Ossi Wessi

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

FROM SS TO STASI AND BACK AGAIN?:
OSSIS, WESSIS, AND RIGHT EXTREMISTS
IN CONTEMPORARY GERMANY

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Late one night, Hellmuth\(^1\) and I were talking about the issues of the
day over beers, as we occasionally did after work. For several months I
had been regularly accompanying Hellmuth, a street social worker
 servicing predominantly young right extremists. That night he abruptly
interrupted our conversation to inquire: “Are you with the Mossad?” Of its
nature such a question defies an unambiguous refutation, and my best
denial efforts proved ineffective. Anthropologists often face mistrust about
their identities, for their voyeuristic inquisitiveness, for their obscure
sources of funding, institutional affiliations, and project titles, which tend
to sound like badly thought-out cover stories, and finally for the paranoid
fantasies of their subjects, for whom being spied upon entails a higher
sense of significance than merely being studied.\(^2\) Such suspicions may
place the research or the researcher herself at risk. But this case was
different. As Hellmuth explained, keen on enticing a confession: “We
won’t hold it against you in any way, or stop cooperating with you on your
project, we have no problem with you working for the Mossad, we’re just
curious to know... You see, among us it’s quite normal that really good,
interesting, smart people also worked for the secret service, we all had
such friends and colleagues. Good people.” Faced with my stubborn
denial, he told me how, after unification was all over, he met for drinks

\(^1\) All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of interviewees
are withheld by mutual agreement.

\(^2\) Of course, suspicions of this kind also gesture to the discipline’s problematic
record of collaboration with (and funding by) governments and intelligence
agencies (see Nash 1975).
with guys from his old NVA (National People’s Army, the GDR military) platoon, and how they mutually divulged what they had filled out on each other in reports that were collected by the Stasi (The Ministry of State Security, East Germany’s secret police). The appropriate place and time to tell of such matters, Hellmuth seemed to be suggesting, was late at night, between pals, in a pub, over a few beers.

In this curious and friendly inquiry a silent third was present in its absence, hinted at without being named as that which remained excluded: the shifter “among us” (bei uns) entailed a collective identity, produced by generating a difference between the Ossi and the Wessi: it’s Ossis whom under specific circumstances one may trust with one’s secret agent identity, not Wessis. My emphatic denials notwithstanding, the question of my possible Mossad identity continued to be raised throughout my ethnographic fieldwork on right-wing extremists in East Berlin, providing but one of many unexpected encounters with the forms in which Ossis and Wessis imagine their differences. Yet the story above also gestures toward another horizon, that of the Nazi past in Germany, of anxieties about Israeli agents hunting Nazi-imaginations of Mossad anthropologists spying on young neo-Nazis. This horizon constituted the backdrop against which the difference between Ossi and Wessi was generated. The triad of the (neo-)Nazi, the Ossi, and the Wessi, in different permutations, has emerged again and again at multiple levels of my research. And ever since the Wende (unification, literally turn), it has indeed been central to imaginations of differences between Ossi and Wessi.

In this article I shall examine the dialectic that has played out between these terms since 1989. I will open by introducing the local category of Rechtsextremismus (right-extremism), its genealogy, its place in the management of deep cultural anxieties, its political entailments, and the debates and apprehensions it provokes; all of which will prove vital for understanding the manners in which it has mediated the relation between Ossis and Wessis. 3 I will then explore three particularly illuminating moments in the entwinements of Ossis, Wessis, and right-extremists. First, I will analyze discursive representations and institutionalized practices that have produced certain imaginations of the East by employing the extreme right as a trope. Secondly, I will examine how unification and the subsequent rise of an active extreme right in the East have impacted the social composition, cultural forms, and political orientations of the extreme right across Germany. Finally, I will conclude by looking at some of the ways in which the interpellation effects of hegemonic discourses find their echo as the GDR and the Third Reich converge in the fabric of everyday life.

**Taming the Demons**

While highly contested and heterogeneously deployed, Rechtsextremismus forms a fundamental category in the political imagination of most Germans. It has gained ground in the FRG since the early 1970s following its integration into official state discourses, 4 and has since occupied a key position in the conceptual arsenal through which the state represents, perceives, and produces knowledge about its enemies, accordingly entailing concrete and consequential implications: from publishing houses and media channels that may censure “extremist” voices to consumption venues that may ban particular items, or from schools that may bar certain groups to real-estate owners who may refuse prospective clients. 5 Before Extremism became commonplace, the distinction between a democratic center (Mitte) and anti-democratic margins was drawn with the concept of radicalism (Radikalismus), which marked political fields—whether on the right or on the left—as outside of the spectrum of tolerable difference. When it arrived, Extremism did not replace Radikalismus, but rather displaced it towards the political center: radicalism became re-signified to accommodate groups that, while represented as far from the mainstream, were not perceived by the state as threats to the liberal-democratic order; while extremism now came to designate that which stood outside the frontiers of the acceptable. In other words, the borderland of ambiguity previously constituted by a binary distinction between the mainstream and the excluded—defining who is enemy and who adversary—has been baptized as a category of its own. The political terrain underwent semiotic differentiation, now extending in

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3 As the entire present volume comprises of investigations into the constructions of Ossi and Wessi, I will refrain from commenting on these concepts separately here.

4 Primarily following its adoption by the Verfassungsschutz (The Authority for the Protection of the Constitution).

5 For instance, the Junge Freiheit, an ultra-conservative publication, has recently appealed—successfully—to the Supreme Court against its classification as a right-extremist organization, a classification that meant its exclusion from sales venues and book-fairs.

6 I use these concepts following Chantal Mouffe, who has described an adversary as “a legitimate enemy, one with whom we have some common ground because we have a shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy: liberty and equality.” A real enemy, in contrast, is a political element with whom a democratic resolution of conflict is impossible (Mouffe 2000 p. 102.).
both directions from a putative mainstream (Mitte) through a zone of tolerated ambiguity (Radikalismus) to the radically excluded (Extremismus). This attempt, as hopeless as it was urgent, to tame the ambiguity by naming it as an objective term within the universe of political possibilities expressed an anxiety about the inherent tenuousness of the distinction itself. In any case, today the concept of Extremismus—right or left—predominates official state discourses, the media, scholarship, lay classifications, and a variety of other contexts.

