

Ideologies and Approaches of the Contemporary Alt-Right in Germany

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The contemporary rise of the alternative (alt-) right is arguably one of the most shocking developments of this decade.¹ This paper will explore the cultural and political presence of the extreme right-wing in Germany by examining how such ideologies have infiltrated mainstream cultural and political spheres. It will focus on how these infiltrations have targeted and attracted German youths. The rise in popularity of the right-wing in Germany is of particular interest, given the country's turbulent, fascist history, and contemporary position as one of the strongest democracies in the world. In addition, this paper explores the cultural, social, and political position of the new alt-right. The analysis includes both psychological and historical contexts, while examining current political and cultural trends, as well as the alt-right responses to contemporary issues such as digitization, immigration, and environmentalism. I will argue that the alt-right is transforming its approaches to appropriating and infiltrating mainstream platforms in order to share its nationalistic, xenophobic and anti-democratic ideologies. This can be seen through the politicization and weaponization of unconventional mediums such as fashion, food and social media, as well as the polarizing populist approaches used by alt-right political parties, such as the *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany), all of which disproportionately affects youth support. Through my analysis of the psychology, history, and current trends of the new radical right, this paper offers an insight into the current cultural position of the European, and specifically German, alt-right.

The digital age has increased the visibility of the alt-right and offered extremist groups the opportunity to infiltrate the mainstream through cultural spheres such as social media, fashion, and food. Globalized digital information has allowed alt-right groups to respond to social trends, thus appealing to stereotypically youthful left-wing interests such as veganism, environmentalism, and cosmopolitan or hipster fashion. Populism is historically linked to crisis—it often emerges within a crisis context, contributing to “a more general social crisis.”²

There is considerable debate over the definition of populism, though it generally exists within and supports spheres that thrive on identity politics and those that “pose a danger to democracy,”³ such as the radical right.

It can be deduced that crises and the rise of right-wing ideologies are (at the very least) interactive phenomena. This is supported by Jan-Willem van Prooijen's theory, which proposes that psychological distress—like that which occurs under social and political crises—provokes an adherence to extreme ideologies such as the radical right.⁴ In this context, psychological distress is defined as “a sense of meaninglessness that stems from anxious uncertainty” that results from “distressing personal or societal events [that] undermine the extent to which perceivers experience the world as meaningful and therefore stimulate people to regain a sense of purpose through strong and clear-cut ideological convictions.”⁵ Contemporary issues, such as immigration and environmental crises, can be contextualized within this definition as “ideological convictions” that are politicized in extreme circles.

Forced mass-migration and immigration are often portrayed as the cause of economic instability by right-wing nationalists (and other radical-right groups). Since political extremists often “report stronger anxiety about their economic future,” it is plain to see that the clear-cut (although skewed) rhetoric of extremists can potentially sway those in vulnerable economic situations, who are prone to extremist viewpoints.⁶ Additionally, “reminding people of their mortality can increase both extremism and [...] nationalism.”⁷ Though this psychological research argues that both ends of the ideological spectrum (left and right) of extremism adhere to these psychological responses, it offers valuable contextual evidence into the psychology of right-wing extremists and insight into their ideological and social standpoints.

In the age of globalization and digitalization, the alt-right can target youths across the globe by infiltrating mainstream and stereotypically leftist social media, fashion, and “foodie” circles. Right-wing ideologies are thus

made more accessible: “the Internet allows us to reach people we can’t reach on the street” argues Andy Knape, the chairman of the Young National Democrats.⁸ This comment was included in a *Rolling Stone* inquiry into ‘nipsters’, a slang term for neo-Nazi German youths who dress and act in a similar fashion to ‘hipsters’, who are stereotypically identified as left-wing, stylish, and urban youths. The case study of the nipster is important in the analysis of how alt-right communities have adapted to “live in the mainstream.”⁹

