

‘Everything has changed’: right-wing politics and experiences of transformation among German retail workers

ALEXANDER HARDER 

ABSTRACT Harder’s article investigates how changes in working and living conditions are experienced by workers and how these changes create the conditions of acceptability for right-wing politics. Drawing on qualitative interviews, mappings, questionnaires and fieldwork with workers in two retail workplaces in southern and eastern Germany, it outlines processes of *logistification* that impact workers’ routines of labour and social reproduction: that is, their everyday lives. Respondents testify to an intensification and isolation of labour as well as a general scarcity of resources for social reproduction and powerlessness to influence the changes. Their work environments demand continuous adaptation to new technologies and management strategies. These experiences are shaped by a metanarrative of societal decline that appears to lie beyond the workers’ control. Nostalgia—a romanticized imagination of the past—and reclusivity—a preference for privacy and suspicion of the public—emerge as responses to the perceived decline of their surroundings. They can constitute elements that far-right parties articulate against migration and towards authoritarian politics.

KEYWORDS authoritarian populism, declinism, far-right politics, logistification, nostalgia, retrotopia

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‘Germany. But normal’

‘Deutschland. Aber Normal’ was the title of the programme of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD, Alternative for Germany) for the federal elections of 2021, in the midst of the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ Their 2021 campaign video juxtaposes the idealized images of domestic life from the 1960s and 1970s with a present that is out of order. Illustrated with

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1 Translations from the German, unless otherwise stated, are by the author.

images of businesses in lockdown and mask mandates, but also with partly staged footage from demonstrations for climate justice and anti-fascist protests, the right-wing populists depict contemporary daily life in Germany as chaotic, hysterical and violent. Against this hostile environment, the campaign promotes normalcy. Being close to your family and simply doing your job, securing the nation's borders and ridding neighbourhoods of crime, freely taking your car wherever you want: these are all normal, according to the AfD. Normalcy is what Germany needs, the narrator explains calmly: 'A normal future. Sounds good, right?'

Established in 2013 in the wake of the European debt crisis, the AfD quickly made migration its core issue and gained strength in all German state parliaments, entering the federal Bundestag in 2017. Despite internal power struggles and almost constant controversy, the party today manages to reliably unite about 10 per cent of voters under its glaring blue banner. Understanding how far-right politics entrench themselves today is not only a matter of studying electoral strategies or analysing campaign rhetoric. The political potential of far-right politics exceeds the AfD's voter base. Demonstrations by so-called 'concerned parents' against inclusive sex education, by 'patriotic Europeans' against migration and, more recently, by 'lateral thinkers' against pandemic measures illustrate this fact time and again. Representative attitude research shows that latent authoritarian, ethnocentrist and anti-democratic attitudes prevail beyond the party's voters.² Assuming that these attitudes are a 'pathological normalcy', simply ingrained into 'complex multiethnic western democracies', forgoes an analysis of *why* and *how* they become possible, even desirable, resources to make sense of one's position in the world.³ In this paper, I want to examine these questions that, in the spirit of Foucault's discussion of critique, could be termed the 'conditions of acceptability' for far-right politics.⁴

To examine the acceptability of far-right politics, I have found it necessary to approach the phenomenon from the angle of everyday culture. In his work on 'authoritarian populism', Stuart Hall emphasizes that 'what is at issue is the production, in conditions of social upheaval, of new kinds of "common sense"'.⁵ Developed in a different historical conjuncture, his claim that right-wing movements and parties offer specific interpretations of social upheaval remains helpful today. Culture provides the forms and the

2 Oliver Decker, Johannes Kiess, Julia Schuler, Barbara Handke, Gert Pickel and Elmar Brähler, 'Die Leipziger Autoritarismus Studie 2020: Methode, Ergebnisse und Langzeitverlauf', in Oliver Decker and Elmar Brähler (eds), *Autoritäre Dynamiken: Alte Ressentiments – neue Radikalität* (Giessen: Psychosozial-Verlag 2020), 27–89 (16).

3 Cas Mudde, 'The populist radical right: a pathological normalcy', *West European Politics*, vol. 33, no. 6, 2010, 1167–86 (1179).

4 Michel Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*, trans. from the French by Lysa Hochroth and Catherine Porter (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) 2007), 61.

5 Stuart Hall, 'Popular-democratic vs authoritarian populism: two ways of "taking democracy seriously"', in Alan Hunt (ed.), *Marxism and Democracy* (London: Lawrence and Wishart 1980), 157–85 (173–4).

practices through which people come to see themselves and others, as well as the conditions, relationships and directions in which they are entwined.⁶ To probe the acceptability of far-right politics, I will therefore examine the narratives, values and practices that make legible changing conditions of everyday life. How are transformations understood, in thought and in practice? How do interpretations of change serve either to render far-right politics acceptable, or to challenge their presumptions?