Corresponding to a hegemonic memory that represents the fall of Germany’s first liberal-democratic experiment as resulting from its helplessness against the two extremes of communism and fascism, the category of Extremismus has also reflected the preeminence in the FRG of the theory of totalitarianism, which entails the reduction of extremes to their non-identity with liberal-democracy and hence, ultimately, their equivalence. By means of a single operation the theory of totalitarianism and its conception of extremism allowed West Germany to generate distance between itself and its two primary others: its National-Socialist predecessor and its state-socialist contemporary.

Despite broad consensus among experts that Rechtsextremismus encompasses heterogeneous phenomena, attempts at outlining its definition are varied and often inspire heated debates. Such definitions commonly delineate a cluster of characteristics which, depending on the author, may include various permutations of nationalist sentiments, imperialist ambitions, authoritarian personality structures, orientation to violence, racism and/or xenophobia, misogyny and rigid conceptions of gender roles, attachment to National-Socialist symbols and ideas, or belief in fundamental inequalities between different ethnic or national communities (see, e.g., Butterwegge and Meier 2002). In matter of fact, the scope of Rechtsextremismus embraces individuals, groups, organizations, cultural forms, styles, commodities, literature, media, events, places, words and phrases, and more. The social contexts of its employment are at least as varied, including mass media discourses, official state rhetoric, pedagogical idioms, scholarly discussions, informal exchanges, and so on. Similarly diverse—and often unexpected—seem to be the pragmatic operations of its deployments.7

The ubiquitous usage of Rechtsextremismus goes hand in hand with widespread dissatisfaction with the concept, usually formulated in either analytical or political terms. Researchers and other field specialists frequently express reservations about the analytical value of the concept, citing its agglomeration of fundamentally dissimilar phenomena, the inconsistency of its application, and its manipulation for political goals. From another direction, the concept comes under fire for its political entailments, its ideological erasures, and its function within the hegemonic discourse of the state, with criticism focusing on its collapsing of right and left and on the alibi it provides for pervasive racist, nationalist, or sexist currents in the general population, which pass as innocuous, legitimate opinions.8 Yet the measure of its force unravels in the difficulty of formulating alternatives to it, indeed in the very inevitability of employing it in the German context, a frustration voiced in multiple instances during my research.9 Some prefer the term (Rechts)Radikalismus, yet beyond the debatable value of this substitution, the two terms are in fact frequently used inconsistently and interchangeably in expert discourses as well.10

7 Just how bewildering such operations may at times be could be illustrated with one telling example. The CDU, the socially conservative and economically liberalist center-right party now in power, has persistently hindered government interventions aimed to counter right-extremism, whether at the level of localities, states, or the Federal Republic. In the context of the recent battle about anti-discrimination legislation required by EU regulations and promoted in Germany largely by the political left, a campaign that ultimately failed, one high-ranking CDU politician argued that anti-discrimination laws should be rejected because they would prevent employers from denying positions to right extremists.

8 I have heard such reservations about the concept from political activists, educators, and NGO staff.

9 Thus, for example, a poignant and extensive critique of the inadequacy of Extremismus as an analytical concept for research and scholarship opens the volume Rechtsextremismus in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland — Eine Bilanz (Right-Extremism in the Federal Republic of Germany — Taking Stock), edited by two leading scholars and including numerous articles, nearly all of which feature Rechtsextremismus in their title (Schubarth and Stöss 2001). This dilemma seems somewhat weaker among those who criticize the concept from a political perspective. On the radical left, Extremismus is often avoided altogether. Here, the things that otherwise fall under the category of Linksextremismus (left-extremism) instead become differentiated and designated on their own terms, for example Antifa (anti-fascist), Antideutschen (anti-Germans), Autonome (anarchists), and so on; while the term Faschismus is employed in place of Rechtsextremismus. On the far right, the use of Linksextremismus is prevalent, yet its corollary Rechtsextremismus is all but absent, the things it generally designates instead named by particular terms, for instance Nationalisten (nationalists), Rechte (rightists), or Deutsche (German).

10 Thus the Handbuch Rechtsradikalismus (Handbook to Right-Radicalism), an encyclopedic reference guide with detailed entries on personalities, organizations, publishers, musicians, and commercial venues whose title indicates a particular terminological allegiance, opens with fifteen articles by various experts of which
That the concept of Rechtsextremismus is at once so widespread and so contested, so fundamental and yet so tenuous, owes to its role in the primary processes of othering and to its articulation with formidable cultural taboos. Marking for most Germans what they are not, it constructs what Allan Pred has termed “otherwheres” (Pred 2000) into which the undesirable can be projected. Following Ernesto Laclau (Laclau 1996), because right-extremism lies beyond the distinction that separates the community and its political enemy, its representation necessarily involves its reduction to relations of equivalence, its homogenization; equally, representing the identity constituted by its exclusion entails a similar silencing of differences, from which the collective emerges as uniform under such empty signifiers as “democracy,” “tolerance,” or “open-mindedness.” Crucial to this othering process is the lingering spectral presence of the historical horizon of National Socialism. Far more urgent than generating difference with a neo-Nazi street gang or a racist political party usually of insignificant dimensions, indeed precisely why in Germany such discourses are particularly powerful, is the constitution of distance with history. In this sense, again following Laclau, today’s right extremists appear as the concrete incarnations of more general forms that have haunted Germany for the past six decades.11

The relation between right-extremism and the collectivity constituted against it is not an external dialectic of two separate terms. Rather, to draw on Mouffe’s formulation of Derrida, right-extremism is a constitutive outside, at once incommensurable with and the condition of possibility of the collectivity, at once radically external to and fundamentally constitutive of it (Mouffe 2000, 12). Since “the constitutive outside is present within the inside as its always real possibility,” (Mouffe 2000, 21) right extremism marks deep anxieties about identity, about the persistent potential of Germany becoming—or indeed already being contaminated by—its radical other. Encounters with and physical proximity to right extremist “things” arouse feelings of discomfort if not angst among many Germans. This constant return of the repressed calls for institutionalized mechanisms, formulaically scripted tropes, and clichéd representations that tame these anxieties, erasing the inherent tenuousness of distinctions and restoring a semblance of stability. A plethora of social institutions—from government agencies to research centers and from expert journalists to NGOs—all participate in this working through of a national neurosis. Not surprisingly, a prominent position in this broad field is reserved precisely for repressive mechanisms: criminalization, state persecution, bans and prohibitions play a central role in managing the angst, and are likely to be hailed by actors who, in any other context, would vehemently oppose them. The labor required for taming this anxiety, for perpetually reinforcing the distinction of an other that stubbornly defies exclusion and that ultimately contaminates the inside, this labor together with the exigency of the task and the weight of the taboos in question forms the context within which the relation between the concept of Rechtsextremismus and the Ossi/Wessi divide must be understood.

