

Economic Prosperity as “Narcissistic Filling”: A Missing Link Between Political Attitudes and Right-wing Authoritarianism

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An expanded analysis of the origin of the correlation with economic deprivation found in the authors' representative surveys of right-wing extremist attitudes (such as racism, anti-Semitism, and chauvinism), focusing on the underlying dynamics in Germany and the historical aspect of National Socialism. The growing prosperity of the West German “economic miracle” of the 1950s served a psychosocial “filling function” to block the narcissistic damage caused by confrontation with past crimes and the sense of the nation's loss of greatness. As this prosperity vanishes for many people during the current economic crisis, the filling comes out and the narcissistic wound opens up. What emerges is both what lies underneath and what has been serving as a defense against it, which involve authoritarian dynamics. Initially, the metaphor of “narcissistic filling” will be developed through our analysis of group discussions conducted as part of our qualitative study (of 2008). The developed hypotheses will thereafter be introduced to our following representative survey (of 2010) and confirmed by means of quantitative methods.

The relation between relative deprivation and antidemocratic attitudes has been thoroughly confirmed by means of empirical studies. Increasing right-wing extremist attitudes in Germany and other European countries have been discussed in connection with experienced or anticipated loss of economic status (Heitmeyer 2010; Küpper and Zick 2010; Decker et al. 2012; Zick 2010; Decker et al. 2012). At the same time, these studies illuminate the potentially integrating function of economic participation and on the other hand the loss of legitimacy of democracy in the event of economic crisis and deprivation (Heitmeyer and Endrikat 2008). Whether measured as “fascism,” “right-wing-extremism,” or “authoritarianism,” this loss of legitimacy is accompanied by ideologies grounded in resentment and prejudice (Feldman and Stenner 1997; Cohrs and Ibler 2009). Experience of deprivation is closely connected with denouncement of the fundamental principles of democratic cooperation and denial of recognition of “the other.” This holds not only for economic deprivation but also for political and social deprivation (Decker et al. 2006). As there is extensive empirical evidence for this connection, it has a strong influence on research on right-wing-

extremism, especially in Germany (Heitmeyer 1994; Endrikat et al. 2002; Schmidt et al. 2003). Unsurprisingly, “deprivation” has been considered a “key concept of social psychology” (Pettigrew 2001). Ever since the notion of “relative deprivation” was introduced to social research by Stouffer and his colleagues (Stouffer et al. 1949), it has been broadly applied and adapted in the field of social psychology (Smith et al. 2011). However, different means of measurement produce divergent outcomes (Rippl and Baier 2005) and raise the question, what exactly is being measured by whom.

Although some effort has been made to integrate theoretical conceptualizations (Rippl and Seipel 2002), the discussion lacks a thorough understanding or explanation of the connection between deprivation and so-called right-wing attitudes. Although one of the central tasks of social psychology lies in analyzing the mediating processes between societal conditions and their individual effects, this task has not entirely been mastered. In spite of refined concepts such as the differentiation between “individual” and “fraternal deprivation” (Runciman 1966), empirical

research has paid little attention to the question why. Yet, social psychological research has a rich history of theorizing on this question.

Analyzing the relationship between the individual and the society was the focus of the “studies on the authoritarian personality” (Adorno et al. 1950), which are considered a “milestone of empirical social research” (Fahrenberg and Steiner 2004). What is more, not only did the Critical Theorists of the Frankfurt school combine quantitative and qualitative approaches to describe the conditions that transport the threat to democracy, they also sought a profound critique of those conditions (Habermas 1968; Rook et al. 1993). In terms of a Weberian ideal type, the “authoritarian personality” has a high price to pay for participating in the societal and economic power of authority by submitting. If this account remains unbalanced, his/her aggression will be directed against representations of the society that demands submission. However, with the cognitive turn the paradigms have shifted in the scientific community. As a result, “critical theorizing” of coercive socialization seems to have lost its legitimacy, and interpretive approaches in social psychology research are still rare. Although the empirical results of the “studies” are still being confirmed, they are simply labeled as “authoritarianism.” The “authoritarian personality” seems to have become as obsolete as psychoanalysis as a theory of socialization that allows the individual to be conceptualized as embedded in societal structures (Marcuse 1963; Decker 2010).

For understanding prejudice, models of social cognition in group processes, such as information processing and the intergroup conflict paradigm, have become dominant (Mummendey 1985). Ever since the model of realistic group conflict (Sherif and Sherif 1979) was reformulated towards conflict being understood as the result of mere categorization (Tajfel and Turner 1979), the theory itself has been repeatedly modified and complemented. For instance, motivational assumptions added to Turner and Tajfel’s theory of social identity have led to the idea of an individual’s need for positive (group) identity and self-enhancement. This need requires a relation and therefore entails in-group favoritism and discrimination against the out-group. As a

consequence, it is only by devaluating the “other” that the in-group and therefore the individual gains in self-esteem (Zick 1996).

