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The Borders of Normality

A Queer Perspective on Far-Right Racism

How can we describe the shifting ways in which racism intersects with other systems of oppression in the present? As an anthropologist who has researched the contemporary German far right from the perspective of gender and queer theory, I have frequently wondered about this question. A gender and queer theory informed ethnography can make important contributions to the conceptualization of racism because it can help us understand the ways in which friend-enemy dualisms function in the present—be they on the level of gender and sexuality, migration or racialized differences.

In my fieldwork, I followed a group of gay men who were members of the far-right party "Alternative for Germany" (AfD)—the "Alternative Homosexuals" (AHO). I also spoke to a range of other AfD politicians, both gay- and straight-identifying, who were not AHO members but who had in some way contributed to the gender and sexuality policies and discourses of their party. The narratives and practices of these people, although representing a very particular segment of the party, provide important insights into the political imaginary of the contemporary far right at large because they tell us something about who and what the far right constructs as 'enemies' today.

That said, it is important to bear in mind that focusing on the far right can serve to externalize racism, that is, to turn away from and overlook the more normalized and every-day workings of racism that are an integral part of the functioning of capitalist liberal-democratic societies. However, studying the far right is important not only because its violent racism is dangerous per se, but also because its political successes exacerbate the normalized racist status quo. Far-right racism, in other words, is not something that hinders the far right from gaining political majorities. It

is, on the contrary, what makes far-right formations compatible with hegemonic discourses[1].

In the worldview of the far right, the hierarchies and inequalities of the binary sex-gender system are the basis of a biopolitical project aimed at the reproduction of a racially and ethnically homogenous *Volksgemeinschaft* ("people's community")—and, therefore, aimed also at the exclusion, oppression, or annihilation of its constitutive others. Importantly, however, this does not imply that members of 'othered' groups cannot be supporters of the far right or that they are per se excluded from the far right. Indeed, some of the boundaries the far right draws between insiders and outsiders have become more porous in recent years—consider, for instance, the role of women as leaders in some European populist radical right parties. I argue below that this change is not only a symbolic one or mere tokenism. My material suggests that in the AfD (and arguably other Western European far-right formations), 'friend vs. enemy' dualisms, while not disappearing, are shifting: The gradual inclusion of some gay men goes hand in hand with the categorical exclusion of newly emerging others.

Contemporary far-right policy in Europe is centered around a racist fear of demographic transformations associated with immigration (Mayer, Šori, and Sauer 2016, 98), as has become particularly visible since the crisis of the European border regime began in 2015: The far right problematizes the lower birthrates among 'autochthonous' European populations compared with higher birthrates among (mainly non-white Muslim) immigrants, and fears that eventually, those migrants and their descendants will outnumber white Europeans. Two threat scenarios (one 'from below' and one 'from above') and two corresponding enemy images ('immigrants' and 'elites') frame this demographic discourse. On the one hand, the homogeneity of the nation appears to be threatened from 'below', that is, by poor and working-class male and female migrants: Male migrants of color, particularly from Muslim-majority countries, are seen as a potential danger to white women (Dietze 2016; Farris 2017),

while the alleged threat posed by female migrants of color is their potential fertility (Mayer, Šori, and Sauer 2016, 94). On this first level, we are dealing with femonationalist (Farris 2017) and homonationalist (Puar 2007) discourses which posit the superiority of the West vis-à-vis an uncivilized 'rest'. This was also the level on which most of my interlocutors were particularly vocal: They argued that the immigration of homophobic Muslim men posed a particular risk to gays, and that therefore, strict and exclusionary migration and asylum policies would also be gay-friendly policies.

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A roll-up banner of the AHO reads "Orlando, June 12th, 2016. They had to die because they were gay. 49 homosexuals brutally executed by Islamists", referring to the mass shooting at the Orlando nightclub "Pulse". The banner also features a large black cross in the background and the AfD's slogan, "Mut zur Wahrheit" ("Daring to Tell the Truth"). © Patrick Wielowiejski

From 'above', on the other hand, the demographic structure of the European nations appears threatened by 'the elites'—imagined as detached, cosmopolitan, individualist, 'politically correct', often childless feminists and lesbians. Not only does the far right claim that it is they who want to open the borders for migrants (this enemy image was prominently embodied by the figure of Angela Merkel during the last years of her chancellorship). The alleged influence of feminism and gender studies on a governmental level is also said to be the reason why white European women are having less children and feel downright pressured into sacrificing having children for their careers. Furthermore, according to this ideology, the recognition of non-heteronormative, trans, inter, and non-binary ways of living—promoted and enforced by these putative feminist elites—threatens the moral model of the heterosexual nuclear family which is seen to be the bedrock of a high birthrate (Paternotte and Kuhar 2017; Graff and Korolczuk 2022). This anti-elitism has structural affinities with antisemitism to the extent that it fantasizes that the function of "gender ideology" is to control the 'masses' and destroy Christian civilization (Graff 2022, 437).