**Imagining Ossis**

If pervasive anxieties, cultural taboos, and a labor of repression form the backdrop for right extremism, the latter must also be understood against the historical horizon of 1989 and its aftermath. Since unification, it has featured as a pivotal trope in representations of the new federal states. From TV coverage of pogroms against asylum-seeker shelters in the early ‘90s to reports on economically depressed Plattengassen12 neighborhoods terrorized by skinhead gangs, in the mass media, in parliamentary debates, or in scholarly research, “Nazis in the East” has emerged as central to imaginations of the former GDR. In journalistic articles, academic studies, or discussion panels, the phrase “right-extremism is not only an eastern phenomenon” more often than not serves as an apologetic prefix to discussions that turns out to be devoted entirely to the East. Terms like “nationally liberated zones” (National befreite Zonen), “fear zones” (Angstzonen), or “no-go areas” have appeared in innumerable forums, evoking eastern landscapes placed under the de-facto domination of neo-Nazis (see, e.g., Schröder 1997; 1998; 2001; Kleffner 2001; Kleffner 2002; Weiss 2003; Staud 2005).

12 Plattengassen, literally plate-buildings, designates for West Germans cheap production line, uniform construction associated in the West with underclass ghettos and in the East with vast GDR-era residential neighborhoods. East Germans generally refer to such buildings as Neubauten (lit. “new buildings”).

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11 Just how ingrained this othering has become may be illustrated with the help of a group of soccer hooligans, loyal followers of a local team generally perceived in Berlin as popular among right extremist soccer fans. Many in this group indeed were NPD (National Democratic Party of Germany, currently the most predominant on the extreme right) enthusiasts, sported jewelry or clothing items and appreciated music listed in official state reports as right extremist, and confessed clearly racist political opinions. Inquiring about their dislike for the fans of another local team, which holds a similar reputation, they explained that “there they are all Rechtsextremisten.”
Just how strong the association of the East with right extremism has been could easily be illustrated with innumerable examples. Sometimes, however, it is not the presence of significations but instead precisely their absences, the silences in narratives, that best disclose the operations behind discursive constructions. Let me therefore consider the instance of the documentary film “Dead in Lübeck” (Tot in Lübeck). The film inquires into a 1996 arson attack on an asylum seekers’ shelter in Thomas Mann’s birthplace. Ten inhabitants of the shelter were killed and many more were injured in the incident. More than the arson deed itself, the movie explores its aftermath. This emerges as drenched in denials and in uncharacteristically—if not suspiciously—incompetent investigation efforts, including an almost successful attempt to frame one of the resident refugees for the arson. The case remains unresolved. The film juxtaposes multiple voices and perspectives, portraying a collective repression, a refusal to recognize that such an event could have transpired “here,” in Lübeck; as well as a denial—as resilient as it is unfounded—that, if it did happen, the perpetrators could have come from among “us.” Nowhere in the film is it mentioned that Lübeck lies in West Germany. Nowhere do the “here” and “us” seem to index anything beyond Lübeck and its residents. This erasure operates both at the level of the discourses of interviewees and local sources, as well as at that of the narration and framing by the directors themselves. The crucial point here is that such denials and erasures would have been unimaginable—indeed impossible—had this been a representation of an analogous instance in an East German town. In such a case, denial would automatically be interpreted as premeditated cover up for, complicity with, or even sympathy to neo-Nazis. The very employment of shifters like “here” and “us” merely to index a particular locality would be a discursive impossibility, as speakers would be compelled to reflect on these also in terms of East and Ossis and the framing voices of authors would likewise not fail to construct the geographical location of the event and the collectivity to which it “belongs” in these terms.

Representations of the East as a space of right extremism have complemented description with ontology, with theories of origins and causality. Beyond manufacturing particular imaginations, they also provided interpretative frameworks within which these could be understood. Debates about causes and factors have witnessed an especially emphatic resurgence of authoritarianism theory. Classically elaborated by Theodor W. Adorno (Adorno, Frenkel-Bruswik, et al, 1950), the theory employed a psychoanalytic approach to account for the rise of fascism as a mass phenomenon and provided a conceptual basis for the development of the F-scale, a quantitative instrument for measuring fascist orientations. In the immediate aftermath of WWII it met the pressing need to comprehend the vulnerability—indeed perhaps the predisposition—of German society to National Socialism. The theory relates the emergence and consolidation of fascist orientations to a particular personality type, itself the consequence of distinct family relations and early childhood experiences. Particularly, it identifies as root causes culturally pervasive family structures that cultivate subjectivities characterized by traditionalism, submission to authority, anti-democratic attitudes, and hatred of marginalized social groups. Its historical horizon therefore consists in the relation between deep-seated Kaiser-era cultural customs on the one hand and National-Socialist popularity on the other hand. In the historical context of post-1989, however, authoritarianism theory has been transposed to trace the roots of an ostensibly special Ossi vulnerability to right-extremism back to GDR traditions of discipline and order, lingering relics of a backward past (cf. Butterwegge and Meier 2002; Boyer 2006; Boyer 2006). Since the family context provides the central site for the formation of authoritarian personality types, this theory implants by genealogical implication in every Ossi an inherent, latent Nazi. The contemporary deployments of authoritarianism theory to account for right-extremism in the East and the analogy they construct between the GDR and the Third Reich or between Ossis and fascists imply that, by contrast, the West has already transcended its fascist-authoritarian past.