According to Terror Management Theory, these processes become even more pronounced under mortality salience, where an awareness of death primes individuals to regulate their self-esteem (Greenberg et al. 1997). This statement is not only in accord with the correlation of cognitive rigidity with self-enhancement (Stangor and Thompson 2002) and with ego involvement (Schultz et al. 1997); it might also illuminate parts of the connection between deprivation and right-wing extremist attitudes. In their experiments in Germany, Jonas and Fritsche demonstrate that under conditions of mortality salience, participants were more likely to choose the Deutschmark as a symbol of cultural identification than a control group (Jonas and Fritsche 2005). Consequently, an economic token helps people to cope with a threat to their self-esteem. In the following we will connect the threads of theory and research as described so far.

One of the central ideas underlying the “studies on the authoritarian personality” was coined by Erich Fromm, who proposed that authority served as “prosthetic security” (1936, 179) and could therefore adopt a regulating function in situations of threat. Even earlier, Georg Simmel pointed out that people willingly subordinate themselves to authority (1908). In Freudian terms the authority serves as a substitute for the individual’s ego ideal and the members of a group identify with each other (Freud 1921). Desires for grandeur and power can be satisfied by means of “narcissistic compensation” (Fromm 1936, 179). Hence, prejudice is always related to regulation of self-esteem, which shall therefore serve as a starting point for our exploration of the connection between deprivation and right-wing extremist attitudes.

1. Our Studies on Right-wing Extremism in the Center of Society

The “center studies” are based on representative surveys on political attitudes conducted every other year since 2002, with between 2,500 and 5,000 participants in each wave (Decker et al. 2003; Decker and Brähler 2005; Decker et al. 2006; Decker and Brähler 2008; Decker et al. 2012). In addition, we conducted a study based on group discussions

in 2007 and 2008, whose participants were recruited from the 2006 survey.

This paper presents findings from a “mixed method” study combining quantitative and qualitative methods. Rather than distinguishing approaches hierarchically, for example by reducing the function of qualitative data to explorative purposes, we emphasize a methodological triangulation in the strict sense (Flick 2010) as has proven productive in studies on prejudice (Flecker et al. 2005; Krüger and Pfaff 2006). With Dilthey, we posit the primacy of understanding the subject matter over separating methodological approaches. Our research aims at understanding the connection between deprivation and right-wing-extremism, assuming that we are dealing with historically variable phenomena.

1.1. Qualitative Design: Theme-centered Group Discussions

On the basis of the 2006 representative survey on right-wing extremist attitudes (Decker et al. 2006), we conducted group discussions throughout Germany with participants who we categorized as right-wing extremist, partly right-wing extremist or not right-wing extremist according to the survey data. The study aimed to analyze in detail the psychosocial genesis of political attitudes (Decker et al. 2008). Our methodology was based on a combination of qualitative social science methods and psychoanalysis. We developed a concept of group discussions building on Leithäuser and Volmerg (1988) and their conceptualization of “theme-centered group discussions,” as well as on the approach by Ralf Bohnsack (2007) who developed the notion of “collective patterns of orientation” (1997, 495, translated).

Our approach to interpreting the transcripts uses psychoanalytic methods by transferring the analysis of counter-transference (Devereux 1967) and “scenic understanding” (Lorenzer 1973) to psychosocial research (see Bereswill et al. 2010 for an English introduction to the method). However, while clinical psychoanalysis seeks to (re)construct biographical and individual forms of conflict and defense, the subject matter of social research is the general in the particular. Psychosocial research deals with the way forms of conflict and defense are repeated unconsciously in the setting of the investigation and always (also) have a “collec-

tive” meaning. Access to this level of meaning can be gained via the analysis of transference and counter-transference in the research process and via “scenic understanding.” Transferring Lorenzer’s concept to psychosocial research, the setting of a qualitative investigation can be regarded as an ensemble of “scenes” in which both participants and researchers become involved, and which are also motivated by unconscious conflicts and defenses against them. They are “(re)mis en scène,” i.e. partly (re)produced in their original unconscious formation. Psychoanalysis has long been based on this phenomenon of reproduction, the idea having been introduced by Freud (1914) who contrasted the notion of an unconscious repetition and enactment of conflictual psychic material to remembering. Group discussions stimulate such (re)productions, as well as the development of relations of transference. In addition, a group setting produces scenes that transcend the individual. Access to unconscious forms of conflict and defense that are (re)produced in the group discussion and interview settings can be gained via exploring the researcher’s own irritations, affects, and associations in response to the transcripts/texts. But how to grasp the conflicts and defenses on a “collective” level, given that they are always intertwined with the individual and neurotic? The interpreted scenes might be referred back to the research question. “The scenic interpretation is in itself a way of validating statements” (Lochel 1997, 69, translated) while at the same time, those interpretations have to be continually validated by the transcript. To analyze our data we formed a group that met at least once a week to discuss individual interpretations. To further intersubjectively validate our findings, we were supervised by the psychoanalyst Elfriede Löchel, Ph.D.

