

Networks of the ‘Repugnant Other’: Understanding Right-wing Political Mobilization in Germany

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Abstract:

Political scientists and sociologists have long been hesitant in applying frameworks from social movements studies to right-wing collective action. Generally developed for left-wing, progressive, egalitarian movements, concepts like rational mobilization, network analysis and micro-mobilizations are considered an awkward fit for analysis of right-wing political and social groups. This paper argues for the importance of such cross-over analysis on two levels. Methodologically, the paper demonstrates crucial importance of ethnographic fieldwork in study of political groups in order to understand the complexity of internal dynamics of right-wing political parties. Insights are drawn from author’s original fieldwork among rank-and-file members of ‘*Alternative für Deutschland*’ (AfD), a right-wing party in Germany. Substantively, the paper produces a nuanced empirical account of internal dynamics of right-wing mobilization. The paper argues, using insights from the field, that far from being homogenous, irrational and predictive, the actions of right-wing political activists appear to be multi-layered, complex and indeed rational, however onerous to liberal minds.

Key Words: right-wing politics, political ethnography, network analysis, right-wing mobilization, German politics

Introduction:

Traditionally, in political science and sociology, right-wing movements have been primarily conceptualised through the so-called ‘breakdown theories’ (Rydgren 2007; della porta 2008; Caini 2012), while left-wing collective action has been addressed from the perspective of rational mobilisation theories. At the macro-level, right-wing mobilizations were often seen as negative reactions to social crises related to unemployment, immigration and economic uncertainties that resulted out of broad, long term processes of globalisation and modernisation (Lipset 1959; Betz 1994; Heitmeyer 2002; Ignazi 2003). This view persisted also at the micro level, as right-wing actors (voters, sympathizers, activists) were primarily defined as ‘losers of globalisation’ who suffered from social breakdown, loss of status, anomie and ethnic competition (Heitmeyer 1993; Betz 1994; Weinberg 1995; Minkenberg 1998). In brief, these

approaches interpreted right-wing collective action as unreflected reactions to social problems and unsuccessful integration and therefore paid scant attention to their internal organization. This paper provides an empirical corrective to these explanations on two fronts. First, on methodological level, it makes a strong case for ethnographic fieldwork to expand the understanding of internal life of right-wing groups. The internal network of a right-wing party is a source of endless frustration for political scientists. Given the lack of data and dominance of the so-called demand-side frameworks to explain right-wing collective action, the inner world of right-wing parties is often left to deductive speculations and default extensions of right-wing voters' analysis. Drawing upon my ethnographic work on grass root members of 'Alternative für Deutschland' (AfD), a German right-wing party, this paper demonstrates the value of qualitative insights an ethnographic reading can provide on the hitherto uncharted territory of right-wing mobilization. Secondly, on substantive terms, the paper revisits common perceptions about right-wing actors and seeks to complicate their relatively homogenous conceptualisations in academic as well as public debates. Using conceptual toolkit from social movements studies particularly mobilization and network analysis, this paper focuses on interpersonal and organisational networking among AfD members in the east German state of Saxony and explores micro-mechanisms of party building.

The paper is divided into four sections. First section discusses methodology. Second section contextualizes AfD in German political system and builds a preface to empirical analysis. Third section provide a detailed ethnographic account of members' personal and organisational mobilising efforts. The fourth section concludes the findings and sums up the discussion.

1. Methodology:

The present paper derives data from a multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork that I undertook to interact with AfD members and observe party meetings from party's ten district branches (*Kreisverbände*) in Saxony namely Dresden, Leipzig, Chemnitz, Vogtlandkreis, Erzgebirge, Mittelsachsen, Nordsachsen, Görlitz, Zwickau and Meißen from September 2018 to March 2020.¹ The meteoric rise of AfD since its foundation in 2013 has both boggled and bothered

¹ Out of the forty party members and workers I have interacted with closely, eighteen are ordinary party members holding no office within the party or in the local/regional/ national/European parliament. However, they are actively involved in party work in their respective local branches. A further ten (out of forty) are members of local governance bodies. Five are members of Saxon state parliament and two are members of national parliament. Further five are party workers but not members. Nevertheless, they are intimately associated with the party and senior party politicians in Saxony.

