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„We need to rediscover our manliness...”: The Language of Gender and Authenticity in German Right-Wing Populism

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Abstract

This essay analyses the use of the term "gender madness" and "lost manliness" in the discourse of the right-wing populist Alternative für Deutschland (AFD). It draws on analyses of public statements, policy papers, manifestos and public speeches. It argues that the "gender" theme constitutes a discursive cluster that is used link otherwise eclectic policies. Furthermore, it is utilised to articulate certain folkish and ethno-nationalist ideas while at the same time helping to avoid open references to extremist language. By presenting itself as the custodian of traditional heterosexuality and family values the AFD creates yet another dimension of the populist dichotomy of "us" versus "them". This is underpinned by a sophisticated media strategy that seeks create an image of authenticity and immediacy between party and supporters. On the whole, the piece analyses and explains the central importance of "anti-genderism" in the discourse of the populist right in Germany.

Keywords: Germany, gender discourse, populism, far right, authenticity, nationalism, rhetoric, orality and speaking style

1. Introduction

Since its foundation in 2013, the populist right-wing Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany, AFD) has seen an almost unprecedented rise. Unlike other populist and far-right parties in Germany after 1945, the AFD has managed to establish a stable electoral base on the Länder-level and to enter the federal parliament, the Bundestag, for the first time in 2017 (Arzheimer 2017). The unprecedented rise of the AFD went hand in hand with significant shifts in the political discourse in Germany. The ideology of the AFD – if the term ‘ideology’ can be applied here at all – is an eclectic mix of different at times contradictory themes. It combines elements of Euroscepticism, historical revisionism, particularly with regards to the Nazi past, German nationalism, xenophobia and anti-Islam sentiments. In addition to these traditional themes of the far right in Germany, the AFD has also emphasised its role as the defender of traditional conservative values and has repeatedly denounced the allegedly subversive influences

of so-called ‘gender ideology’ and the alleged loss of manliness in politics. The attacks on ‘gender ideology’ and ‘gender madness’ feature prominently in speeches of leading AFD politicians and are a key element of the party’s political platform. Yet the significance of the gender theme goes beyond the mere ideological context. It has become a rhetorical device that is crucial to the ways the AFD communicates with its supporter base. Analysing the uses of terms, such as ‘gender madness’ (Genderwahnsinn), ‘gender ideology’, and ‘manliness’ makes it possible to understand the way right-wing populism in Germany operates. The alleged subversion of traditional gender roles by an overly permissive society, which is driven by left-wing academics and queer activists has become a trope that is used to link the different policies of the AFD. The rejection and public ridicule of LGBTQ+ issues, for instance, also serves to underpin the public image of the AFD as the authentic voice of those who dare to “speak up for the little man on the streets”, and who can no longer understand the debate on these issues. This clearly serves the purpose of creating an ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomy, in which the AFD presents itself as the authentic party of common sense in opposition to out-of-touch liberal elites. The themes of manliness and political virility are used in a way very similar to the deployment of “gender ideology”. Prominent AFD politicians, such as the leader of the party in the state of Thuringia, Björn Höcke, frequently emphasise the need to ‘rediscover our manliness’. On the other hand, this ‘rediscovery’ of political virility is presented as a necessity to physically defend Germany – often evoking the image of unprotected and helpless German girls and women – against the alleged invasion of male Muslim refugees. However, the tropes of ‘lost virility’ and the alleged effemination of German men are also used to denounce the alleged hegemony of left-wing educators and liberal elites, who are made responsible for this development. At the same time, the lack of a resolute German virility is contrasted with hypermasculinity and the alleged transgressive sexual behaviour of African and Muslim migrants. The focus on the alleged subversion of traditional gender norms speaks to a predominantly male supporter base. Despite some prominent female frontbenchers over 87 percent of the party’s 29,000-strong membership are male. Men were also more likely to vote for the AFD than women in the 2017 Bundestag elections. This gender imbalance has led some observers in Germany to describe the AFD as ‘a party of men for men’ (Münchener Merkur, 3 April 2019)¹.

The centrality of the gender theme, either as the rejection of ‘gender madness’ or as the call for a ‘rediscovered manliness’, has been recently been emphasised by scholars. Villa and Hark, for instance, have underlined the importance of “anti-genderism” ideology to create links between

¹ <https://www.merkur.de/politik/afd-als-partei-von-maennern-fuer-maenner-nur-haertesten-frauen-kommen-durch-zr-9635568.html> (last accessed 14 May 2019).

conservative groups and the far-right (Villa and Hark 2017). Kováts has highlighted the centrality of “anti-genderism” within right-wing populist movements in Europe yet also maintaining that it has to be understood a specific response to the rise of “identity politics” on the left (Kováts 2018). Against the backdrop of the rise of the Freedom Party in Austria in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Geden has analysed the representations of masculinity in Austrian right-wing populism along very similar lines (Geden 2005). Berg has emphasised the decidedly anti-feminist character of the gender discourse within the AFD (Berg 2019).