Altogether we conducted twelve group discussions in nine regions throughout Germany with participants who, we categorized as right-wing extremist, partly right-wing extremist or not right-wing extremist in their attitudes on the basis of the survey. Initially we had planned to form groups with homogenous political attitudes from the survey sample. Due to a low response rate however, we were unable to recruit enough participants with right-wing extremist attitudes. We therefore directly recruited two groups that were considered right-wing extremist by local social workers. The number of participants varied between

three and six. The participants were of various age groups (range 18–89 years) and had different social and educational backgrounds. As the introductory “theme,” they were asked by two facilitators to discuss amongst themselves how they experienced living in their town or region. The facilitators did not intervene much during the following conversation, except to stimulate further discussion. At some point they introduced the period of the discussants’ childhood (unless they had already brought it up themselves).

1.2. Quantitative Design: Representative Surveys

On behalf of the University of Leipzig, the polling firm USUMA (Berlin) conducted surveys on the distribution and influencing factors of right-wing extremist attitudes since 2002. The data presented below (see section 2.2) is based on face-to-face interviews conducted at 258 sample points (N = 2,411) in 2010.

The core of the studies is the scale on right-wing extremist attitudes, comprising “approval of right-wing dictatorship,” “chauvinism,” “racism/xenophobia,” “anti-Semitism,” “social Darwinism,” and “relativization of National Socialism.” Each of the six dimensions comprises three items, so participants were asked to respond to eighteen items on a five-point Likert-scale (between “I strongly agree” and “I strongly disagree”). To give a few examples, one of the items measuring xenophobia was “Foreigners only come to this country to take advantage of the welfare state” (our translation). Chauvinism was measured by items such as: “What we need in our country is to forcefully and aggressively assert German interests towards foreign countries” (our translation). (See Annex 1 for a complete list of items).

Several items on the estimation of the economic situation and different forms of deprivation were correlated with the right-wing-extremism scale in order to assess their impact as influencing factors. In order to estimate individual economic deprivation, we assessed the subjective experience of loss of prosperity as well as concerns about the individual employment situation (Decker et al. 2012).

Experience of unemployment and the level of income were used as markers of the objective economic situation. How

participants assessed the current state of the economy served as an indicator of economic deprivation at a collective or societal level. Since individual economic deprivation is likely to be accompanied by social deprivation, i.e. experiences of loss in social life, the latter were also assessed. Furthermore, we tested the impact of political deprivation, i.e. the feeling of powerlessness related to participation in democracy, on the development of right-wing extremist attitudes.

In our 2006 surveys all measures of deprivation proved to have a strong impact on the endorsement of right-wing extremist statements (Decker et al. 2006, 122–27). It still remains open how this influence might have changed given the current economic crisis. In addition, our 2010 survey includes socio-economic factors as moderating variables. We calculated two linear regression models. The first model comprises markers of economic, social, and political deprivation; the second includes the variables of educational background, age, and gender as socio-structural variables and possible moderating factors (see section 2.2).

2. Findings

Building on the findings of the preceding representative survey that confirm a correlation between economic deprivation and political attitudes (Decker et al. 2006), the group discussions allow a more detailed exploration of the individual and collective meanings ascribed to those experiences. We now explore how participants discuss prosperity and trace the historical roots.

2.1 Material Prosperity as a Core Issue of the Group Discussions

Without having been asked by the interviewers, participants brought up the topic of prosperity as a core issue in eight out of twelve group discussions (Decker et al. 2008). The topic was mentioned with explicit reference to the “economic miracle” of the 1950s and, as such, contrasted to the immediate post-war period. Some of the participants experienced this period themselves, while others talked about their parents’ experiences. In order to analyze in detail different aspects of the experience of prosperity and economic decline or the anticipation of economic decline, we selected one group discussion (in the major western German industrial city of Dortmund) for the pur-

pose of this article. We chose the Dortmund discussion because it includes vivid accounts of the experience of prosperity, a first-person narrative of the transition from the war to the postwar period, and indications of inter-generational aspects (for analysis of the other discussions see Decker et al. 2008).

Firstly, we quote and summarize how the issue of prosperity is discussed and then contextualize the statements with regard to the group dynamic as well as to their individual and intergenerational meanings: how do the participants situate the issue in their individual and family biographies? Which individual and collective meanings are ascribed to experienced or anticipated economic decline?

2.1.1. Generations

“And that’s another issue of the parents’ generation, who defined themselves by it – my parents as well”

Two men and two women participated in the Dortmund discussion, three of them in their sixties, one in her forties. The discussion is shaped by significant differences in economic and social status between the discussants, since two of them (Herr Wernecke and Frau Wagner, see below) have more education and a significantly higher income than the other two (Frau Meier and Herr Winkler). Correspondingly, Herr Wernecke and Frau Wagner attempt to document higher status and subtly exclude the other two participants.

In response to the question regarding what life is like in Dortmund, the participants begin discussing shopping opportunities in the Rhein/Ruhr region. Their discussion about participating in material consumption and access to material commodities refers indirectly to the shared experience of prosperity. Subsequently, they touch on intergenerational aspects by speaking about their childrens’ generation(s) and by discussing symbols of status. Frau Wagner notes the pressure of stigmatization on children whose parents cannot afford to buy them brand clothing:

*Frau Wagner:*¹ Now, that’s an issue amongst kids of poor people and of rich people, right. Those of the rich people suppress the poor kids: “Oh, look at your clothes!” or ^Lthose

Herr Wernecke: ^LYeah.