the scholarly community. In recent times a number of scholarly accounts have emerged on the party, its voter base and leadership (Bebnowki 201; Grimm 2015; Häusler 2016; Decker 2016; Schroeder 2017; Schwander 2017; Hubert 2018; Arzheimer and Berning 2019 among others). Yet, to my knowledge, till date no academic work on AfD has drawn upon ethnographic fieldwork among party's grass root members. My inquiry began in form of semi-structured interviews with members of the local party executive (*Kreisvorstand*) in Dresden but it soon evolved into more informal lines of interaction in form of lengthy (typically lasting about an hour) one-on-one chats with party members taken place in various locales- their homes, party offices, their private offices, cafes as well as on the side of major party events. An informal referral network (snowballing) emerged, when party members introduced me to their colleagues in either their own branch or other local branches, who were otherwise almost inaccessible to approach as an outsider, given their profound skepticism towards academic community. I also secured access to intra-party group meetings- informal members meet-ups (*Parteistammtische*)² as well as party's public outreach events and members-only brainstorming sessions. In this period, I interacted with forty party members and workers in Saxony and observed over a hundred members during party's internal meetings as well as public events. Indulging in lengthy, unstructured conversations with party members, observing them while at work in party offices, during campaign events, reaching out to members of public as well as socializing among themselves have helped me explore the inner world of the party at close range. These insights are analysed using mobilisation frameworks from social movement studies that emphasise mobilisation and networking skills of actors. Rightist activism is generally believed to fit awkwardly in the theoretical templates developed largely on the basis of progressive, left-libertarian movements (Blee and Creasap 2010). Barring few notable exceptions, concepts like network analysis, mobilization strategies have been rarely applied to right-wing political parties and movements (for exceptions see Koopman 1996; Minkenberg 1998; Art 2011; Caiani et al. 2012). This paper contributes to this trend by highlighting key role of ground level mobilization efforts by the AfD members within and beyond the purview of party organization. By illuminating their 'micro-mobilization contexts' (McAdam 1988), the paper aims to establish the importance of formal and informal associational networks and interpersonal contexts of right-wing party members in shaping their participation in collective action.

2. Successful yet Stigmatized: AfD in Germany

Founded in 2013, AfD rose to prominence in record time. Today, it is represented in all sixteen *Landtage* i.e. state parliaments in Germany and is the largest opposition party in *Bundestag* (national parliament). Besides, the party boasts numerous seats in regional and local

² *Parteistammtische* (henceforth *Stammtisch(e)*) refer to informal, locally held, regular meet-ups of members. Detailed description of them follows in section 4.

representative bodies in the country. The party presence is thus conspicuous, yet barring the top leadership, its members prefer to keep a low profile. “*Nazikeule*” is a reason cited by many for this secrecy. *Nazikeule* is a metaphorical label, a rhetorical tool, which is employed to draw affinities between national socialism and practices of the (right-wing) opponents to criticize their arguments. Nobody wants to be associated with the Nazis, and the charge is particularly damning, not surprisingly, in Germany.

AfD is frequently cited as the anomalous successor of right-wing parties in post-war Germany, because it achieved phenomenal success in national as well as state parliaments that was unmatched by any of its predecessors. Scholars have long noted the absence of a strong right-wing political party in Germany unlike other European countries in post-war era. Several reasons were cited for this apparent ‘anomaly’. Fascism was discredited and disgraced with the end of National Socialist regime in 1945. The West German Constitution, known as *Grundgesetz* or Basic Law put key emphasis on human rights, rule of law and democratic values of liberty and equality. It also created an extensive system of checks and balances to avoid the mistakes of the past. It subscribed to the concept of ‘*wehrhafte Demokratie*’ (militant democracy), which denoted a democracy that steadfastly and proactively defended itself from attacks on its liberal and pluralistic values, even if it meant curtailing basic democratic rights as freedom of speech. A separate office for the protection of the constitution known as *Verfassungsschutz* was created with an extraordinary broad mandate of banning political parties if it deemed them to be extremist or anti-democratic. A five percent hurdle was set for parliamentary representation to avert proliferation of small parties that was one of the key factors responsible for instability of Weimar Republic. Germany’s public culture of atonement and remembrance of Nazi past strongly stigmatizes nationalist narratives of extreme right parties in the country. In contrast to right-wing parties in a number of European countries, members of such political organizations in Germany are not treated as ‘normal’ politicians. Irrespective of their professed claims and party programs, right-wing parties in Germany i.e. generally parties right to centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its Bavarian counterpart Christian Social Union (CSU) have never really been able to escape the long shadow of Nazi past. This implies that they are compelled to articulate their position towards an ideology which has brought death and horrors to millions of Europeans (Berbair 2014). All the new entrants on the political right automatically run the risk of being stigmatized as the heirs of National Socialism. AfD proved no exception. On grounds of its vehement Euroscepticism, virulent anti-immigration stance especially since the European refugee crisis of 2015 and revisionist statements pertaining to Germany’s Nazi past by some of its top leaders, the party is almost unanimously categorized in the radical right or right-wing populist party family by political scientists and sociologists alike (Decker 2016; Häusler 2016; Mounk 2018; Rydgren 2018; Pfahl-Traugher 2019).

