Placing the Extremes: Cityscape, Ethnic ‘Others’ and Young Right Extremists in East Berlin

NITZAN SHOSHAN
University of Chicago, USA

ABSTRACT
Based on fieldwork in young right extremist street milieus in East Berlin, this article aims to advance debates on the European far right by approaching my subjects as intricately embedded within German society and within a broader ethnicization of political identities. The politics of young right extremists, I argue, hinge upon senses of place and sensualities of otherness that weave ethnic stereotypifications into geographies of difference in the multi-ethnic city. Particularly, right extremist subjectivities rely upon the figure of an ethnicized collectivity of ‘Turks and Arabs’. In turn, the quotidian right extremist negotiation of a racist nationalism and a multi-ethnic landscape reveals itself to mimic far broader European debates on immigration and cultural toleration, breaching the presumed boundaries that ostensibly define right extremism as a distinct political domain. The ethnographic purview shows how ultra-nationalists live out rather than resolve the contradictions of a situated bigoted politics and questions conventional approaches to European racist nationalisms that employ abstract political categories.

KEY WORDS: right-extremism, urban space, ethnicity, tacism, Berlin

Introduction
A bony 20-year old with short, light hair and a brash attitude, Sebastian1 belongs to a clique that routinely congregates at a small public square in a GDR era high-rise neighbourhood on the southeastern fringes of Berlin. He lives with his mother and subsists on the remittances of a mandatory welfare-for-work programme. His daily life unfolds largely in his neighbourhood, dubbed the ‘Ghetto’ throughout the district for blatantly signaling rapid post-reunification socio-economic decline. He spends his time at friends’ apartments, at the public square or here in Little Istanbul, a local Turkish restaurant-bar where he and his friends Danny and Klaus take turns at the slot machines as we sit to chat on an August afternoon. Flipping through his wallet he exposes an election sticker of the National Democratic Party of Germany2 (Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands, NPD) attached to its inner lining and pauses briefly, as if ascertaining that I perceive the careful provocation. The cautiously placed sticker more or less summarizes his formal political commitments.

Some three months earlier he and a friend were chased ‘with carving knives’ and banned from Little Istanbul after rioting and threatening its owners. Such incidents recur every so often, but invariably end with the renewal of amicable relations
Sebastian, exchanging jokes with waiters who serve beers to our table. Before long we turn to politics. True to form, immigration and foreigners top his list of grievances: ‘I would start by prohibiting and shutting down all of their businesses,’ he declares, ‘but sooner or later all foreigners living here should leave the country.’ I inquire why, considering their views, he and his friends favour Little Istanbul over nearby ‘German’ restaurant-bars. ‘One simply gets used to it,’ he replies, ‘and besides,’ he adds in a confession all the more astonishing for coming from a German ultra-nationalist, ‘the beer here tastes better.’

Sebastian and his peers navigate a shifting, heterogeneous landscape where, even in the Ghetto, they must constantly live out an inevitable proximity with ‘others’ they perceive as threatening. This predicament of German ultra-nationalists at the start of the twenty-first century reflects in turn far broader processes that have reconfigured relations of alterity in urban contexts and have redrawn both political visions and quotidian habits. Observers of the extreme right have recently documented a drastic proliferation of lifestyles and cultural identifications as ultra-nationalists have incorporated globally circulating fashions (Schröder, 2001; Staud, 2005). Debates on these transformations have often focused on internal mechanisms and machinations, the instrumental strategies of ‘endogenous’ actors such as cultural producers, organized groupings, activists or politicians (Brodkorb & Schmidt, 2002; Röpke & Speit, 2004). While helpfully illuminating the organizational structures and political agendas that have buttressed cultural reconfigurations on the extreme right, such analyses have sometimes occluded the thorough embeddedness of racist nationalisms in their contemporary social contexts.

Far from being isolated domains, locally situated right extremist milieus present an ambiguous and porous field and a constant intermingling with other, equally diffuse milieus. On the streets of East Berlin it is as if the boundaries of right extremism dissolve into thin air, and the more emphatically so the more one attempts to fix one’s analytical gaze upon them: individuals and cliques come and go, legally banned neo-Nazi songs and overtly ‘leftist’ music are enjoyed side by side, Will Smith receives as much veneration as Edward Norton, violent felons sit together with peaceful clean-cut friends and formal political commitments range from disillusioned indifference to extra-parliamentary militancy, from the NPD or German People’s Union Party (Deutsche Volksunion, DVU) to the Christian Democrats (CDU), the Social Democrats (SPD), or even the former Greens party leader Joschka Fischer, who after all ‘was also a hooligan once, no?’