Much like in representations of colonial subjects, here too asymmetrical power relations background a conception of the other as deterministically bound by a collective consciousness, its behavior and thought prescribed by injunctions of cultural customs. From this perspective, the Ossi subject, like the colonial one, has not yet attained the alleged autonomous agency of the liberal individual claimed by the West; it has not yet broken free of the authoritarian chains of tradition. Hence a violent assault in the East will inevitably emerge as representative of the East and comprehensible through the East, that is by recourse to an imagined Ossi collectivity; while an arson attack in the West, as we have seen, will neither become framed in relation to a national (German) nor to a regional (Wessi) collectivity, and its representation will instead focus on individual actors.

13 The CDU’s Jörg Schönbohm, for example, remarked in August 2005 on a multiple infanticide case in Brandenburg, tracing the mother’s actions to the GDR past, and conjecturally gesturing to an unredeemably blemished character of all Ossis.
These discursive representations are embedded in a rich field of strategic practices in which the East and Ossis are constructed as targets for therapeutic interventions. Such interventions constitute through concrete practices a hegemonic identity (as democratic, as "western," etc.) and its other (as authoritarian, extremist, and so on). Since its inception in 2001, the over 50 million Euro government-funded program “CIVITAS - initiativ gegen Rechtsextremismus in den neuen Bundesländern” (CIVITAS – initiative against right extremism in the new federal states) has been the most prominent element in the spectrum of interventionist efforts in this field. The goal of CIVITAS is:

- to oppose an ideology of the inequality of humans, which expresses itself in right-extremism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism, with a democratic, community-oriented culture in the new federal states. (2006)

This is to be achieved through the "construction, reinforcement, networking, and further model development of civil-society structures in communities in the new federal states." Complementing its work, numerous church groups, sports clubs, political parties, and foundations have also established programs and projects against right extremism.

Through various performances, bureaucracies, and disciplinary mechanisms, these interventions constitute also the very dichotomy of state and civil society. The distinction in official discourses between the two resolves itself concretely in the situated practices of local organizations such as those that operate under the financial umbrella of CIVITAS. Frequently NGOs that receive a substantial portion of their funding from the program, they occupy a mediating position between the two sides of the dichotomy, in effect performing the labor of converting (state) financial resources into (civil society) cultural and social resources: training, education, consulting, networking, organizational know-how, research, policy recommendations, and cultural events. They translate budget figures into school projects, community forums, exhibitions, soccer tournaments, creative competitions, public campaigns, music festivals, or

trips to Auschwitz. It is precisely in their neoliberal function of mediation that such NGOs become important sites for the generation of the dichotomy in the first place. Yet, to borrow on Laclau once more, to the figure of the state these hegemonic interventions in the East oppose civil society and a tolerant democratic culture as an empty signifier, the symbolic representation of a lack (Laclau 1996). The Ossi public appears here deficient, incomplete, in need of education for democracy and tolerance and of therapeutic rehabilitation from the traumas of two pasts. Not surprisingly, in colloquial parlance such interventions are often described as arrogant Besserwissers (a pun on Besserwisser, meaning smart aleck) telling "us" what’s good.

These rehabilitative interventions and the discourses that surround them not only unfold against the backdrop of the GDR era, but also gesture towards the historical horizon of the Third Reich, and more particularly to the aftermath of the war. John Borneman remarked on the projection of West Germany’s post-WWII historical narrative onto the post-unification East (Borneman 1993). The narrative form of the story of the United States as the good protagonist defeating a totalitarian regime and proceeding to reconstruct the economy, install democratic institutions, and spread liberal values has remained the same, while the cast of characters has changed. In this iconic transposition we find the Federal Republic as a strong capitalist state fixing up a post-totalitarian territory: providing aid for economic reconstruction, re-educating the masses for democratic values, establishing a cultural hegemony, introducing new consumption habits, silencing a history that must be suppressed, and pargeting all those it deems ex-perpetrators. Again, the image of the GDR emerges here as a term which, through its analogy with the Third Reich, enables the Federal Republic to generate a distance not so much from its state-socialist rival as from its National-Socialist past. Through its interventions in the new federal states Germany constructs itself as a liberal-democratic society now mature enough to crusade for the values that it once had to be taught.

The analogies through which the two historical horizons of the Third Reich and the GDR or of post-WWII West Germany and post-unification East Germany are brought together appear in multiple sites and moments. The wholesale purges that followed unification—not only in government branches but also in academia, juridical professions, media establishments,

14 Interventions in other fields, such as infrastructure, investment, privatization, or federal subsidies have concerned far higher sums of money, of course.

15 Ziel des Programms ist es, eine demokratische, gemeinwesensorientierte Kultur in den neuen Bundesländern einer Ideologie der Ungleichheit von Menschen, die sich in Rechtsextremismus, Fremdenfeindlichkeit und Antisemitismus ausdrückt, entgegenzu setzen... Das Programm soll dazu beitragen, zivilgesellschaftliche Strukturen im Gemeinwesen in den neuen Bundesländern aufzubauen, zu stärken, zu vernetzen und modellhaft weiter zu entwickeln.

16 As more than one scholar has noted, the GDR for its part used the FRG for precisely the same purpose, identifying fascism with capitalism and presenting socialism as the surest defense against it (see, e.g., Borneman 1993).
and leading positions in education or health (see, e.g., Borneman 1992; Boyer 2001)—have indeed far surpassed the half-hearted de-Nazification that followed the war. The scale of the purges has stretched far beyond Stasi employees or SED loyalists, even beyond the wide populations of party members or of persons listed in Stasi files as informers, and included also their relatives and, in academic institutions, their students. GDR archival materials—especially Stasi files—have been opened to the public to an extent far exceeding the accessibility of Third Reich and Gestapo documents even to scholars and experts at the time. An ultimately impossible campaign to erase traces of the GDR past from public space included the demolition of buildings, the removal of monuments, and the renaming of streets, the latter particularly telling because it de-facto placed on equal ground anti-fascist resistance fighters who were sympathetic to communism and after whom many streets were named with the Nazis against whom they struggled (Verheyen 1997). The concept of Extremismus of course facilitates the discursive construction of such analogies, with its entailment of an equivalence relation between fascism and communism. Thus, for example, hegemonic state discourses often represent as comparable the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism), the socialist offspring of the GDR’s ruling SED party that enjoys wide support in the East, and the NPD (National Democratic Party of Germany), today’s most prominent far-right party in Germany.