My investigation starts by drawing on the narratives of German retail workers in two locations impacted by dynamics of transformation and crisis. After outlining the theoretical framework and method of the study, I discuss how pressures of logistification force retail companies either to adapt and reshape management strategies and labour routines towards increased capacities of circulation, or to plunge retailers unable to compete into fiscal crises.⁷ Subsequently, I examine how workers experience these transformations both in relation to their work environments, but also in relation to their practices of social reproduction. I will highlight that a meta-narrative of societal decline, largely deemed unstoppable, frames workers' perceptions of their everyday lives. Nostalgia—a romanticized vision of the past—and reclusivity—a preference for privacy and suspicion of the public—emerge as responses to the perceived deterioration of their environments. In my conclusion, I return to the AfD's slogan to highlight how it connects these responses to a right-wing political project.

Right-wing populism, labour transformations and everyday life

Since the electoral and political successes of right-wing populism in 2015 and 2016, the relationship between societal transformations and far-right politics has come under closer scrutiny. Sociologists and political scientists have highlighted—and sometimes pitted against each other—the economic, political and cultural factors that characterize this 'populist zeitgeist'.⁸ A wealth of research shows that socio-economic precarization and transformation,⁹ anxieties about sociocultural decline,¹⁰ and the erosion of democratic

6 John Clarke, 'Conjunctures, crises, and cultures: valuing Stuart Hall', *Focaal*, vol. 2014, no. 70, 2014, 113–22 (119).

7 Jesse LeCavalier, *The Rule of Logistics: Walmart and the Architecture of Fulfillment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2016).

8 Cas Mudde, 'The populist zeitgeist', *Government & Opposition*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2004, 541–63.

9 Nancy Fraser, *The Old Is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born: From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and Beyond* (London and New York: Verso 2019); Wilhelm Heitmeyer, *Autoritäre Versuche* (Berlin: Suhrkamp 2018).

10 Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2019).

participation¹¹ have contributed to the rise both of new right-wing, but also of left-wing, parties and movements. Such macrostructural perspectives are helpful in understanding the manifold political developments that shape the current moment. Beyond the focus on large-n studies or on ‘supply’-side versus ‘demand’-side approaches, contextual and qualitative research reconstructing the role of far-right politics in everyday culture is somewhat rare.

German labour sociology provides one field in which researchers have paid closer attention to the relationship between transformation of everyday life—specifically labour conditions—and proclivities for far-right politics among workers. Taking up Arlie R. Hochschild’s analysis in *Strangers in Their Own Land* (2016), sociologist Klaus Dörre identifies a similar ‘deep story’ among industrial workers who see themselves in line for social benefits and frame undeserving others—such as migrants and refugees—as jumping the queue.¹² According to this model, deteriorating labour conditions, a decrepit welfare state and the absence of ‘class’ as a political category, make it easy for right-wing populists to channel workers’ tendencies towards ‘exclusive solidarity’ against migrants.¹³ This rich approach highlights how more structural transformations become articulated as racism or nationalism in the world-views of industrial and primarily male workers. It encounters problems, however, when it is extended into a general explanation for the acceptability of far-right attitudes.

The link between material deprivation and right-wing attitudes that accompanies studies such as Dörre’s has rightly been questioned from within the field. Authors such as Wolfgang Menz and Sarah Nies highlight how contradictions within the moral order of meritocracy instead produce conditions for exclusionary ideologies, and how the weakening of collective bargaining power leads to a more general relinquishing of normative political claims over the economy.¹⁴ Beyond these criticisms, the growing tertiary sector, in which part-time, temporary and low-waged employment conditions run rampant, has been identified as the locus of a new, and often female or migrant, ‘working class’ whose living conditions have only

11 Susanne Rippl and Christian Seipel, ‘Modernisierungsverlierer, Cultural Backlash, Postdemokratie: Was erklärt rechtspopulistische Orientierungen?’, *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, vol. 70, no. 2, 2018, 237–54.

12 Klaus Dörre, ‘In der Warteschlange: Rassismus, völkischer Populismus und die Arbeiterfrage’, in Karina Becker, Klaus Dörre und Peter Reif-Spirek (eds), *Arbeiterbewegung von rechts? Ungleichheit—Verteilungskämpfe—populistische Revolte* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag 2018), 49–81 (52). See also Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: New Press 2016).

13 Klaus Dörre, *In der Warteschlange: Arbeiter*innen und die radikale Rechte* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot 2020), 22.

14 Wolfgang Menz and Sarah Nies, ‘Marktautoritarismus und bedrohte Selbstverständnisse: Impulse der arbeitssoziologischen Bewusstseinsforschung zur Erklärung des Rechtspopulismus’, in Carina Book, Nikolai Huke, Sebastian Klauke and Olaf Tietje (eds), *Alltägliche Grenzziehungen: Das Konzept der ‘imperialen Lebensweise’, Externalisierung und exklusive Solidarität* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot 2019), 207–27.