This essay will analyse the uses of the terms ‘gender madness’ (Genderwahnsinn) and ‘manliness’ (Männlichkeit) by the AFD. It will discuss how the theme is used to link disparate policies and create a coherent narrative and discursive cluster for the supporters of the party. For this purpose, representative examples from publicly available sources, such as speeches by AFD politicians, party publications, and party websites were analysed. Furthermore, this essay also discusses how the use of traditional and new media by the party is shaped by the ambition to present itself as the authentic voice of “ordinary” Germans. This discourse is embedded in a dichotomy of “us” versus “them”, which posits that the party is in the frontline against the alleged dominance of liberal elites in the public life. This is accompanied by a rejection of traditional media outlets and at the same time an extensive use of social media to interact with its supporter base in a direct, unfiltered way. On the whole, this essay will demonstrate the struggle against “gender ideology” is an essential element of the otherwise eclectic ideology of the AFD that links discourses of the far right with more established, traditionally conservative narratives.

2) “Gender Ideology” and the Threat to the German People

The salience of “gender ideology” for the AFD is highlighted in its political platform. The term features prominently in almost all policy fields yet with the most emphasis placed on schools, higher education and family policies. The manifesto for the 2017 federal elections defined the concept of “gender ideology” as follows:

- (1) “Gender-Ideology marginalises the natural differences between the sexes and questions gender identities. It wants to abolish the traditional family as a model for life and gender roles. This is in direct contradiction to the Basic Law, which protects the traditional marriage and family because they are the only ones that can produce the people (Staatsvolk) who are the ultimate bearers of sovereignty. Gender ideology contradicts scientific biological knowledge and developmental psychology as well as the practical experience of many generations.” (AFD Election Manifesto 2017, 40)

In another section of the election platform, the AFD rejects the alleged “early sexualisation” of school children because they are confronted with a “one-sided emphasis on homo- and transsexuality”, which would inhibit the “natural development of our children” (AFD Election Manifesto 2017, 41). Moreover, this form of “diversity sexual pedagogy” is allegedly enforced against the will of the parents and creates “insecurity, overwhelms their sexual identity and hurts their sense of shame”. In the eyes of the AFD this all amounts to a “state-sponsored re-education programme in our kindergartens and schools, which is designed to abolish the traditional family” (AFD Election Manifesto 2017, 41). Ultimately, the AFD demands that “our children must not become the pawns of the sexual orientations of a loud minority” (AFD Party Platform 2016, 55). In a similar tone, the party also calls for a cut to the funding of Gender Studies programmes and the abolition of equality officers in the universities. Yet the concern about the influence of “gender ideology” extends to the use of language itself. The party platform of 2016 demands to make an end to “gendered language” – a reference to the practice of using gender-neutral terms or the feminine version of nouns in contemporary German. The AFD presents this policy as part of their struggle against “politically correct language” (AFD Party Platform 2016, 55). Yet this is also example of the attempts of the party to present itself as the ones who uphold “common sense” as opposed to the “unnatural” and out-of-touch use of language by the elites.

The criticism of “gender ideology” operates on several levels and appeals to different anxieties yet also manages to link them effectively to one another. The emphasis on “our children”, for instance, is emotionally evocative. They are presented as the victims of a deliberate policy that is designed to promote non-heterosexual lifestyles. Behind this attempt to re-educate the population is a “loud” yet influential minority that is supported by the state. The language used to reject “gender ideology” explicitly implies certain tropes about homo- and transsexuality. For instance, the claim that educational programmes are not aimed at fostering tolerance and acceptance towards sexual diversity but that they constitute a deliberate attempt to “promote” these sexualities and subvert the “natural” sexual order. Likewise, the claim that the acceptance of non-heterosexual partnerships leads automatically to a decline of family life is designed to create a sense of threat. The reference to the traditional family as the foundation of the “Staatsvolk” also links the discourse about “gender ideology” to more general claims of a decay of the German state. More importantly, however, it also connects personal anxieties with more general ideological themes.