Based on ethnographic research with young right extremist street milieus in East Berlin, my goal in this article is to advance debates in the field by approaching extreme right phenomena as intricately embedded both within German society and within broader contemporary processes. Particularly, my focus will be on the growing proximity to, and proliferating encounters with, alterity in the urban everyday of Sebastian and his peers. Their senses of place and sensualities of otherness, I will argue, weave political significations about ethnic groups into geographies of difference in the tangible fabric of the multi-ethnic city. Within the contemporary ethnicization and culturalization of politics and difference at large, ultra-nationalist subjectivities in Germany crucially hinge upon the singular figure of an ethnicized collectivity of ‘Turks and Arabs’. Their constructions of this embodied alterity rely on somatic modalities—visual, auditory, olfactory—that suture stereotypifying narratives and that shape urban landscapes. My analysis will draw on semiotic approaches from linguistic anthropology, which will reveal the inherent emplacement of embodied alterity and explain how this emplacement incorporates a constitutive indeterminacy that allows the negotiation of everyday proximity.
The ethnographic purview shows especially well how, in Little Istanbul and elsewhere, ultra-nationalists live out rather than resolve the contradictions of a bigoted politics. In doing so, it illuminates the limits of conventional approaches to European racist nationalisms that employ abstract, conceptual categories. As I shall discuss at the end of the article, the negotiation of a racist nationalism and a multi-ethnic landscape among right extremists emulates and ventriloquizes far broader German and European debates on immigration and cultural toleration. This reproduction of ‘mainstream’ idioms breaches the presumed boundaries that ostensibly define right extremists as a distinct political collectivity.

Landscapes of Otherness

Authors have noted contemporary transformations in processes of identity production across the world. On the one hand, these changes have been linked with reconfigurations in regimes of production, consumption and marketing under post-Fordist or global capitalism (Friedman, 2003; Harvey, 2001). On the other hand, recent decades have witnessed drastic transmutations in idioms of essentialization through the broad ethnicization of politics (Alonso, 1994; Hale, 2005). Around the globe ethnic alterity has been encountered as the material incarnation of the abstract processes of global capitalism, at times with brutal consequences (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001; Holmes, 2000). Throughout Europe the political terrain has realigned around the trope of immigration, and more precisely around a cluster of stereotypifications of ethnicized Muslim minorities (Asad, 2003; Bunzl, 2005). Meanwhile, whether as institutionalized discrimination or spontaneous bigotry, racism has been repackaged in cultural terms (Pred, 2000).

In Little Istanbul Danny gestured towards the Turkish staff as he grumbled about ‘foreign cultures’. For him and other right extremists with whom I conducted my fieldwork immigration unquestionably stands as the most salient political horizon, far beyond the memory of World War II, the eclipse of welfarism or Jewish conspiracy theories. For most it provides the very yardstick by which they assess political difference. ‘Leftists are for foreigners and rightists are for Germans’ is by far their most common rendering of the political spectrum. Karl, an 18-year-old who embodied the right extremist appropriation of popular consumer identities and who belonged with a politically organized social clique, pronounced that:

left and right don’t mean much ... the left is against the state and the right is against the state, only, the left is against the right because the right is against foreigners but the right at the same time is against the left ... actually they’re both the same, only, out of ten opinions both sides have only one [i.e., immigration] that diverges, but otherwise they’re the same.

The notion that idle workers abuse the resources of the welfare state haunted Karl’s world: ‘out of 100% of foreigners one can really throw out 95% because, well, [only] the other 5% want to work and accomplish something here.’ His take on the EU was surprisingly upbeat, yet he expressed misgivings about its expansionary vision, an apprehension that ultimately revolved singularly around Turkey’s membership bid. Karl fashioned his objections in an economic idiom (‘only countries that would be useful’ should be included), by geographical criteria (‘Turkey is mostly not directly in Europe’) and through human rights standards (‘they still practice stoning ... and capital punishment’). Yet the
subtext underscoring his position quickly surfaced: ‘if Turkey became part of the EU then anyone could travel as they wished and then of course they would all come to Germany . . . and already more and more [Turks and Arabs] are always coming here.’ The menace that Turkey’s possible entry into the EU spells for Karl and his peers finds its root not in abstract economic, geographical or human rights criteria but rather in situated perceptions of an ethnically heterogeneous here and now.

Their ubiquitous talk of ‘foreigners’ and ‘immigrants’ expresses a careful differentiation of ethnic stereotypes. In Karl’s universe ‘Chinese’7 are ‘quiet’ and ‘always work hard,’ while Russians ‘also work well . . . usually at construction sites, because they are naturally stronger’ and Africans too are hardworking and quiet. His rants about foreigners turn out to target an ethnically marked Middle Eastern population: ‘generally it’s really just these Turks and Arabs who don’t work,’ he said, ‘[who] are outside all day . . . always making trouble, like robbing people or threatening or stabbing people.’ An ethnicized Middle Eastern otherness, then, has become the crux of political identifications for German right extremists today.

Cityscape and Somatic Modalities of Alterity

Karl and his peers encounter this population as an undifferentiated group somatically identifiable through sensual criteria. In the late capitalist ‘ethnic city’ (Low, 1996) boundaries correspond to relations of difference that are negotiated in everyday situations of proximity through perceptive sensibilities. Visual regimes define an embodied semiotics of recognition that comprises not only such manifest indices as skin colour but also the architectonics of bodily demeanors, the stylistics of fashion or stereotypified perceptual hygienics. Food serves as a trope for organizing sensual indices of taste and smell, which emplace alterities in specific sites in urban space. Auditory sensibilities territorialize otherness through tropes of foreign language, unfamiliar music and peculiar sounds.