recently figured into studies on labour transformations and its political consequences.¹⁵ Generalizing findings from the industrial sector not only forgoes this perspective, but also suggests that there is a coherent experience of the economically marginalized.¹⁶ Furthermore, such an approach argues that, ultimately, neoliberal disenfranchisement necessarily produces racist and nationalist frameworks as a kind of side-effect.¹⁷ In the absence of other political options, the adoption of far-right attitudes becomes a kind of self-protective reflex.¹⁸ Subsequently, racism and nationalism do not have to be challenged in themselves, since the expansion of social policies would suffice to counteract such reflexive interpretations. Lastly, while labour routines are a central part of the rhythm of everyday life, they do not exhaust it. Workers' experiences at their workplaces exist in the context of their social and ideological reproduction, which is structurally prone to crisis.¹⁹

Writing on the issue of Thatcherism, Stuart Hall notes that 'the "swing to the Right" is not a *reflection* of the crisis; it is itself a *response* to the crisis'.²⁰ Over and above the specific historical situation of the 1970s, this perspective highlights, for example, that links between deteriorating living conditions and the rejection of migrants do not emerge autonomously but require political and ideological work. I want to investigate this work of articulation by focusing on the 'common sense' interpretations of transformations and crises, on *how* far-right politics can offer orientation and interpretations in a changing environment. John Clarke points out the relevance of 'culture' to this endeavour, which comprises the 'imaginative, affective, and interpretative maps of the social world and its organization'.²¹ I focus, therefore, on the narrations of transformations not among specific far-right groups or actors, but among those impacted by such processes. In contrast to contributing to an investigation of 'populism-as-project', as political scientist Marco Revelli terms it, I survey 'populism-as-context', meaning the politico-cultural climate that provides the conditions for right-wing populism

15 Julia Friedrichs, *Working Class: warum wir Arbeit brauchen, von der wir leben können* (Berlin: Berlin Verlag 2021).

16 Daniel Mullis and Paul Zschocke, *Regressive Politiken und der Aufstieg der AfD: Ursachen- und Wirkungsforschung im Dickicht einer kontroversen Debatte*, PRIF Report 5 (Frankfurt: HSFK 2019), 19.

17 Emma Dowling, Silke van Dyk and Stefanie Graefe, 'Rückkehr des Hauptwiderspruchs? Anmerkungen zur aktuellen Debatte um den Erfolg der Neuen Rechten und das Versagen der "Identitätspolitik"', *PROKLA: Zeitschrift für kritische Sozialwissenschaft*, vol. 47, no. 188, 2017, 411–20 (413).

18 Dörre, *In der Warteschlange*, 24.

19 Julia Dück, 'Mehr als Erschöpfungen im Hamsterrad – Soziale Reproduktion und ihre Krise(n)', in Moritz Altenried, Julia Dück and Mira Wallis (eds), *Plattformkapitalismus und die Krise der sozialen Reproduktion* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot 2021), 28–48 (33).

20 Stuart Hall, 'The great moving right show', *Marxism Today*, vol. 23, no.1, 1979, 14–20 (15) (emphasis in original).

21 Clarke, 'Conjunctures, crises, and cultures', 119.

to thrive.²² With the heuristic of ‘cultures of rejection’, I thus want to focus on the culturally significant, rather than the (statistically) representative elements of common sense that become enlisted into a right-wing political project.²³

Method

My article draws on multiple field visits, expert interviews with union representatives, and twelve interviews conducted with employees of an inner-city department store in southern Germany and a furniture store in eastern Germany.²⁴ The companies and locations were selected for their significant processes of labour transformation outlined below. The respondents reached through non-purposive sampling were largely female, and between 32 and 64 years of age. In-depth and semi-structured interviews touched on the themes of their working environments, their practices of social reproduction and free-time activities, and their perspective on political issues and democratic participation. This material was enriched by questionnaires with demographic questions, by mappings of respondents’ social environments, and by multiple field visits to the workplaces in question.²⁵

From department store to ‘city hub’: changing landscapes in German retail

‘The German retail sector is threatened with mass extinction’, the newspaper *Die Welt* warned in 2017.²⁶ Long before pandemic lockdowns and supply chain hold-ups, the *Handelverband Deutschland* (German Retail Federation) predicted a wave of insolvencies if businesses dawdled while use of the new consumption and distribution models enabled by digital technologies increased. The anxiety around the ‘crisis of retail’ stems partly from the sector’s central role in Germany’s economic growth and labour market.²⁷ In 2016, the German retail sector employed over three million workers

22 Marco Revelli, *The New Populism: Democracy Stares into the Abyss*, trans. from the Italian by David Broder (London and New York: Verso 2019), 11.