The appeal here is a personal one to those who are often referred to as “normal” or “ordinary” people. Normality in this context implies the dominance of heterosexual marriages with the aim of producing children. This normality is represented as being under threat by liberal left-wing

educators in schools and universities yet also by state policies. The traditional family and with it those “ordinary Germans” living within them are presented as being under siege from all sides. The scenario created here evokes notions of threat and allows the AFD to present itself as the guardian and protector of “ordinary Germans” against unchecked liberal elites. The reference to homo- and transsexuals as “a loud minority” implies that the AFD represents the views of the “silent majority”. The creation of a dichotomy between the “silent majority” and out-of-touch liberal elites is, of course, a key element of modern populism (Stavrakis et al. 2017). However, the AFD extends this language game by referring to more fundamental categories, such as “Staats-Volk” – a deliberately ambiguous term referring to both racial and political notions of what can only be imperfectly translated into English as the “nation” or the “people”. Against this backdrop, the traditional heterosexual family of husband, wife, and children is not only presented as the basic unit of society but as the foundation of the German “Volk” and its biological reproduction. Without explicitly stating it, the AFD platform links the appeal to individual anxieties with more general racial and folkish positions. This was made explicit in a 2015 resolution passed by the Baden-Württemberg section of the party. In its final point it stated:

- (2) “Gender ideology, which is directed against human nature, has a negative impact on the biggest challenge for our demographic policy in Germany, namely to increase the birth rate.” (Resolution AFD Baden-Württemberg)²

Ultimately, the preservation of the traditional family unit is presented as a necessary means of ensuring the survival of the German “Volk” in a racial sense. This concern for birth rates is also reflected in the demand to “stop the trivialisation of abortions, to promote them by the state or to even declare them to be a ‘human right’” (Resolution AFD Baden-Württemberg). Yet again the reference to the alleged permissive and liberal mainstream serves to construct a sense of threat, linking personal anxieties and political emotions with broader political narratives. The criticism of “gender ideology” is often presented as part of a wider state-sponsored policy of a “great replacement”. The idea that elusive elites enforce replacement of the – racially defined – German people by a new docile migrant population is wide-spread in far-right circles in Europe and beyond (*New York Times*, 18 March 2019)³. In this context, the promotion of “gender ideology” is regarded as part of a secret conspiracy to suppress the birth rate of ethnic Germans, who will eventually become a minority themselves that will be replaced by migrants from predominantly Muslim countries. The chairman of the party, Alexander Gauland, explicitly referred

² <https://afd-bw.de/partei/resolutionen/gender-mainstream> (last accessed 15 May 2019).

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/18/technology/replacement-theory.html> (last accessed 15 May 2019).

to this conspiracy theory when he declared in 2017 that the planned family reunifications for refugees would mean that:

- (3) “The population replacement [Bevölkerungsaustausch] in Germany is at full-speed run. The anti-German [deutschfeindlichen] Green Party want to speed it up even further.” (Press Statement Alexander Gauland, 5 April 2017)⁴

The use of terms, such as “population exchange” or the synonymously used “Umvolkung” as well as “deutschfeindlich”, are clear references to terms used during the Nazi regime. The concept of a deliberate policy of a “Great Replacement” has become an important element of the far-right discourse in Europe and the United States since the mid-1990s. In August 2017, white nationalists chanted “You will not replace us!” at “Unite the Right” Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia (BBC News, 12 August 2017).⁵ In March 2019, the perpetrator of a terrorist attack on different mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, in which 50 people were killed, justified his atrocity in a manifesto by referring to the “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory (Önnerfors 2019). The fact, however, that the use of these phrases is not limited to the violent extreme fringes of the far right but are also used by prominent right-wing populists is important to note. They provide a discursive link between street activists, violent extremists and politicians who try to maintain a respectable appearance. In the case of the AFD, the self-proclaimed struggle against the threat of “gender ideology” for the existence of the German people is supplemented with references to the alleged “great replacement” by migrants. In this way the AFD combines tropes of the far right with more mainstream elements of right-wing populism. However, by emphasising the concern for traditional values and gender norms, it is easier to speak to and reach a traditional conservative clientele that would otherwise be alienated by all-too open references to neo-Nazi rhetoric. At the same time, however, the obvious and often only thinly veiled reference to far-right conspiracy theories also appeal to the extremist fringes of German politics.

Yet, the focus on the gender theme is not only crucial to link up different aspects of the otherwise rather eclectic ideology of the populist and far right. For the AFD it also represents a tactical element of their public appearance. Since the foundation of the Federal Republic in 1949, German party legislation has provided comparatively robust provisions to deal with extremist parties and incendiary propaganda. If a party is identified as extremist and with the aim to “abolish liberal-democratic foundations of the state” (freiheitlich-demokratische Grundordnung),

⁴ <https://www.afd.de/alexander-gauland-erschreckende-zahlen-der-bevoelkerungsaustausch-laeuft/> (last accessed 15 May 2019).

⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-asia-40911744/white-us-nationalists-chant-you-will-not-replace-us> (last accessed 15 May 2019).

it can be placed under surveillance by the domestic intelligence agency Verfassungsschutz and rare cases banned all together (Minkenberg 2006). The evidence for proceedings against a political party, which enjoy special protections in the German constitution, is usually taken from public statements and information gathered by intelligence agencies. This a key reason why the careful use of certain terms and phrases as well as the dog-whistle references to conspiracy theories, such as the “Great Replacement” matter to the AFD. An internal study commissioned by the AFD itself found in October 2018 that the language used by the party would justify its surveillance by the security agencies (Legal Opinion Professor Dieter Murswiek, 22 October 2018).⁶ It argued that some of the public statements of the party were openly promoting a “system change”, attacked democratic institutions and incited hatred against migrants from Muslim countries. Particularly the use of terms, such as “Umvolkung”, “Volkstod” (death of the German volk), and “Great Replacement” alongside the representation of migrants as “invaders” would provide the authorities with evidence of the extremist character of the party (Legal Opinion Professor Dieter Murswiek, 22 October 2018). They evoke clear associations with the language used by the Nazis in the 1920s and 1930s. To avoid any accusations of being a neo-fascist party with extremist aims, activists should avoid using such terms at all. This was confirmed in a 436-page report in January 2019 by the Verfassungsschutz in which parts of the party, especially its youth wing “Junge Alternative”, were classified as potentially extremist and therefore subject to potential surveillance by the authorities (Review of the AFD Activities by the Verfassungsschutz, 15 January 2019).⁷ This underlined the importance of the gender theme for the party as it allows it to promote essentially folkish and anti-immigration positions yet without falling into the trap of making all-too obvious references to historically fraught terms that were already used by the Nazis. This also needs to be considered as a deliberate strategy of the party designed to avoid surveillance by the domestic intelligence agencies.

The threat of surveillance might also have contributed to certain openings in the gender discourse. For instance, Alice Weidel, one of the leaders of the AFD in the Bundestag, openly identifies as lesbian and lives in a same-sex partnership. This fact is often used to deflect criticism of the anti-LGBT+ policies of the party. During the 2016 elections to state legislature in the traditional left-leaning city of Berlin, the AFD tried to present itself as the protector of LGBT+ rights against the alleged influx of homophobic Muslim migrants. Kim sees these examples as signs of “partial openings” in right-wing discourse that move away from rather traditional ethno-

⁶ https://netzpolitik.org/2018/wir-veroeffentlichen-wie-sich-die-afd-ihre-eigene-verfassungsfeindlichkeit-bescheinigen-laesst/#2018-10-23_AfD-Gutachten-Beobachtung-Verfassungsschutz (last accessed 15 May 2019).

⁷ https://netzpolitik.org/2019/wir-veroeffentlichen-das-verfassungsschutz-gutachten-zur-afd/#2019-01-15_BfV-AfD-Gutachten_A (last accessed 15 May 2019).

nationalist, folkish ideology (Kim 2017, 8-9). However, despite the pressure to tone down the folkish rhetoric there have been no significant moves within the party to significantly change the party platform and policies. Instead, a more calculated use of language dominates the public appearances of AFD activists. Against this backdrop, the attacks against “gender ideology” and the defence of the traditional family model are a convenient discursive vehicle which helps to avoid allegations of openly promoting traditional far-right ideology while maintaining core political positions.

3) “Lost Manliness” and Anti-Immigration Rhetoric

The attacks on “gender ideology” are frequently supplemented by references to the “lost manliness” and the suppressed virility of German and European men in general. Just like the alleged state-sponsored promotion of non-heterosexual partnerships purportedly leads to falling birth rates and population decline, the suppression of traditional masculinity would make Germans defenceless victims of mass migration. The allegedly unreformed and aggressive masculinity of migrants from Muslim countries is juxtaposed to the “lost virility” of German men who have been re-educated by left-wing educators and liberal elites. Since the migrant crisis of 2015, a number of high-profile cases of sexual assaults by migrants, such as the group assaults on women on New Year’s Eve 2016 in Cologne and murder of a 15-years old German girl by her ex-boyfriend in the small town of Kandel in 2017 have become focal points in this discourse. Yet again, the lament about the ‘lost manliness’ is not merely a reaction to current events but deeply rooted in certain ideas, such as the “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory or ethno-nationalist conceptions of a German “volk”. The call to rediscover the “lost masculinity” is intrinsically linked to a vision of society in which men are again defined by their “heroic virility” that signifies action and a passive femininity that is in need of male protection.