The somatic labour of differentiation in proximity obtains even in the relatively homogeneous areas where I conducted my fieldwork. Karl’s neighbourhood, Johannisthal, for example, sits at the heart of the district and has often been characterized as a fear zone8 by immigrant groups, anti-racist non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and anti-fascist organizations. Yet in the public park the gazes of right extremists who congregate regularly around benches often encounter the figures of Muslim women with their heads covered strolling about. The neighbourhood’s central avenue is dotted with businesses that embed a variety of ethnicized indices into the local experience of consumption and commodified leisure. Boundaries materialize fleetingly in the arbitrary encounters of an urban everyday and then dissipate, for example at nodes in the urban fabric, such as bus and tram stops. The presence of a pair of persons of Middle Eastern appearance at a bus stop would only exceptionally draw verbal commentary. However, the sensitive observer would not fail to identify the shifting gazes of bystanders who, in their own external appearance (for example via a rightist skinhead dress code), radiate a right extremist identification.

Uta illustrates well the somatic weaving of an ethnicized urban landscape. Once a member of the social milieu of Sebastian and his peers in the Ghetto, at 21 years old she had meanwhile relocated with her boyfriend. Her most pressing challenge consisted of repaying long-standing debts and maintaining a balanced budget on the low remittances that she and her boyfriend received from their state-funded vocational training programmes, a daunting task that demanded endless and protracted bureaucratic encounters. Immigration, wide-open borders and foreigners abusing the welfare system
top her list of political concerns. For her too ‘immigration’ distills a particular ethnic
collectivity: the rest of the immigrant groups, she said, ‘are not so many ... it’s not
over-settled (ubersiedelt) or too bad, but especially those Turks and Arabs and all of that,
everything that’s this one type (Sorte), that’s too over-settled, it’s just too much.’ Close
behind immigration is criminality, its intolerable levels in her view traceable to juridical
leniency and luxurious prisons. Immigration and criminality conveniently merge for her in
the figure of the ‘criminal foreigner’ as the embodiment of Germany’s woes.

Uta’s image of the state betrays a profound sense of institutionalized bias in favour of
‘foreigners’ and against ‘Germans’. She grumbled:

Sometimes you get treated like you’re the last piece of crap ... too many foreigners
is not good ... you see it nowhere else ... but here they want to hand everything to
the Turks on a silver platter and everything must be provided for them.

She complained that idle ‘foreigners’ easily obtained inordinate amounts of money from
the state while hard working ‘Germans’ like herself had to navigate bureaucratic hurdles in
order to afford basic necessities or that a minor brawl won her an unusually harsh
punishment in her view, whereas violent, drug trafficking, multiply convicted Turks
received unjustifiably lenient sentences. She resented the public funding of mosques and
voiced particular anger about immigrants who failed to master German and thus,
according to her, created discrimination against native Germans in the labour market,
where employers increasingly favoured multilingual workers.

Through various stories Uta narrated a quotidian friction with ‘Turks and Arabs’: a fight
at the shopping mall, threats at a court-mandated anti-violence seminar or incidents at
the vocational school (a stabbing, harassment by classmates, loud Turkish music and
conversation that obstructed her studies). Like Karl, she avoided areas of the city that she
perceived as excessively foreign. Her narratives form discursive renderings or ‘spatial
syntaxes’ (de Certeau, 1984) of the cityscape that authorize a geography of alterity.
The schools she attended, her anti-violence seminar and the shopping mall mark areas of
the city as ethnically different and inseparably, dangerously threatening. This
territorialization of difference is imbricated in and generated through a web of somatic
modalities that incorporate alterity into material things:

A friend of mine also lives in Neukölln and I’m happy that I have to walk only 5 minutes
[from the train station] to her place and the same going back, and that’s okay, but I would
never settle there, never, it stinks there so badly for me, when you enter the hallway of
her building sometimes it smells like garlic, sometimes it smells stale, and here it
doesn’t stink so bad, perhaps we cook with different spices, that’s possible, but the
Turks, oh no, even when you walk down the street every kebab place smells differently.

Such sensual evocations of otherness reiterate across the groups with which I conducted
my research. Karl for example complained that:

there are many [Germans] who already start to talk like they always do, weird
sounds like ts ts [tongue clicks], I’m sure you know it ... ts ts, they always do that,
always after every word, very strange. Or, they make their own dialect, this Turkish
German (Turkdeutsch), that’s quite terrible.
Linguistic otherness in particular seems to articulate with perceptions of institutionalized discrimination, as the case of Ole illustrates. Tall, large bodied and dressed in hooligan fashion, 19-year-old Ole was completing his vocational training as an electrician. His clean slate appeared at odds with his lifestyle. An integral part of a violent geography that cultivated a non-violent habitus, he at once invited and subverted generic classifications. In a universally familiar alibi for racism he cited his relations with ‘foreign’ colleagues at his vocational programme and with a local kebab vendor. He sought to further temper the racist undertones of his laments about Germany’s immigration policy and the vices of immigrants in the country by disavowing hostility to foreigners who work, pay taxes and speak German. Ole thus performs common strategies for negotiating racist nationalism and a heterogeneous everyday: equating ‘foreigners’ with a Middle Eastern ethnic collectivity, postulating a moral distinction between useful and parasitic immigrants, suspending political convictions for individual relations in his immediate environment, and all the while evoking ethnically inflected tropes of violence, criminality, idleness and abuse of the welfare system.