Thanks to the stigmatization, it comes as no surprise that ordinary party members prefer to live a life away from the public eye. Given their suspicion towards academia and journalists fearing that the information provided by them will not be used solely for academic purposes (not always without reason), right-wing parties tend to evade and circumspect contacts. This, in turn, has reinforced stereotyped depictions of them as typical right-wing actors with pathological, authoritarian traits (della porta 2008:221; Art 2011:3-6; Caiani et al. 2012:6-9). Characterization of AfD in lay and expert discourses proves no exception. With a conspicuous lack of research on ordinary AfD members, the internal life of the party continues to be a mystery for academicians. Drawing upon insights gained through intimate interaction with party's rank-and-file in Saxony, this paper compares and contrasts the big picture of the party found in public surveys, news accounts and scholarly debates; and complicates the widely monolithic conception of those, who find the idea of AfD compelling and worth fighting for.

3. Personal Networking and Local Embeddedness

I was about to leave the house of *Frank*³ and *Marine*, an elderly couple in a small town in the Saxon countryside, to catch a train to Dresden. It was going to be an arduous journey of more than three hours with two stop-overs. Marine, in her 60s, rushed to put together a travel snack for me. "Come, will make you some sandwich.", she insisted to which I politely said no. "How about some apples?" She hadn't given up. "I have got a couple in my bag," I answered with a smile. After a pause she asked me, "Water?" I pointed at my filled water bottle, that answered her question but failed to stop her line of questioning. "Do you have an umbrella? It's going to get very wet till Dresden." "Yes, I do," I answered realising I had said no to practically everything she had on offer. Her husband Frank, 65, grinned at the back of their cosy living room and quipped, turning to his wife, "*Ach Du*, you know, women always plan ahead. They always think it through!" On this note, I hugged her good-bye and got into Frank's car. He insisted he would drop me to the station and make sure I set off alright.

Frank, a long-standing local politician and an AfD member and his wife Marine are a friendly, elderly couple and loving grandparents of three. Their house nestles neatly in a quiet neighbourhood surrounded by pristine green landscape of a charming small town in southern Saxony. Almost everybody in the town knows him and he is well received not only by lay residents but also by fellow politicians from other parties. The owner of a small Bed and

³ To protect the privacy of the participants pseudonyms are used and they appear in italicized form the first time they are mentioned. Quotation marks are used to indicate insertion of precise words of participants.

Breakfast place in a neighbouring town, where I had stayed for two nights, knows him too and has worked with him on some city development project. The couple has travelled extensively over the world, their most recent visit being to Kenya.

When it comes to characterizing an AfD-politician, the notion of “old white man” is very prominent. This common stereotype is not entirely unfounded and is somewhat confirmed in scholarly accounts which point out disproportionately high share of “experienced men” in AfD leadership (Schroeder et al., 2017, 14-15). In this respect, Frank does ‘fit the demographic’, as social scientists would describe it. Indeed, the majority of the AfD politicians in Saxon state parliament and local councils are white middle-aged men, who belong to an educated bourgeoisie class. Many of them, who I spent time with, belong to highly esteemed professions such as lawyers, professors and doctors confirming the image of the party (particularly in early years) as a *Professorenpartei*- Party of Professors. However, there is also a whole range of professionals engaged in trade and service industry such as insurance, auditing, IT, who are part of the ranks and files of Saxon AfD. A large number of members are small business owners often in the field of remodelling, repair or construction. The party members I interacted with showed an impressive plurality of occupations- from taxi driver to typographer, plumber to school teacher, lawyer to army man and dog trainer to environmental auditor. Some have a calling for art and music, though these creative souls represent a small minority. Professionally, many lead quite a mainstream life. “I am doing pretty OK actually, I recently bought a house, it’s a small one and on house loan but that is quite something in this area,” revealed *Jan*, a young party member from *Erzgebirge*, Saxony’s mining heartland. His big, burly, tattooed body and quiet, mild demeanour matched the appearance of a ‘gentle giant’. *Jan* worked as an ambulance driver and his wife taught German literature in school. “Here in Dresden, life has been pretty good,” admitted *Walter* sitting in his spacious dental clinic in the heart of the city. He was a dental surgeon and the clinic had a constant stream of patients coming in, while we talked. So far, he had noticed no negative impact on his private practice, that his AfD membership might bring to bear. *Walter* wished to remain “*einfacher Parteisoldat*” (mere foot soldier) in the party and had not contested any local or state elections. Although away from the limelight by choice, he was quite a resourceful member of the party. He had donated a small property to the party to use as office space- a fact hardly known in the party circles, till a fellow party member unexpectedly announced it during a local party conference.