23 Wolfgang Kaschuba, *Einführung in die Europäische Ethnologie* (Munich: C. H. Beck 1999), 195.

24 Specific locations and company names have been withheld in order to protect interlocutors’ anonymity.

25 Jan Kruse, *Qualitative Interviewforschung: Ein integrativer Ansatz* (Weinheim: Beltz Juventa 2015).

26 Michael Gassmann, ‘Dem deutschen Einzelhandel droht ein Massensterben’, *Die Welt*, 5 February 2017.

27 Nico Hornig, ‘Einzelhandel in der Krise: “50.000 geschlossene Geschäfte sind die Untergrenze”’, *WirtschaftsWoche*, 20 August 2017.

and accounted for about 16 per cent of Germany's gross domestic product.²⁸ The sector's working conditions, however, are seldom addressed as part of this 'crisis'. Retail wages are not only significantly lower than those in other service and manufacturing jobs (on top of long working hours), but a large percentage of the majority-female workforce are employed in atypical, temporary or low-wage contracts. These contracts provide less security and stability and reduce workers' claims to pensions. In addition to taxing working conditions, there is mounting pressure to shift towards new retailing models based on the introduction of digital technologies, as well as new management strategies. Two retail companies highlight how these processes play out: a historic chain of German department stores, and an international furniture retailer.

Few institutions symbolize shifts in retailing as succinctly as the European department store. Historically, these 'cathedrals of consumption' offered a breadth of mass-produced, affordable products to a middle-class consumer base.²⁹ To its workforces, sometimes in the thousands, it promised ascent to higher social status.³⁰ After the war, economic prosperity and political support led department stores to prosper in the early years of the Federal Republic.³¹ The chain of department stores whose workers I interviewed operated in over 150 locations across Germany and employed about 75,000 workers in 1981. In the course of the 1980s and 1990s, however, profits began to fall and chains started to close. Starting in the early 2000s, the company made a number of short-sighted financial decisions and entered a period of crisis that continues today. While running through six different CEOs, locations were closed, employees were let go, and the company abandoned union-negotiated wage agreements. After its first insolvency, the company was acquired by a real estate investor with eyes on its valuable inner-city properties. A 'future agenda' was drafted, promising a digital transformation. This agenda also included renting out floor space to other retailers, restructuring departments and functionally differentiating workers into those primarily working in sales and on registers, and those mainly unpacking goods, managing inventory and stacking shelves. The proclaimed objective of this development was to turn the stores into urban logistics centres. These 'city hubs' are supposed to collect and distribute

28 Gregor Holst and Franziska Scheier, *Branchenanalyse Handel: Perspektiven und Ansatzpunkte einer arbeitsorientierten Branchenstrategie*, Working Paper Forschungsförderung no. 161 (Düsseldorf: Hans-Böckler-Stiftung 2019).

29 Geoffrey Crossick and Serge Jaumain, 'The world of the department store: distribution, culture and social change', in Geoffrey Crossick and Serge Jaumain (eds), *Cathedrals of Consumption: The European Department Store: 1850–1939* (London: Routledge 2018), 1–45.

30 Ibid.

31 Detlef Briesen, 'Die Debatte um das Warenhaus: Vom Deutschen Kaiserreich bis zur Bundesrepublik Deutschland', in Godela Weiss-Sussex and Ulrike Zitzlsperger (eds), *Das Berliner Warenhaus: Geschichte und Diskurse—The Berlin Department Store: History and Discourse* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang 2013), 17–32 (30).

commodities from an array of other retailers. Contracts with leading German logistics providers, as well as the online retailer Amazon, have already been signed. At the same time, the company's workforce has been almost halved in the last decade. In 2020, the still-ailing company had about 18,000 employees. In the specific site where I conducted interviews, the workforce has shrunk from approximately 1,000 employees in the mid-1990s to about 250 workers tending to the 25,000 square metres of shop floor today.

The furniture house serving as my second field site has undergone similar processes of transformation, albeit more successfully. Over the course of a decade, the international company gradually phased in the functional separation of workers, online shopping, mobile devices, self-checkout and collection services. Like the 'city hubs', the furniture chain is setting up small inner-city showrooms, where orders can be placed away from its larger locations located in non-residential and suburban areas. The latter will likely turn into warehouses to meet the increasing demand for storage and circulation. Multiple waves of a 'business transformation' are meant to modernize its retail model, but they also threaten jobs; a recent union study highlights that over 80 per cent of German employees are worried about losing their position. The company employs about 20,000 workers in Germany, and at the location I surveyed, approximately 320 workers maintained 33,000 square metres of shop floor. This number has remained stable since its founding in the mid-1990s, but contract hours are dropping due to part-time employment positions offering as little as 20 hours per month. At the same time, the number of processed orders has risen considerably, increasing pressure and workload especially for logistics workers. In contrast to other locations, the site I visited is a so-called 'VAP' location (value-added-participation), which grants managers more autonomy to encourage experimentation. This enables even tighter staffing and more flexible employment. The managers of VAP stores change every six years, leading to frequent turnover and a fraught relationship between management and employees.

