Normalization of the Global Far Right

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Normalization of the Global Far Right: Pandemic Disruption?

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Introduction

The Normalization of the Racist Far-Right as Global Phenomenon

We are writing in the year 2022 and the virus Covid-19 causing a worldwide health crisis and defined as a pandemic since March 2020 continues to shape our global and late modern life. By now we passed distinctive national lockdowns, extreme isolation measures particularly for those elderly who suffered when locked up in care homes, and hundreds of thousands, even millions of deaths, worldwide. Conspiracy theories (Sturm et al., 2021) are looming around and populist resistance against enforced vaccination is rising.

That said we will show in this book that deep-seated societal and colonial structures of injustice and social inequality (e.g., class, race, and gender/sex inequalities) persist and are encompassed by the normal dirty work of free market capitalism. All of this is not diminished but rather extended throughout the global health crisis (Vieten, 2020). We start with an attempt to anchor the spreading disaster and extremist positions in Europe.

If we think "Europe of the Second World War years" horrific images of the Holocaust appear in front of us: we suffocate when trying to understand in what ways the German society at the edge of an open society with a liberating modernity in the 1920s turned its tables when *legally* organizing industrial mass murder of Jews, disabled people, Sinti, and Roma. Everyday intimidation and inferiorization of Jewish citizens next door – robbing ethnic and racial minorities of their livelihood and dignity – were enacted, first randomly, but then systematically, when enshrined with the Nazis' racist Nuremberg Laws (1935). What followed was an unprevented mass execution of Jews decided at the Wannsee Conference in Berlin, 1942.

Within only 9 years after the NSDAP gained power in 1933, anti-Semitism accelerated to industrial mass murder, during World War II, notably from 1942.

What appears as a "civilizational" break, however, should be read as linked to a long-term development of racist anti-Semitism built in and connected to the *völkisch* ideology and anti-Semitic nation building of Germany in the nineteenth century (Fischer, 1986; Friedländer, 1998; Massing, 1949; Mosse, 1987).

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Paul Massing – an intellectual of the Frankfurt School in US-exile, for example – argues in his contemporaneous studies (1939, 1949) that primarily the urban classes were the most "implacable enemies of the Jews" during the first wave of racial anti-Semitism (Massing, 1949, p. 75).

Anti-Semitism encompassed the urban liberal lifestyle of the 1920s, already: the fictional German film "Babylon Berlin" released in 2019,[1] illustrates in its various plots how national socialist mob and increasing authoritarian norms were threatening a weak Weimar political leadership and impacting the mundane life of the city, step by step undermining freedom of cultural and political expression. The street fights between communists and national socialists became the litmus test for the political elite trying their patriotic, proto-fascist, and socio-economic upper-class interests while taking sides with the Nazis. The film captures very well some of the everyday harassments of Jews, and the criminalization of left-wing and communist political actors, at the time.

The Weimar republic had ended when Adolf Hitler was appointed *Reichskanzler* (chancellor) by President von Hindenburg, in 1933. Political Power was handed over, institutionally and legally. Hitler and the NSDAP rose to brutal dictatorship in only 10 years, after the failed 1923 coup.[2] In Italy, the fascist Mussolini seized power in 1925. In Spain, Franco ruled from 1936 until his death in 1975.

It is tempting to compare the shift to the fascists and National Socialist terror regimes back then with the extremist move we witness as the contemporary rise of far-right populism and governments leaning to authoritarianism, in the twenty-first century: in the United States, Donald Trump was democratically elected in 2017; Jair Bolsonaro won his election in Brazil in 2019, Narendra Modi became PM in India, in 2014. And let us not forget current European far-right governments, such as Victor Orban's in Hungary, since 2010, or the situation in Poland since 2015, with the election of the far-right "Law and Justice Party" (Vieten, 2015).[3]

Finishing this book in the beginning of 2022 the pre-pandemic far-right populist threat as established governments seems becoming a fading memory. Not as long ago, in summer 2020, we embraced the end of Donald Trump's presidency

[1]The film script is based on novels by German author Volker Kutscher. The series takes place in Berlin during the Weimar Republic, starting in 1929. It follows Gereon Rath, a police inspector on assignment from Cologne who is on a secret mission to dismantle an extortion ring, and Charlotte Ritter, police clerk by day, flapper by night, who is aspiring to become a police inspector.

