was solely the act of 'resisting the system' that mattered to him, and that needed to be done with a particular urgency. To him and to many other members of German far-right groups, the German government (the 'system') was to blame for the cultural and/or civil war that Germany was embroiled in and that in the worst case would lead to the 'Umvolkung' – the idea of a biological and cultural replacement of the German people – and eventually, the national socialist myth of 'Volkstod' – the death of the German people.

These apocalyptic and conspiratorial visions at the heart of the resistance narrative are not just fuelling the current activities of the German far right, but "gaining currency" in European far-right and populist politics (Bromley 2018: 13). In this logic, because of the imminent 'Umvolkung,' performing resistance and staging a revolution become urgently necessary. The idea of an impending 'great replacement' that goes back to French writer Renaud Camus has turned into a narrative gone global: it is used as a reference by *Generation Identity* activists, eco fascists, white nationalists, and far-right terrorists alike (Davey & Ebner 2019). According to the narrative, Europe is already in the midst of a civil war, while the liberal governments of the European states purposefully refuse to protect their 'native' citizens from an 'invasion' of Muslims (the 'Islamisation of Europe,' in Germany most prominently propagated by the PEGIDA movements). The governments are further to blame because their liberal asylum and immigration policies made the 'Muslim invasion' possible in the first place, and now, the 'ethnos' of the European nations are in danger of being replaced. According to this narrative, the 'Muslim invasion' must be resisted to ensure the survival of the nation – that is, the nation imagined as an ethnic people, a homogeneous cultural entity, or a superior civilization. Those who are to blame for the 'great replacement' of the German people, for example, are not limited to the 'Muslim invaders,' or 'non-Germans' but include everyone who render the replacement possible or do not oppose it, that is, politicians, the establishment, liberals, greens, leftists and the naïve, duped, and/or brainwashed people who have not yet awoken, but are commonly referred to by white nationalists as 'sleeping sheep.'

4 See https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/wirmer-flagge-pegida-und-das-symbol-der-hitler-attentaeter-1.2593682 (retrieved June 25, 2019)

THE FUNCTIONS OF THE RESISTANCE NARRATIVE

The defiance of 'mainstream' categorisations of left and right is found in many groups which scholars and observers situate within the far right. The use and appropriation of the resistance narrative allows certain groups to spread and further popularise far-right tropes, while attempting to escape the 'far right' label and their negative connotations. The resistance topos conceals the underlying political position on the far right, while it furthers the normalisation and social acceptability of far-right attitudes and ideas. For the resistance narrative to function in that manner, it needs to be practised, as we argue, that is, it needs to be continuously renarrated and performed.

In our ethnographic research, we observed how different activist groups performed the resistance narrative in distinct ways. The German yellow vest movement, for example, uses the resistance narrative as a central topos for mobilising members and supporters. While the *gilets jaunes* protests in France gained worldwide attention in 2018 and 2019, the yellow vest movement in countries like Germany has lacked any public or academic interest.[5] Unlike the *gilets jaunes* in France, the yellow vests in Germany are not linked to physical violence. As part of our ethnographic research, we conducted narrative interviews with participants, sympathisers and observers in the yellow vest movement, who have been organising in many German cities – albeit with a limited number of members, but a steadily growing number of followers on their social media pages. We focused on the yellow vests which came to a maximum of 50 to 120 protestors on the streets of Erfurt and Heilbronn. A journalist investigating the local yellow vests emphasised in a conversation that paying this small group "so much media attention" was hardly justifiable and stressed their presence in local Facebook groups instead.

In early 2019, more than 1,000 people wearing yellow vests protested in Stuttgart. As the home of Daimler and Porsche, Stuttgart is considered an automobile city. Yet recently, the city's government banned older diesel vehicles to comply with the European Union's nitrogen oxide exposure limit, which ignited the protest of the yellow vests in Stuttgart. The press termed the protesters "Diesel-Wutbürger" (angry citizens defending the diesel vehicle).[6] While the public perception and the numbers of yellow vest protesters in Germany and France differ, one common feature of the movements is the defence of personal freedoms from state intervention. From this perspective, the yellow vest functions as a symbol of industrial worker's resistance. The use of resistance symbols does not mean that the German yellow vests can be labelled homogenous protests of the far right.[7] Yet, it reveals that the underlying atmosphere of resistance serves as the basis for the normalisation of right-wing politics.

