Two Paradigmatic Views on Right-Wing Populism in East Germany

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Abstract: In German public perceptions, right-wing populism is cast as a specifically east German problem. This article critically examines how this assumption is located within the debate on German unity. In order to clarify the sometimes-confusing arguments on German unification, two paradigmatic perspectives can be identified: German unity can be approached from a perspective of modernization, or through the lens of postcolonial critique. When it comes to right-wing populism in eastern Germany, the modernization paradigm suffers from a lack of understanding. Hence, the arguments of the postcolonial perspective must be taken seriously, particularly as the postcolonial reading can grasp the complex phenomenon of right-wing populism in east Germany, and prevent the discursive and geographic space of the region from being conquered by right-wing political actors.

Keywords: Alternative for Germany (AfD), east Germany, German unity, modernization, postcolonial theory, right-wing populism

Introduction

In the 2019 election campaign for the Landtag (state parliament) of Brandenburg, the radical right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD) provoked the electorate with slogans like “we are the people!” (Wir sind das Volk) or “peaceful revolution with the ballot” (Friedliche Revolution mit dem Stimmzettel). By doing so, the AfD drew parallels between 1989’s peaceful revolution and Germany’s current political situation. This questionable campaign was apparently effective, as the AfD gained 23.5 percent of the votes and became the second strongest party in that federal state. In 2019, with 23.4 percent in Thuringia and with 27.5 percent in Saxony the AfD became the second strongest party in two more state parliaments.

During the last few years, the AfD has developed into one of Germany’s major political actors, particularly in the east. The last elections for both the
Bundestag in 2017 and the European Parliament in 2019 revealed significant differences in the voting behavior of eastern and western Germans. In all eastern federal states, the AfD achieved results that were well above the national average, with mostly below-average voter turnout (see Table 1).

Table 1: Recent AfD Election Results

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<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% AfD</td>
<td>% voter turnout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German average</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>76.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saxony</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>75.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saxony-Anhalt</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>68.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thuringia</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>74.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brandenburg</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>73.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mecklenburg-West Pomerania</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>70.9</td>
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Almost thirty years after unification, elections are showing that eastern Germany is more susceptible to right-wing populist tendencies and right-wing extremism than the west. It even looks as though right-wing populism is a specific eastern German problem and hence related to German unity. The public, political, and scientific debate on the German unification process and its consequences is diverse and, overall, rather ambiguous. Official documents like the annual Reports on the State of the German Unity detect both democratic progress and problems with political right-wing tendencies in the east. Some social scientists identify differences of political culture between east and west, whereas others critically examine pejorative stereotypes of east Germans.

In political science as well as in public perceptions, a key question needs to be answered: Is there a link between the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), the transition period starting with the peaceful revolution of 1989, and the current political landscape of east Germany?

In this article, I critically examine how the assumption of a right-wing east Germany is, in fact, located within the wider debate on German unity. In order to clarify any contradictory arguments, I suggest that the debate about the process and evolution of German unification is mainly shaped by two different paradigmatic perspectives. On the one hand, it can be regarded from a modernization lens, and second, through a postcolonial critical perspective. Based on the debated explanations for the AfD’s success in east Germany, I develop these two frameworks, as well as explor-
ing their implications for understanding the German unification process and its consequences.

Under the conditions of the Cold War, each year German unity seemed increasingly unlikely, if not impossible. Therefore, German society, politics, and the social sciences were quite unprepared and generally surprised by the peaceful revolution when it occurred over several months in the late summer and fall of 1989. Soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall, which marked regime change in the East, however, the events came to be seen as chance for Germany. They opened up an opportunity for the divided German society in the East and the West to unite, as well as for social scientists to observe the processes of political and economic transformation under near-laboratory or quasi-experimental conditions.¹⁰

Modernization

Following assumptions of what Francis Fukuyama has deemed the “end of history,”¹¹ the liberal “one world consensus,”¹² consisting of liberal democracy and a market-based economic system, was expected to be established worldwide after 1989. The end of the Cold War supposedly proved that liberal democracy has “conquered rival ideologies”¹³ like communism or socialism.