Ole’s gravest concern revolved around linguistic alterity, a problem he articulated through encounters in institutional settings of state bureaucracy (e.g. the employment or welfare offices) where people ‘should be able to talk German and not with their hands and feet, because many go there and [with] ‘I no understand’ they already win [what they want].’ Foreign words, broken speech, bodily gestures and an incapacity to speak German fluently in institutions governing the dispensation of public resources emerged for him as enabling an unfair access to and abuse of these resources.

Auditory signs interlaced with visual markers of otherness in his perception of the urban landscape:

[I dislike Neukölln] first because of the high ratio of foreigners, many youth gangs that are not of German origin … and also because a lot [there] is dilapidated, I also see a lot of poverty, and that’s not pretty.

The visual markers of embodied alterity intertwine here with an aesthetics of urban form in a manner that associates immigration, criminality, poverty, unsightliness and threat. At stake for Ole are not concrete negative experiences but rather a perceptual/aesthetic ordering of immaterial, yet clearly evident, boundaries: ‘[it’s not that] I was assaulted or harassed there, which is something that of course could happen anywhere, it’s just that there’s a border for me there that I don’t like to cross.’ Ole’s tirades about ‘asylum shelter Germany’ (Asylheim Deutschland) ultimately concern not legal codes, government policies or statistical measures about the influx of immigrants and refugees, but rather how the latter appear to the ‘ordinary person’:

it’s fine if people come, but it can be pushed too far … it shouldn’t stand open for everyone, which is somehow the way it appears to us right now, even if the law prescribes something else or says something else or equally with the statistics, but to people on the street it looks nevertheless different.

Rooted in quotidian experience and articulated through somatic modalities, Ole’s perception of alterity hinges on how foreign presence ‘appears to us,’ how it looks ‘to people on the street’—not how ‘people on the street’ think about it but literally how they tangibly sense it.
The Spatial Configuration of Strangeness

For Ole, Karl and Uta the geography of alterity gains life through the sights, sounds and smells that permeate the city and that become attached to tangible sites in the physical landscape: streets, neighbourhoods, offices of state bureaucracy, vocational schools, restaurants, shopping malls and so on. These sensual modalities weave into their imagination of particular locations a strangeness that in turn appears as an inherent quality of these places’ material being. Their territorialization of alterity operates through an intricate articulation of regions, sites, boundaries and circulations, generating multilayered spatial orderings.

At times it appears as a relatively stable classification of bounded territories. For example, the districts of Kreuzberg and Neukölln invariably surfaced as the incarnation par excellence of spatial negativity in the cityscape. As such, they mirror the obverse not of familiar spaces but of fantasies about them. Thus, while permeating familiar spaces, the maladies that frustrate these fantasies (immigrants, disorder, dilapidation, criminality, violence, unemployment, etc.) nevertheless remain foreign to them and find their natural home in Kreuzberg and Neukölln. Yet the territorial delimitation of strangeness must always come to terms with the inherent porosity of boundaries. We therefore find pervasive spatial aversions to areas perceived as too close to and, hence, already polluted by Kreuzberg and Neukölln: ‘Treptowerpark is on the edge of Kreuzberg, it already starts there that different looking, strange people come’ said Karl.

This contaminating infusion in turn inflects a far more vague geographical imaginary that hinges upon an elusive East–West ordering of the city. Kreuzberg and Neukölln feature here not only as particular negative spaces but also as emblematic of the West at large. The domestication of strangeness through its spatial enclosure becomes at this point highly precarious, for the territorialization of East and West lacks even the semblance of boundaries on which it could rely for valence. The political frontier once starkly marked by the Wall has evaporated into a misty, ethereal geography. Its precise course is a mystery to virtually all the young people I met in my research. The distinction between East and West, therefore, takes on a variety of different outlines that territorialize safety and danger, familiarity and strangeness, comfort and uneasiness. Invariably they trace incisions that fall to the ‘east’ of where the Wall once stood, but just how far varies greatly. For some such ‘Eastern’ districts as Mitte, Prenzlauer-Berg and Friedrichshain have become de facto indistinguishable from the West. For many the East–West boundary resurfaces within their own district, tracing a fractal recursion (Irvine & Gal, 2000) of the geographical idiom through which they imagine the wider urban landscape.

