European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology

ISSN: 2325-4823 (Print) 2325-4815 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/recp20

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To cite this article: Bernhard Forchtner & Christoffer Kølvraa (2017) Extreme right images of radical authenticity: Multimodal aesthetics of history, nature, and gender roles in social media, European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology, 4:3, 252-281, DOI: 10.1080/23254823.2017.1322910

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23254823.2017.1322910

Published online: 07 Jul 2017.

EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF CULTURAL AND POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY, 2017
VOL. 4, NO. 3, 252–281
https://doi.org/10.1080/23254823.2017.1322910

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Extreme right images of radical authenticity: Multimodal aesthetics of history, nature, and gender roles in social media

Bernhard Forchtner[a] and Christoffer Kølvraa[b]

[a]School of Media, Communication and Sociology, University of Leicester, Leicester, UK; [b]School of Culture and Society – European Studies, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark

ABSTRACT

Over recent years, the German extreme right has undergone significant changes, including the appropriation of symbols, styles, and action repertoires of contemporary (youth) cultures, sometimes even taken from the far left. In this article, we investigate extreme right visual communication through Facebook, focusing on claims to truth and authentic Nazism in relation to 'history', 'nature', and 'gender roles'. These themes were central in National Socialism, but today need to be (re)negotiated vis-à-vis contemporary (youth) cultures. We show that while a traditional notion of ideological authority is enabled through visuals, there is also a strand of imagery depicting and celebrating 'intimate' communion. While this simultaneity leads to tensions within the 'ideal extreme right subject', we argue that such dilemmas can also be productive, allowing for the (re)negotiation of classic National Socialist doctrine in the context of contemporary (youth) cultures, and thus, potentially, for a revitalisation of the extreme right.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 9 May 2016; Accepted 20 December 2016

KEYWORDS Autonome Nationalisten/autonomous nationalists; Facebook; fascism; right-wing extremism; National Socialism; neo-Nazism

Introduction

We think that we know the far and extreme right: drunken skinheads or dubious-looking men in bad suits insisting that the Holocaust never happened. Of course, these stereotypes are, at least partly, mere stereotypes; and although these characters still populate the scene, the situation has fundamentally changed over the course of the past few decades. This is not only the case concerning what is nowadays referred to as right-wing populism, a manifestation of the far right which has long worked to modernise its appearance and rhetoric (Forchtner, Krzyżanowski, & Wodak, 2013; Mudde, 2007; Wodak, 2015). The extreme right, too, has undergone

CONTACT Bernhard Forchtner bf79@le.ac.uk

its moments of modernisation (or post-modernisation). Since the early 2000s, the German extreme right in particular has appropriated elements of contemporary (youth) cultures, including symbols, individual styles (for example, hairstyles and outfits), and action repertoires commonly associated with the extreme left (Häusler & Sturm, 2013; Peters & Schulze, 2009; Pisoiu & Lang, 2015; Schedler, 2014, 2016; Schedler & Häusler, 2011; Schlembach, 2013; Staud & Radke, 2012). This development, the 'travelling' of symbols, of bricolage, was initially linked to the rise of the self-styled '*Autonome Nationalisten*' (*autonomous nationalists*, in the following simply AN) but has, by now, spread throughout the extreme right in Germany and beyond (Peters & Schulze, 2009; Schedler & Fleisch, 2011).

This (post-)modernisation has been analysed in considerable detail, and much reference has been made to changes in the visual aspects of participants' performances (for example, their dress codes and banners at demonstrations) while, simultaneously, pointing to the extraordinary importance of the Internet and social media for their politics (Pfeiffer, 2016, p. 260; Schlembach, 2013, p. 296). We contribute to this evolving body of knowledge by analysing actual visuals that this 'new' extreme right creates and disseminates, considering especially claims to (historical) truth and the authentic representation of a National Socialist lifestyle. Given the significance of the Internet for the contemporary extreme right, we focus on their voices in an interrelated cluster of Facebook sites. Against this background, we ask how these images negotiate and communicate the connection between contemporary (youth) cultures and National Socialist ideology, and how the potential tensions between these are handled through the medium of images.