In Saxony, AfD has deep roots in a nationalist-conservative subculture that thrives particularly well in party’s rural heartlands. This was attested by many of the members I spoke with, who hailed from less urban areas such as *Erzgebirge*, *Görlitz*, *Zwickau*, *Mittelsachsen* or *Nordsachsen*. When asked, whether he faced any problems due to party membership, a local AfD councilor from one of these regions answered, “On the contrary! I received compliments that I stepped forward to do something for my region”. Many readily admitted that in the “blue

pockets” (alluding to party’s blue colour) of Saxony they had no tragic stories to tell. “I didn’t have to think hard before joining the party,” Jan from Erzgebirge confided in me. He had full support of his wife, at work there were no issues, his father-in-law had been an active supporter of a far-right movement in France, in sum, “there were no qualms”, came his candid revelation. The significant number of *Antifa* (militant anti-fascist) attacks on AfD politicians and their properties in Leipzig or Dresden had no match in Saxon countryside. Sitting in the party office in a small town not far away from Dresden one AfD councillor, (and a proud children’s’ book writer) could not recall a single incident of abuse towards herself or towards her colleagues or party office since the local office was opened.

AfD being a newcomer in German political landscape, many of the party members are new to a political career. However, there was a sizable yet influential minority of members, that I chatted with and saw in action, who had been former members of established parties. A few had played prominent roles in their previous political engagement, which included heading women’s wing of CDU and co-founding regional conservative parties such as *Deutsche Soziale Union* (DSU). Out of fifteen AfD politicians, who won constituency seats in Saxon parliament in 2019, five had formerly belonged to either mainstream conservative CDU or social democratic SPD, parties that have traditionally dominated constituency seats in state and federal elections in Germany. Among the first thirty party list candidates for state election, more than 25% of the aspirants had previous political affiliations with parties ranging from conservative (CDU, DSU), social democratic (SPD) and economic liberal (FDP) milieus. Their exposure to a political organisation meant that they were not suddenly awakened middle-of-the-roaders. In their past, they had gone beyond voting to more active engagement with politics. Now that the AfD enters 7th year of its political existence, party has produced its own batch of politicians with some experience of doing politics for AfD. These were party members who managed to get into city/county council or even in state parliament since 2013 and since then have represented the party in law-making bodies. This pool of so-to-say first generation AfD politicians with “home grown” political expertise complements the seasoned politicians in the party. Moreover, like any other party, local party executive committees (*Kreisvorstände*) as well as state party board (*Landesvorstand*) provide standard intra-party avenues that groom grass root members in skills required for competitive party politics such as public relation, networking with other regional branches, campaign management making them better equipped to take on responsibilities of a public office. Throughout my fieldwork experience I found that political training via membership of local party executive (*Kreisvorstand*) leading to election in city/county council and furthermore at state level was a pretty standard practice, albeit not a pre-requisite. At party conventions, inquiry regarding contribution to local party activity constituted one of the mandatory questions for all prospective electoral candidates for nomination at local or regional level. Aspiring candidates were routinely grilled over their level of participation in party activism by attendees. A large number of nominees in AfD’s sixtyone-

member strong state party list could speak of at least two to four years long engagement in local party committees or council bodies. This underlines the crucial role of political socialization.

