Don’t Call Me Right! The Strategy of Normalization in German Right-Wing Extremism

This is the 18. article in our series Trouble on the Far-Right. For more information on the series, please click here.

by Holger Marcks

When it comes to change in social environments, a parable of philosopher Charles Handy gets pulled out quickly. If you drop a frog in boiling water, it jumps out immediately; but placed in cold water slowly warming up, it acclimates itself and falls to sleep, unaware of being boiled alive. The parable reminds us of the perceptual relativity of change: Within communities creeping developments cause habituation, abrupt breaks an arousing shock. In terms of social movements this truism becomes apparent in a double way: On the one hand, erupting crises may destabilize social orders and create the necessary space for dissident actors to gain momentum – while they would fail to mobilize outside the scenario of an anxious community gasping for a new guarantor of order. On the other hand, the rise of a dissident actor with unconventional performances may work as a shock triggering withdrawal reflexes in the broader society – while dissidents with relative habitual sentiments can find resonance in communities disappointed by the ruling order.

Does this perspective offer a potential to explain the rise of far right movements in Europe? Let’s examine it by the example of Germany where, in the last two years, far right actors have experienced a remarkable gain in political acceptance – on the streets, in the booths and in the talk shows. In this case, it could be argued that their success in protest and electoral mobilizations as well as their disproportionate high presence in the media rests on communication politics that effect a normalization of far right positions previously disreputed in public discourse. Through this creeping habituation by society, they are able to gain momentum in situations of crisis, producing themselves successfully as a legitimate agent of the “anxious citizens” disappointed by the government. To test this little argument, a finger exercise in frame analysis seems to be proper, a tool common in social movement studies to explain why certain ideas in
certain contexts are potent to mobilize audiences – and are not in others.

**How Normalization Works: Strategic Framing and the Diffusion of Far Right Ideas**

“The far right position of yesterday is the political centre of today”.¹ This process – here referred to the Rechtsruck that struck Germany in the 1990s’ – has been subject to various extremism studies. It can be grasped, for instance, as an interrelationship between the “contagion” of a political centre by the far right and a “failing mainstream” which does not perceive far right positions as a threat.² This fits well with sociological perspectives highlighting how ethnifying discourses – a major feature of far right politics – gain “symbolic power” and enable the diffusion of specific publics into the general public. Again, the interrelationship becomes obvious: By activating and amplifying ethnic boundaries between an imagined community and an alienated “other”, the socio-political boundaries are blurring in public perception. Undoubtedly, this dialectic of exclusion and inclusion is the path to normalization far right politics usually follow. “Ethnic mobilization” – the symbolic empowerment of a collective identity to be protected against a dehumanized alterity threatening its homogeneity – has always been the engine of far right successes.

Of course, ethnic mobilization doesn’t work over night. If far right actors want to be successful, their specific discourses need a certain compatibility with ideas circulating in public discourse. And often it is a situation of crisis which opens an opportunity for (electoral) breakthrough. For instance, far right ideas may have penetrated the political center but are overlaid by a conventional electoral behavior. In a crisis situation, where trust in established parties is exhausted, this “extremism of the center” can become manifest with election successes of far right actors. While the condition of a crisis is mostly beyond their influence, they can, at least, bring themselves in a better position by diffusing their ideas increasingly into public discourse. This indicates another interrelationship: Moments of crisis can give an impact to actually minor actors of the far right, if they resonate with a set of rightist ideas already normalized in public discourse; and at once, they can enable exactly this resonance by strategic acting that causes a normalization of their ideas in society.

It is therefore standing to reason that the strategic rationality of far right actors is also guided by considerations on how to effect normalization. One possible access to grasp this is to analyze their “frames”: the schemata of how they construct social reality and shape the perception of their environment. Framing activities can be *strategic*, insofar as actors intend “to telegraph meaning and to focus audience attention on ... aspects of a topic in order to gain favorable response”.³ However, strategic framing is not arbitrarily malleable for actors. After all, they hold core beliefs – as diagnoses and prognoses of what is wrong in the world and how it has to be changed – and try to act consistently to them.⁴ At once, it is also bound to normative constraints, since frames have to resonate with prevailing beliefs to be attractive.⁵ With that, a challenge is issued to far right actors: To create legitimacy and reliability, they have to align with habitual sentiments without contradicting their core beliefs. We will see now how far right actors in Germany managed this congruence building – which is the “key to acceptance”.⁶