While European right-wing 'populist' parties have celebrated some electoral successes in recent years, turning into a truly pan-European phenomenon, overt fascist and National Socialist actors too are poised in expectation of a similar windfall. In this context, we agree with the aforementioned research that the potential for success of this extreme right lies in its apparent ability to unfold a wider (life)style which is recognisable and palatable to a larger section of the population, and in particular contemporary youth. As a consequence, we focus less on their immediate political claims (such as their anti-European Union stance, their anti-Antifa politics – extreme right activities targeting antifascists – and their anti-refugee agitation) but turn instead to a number of salient 'cultural' themes. The latter are significant not simply in relation to immediate political goals and grievances, but in pointing to core

elements in their conception and representation of an ideal for 'authentic extreme right subjectivity'.

The basic themes we single out here are those of (a) history (the 'Third Reich'), (b) nature, and (c) gender roles. Of course, while we separate these themes analytically, they are, empirically, woven together; indeed, they overlap and inform each other in a myriad of intertextual and interdiscursive ways. Nonetheless, we have chosen to separate and focus especially on these themes not only because they are salient in the self-representation of the investigated actors, but also because the renegotiation of and tension between their ideological inheritance and their contemporary, updated 'style' is especially visible here. In each, a classical National Socialist set of conceptions (of the 'Third Reich' and its leaders, of nature and 'natural' living, and of male and female identities) is creatively merged and morphed into a more contemporary form, while nonetheless retaining its ideological 'authenticity' (Holzer, 1994).

Our analysis suggests that the negotiation between classical National Socialism and contemporary (youth) culture is achieved by the extreme right through the production of images belonging to two different and distinctive *imaginaries*; one of 'authority' and one of 'intimacy'. As such the different imaginaries, and their part in producing an (aesthetically) more 'youthful' and 'contemporary' National Socialism, concern the very core of how these actors represent themselves and seek to attract followers. Interestingly, and we turn to this at the end of our article, this leads to a rejection of a widely held view in the literature on the AN, according to which internal contradiction or variety is causing the weakening of the ideological position, the fragmentation of a subject.[1]

We start by introducing our understanding of the extreme right, and of the importance of a wider 'cultural' focus when analysing it. Subsequently, we introduce data and methodology, and elaborate on our theoretical understanding of the 'imaginaries'. Finally, we turn to analysis, focusing on the coexistence of an imaginary of authority and one of intimacy in the investigated corpus and arguing that these two imaginaries enable these actors to simultaneously affirm an authentic National Socialism and engage with contemporary (youth) cultures. We close our contribution with a summary and thoughts on the ideological consequences of the practices we have analysed.

Introducing the extreme right

The rise of right-wing 'populist' parties has resulted in much research but has also provoked concern over the resulting plethora of conflicting

definitions and unclear boundaries (Mudde, 2000, p. 176). There is indeed widespread confusion concerning what counts as far right, right-wing extremism, extreme right, fascism, neo-Nazism, and so on, something which has sometimes resulted in the conceptual overlap of right-wing 'populist' actors, fascist, and even National Socialist ones. For example, Mudde's (2007) seminal study on populist radical right parties (PRRP) offers a 'minimal definition' of PRRPs centred on nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. Based on this definition, he includes, among others, the British National Party, which Richardson (2013), however, situates within the British tradition of National Socialism.