In their extensive ethnographic study of Tea Party republicans of the United States, Skocpol and Williamson go beyond the narrow definition of political experience and speak of “civic engagement” of Tea party activists. The authors compellingly argue that active participation in voluntary organisations as well as local chapters of civic movements enabled many tea partiers compensate for their relative inexperience of party politics and gain skills that they readily transferred to political life (2012,36-7). If one is to adopt such broader notion of activism, it would certainly bring many more party members to the fore, especially those who are long term members (in some case also leaders) of several professional organisations long before AfD came into existence. Membership in local sport clubs and honorary engagement in community organisations and local trusts dedicated to conservative themes like *Heimatschutz* (protection of Homeland) or *Denkmalstiftung* (Trust for Monument Protection) has helped many strike deeper roots in their communities. Given the overwhelming presence of *Mittelständler* (small and medium entrepreneurs), many are plugged into various professional organisations- from tourism board to forestry organisation and from technical society of glasswork to business incubators. A few had played an active role in anti-government protests and reformist movements in the final years of German Democratic Republic (GDR) and thus accumulated first-hand experience of protest politics. Given the broad spectrum of voluntary associations in Germany, many members could successfully draw upon diverse forms of civic engagement and hone soft skills that helped them in political life. It is important to note that the linkage was not always without problems. For some living in cities, given the stigma attached to AfD, especially those living in big cities their party membership caused, at times, some disquiet within the organisations and in extreme case led to forceful resignation. Party activists in rural conservative strongholds were by and large better cushioned against any liberal backlash.

Saxony’s conservative political culture has undoubtedly played its part in broadening the reach of AfD. Moreover, party members I interacted with, routinely resorted to tap into local sub-cultures using personal connections and networks. Despite the alluring success of digital networking, this old-fashioned channel has retained its appeal in the ‘ground game’ of politics. Some banked on a good reputation built on their role in anti-communist uprising in Saxony in late 1980s and are still respected in local communities because of their activist history. In January 2020 an event commemorating thirty years since the fall of Berlin Wall in 1989 brought together leaders of an erstwhile *Bürgerinitiative* in a small Saxon town. United in their legacy of protest demonstrations against the local communist party office back in the 1989, in post-unification Saxony many had aligned themselves to different party lines and continue to

be politically active. Frank, the loving grandfather of three was one of them. He went on to become a charismatic local politician. He was a long-standing local councilor before joining the AfD in 2013. When he offered to take lead in planning the commemorative event, his AfD-affiliation caused a few hiccups. “The organizers are behaving strangely, I guess because they don’t want to be seen with an AfD politician”, confided a local party-worker in me, and suspected that he might have to start looking for a back-up venue as insurance. The event eventually took place at the planned venue and managed to bring the peers in anti-communist struggle under one roof. Although presented as a strictly non-political affair as per the protocol of venue authorities, the charming appeal of AfD politician was unmistakable. He energized the forty-odd attendees- mostly in their late 50s and 60s to engage in a lively give and take and rekindled memories of their historic protest together. His party friends could be seen rushing around engaging with guests, giving technical support, serving refreshments, taking photos and doing other hands-on activities. Frank and another lead activist from *Bürgerinitiative* gave impassioned speeches recreating the charged atmosphere of 1989, followed by an equally engaging audience discussion. Many openly shared their family stories of *Wende*- a colloquial term literally meaning turning point and signaling the moment of rupture in east German society. Their experiences ranged from painful memories of *Stasi* (east German state police force) imprisonment to episodes of confusion and chaos after the fall of Berlin wall. The mood swung between joyful recognition of the collapse of a repressive regime and disillusioned realization of a not-so-well present. The AfD leader, although steadfastly abstaining from any mention of his party, couldn’t resist but to pick up on frustration expressed by some of the attendees and asserted:

“At that time, we thought a lot will change, and it didn’t change a lot. Today we again believe that something will happen, but not much has changed.[...] The GDR was an unjust state (*Unrechtsstaat*) and we should not forget people who protested against it. Like Holocaust- I find it good that Holocaust is taught in the school so that the Nazi crimes are not forgotten. Like that, people should not forget the history of the GDR.”

The subtle attempt to compare and relate frustrative experiences of political systems of past and present was commensurate with party’s political agenda, that drew frequent parallels between GDR and current German political system by accusing both of lack of free media. Calling the GDR an “unjust state” *Unrechtsstaat*- a regime that disregarded the rule of law, was remarkable the term being a controversial battle cry among German politicians. The term *Rechtsstaat* means a constitutional state founded on the rule of law. An *Unrechtsstaat* is the opposite and means a state *not* based on the rule of law. The word *Unrecht*, however also indicates ‘injustice’ and ‘wrong’. The label ‘*Unrechtsstaat*’ thus not merely suggests a state that is not based on rule of law, but also that it is fundamentally unjust and founded upon profound wrongs. In German political discourse, the epithet was used almost singularly to