Axel was a harmless, clean-cut 16-year-old teenager when I met him. Until not long before, however, he was a key figure in the local scene of militant, organized right extremists. In his rendering of the cityscape Neukölln figured as a heart of darkness whose maladies centrifugally encroached eastward into the landscapes of his own life-world. The western fringes of his district, adjacent to Neukölln, had already become in his view a nest of ‘Ghetto people’ and violent foreigners. However, these polluting influences had meanwhile percolated farther into his own neighbourhood, Johannisthal:

lately I see in Johannisthal too many people running around who make trouble . . . who provoke and harass people on the street . . . [they are] young bullies who think they’re some young gangsters, like for example they think they come from the Bronx in America, they think they have to create a ghetto here in Johannisthal.
Boundaries in the urban geography appear here as interfaces for flows rather than as restrictive borders. The substances they filter become, as it were, diluted as they proceed away from their origin, as in the cascading progression of strangeness from Neukölln to Johannisthal. For Elsa, an enthusiast of Germanic mythology who was intimately linked with both politically organized and unorganized right extremist circles in the district, these flows had seeped farther on. Under pressure from her parents she was looking to move out of their apartment into one of her own. Her painstaking search for an apartment drew a progressive gradation of strangeness that ran through the district. Her view of her home neighbourhood temporalized space as a process of continuous contamination. Once peaceful and quiet, she said, the area has degenerated as it gradually absorbed the spirit of Neukölln, immediately to its west. Violence, crime and ‘bad people’ (read persons of Middle Eastern appearance) have become preponderant. This unabated eastern spread of strangeness left her with ever scarcer and more distant places for refuge. Despite their remoteness, their inferior public transportation infrastructure and their poorer consumption and leisure offerings, she showed interest only in the districts’ eastern quarters, and the farther to the east they stood the more they seemed to appeal to her.

The fluidity of the East–West ordering of alterity revealed itself tellingly one unusually hot morning as we lingered outside a train station kiosk on the very southeastern perimeter of this southeastern district: Sylvia, Robert, Meier, Norman and Martina, all some 20 years old, and Michael and Kurt, in their late twenties and mid thirties, respectively. The station area served its sleepy residential vicinity as a transportation hub and a consumption centre. Below the raised train tracks a wooden hut housing a kiosk shop constituted a local institution for several groups: older customers, long unemployed, took their place by the outdoors tables in the late morning; commuters regularly stopped by for a drink to mark the break between labour and leisure; and, beginning in the late afternoon, gender-mixed crowds of adolescents and young adults congregated there. Not entirely gratuitously, the latter group had granted the kiosk fame as a neo-Nazi den. If they transformed it from a charmless wooden shack into a pilgrimage site for abject youths, the kiosk in turn constituted those that it gathered under its roof. For many among them it was indeed where they had turned properly nationalist, a site politically formative in its quotidian rhythms, which mediated the circulation of narratives, the consolidation of solidarity and the inculcation of a particular habitus, including the coordinates of an imagined geography of alterity.

On that morning Michael, divorced and father of three, lost his cheerful composure after Martina disclosed that his current girlfriend had been cheating on him. He ranted about his misfortunes with women, extolled his fulfilment of his fatherly duties and, finally, complained of the perils of raising children in today’s dangerous social environment, pointing at the pervasiveness of drug dealing as particularly worrisome. Here Kurt, a toothless, thin and starkly unkempt regular of the kiosk who relocated some years earlier from Berlin to a satellite town a few train stops farther into the Brandenburg countryside, intervened. He described his abandonment of the city as an exile of sorts, an eastward flight from western afflictions that have steadily seeped into landscapes once familiar but meanwhile metamorphosed into alien places. This southeastern corner of Berlin’s southeastern-most district marked for him a last frontier, the western rim of his universe. The beyond materialized for him as irredeemable and insufferable, traversed by evils and overpopulated with immigrants.

Nods of agreement responded to his appraisal and an exchange on the idleness, criminality and welfare dependency of an oversized immigrant population followed.
In this interactional entextualization (Silverstein, 1997) of space (an East–West ordering),
of time (decline and creeping encroachment) and of difference (women, immigrants),
geography and temporality intertwined with and bound together toxic social maladies:
criminality, idleness, illegal drugs, violence, dependency and infidelity.

Boundaries and Identities

The territorialization of difference in the cityscape thus follows a universal schema while
revealing irregular contours. Yet how should we conceptualize the relationship between
embodied forms of difference and their territorialization in the urban landscape? Are they
determined as it were externally to their spatial configuration and generative in turn of
boundaries that reflect their flows across the cityscape? Or else, if spatial forms already
insinuate themselves into their process of becoming, how are they constituted? Such
questions appear particularly thorny in the case of embodied alterity, whose corporeality
grants it an irresistible—and insuppressible (Fanon, 1967)—force that refit it as material
presence. The facticity of somatic sensibilities endows embodied alterity with an ontic
compulsion that would appear to precede any spatial determination.