Contrary to the stereotypical ‘violent skinhead’ imagery of a 1990s German neo-Nazi, these youths often sport trendy attire. As one anonymous nipster put it, “We don’t walk around the city center with our eyes closed, we see what people are wearing on TV.”¹⁰ Thor Steinar and Phalanx Europa are two counterculture, nipster, alt-right brands that have successfully infiltrated the fashion industry with obscure and indistinct right-wing symbols and imagery.¹¹ To the untrained eye, these brands are “essentially identical to mainstream, fast-fashion garments,” allowing extremists to camouflage themselves while still maintaining the ability to identify each other.¹² The two aforementioned brands are not unique in promoting hidden neo-Nazi symbols. A large number of right-wing fashion brands have emerged in the past twenty years, sporting indistinct symbols such as 88 (the alphanumeric code for “HH,” or “Heil Hitler”) or HKNZ (for *Hakenkreuz*, German for swastika).¹³ Despite the existing regulations against Nazi symbolism in Germany, these fashion brands have mostly avoided legal and social recognition through the use of such codes.¹⁴ For example, it is illegal to print the word “swastika,” or *Hakenkreuz*, on clothing, but the lettering “HKNZ” evades this clause.¹⁵ This shift in right-wing fashion branding is not a simple change in alt-right aesthetics, but rather a weaponization of fashion in the form of metapolitics. Like media, literature, and music, fashion is an influential cultural force: “the political effect of fashion is based in particular on the notion that it pre-eminently is not perceived as political and thereby has the power to influence and to change social values.”¹⁶ Far-right youths “can express their own individuality and still be right-wing, and commercial entities are both capitalizing on this and acting as driving forces of the phenomenon.”¹⁷ These brands specifically target youths by exploiting traditionally leftist, urban, and youthful ‘normcore’ street styles and “attempt to slide into debates where young people wouldn’t expect them.”¹⁸

Other groups, like the eco-fascist community, appropriate such frameworks to complement their own oppressive ideologies. Eco-fascism is a subset of the alt-right community that incorporates neo-Nazi beliefs into their environmental activism and argue that “racial purity is the only way to save the planet.”¹⁹ This argument is justified through the skewed application of the

theory of invasive species—often attributed to bacteria, fungi, plants, and insects. This theory, which normally applies to alien organisms that cause harm to a new environment, thus translates to human racial minorities and immigrants to support nationalistic and xenophobic rhetoric.²⁰ Eco-fascists and nipster culture often incorporate veganism, mythology, and animal activism into their xenophobic and white nationalist framework.²¹

Groups from either end of the political spectrum apply their own ideologies and values to macro-political issues such as immigration, environmentalism and social rights. Given that, in popular discourse, environmentalism and fascism are dissonant ideologies, it is worth noting that there are historical ties between environmental conservationism and the radical right-wing.²² The counterculture utopian sentiment of the 20th century organic, agricultural, and environmental anthroposophist movement attracted members with far-right views.²³ Though there is considerable debate over the connection between this philosophy and racism, there was a thematic overlap between anthroposophist and right-wing German green ideologies. For example, anthroposophism was a movement that popularized anti-modernist mystic approaches and a deep connection to nature, with an emphasis on purity of self, food, and community. During the Nazi era, anthroposophists published “sympathetic overviews of Nazi racial theories” and argued for the compatibility between their views and those of the Third Reich.²⁴ One of the offshoots of anthroposophism was “biodynamic agriculture,” which was appropriated by the Nazi Party during the Third Reich.²⁵ The Nazi Party had strong connections to environmental issues, organic agriculture, and vegetarianism, favouring a “natural diet that focused on the purity of food” and “the anthroposophist method of organic farming.”²⁶

The history of the relationship between environmentalism and the extreme right is complex. The fashion brand Thor Steinar, which invokes images of *Völkisch* mysticism (a late-19th-century German ethnic and nationalist movement), shares a similar name with the founder of anthroposophy, Rudolf Steiner. This is further evidenced in the eco-fascist usage of the phrase “blood and soil,” which symbolizes the “desire to have nations that are only full of people [...] indigenous to that region (blood) and the demand for a geographically bounded home that is preserved through environmentalist principles (soil).”²⁷ Eco-fascists have acknowledged this connection in such statements as: “To be fair, the Third Reich was one of the earliest governments to make conservationism a major focus” and “what really pisses me off is how everyone associates deep ecology with [...] far left ideologies [...] it was Nazi Germany that was environmentally aware.”²⁸ Eco-fascists use their environmental theories to support illegal and immoral actions: “I believe that both the state and the state’s cit-

izens have the right to use all means necessary to save the environment, including murder and sabotage [...] as combating climate change is sure to save more lives than [such crimes] could ever hypothetically destroy.”²⁹

The resurfacing of the relationship between neo-Nazism and environmentalism has been further popularized through the internet, via eco-fascist social media accounts and media like the YouTube vegan-Nazi cooking show *Balaclava Küche*. *Balaclava Küche* exemplifies the way that right-wing environmentalism has resurfaced in media.³⁰ In using ‘foodie’ entertainment, this show translates its anti-globalist/nationalist rhetoric into accessible and seemingly ethical suggestions, such as buying local organic food.³¹ Food, like fashion, is political—both are part of daily lifestyles, offering insight into why an individual or group might choose to consume certain products. For example, veganism is specifically depicted as an “ethical pattern of consumption.”³² Though *Balaclava Küche* is not subtle when it comes to its unethical ideologies, this approach to mixing left-wing consumption choices with counter-culture right-wing rhetoric popularizes a “new obscurity in style as a deliberately produced strategy of confusion due to the mechanisms of normcore.”³³

All of these examples demonstrate the alt-right’s infiltration into the mainstream media. This is in part due to less exclusive digital platforms. Compared to the “gatekeeping mechanism of the old media,” namely public television and newspapers, modern media platforms like Youtube, Instagram, and Facebook allow for “previously unimaginable opportunities for the promotion of extreme right messages.”³⁴ This dangerous adaptation to popular left-wing trends indicates the malleability of right-wing rhetoric. This unconventional approach infiltrates previously detached sub-cultures and popularizes alt-right rhetoric in seemingly progressive circles.