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describe the Nazi regime, but post-unification public disclosures of Stasi collaborations and regime corruption created a predominant image of the east German regime as a repressive *Unrechtstaat*. This was vehemently resisted above all, by the party Linke (Left), which had taken birth from the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS)- the successor of east German regime's communist party. Scholars have pointed out that the insistence on a stigmatized depiction of communist regime of West German conservatives, notably the CDU and liberals (FDP) was steeped in Cold war propaganda and it failed to accommodate more positive memories of many east Germans, who tried to "lead a correct life within a wrong system" (Markovits 1999:212, Jarausch 2012:340). Even today the labelling of former east German republic drives a wedge between east and west Germans⁴. Many easterners, who look back fondly at GDR, find the term '*Unrechtstaat*' unduly overreaching and a denigration of people who lived under that regime. AfD leader's close confidant and party worker is one such east German who has a sympathetic disposition towards life in the GDR. Notwithstanding its official affirmative stand, the party is mindful of such sympathies that are not uncommon among its east German base⁵. Studies show that in east Germany parties on both edges of political spectrum tend to fish in the same pond for their voters by presenting themselves as voice of those who feel dejected and second-class citizens in united Germany (Mudde 2007,242; Olsen 2019). Yet, given the context of the commemorative event, where former civil right activists reunited to celebrate the collapse of the communist regime, the use of the term appeared relatively safe and above reproach. It was indeed received with no objection and an overarching sense of relief in bringing down an oppressive state prevailed throughout the afternoon.

Tapping into local cultural resources and subcultural movements didn't always prove beneficial though. This is aptly demonstrated by party's vexed relationship with Dresden-born anti-Islam platform called PEGIDA (acronym for Patriotic Europeans Against Islamization of the Occident). AfD's relationship with this right-wing street movement has, till date, received considerable scholarly attention (Patzelt 2015, Rucht 2015, Vorländer 2016). Since October

⁴ An online survey in October 2019 by Public Opinion research Institute Civey shows that only 49.2 per cent East Germans fully or partially agreed to the statement that GDR was an "Unjust state" compared to 80.9 per cent West Germans. The survey was commissioned by the newspaper Berliner Morgenpost. The findings are available at newspapers website at <https://www.morgenpost.de/politik/article227310595/War-die-DDR-ein-Unrechtsstaat-Ost-und-West-gespalten.html> dated 8 October 2019.

⁵ See for example the statement of party's deputy flour leader in Bundestag in AfD Kompakt- members magazine at <https://afdKompakt.de/2019/10/07/ddr-unrechtsstaat-debatte-ist-zynisch/> dated 7 October 2019.

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2014, PEGIDA organizers have been holding regular marches in the city of Dresden to protest against ‘Islamization’ of European population. At its peak in early 2015 some 25,000 supporters joined its twilight rallies in Dresden, which struck a chord with those opposed to the influx of migrants from Muslim countries in Germany. The rallies since then have dwindled yet they are a regular occurrence in Dresden and even led to offshoots- albeit less spectacular- in other German and European cities. AfD’s relationship with PEGIDA has been ambivalent to say the least. Keen to ensure that it didn’t alienate party’s supporters from conservative mainstream particularly in west Germany, the party shied away from allying itself with Dresden’s grass root movement early on. In May 2016, the party forbid its members to participate in PEGIDA rallies and its offshoots; and speeches on PEGIDA platform.⁶ However, the ban was soon relaxed and since March 2018 the party leaders are allowed to participate in PEGIDA (Dresden) demonstrations in their individual capacity.⁷ This relaxation officially reinstated PEGIDA in the AfD circles. During my interaction with party members, I often came across overt sympathies with PEGIDA. The organization was clearly seen not as tainted as other right-wing groups in the region. “I have been to PEGIDA a more than 120 times, and if I ever get the slightest feeling that they do racist talk there, I would stop going there,” a PEGIDA marcher made proud declaration during one *Stammtisch*- a local members’ meet. He was not a party member but had come to the *Stammtisch* first time, along with his member friend to “get an idea about party discussions”. Many well-accepted members of the party had regularly visited PEGIDA rallies in Dresden in the past, as they revealed to me in private conversations. When some of them got to know that I had been to PEGIDA demonstrations myself and had walked alongside the marchers, they were visibly surprised. “She was at PEGIDA! The whole time! She even walked with them!”, a party member whispered to his fellow partymen in one meeting. The appreciation of PEGIDA is not unequivocal though. Some view PEGIDA and AfD as two ideologically similar yet distinct forms of mobilization. “PEGIDA is on the streets, AfD does politics,” attested *Ulrich*, a party member in Dresden and an IT expert, while he agreed on their “topical overlap”. AfD’s mourning march in Chemnitz on September 1, 2018 had indeed shown that such show of support was not mere lip service.