The anthropological literature has explored the relation between identities and contexts,
and recent writings have especially attended to the manners in which new regimes of
legibility have generated novel uncertainties and inspired ethnic conflicts. Thomas Hansen
(2002) has described naming—in Mumbai—as a fixating act at once productive of ethnic
identity and contingent upon its indeterminacy, a struggle to stabilize the elusive scenery
within which indeterminate identities unfold. Allen Feldman (1991) has argued that a
history of (un)mixing, a spatialized ethnic division of labour, an interface of physical
barriers and a territorialization of death together offer an interpretative framework for
concrete acts of ‘telling’ in Belfast. In both cases ethnic alterity becomes embodied
through the stabilization of contextual determinations. Arjun Appadurai (1998) has
insisted that new orders of indeterminacy posit the ethnic body itself as the site and target
for brutal ‘vivisectionist’ techniques that seek to tame its growing instability, producing
personified bodies out of the large-scale abstractions of a rapidly globalizing present.
In contrast, Jonathan Friedman (2003) has viewed ethnic conflict today as primarily
concerned with increasingly elusive boundaries, in the struggle over which violence
targets plainly recognizable others with the aim of eradication, not identification.

It appears, indeed, that antagonistic relations between ethnicized collectivities take
a plurality of context-dependent forms with varying degrees of ambivalence about
boundaries and identities. Yet I would argue that its apparent facticity notwithstanding, the
encounter with embodied alterity always entails an inherent ambiguity that can only be
domesticated tentatively through a situated dialectic of body and scenery. In order to
understand why this is so, let me at this point consider two moments of the social
constitution of embodied alterity as a form of difference. To begin, before we encounter
particular corporeal markers as alterity they must first become mobilized as signifiers of
otherness and rendered perceptible to our somatic sensibilities. The tongue clicks about
which Karl complained or the odours that upset Uta emerge within socially mediated
processes as signifiers of some incommensurable alterity, while other differences remain
imperceptible or meaningless to them. But secondly, the construction of embodied alterity
relies upon semiotic processes of stereotypification, themselves embedded in uneven
social relations, through which concrete markers, as signifiers, become attached
to particular signifieds. In the constitution of this indexically iconic relation appearances are collapsed into essence and take the form of an immediate somatic materiality. Yet the semiotic binding of corporeal markers (as signifiers) and stereotypified tropes (as signifieds) remains a tenuous, socially mediated and context-driven process.

The contingency of embodied alterity as the enactment of an indexically iconic relation upon context implies that stereotypification depends upon situated, sometimes interactional, interpretations that invoke notions of place, senses of time and ideologies of difference. Thus, beyond curbing the racist impression of his proclamations about immigrants, Ole’s description of his amicable relationship with his kebab vendor ventriloquized a particular chronotopic (Bakhtin, 1998) articulation of time (working hours), place (the Turkish eatery) and social roles (an ethnic division of labour). For many right extremists this chronotope defines ‘Middle Eastern’ alterity as welcome behind the counter of a kebab stand, where it blends, so to speak, harmoniously into the scenery.

In the exchange about immigrants at the train station kiosk Martina invoked the Bangladeshi owner of a cheap eatery across the railway tracks to posit a distinction between abusers of the welfare system and those who worked and paid their taxes. In doing so she voiced a social Darwinist assessment of alterity, a form of racism pervasive among right extremists and contingent upon understandings of place, time and activity. When Karl contrasts the upright Vietnamese, whom ‘one sees everywhere during the day but [not] outside in the evenings,’ with the parasitical Turks, who ‘are outside the whole day,’ his distinction entails a temporal boundary (the working day) that inflects alterity as either virtuous or criminal. At the same time he proclaimed that ‘really any Turk who lives here . . . works, one has a kiosk, the other has his Internet café, a restaurant, a produce shop . . . there are no Turks here who don’t work.’ The same material markers that bind paradigmatic figures of foreigners with social ills seem to stand in other places and times for industriousness and normativity.

Inherent to recognition, then, is an interpretative gesture that encompasses not only markers of difference but also contextual cues that define the terms of encounter. Embodied alterity emerges as thoroughly situated in a tenuous reciprocal constitution of signs and scenery, identities and boundaries. Étienne Balibar (2002, p. 76) argued that borders constitute identities by imposing a forced definition upon them. But at the same time he insisted on the inherent equivocality of borders. Hence, according to Balibar, that which traces the outlines of identity remains itself always indeterminate. Since the signification of alterity relies upon the interpretation of contextual cues, ambiguous boundaries and indeterminate identities cannot but go hand in hand. The very constitution of identity, then, always incorporates an inherent ambivalence.