[2]Paul Massing, alias Karl Billinger (1939, p. 114), writes about Hitler's putsch attempt of 1923: "The two thousand National Socialists, with Hitler and Ludendorff at the head, were stopped by a few policemen, first with warnings, then – much to their surprise – with bullets. The *Fuehrer* fled. The Putsch had gone on the rocks. Among the sixteen dead who fell before the *Feldherrenhalle* were: a judge, a retired captain of cavalry, three bank officials, three engineers, four salesmen, two craftsmen, a butler, and a head waiter. The list of casualties gives a true cross-section of the social composition of Hitler's party. Industrial workers were none."

[3]http://qpol.qub.ac.uk/law-and-justice-polands-return-to-catholic-morality-and-a-homogenous-society/

in the United States when hopes returned that extremism of the far-right was downsizing. That said, the virulence of white supremacist violence in the same US, attacking black and visible minorities as well as Jews is continuing, and the change of US presidential political leadership does not alter deeply enshrined white supremacy. The second impeachment failed (February 2021) due to Republican votes in favor of Trump and allowing him to enter the stage for a likely return of Republican presidential candidate again, in 2024. *Two years to go*.

Facing up to a global lack of coherent and good governance in the current Covid-19 pandemic crisis we might be haunted by experiences of the early twentieth century situation: a study on the socio-economic impact of the pandemic disease, *influenza*, 1918–1920, gives some troubling indications that there might be a link between potential extremist voting and post-pandemic years (Blickle, 2020).

Blickle (2020, p. 4) refers to historical studies (Cohn, 2012; Voigtländer & Voth, 2012) highlighting the endemic feature of anti-Semitism, and the blaming Jews for infecting the "we-people" in the context of plagues.

The racist pattern sounds familiar.

The constructed "cultural-ethnic" war as a contestation of who belongs to a society, and who can be intimidated, discriminated, or excluded from the common good, touches on deeply gendered, classed and racial plots.

When witnessing the twenty-first century rise of the racist global far-right core questions come to mind: how can all these processes happen in front of our eyes? How can we grasp and detect those social and legal processes *normalizing* the systematic marginalization of a minority group? What does it take to resist the authoritarian norm and going beyond the "bystander" role? Is there an alternative to the normalized everyday racisms accompanying the current shift to the global far-right? Though the book largely focuses on the processes of normalization, which take place as gradual normative adjustment for most people, we attempt to sketch in the second chapter part, too, some perspectives in undoing bystander habits.

Analytically, we approach the return of authoritarianism – the international rise of far-right political parties linked to extremist racist movements – through a historical and political sociological lens: we foreground concepts that seemed to be recycled in the current context but carry the sexist and racist meaning of previous fascist periods. One of these concepts is "*Umvolkung*" or "replacement" (see Chapter 3). The ideological perception of who belongs to the native group, who claims entitlement to the goods of society, and further the right to restrict "women's equal rights," for example, refers to systemic misogyny at the center of fascist "*völkisch*" constructions of the "We-people" (see Chapters 1 and 2). Whereas the success of far-right populist parties and its ideological domains are imprinting the public and international political discourse we follow the cultural–societal processes – the everyday processes of normalization and mimicry of respectabilities – watching the public stage and (social) media space given to far-right actors, and for the sake of audience spectacle, buying into extremist voyeurism. That said, the two sides of this mediocracy are the few able to build propagandistic tools, and those many, who are exposed to it. As we will outline later the digital world provides partly the chance of democratizing media access and articulation

though otherwise with a range of dubious platforms also helping to diversify the propaganda and rhetoric of extremists.

Following Stuart Hall's (1980) terminology, Morelock (2018, p. xiv) puts forward the term "authoritarian populism" arguing that this helps to analyze contemporary far-right populist movements. This notion of populism is foregrounding the homogenizing of "we-people" and accelerated propagandistic efforts to ouster the political elite in government. In terms of the historical patterns and proximity to authoritarianism, the concept carries important meanings. However, when exploring the role of hybrid and different angles of racisms we add an aspect of "xenophobic populism," the latter coined by DeAngelis (2003) in the context of French far right populism, associated with the Le Pen family.