A speech delivered in October 2018 by the prominent leader of the AFD in the Thuringian state parliament, Björn Höcke, encapsulates this view of society. The use and linking of the terms “masculinity” (Männlichkeit), “resolute” (mannhaft) and “able to defend ourselves” (wehrhaft) at the beginning of the speech is quite instructive:

- (4) “(...) I love my Volk! Dear Friends, do you know what the big problem is? The big problem is that Germany – that Europe – have lost their masculinity. I say: We need to rediscover our masculinity, because only if we rediscover our masculinity, we will be resolute. And only when we are resolute, we

will be able to defend ourselves. And we need to become able to defend ourselves, my friends!”
(Speech by Björn Höcke in Erfurt, 18 November 2015)⁸

The rather simple syntax presents an almost formalistic logical progression from masculinity to resoluteness and to the ability to defend oneself. In the following sentences, Höcke makes unequivocally clear against which threat German men need to defend their volk:

“Paris has become the European capital of terrorism.” After this statement follows a list of terrorist attacks in Europe only to conclude:

- (5) “(...) These are the consequences of a decades-long, failed immigration and asylum policy, dear friends. More than ever before our demand is justified (...) that immigration to Europe must be stopped immediately.” (Speech by Björn Höcke in Erfurt, 18 November 2015)

Terrorist attacks in European cities are presented as the direct result of immigration. This in turn is framed as a result of the lack resolute responses of the European men, and indeed the German state, to protect people and territory. Höcke moves on to repeatedly refer to the alleged “decay of the state” (Staatszerfall) in Germany and the alleged inactivity of the authorities in tackling illegal migration. Höcke seeks to link the feeling of male disempowerment with the alleged inaction and impotence of the German state.

The same state – run by liberal elites – which is elsewhere described as promoting a “gender ideology” designed to weaken traditional gender roles and masculinity. Later in the speech, Höcke claims:

- (6) “Those responsible try to cover up their inactivity with appeasement slogans. But words are words and deeds are deeds!” (Speech by Björn Höcke in Erfurt, 18 November 2015)

Yet Höcke presents a clear solution to the decay of the state:

- (7) “The AFD is the only serious political force that speaks about this problem and fights for the preservation of our state.” (Speech by Björn Höcke in Erfurt, 18 November 2015)

Shifting the focus of his speech yet again slightly, Höcke starts to berate the political elites, particularly chancellor Angela Merkel and the social-democratic Foreign Minister Heiko Maas. He does this only to emphasise that he is speaking for the “people”, which the audience responds to with chants of “We are the people/volk!”. In this part of this speech Höcke eventually evokes the established “us the people” versus “them”, the government and liberal elites. The AFD is presented as the guardian of the German volk:

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=enUBcTp3njik> (last accessed 15 May 2019).

- (8) “We must protect our country; we must protect our state and we must protect our Volk against the policies of the established parties! And this is mainly the task of the AFD!” (Speech by Björn Höcke in Erfurt, 18 November 2015)

At a later point in the speech Höcke refers to the party as the “last opportunity for peaceful change” – a thinly veiled threat of violence. Yet more importantly the speech ends on a familiar note:

- (9) “(...) Germany is not a laboratory for societal experiments. We reject irresponsible experiments with and on our Volk. Only ideologues believe that society can function without family, or that everyone becomes a German as soon as he crossed the border. To those dangerous ideologues who want to create a multicultural society and abolish the traditional family, we issue a clear rejection.” (Speech by Björn Höcke in Erfurt, 18 November 2015)

This speech is instructive in helping to understand the careful use of language by leading AFD politicians. Superficially, Höcke jumps between different topics without spelling out explicitly what connects them. The lament about the “lost manliness” is followed up by references to terrorist attacks only to then focus on the “decay” of the German state and Chancellor Merkel. At this point the initial statement about lost masculinity becomes a crucial point as it frames the rest of the speech. Masculinity is presented as the necessary condition for the resolute defence of Volk and State. In many ways it is depicted as the anti-thesis to the effeminate liberal-democratic order that is blamed for the current state of affairs. The individual fear of effemination is equated to the impotence of the state in protecting its citizens against the alleged threat of mass immigration.