So far so good. In Neukölln, we are told, Turks are idle criminals while in Schönefeld they are hard working citizens, and immigrants who linger about after working hours cannot be up to anything good. Yet what happens when alterity appears in ambiguous borderlands or in places where it’s not meant to be? The contingency of alterity upon scenery implies that its signification could become impossible under certain circumstances: the signifier (somatically perceptible alterity) could fail to attach to a signified (a stereotypified notion) and remain utterly indecipherable. Alterity, to paraphrase Mary Douglas’s (2002) definition of dirt, may simply appear ‘out of place’, as for example outside the soccer stadium of a local third league team with a reputation for a right extremist fan base, where Elsa, myself and a few others loitered before a match. While her friends chatted Elsa took note of a nearby group of men who were audibly conversing in Turkish and I became captivated by her silent
stare, her wide-open eyes and the look of disbelief on her face. ‘What was that?’ was literally all she could enunciate, loudly and with flabbergasted distress, after they had walked away. In her everyday routines there was nothing outrageous about the presence of foreigners for Elsa: they were simply there as objects of her aversion. But in this eastern corner of the city, outside the stadium and surrounded by skinheads, the Turkish fans struck her as glaringly illegible.

Talking Immigration

Against this out of placeness, Elsa’s distressed astonishment mimicked general forms of encounter with otherness in Germany and in Europe more widely. As material signs of religious/ethnic alterity, mosques seem to enter the perceptual field of broad populations as out of place within it. With some 120 mosques serving a population of over 200,000 Muslims in Berlin (Rohde, 2006), in 2006 construction work commenced on the first mosque in the city’s East. The plans sparked broad protests in which right extremists advocating the immediate deportation of all ‘foreigners’ mingled with mainstream conservatives desperate to appear respectable (Strauss, 2006). According to the newspaper Die Welt the leader of the protests praised himself as a beacon of tolerance as regards his lesbian daughter and Nigerian neighbours but ‘thought it must have been a joke when he read … in the newspaper that a mosque would be built in his neighbourhood’ because ‘no Muslim has ever lived in “his part of the city”’ (Peter, 2007).

For him and many others the struggle centred not on the presence of religious alterity in the city at large, much less in Germany or Europe, but on its perception as out of place in their own district, as a sign illegible within their local scenery that triggered incredulous disbelief and accentuated anxieties. Shari’a law, arranged marriages and women coerced into burkas were all cited as possible scenarios for the imminent future of the neighbourhood. We find analogous outlines in debates about Muslim women’s head covering as ‘out of place’ in schools or public offices (Walzer, 1997).

Elsa’s ‘what was that?’ thus reflects the singularly vital position that immigration has come to occupy in contemporary European politics, permeating debates about social welfare, demographic prognoses, criminality and law enforcement, labour policies, educational reforms, budget allocations and the future of the EU. Certainly, immigrants have long stood as the paradigmatic deviants of modern state power in Europe (Sassen, 1999). Yet recent European discourses about otherness have shifted drastically to focus virtually exclusively on Muslim communities while domesticating a range of other alterities (Bunzl, 2005).

In Germany as elsewhere, (anti-)immigration rhetoric has pervaded mainstream political idioms (Karapin, 1998). Today’s young right extremists enact broadly circulating discourses that have forcefully come to the fore in heated debates on immigration and asylum policies during the 1990s (Halfman, 1997). Regardless of their legal or policy outcomes, these contestations propagated discursive topos that have seeped as citations into the situated politics of right extremists. Their very vocabulary already signalled the difficulties of incorporating the other, who persisted as lexical difference.

The CDU/CSU especially has instrumentalized the question of Turkey’s EU bid in recent election campaigns. In 2004 Angela Merkel, then opposition leader, proposed a popular petition against Turkey’s membership. The idea was swiftly and unceremoniously scrapped, embarrassingly winning its most enthusiastic praise from the DVU and the NPD,
which subsequently put Merkel’s vision into practice. When laying out his objections to Turkey’s EU membership Karl thus cited public deliberations far broader and more articulate than the crude rhetoric of the far-right fringes. At stake for him and his peers, however, was not a European future but the tangible present of their everyday lives.

The trope of ‘criminal foreigners’ has equally reverberated across mainstream media representations and political idioms (Jäger et al., 1998). Paradigmatically, the recent re-election campaign of the CDU governor of the state of Hessen, Roland Koch, centred on immigrant youth crime and called for more heavy handed approaches. Irrespective of its political results, the broad public debate that ensued already authorized the trope of ‘foreigners’ criminality’ through incessant scandalization (see, for example, Sievert & Bittner, 2008; Thorer et al., 2008).

Immigration has also saturated public debates through the tropes of labour (and unemployment) and of demographic anxieties. Both converged marvelously in the CDU candidate Jürgen Rütgers’s campaign slogan ‘Kinder statt Inder’ (‘children instead of Indians’) during the 2000 state elections in North Rhein–Westphalia, which was immediately picked up by the right extremist Republican party. On the left the Labor and Social Justice-the Electoral Alternative (WASG) party leader, Oskar Lafontaine, commented on ‘foreign workers’ (Fremdarbeiter, a phrase carrying National Socialist associations) threatening Germans’ jobs.

The electoral value of such discursive strategies remains questionable, but their contours, as we have seen, repeatedly resurface in the discourse of young right extremists. Their social Darwinism informs the experience of a heterogeneous urban everyday. In this, however, they rest not only upon xenophobic conservatism but equally upon Third Way politics that seek to import hi-tech labour while accelerating the export of deported refugees and which abandon and vilify the socially marginalized.