Now, when we study a racist formation like the far right from a queer perspective, we could, for instance, start by interrogating the position of gays and queers in this formation. Such a queer perspective brings with it a heightened sensitivity for the lived realities of subjects at odds with heteronormativity and binary gender norms as well as for discourses of normality and identity more generally. Indeed, one of my interlocutors' central preoccupations was their conflicted and contradictory relationship to 'normality'. Some of them, especially the ones who were not members of the AHO, argued that homosexuality was considered completely normal nowadays, that discrimination was not an issue anymore, and that now that legal

equality had (almost) been achieved, there was nothing left for gays and lesbians to fight for politically. Now that their sexual orientation finally did not matter anymore, there was no need to "flaunt" it. Consider this quote by my interlocutor Michael, who was a member of a state legislature in Eastern Germany. Speaking about gay pride parades in his city, he said:

> I don't know what they want anymore. We have marriage equality, everything is done. If they want to celebrate, let them go out and celebrate, but that's a political event they're doing there. It's like: "We are here, we are loud." (Laughs.) There used to be two gay bars here, and they don't exist anymore. Why don't they exist anymore? Because people can go anywhere! Without being discriminated against or attacked. It's just *normal*. Almost nobody joins those LGBT associations anymore. There's just a small bunch of guys left, most of them just have mental problems and meet there as a discussion group[2].

The disappearance of gay bars in his city was in fact a good sign for Michael: To him, it was an indication that gays are no longer discriminated against in other bars. According to Michael, people who are still members of gay and lesbian organizations nostalgically insist on being different from the rest of society. If they have not arrived in the 'normality' of society yet, it is their own problem, their own stubbornness, their own adherence to the stigma of homosexuality: "It's normal! And at some point, you have to accept it as normal for yourself."

That is also the reason why Michael did not see a point in getting involved in the AHO although he had been asked several times whether he would like to join. But Michael did not think that such a group was necessary because he did not experience homophobia in the AfD. Little by little, he recounted, everyone in the AfD knew that he was married to a man, but nonetheless the members at the base of the

party voted for him: “For me, that’s proof that they’re not homophobic.” Michael was not fundamentally against the existence of the AHO. But “if they got too loud”, as he said, he would find it counterproductive. It was important to Michael that his politics had nothing to do with him being gay, and that is why he did not want to be perceived as such: “I am myself because of what I stand for, my sexual orientation doesn’t matter.”

Michael and some other interlocutors of mine who argued like him adhered to values such as restraint, discretion, and respectability. With historian and queer theorist Lisa Duggan, we could call this a homonormative position:

> a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption. (Duggan 2002, 179)

Heteronormativity, the biopolitical basis of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, is being reproduced by Michael’s narrative rather than contradicted through it: As long as he is integrated into the national imaginary, that is, as long as he is granted citizenship rights (particularly access to the heteronormative institution of marriage), Michael does not see a point in politicizing homosexuality—he even finds that dangerous. All my interlocutors, gay or straight, agreed that heteronormativity was the *sine qua non* of a far-right political project. However, some of them chose to flaunt their otherness as gays in public, staged themselves as deviant, and appropriated and affirmed the position of the outsider—the opposite of Michael’s approach. A straight-identifying AfD politician from Southwest Germany that I talked to, who was considered an extreme right-winger within the AfD group he was a member of in parliament, said of the AHO: “If we didn’t have these flamboyant personalities

["Paradiesvögel"], it would be boring in the AfD!" The figure of the *Paradiesvogel*, literally a bird of paradise, was in fact a good description of my interlocutor Andreas, I thought, who half-jokingly liked to call himself the "token gay" of the AfD. Let me illustrate this second and rather different approach to 'normality' by portraying Andreas in more detail.

Andreas was a member of a Western German state parliament but known widely in the party. His visual appearance alone stood out: Each of his outfits was colorful, right down to his shoes. He often underscored his words with sweeping, erratic gestures and pointed laughs. In his apartment, the little cartoon character Ziggy was everywhere. Ziggy as a sailor, Ziggy as a cook, Ziggy as a prison inmate. On his travels through Germany, Andreas always had a Ziggy figure with him; every now and then Andreas would send me a photo of one of his Ziggies. Andreas liked the little bald man with the huge bulbous nose because, as he said, Ziggy was not the strong superhero who saved the world, but rather an anti-hero who always got into some kind of mess and illustrated the absurd situations of life. In a comic strip from 1971, Ziggy stands on a closed-off path, with the sign "Wet cement" in front of him. To the right and to the left of the path, there is also no further way, two signs warning: "Keep off the grass". A double bind. The name Ziggy, I read, came about because his creator Tom Wilson had a character in mind that always comes at the very end in the alphabetical order of life: "Ziggy is a last-in-line character. [...] The last picked for everything and kind of a lovable kind of loser character" (The Hollywood Reporter 2011). Andreas, it seemed, identified with that characterization—and he made it his trademark.