Herr Winkler: Those, who don’t have anything, they try to – if, for example, there is a weak guy – they will try to steal his clothes, ’cause they themselves don’t have anything. That’s one of those things.

Frau Wagner: That’s not the child’s issue though, that’s an issue of self-confidence, I can

Herr Winkler: No, no, that’s an issue of the pare- (.) yeah, sure.

Frau Wagner continues exploring the parents’ responsibility to help their children gain self-confidence without the use of material status symbols.

Frau Wagner: And that’s another issue of my parents’ generation, who defined themselves by it. My parents as well. My mother would be like “look, Aigner, Joop”! She wanted other people to see: “hey, ^Lwe succeeded in life,” right.

Herr Winkler: ^L Not -. ³ No. No.

Frau Wagner: I’m just saying, if I had the Prada label on the back or whatever, that would be my business. I’d know I have a cashmere sweater but that would be enough. Whereas for my mother, being a member of the other generation - - it’s important for her, that other people also see how she succeeded (L1460–1491⁴).

Frau Wagner is speaking as a product of the “economic miracle” in the West Germany of the 1950s and therefore emphasizes that she differs from her parents, who grew up during wartime (L1324). She also contrasts her experience with the “problems [...] of kids kids nowadays” (L1325). This background frames the issue of prosperity as well as the significance of its documentation. Current experiences of deprivation are indexed historically, with prosperity being contrasted with the immediate post-war period. At the same time, Frau Wagner alludes to the necessity to reassure oneself and others of participation in prosperity; she locates the wish to document prosperity in her parents as well as in her children. Although she claims not to need the mirroring of others, she does articulate her enjoyment of the goods and symbols of prosperity.

1 All names are anonymized.

2 Speaking simultaneously.

3 “-”: pause or interruption.

4 “L”: Line number in the original transcript.

Herr Wernecke joins the discussion of historical references initiated by Frau Wagner.

Herr Wernecke: That’s correct. On the other, on the other hand, when I went to school at the end of the forties, or the early fifties, the social divide was immense. There was a high unemployment rate, there were the so-called newly rich, who by 1948, uhm, became rich very quickly. And who are supposed to be the norm for the normal public, who - ? Prosperity or well-, well-being was not the standard before the second half of the 1950s. Then, in the 1960s, ok, I must say, the economic miracle uhm had an impact (L1573–1580).

Herr Wernecke describes the economic divide before the “economic miracle” of the 1950s and 1960s as pronounced. Only then would many Germans in the former West Germany be able to participate in societal prosperity, as expressed in the slogan “Prosperity for all” (“Wohlstand für alle”) coined by West German Economy Minister Ludwig Erhard in 1957 (Erhard 1957). It marks the political promise of economic participation that Herr Wernecke (together with other participants) considers fulfilled in the time period of the “economic miracle”. Once more, the end of World War II as a historic event frames the topic of economic prosperity.

2.1.2. The Promise of Prosperity

Frau Meier refers to the era of the “economic miracle” as a period of “construction,” (*Aufbau*) in an almost nostalgic way.

Frau Meier: Right, especially, ’cause back in the day, everything was being rebuilt. It was like, let’s say, it wasn’t like you could uhm, that you could uhm – . Especially, you wouldn’t have a car, like –. My father bought his first car in the sixties and uhm (3),⁵ then it just went – since then, things were in the flow even more, right (L1158–1169).

The discussant describes how, in the 1960s, her father apparently bought a car as a symbol of prosperity. Her phrasing, that “things were even more in the flow,” alludes to the reconstruction (of Germany after World War II) as an “automatic process” bringing prosperity into the family.

Frau Meier from Dortmund is a highly engaged discussant, both quantitatively and affectively. Later in the discussion she will introduce the “issue” of “foreigners,” with the effect that the group, whose members were categorized as “non-right-wing extremist” (according to our survey data), takes an unexpected turn. But before analyzing how statements on the economic situation connect with xenophobic or racist sentiments, let us turn to Frau Meier’s biography. After the other participants have introduced themselves, Frau Meier joins in with a relatively long answer to the facilitators’ question, what life was like in Dortmund. She introduces herself as a “displaced person” (“Vertriebene,” L125) and describes how she experienced severe poverty at the end of the war and during the family’s flight “from the Russians” when her hometown Breslau (Wrocław since 1945) was liberated. While her father was serving as a soldier, her mother took her and her siblings westwards. Her sister was temporarily lost during their flight.

Frau Meier: And then we arrived at my aunt’s house in uhm Tor-gau. Wegot two small rooms there, but at least we had a roof over our heads. And the winter was so hard back then, and we collected every piece of wood – although we were not allowed to do that – just to get it warm in there. (...) You know, we had nothing, we had no money, nothing at all, and uhm, my mother was glad to get something from the farmer once in a while. Well, and then, at some point my father came from captivity, and it was like: where is my sister. And my father had the Red Cross search for her (1), and she was found (L125–148).