They reflect, too, the prevalent culturalization of racism. In Germany’s belated and troubled encounter with its heterogeneity difference has become subservient to a vital notion of a German ‘dominant culture’ (Leitkultur) as the infrastructure upon which ornamentations could be tolerated (cf. Borneman, 2002). In turn, the appearance of Islam in today’s Europe as an incommensurable civilizational alterity (Asad, 2003) echoes not only socially marginalized right extremists but also arguments from elite North American universities, as Samuel Huntington’s (1997) work illustrates. Of relevance here also are Huntington’s (2004) more recent fears about the Hispanic threat to America’s Protestant, Anglo-Saxon culture, and particularly about the diversification of linguistic practice. For Huntington Hispanics pose a problem not so much because their cultural isolation may impede integration and foster marginalization, but rather because their linguistic otherness in his view grants them privileged access to resources, a concern expressed by Ole and Uta but equally in parliamentary deliberations on multilingualism, as I witnessed during an internship at the Bundestag.

Conclusion

My argument in this article has been that such public debates about immigration seep not only into right extremist idioms but also into the very manner in which right extremists perceive and construe a landscape of alterity in their daily habits. As the paramount screen against which European societies formulate and perform their differences, discourses about immigration outline schemas that organize the imagination of boundaries and
landscapes and that structure both the place and the out of placeness of alterity in situated local contexts. Among the right extremists with whom I worked the salient political debates about immigration inflect the quotidian experience of late capitalist urban heterogeneity. The bigoted political visions to which they give rise, their claims notwithstanding, do not revolve around abstract postulates of identity. Theirs is a firmly—if misguidedly—locally situated politics. It is politics as a sinister rendering—but a rendering all the same—of the everyday in which they encounter the emergent contours of ethnicized geographies. It is, hence, politics as a paranoid sense of places and landscapes wherein strangeness sediments and encroaches upon the familiar.

Right extremist political parties and ideologues may elaborate categorical platforms and uncompromising visions, but the social milieus to which they appeal and on which they crucially rely live out in full the seismic contradictions of late capitalism in the daily negotiation of their immediate, material worlds. Analytical understandings would therefore search in vain for a practical resolution of these contradictions in the habits of right extremists, much less for a conceptual coherence to their insidious politics. Back at Little Istanbul it was perhaps not gratuitous that Sebastian railed against ‘foreigners’ while praising the beer in his favoured locale, a Turkish restaurant. He and his peers voice not a party programme but rather various amalgamations of broadly circulating idioms. These open a space of ambiguity that also allows precarious modes of (co)existence. The ethnographic focus on emplaced experience thus questions analytical distinctions in the study of right extremism not only in registering inter-discursive circulations between ‘mainstream’ and ‘extreme’, but also by illuminating the locally embedded unfolding of ultra-nationalist politics in today’s Europe.

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Notes

1 All names in the article have been modified to protect the confidentiality of my subjects.
2 The NPD is today’s most prominent extreme right party in Germany.
3 The concept of right extremism constitutes a politically loaded and contentious notion, which I have examined in detail elsewhere (Shoshan, 2008) and will not have the space to expand upon here. I employ it as a ‘local category’, following its actual usage in today’s Germany, rather than as an analytical category. (for scholarly definitions see Butterwegge & Meier, 2002; Schubarth & Stöss, 2001).
4 In the late 1960s and early 1970s Fischer was involved in violent clashes with police forces.
5 Informed by the work of Charles Peirce, these approaches conceive of language—or any medium of meaning—primarily as action and process thoroughly embedded in socio-cultural contexts, rather than as mere communication or as an abstract system of arbitrary relations. Salient to them is the Peircean classification of sign relations: icons (signification by similarity), indices (signification by proximity) and symbols (signification by convention) (see Parmentier, 1994; Peirce, 1960; Silverstein & Urban, 1996).
6 Despite its essentializing ontological claims, I view ethnicity as very much a product and construct of our time and as a political claim rather than a descriptive category. (cf. Brubaker & Laitin, 1998; Calhoun, 2007; Tambiah, 1996).
7 A label by which he and many others designated an East Asian population largely consisting of immigrants of Vietnamese background who arrived in East Germany as workers and remained following reunification.
8 ‘Fear zones’ have been used in Germany to designate areas perceived as especially tainted by right extremist violence and, hence, particularly threatening for groups of potential victims.
The notion of indexical iconicity refers to the manner in which particular features (indices) of a group, e.g. linguistic or cultural characteristics, become their iconic representations, ‘as if they somehow displayed a social group’s inherent nature or essence’ (Irvine & Gal, 2000, p. 37).

The ‘asylum compromise’ of 1993 constituted an official endorsement of the narrative of exaggerated leniency towards refugees. The remainder of the decade witnessed intense conflicts over reforms to Kaiser era citizenship laws and National Socialist era laws governing aliens (Senders, 1996).

For example as ‘foreigners with a German passport’ (Ausländer mit deutschen Pass) or, more collegially, ‘co-citizens’ (Mitbürgers).

References