In the case of Germany, the western Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) ended up as the political and economic winner from the Cold War, while the eastern GDR disappeared as a result of the 1989 upheaval. The German Unification Treaty formally marked the accession of the five newly reconstructed eastern federal states into the scope of German Basic Law (Grundgesetz) on 3 October 1990.¹⁴ Despite calls from many quarters, discussions about a completely new constitution attained low interest in both east and west Germany.¹⁵ The monetary union and the transformation of the east German economy by the established Treuhandanstalt (trust agency tasked with rapidly privatizing and selling off state-owned assets) preceded in the summer of that year.¹⁶

Although it started as an experiment, from the beginning it was quite clear how German unification would be expected to proceed: the former politically socialist-authoritarian and economically centrally planned East Germany had to reach West German standards. The FRG with its democratic political institutions and well-functioning economy—incidentally, highly respected worldwide—served as role model that had to be established in the former GDR. Accordingly, the philosopher Jürgen Habermas declared the peaceful revolution to be a “catch-up revolution” (Nachholende Revolution).¹⁷
The resultant processes of economic, institutional, and social modernization of the east German federal states took place within this framework of modernization. Newly united Germany thus mostly represents a continuation of the FRG’s specifically western history, accompanied by the assumption that the eastern German federal states—often referred to as the “new states” (neue Länder) even decades later—would align themselves to the standard of West Germany through a process of modernization and democratization.

**East German Deficits**

Almost thirty years after unity, east Germany is still catching up. The process of modernization and democratization is incomplete, as the official annual Reports on the State of the German Unity regularly indicate economic and political differences between the two regions. Inequality between East and West can be illustrated by various socioeconomic factors like the unemployment rate or the gross domestic product (GDP). Eastern German per capita GDP in 2017, for instance, was some 26 percent lower than the average west German figure. Coeval unemployment was also rather higher at 7.6 percent in the east and 5.3 percent in the west. Hence, the process of economic modernization initiated and enforced by the Treuhandanstalt has only been partially successful.

Similarly, the process of democratization remains incomplete. Although the autocratic regime of the GDR was quickly replaced by liberal democratic political institutions based on the German Basic Law, average east German citizens differ politically in their voting decisions, party preferences, and political behavior from their western counterparts. The success of the AfD particularly in east Germany illustrates these inner German asymmetries. Indeed, Eastern Germany seems to have a serious problem with political right-wing tendencies, as revealed in a 2018 survey on political attitudes that clearly show higher rates of manifest xenophobic mindsets in east Germany (30.9 percent) than in west Germany (22.3 percent). Likewise, beliefs such as social Darwinism (east: 15.1 percent; west: 8.5 percent) are more pronounced in East than in West Germany, as is the representation of ethnic prejudices and skeptical views against foreigners and migrants. Muslims are judged particularly negatively: in 2019, 57 percent of east Germans regarded Islam as a threat (versus 50 percent in the west), and 20 percent are in favor of completely banning Muslim immigration (11 percent in the west). In the same year, 30.3 percent of east Germans tended towards right-wing populism, whereas just 19.6 percent of west Germans did. In 2018, only 46.9 percent in the east were satisfied with the way democracy works in today’s Germany (54.9 percent in the west); 7 percent of east Ger-
mans even were in favor of a right-wing authoritarian dictatorship (2.7 percent in the west).²⁸

Statistics and survey research are clearly identifying economic and political differences between east and west Germany. The higher occurrence of ethnic prejudices and lower satisfaction with democracy is interpreted as a disparity in democratic culture.²⁹ According to the modernization paradigm postulating that easterners should “catch up” to the levels of the west, east Germany has clearly not yet reached a west German standard and seems to have a serious problem with radical right-wing populism. Hence, the process of unification as modernization still is incomplete.

Explanations and Problems

The recent success of the AfD in the eastern region strongly suggests a path linking the GDR’s past, the 1989 upheavals, the transition process, and the current political situation. Through the lens of the modernization paradigm, mainly two causal factors explain the supposed connection. The first relates to the continuance of authoritarian and antidemocratic attitudes and norms that can be traced back to authoritarian structures in the socialist GDR. Some even hold “socialist parenting” responsible for higher tendencies towards right-wing populism and lower levels of political participation. East Germans still need more time to learn how to fully participate as mature and democratic citizens.³⁰ The second hypothesis assumes that the socioeconomic losers from modernization (Wendeverlierer) are more likely to support populist parties. According to this hypothesis, the process of economic transformation enforced by the Treuhandanstalt, is held responsible for areas in east Germany that have been left behind, struggling with lower GDP, high unemployment, lack of career perspectives, and demographic change. Hence, the strength of populism there and even the higher occurrence of right-wing extremism seem self-evident.³¹