The right-wing’s infiltration into mainstream spheres is not exclusively cultural. Parallels can be drawn from the Europe-wide resurgence of right-wing populist political parties. The rise of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) effectively demonstrates the infiltration of right-wing ideology in mainstream political discourse in Germany. The AfD capitalized on the 2015 migrant crisis in Europe, which supports van Prooijen’s psychological theory about the causal relationship between crises and rising extremism. Additionally, the AfD has resorted to mainstream platforms, such as advertisements, which disproportionately affect youth support. The AfD targets this demographic through various means, including the *Junge Alternative*, a branch of the party that is especially active online.

The rise in popularity of parties, such as Italy’s Lega Nord, the Sweden Democrats, and France’s Front National, demonstrate the continent-wide support gained by the right-wing in the 2010s. In 2018, support for the Lega Nord doubled after the 2018 elections and the

Sweden democrats claimed 17.6 per cent of the vote (rising from a mere 13 percent four years earlier). A year prior, the Front National captured 33.9 per cent of the vote in the federal election.³⁵ Feelings of psychological distress in response to political crises can make civilians vulnerable to extremist, nationalist ideologies.³⁶ The response to contemporary issues such as the environmental and migrant crises explains the notable electoral losses suffered by moderate parties in the EU, as well as the increased support for populist and nationalist parties.³⁷ Following the 2017 federal election, the AfD became the first extreme right party to enter the German parliament (*Bundestag*) since World War II, securing 12.6 percent of the vote and becoming the third-largest party in Germany.³⁸ The AfD was founded in 2013 and won a mere 4.7 per cent of the vote in that year’s *Bundestag* election.³⁹ The rise in support for the AfD is attributable to a political rebranding of the party following the 2015 migrant crisis. This rebranding aligned the AfD manifesto with anti-immigrant sentiments, which echoed other populist parties across Europe.⁴⁰

The AfD was founded as an anti-EU party in the wake of the eurozone crisis, members of the AfD later recognized that “eurozone bailouts had receded as a political issue while immigration had acquired salience.”⁴¹ The AfD, like many other populist parties, used reflexive political strategies that capitalize on psychological distress in times of crisis. Support for the AfD surged following terrorist attacks in France, Belgium, and Germany. There was also subsequent concern over Germany’s open-door policy, as implemented by Chancellor Angela Merkel.⁴² The anti-immigration stance adopted by the AfD was not unique in German political discourse. Centrist parties also adopted more aggressive platforms on immigration issues: The Social Democratic Party (SDP) released a statement that announced the party would also be “tough on migration” and used politically charged language, arguing that “foreign criminals” should be deported.⁴³

This affair afforded right-wing populist parties an opportunity to create reactionary platforms that would appeal to civilians who were experiencing psychological distress.⁴⁴ The apocalyptic narratives that were invoked during the migrant crisis only aggravated perceptions of “threatening conditions.”⁴⁵ For example, in 2017 the AfD released a manifesto that stated: “The goal of the AfD is the self-preservation, not self-destruction of our state and nation [...]. We want to bequeath our descendants a land, that is still recognizable as our Germany.”⁴⁶ It demanded that “the borders must be closed at once to stop unregulated mass immigration to our country.”⁴⁷ Invoking imagery of ‘self-preservation’ further polarized citizens and aggravated existing psychological distress. Additionally, in depicting the acting government as self-destructive, the AfD offered a space for political skeptics who harboured deep criticisms of, or concerns

about, the migrant crisis and Merkel's government. Right-wing populist parties across Europe have used advertisements and other media platforms to depict immigrants as economic and cultural threats.⁴⁸ The AfD used similar tactics, portraying Islam and Muslims as a threat to Germany in their 2017 campaign.⁴⁹

The use of right-wing anti-immigration and populist posters were key aspects of the AfD campaign. Blunt slogans such as "Burkas? We prefer bikinis" or "New Germans? We'll make them ourselves" have attracted international attention.⁵⁰ The effectiveness of the right's advertising is especially effective as studies have shown that the vast majority of youths' knowledge about political issues and parties comes from political advertisements. Desirée Schmuck has noted that young voters are especially susceptible to right-wing populist branding, which often depicts anti-immigration narratives in more blatant ways than other forms of media.⁵¹ A significant proportion of young people support populist move-

ments and parties, and young people with low-education levels are disproportionately susceptible to widespread and "persuasive anti-immigrant advertising content."⁵² Given that German youths are disproportionately affected by high unemployment rates, the invocation of rhetoric that paints immigrant populations as economically threatening is appealing to them.⁵³