Later in this introduction, we present the notion of normalization we are using as our conceptual framework. We will discuss processes of (civic) normalization against the notion of (ideological) "mainstreaming" and approach structural and system-led far-right mobilizations and everyday racist repercussions in mundane societies as intertwined dynamics. Finally, we will briefly outline the following chapters. But before a few words on our methodological framework. We are inspired by Critical Discourse Analysists investigating the linkages between macro-level ideological frameworks and meso-level intertextual discourses (Martinez, 2007; Wodak, 2014, 2015) though we do not focus on micro-level sociolinguistic analysis of texts. That said we predominantly apply content analysis of international media outlets and turn to historical texts of various German and English-speaking archives as form of secondary data analysis. Our aim is to raise radical questions, linking the analysis of different forms of transnational and European feelings of (white) superiority with an anti-capitalist stand, since capitalism itself remains largely unchallenged and reproduces patterns of social inequality, ecological disasters, and injustice.

Mainstreaming Far-right Politics and Normalizing Racist Exclusion of Minorities

Back in the 1990s "mainstreaming gender" in the context of EU policies conveyed a progressive and liberating message (Caglar, 2013; Daly, 2005). In the last decade and in the context of populist far right challenges to representative democracy and multicultural societies, various academics (Akkerman et al., 2016; Feischmidt & Hervik, 2015; Mondon & Winter, 2020; Wodak, 2021) interrogate and pay attention to the notion of "mainstreaming" in the context of the extremist right.

Admitting the problematic fluidity of its notion, Mondon and Winter (2020, p. 10), for example, describe it as "functional floating signifier." Feischmidt and Hervik (2015, p. 3) explicitly define "neo-nationalism and neo-racism (as) main engines of the process (of) mainstreaming the extreme." Their approach is very helpful as it names racism and nationalism[4] pushing extremism as mainstream.

[4]Though our contention would be that it is not neo-racism, but overt racisms linked to enshrined institutional racism.

Feischmidt and Hervik's point of departure comes close to our own thinking while arguing that a clear-cut distinction between extreme political and mainstream liberal positions misses the point as it is not looking at the entanglement of both, and the transgression of institutionalized and temporarily less overt forms of racism.

Providing a more nuanced definition of "mainstreaming" Kallis (2021, p. 9) argues,

> On the one hand, there is a *normative*[5] mainstream, expressed in the language of "ought to" through hegemonic channels mediated by politicians, public intellectuals, educational institutions, and established media outlets. On the other hand, there is an *aggregative* mainstream, denoting a volatile patchwork of ideas and attitudes that occupy a broad spectrum of acceptability all the way to the boundaries of what is broadly considered taboo extremist ideas, speech, and behaviour.

Kallis in his approach – and reading closely the work of Norbert Elias – explores historical fascism not as fall from and aberration of the "normal" civilizing process, but as encompassing the civilizing process. Kallis analyses

> fascist radical uncivility as rooted in a continuum of mainstream acceptability, embedded in key trends of the "civilizing process" but resting on revised underlying norms about community identification and treatment of otherness. (2021, p. 5)

Why is the connotation of normality and – ergo tackling processes of normalization – relevant? It is relevant when interrogating "normal" levels of racisms, or "normal" standards of democratic consensus, and pinpointing the transgression of these normalities into systemic violent and rhetorical forms of minority exclusion. Cas Mudde (2010), for instance, has critiqued an influential stream of research into far-right populism, which applied the "normal pathology" lens. Mudde argues,

> key foundations of the normal pathology thesis have dominated the academic study of the post-war populist radical right in (Western) Europe. They include at least the following aspects: (1) populist radical right values are alien to western democracies; (2) a small potential continues to exist in all societies; and (3) support for populist radical right parties is explained by "structurally determined pathologies," which are triggered by "extreme conditions" (i.e. crises). (2010, p. 1171)

[5]Italics in the quote by authors, UMV and SP.