Conversations and posts in a Facebook group by the local yellow vests, for example, in Heilbronn near Stuttgart, show how narratives of 'resistance' against the ban on driving diesel-run vehicles converge with far-right tropes. On Facebook, videos of the yellow vest protests in France and news reports on the diesel-driving ban in Germany are being shared –, joint meetings are planned, dates of demonstrations are announced, and videos of their own protests are uploaded. Above all, however, the members seem to continuously express anger and irony about the Green party and the "old parties" (often symbolised by the figure of Angela Merkel). While they serve as figures of the 'establishment' and are framed as the political enemy, the politics of 'old' parties is being cynically criticised for their immigration and asylum policies, for 'letting criminal migrants into the country,' and for 'lying' about the 'threats (im)posed by Islam.' The posts shared on the yellow vests' Facebook pages conjure up apocalyptic and conspiratorial visions that are in line with the far-right master narrative of 'resistance' – which is inevitable in light of the imminent 'Umvolkung,' in their opinion. And although academic observers noted that the yellow vests' protests "have become hijacked by far-right groups" all over Europe (James 2019), and although the yellow vests' protests are publicly supported by the AfD, PEGIDA, and other far-right groups (May 2019), the German yellow vests commonly dismiss any attribution of their cause as 'right' or 'left.' What self-image are the local yellow vest groups aiming for?[8] What allows them to reject the attribution 'right' and to articulate far-right narratives at the same time? How does presenting those tropes as 'resistance' work? And what is the function of the yellow vest?

At the end of March 2019, we observed a protest organised by the local group *Yellow Vests Eichsfeld* in Erfurt. About 120 people – mostly older men wearing yellow vests – had been gathering in front of the train station. Music was playing and booming from the loudspeakers: the *gilet jaune* song by Kopp Johnson, and a song by Julia Juls, a member of *Frauenbündnis Kandel* ('Women Alliance Kandel'), rang out hauntingly: "Come out, come out / We're fighting for our land / Hand in hand / For the resistance." Most of the yellow vested participants had written slogans on their vests or held banners aloft reading: "Down with the Merkel regime!" "For our future!" "Revolution!" "We are the people!" "The people does not know about its power" "Together we're strong!" "Effective liability for wrong political decisions!" Before the protesters began marching through the city, the organiser and leader of *Yellow Vests Eichsfeld* addressed the demonstrators, saying, "We are awake, we are a critical mass, and we are neither left nor right; together, let us be a sworn community." Political attitudes do not matter in the fight against the "real political enemy," he said, and concluded, "What we need is a new world order and it is important that no corrupt lackeys are to lead this new order!" As they started marching, he held aloft a banner reading "We're standing up for our future and our children."

5 The literature on the yellow vests in France includes scientific commentaries (e.g. Kempin & Tokarski 2019 on national debates), political expertise (e.g. Fourquet & Mantern 2019; Galetti & Wissmann 2019), and calculations on the end of the movement (Morozov et al. 2019).

6 "Wutbürger" is a term coined by Spiegel journalist Dirk Kurbjuweit (2010) and intended to capture a particular German protest culture. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* journalist Rüdiger Soldt (2019) termed the yellow vests "Diesel--Wutbürger," adapting Kurbjuweit's term.

7 Especially at the beginning of the yellow vest movement in France, there was also approval for the gilets jaunes by leftist politicians in Germany. Thus, the first demonstration in Germany was organized by the movement #aufstehen ('standing up'). At the end of 2018, initiator Sahra Wagenknecht (Die Linke) expressed her solidarity in front of the Federal Chancellery in Berlin, wearing a yellow vest.

8 Michalis Lianos (2019: 1) raises a similar question for the protests in France: "The yellow vest protest in France raised the question again. The entire range of possible accusations has been launched against them: fascists or anarchists, secret instruments of political parties, apolitical, clueless rednecks or sophisticated haters. Nothing sticks, however, since they openly and unreservedly admit their plurality. So, what keeps them together?"

The German yellow vest groups we analysed show similar affective practices and narratives as identified by Christine Hentschel (2018). Based on her participatory observation of far-right protests in East German cities, she argued that Islamophobic narratives were presented as a resistant and courageous enlightenment, and as the suppressed truth held by outcasts (2018: 219, 224–226). The yellow vest movement does not seem to be a phenomenon that can be localised, for example, in East Germany. Rather, the movement practises a circulating narrative that has an affective appeal for a variety of groups, allowing them to feel resistant, courageous, and in the 'possession of the truth.' A video on a homepage of the yellow vests in Heilbronn for instance, tells viewers, "the truth […] is neither good nor bad. It is neither left nor right. It is neither racist nor anti-Semitic. The truth is just the truth."[9] In a Facebook group of Heilbronn's yellow vests, a meme was posted, stating: "I AM: left [], right [], conservative [], AWAKENED! [ERWACHT!] [X]."[10] The administrator of the Facebook group shared a post saying that migrants kill German girls, commenting "Germany 2019" – implying cynicism. Above the post, he had written in the same cynical tone: "But that's all imagined… is what stupid people would say now." The comment section of the post was full of sad emojis, and the only comment said: "And they are still sleeping."