Telling her story, Frau Meier is intensely involved emotionally, thus marking her early experiences of the post-war flight as still highly meaningful today. This passage forms a significant contrast with that of the newly acquired quality of life quoted above, on both the thematic and the affective level. In addition, her family’s gain in prosperity was followed by Frau Meier’s own moderate economic ascent, as she married and created her own business with her husband (L1063–1083).

In the discussion Frau Meier introduces her father as a key figure in her life and family, and confirms this when speaking about his parenting style.

5 (n) Length of pause in seconds.

Frau Meier: And I got my driver’s license and I had to - or rather my father told us what to study. My brother had to become an electrician, although he wanted to do something totally different and so did the other brother. My sister wanted to become a hairdresser, but had to go to housekeeping school, and I had to become a saleswoman, though it didn’t suit me, but what could I do. Oh well, and then I went into training for three years and (3) well, it went on like that (L1049–1056).

With the father not taking into account his children’s career wishes, this description already illustrates an authoritarian parenting style. As Frau Meier relates, this also included severe physical punishment. Except for Frau Wagner, who is about twenty years younger than the others, the participants share similar experiences. All three of them report and legitimize, in hindsight, how parents and teachers beat them severely.

Frau Meier: But did it do any harm to anybody? No, it didn’t. And nowadays, (...) whenever any father or mother beats their child – I mean, nobody beats a child without reason, right (L1244–1256).

Whereas the other participants distance themselves to some extent from their parents’ disciplinary practices in the course of the discussion, Frau Meier remains highly identified with her father. The father of the period of economic growth demanded submission and is still obeyed to this day. Although alluding to her own desires and expectations for life, Frau Meier does not acknowledge them, nor does she express any anger at her father or any feeling of disappointment. However, she is highly enraged and aggressive when she expresses resentment towards “foreigners”:

Frau Meier: Now we’ve got a lot of Turks in Dortmund. I’ve got nothing against foreigners, no matter where they come from, black or white. But they dare to do things that we mustn’t. They park in the middle of the street, they yak at the corner, [she hits the table repeatedly], they stop and talk, and when you honk your horn, they get sassy. When the police get called and they see the Turks, they run away. And it’s really terrible in our city, they run rampant, they buy up every shop, they buy every house that gets empty. I’d say, we’ll reach 80 percent Turks soon. (1) One shouldn’t tar them all with the same brush, but it’s not nice anymore. They live in uhm, uhm, real ghettos, and they think

they got rights everywhere, and uhm they can get away with anything. If we wanna go to their country, we have to adjust to them. If we did what they dare to do, ☺I believe we’d end up in jail☺⁶. And they always draw their knives and shit. (2) Well yeah, and yeah, it’s us here today (7) (L187–203).

Throughout the group discussion Frau Meier repeatedly bursts out in hatred and, as if evoked by her strong affect, she seems to motivate the other participants to express resentments as well. A xenophobic consensus is successively created.

Frau Meier: But I keep wondering – the Turks around here, they never go to work, I always see the same lot on the street, morning, noon, and night. They don’t go to work. But then she drives a big BMW. He drives a big Mercedes. They got a house. I don’t know how they do that, how they get that money - whether it’s all by selling pot and whatnot, I don’t know (...) Yeah, it makes you wonder sometimes ^L how those nationalities do that, right.

Frau Wagner: ^L Yeah.

Herr Winkler: ^L That was a Polish guy.⁷

Frau Meier: They don’t go to work. Just hang around in the pedestrian precinct. Starting at

Frau Wagner: dubious business

Herr Wernecke: Right.

Frau Meier: 9 am ^L, there’s only Turks in the café or outside on the street. It’s insane!

Herr Winkler: ^L It’s the Mafia, slip me something, and then they have to

Frau Wagner: protection money (2) right.

Herr Winkler: Yeah, yeah (L815–836).

We understand this strong affect as envy that is displaced onto “the Turks” and other groups of people, who are associated with what Frau Meier has wished for herself. She therefore represents the experience of deprivation. In the group discussion we can observe an authoritarian dynamic in the classic sense of the term: identification with economic well-being as a powerful authority or ideal, while, at the same time aggression is played out against minorities, who are, in turn, fantasized as powerful. As indicated above, the other participants join Frau Meier in expressing

6 ☺: Laughter

7 Frau Meier and Herr Winkler know each other personally.

resentment against migrants, especially against Muslims (“those wearing headscarves,” Frau Wagner) whom they differentiate from other groups of immigrants that are supposedly closer “to us” (L1527–1579). Adorno coined the image of “bicyclist characters: ‘above they bow, they kick below’” (Adorno et al. 1950, 422, footnote 25). By supporting Frau Meier’s rage against migrants that she fantasizes as powerful and wealthy, the other participants join her and thus create an authoritarian group dynamic.

Another remark shows how the rage is directed at whoever is suspected of leading “the good life without working” and who is imagined to possess property, cars, money, and drugs and be free to do whatever they want:

Frau Meier: The standard of living got more expensive for us, the – for the little man, who only got a few Deutschmarks. But not for th- the ones up there,⁸ who earn thousands of bucks a month. On top of that, they get free prescriptions of Viagra from their doctors and they get like - [heavy breathing] (L663–666).