The alt-right is resurging in Europe, especially in Germany. Enabled by political and environmental crises in Europe, alt-right forces have utilized unconventional mechanisms such as fashion, food, and social media, in combination with polarizing rhetoric, to increase their support. Youths are particularly susceptible to the tactics employed by groups like the AfD. Right-wing political forces are benefitting from the emergence of crises and a polarized population that displays growing social discontent with their economic and political situation.

Notes

1. In this paper, 'alt-right', 'radical right', 'new right', and 'right wing' are used interchangeably.
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5. van Prooijen and Krouwel, 160.
6. van Prooijen and Krouwel, 160.
7. van Prooijen and Krouwel, 160.
8. The 'Young National Democrats' (JN is the youth organization of the right-wing/neo-Nazi NPD party; Thomas Rogers, "Heil Hipster: The Young Neo-Nazis Trying to Put a Stylish Face on Hate," *Rolling Stone Magazine*, June 23, 2014, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/heil-hipster>.
9. Rogers, "Heil Hipster."
10. Rogers, "Heil Hipster."
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12. Gaugele, 716.
13. Gaugele, 715.
14. Gaugele, 716.
15. Gaugele, 715.
16. Gaugele, 726.
17. Cynthia Miller-Idriss, *The Extreme Gone Mainstream: Commercialization and Far Right Youth Culture in Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 2.
18. Rogers, "Heil Hipster."
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20. Bernhard Forchtner, "Nation, Nature, Purity: Extreme-Right Biodiversity in Germany," *Patterns of Prejudice* 53, no. 3 (2019): 286–88, doi:10.1080/0031322X.2019.1592303.
21. Forchtner, "Nation, Nature, Purity."
22. Forchtner, "Nation, Nature, Purity," 286.
23. Anthroposophism is a philosophical movement that spurred from German idealism and mysticism. One of the offshoots of this movement is 'biodynamic or organic agriculture'. For more context see Fortchner "Nation, Nature, Purity"; Peter Staudenmaier, "Between Occultism and Fascism: Anthroposophy and the Politics of Race and Nation in Germany and Italy, 1900–1945" (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2010); Michael Barker, "Environmental Flight From Reason," *Theory in Action* 8, no. 4 (2015): 70, doi:10.3798/tia.1937-0237.15024.
24. Staudenmaier, "Between Occultism and Fascism."
25. Peter Staudenmaier, *Between Occultism and Nazism: Anthroposophy and the Politics of Race in the Fascist Era* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 129.
26. Bernhard Forchtner and Ana Tominc, "Kalashnikov and Cooking-Spoon: Neo-Nazism, Veganism and a Lifestyle Cooking Show on Youtube," *Food, Culture & Society* 20, no. 3 (2017): 421, doi:10.1080/15528014.2017.1337388.
27. Manavis, "Eco-Fascism."
28. Manavis, "Eco-Fascism."
29. Manavis, "Eco-Fascism."
30. Forchtner and Tominc, "Kalashnikov and Cooking-Spoon," 416.
31. Forchtner and Tominc, 430–31.
32. Forchtner and Tominc, 423.
33. K-Hole, *Youth Mode: A Report of Freedom*. (New York: BOX, 1824), <http://khole.net/issues/youth-mode>.
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37. van Prooijen and Krouwel, 162.
38. Bremmer, "These 5 Countries"; and David F. Patton, "The Alternative for Germany's Radicalization in Historical-Comparative Perspective," *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 25, no. 2 (2017): 163, doi:10.1080/25739638.2017.1399512.
39. Patton, "The Alternative for Germany's Radicalization, 163.
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41. Patton, 164, 172.
42. Patton, 172.
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45. Karakayali, “The Flüchtlingskrise in Germany,” 609.

46. Patton, “The Alternative for Germany’s Radicalization,” 166.

47. Patton, 166.

48. Desirée Schmuck and Jörg Matthes, “How Anti-Immigrant Right-Wing Populist Advertisements Affect Young Voters: Symbolic Threats, Economic Threats and the Moderating Role of Education,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 41, no. 10 (2015):

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50. Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson, “In German Election, Campaign Posters Are More Important Than TV Ads,” *NPR*, September 23, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/>.

51. Schmuck and Matthes, “How Anti-Immigrant Right-Wing Populist Advertisements Affect Young Voters,” 1579.

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53. Schmuck and Matthes, 1581.