These academic approaches locate the extremist far-right outside of "normal democracy." Mudde proposes the concept of "pathological normalcy" instead. The tension between "normalcy, antinomy and othering" is most relevant when we reflect on processes of normalization. We can see a double bound notion of normalization and normativity. One that tries to bring people – those belonging – into line and conformity, and the othering effect ousting those, who do not conform to this normality. Misztal (2001) identifies two dimensions of normality: factual and normative. *Factual normality* is based on perceptions of the regularity of people's behavior. Behavior is considered as "normal" when people experience it as "average" or "typical" in each social context. *Normative or evaluative normality* asks, "how things ought to be." This definition does have similarities with Kallis's understanding of "normative mainstreaming." A regularity of behavior as an expected social pattern is organized in line with a majority's understanding of what counts as accepted and "factual" normality. Misztal (2001) refers to Goffman's (1971; quoted in Misztal) notion of normality as "a sense of collective safety rooted in the predictability" of a given social environment (Misztal, 2001, p. 314). Thus, normalcy is a social construct which is anchored in "shared collective presumptions" (Misztal, 2001). Normality as an expectation of "things as usual" helps to navigate daily lives and it makes people feel comfortable, among other things. The question arises, who belongs to this group of "normal people," what is expected as "normal behavior," and what happens if we disrupt this expectation of "normal behavior."

From here we could conclude that a process of normalizing the extremist right includes three angles: the normative collective as such, the individual who is asked to conform and adjust to the normative collective, and the outsider, who is constructed as not belonging to the collective mainstream. The latter in its situated construction of otherness never can become "normal." In a systematic formation these distinctions make sense though belonging to a specific outsider group might shift historically, and therefore the position of an individual rather ought to be regarded as fluid. This three-angled positioning must be kept in mind when reflecting on the power of discursive normalization of racist and extremist rhetoric and the pattern inscribed in a generalization of far-right racist habits. However, a fourth angle comes to the fore when we project that there could be – in principle – a position neither absorbed into "normality patterns" nor constructed as the eternal outsider. It is this position that we should consider more seriously when challenging established privileges and racist business as usual and engage more thoroughly how privileged individuals unlock bystander habits and interfere in normalizing processes. The following chapters speak distinctively to the normalizing of far-right racist orientations in different parts of the world.

The Order of the Chapters

The **First Chapter** goes back to the critical contributions on the phenomenon of authoritarianism and anti-Semitism as analyzed by Theodor Adorno, Norbert Elias, and other intellectuals of the Frankfurt School in exile capturing the meaning making of socio-economic political crisis which triggers processes of

othering group difference. We focus here more in-depth on Paul W. Massing's – alias Klaus Billinger – contributions witnessing the rise of Hitler and his colonializing war of Europe: we turn to the testimonies from Massing's (Billinger) book *Hitler Is No Fool*, published in 1939, and his book of 1949, *Rehearsal of Destruction: A Study of Political Anti-Semitism in Imperial Germany*. We regard Massing as contemporary witness, who analyzed the rise and establishment of Nazi terror, personified in Hitler's anti-Semitic and militaristic program, from a communist point of view. While engaging with the critical analysis of a contemporary of the German National Socialist totalitarian and racist regime we intend to unpack the blurred boundaries between extremist margin and its move to the center, capturing historical processes of authoritarian normalization. Second, we introduce and discuss the controversial debate surrounding the comparison of anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim racism (Islamophobia). While following those, who advocate that both are distinctive forms of racisms we situate anti-Semitic as well as anti-Muslim rhetoric and acts as signifiers of a wider socio-economic and political governance crisis with respect to global capitalism in late modernity. In a contemporary reading anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim racism become entangled ideological frameworks targeting othered minorities. This chapter provides a historical and structural embedding to further our argument that the normalization of the global far-right is linked to both, collective processes of othering minority differences – a form of everyday racism – and specific gendered and culturalist dynamics of twenty-first century layers of anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim racism in a digital world.