While the specific circumstances of the two companies differ, I argue that they are both entwined in a process of *logistification*.³² The aim of turning urban department stores into inner-city hubs and peripheral furniture stores into warehouses lies, ultimately, in increasing their logistical capacities in order to cope with new demands on production and distribution. At both locations, tasks such as customer service or in-person sales have been overshadowed by attempts to increase the ability to distribute goods effectively. This involves measures such as restructuring the workforce, tightening staff numbers or creating more flexible contract options. It also includes introducing digital technologies such as mobile data-entry devices, automated registers, online ordering and collection services, all of which attempt to quicken the pace of sales. Software that forecasts demand at the furniture store, or that uses AI to update markdowns at the department store,

32 LeCavalier, *The Rule of Logistics*, 6.

continuously optimizes stock. The 'ideal condition' these businesses strive for is 'to have all of [their. . .] merchandise suspended in a constant state of circulation, a humming network of movement with no backups, no bottlenecks, and no accumulation of storage'.³³ Writing on the architecture of logistics and infrastructure, Jesse LeCavalier demonstrates that the rising importance of distribution and circulation of commodities leads retail companies to construct environments that are increasingly automated and illegible to humans. Labour, in his view, turns into little more than an organic extension of a computational logic.³⁴ The department store and furniture house in question, however, are not yet as suffused with digital technology as companies such as Walmart or Amazon. But the transformation inaugurated by programmes such as 'Future Agenda' or 'Business Transformation' already impacts the conditions of work and life for employees. Rather than materializing a fantasy of smooth and seamless circulation, these processes create frictions and contradictions in the everyday routines of my interlocutors.

Experiences of transformation at work and at home

Magda has been working as a saleswoman in the department store for twenty years, after she lost her previous job due to a chronic disability. She is 60 years old and many of her colleagues are of a similar age. On the shop floor, she consults customers, takes care of returns, sorts and arranges merchandise, takes orders with her mobile data-entry device, and is constantly on her feet. 'It's very stressful in our department', Magda reported over coffee, 'because we are *always on our own*'. The most tangible transformation of everyday life in the department store is the drastic reduction of the workforce, with some salespeople now finding themselves solely responsible for up to 1200 square metres of retail space. As a result, the works council is increasingly dealing with burnt-out salespeople suffering under insurmountable workloads.

None of the technological and managerial innovations introduced by the company ameliorate this situation. On the contrary, the functional differentiation into several groups by management has not improved workflows, but only cut personnel costs. Due to insufficient staffing, employees have to support each other even more to finish their tasks. For salespeople, often-rewarding consultations with customers are thus eclipsed by the maintenance of shelves, the clearing of dressing rooms or the fetching of products from storage units. Susanne, a saleswoman and Magda's colleague tells me that

it would have been best if they just left it as it was. . . . Now you are there alone, serving a customer and you're supposed to, on the side, when you're already exhausted in the evening, you are supposed to clean the dressing rooms and clear all the goods as well.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., 152.

Digital hardware, such as mobile data entry devices and computer terminals for placing online orders, has created new demands instead of simplifying work routines. Salespeople additionally handle online orders and navigate new technology while trying to serve customers. '[The device] rattles and rattles and nothing happens—it's terrible. . . . You're stuck at the thing for twenty minutes before you can go back to serving and tidying up' (Magda). The store's employees have to continuously adapt to a stream of innovations, most recently the complete rebranding of the entire company, as the most obvious burden of their work routine—the lack of personnel—remains.

Workers at the furniture store emphasized how this constant adaptation to changing work environments itself produces dissatisfaction. While the workforce has remained stable, frequent shifts in management due to the VAP system require that employees continually adapt to changing guidelines. Anke, working in the cafeteria, complained: 'It's always been a constant coming and going. Three, four years, then the boss changes to a different location. And each boss did something else, had a different concept, let's say. Or different rules and regulations.' The technological devices introduced at the store, such as self-checkout registers or self-ordering terminals, have led to anxiety among workers, with cashiers regularly attempting to change their positions for fear of being replaced by automated registers. Primarily, however, the new technology produces less satisfactory tasks. Maike, who has worked as a cashier at the location for over fifteen years, said about the new registers: 'I like to have my own register. . . . I can set my own rhythm and I still have direct contact with customers. You don't have that at the self-checkout registers. Only if there is a problem.' Similar to innovations in the department store, the transformation implemented by the German furniture retailer already impacts their employees' working and living conditions. At both locations, employees are required to adapt continually to measures that they perceive neither as improvements nor as solutions for the challenges of their work environments.

At home, social reproduction of the respondents' livelihoods demands a dual income as well as cutbacks in leisure time. Katja is in her late 30s and has worked for the furniture store in visual marketing for fifteen years. Her work, she claims, is creative, demanding and diverse. When meeting her after her shift in an empty office, she massaged her neck and apologized: 'I just had to sit all day. And it is very, very cold in the office.' To relieve her pain, we conducted parts of the interview standing.

'Financially, it is a difficult time right now', she explained. Her husband quit his low-wage job in a call centre to pursue an unpaid internship to become an IT programmer. The unemployment benefits he receives are meagre, and Katja's income has to provide for them and their two daughters. Their budget needs careful management to cover food, clothes, kids' birthday presents and one summer vacation. Even though Katja describes

her job as well paid, her self-reported household income places her at risk of poverty. In addition to her part-time position at the store, she must also take care of the larger share of child-rearing and household chores. 'Two years ago, I would have said I do everything', she explained. After a lengthy period of chronic illness, things have improved a little bit for her, 'but I would still say that I do the lion's share regarding all the organizational stuff'.