⁶ See a review of AfD’s PEGIDA- resolutions dated 15 May 2017

(https://cdn.afd.tools/sites/75/2017/05/15144844/2017-05-15_afd-bundesverband_zusammenfassung_beschlusslage_gida-ib.pdf).

⁷ See explanation of AfD PEGIDA-resolution on 3 March 2018 dated 5 March 2018

(<https://afdkompakt.de/2018/03/05/beschlusslage-auf-der-ebene-des-afd-bundesverbandes-zu-PEGIDA-dresden/>).

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In the march, party leaders of three eastern states walked alongside PEGIDA leader Lutz Bachmann to mourn the fatal stabbing of a German man allegedly by a Syrian and an Iraqi. This brazen show of rapprochement with PEGIDA was widely condemned by the German media. Critical voices were audible even within party's own ranks (Weiland 2018). Party's affinity with PEGIDA was never a secret. Back in 2015 the '*Erfurter Resolution*' tabled by east German party leaders made a strong case for party's support to PEGIDA. Without explicitly mentioning PEGIDA, the Resolution sharply criticized party's unnecessary distancing from "citizen's protest movements" even though "thousands of AfD-members were already taking part in these initiatives as demonstrators or sympathizers".⁸ Yet, until recently, the sympathizers within the party had stopped short of a joint public appearance under party's banner. The Chemnitz march could be seen in this sense a move breaking away from party's self-imposed taboo. During my fieldwork I bore witness to many episodes reflecting the tension between members' affinities for PEGIDA as private citizen and distance as a political party. On one autumn Monday evening in Dresden I was sitting at a brainstorm meeting by local party members. At the local party office situated in *Altstadt*, old part of the city, the members were deeply engrossed in a lively discussion over party program ahead of local elections in May 2019. Suddenly, we all heard a music band playing to the tune of German national anthem. It was one of my very first meetings with party members and it took me some time to realize that the meeting had coincided with the Monday evening PEGIDA demonstrations that took place less than a mile away from the office. One could hear the marchers coming closer to the building which housed party's local office and coming to a halt outside the building on the road en route to their destination. As their live band started playing the national anthem, members in the meeting hall inside the party office joyfully got off their seats; walked up to the road-side window and looked down beamingly. Many marchers downstairs were elated to see party members and cheered jubilantly. Party members ventured to swing along a big German national flag outside the window and even engaged in a friendly banter. One of the members urged me to come up to the window to hear the song and watch the rally. I obeyed and could see the gleeful faces of many marchers on the road down below with melodious instrumental piece in the background. The affections generated in the atmosphere were warm, congenial, cheerful, musical, almost surreal. After the anthem was over, the marchers walked along and the members got back to business, visibly upbeat, back at the meeting table. The rendezvous with PEGIDA rallies didn't occur every time and many times the rallies passed along without stopping at the office building, Yet, the remarkable display of mutual affection and recognition between PEGIDA demonstrators and local party members that I witnessed in early days of my

⁸ The Erfurter Resolution is published on the website of Flügel at <http://derfluegel.de/die-erfurter-resolution-wortlaut-und-erstunterzeichner/> dated 14 March 2015.

fieldwork remained a vivid memory inscribed in fieldnotes. To be sure, the sympathies for PEGIDA among members were not universal albeit very common. Some members found the talks at Pegida rather crude and “repetitive” and were not keen on joining the rallies. “Politics is done in parliaments, not on the roads,” snubbed *Michael*, a young party member working on his doctoral thesis at the university. The implication was clear- street movements like PEGIDA were ‘bad taste’: too loud, too vulgar and too boorish for a member of intellectual class like him. Yet, his personal disdain remained largely inconsequential for his fellow party members and PEGIDA sympathizers in Dresden, perhaps because Michael didn’t chair any members’ group like *Stammtisch* and wanted to keep a low profile. At the local level, the tough job of striking a balance between private sympathies and public support for PEGIDA fell largely on the chairpersons of respective *Stammtische* as well as the executive committee members (*Kreisvorstand*) of AfD Dresden. Tensions flared up when many Dresden members during members’ meets expressed their frustration over party’s “unjust” attitude towards PEGIDA in relation to the local and state elections in Saxony in the summer of 2019. PEGIDA had helped mobilize “their” voters and it was only fair and due, in their view, for the party to send a clear sign of appreciation to PEGIDA’s organizers. Their demands had been triggered by a recent speech by none other than Siegfried Däbritz, one of PEGIDA’s chief organizers. In his speech, Däbritz lashed out at “people in the *Landtag*, who were voted in by PEGIDA marchers”, who he condemned for being conspicuously absent at PEGIDA rallies. He asked them to “show their face” and suspected that they were out of touch post-elections.⁹ There was little doubt about who these “people in *Landtag*” were. The allusion to AfD politicians was amply clear to many party members, who, in turn, reprimanded their local leaders for their apathy. It indeed became a strained situation for councilors and state parliamentarians present during such meets, to mitigate the growing dissatisfaction among party’s ranks and file. A city councilor- in charge of one such agitated forum, vouched for his unconditional appreciation for PEGIDA marchers on the one hand, and but also inserted a polite reminder of the directive on this matter from party’s national executive. His call for caution did secure a compromise, by which members decided to visit the next PEGIDA demonstration in an informal group (as private citizens) to thank PEGIDA goers personally for their support for AfD but refrain from using any party insignia. His handling of the matter with a certain authority and good negotiation skills allowed him to broker peace, at least for the time.