This call for a rediscovery of an allegedly lost virility is, of course, nothing new in the discourse of the far right. It can be traced back at least to the 1920s. The identification of liberal democracy with decay on the state-level together with that of the individual male body was a trope that fascist movements evoked frequently in the interwar years (Mosse 1996, 77-106). These implicit references to far-right tropes are no mere coincidence. As a trained historian, who frequently refers to proponents of the “Conservative Revolution” of the 1920s, Höcke is certainly well aware of these connotations. Yet they are abstract enough to avoid any allegations of all-too open promotion of far-right extremism.

The issue of masculinity is, however, also important in another context. At least since the refugee crisis of 2014/15, migrants from Africa and Middle East, particularly those from Muslim countries, are presented as sexual predators. They are presented as examples of an aggressive, archaic type of unreformed masculinity that preys on German girls and women. There have, indeed, been high-profile cases of sexual assaults by migrants, such as the attacks in Cologne on

New Year's Eve 2016 or the murder of a 15-year old girl by an Afghan refugee in the town of Kandel. Nonetheless, official crime statistics indicate no significant increase of such offences committed by refugees (*The Times*, 8 May 2018).⁹ Nonetheless, they have become a key element in far-right demonstrations. At demonstrations, for instance, placards and t-shirts with the slogan "RAPEfugees not welcome" have featured prominently since 2016. The image of refugees as aggressive, violent sexual predators has become an established trope in the political communication of the AFD as well. During the 2019 European election campaign, the Berlin branch of the AFD used a 19th-century painting of the French artist Jean-Léon Gérôme, which depicts an orientalisating scene of a slave market. A naked white woman is inspected by a potential buyer in a traditional Arabic dress. The AFD used this scene to illustrate its campaign slogan "So that Europe won't become 'Eurabia'! Europeans vote for the AFD!" („Damit aus Europa kein 'Eurabien' wird! Europäer wählen AFD!“) (Deutsche Welle, 24 April 2019).¹⁰ Here again the notion of white German women as potential prey for allegedly predatory migrants is the key message of the placard. It suggests that a vote for the AFD is a vote to defend women and girls against the nebulous threat of predatory migrants. Supporting the party, so the more sublime message goes, is yet another way to reclaim the "lost manliness".

The use of the "lost masculinity" trope underlines the centrality of the gender theme for the AFD. While "gender ideology" is a shorthand for far-right debates about national decline, including the conspiracy theories surrounding the alleged "Great Replacement" of the German people. The call to rediscover a form of heroic masculinity in what some have dubbed the "post-heroic age" compliments this discourse. It suggests agency and defiance on the part of the AFD supporters. Yet more importantly it is also embedded in a wider discourse about reclaiming and saving the country from the alleged threats of mass immigration and liberal elitism. This is a narrative designed to appeal primarily to a male audience. It links agency to masculinity and presents women as merely passive bystanders, who feature mainly as the victims of sexually aggressive migrants.

The equation of the decline of masculinity with the decline of the nation that Höcke evoked in his speech is a constituent element of far-right discourses since the nineteenth century. Activists such as Höcke are using these established tropes to frame the current situation in Germany and thereby to revive the language of the far right. The discussion about "lost masculinity" is another

⁹ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/german-crime-rate-fall-despite-rapefugee-fears-n6xxjlb7> (last accessed 15 May 2019).

¹⁰ <https://www.dw.com/en/afd-in-hot-water-with-us-museum-over-campaign-billboard/a-48508555> (last accessed 15 May 2019).

example of the attempt to evoke tropes of the far right without – at least in the German context – sounding like the traditional extreme right.

4) Scandal, Experience and Direct Appeal: The Communication Strategy of the AFD

In order to gauge the impact of the AFD's struggle against "gender ideology" on the political culture in Germany, it is also necessary to analyse how the party communicates these themes and ideas to the public. Like other populist parties, the AFD combines the sharp criticism of traditional media outlets with attempts to create a direct, authentic connection to its supporter base. The authenticity of direct appeal is a crucial part of this communication strategy. AFD politicians are most active on various social media platforms where they can address their supporters directly. A recent study has highlighted that more than 47% of all political content in the German social media sphere either originates from or relates to the AFD (Tagesschau, 8 May 2019).¹¹ The party has considerable presence on Twitter, yet it is primarily Facebook where the party creates most of its digital interactions with followers. This might be a reflection of the changing age structure of the users of both platforms. In addition to the national level, local and regional AFD-branches also maintain their own accounts. The party follows a strategy of high-frequency postings, combining party propaganda, news items and personal statements of politicians (Tagesspiegel, 2 April 2019).¹² The aim of this interaction with supporters on social media is to create the impression of immediacy and authenticity. An AFD parliamentarian openly admitted that "our followers want to see our point of view directly and unadulterated. They want to experience the AFD themselves." (The Local, 9 November 2018).¹³ Social media are not only utilised for the targeted transmission of information but to create emotional experiences for the readers. Consequently, the relationship between supporters and the AFD is described by activists as more committed and intense than in other political parties, or as one activist put it "We don't just have voters, we have fans" (The Local, 9 November 2018).