From a modernization perspective, the success of right-wing populists and the different democratic culture in east Germany is explained either by socialization or the socioeconomic situation. Both assumptions imply a still-incomplete process of political and economic modernization. Unfortunately, both simplifying hypotheses have already been proved faulty, or at least incomplete. It is simply not possible to prove a significant influence of the defunct GDR on current political attitudes such as authoritarianism via quantitative methods.³² The link between socialization in the former GDR and right-wing populism is rather theoretical than empirical. Furthermore, analyses of AfD voters show that the poor economic situation has no significant influence on their voting behavior. The simplifying hypothesis of the
east German socioeconomic loser from modernization as an AfD voter is incorrect and needs to be adjusted.\textsuperscript{33}

Factors like contact to foreigners, feelings of relative deprivation, and the effects of globalization, must all be taken into account to explain right-wing populism.\textsuperscript{34} Since populism, as well as its explanatory factors, can be found in west Germany and worldwide, right-wing populism cannot be regarded as exclusively an east German problem. Similarly, as extremist attitudes are measurable in the populations of both east and west Germany, extremism is not a specific Eastern phenomenon.\textsuperscript{35} Thus, differences in political culture have to be considered at the regional or even local level, rather than within the larger east-west cleavage.\textsuperscript{36} Nevertheless, since the explanatory factors behind populism and extremism occur with a higher density in east German regions, there still appears to be some sort of hidden connection between the post 1989 transformation process and the current political landscape of the east.

From the perspective of the modernization paradigm, mixed conclusions can be drawn after almost thirty years of German unity. On the one hand, the economic and political-institutional restructuring of east Germany was successfully completed, but, on the other hand, differences between east and west Germany remain evident in statistics, survey research, and election results. East Germany has not yet reached the level of the west German role model—despite the sums invested and the decades of experience with the western system. On the contrary, it seems to have a serious problem with populism and right-wing political tendencies. Since the most likely hypotheses concerning the origins of these phenomena do not work, the modernization paradigm is ineffective as an over-arching explanation. It reveals a lack of understanding regarding the posited connection between east German peculiarities and the current success of the radical right-wing populist AfD in this region.

**Postcolonial Critique**

In order to achieve a more nuanced and differentiated understanding of right-wing populist success in east Germany, a fundamental change of perspective is necessary. As argued above, the main criticism of the modernization paradigm concerns the belief that the former FRG is a role model to which eastern Germans must adapt.\textsuperscript{37} Indeed, in his analysis of the 1989 upheaval, Habermas observed that the liberal reading of German unity ignores its own deficiencies and inherent weaknesses, caused by the superiority of liberalism over communism and socialism at the end of the Cold War.\textsuperscript{38}
These critical approaches can be summarized as a postcolonial reading of German unity. In general, the postcolonial paradigm is understood as an alternative to the liberal developmental theory, which itself is held responsible for socioeconomic inequalities. Furthermore, the postcolonial approach questions the associated Eurocentric worldview and the resulting constructions and reproductions of narrative imaginations of the “other”.

This postcolonial perspective can be applied in the context of German unity, since there is a clear imbalance between east and west. It neither questions German unification, nor democratic institutions like the German Basic Law. Instead, it seeks to reflect the modernization process, and most importantly, the narrative imaginations that are necessarily connected with the deficits detected between east and west. Since the west serves as the role model, the postcolonial lens highlights the effects of eastern devaluation.

East German Devaluation

The measured lack of democratic culture and higher affinity with populist, authoritarian, and right-wing attitudes are thus involved in the west German construction of the cliché of the backward east German. The image of the Ossi, a pejorative name for East Germans, represents the “ugly German” who is unwilling or unable to seize political and economic opportunities or take individual responsibility. The pejorative image involves projections of eastern ingratitude and whining as well as the tendency towards greater support for right-wing populism and extremism. The narrative of the backward east German developed through various channels, especially the media, but also through social science. Since 1990, the media discourse has labeled east Germans as incapable of adapting to the western standard and being more xenophobic and racist. Similarly, various statistics and quantitative research have lent support for the reproduction of this classification. Assuming a west German normality, social differences are interpreted through a demeaning and virtually ethnic pattern. The above-mentioned results of survey research concerning east German mindsets and modernization deficits are not only misleading; they are also derogatory. Hence, the East is presented as premodern, mysterious and unknown, or a wild and threatening inner Orient. Eastern Germans appear as the undemocratic, populist, and even extremist “other”.