Although Katja is an exception among the respondents, her case shows how strictly retail wages are calculated. The economic situations of my interviewees vary due to differences in generational wealth, family status, educational levels or employment length. In both field sites, most interlocutors appear to have a little less than the German median equivalent income of about €1960 per month at their disposal. They are part of the lower end of the 'middle class'. Almost all claim that their wages suffice for their needs, which they adjust in light of their earnings. A majority can cover everyday expenses such as rent, food, petrol and short holiday trips, but they rarely have large savings. Outliers such as Katja show how profoundly such an arrangement rests on a dual income. Other interviewees' household income is in large part supplied by partners in more lucrative jobs in industry or as civil servants. Such a 'couple-centered reproductive model' can be stable as long as both partners remain together and in employment.³⁵ However, as sociologist Gabriele Winker points out, the lack of recognition of childcare needs and gaps in employment histories still lead to low pension entitlements for women and potential poverty in old age.³⁶ Accordingly, even those interlocutors in stable dual-income arrangements are preoccupied with their pensions.

Cases such as Katja's highlight how easily one can slip into a 'precarious reproductive model' in which necessary expenses have to be carefully managed or deferred.³⁷ Strategies for coping with these pressures are increasingly individualized as people—mostly women—become 'managers of labour power'.³⁸ 'It's all a matter of organization', Monika, a single saleswoman at the department store told me, as she laid out her efforts to cope with her many household chores. For respondents without dual income, this organization largely involves managing scarcity,³⁹ certainly of money but also of time. Long opening hours, working weekends and care work make it necessary for workers to

35 Gabriele Winker, *Care Revolution: Schritte in eine solidarische Gesellschaft* (Bielefeld: transcript-Verlag 2015), 61.

36 Ibid., 62.

37 Ibid., 64.

38 Ibid., 32.

39 Tomke König and Ulle Jäger, 'Reproduktionsarbeit in der Krise und neue Momente der Geschlechterordnung: Alle nach ihren Fähigkeiten, alle nach ihren Bedürfnissen!', in Alex Demirović, Julia Dück, Florian Becker and Pauline Bader (eds), *VielfachKrise: Im finanzmarktdominierten Kapitalismus* (Hamburg: VSA 2011), 147–64 (151).

budget time by cutting social activities.⁴⁰ Participation in political organizations, cultural associations or athletic memberships are practically non-existent and, where it is undertaken, it is done so alone to remain flexible. Even where resources are not as precarious as in Katja's or Monika's cases, the individualized pressure that stems from time restraints can lead to restrictions regarding one's own well-being and a crisis of stress and fatigue, visible in the high prevalence of chronic illness among my respondents.⁴¹

My interlocutors' routines of labour and of social reproduction are impacted by the logistification of their work environments. However, they also point to the consequences of the liberalization of employment conditions throughout the 1980s and 1990s, as well as reforms of the labour market beginning in the early 2000s that enabled new, atypical employment positions to thrive. In many cases, these transformations have demanded the continuous adaptation to changing conditions at work and careful management of money and time at home. A sense of anxiety and insecurity regarding the future characterizes almost all my interviews with employees. Maike, the cashier at the furniture store, summarized this feeling: 'Everybody's scared about their employment. "Will I make it to my pension, who knows if my health holds out?"' For most respondents, these experiences are placed in a metanarrative of general societal decline. In place of meaningful co-determination, nostalgia and reclusivity emerge as responses to this process.

An unstoppable decline?

'It was always nice, but now it's getting worse and worse', Susanne, a saleswoman at the department store complained. She echoed a sentiment shared by almost all of my interlocutors. During the 1990s, when many interviewees joined the company, it offered various benefits to employees, regular extracurricular activities such as football matches, and provided security and a sense of social ascendancy even to employees without proper training. Today, employees have sacrificed wages, holiday pay and Christmas bonuses in order to support their ailing employer. But, in their eyes, this has yielded no positive change: 'Nothing is happening and we waived everything. We waived a lot, a lot of money', Monika, another employee, explained.

This perceived decline extends, however, beyond transformations of the workplace. Everyday life, according to interlocutors, has become more

40 Ines Roth and Astrid Schmidt, *Arbeitszeit und Belastung: Eine Sonderauswertung auf Basis des DGB-Index Gute Arbeit 2014/15 für den Dienstleistungssektor* (Berlin: Ver.di 2016), 72.

41 Pauline Bader, Florian Becker, Alex Demirović and Julia Dück, 'Die multiple Krise—Krisendynamiken im neoliberalen Kapitalismus', in Demirović, Dück, Becker and Bader (eds), *VielfachKrise*, 11–28 (19).

hectic and chaotic, whether it is at work, on public transport or in their neighbourhoods. Specific social figures, such as the overindulged unemployed, lethargic youngsters or privileged refugees, represent this dynamic. Susanne has heard that refugees get better health services than she does for her chronic illness. Claudia, a colleague of hers, fumes at lazy and unemployed youngsters that sleep in while she, at 55, still has to get up at seven o'clock in the morning. Magda complains about being the last German family in her neighbourhood, feeling her new neighbours are unfriendly and the living conditions are in disarray.