In the following **Second Chapter**, we investigate the gendered dynamics of fascist, racist and far-right orientations. Historically situated notions of masculinity and proto-fascism and their intersection with racial supremacism have been analyzed by Klaus Theweleit (1977, 1978). While referring to Theweleit we will bridge his work on historical emanations of militaristic masculinities, homophobic (anti-femininity) masculinity and misogyny with more recent academic interventions on what is called "toxic" – masculinity. "Toxic masculinity" has been associated with far-right populist male white leaders, such as Trump, Orban, or Putin. It is important though to reflect on the binary of traditional (western) masculinities as well as femininities as they are relational and performed divisively in the public (e.g., media). Following the argument of *chapter 1*, which looks at the normalization of minority inferiorization in chapter two the role of liberal feminism in advocating a Western (Christian) normatively adopted civil consensus will be foregrounded. A female identification with the dominant notion of male power does have repercussions with Christina Thürmer-Rohr's concept of "*Mittäterschaft*" (1987, 1990).[6] While ideologically seconding a reductive notion of Western emancipation the normative marginalization of minority ethnic and religious (Muslim) women and men, are co-constructed, and here we reflect on Sarah Farris' (2017), *femonationalism*. Hence, what was discussed in the previous chapter as historical normalization of anti-Semitism and problematizing the

[6]https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-531-91972-0_11

normalization of Anti-Muslim racism, here is scrutinized as the "normalization" of liberal and "queer" modes of lifestyle, as part of commercialized culture and identity discourse.

The **Third Chapter** investigates the trans-nationalizing of far-right racist populism, beginning by investigating the global provenance of the ideology that motivated the Christchurch terrorist in his mass murder of 51 Muslim worshippers in New Zealand in March 2019. It discusses the international (Balkan, French, and US) origins of the myth of "white replacement" as one such ideological element. In doing so, it discusses the functionality of what the chapter terms "ideological promiscuity": the slipperiness of who is the Other being racialized and what is the nationality, culture or civilization to be "saved" from replacement makes for ready transference of the ideology between one national cultural–historical context and another, usually via the internet. The chapter goes on to consider the role of the internet in transmitting right-wing racist populism, and how this is accelerated and targeted using social media. Offensiveness and symbolic violence become a marketing ploy in this commodified zone.

The role of crisis as a condition for fascism, proto-fascism, neo-fascism and authoritarian populism is discussed. The parts played by various crises leading to the contemporary state of right-wing racist populism are examined: among these the Global Financial Crisis, the 2015 refugee crisis, the Coronavirus pandemic from 2019. The attributes of fascism, using differing models, from Martin Kitchen's (1976) to Umberto Eco's (1995), are delineated and compared to contemporary right-wing racist populism.

In the **Fourth Chapter**, we delineate the ideological elements of racialized othering, and particularly Islamophobia, in the populism of the far right. The discussion sets out from what Hillary Clinton infamously labeled the "basket of deplorables" addressed by Donald Trump: racism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, sexism, and homophobia. These attributes are all evinced in various groups of Trump followers, as is anti-communist conspiracy-mongering.

Archetypical of populism is the notion of "everyday" citizens deprecated and overlooked by elites, and the populism of present-day right-wing ethno-nationalists in the "West" is examined in this respect. The ideological functioning of racist othering is here explored: as imagined causes of real insecurities and hardships, entailing the projection of fear and anxieties, experienced during social and economic crisis, onto racialized scapegoats. The Muslim Other is the pre-eminent such scapegoat of our times. The ideological elements of Islamophobia are accordingly examined. It is argued, following Arun Kundnani (2016, 2017) and Deepa Kumar (2012) that this form of racism stems from colonialism and imperialism. The connections of the "Global War on Terror" and its Islamophobia with the US-led Empire of Capital (Wood, 2003) are traced. Finally, this chapter analyzes various ideological maneuvers that are at work in contemporary global Islamophobia, as deployed in far-right populism. These include projection, inversion (camera obscura) and denial.

In **Chapter Five**, our conclusion, we pull our arguments together, situate finally the normalization of the global-far-right in non-normal pandemic times. As we argue the global pandemic has disrupted local everyday consumerist and working