From budget worksheets to Bundestag deliberations, from policy papers to mediated representations, and from scientific communities to NGOs, the production of the Ossi proceeds at multiple institutionalized discourses and practices. But it equally proceeds in spontaneous interactions, at soccer games, at the pub, or at the workplace, through jokes and side-comments, or in the formation of networks of personal relationships. This dialectic of differentiation employs multiple other tropes besides political sympathies. Child rearing practices, linguistic forms, professional cultures, or spatial orientations are only some of the dimensions around which the production of differences has been

17 Far from being an arbitrary decision by the Federal Government imposed upon a passive population, the opening to the public of classified GDR archival materials was performed (also) in response to wide demands by many East Germans. However precisely the fact that here, in contrast to elsewhere, the voices of former GDR citizens were listened to and their demands so duly and promptly granted exposes the political will on the side of the Federal Government to conduct this chirurgical intervention.

documented (Boyer 2000; Glaeser 2000). Yet, ever since unification, the figures of the right-extremist or the (neo-)Nazi have had a particularly crucial role in the dialectical constitution of otherness. As the production of difference, othering generates meaning or identity by negation, in this case by indexing what the non-marked Wessi is not. Yet the very work of othering in which, as we have seen above, such immense social resources are spent and such a wide array of forces is involved, in itself already divulges another face of the process. Namely, that beyond mere signification of identity, the othering at play entails a deep anxiety precisely about the lack of difference, about proximity and contamination, indeed about the always present possibility of being or becoming that which is signified as a radical other. In other words, the construction of the Ossi and the East that we have examined reveals not so much what the Wessi is not, but rather the nature of the anxieties about becoming that underpin the process in the first place.

We have seen how in its very exclusion the other emerges as intrinsically constitutive of that from which it was excluded. Yet the operations entailed in productions of otherness proceed neither unambiguously nor along a single path. Understanding the construction of the Ossi/right extremist demands that we look beyond the mere relation between the excluded and the collective; that is, beyond the former as telling of and negotiating the constitutive anxieties of the latter. Instead, we must also attend to the multiple paths of exclusion and inclusion that emerge within this process, and we must ask how these are linked with different productions of others. Before proceeding to the next section of this paper, I would like to advance the current discussion one step further in this direction. If the Ossi as right extremist marks the efforts of a hegemonic German collectivity to exorcize its demons, it simultaneously also traces a path of (re)inclusion into that collectivity. The blending of the GDR and the Third Reich grounds the East’s very particular history in a familiar terrain, in “our” history. The Ossi as right-extremist gestures toward a shared past, a common identity, and an essential likeness that transcends its temporary destabilization by uneven progress through

18 See also Anja Vogel’s article in this volume for an insightful analysis of this othering process in interactions between teachers and students in Berlin schools.

19 In his discussion of the exception and the example Giorgio Agamben points out that exclusion is always inclusive and inclusion always exclusive: “While the example is excluded from the set insofar as it belongs to it, the exception is included in the normal case precisely because it does not belong to it... in every logical system, just as in every social system, the relation between outside and inside, strangeness and intimacy, is this complicated” (Agamben 1998, 22).
history. The very form of the exclusion here provides the means for reintegration through a narrative that constitutes Ossis as essentially like "us," or more precisely like "we" once were. The debates about Ossis and Wessis, about democracy and authoritarianism, or about new and old Nazis thus draw demarcations of inclusion in the national collective. The absent third against which such debates generate a community reveals itself to be the essentially alien other of the immigrant, who must either be tolerated as different (multiculturalism) or learn to conform to a presumed dominant German culture (Leitkultur) despite his fundamental otherness (integrationism).

Right Extremism after the Wall

The discussion above is meant to engage critically with the ways in which representations of right extremism in the East (or of the East as right extremist) have produced particular imaginations and have functioned in processes of identity constitution. Yet it should not be misread as contesting the emergence and perseverance of forms of racism, ultra-nationalism, and violence in the new federal states since unification. That the term right extremism today covers phenomena that were absent from its spectrum a mere decade and a half ago owes not to a simple shuffling of definitional distinctions, but rather to the emergence of new cultural and social constellations that—because of their zealous nationalistic ideologies, their rabid racism, or their affinity with Third Reich elements—have come to be classified under the term. The development of these new forms has been crucially motivated by unification and by the subsequent rise of extreme right groups in the East and of the figure of the right-extremist Ossi, whether as representation or as interpolated production of selves. It is to these processes, which present the second level at which in the aftermath of unification Ossis and Wessis have articulated with the extreme right, that I should like to turn now. Before we explore these currents in detail, however, I must briefly sketch their historical background.

Official denials of the GDR at the time notwithstanding, neo-Nazi groups were active in East Germany by the early 1980’s (Wagner 2001; Bugiel 2002). Growing at the fringes of marginalized subcultural scenes of punks, hooligans, and skinheads, however, such groups were not only minor but also poorly organized, especially when compared with their western equivalents. Naturally, their capacity for staging political, cultural, or commercial activities was small, as were their possibilities for gathering means and resources. If the state denied the presence of neo-Nazis per-se, it did not ignore these groups, but rather classified them—as it did also the punks, hooligans, and skinheads—as Asoziale (asocials). Accordingly, it persecuted and repressed them in the same way it did all those placed into this default category for the excluded: by issuing against them prohibitions on residing in or even entering Berlin, by imprisoning them, or by including them in "freigekauft" exchanges with the FRG, a practice that consisted of the GDR handing over unwanted persons in return for much-needed western currency (cf. Hasselbach and Bonengel 2001). Many of those who were handed to the West in these deals returned following the fall of the Berlin Wall, bringing with them the organizational skills, ideological training, and financial backing that they had meanwhile acquired.