'Declinism', the negative vision of the evolution of society, forms a metanarrative that frames most of the everyday experiences reported by respondents. The prevailing sense is that the present is out of order and unjust, and the future is a source of anxiety.⁴² With regard to their work environments, the causes they identify include heightened competition, changing consumer demands and the need to increase profit margins. But, just as often, they concern a general cultural shift. Not only has 'social cohesion' vanished, but 'humanity' altogether has changed, Claudia said. These often vague dynamics cannot be meaningfully changed or redirected towards the improvement of living conditions. Instead, they become naturalized and therefore rendered unalterable.

The limited potential that respondents ascribe to parliamentary politics and individual political action bears witness to this claim. Political efficacy—'the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact on the political process'—is explicitly disavowed by most interlocutors, sometimes entailing a visceral rejection.⁴³ Claudia shuddered: 'I get really worked up about politics. It's no laughing matter.' Everybody is complaining, she said, but nothing changes. 'They are not listening to the voice of the people. Even though we live in a democracy, which means that, the voice of the people . . . well anyway. . .', Claudia trailed off. For several interlocutors, the resulting conviction that living and working conditions are impervious to positive change leads them to relinquish political demands outright. Christian, working at the furniture house discussed his political indifference openly. He voted in the last general election at the behest of his friends, but deep down he believes that 'nothing will change. . . you can't really control it'. After a drag on his e-cigarette, he concludes: 'We live in a totally normalized capitalism.'

42 Mark Elchardus and Bram Spruyt, 'Populism, persistent republicanism and declinism: an empirical analysis of populism as a thin ideology', *Government and Opposition*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2016, 111–33 (117).

43 Angus Campbell, Gerald Gurin and Warren E. Miller, *The Voter Decides* (Oxford: Row, Peterson 1954), 187; Jennifer Shore, 'How social policy impacts inequalities in political efficacy', *Sociology Compass*, vol. 14, no. 5, 2020.

Nostalgia and reclusivity

Nostalgia, ‘a sentiment of loss and displacement, but . . . also a romance with one’s own fantasy’, forms a crucial element of the metanarrative of decline.⁴⁴ Magda swooned when she talked about her early days at the department store, contrasting the pride she felt back then with its current disarray and her lack of time for rewarding interactions with customers. Susanne, her colleague, also compared the department store as it once was with the circumstances she perceives today: ‘Back then, all the way back, it was luxurious to go to this store. We had super customers; everything was great. But now – we have a totally *different* clientele.’ She went on to describe the ‘primitive’ nature of her customers. For Susanne, working at the store had previously signified exclusivity for herself as well: ‘It was amazing! You got a hefty employee discount. It wasn’t like now, you couldn’t really get a discount unless you really knew someone.’ Today, as discounts are distributed more freely, the sense of exclusivity has dissolved. The customers that indicate to Susanne that her work environment has transformed specifically include ‘non-Germans’ and refugees who buy clothing with welfare vouchers. ‘[They buy] expensive jeans and shoes, everything. *Our people* are unemployed too, you know, and they cannot afford it.’ Imagining the past offers a kind of stability in a present that appears unstable and out of order. Along with many others, Susanne connects societal decline with the presence of undeserving others. Even when refugees are not explicitly mentioned, and disapproval extends to unemployed or lazy youngsters, meritocratic ideals—‘the deserving are those who show effort and activity’⁴⁵—appear central to the imagined past and discontent with the present. As a response to perceived decline, meritocratic order and exclusivity suggest an acceptable minimum of stability and self-assurance that can supposedly prevent further erosion.⁴⁶

A second response to an overarching sense of decline lies in interlocutors’ preference for privacy and reclusivity over public life in which everything is deemed ‘political’. Karsten, a salesman, discussed his relationship with me. ‘We don’t have a lot of outside contact. That’s just how it is’, he told me. ‘We don’t really care, I think. . . . We’re not freaky in that way, that we think we have to have best friends somehow, like in a sitcom.’ For all respondents, impractical work schedules, family responsibilities and the general exhaustion and scarcity of time limit participation in social or cultural associations. Along with Karsten, several respondents in both field sites viewed ‘outside contact’ beyond close social circles and the family as generally suspicious.

44 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books 2001), xiii.

45 Jan-Ocko Heuer, Thomas Lux, Steffen Mau and Katharina Zimmermann, ‘Legitimizing inequality: the moral repertoires of meritocracy in four countries’, *Comparative Sociology*, vol. 19, nos 4–5, 2020, 542–84 (556).