Both AfD and PEGIDA share a profound immigration skepticism- especially towards Muslims and a radically anti-establishment stance. Despite extensive thematic identification, party organizers struggle to strike a balance between informal sympathies and formal coalition-

⁹ The full speech is available on YouTube and was uploaded by Lutz Bachmann, the leader of Pegida dated 7th

October 2019. Retrieved on 14 December 2019. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t0D9mDG1stI>)

building. The pragmatism of not distancing PEGIDA's human and organizational capital but, at the same time, not cozying up too much with the movement has always been a daunting challenge within the party and continues to be a difficult affair. Especially in Dresden, where party leaders are allowed to speak at PEGIDA platforms (albeit as private citizens and not as party representatives) as per party's new self-regulations, keeping a *cordon sanitaire* is not only hard but sounds absurd and counter-intuitive to many of movement's sympathizers within the party.

4. Conclusion

This paper took a two-pronged approach while illuminating networking endeavors of members of AfD, a right-wing political party in Germany. On methodological level, it made a case for ethnographic fieldwork to better understand the internal dynamics of right-wing political groups. Studies on right-wing political parties have historically stressed pathological and irrational traits of their behavior. This also in part explains why social movement studies under the influence of rationalist paradigms of resource mobilization theories have been slow, if not reticent, in addressing right-wing collective action. Rarely applied to the analysis of political right, these concepts of rational mobilization hold considerable explanatory value for right-wing activism. The nuances gained through intimate interaction and observation of their actions could provide a useful value addition to the growing body of research on AfD in particular and right-wing actors in general. From the past couple of decades ethnography as a method has made important headways in understanding political communication. It offers insider perspectives and ground-up knowledge to a discipline that is hegemonically deductive in its theorizing and largely structuralist in its explanations (Bayard de Volo and Schatz 2004:268). By employing an ethnographic approach, political scientists could illuminate the agency of party's rank-and-file in the micro-foundations of the party and its internal organization.

On substantive level, the paper critically examined the relatively monolithic conceptualizations of right-wing collective action traditionally furnished by political scientists and sociologists. Endeavors to navigate through backgrounds of right-wing groups 'in search of a flaw' to 'explain' their commitment often end up doing caricatures of such activists serving misleading conclusions (Blee 2002, 21). The rank and file members of the AfD are far from a homogeneous group of fanatics- a common stereotype- and have instead different visions of their party and different levels of commitment to it. More often than not, they come with different level of education and political experience, resources and personal connections, in short, with something to lose, contrary to the popular perception. The discussions at party meetings I attended, were much more complex and revealing than party's stereotypical and provocative election posters or manifestos targeted for public consumption. Even though this research is a case study and remains very close to the particularities of AfD in Saxony, it can have, so I believe, some heuristic value in explaining the inner world of some of the stigmatized right-

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wing parties in Europe. Set categories of “us” and “them”, assertions of “moral hygiene” (Gingerich, Banks 2006) made not only by political opponents of these parties but also by some academic practitioners often truncate efforts of nuanced analysis of these parties and reinforce the reified visions of a righteous self and a repugnant other, as Susan Harding (1996) has so convincingly demonstrated. By humanizing the interlocutors of our “repugnant other”, the possibility of a nuanced critique is certainly not ruled out (Blee 2002; Carey 2019). Instead, it illuminates the heterogeneity of experiences within such groups and also unsettles the reified categories of “us” and “them”. In a world of tremendous complexity such a differentiated understanding of actors, right-wing or not, is not only instructive but also urgent.

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