Public gatherings and demonstrations fulfil a very similar function. They are often chosen to mark certain political occasions or to show presence in specific localities, for instance after spectacular crimes have been committed by migrants. Many of these events are organised

¹¹ <https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/ndr-wdr/europawahl-soziale-medien-101.html> (last accessed 15 May 2019).

¹² <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/kleine-parteien-grosse-wirkung-rechtspopulisten-dominieren-politische-diskurse-auf-social-media-plattformen/24170746.html> (last accessed 15 May 2019).

¹³ <https://www.thelocal.de/20181109/we-dont-just-have-voters-we-have-fans-behind-the-scenes-of-the-afd> (last accessed 15 May 2019).

nationally and supporters are ferried in from all over the country. A prime example was a demonstration in the Saxon city of Chemnitz on 1 September 2019. After a German man was stabbed by two Asylum seekers – the exact circumstances are still unclear – the AFD state branches of Brandenburg, Thuringia and Saxony together with PEGIDA called for a “Silent March” to commemorate the “victims of illegal migration policies” (*Der Spiegel* 1 September 2018).¹⁴ The march attracted a diverse crowd, including local citizens but also neo-Nazi hooligans from the local football club. Most marches of the AFD attract considerable counter-protests, which leads to a significant and visible presence of riot police on the streets. The fact of being surrounded by protestors and police does, however, often create a feeling of being besieged among participants. This represents yet another instance of authentic personal experiences that correspond and reinforce the political meta-narrative of being under constant threat by leftists and liberal elites. These are occasions where the predominantly male supporters of the party can directly experience a sense of reclaimed “heroic” masculinity by marching through a hostile environment of counter-protesters and police. The purpose of organising marches is less political advertisement to a wider audience but more to emotionally underpin the political narratives of the party. This also explains why prominent activists, such as Björn Höcke, place so much emphasis on public speeches and marches, often in the face of noisy opposition. The speeches are themselves stage performances of the kind of political masculinity that Höcke frequently evokes. Likewise, they create an air of authenticity and immediacy that reinforces the direct appeal to the listeners.

Despite the attempts to create its own public sphere on social media and at marches, the AFD nonetheless heavily relies on established media outlets, particularly the state broadcasters and the press, to communicate its messages beyond the hard core of its supporter base. Party leaders and activists feature regularly in political panel shows and newspaper reports, more than representatives of other parties with comparable electoral support. One reason for this prominence in the media might be the deliberate strategy to create attention through calculated scandals. The use of incendiary language is a key element of this strategy. In June 2018, for instance, the chairman of the party, Alexander Gauland, declared that the period between 1933 and 1945 was “nothing but a fly’s shit in 1000 year of successful German history” (*Die Zeit*, 3 June 2019).¹⁵ This represented a well-calculated attack on the political consensus of the Federal Republic that defined itself in contrast to the Nazi past. Gauland’s speech was widely reported in

¹⁴ <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/chemnitz-afd-pegida-und-pro-chemnitz-schliessen-sich-bei-demo-zusammen-a-1226122.html> (last accessed 15 May 2019).

¹⁵ <https://www.zeit.de/news/2018-06/03/empowerung-wegen-gaulands-relativierung-der-ns-zeit-180603-99-560879> (last accessed 15 May 2019).

the German media often accompanied by expressions of outrage. This outrage is, however, part of the media strategy of the party to create publicity through calculated media scandals. Yet the use of certain phrases and terms also opens up the political discourse to the right. Statements that would have been considered as markers of extremism are now increasingly normalised and made acceptable.