The treatment of truth as something that simply exists permeates the affective narrative proposed by the yellow vests. As Hentschel argued, "truth appears not as the outcome of a line of argumentation, of establishing facts and evidence, or of taking a position on a given framework of thought. While the lie needs to be made, the truth, here, simply *is*. […] It can be *held*, it can be revealed or come to light" (2018: 219). Although *the* truth is already there, many are unable to grasp it, because they have been ideologized, lulled and dulled – the perspective of the yellow vests, this is what the 'mainstream media' and the 'established parties' do. In sharp contrast, the yellow vests proclaim they are the ones being "AWAKENED!" They enact themselves as in possession of the truth and thus position themselves as resisting those who do not want or cannot see the *real* truth. The yellow vests are addressing a wide, potential audience – the vague 'anti-establishment' gestures serve as an entry point for various political groups. During the demonstration in Erfurt in March 2019, various local far-right groups joined the yellow vests, including the anti-Islam organisation *Erfurt zeigt Gesicht* ('Erfurt shows its face'). According to Michael Herzfeld (2019), the yellow vests can be understood as a part of a larger, conspiratorial community, which relies on suggesting self-evidence and truths. Herzfeld argued that the performance of shared 'actual truths' is one of the central functions of populist politics.

To offer courageous resistance – i.e. resistance showing local presence not only as a small group, but also as an individual wearing a yellow vest[11] – it is necessary to practise the representation of an oppressed group. Not being heard 'objectively' and getting too little media attention functions as an enabling device. In a video shared and uploaded on Heilbronn's yellow vests Facebook group, an organiser of the group was interviewed at one of their demonstrations. In the interview, he initially problematizes the relationship with the local media and their reporting style, while explaining his understanding of 'good journalism:'

> But, if there are only biased reports, and if the opposition, for example, the AfD in Germany, is constantly being oppressed and devalued… That can no longer be objective reporting. […] Everyone can use a camera. Everyone can upload something to the internet. And that is being used… and this is the one-on-one picture of what is really happening, and this one-on-one picture is in no way represented in public media. […] In my opinion it's like in normal life. In every relationship, you should meet at eye level, with decency and respect. And I'm experiencing again and again that the interviewing done by mainstream journalists is absolutely manipulative. That means, it works with psychological means to conjure up, to create, a certain answer. And the way we talk, with quite normal questions, where I get the opportunity to speak out and maybe even to get somewhat emotional. When nobody holds me back, that's the way it has to be. The way I talk to my wife, to my son, to my dad, that's how I want to talk to you journalists. That generates trust. (Interview with a yellow vest protest organiser, Facebook upload, May 4, 2019)

According to the organiser, reports on the yellow vests – just as the far-right populist party AfD – were not objective and truthful. He was suggesting a non-representative idea of reality: truth simply *is*. The camera he used to film the interview did not present reality anew, but showed the truth directly, "one-on-one," as he put it. He conceptualised affects as a promise of direct access to reality. As the AfD politician Georg Pazderski said in his election campaign, "Perception is reality. That means, what you feel is also reality" (van Laak 2016). When journalists identify the yellow vests as 'Diesel-Wutbürger,' they use affects in a pejorative way. In contrast, affects are seen as authentic in the narrative of resistance. Thus, the devalued affectivity of the 'angry citizen' transforms into a positive notion of affect: one's own affectivity "is treated as a matter of truth that cannot be topped by any rational reasoning" (Hentschel & Krasmann 2018: 5). The articulation of one's own affectivity functions as a performance of resistance. From this perspective, someone who expresses the truth does not act *politically* (in this logic: neither left nor right), but *truthfully*. We argue that the yellow vest symbolises the embodied commitment to the truth and the resistance to 'the established half-truths.' The neon yellow colour then acts as an alarm. The yellow vest is supposed to unsettle the 'sleeping sheep' and wake them up. Thus, the yellow vest appeals to those who feel victimised and want to feel part of a 'resistance' in Germany.