**Petry-fying Society: The “Anxious Citizen” as a Bitter Arsonist**

After different far right parties – as NPD, Pro Deutschland or Die Rechte – failed to attract broader masses, the *Alternative for Germany* (AfD) has lately been able to achieve remarkable successes in *communal* and *regional* elections, accompanied by a notable *uptick in the general polls*. Those successes...
were preceded by much-noticed and still lasting xenophobic mass mobilizations, mostly associated with the *Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West* (PEGIDA), accompanied by an endemic wave of attacks on refugee shelters. Both strands can be seen as two arms – a political and a social one – of a new far right movement. Not only do PEGIDA protesters identify with AfD’s politics, party leaders also declare their compliance with the protesters. Indications for the movement’s extremist character are numerous: The protest and attacks perpetuates the “Nein zum Heim” campaign, where the neo-fascist NPD was a leading force; many protest organizers are well-known for their neo-fascist background; moderate positions have been squeezed out in AfD, while firmly extremists are highly attracted by the party; and where AfD did not run in communal elections its potential voters turned to NPD.

Nevertheless, politics and media are zealous not to make the movement stand too much in the extremist corner, often speaking of “anxious citizens” whose sorrows have to be taken seriously. It is plausible to say that this already reflects an outcome of far right actors’ normalization strategy. Indeed, the movement likes to present itself as carried by the “normal” people disappointed by the government. Its adherents often refuse to be called a “Nazi” or even a rightist. And if they recognize their right-wing contents, it is framed as “normal”, too: They just fill the conservative gap which has been created by an alleged shift to the left by the *Christian Democratic Union* (CDU). AfD and PEGIDA, so the narrative, just represent the will of the people (“We are the people!”) ignored by the state. However, even if the movement is successful in mobilization, they are far away from being a majority and representing “the people”. In general polls, AfD always ranks under 15 percent, and even the notorious protests of PEGIDA could gain a real foothold just in a few regions while they have been outdone by counter-protests in most parts of Germany.

In this sense, the claim of far right actors to represent the popular masses is contradictory. Nevertheless, the narrative of being “normal” citizens gets caught up in public discourse. This suggests a congruence building that successfully covers the contradiction. Here, efforts of “frame amplification” seem to be critical. By emphasizing and petrifying an ethnified issue that touches popular sentiments – as the so-called refugee crisis –, other political positions which are by no means popular take a backseat. In addition, certain constructs help to patch the contradiction. Here, the narrative of a “liars’ press” (*Lügenpresse*) comes to mind. By diagnosing media politics that manipulates the population, a kind of *Verblendungszusammenhang* is imagined which prevents the people to realize their objective interests. Beneficially, this framing allows far right actors, such as AfD leader Frauke Petry recently, to present themselves as victimized and ordinary at the same time. As a result, they are often perceived as “anxious citizens” – and not as bitter arsonists that have problems to accept democratic decisions.

**Missing the Forrest: Remarks on the Complexity of Normalization**

Up to here, this contribution highlighted just one little aspect of far right normalization, namely how actors strategically frame themselves as “normal” to gain acceptance in broader audiences. Of course, things are not that easy to explain. For instance, it is not clear how this relates to the fact that many adherents of the movement indeed exhibit a firmly anti-mainstream attitude and bitterly lament an alleged dominance of leftist “taboos” in society. Moreover, it is unclear where framing is actually strategic or just an authentic expression of a subject’s cognition. And this aspect gets even more complicated since such a distinction is hard to make. After all, far right actors try to influence their environment systematically. In doing so, they purposefully spread misleading information (as AfD cadre Björn Höcke even admits) or exaggerated interpretations (see Petry’s instruction for the party’s public relations). While for the receiver of the information the strategic intention is not clear, he nevertheless may start to repeat such persuasive falsehoods, thus becoming part of the strategic project.
In addition, far right normalization is not just about a former minor actor gaining acceptance but also – and even more – about far right ideas being adapted by mainstream actors. The mechanism behind this process has much to do with party competition. That is to say: Party actors concerned about a possible loss of voters switching to a rising far right party may borrow some of the latter’s content. This has been exemplified already in the early 1990s when considerable parts of *The Republicans*, (REP) party program has been integrated in the *Asylkompromiss*, a law limiting the right to asylum, by the government. And it can be seen today also in other countries. The conservative FIDESZ in Hungary, for instance, took over many programmatic aspects of the fascist JOBBIK for its governmental policy in the past year. Likewise, in Germany recently different party actors have tried to internalize positions of the rising far right movement. This is not reserved for center-right parties as the CSU, it is also observable in the ranks of the leftist party *Die Linke*. Such moves are often justified with the intention to take the wind out of the extremists’ sails. However, it is questionable what this is worth when the political center itself is becoming more extremist.