Authoritarian aggression seems to emerge whenever the promise of prosperity is unfulfilled.

2.2. Economic Prosperity as “Narcissistic Filling”

In order to elucidate the relation between deprivation and right-wing extremist attitudes, we suggest understanding prosperity as serving the psychosocial function of a “narcissistic filling.” The term was coined by Morgenthaler (1976, 1988) as part of his theory of perversion, which “fills – somewhat like a dental filling – a cavity in the regulation of self-esteem acquired in childhood” (Morgenthaler 1976, 170).

With this metaphor we also refer back to Alexander and Margarethe Mitscherlich (1967), who “diagnosed” the majority of non-Jewish Germans after 1945 as incapable of mourning. Their “diagnosis” builds on the psychoanalytic understanding of response to a significant loss of an authority and its correlation with the loss of self-esteem. Deploying the Freudian concept of “mourning” versus

“melancholia” in social psychology, they bring to light processes effective in the majority of Germans after 1945. Following Freud, they describe the functional response to a significant loss, e.g. of a beloved person, as “slowly detaching oneself from lost object relations” (Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich 1975, 66). Working through this process of mourning means to finally accept “definitive change in reality brought about by the loss of the object.” (ibid., 64). Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich transfer the notion of the response to an individual object loss to the collective level by combining it with Freud’s analysis of mass or large group processes: “The individual gives up his ego ideal and substitutes for it the group ideal as embodied in the leader” (Freud 1959, 78 [orig. 1921]). According to this analysis, for the majority of Germans in National Socialism the “Führer” Hitler represented a “grandiose self” image with which they identified. He replaced the ego ideal of every individual who identified with the National Socialist idea of “German greatness,” and by following the “Führer” they realized parts of this ego ideal (Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich 1975). “He was the object on which Germans depended ... and ... represented and revived the ideas of omnipotence that we all cherish about ourselves from infancy; his death, and his devaluation by the victors, also implied the loss of a narcissistic object and, accordingly, an ego- or self-impoverishment and devaluation. (ibid.: 26). With the victory of the Allies and the collapse of the construct of the “Third Reich” they lost (the identification with) the collective ideal and therefore the grandiose “self”.

With their theorizing the Mitscherliches illuminate the connection between a defense against a narcissistic damage and the reconstruction of Germany after the war. The narcissistic loss could have led to collective melancholia (Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich 1967, 1975). Yet, instead of recognizing the loss of an ideal grandiose self, the majority of Germans not only covered over this loss, but also replaced it by means of “narcissistic filling.” What is more, they would also have had to recognize the guilt of the war

⁸ This is the only moment in the discussion that Frau Meier (or anybody else) points at those “up there” as the privileged. She might be indirectly alluding to the two participants whose higher economic status is higher than hers.

of annihilation and the Holocaust, organized by Germans. Instead, according to Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich (1967, 1975), they withdrew all the psychic investment with which they had adored Hitler and done their “duty.” They disavowed the crimes, derealized their experiences and externalized the guilt, for example by displacing it onto Hitler, or by weighing their guilt against the guilt of others and identifying as wrongly accused victims, or, on the other hand, by identifying with the victors. As Rothe shows in her qualitative interview study on the aftermath of the Holocaust in several generations of non-Jewish Germans, even in the second and third generation after National Socialism, defense processes against narcissistic damage are induced whenever the Holocaust is evoked. According to Rothe’s analysis via “scenic understanding” (see above) the core scene that is “(re)mis en scene” or (re)produced in the interviews is a confrontation with the crimes of the Holocaust (Rothe 2009, 2012) and as such relates back to the confrontation by the Allies. The participants (who were either children during National Socialism or born afterwards) spoke as if accused of participation, which can only be understood if processes of intergenerational transmission and identification with the construct of the nation are taken into account.

Coming back to the thesis developed above, the “collective narcissism” that was massively damaged by the breakdown of National Socialism was replaced by the economic boom, by the “feeling of ‘how competent we are’” (Adorno 1986, 122). Democracy was accepted because life can be easy in democracy (ibid.), but it was neither lived nor internalized.

2.3. Deprivation and Right-Wing Extremist Attitudes in the Representative Study

In order to test the findings of the group discussions by means of a methodological triangulation, we correlated parameters of economic deprivation and other possible impact factors with measures of right-wing extremist attitudes by means of two regression models (see section 2.1.2.). We hypothesized, firstly, that endorsement of right-wing extremist statements increases if the individual’s economic situation deteriorates, both objectively (assessed by the level of income) and as subjectively experienced. Secondly, we posited that this holds true not only for the

individual economic situation, but also for the assessment of the German economy as a whole. (See Annex 2 for the distribution of right-wing extremist attitudes in 2010; see Annex 3 for perceived social and political deprivation over time). As we developed in our analysis of the group discussions, we assume that (especially) in (West) Germany identification with prosperity replaced identification with the “Führer” and a collective fantasy of grandiosity and consequently served (and might still serve) the function of “narcissistic filling” after the defeat of National Socialism and the confrontation with its crimes.