46 Zygmunt Bauman, *Retrotopia* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity 2017), 8.

This suspicion extends specifically to public debate and discussion that touch on politics or grievances. Anke, the cafeteria worker at the furniture house, is well known among colleagues for her usually upbeat demeanour. But she stressed that, in general, she keeps her views about society to herself. ‘You cannot talk with people anymore’, she murmured. Similarly, Claudia stressed her stubborn willingness to share her opinions—‘even if they lock me up. . . you never know!’—although she admitted that this was so ‘only within my own four walls with my husband’. This reclusively also entails a retreat from discussions on social media and, in some cases, a deletion of accounts due to the harmful and charged climate on online platforms. Laura, an employee at the furniture store, has stopped following or discussing current events with friends, as they weigh too heavily on social relationships and produce emotional strain: ‘to be honest, I feel better doing so.’ Instead, respondents frequent environments perceived to be less exposed, and that facilitate conflict-free expression. These include the home, as well as a notorious smokers’ lounge at the department store or private *WhatsApp* or *Telegram* groups, all seen as spaces for venting, largely free of antagonistic debate and shielded from the turmoil of public opinion and politics.

The *normal* future as a retrotopic promise

‘Everything has changed’ was a diagnosis made by most of my respondents before 2020, who saw their impression confirmed as the COVID-19 pandemic hit. In its wake, market experts divided businesses into ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ of the catastrophic event. The department store’s retailing model failed this litmus test, ultimately forcing the closure of multiple locations, the dismissal of more than 2,000 employees, and an application for substantial state support. In contrast, the furniture store’s profits grew during the crisis, due to its ability to offer remote services, including online ordering, and home collections and distribution. Its online revenue almost doubled, as more workers such as Katja shifted from servicing shop floors to tasks like managing and processing merchandise for delivery. Drawing on the concept of ‘logistification’ has highlighted that this shift in retailing began much earlier, and produced specific experiences in the realms of labour and social reproduction among workers. They feel pressured to adapt to continuously changing work environments that increase stress and lead to dissatisfaction regarding their work routines. Precarious reproduction models demand sacrifices by respondents’ involving their own well-being and, even where their positions are stable, create worries about future scarcity. Anxiety and a sense of futility characterize respondents’ perspectives on the future, and many report merely ‘hanging on’ in hopes of securing a liveable pension. A metanarrative of a broader, societal decline shapes these experiences and, in many cases, suggests that they are beyond the influence

of political intervention. Turning backwards—towards nostalgic imaginings of a more orderly past—and turning inwards—towards private and protected social spaces, such as the home—provide a modicum of stability in face of this perceived decline.


I argue that it is these responses that render far-right politics acceptable and that provide points at which nostalgia and desires for protected domestic space can become connected to the rejection of migration and refugees. The longing for an image of society as it once was frequently entails the supposed re-establishment of meritocratic order and deservedness. Holding on to the constant principles of individual productivity and meritocracy in the face of increasingly transparent contradictions is made possible by rejecting specific subjects from a community of solidarity, namely migrants and refugees.⁴⁷ The disavowal of institutional politics and public deliberation more generally leads a subset of respondents to demand a more authoritarian and executive style of politics, a strengthening of law enforcement, a more punitive social state and more assertive and ruthless politicians. Although such positions are commonly associated with the eastern German electorate, my observations do not fit this picture easily. Rather, nostalgia and the readiness to uphold the principle of meritocracy by excluding Others seemed more pronounced among the workforce in southern Germany.

The interpretations that shape respondents' experiences do not arise as natural 'demands' to which far-right parties respond with their ideological supply. Through campaigns like the AfD's 'Germany. But Normal', far-right actors strive to offer the symbolic registers in which such experiences are framed, and in which nostalgic imaginations and the protection of the domestic sphere become linked to the securitization of borders and the rejection of migration. The party's promise of a 'normal future' that provided the starting point for this investigation suggests more than a return to pre-pandemic times. In contrast to a society without order, it plunders a romanticized past for elements that are supposed to guarantee trustworthiness and security. It is a 'retrotopic' promise, as Zygmunt Bauman might have called it, a promise that leverages 'visions located in the lost/stolen/abandoned but undead past, instead of being tied to the not-yet-unborn'.⁴⁸ Against pressures of transformation, crisis and change, the 'alternative' is simply to *go back*. At the same time, the promise of a 'normal future' constitutes an attempt to absolve this vision of its political nature and position it as a commonsense demand beyond public deliberation. While none of the interlocutors proclaim open support for them, some suggest they understand far-right parties, given perceived societal decline. Opportunities for challenging the metanarrative of declinism and its articulation in far-right politics appear

47 Markus Rheindorf and Ruth Wodak, 'Borders, fences, and limits—protecting Austria from refugees: metadiscursive negotiation of meaning in the current refugee crisis', *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, vol. 16, nos 1–2, 2018, 15–38.

48 Bauman, *Retrotopia*, 5.

to lie in tackling the lack of solidarity and a disavowal of politics, but also in visions of the future beyond romanticized nostalgia.

Alexander Harder is a doctoral student and assistant researcher at the Department of European Ethnology at Humboldt University Berlin. He researches far-right ideologies and the sociocultural dimensions of digitization with a focus on perspectives from cultural and digital anthropology. Email: alexander.harder@hu-berlin.de ORCID  <http://orcid.org/0009-0007-7631-6094>