East Germany’s leadership was finally forced to acknowledge the presence of “fascist” elements in its territory following a 1987 incident in which a neo-Nazi skinhead mob assaulted a punk concert in an East Berlin church. Nevertheless, their numbers remained trifling and their presence virtually insignificant. While the GDR was neither innocent of institutionalized discrimination nor everyday racism, many immigrants report it was only following 1989 that verbal harassment and physical violence against them became a problem. An Ethiopian immigrant who arrived to the GDR as a student in 1980 and now heads a local intercultural center in East Berlin remembered:

... and then came the Wende, really, that is, and then in the Wende, it was difficult for us, because these people, who never had any contact with foreigners, when they received their freedom, they openly harassed people on the street, then they really started, to harass and to assault, and naturally I was afraid then... I bought an old car, a small one, for my family, so that we won’t use public transportation. (interview by author, December 2, 2005)

Indeed, it was only with 1989 and the liberalization of movement between East and West, of political organization and mobilization, of commercial activities, and of cultural practices that far right currents became more widespread, more visible, and more aggressive, their swift rise culminating in a number of spectacular pogroms on asylum seeker shelters in the years 1991-1992.²⁰

²⁰ Unfortunately, I will not have the space in the current discussion to examine the complex processes that motivated this rapid growth of far right identifications in the post-unification East. One important factor seems to have been the massive efforts of various western groups that entered communities in the East—at times represented by returning “exiles”—well before the conclusion of official
Since then, these processes have in turn impacted in several unexpected ways the political orientations and cultural identifications of extreme right groups throughout the Federal Republic. Most prominently, and in stark contrast to pre-unification times, today’s extreme right has swung decisively towards socialism, if still, of course, within an ultranationalist framework. One might say that it has shifted from National-Socialism to National-Socialism. This change has been perhaps most hyper-visible in the rhetoric of established extreme right parties. Particularly the NPD and DVU (German People’s Union), traditionally West German and socio-economically conservative, have appropriated the “we are the people” (“Wir sind das Volk!”21) slogan of the 1989 East German Monday demonstrations,22 which they placed at the center of their relatively successful election campaigns in the East. Socialist tropes have also come to dominate the discourse of non-partisan groups, these often far more radical than parliamentary parties, which they perceive as too institutional, pro-democratic, and moderate. In internet discussion forums and on banners, stickers, flyers, or graffiti, the interests of the working class and their oppression by the rich take central stage. Popular slogans include for instance “Kapitalismus zerschlagen!” (smash capitalism); “Sozialismus ist braun” (Socialism is brown)23; or “Echter Sozialismus ist national” (real socialism is national). In demonstrations, orators declare, “the struggle is not about left and right, but about top and bottom.” Extreme right political parties and non-affiliated groups alike participated enthusiastically in the broad protest movement against the looming Hartz IV social reforms in the fall of 2004.24 At times they staged their own independent marches, but more frequently they joined ranks in mass demonstrations organized by labor unions and leftist groups, generating tremendous embarrassment and triggering panicked debates about how to keep out the unwanted guests. The socialist tide, however, has not manifested itself only amongst the politically organized or those whom they have mobilized for action. It reveals itself equally in park bench conversations between the (frequently long-term) unemployed or in lay political analysis between friends at people’s apartments. In such situations, memories of full employment and generous welfare often blend with ethnic imaginations of the nation, with admiration for National-Socialist policies, and with racist scapegoating of immigrants. Moreover, as we shall explore in more detail below, such discourses also frequently converge with nostalgic memorializations of the GDR era, these often ventriloquized by persons too young to have experienced life in pre-unification East Germany. Socialism runs like a thread that weaves together the Third Reich, the GDR, and the present, where its spectral absence hovers over the state in the form of resentment and discontent.

Another significant impact of unification has consisted of a makeover of the generational structure of extreme right groups in Germany. In contrast to the West, where political parties, publishing houses, or civil associations feature continuous genealogies of sympathizers stretching back to the war and often dominated by a culturally conservative older elite, in the East such foundations were all but absent, and new recruits came largely from among the younger generations. Even if today the earliest cohorts are approaching middle age, extreme right subcultural scenes and political discourses in the East have preserved the strong youth-oriented flavor with which they emerged. In the neighborhood where I worked, for example, the central campaign of local Kameradschaften (extreme right fraternities) has focused on increased state support for youths in the face of continuing budget cuts and on demands for the establishment of a “nationalist” youth club, campaigns which have included demonstrations, the distribution of flyers, or internet-based propaganda. Again, such discourses find a strong echo also among young people who refrain from involvement in organized political activities. In nearly all of the interviews I conducted, such subjects cited increased allocation of resources for young people as the most pressing change in contemporary government policy: “doing more for the youth” and “having more youth clubs” were among the most common responses to inquiries about what urgent problems they would address had they

throughout Germany, many of which employed the loaded label Montagsdemos (see above) with reference to the GDR and 1989.
found themselves in positions of political authority. Especially hard-hit by high and lingering unemployment, young persons in the biographical phases of high-school termination, professional training programs, or recent entry into the narrow labor market who face slim prospects of obtaining work demonstrate particular receptivity to this youth-oriented rhetoric and to its simultaneous condemnation of political elites on the one hand and immigrants on the other.

Younger and more socialist, the extreme right in the East has also been an important impulse behind the emergence of new cultural practices and aesthetic forms, those often borrowed from the opposite political camp of the radical left. Whereas until the late 1990’s young sympathizers generally spanned the limited spectrum of hooligans and skinheads, today’s constituency of extreme right parties, participants in Rudolf Heß commemoration marches, or members of local Kameradschaften exhibit a far more diverse range of cultural identifications. In their outlook, especially young activists take after the anarchist (Autonome) dress code, consisting of dark pants and jackets, caps, sunglasses, sneakers, and short haircuts. Alongside garments decorated with gothic letterhead inscriptions of “Berlin – Reichshauptstadt” (Berlin – the Reich’s capital) or of neo-Nazi rock bands’ insignia are also T-shirts featuring the familiar Che Guevara print, whose popular black, red, and white combination—the colors of the Third Reich—conveniently blends in with other outfits and propaganda items. Even more ubiquitous is the sporting of Palestinian headscarves, which—in much the same manner as on the left—have proliferated far beyond the context of political protest against Israeli occupation to become trendy fashion items. Designs of shirts and demonstration banners also increasingly resemble aesthetic forms previously associated with and popular on the left, most noticeably in the widespread use of comics characters, in more diverse color palettes, in the inclusion of digital media characters and symbols, and finally in the formatting of textual elements, often printed in letterheads that emulate graffiti styles. Graffiti crews generally counted among the worst enemies of the scene, the practice of spraying also deemed unworthy of true Germans, and finally popular comics viewed as imperialist cultural pollution, such forms and elements would have been unthinkable scarcely a few years ago.