Thus, we need to be clear about what we think characterises the actors that we focus on, that is, actors who are not simply showing disdain for liberal-democratic politics (as in the case of right-wing 'populists'), but who take a specifically anti-democratic stance. Given our focus on the German context, with its particular National Socialist historical trajectory, we draw, first, on Willibald Holzer's (1994) definition of extreme right ideology, which includes (a) an emphasis on the *Volk* and *völkisch* ideals, that is, the idea that the people are an organic unity, a true subject of history. It (b) identifies ethnocentrism, ethnopluralism, and the exclusion of 'the other' as significant traits as well as (c) criticism of democracy, that is, anti-liberalism, anti-pluralism, and authoritarianism. Next, Holzer mentions (d) antisocialism as an essential characteristic, (e) the belief in the necessity of a strong state, (f) an idiosyncratic tendency for scapegoating, and (g) a particular concern for the historical past, such as post-war topics of Holocaust denial and war guilt. More precisely, our corpus (see below) is, second, comprised in part of the extreme right which are not only 'extreme' in the general sense defined by Holzer, but regularly acknowledge and even celebrate National Socialism as their ideological legacy and inspiration. These actors are thus particularly rigorous in their, for example, *völkisch* thinking, their anti-democratic stance, and their historical revisionism.

Against this background, we seek to capture the distinctive 'cultural' or 'aesthetic' development of a spectrum of actors within the extreme right that has taken place more recently in Germany. The crackdown on neo-Nazi structures by the state in the 1990s led to the rise of only loosely organised *Freie Kameradschaften* (Free Comradships), small groups and networks far more difficult to monitor and prosecute (Schedler, 2011). Within the context of this *organisational innovation,* the subsection of the self-styled *Autonome Nationalisten* (AN) has emerged since the early 2000s. These developments have enabled the aforementioned *cultural innovation* which covers changes in the dimension of aesthetics

(individual style and collective symbols, for example, by using cartoons on banners, hairstyles, and outfits which are well known from left-wing demonstrations and have, for this very reason, long been despised by the extreme right) and in action repertoires (for example, by adopting radical left-wing demonstration tactics and practices). Analysing the travelling of symbols between subcultures, Dick Hebdige (1989) has noted how changes in style are in fact responses to social changes and how, more specifically, the subversion of existing styles enables new meanings and new distinctions.

Significant in this respect is the use of bricolage championed initially by the AN (Pisoiu & Lang, 2015, p. 73; Schedler, 2014, p. 253). The notion of bricolage, initially outlined by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966, pp. 16–36), denotes the creative re-assembling and ad-hoc improvisation of basic elements in order to generate new meanings in and understandings of the world. While the extreme right's repertoire concerning forms of action, individual styles and symbolic resources has been traditionally determined by its National Socialist heritage, aesthetic- and action-related bricolage has led commentators to describe the AN as 'anything goes' (Schulze, 2009, p. 12), 'Patchwork-Nazis' (Staud & Radke, 2012, p. 75), or 'postmodern Nazis' (Häusler & Sturm, 2013). Indeed, there have been incidents of affirming Che Guevara and, more widespread, an openness to different subcultures, visible in remarks such as this one: 'Whether you are a Hip-Hopper, a Rapper, or something else, whether you have a bald head or long hair: totally irrelevant – the main thing is that you are against the ruling system!' (ANM, 2008, p. 4). This can be related to wider societal changes, such as the rise of consumer capitalism and the widespread decline of industrialism – encouraging a move from skinhead culture to a more post-modern neo-Nazism (Häusler & Sturm, 2013, p. 443; Raabe, 2009).

While debates about the limits of 'anything goes' have taken place inside the scene, it is important to notice that, overall, the boundaries between what could previously be clearly identified as AN and the broader movement of those situating themselves in a National Socialist tradition have become increasingly blurred. Indeed, their innovations have been diffused across the scene and are generally believed to have played a part in making this extreme right more attractive to potential newcomers (Schedler, 2011, p. 32).