At a national party convention in 2017, Andreas ran for the party executive committee. He told me that there were many people who somehow tried to get through to the party members with their concerns, whereas he preferred to keep a low profile. But lo and behold, Björn Höcke, the charismatic leader of the extreme right wing of the party had approached him personally and congratulated him on his

"wonderfully likeable speech". Andreas thought you had to do something different to stand out at all, so he told me he had put on a "gay-looking" sweater that must have made him look kind of funny. Höcke had said to him that he was actually the only likeable candidate, if only because of the way he "pranced up" to the stage. The whole room, Andreas said, started laughing: "In a positive sense!"

It seemed to me that Andreas liked himself in this role. At the last AHO meeting I attended in January 2019, he asked me why I was always so serious, "such a normal guy". In contrast to his homonormative colleagues, Andreas always wanted to stand out, to be recognizable as a gay man, not as perfectly assimilated, but as eccentric. Confirming his own "abnormality" (a term Andreas consciously used to refer to himself and gay people in general), Andreas also contributed to upholding heteronormativity, but not so much by behaving 'like everyone else' and desiring inclusion, but by embodying and performing the discursive position of the constitutive outside. As Claudia Liebelt reminds us in an essay on the AfD's 2021 federal election campaign ("Germany. But normal."), the construct of the 'normal' is never innocent: It presupposes the construct of the 'abnormal' and produces a pressure to conformity (Liebelt 2021). However, Andreas did not seem to feel that kind of pressure—quite the contrary, he seemed to be accepted precisely because he was such an 'anomaly'. But perhaps this is a role that only one or very few people can take on—*Paradiesvögel* who stick out like a sore thumb.

People waving AfD flags and a flag of Saxony at a rally. © Patrick Wielowiejski

Regardless of whether or not they performed normality, what all my interlocutors could agree on was that normality and (hetero)normativity were good things in need of protection, and they had a clear compass in terms of what they considered normal and what they did not: Most importantly, for them, it was normal that Germany was Christian and white, and that heterosexual families with children were the nucleus of that nation. As opposed to earlier formulations of queer theory that argued that "[q]ueer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal" (Halperin 1995, 62; emphasis in original), more recent contributions have problematized the ways in which queer subjectivities do not only subvert normative orders but can also be co-opted by them and play a role in their reproduction (e.g. Castro Varela, Dhawan, and Engel 2011; Duggan 2003; Edelman 2004; Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz 2005; Haritaworn, Kuntsman, and Posocco 2014). Thus, the dualisms between subversion and reproduction, oppression and resistance are being questioned in queer studies. The relation of queerness to normativity is set in motion. While normativity and

identity were the primary targets of an earlier queer critique, this "normative antinormativity" (Biruk 2020, 633) has come under scrutiny (Wiegman and Wilson 2015), particularly based on qualitative empirical research. As it turns out, people's lived reality is never free of normativity, and even queer lifeforms can have a positive attitude to different variants of normativity. Often, queers find themselves in a complicated situation where they have to carefully negotiate their relation to normative orders such as the family (Nelson 2015) or religion (van Klinken 2019) because in their situation, plain rejection is not an option. Thus, a queer position does not have to be tantamount to an unequivocal resistance against the norm (or identity). This complexity, these aporias between normativity and antinormativity, between identity politics and a critique of identity, seem to me to lie at the heart of queerness in the present. In contrast, the results of my fieldwork suggest that in this historical conjuncture, an anti-queer position is not one that condemns each and every form of deviation, but rather one that aims at avoiding ambiguity, neatly separating conformity and transgression.

What does all of this tell us about racism? At the end of the day, contemporary far-right ideology always has to do with the drawing of clear boundaries between inside and outside, normal and abnormal, friend and enemy, both when it comes to geopolitical borders and the boundaries of sex and gender. Some of these borders and boundaries might be shifting. My claim is that, in contemporary far-right ideology, the dividing line between 'healthy' and 'mentally ill', between 'normal' and 'perverted', does not run between hetero and homo, but rather between forms of life that affirm normality and identity (such as my interlocutors) and those that are critical of normality and identity. While the categorical borders of normality have become more fluid for some gay men, the new abject enemy is everyone whose politics and positionality question heteronormativity and the binary sex-gender system: particularly non-binary and inter folks, gender studies scholars and feminists, or queer families, to name but a few. Therefore, a queer critique of far-right ideology needs to be more than just a critique of discourses of normality and

identity. Instead of affirming these new boundaries and thereby occupying the imaginary position of the enemy, a queer critique of far-right racism rejects such friend-enemy dualisms—be it terms of gender, sexuality, migration, or racialized differences. As opposed to the far right, it embraces ambiguity.

Footnotes

[1]I use the term "far right" in Cas Mudde's sense, according to whom the defining criterion of the "far" right is its opposition to liberal democracy: While the conservative or liberal/libertarian right approves of liberal democratic institutions and procedures, the far right does not (Mudde 2019, 7). Mudde further differentiates the extreme right from the radical right, whereby the former is seen as a revolutionary force opposed to democracy *tout court*, while the latter rejects only the principles of *liberal* democracy (such as minority rights, the rule of law, and the separation of powers) (ibid.).

[2]All quotes from interviews translated by the author. To protect privacy, all names are pseudonyms.

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