The regression model reveals a surprise with regard to the impact of the economic situation. The factors of “income” and “experience of unemployment” have no impact on the right-wing extremism scores. Relative individual deprivation does not correlate significantly with the scores on the right-wing extremism scale; other moderating factors prove to be more influential. However, the first model does show a significant impact of the estimation of the German economy as a whole. This significant impact of “collective” economic deprivation can still be shown after controlling for the socio-structural variables of educational background, age and gender. Since including the moderating variables increases the explanatory power from approximately 8 percent to 10 percent, we shall focus in the following on the second model.

Table 1: Economic deprivation in Germany (West and East)

	Model 1	Model 2
Income	-0.061**	-0.026
Experience of unemployment	-0.003	0.002
Concern about current employment	-0.025	0.025
Individual economic deprivation	-0.010	-0.015
Collective economic deprivation (Germany)	0.120**	0.111**
Political deprivation	0.116**	0.094**
Social deprivation	0.182**	0.179**
Education		-0.109**
Female		-0.051*
Age		0.095**
Constant	23.869**	26.362**
Adjusted R ²	0.081	0.103

*p < .01 **p < .001; N= 2,195
 Source: Decker et al. 2012.
 Standardized beta coefficients

First of all, the Table 1 shows that all three socio-structural variables (education, age, and gender) have a significant impact on the scores on the right-wing-extremism scale. Whereas education correlates negatively with right-wing-extremism, age correlates positively. Women tend to score significantly less than men; this gender effect remains even after controlling for measures of economic, social, and perceived political deprivation.

As already mentioned, the variables of objective and subjective economic situation – as assessed by level of income and experience of unemployment – do not have a significant impact on the right-wing-extremism scores. Neither experience of personal economic deprivation nor concerned about employment correlate significantly with right-wing extremist attitudes. Consequently, the subjective estimation of an individual’s economic situation does not have a significant impact on right-wing extremist attitudes. However, the measures of deprivation at the “collective” or national level do show a significant impact; i.e. the higher the level of deprivation, the more likely an endorsement of right-wing extremist statements. Experiencing the of prosperity seems to be more meaningful at the national or “collective” level than at the individual level. This result corresponds with the

findings of Rippl and Baier regarding the impact factors of ethnocentric attitudes: “feelings of deprivation at the group level that remain meaningful independently from individual deprivation” (2005, 662, translated).

If calculated separately for eastern Germany (the former German Democratic Republic) and western Germany, the model reveals significant differences. First of all, the explanatory power rises from approximately 10 percent to 20 percent. What is more, differentiating between eastern and western Germany shifts the levels of significance. While for the western states the pattern of influencing factors is similar to the model as a whole (see Table 1), in the former GDR individual income shows a highly significant impact on right-wing-extremism (see Table 2); concern about employment nearly reaches the threshold of significance. We thus gain the impression that the impact of the individual economic situation is greater in eastern than in western Germany, especially with regard to the level of income. This might be related to the fact that in eastern Germany the job market is more insecure than in the west and the unemployment rate is higher. However, the perception of the overall economic situation is not correlated significantly with right-wing extremist attitudes.

Table 2: Economic deprivation in East Germany

	Model 1	Model 2
Income	-0.209**	-0.159*
Experience of unemployment	-0.089	-0.094
Concern about current employment	0.139**	0.154*
Individual economic deprivation	-0.092	-0.086
Collective economic deprivation (Germany)	0.075	0.069
Political deprivation	0.237**	0.211**
Social deprivation	0.222**	0.221**
Education		-0.160*
Female		-0.022
Age		-0.015
Constant	29.160**	36.719**
Adjusted R ²	0.192	0.206

*p < .01 **p < .001; N= 2195
 Source: Decker et al. 2012.
 Standardized beta coefficients

In model 2 for eastern Germany alone, the impact of collective economic deprivation vanishes. We therefore posit that the individual economic situation is more important in the former GDR than in the former West Germany. As much as participation in prosperity is desired at an individual level in eastern Germany, a collective identity regulated by identification with “national” wealth (as symbolic of power) is more pronounced in western Germany.

Let us return to the impact of the level of income: whereas its impact remains statistically insignificant in model 2 (see table 1), income does have a significant impact in model 1 (which excludes the socio-structural variables of age, gender, and education). Thus, the effect is overpowered by other variables in the second model. Since income and education are highly correlated, we conclude that education trumps the impact of income. The effect of political deprivation is similar to the effect of collective economic deprivation. Holding a fatalistic worldview, according to which the individual has no impact on politics, is a strong predictor of right-wing extremist attitudes. Social deprivation proves to have the greatest impact of all the investigated variables.