The “gender ideology” theme is used in similar ways to provoke outrage in the media. A good example is a speech by Beatrix von Storch in the Bundestag on 11 October 2018 in debate about the introduction of a third gender into German law. In it von Storch attacked the “madness of gender ideologues”, who allegedly promoted the idea “that you can freely choose your gender” (Bundestag Speech Beatrix von Storch, 11 October 2018).¹⁶ The most controversial and inflammatory bit was, however, the following statement: “(...) that you can be a man in the morning, a woman in the evening, and something completely else at full moon” (Bundestag Speech Beatrix von Storch, 11 October 2018). An otherwise unremarkable speech that yet again referred to the alleged “conspiracy” of government and liberal to destroy the traditional family through “gender ideology” was now widely reported in the media. Von Storch herself uploaded the video of the speech to her official YouTube channel, which expanded its reach even further. It is also an example of the hybrid communication strategy of the party. This involves issuing potentially scandalous statements, which are then reported in soundbites by the news media, which then in turn creates even more attention for the social media channels of the party. The tendency by the German media to scandalise statements by prominent AFD politicians, such as those by von Storch or Gauland creates additional attention and at the same time reinforcing the notion of the AFD as an authentic voice of “ordinary Germans” (Gäbler 2018).

Despite the omnipresence of the AFD in traditional media outlets, many party activists and supporters nonetheless complain about hostile reporting about the party and misrepresentations in the media. The terms “system media” as well as “lying press” (Lügenpresse) are regularly used in this context. One charge levelled frequently against the press is that certain development is kept quiet and that crimes committed by migrants, particularly reports about sexual assaults, are swept under the carpet. The AFD uses its own social media presence to act as a form of counter-press. The party regularly reports about alleged attacks on German women, mainly on its Facebook pages. This is often the result of the initiative of local party activists, who often claim to have contacts in the community and access to information the press would refuse to cover. This feeds into the narrative of authenticity and immediacy that dominates the official communication of the AFD. However, this claim to authenticity and immediacy also blurs the

¹⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=vP0V8lgZ_vk (last accessed 15 May 2019).

line between established fact and deliberate misinformation. A case in point for this deliberate use of misinformation is an AFD-politician in the Saxon city of Chemnitz who claimed that within only a few months dozens of women were raped by migrants: “the police says 56 by migrants, 4 unknown” (*Der Westen*, 6 September 2019).¹⁷ These numbers were published at the same time the city was swept by demonstrations in the wake of the killing of a German man in the city. Although there was no evidence provided for these numbers, the claim to local knowledge by the party activist and the alleged suppression of the information by the press were presented as markers of authenticity. Days later the Saxon State Police sought to correct the information by publishing the official crime statistics for Chemnitz, which showed that only 14 cases had been reported, 12 suspects were investigated and only three of these were not German citizens (*Der Westen*, 6 September 2019).

5) Conclusion

The discourse around “gender ideology” and “lost manliness”, which have been discussed in this essay, are a crucial element of right-wing populism in Germany. The theme features prominently in speeches by AFD politicians but also in the party platform and election manifestos. An explanation for this prominence must take into account the different discursive functions of the topic. The charge against “gender ideology” is always also an attack against feminism and the implementation of feminist policies by the German state, such as the use of gender-sensitive language or reproductive rights. Yet while this is a well-established battleground of conservative politics, its function goes beyond articulating anti-feminist positions. As we have seen, the “anti-genderism” has become a discursive cluster that incorporates bigger ideological themes, such as folkish conceptions of the German nation, concerns of cultural and political decay as well as threats to the biological reproduction of the German people. At same time references to the gender discourse also reinforce xenophobic ideas, such as the “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory. Attacks on “gender ideology” are in some ways used a discursive “bracket” to communicate otherwise disparate discourses. Yet, the centrality of the gender theme in the public communication of the party can also be explained by the pressure on the party to avoid surveillance by German domestic intelligence agencies. As we have seen, the talk about “gender madness” is a convenient way to articulate essentially folkish positions while avoiding to openly articulate clearly extremist positions. The “gender” language game only functions so well for the party because it is embedded in a hybrid media landscape. The party combines an omnipresence

¹⁷ <https://www.derwesten.de/politik/nach-ausschreitungen-in-chemnitz-polizei-sachsen-stellt-fake-news-von-afd-richtig-id215271835.html> (6 September 2019).

in traditional media outlets with extensive use of social media. Unlike any other German party, the AFD is able to convert social media activity into attention into the traditional media.

What combines both the ideological attacks on “gender ideology” and the mastery of a new, hybrid media landscape is the attempt to present the AFD as the authentic voice of “ordinary Germans”. The party fashions itself as an insurgent anti-politics force that dares “to speak out what everybody thinks”. This quest for authenticity is essential for the appeal of modern populism, which is built on notions of “us” and “them”. The rejection of “out-of-touch” liberal elites goes hand in hand with a direct – at times simplistic – use of language. Overall, they are important elements of right-wing identity politics, in which “anti-genderism” provides the foundation for an ultimately eclectic set of policies and beliefs.

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