Finally, the role of the media has to be addressed. Even if far right actors lament to be victimized by it, there is no doubt that they profit enormously by its coverage. After all, it could be argued that it was the broad reporting on the early PEGIDA manifestations – at the beginning not well-attended – which gave them a boost. Likewise, AfD has a disproportionate high presence in the media. And since its representatives are invited solely to talk shows on ethnified issues, this may suit perfectly the party’s book of frame amplification. Further, the question arises if the media themselves is a field of far right resonance. This is indicated by the case of the sexual assaults in Cologne at New Year’s Eve which brought not only an intensive coverage of the incidents but gave “criticisms” of asylum and criminal foreigners a lot of space in the media. In contrast, organized mobs of rioting neo-Nazis or the endemic encroachments against refugees fall into oblivion. One could read this as effort to take the “anxious citizens” seriously and prevent their further radicalization. It could also be hint that far right ideas are more normalized in public discourse than it appears. Hard to perceive if the water is slowly warming up.

---

**Holger Marcks** currently serves as a research associate at the chair for “International Organizations” at the Goethe University Frankfurt. Primarily he is researching in a project on “Transnational Escalation Mechanisms of Violent Dissidence” where he is attended to political violence in historical anarchism. Besides that he is also interested in aspects of nationalism and has published on the advancement of right-wing extremism in Hungary.

---


9. See Knoell, p. 152.


Tags: AfD, crisis, extremism, far right, frame analysis, framing, Germany, Lügenpresse, mobilization, NPD, Pegida, Rechtsruck

« Der Aufstieg und Fall Swobodas: Restrukturierung im ukrainischen Nationalismus

Bislang keine Kommentare

Einen Kommentar hinterlassen

Name

Email

Webseite

Kommentar
Social Media

Suche

Suche...

Twitter Feed

- Don’t Call Me Right! Holger Marcks about the Strategy of Normalization in German Right-Wing Extremism [https://t.co/vgwodHY34Q #AfD #FarRight](https://t.co/vgwodHY34Q) about 7 hours ago from Twitter Web Client
- Der Aufstieg und Fall Swobodas: Restrukturierung im ukrainischen Nationalismus [https://t.co/2gbj0PDO8T #Ukraine #Swoboda #Maidan](https://t.co/2gbj0PDO8T) 22. April 2016, 10:06 from Twitter Web Client
- Erdoğan’s Wolves – Nikolaus Brauns über die Kriegsallianz von #MHP und #AKP [https://t.co/6qoIoJIMGI #GraueWölfe](https://t.co/6qoIoJIMGI) 21. April 2016, 10:17 from Twitter Web Client

Tags
Der Dschihad der Auslandskämpfer: Ausdruck einer Subkultur

Terroristen oder Bürgerkriegsflüchtlinge? Was wir gegen diese Verwechslung tun müssen

Lebenswelten anerkennen! Religion im Unterricht und die Prävention salafistischer Einstellungen

**Kategorien**

- Außenpolitik (66)
- Bürgerkriege (25)
- Cyber Security (52)
- Demokratisierung (14)
- Drohnen (15)
- Flüchtlinge (18)
- Humanitäre Interventionen (15)
- Innere Sicherheit (34)
- Interviews (10)
- Katastrophen (4)
- Konferenz (31)
- Militär (31)
- Pandemien (2)
- Podcast (7)
- Popkultur (22)
- Raketenabwehr (1)
- Rechtsradikalismus (18)
- Sanktionen (8)
- Security Culture (27)
- Sicherheits-Kommunikation (16)
- Sicherheitskultur (240)
- Sozialwissenschaft Online (72)
- Stellenangebote (55)
- Strategie (12)
- Terrorismus (64)
- Theorie (5)
- Umwelt (1)
- Versicherheitlichung (23)
- Visualisierung (6)
- Whistleblowing (8)
- WikiLeaks (17)
- WMD (10)
- Zivilgesellschaft (67)

**Blogroll**

- Arbeitskreis soziale Bewegungen
- Augen geradaus
- Dan Drezner
- Dart-Throwing Chimp
- David Campbell