25 Heß was Hitler’s deputy who parachuted into Britain in 1941 to seek an armistice deal and spent the rest of his life in prison until committing suicide in 1987, and therefore is hailed as a peace-loving martyr.

Complementing these changes in style and fashion, language has also been affected, notably by the ever more frequent employment of English slogans and phrases, a practice that had previously been tabooed as contaminating the purity of German, and indeed which was identified with and broadly used strictly on the radical left. Nowadays, however, whether on demonstration banners, clothing items, or graffiti, English has become commonplace, in phrases such as “Fight Jews,” “Reds better run,” “Smash the reds,” “Fight terror, defend Europe!,” “C4” for reds,” or the skinhead rhyme “I’ve been pushed too far, now it’s time to fight; I will never stop, until the wrongs are made right.” Some groups have also adopted the familiar Antifa emblem of a red flag foregrounding a black flag, modifying it only inasmuch as the order of the flags has been reversed. Finally musical tastes, which play a critical role in recruitment, financing, community-building activities (such as underground concerts or private parties), and the production of identities, have likewise undergone extensive diversification (Dornbusch and Raabe 2002). Whereas Hard-Metal remains among the best-liked genres, skinhead Oi! music in contrast has sharply declined in popularity. And some now prefer hip-hop or visit techno clubs, two musical genres that until recently were also tabooed as non-German and perceived as leftist.

The tropes that define the political agendas of extreme right groups, unlike their aesthetic dispositions and cultural practices, have seen far less innovation. With the significant exception of the oscillation towards a socialist vision of nationalism, political campaigns continue to pursue long-standing issues and to formulate familiar slogans, even if slightly modified to accommodate a changing context or to address the burning themes of the day. Immigration occupies the top of the list, with the NPD’s Gute Heimweise (a good journey home) campaign dominating the field, which articulates also with protests against unemployment and against “foreigners’ criminality.” Other related issues involve the EU expansion, or more accurately the impending entry of Turkey into the EU, against which an originally Christian Democrat-proposed petition campaign has been picked up and promoted by the NPD; as well as local actions in opposition to the construction of mosques. Straddling the discourses about immigrants and criminality, protests decry an alleged soft-handedness of the state in its policies on and penalization of drug-use and child molestation.

Close behind the spectrum of immigration-related issues stands the memory of World War II, which in the last few years has focused on the
figure of Rudolf Heß; but also, increasingly, on the commemoration of German victims of the massive Allied carpet bombings of cities (referred to as the Bombenholocaust, or bombing Holocaust), with a special emphasis on Dresden, which was particularly hard hit; and finally too on the memorialization of German military casualties, which has concentrated on the vast army cemetery at Halbe in Brandenburg. Somewhat more sporadic, protests against the erection of memorials for the victims of the Nazi regime likewise fall under this rubric, recently targeting primarily the construction of the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, but also the reconstruction of synagogues in various localities. Always linked with the memory of the war and of National Socialism as well—or with their tabooing and criminalization—are campaigns against political persecution, legal repression, and limits on the freedom of expression.

Certain newer concerns have also come to the limelight, although these tend to reveal themselves upon closer inspection as recent formulations and permutations of long-standing and well-known tropes. The deployment of anti-globalization language for articulating “socialist” positions, for example, has underscored countless political actions: “Employment instead of globalization!” or “Against globalization wars!” have become popular slogans, alongside others denouncing capitalist imperialism. Anti-globalization rhetoric lends itself well to incorporation into the extreme right’s political agenda not only because of the latter’s recent socialist turn but also as an up-to-date and more widely tolerated substitute for the traditional figure of Jewish capital. As with the domestication of aesthetic orders previously associated with the radical left, here too the re-articulation of ideological stands through the language of (anti-)globalization entails a realignment of positions vis-à-vis traditional political enemies. A similar case has been that of the anti-Iraq war protests, which have likewise stood at the center of numerous political actions of extreme right groups in Germany in recent years, and which follow a well-established anti-Americanism. Indeed, leftist anti-Iraq war activists have encountered difficulties as menacing as have anti-Hartz IV protestors in keeping NPD supporters and other extreme right groups away from their demonstrations.

For the time being, the classical figure of the neo-Nazi skinhead remains far from extinct, and the followers of Che Guevara or fans of hip-hop music constitute subcultural minorities that, more often than not, become hyper-visible precisely against a more conventional background. Yet these emergent forms of right-extremist expression have undeniably gained acceptance in and come to be perceived as belonging to the groups that gather in political or cultural events, or at train stations and shopping malls entrances. Rather than describing a sweeping and radical transformation of style and cultural identifications, then, these changes gestured to important reconfigurations in relations of difference and equivalence through which collectives and their others become constituted in today’s extreme right, and which have witnessed a proliferation of meanings as they absorbed and accommodated new elements and forms. The fact remains, however, that nowadays NPD enthusiasts and Kameradschaft members might look, walk, and talk like radical left anti-globalization activists, and that during demonstrations distinguishing them from the Antifa crowds that vocally—sometimes violently—protest against them may prove all but impossible.