Elements of this (post-)modernisation show parallels with the fascist revolts between the World Wars (except for their actual political significance); revolts which also imagined themselves as being concerned with cultural change and a re-aestheticisation of life.[2] In concentrating our

analysis on the visual aesthetics of extreme right social-media presence (for more on this presence, see Ekman, 2014; Peters, 2015), we draw on the turn towards a 'cultural' explanation of the rise of fascism in the interwar period within (classical) fascism studies (Griffin, 2002). Such a cultural grounding understands fascism as a (politico-ideological) form of modernism (Griffin, 2007) that is based on palingenetic ultranationalism. The latter strives for a national or ethnic 'rebirth', a rebirth that revitalises the community through a revolutionary rejection of various degenerative threats brought on by modernity. These might include the supposedly 'corrupt' nature of democratic/liberal politics, industrial and urban 'alienation' from nature and natural living, and the 'perversion' of modern gender roles. Sternhell et al. (1994, p. 29), in their study of the rise of fascism, views the aesthetic as key in this type of cultural rebellion, speaking of 'a new scale of values, a new vision of culture (…) the cult of energy, of dynamism and power, of the machine and speed, of instinct and intuition, of movement, will power, and youth'. This set of ideas seem to be equally relevant for the AN. Thus, the promise of such a wider scope is to better understand the existential imaginary which drew people to fascism by looking beyond the latter's organisational forms, institutional structures, or concrete aims and policies.

It is true that the linking of the politico-ideological sphere and the concrete lifeworld of the individual, that is, the inclusion of leisure, (youth) cultures and personal life into a National Socialist 'culture', was a main ambition of classical National Socialism (Paxton, 2004, p. 143f). In that sense, we are by no means claiming that the interest in (youth) cultures and mobilisation is a distinguishing feature of *contemporary* National Socialists, but rather stress that it should be read and understood in and through the general 'youth cultural' style in which it is seeking to embed itself today. If classical fascism must be understood as part of the wider cultural strand of modernism, then contemporary fascism must likewise – at least in part – be approached as fundamentally intertwined with 'post-modern' (youth) culture's expressing itself creatively, humorously, and to some extent ironically, though this time in and through performances located in social media.

Making sense of extreme right aesthetics: Data and methodology

In order to deal with a manageable data pool, we focus on images posted in 2015 on Facebook profiles clearly adhering to German extreme right

actors. In generating a cluster of extreme right Facebook profiles, we started from one of the most publicly visible actors in this 'new' extreme right: a group of activists calling themselves *Balaclava Küche*, a self-styled 'national-socialist vegan cooking crew' which has attracted considerable national and international news coverage (for details, see Forchtner & Tominc, in press). The group shows all signs of being a product of (post-)modernisation and we thus considered it to be a pragmatic starting point. We subsequently mapped all Facebook pages whose content was shared by *Balaclava Küche* and repeated this process once more so that the network of extreme right Facebook pages extends for three generations, from the original seed node (that is, *Balaclava Küche*) to those pages whose content was shared by *Balaclava Küche* (second generation) and sites (third generation) whose content was shared by pages of the second generation. The layout of Figure 1 and the terminology of 'generation' might suggest a real-world hierarchy of these profiles; however, the seeming hierarchy reflects only the necessity for choosing a starting point for this basic method of snowballing.

As this 'snowballing' resulted in an exponentially growing database, and in order to maintain a relatively uniform and manageable data pool, we excluded, firstly, bands and musicians which, although a core