The postcolonial reading highlights that assertions of east German backwardness only make sense in opposition to, and as a deviation from, the west German role model. In the narrative notion of being more politically right-wing, east Germany clearly differs from the West German standard. East Germans are considered as the exception; they are portrayed as far-...
right and nationalist, undemocratic and authoritarian, more racist, and even more violent than West Germans.\textsuperscript{45} Thirty years after German unity, east Germany is therefore perceived as an abnormality in, and burden for, Germany as a whole. Being stuck with a mindest of the Cold War, the modernization paradigm qualifies east-west differences as east German deficits of economic and democratic modernization, ignoring its inherent downgrading impact. The postcolonial perspective is able to grasp this accessory phenomenon with its discursive functions and effects within the German unification process.

*Discursive Functions and Effects*

By looking at the link between populism and German unification through a lens of postcolonial critique, three major discursive functions and effects can be identified. The narrative imagination of east Germany as politically right-wing is helpful for the west, has implications for the east, and unintentionally strengthens actors of the political right.

First, the image of right-wing populist east Germany is convenient and welcome for west Germany in some respects as it opens up the possibility of outsourcing and projecting negative characteristics, such as authoritarianism and nationalism from Germany as a whole onto the east specifically.\textsuperscript{46} In other words, it deports the problem of extremism to the “other,” and increases the west’s own self-satisfied feeling of being democratic and “progressive.” Even the self-glorification of the western Federal Republic can be observed in various forms, as the image of the right-wing and backward east strengthens the west’s self-image as the political-institutional, economic, and democratic role model for the deficient East.\textsuperscript{47} Populism in particular is regarded as a backward phenomenon, directed against progressive modernization and democratization.\textsuperscript{48} Therefore, the eastern states look like relics of a past that still has to be overcome. The image of a right-wing east legitimizes the western FRG as the only German success story. Further, in order to liberate the eastern states from the premodern past, a paternalistic view towards the east is justified.\textsuperscript{49} East Germans are similar to other marginalized groups, such as Muslims in Germany, as both groups live with widespread prejudices and stereotypes among the west German majority. In 2019, for instance, 36.4 percent of west Germans agree on the statement that east Germans “have not fully arrived in today’s Germany” (…*sind noch nicht richtig im heutigen Deutschland angekommen*), 58.6 percent think the same about Muslims in Germany.\textsuperscript{50}

Second, while the east’s marginalization is useful for west Germany, it has an impact on the people of east Germany. The externally attributed
image of the democratically incapable losers from modernization appears unjust to many east Germans, strengthening skepticism towards political institutions, and perhaps even motivating some to vote for populist parties. The postcolonial perspective clarifies the need for one’s own identity, language, and authentic representation. A common German identity, which many citizens of the former GDR had longed for by 1990, could not be established, and the prevailing discourse of modernization and the related differences have even prevented an all-German identity from emerging. In search of their own identity, the modernization-paradigmatic patterns, which are held responsible for devaluation and group-specific marginalization, are rejected or at least viewed critically by east Germans. At the same time, alternative patterns of interpretation become visible: east Germans are trying in various ways to oppose the hegemonic, west German-dominated discourse, for example in bellettristic literature. Protagonists mainly speak from an individual perspective, avoiding being part of an “east German” collective and its attributions. Other ways of dealing with the situation include assuming patterns of victimization or promoting a nostalgic transfiguration of the GDR past in museums and associations. These are forms of glorifying supposedly positive sides of the GDR such as social security, security of employment, and solidarity, while systematically hiding its negative aspects like the surveillance measures of the domestic intelligence service (Ministerium für Staatssicherheit, MfS). These are examples of some of the many attempts by eastern Germans to find their identity and to counter the discourse of devaluation with a self-determined position.

Third, the discursive devaluation of east Germans unintentionally leads to the success of right-wing political actors in that region in at least two ways. Since German unification, various protagonists on the political right have attempted to conquer the discursive and geographic space in east Germany—although most of them originate from west Germany. In Saxony-Anhalt, for instance, far-right actors like the identitarian movement (Identitäre Bewegung) and the think-tank Institut für Staatspolitik attract attention. They try to influence the political landscape via magazines and events. Furthermore, there are several projects of radical folkish settlements (Völkische Siedler) in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania and Brandenburg. For these actors, the territory of the former GDR is a practically empty space without too many migrants or governmental influence and interference. Finally, the Flügel—the most radical faction within the right-wing populist AfD—has been founded by the AfD-protagonists Björn Höcke (Thuringia) and Andreas Kalbitz (Brandenburg) and is particularly active in east Germany.
Furthermore, these actors of the political right can exploit the specific east German need for identity and historiography. The controversial interpretation of history presented in the 2019 AfD state election campaign in Brandenburg, for example, stylized it with slogans like “we are the people!” (Wir sind das Volk) or “peaceful revolution with the ballot” (Friedliche Revolution mit dem Stimmzettel) as a continuation of the 1989 peaceful revolution. To some extent, AfD voters seemed to believe in this alternative reading of history, or the right-wing populists were regarded as adequate representatives for specific east German needs, experiences, and challenges. From the postcolonial point of view, the search for authentic representation at least becomes comprehensible.