3. Discussion

By means of a methodological triangulation we analyzed in detail the connection of economic deprivation and right-wing extremist attitudes. We interpret the function of prosperity as a collective object serving the regulation of self-esteem. In times of economic decline or crisis this integrating potential loses its cohesiveness and right-wing extremist attitudes become manifest. We suggest grasping the psychosocial function of prosperity with the metaphor of “narcissistic filling.” In post-war (West) Germany the “filling” replaced the “collective” identification with greatness as embodied in the image of the “Führer”. The collective meaning of the object of a “strong economy” has been transmitted intergenerationally. When the wealth crumbles, as many people are experiencing for instance during the current economic crisis, the filling comes out and the deficits in democratization become apparent. Furthermore, the loss of the object of identification leads to an increase in authoritarian aggression. The Authoritarian Personality described by Fromm and Adorno is ambivalent towards

authority: the idealization of the authority allows for feelings of greatness and power, but it also involves submission which in turn motivates aggression that he or she displaces onto less powerful objects. If the idealized object loses power, the authoritarian personality is narcissistically hurt and responds with intensified anger. The same authoritarian dynamic can be observed with regard to the idealized “object” of the economy.

Although additional impact factors influence right-wing extremist attitudes (Decker et al. 2006), the regression analysis allows our findings of the group discussions to be specified. Whereas in eastern Germany individual access to commodities, ergo individual prosperity regulates “collective” identifications and self-esteem, in western Germany they are regulated by identification with (a flourishing) economy. Conceivably, “eastern Germans” are less identified with the economic structure, whereas in western Germany the post-war identification with the “hard Deutschmark” might still prevail even in times of economic crisis.

Durkheim’s studies on the impact of religious beliefs on individual socialization have already indicated how historical traditions influence cultures of everyday life, even if the majority is not religious (1997, 164). His theory of anomie also elucidates our thesis on the psychosocial function of wealth. When the regulating function of (individual and collective) self-esteem through religion decreased, the significance of economics took over (Weber 2000; Parsons 1940). More recently, Deutschmann (1999) and Türcke (2002) explored the religious underbelly of economy; and with their analysis our metaphor of “narcissistic filling” also gains in sociological significance. We do not suggest that the economy only began to serve the function of a collective ego ideal after World War II, nor that it only served this function in Germany. However, we assume that the cultural connotations and meanings have developed differently in other countries with different histories. Talcott Parsons and more recent studies in the United States (Kintz 1997) might be a starting point for further analyses.

In any case, our metaphor of “narcissistic filling” might be useful to help grasp the meaning of global or collective

experiences of deprivation; our findings are in accord with other studies on the connection between deprivation and right-wing-extremism. They also resonate with Tajfel and Turner’s theory of social identity as well as with the understanding of cultural artifacts as “anxiety buffers” (Greenberg et al. 1997; see also Jonas and Fritsche 2005) in Terror Management Theory.

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Annex

Annex 1

The Leipzig scale on right-wing extremist attitudes

For the national interest a dictatorship is the best form of government under certain conditions. (1)*
If it were not for the extermination of the Jews, Hitler would be regarded as a great statesman. (6)
Germany needs a strong single party that represents the ethnic community as a whole. (1)
We should have a leader who rules Germany with an iron hand for the greater good. (1)
As in nature, in society the fittest should win. (5)
Foreigners only come to this country to abuse the welfare state. (3)
Jews still have too much influence. (4)
It is about time that we regained a strong sense of patriotism. (2)
In fact, the Germans are naturally superior to other ethnic groups. (5)
When the unemployment rate rises, foreigners should be sent back home. (3)
Jews play more dirty tricks to achieve their goals than other people do. (4)
The crimes of National Socialism have been highly exaggerated in historiography. (6)
What we need in our country is to forcefully and aggressively assert German interests towards foreign countries. (2)
The primary goal of German politics should be to give Germany the power and prestige that we deserve. (2)
There is worthy and unworthy life. (5)
Foreigners dangerously pollute Germany. (3)
The Jews are just peculiar and don't really fit in with us. (4)
National Socialism had its positive aspects. (6)

(Numbers in parentheses indicate the dimension on the right-wing-extremism scale, see Annex 2).

Annex 2

Right-wing-extremist attitudes in western and eastern Germany, 2010 (in percent)

	Germany	Western (N=1,907)	Eastern (N=504)
Approval of a right-wing dictatorship (1)*	5.1	4.6	6.8
Chauvinism (2)	19.3	19.2	19.8
Xenophobia (3)	24.7	21.9	35.0
Anti-Semitism (4)	8.7	9.0	7.7
Social Darwinism (5)	4.0	3.4	6.2
Downplaying of National Socialism (6)	3.3	3.7	1.8
Right-wing-extremist world-view	8.2	10.5	7.6

Average agreement per item > 3.5 on five-point scale (“1” = “I totally agree”, “3” = “partly agree/partly disagree”, “5” = “I completely agree”)

Annex 3

Perceived social and political deprivation over time (in percent)

	Germany		Western		Eastern	
	2006	2010	2006	2010	2006	2010
People like me don't have any impact on the government anyway.	78.9	79.4	76.7	78.5	87.6	82.9
I think it's useless to engage in politics.	68.8	70.9	66.8	70.2	77.3	73.5
There are not enough people who accept me the way I am.	19.1	19.5	19.3	19.1	18.2	21.3
I don't feel good and safe in my personal environment.	12.9	13.3	13.3	13.4	11.3	12.8

Percentage who “agree” or “totally agree”

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