Grandpa was SS, Dad was Stasi, I’m BFC

So far, we have seen how hegemonic discourses articulate the past of the GDR with that of Third Reich, or the figure of the Ossis with that of the (neo-) Nazi; and we have also examined the transformations that were motivated by the upheaval of unification in the groups that compose the sphere of right extremism in today’s Germany. In this last section I would like to briefly explore those unexpected quotidian moments in which being Ossi converges with being Rechte, in other words, in which subjects formulate their Ossi-Being in terms of Rechte-Being, and vice versa. If in diverse contexts and employing varied discursive strategies state apparatuses equate the GDR with National Socialism, the Stasi with the Gestapo, or the PDS with the NPD, their hegemonic constructions are echoed as these two horizons merge into a single specter in a variety of everyday situations. Far beyond the institutional walls of government agencies, the mass media, or the academic community, outside too of the artifacts of knowledge that they produce and propagate, such images and imaginations circulate, traverse, and ultimately permeate the manners in which the production and presentation of selves unravel. For subjects that inhabit the places in which such convergences emerge, they become taken for granted, naturalized relations of indexical proximity. In third-league soccer matches, for example, black leather jackets display the GDR flag next to favorite neo-Nazi symbols: an iron cross, the digits 88, or the black sun. Elsewhere GDR hats can be spotted shading pendants with miniature representations of Thor’s hammer, a much beloved jewelry

27 The iron cross was the Reich’s badge of honor; the number 88 stands as an encrypted acronym for the illegal “Heil Hitler.” H being the 8th letter in the alphabet; and finally the “Black Sun” was an SS symbol.
piece in extreme right circles. And gothic script Ostberlin (East Berlin) coats half covering banned insignia shirts are likewise observable. Or, sharing in an altogether different medium of circulation and consumption, seated under a canopy outside a train station kiosk that serves as a regular meeting place for cliques of right-extremists, two young persons sip on beers while transferring ring-tones between their cellular phones: a sound-clip of a childlike female voice talking about killing all the blacks and the Jews, another of an address by the character Derek from the movie American History X dubbed into German, a techno mix with shouts of Deutschland Sieg Heil, and the melody of the national hymn of the GDR.

Such momentary flashes of visual and auditory conjunctions entail and constitute relations of proximity between the two historical horizons towards which their respective elements gesture. The same merging appears in less incidental and more articulate forms in nostalgic narratives of historical memory. Here, shifters such as damals (then) or früher (before) constitute a temporal distance at the other end of which lies an amorphous past in which red and brown blend indistinguishably. “Everything was better before,” state people hardly old enough to have acquired their own childhood memories of the GDR. More often than not, inquiries into what damals or früher might more precisely signify in this context—which chronological eras span their scope—reveals a non-differentiated and non-specifiable past. Its meaning becomes constituted strictly in terms of non-identity with a perceived present and its image emerges as saturated with nostalgia: “earlier,” “simply before,” or “the way things once were.” Questions about the sources of such memories generally elicit similarly vague replies: “everybody says so and therefore it can’t be entirely wrong,” so goes a typical response. Upon further investigation “everybody” turns out to consist of grandparents, parents, and other kin, or of older relatives of friends. They relate their recollections in intimate contexts, at the dinner table, in private conversations, while watching TV, or at family gatherings: from grandfather, tales of brotherhood, sacrifice, and honor, and from father, stories of full employment, low prices, and few immigrants. Hence perhaps the print that decorated the T-shirt of a fan of BFC Dynamo, a Berlin soccer club once strongly associated with the Stasi and nowadays infamous as a stronghold of neo-Nazi hooligans. It read, “Grandpa was with the SS, dad was with the Stasi, I’m with BFC Dynamo.” Beyond the family context, the circulation of such narratives may also be traced to a neighborhood elderly home, where some residents still remember and talk nostalgically about the war. Or to a routinely frequented train station kiosk or park corner, where older men, many of them chronically unemployed or

“transition losers” in vernacular terminology, discuss how cheap beer used to be. GDR hats and neo-Nazi garments dot their young audience, whose employment prospects scarcely appear any better. It may therefore come as hardly surprising that many young NPD enthusiasts or Third-Reich admirers declare unhesitatingly their desire to see the Berlin Wall rebuilt. Unification, distilled in the image of the demolition of the Wall, emerges here as the temporal partition that separates a disquieting “now” from a nostalgic “then” and whose reversal holds the promise of a return.

Conclusion

The attentive crowd in the room appears mostly middle-aged and older, and the rows of folding chairs look toward an elevated panel at which a number of experts and public figures are seated. They have congregated here to inform concerned locals about the alarming level of extreme right activity in their East Berlin neighborhood and to debate appropriate strategies for countering what they perceive as worrying recent trends. As the last of the speakers concludes the mediator opens the stage for questions and comments from the audience. Immediately numerous people raise their hands. The question is raised of why the state abstains from criminalizing the entire range of these groups, their political activities, their cultural practices; another person condemns the failure of schools to impart to their students an adequate understanding of history and the fundamental values of humanism; yet another would like to encourage active civil engagement and to enhance the alertness of fellow residents. The panelists respond to each, bringing forward examples and sharing their knowledge. One indicting voice remains unanswered, indeed unnoticed, left to dissipate in the ongoing stream of remarks, queries, and replies; that of an animated man who, rising to his feet, proclaims, “it came from the West, fascism, from Munich, where they started, from the USA, where they are free to do as they wish.”

Out of the cacophony of voices that come to bear on Rechtsextremismus, on Ossis, Wessis, or on the unification in today’s Germany a hegemonic discourse nevertheless coheres, one that renders utterances as that quoted above illegible, if not laughable: clearly, fascism could not have come from the West; instead, it is right extremism that has come from the East. The present article has sought to illuminate these hegemonic constructions of otherness and to expose the discursive operations through which they give rise to particular imaginations of social and political landscapes, to a sequence of relations of difference and equivalence, and to a set of analogies and exclusions. But it has also aimed to bring to light the
interpellating force that hegemonic discourses entail: to uncover how they induce certain perceptions and productions of self and how they foreclose others. These forms of being that they subject, negotiate and articulate their varied—and at times divergent—exclusions. These processes, importantly, always proceed under asymmetrical power relations. Their erasures and silences just as much as their enunciations outline the positions from which voices may speak and from which subjects may act. Put differently, they define the spectrum of possible identities. In post-unification Germany, such a position has been constructed and reserved for the conjunction of the right extremist and the Ossi, and its call indeed has been answered.

Works Cited