**Outlook on German Unity**

In the public perceptions, the recent success of the right-wing populist AfD appears to be a specific East German problem. This article has shown that the issue can be regarded from two different paradigmatic perspectives, which are highly interconnected with German unification. In order to find clarity in the wide-ranging debate about German unity, it is important to differentiate more subtly.

The modernization lens sees the success of the AfD as connected to deficiencies in the east German democratization and economic modernization process since 1990. East Germany has still not reached west German standards of political and civic culture. Official documents like the German Unification Treaty and the annual Reports on the State of the German Unity, as well as several social science studies, all show that the tone of the unification process is strongly affected by a west German reading of history and political institutions. Hence, this view reveals a significant lack of understanding regarding explanations of the current success of the right-wing populist AfD in east Germany, meaning that a change of perspective is necessary.

The postcolonial perspective criticizes the inherent marginalization of east Germans within the debate by paying attention to the subjective feelings of deprivation. Once they have been devalued, individuals respond with a certain lack of understanding and defiance of this stigma, paradoxically reproducing and even reinforcing the dominant narrative. The postcolonial view directly opposes the modernization paradigm, which holds east Germans responsible for the deficit in German unity, and even denies their ability to act rationally.
Without questioning German unification or fundamental democratic institutions like the German Basic Law, the arguments of the postcolonial perspective must be taken seriously, for two reasons. First, they can help to overcome the analytical weaknesses of the modernization paradigm and its inherent lack of understanding, especially concerning the current success of radical right-wing populism in east Germany and the interrelation with the individual feelings of deprivation. Second, the findings of the postcolonial paradigm can help to prevent radical right-wing populism and even far-right extremism in east Germany. The narrative imagination of potentially right-wing East Germany is argued to be helpful to right-wing actors; once devalued and stigmatized, east Germany provides ground and opportunities for political right-wing activities. In order not to allow actors of the political right to conquer the discursive and geographic space of East Germany, it is important to highlight this dynamic and to stop reproducing dominant narratives and stereotypes.

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Notes

1. Following Lars Rensmann, the AfD is labelled “radical right-wing populist” in this article; see Lars Rensmann, “Radical Right-Wing Populists in Parliament. Examining the Alternative for Germany in European Context,” German Politics and Society 36, no. 3 (2018): 41-73.
Bilanzen, eds. Wolfgang Frindte, Daniel Geschke, Nicole Haußecker, and Franziska Schmidtke (Wiesbaden 2016), 99-117.

6. For an overview, see Astrid Lorenz, ed., Ostdeutschland und die Sozialwissenschaften. Bilanz und Perspektiven 20 Jahre nach der Wiedervereinigung (Opladen, 2011); Peter Krause and Ilona Ostner, eds., Leben in Ost- und Westdeutschland. Eine sozialwissenschaftliche Bilanz der deutschen Einheit 1990-2010 (Frankfurt/Main, 2010).


13. Fukuyama (see note 11), xi.


15. Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk, Die Übernahme. Wie Ostdeutschland Teil der Bundesrepublik wurde (Munich, 2019).


17. Jürgen Habermas, Die nachholende Revolution (Frankfurt/Main, 1990).

18. Kurt Sontheimer, So war Deutschland nie. Anmerkungen zur politischen Kultur der Bundesrepublik (Munich, 1999), 216.


27. Küpper et al. (see note 5), 255.
28. Oliver Decker et al. (see note 24), 82 and 97.
31. Heinrich Best, “Trends und Ursachen des Rechtsextremismus in Ostdeutschland” in Frindt et al. (see note 5), 119-130, here 120; Dirk Jörke and Veith Selk, Theorien des Populismus zur Einführung (Hamburg, 2017), 92.
35. Decker et al. (see note 24), 113; Küpper et al. (see note 5), 252ff.
38. Habermas (see note 17), 186.

46. Shoshan (see note 41), 42.


48. Jörke and Selk (see note 31), 105.

49. Heft (see note 9), 361.


51. Küpper et al., (see note 5), 245.


58. Küpper et al. (see note 5), 245.