9 Video available online: https://gelbe--westen-heilbronn.de/; https://bit.tube/play?hash=QmadeVjpLMDnKUD19cQz5MexHHtPLSybaRFTKoBZKQ7GCM&channel=196493&for=Wahrheit%20%C3%BCber%20Deutschland&isyt=false (retrieved June 25, 2019)

10 The reference to the *Sturmlied* from 1920 with the line "Germany, awaken!" ("Deutschland, erwache!") undermines the rejection of the attribution "rightist."

11 The notion of a few resistance fighters mobilises the well-known reference of the *Identitarian Movement*, the "300" of Sparta (e.g. Martin Sellner, the Austrian head of the *Identitarian Movement*: „300 people, one unbelievably symbolic number", video available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7mV_qEiiREs, retrieved June 25, 2019).

CONCLUSION

In numerous European regions, far-right political engagements and manifestations of racist activism are on the rise, and the normalisation of far-right tropes and attitudes is progressing. Increasingly, these developments are attracting the attention of scholars and observers, who are attempting to explain the growth of the far-right political spectrum across Europe.

We argue that an ethnographic lens on the affective and narrative practices of far-right groups in Germany is analytically beneficial for creating an understanding of the growth of the far right, their increasing popularity, and the normalisation of the far-right discourse as they seek to establish within and across the political 'mainstream.' The capacities for mobilising rage and anti-establishment resentment – that, in case of the Chemnitz riots, quickly transformed into violence against those marked as 'abject Others' – are grounded in what we term the far right's 'master narrative of resistance.' Social and collective action is legitimised, if it is framed as acts of resistance; voicing one's anger, marching in the streets, and even attacking other people is rendered an urgency – and a necessity, if these actions serve to perform resistance against 'the system,' 'the establishment,' the 'old parties,' etc. to defend 'the nation,' 'the homeland,' 'the people' against the imminent 'Muslim invasion.' These propagated apocalyptic and conspiratorial visions suggest that the nation is under threat, i.e. the nation imagined as a homogeneous ethnic people, a homogeneous cultural entity, or a superior civilisation. The survival of the nation's 'natural order' is, as suggested, being threatened by a 'Muslim invasion' and all those responsible for it – which allows for blaming politicians, elites, journalists, liberals, and practically all those people *who know what's going on, but are lying to the people about it*, in their opinion. Thus, the threat is situated both on the outside of the imagined community – the 'Volksmörder' ('murderers of the people') – and on the inside – the 'Volksverräter' ('traitors of the people').

A constant practising, performing, and narrating of the 'resistance topos' enables activists on the far right to frame their cause, collective actions, and their (individual and group) identities in a particular manner. Performing 'resistance' allows for the enactment of courage, pride, solidarity, and a sworn community. In other words, it allows for the (re-)production of particular affective engagements that may seem appealing to others, while these affective allures are backed by a detailed and convincing narrative framework that invites to become a part of a 'resistance movement.'

When analysing the affective allure of the Tea Party movement in the United States, Arlie R. Hochschild pointed out that the supporters of the far-right party were seeking release from "feeling rules" imposed by 'the liberals' – in Hochschild's words, "release from liberal notions of what they *should* feel—happy for the gay newlywed, sad at the plight of the Syrian refugee, unresentful about paying taxes" (Hochschild 2016: 15). The far right's master narrative of resistance is operating on that level as well, as it holds the promise of providing that sense of community for those who are 'awakened,' and framing those who still 'believe in the media and the government' as the duped 'sleeping sheep' who do not know 'the truth.' In a sense, it holds the promise of resistance against those who seem to dictate what 'we' *should* feel. The resistance narrative thus has to be understood as a part of the far right's politics of affective attachment, attunement, and ultimately, belonging. The conspiratorial nature of the resistance narrative further enables an understanding of how narratives are capable of construing realities, and as Kathleen Stewart (2007: 89) argued, "[t] here's pleasure in conspiracy theory" – i.e., it constitutes a kind of knowledge that is affectively appealing, Scholars of the far right tend to represent its members and activists as driven by politics of fear, rage, resentment, and hatred. Yet all emotions are, as Kathleen M. Blee argued, "socially and politically encouraged (or forbidden)" (2018: 69), and a narrative frame that allows for positioning oneself as a courageous and 'awakened' member of a 'resistance movement' is probably more appealing than being identified a 'hater' or a 'Wutbürger' in a pejorative way. We need to further our understanding of the affective constellations which far-right activists and groups are tapping into and working with. The far right's growth is intertwined with the way they practise and perform the resistance narrative and the underlying affects to the story, and in this manner, they are gaining social acceptability.

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