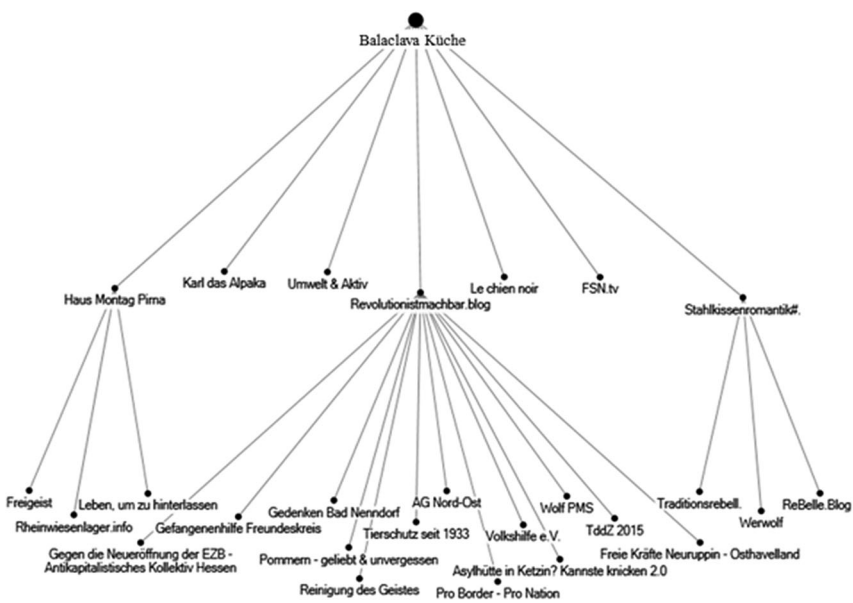

Figure 1. 'Network' of investigated actors.

element in the extreme right, have been extensively studied (Langebach & Raabe, 2013). Secondly, we excluded sites with a narrow commercial focus such as shops or concert venues. Thirdly, given that we are not concerned with links between the extreme right and other (right-wing) actors, we excluded links to pages which are external to the extreme right (while right-wing 'populists' are not always easily demarcated from the extreme right at the level of political ideas and statements, our aforementioned definition provided sufficient means to do so; especially given the fact that extreme right groups focused on here signal their ideology by mobilising imagery and coded language which invokes Nazism). Finally, given our focus on the 'groupuscule' section of the extreme right, we have disregarded parties and groups explicitly affiliated with parties. The resulting 'network' of actors whose images we downloaded (522 in total, see Table 1) is summarised in Figure 1.

Table 1: Distribution of images.

		'Cultural' themes			Total
		Images of the 'Third Reich'	Images of nature	Images of Gender roles	
Analytical dimensions	Imaginaries of authority	150	58	85	293
	Imaginaries of intimacy	38	139	52	229
Total		188	197	137	522

As mentioned, we chose to focus on three 'cultural' themes which organise much of the collected images and echo recognisable topics in classical fascism through which the 'new' extreme right raise claims to truth and authenticity.

The first theme (188 images), dealing with references to the 'Third Reich', includes archival and historical photos, images from Nazi propaganda material and, perhaps most interestingly, creative bricolages in which text or new graphic elements have been added, while persons (for example, Nazi leaders) or symbols (for example, the swastika) depicted still refer to classical Nazism. Although the extreme right clearly raises claims concerning their authenticity by signalling their political-ideological inheritance and continued adherence to National Socialism, such

references serve primarily as a vehicle for a much wider ('cultural') indictment of contemporary society and political systems.

The second theme (197 images) of nature and 'naturalness' (for example, health and diet) also has close links to classical fascism (indicated, for example, in the anti-modern cultural critique embedded in notions of the 'healthy body' and the modern degenerating effect of urban life). In addition, its contemporary form creatively links up with ideas of animal rights and veganism (see Forchtner & Tominc, in press; Staud & Radke, 2012, p. 106; Virchow, 2011, p. 99). What are, however, missing are images related to key environmental issues of our time, first and foremost transnational environmental crises such as climate change. As it has been noted (Hansen & Machin, 2013), these issues, their causes and effects, are difficult to depict visually – but this particular deficit might also be due to deeper ideological tensions (Forchtner & Kølvraa, 2015).

The final theme (137 images) of gender roles and family life is likewise both a classical and a contemporary core issue for the extreme right. There has been much writing on contemporary right-wing populist views on gender (see Wodak, 2015, pp. 151–176 on the 'politics of patriarchy' and Mudde, 2007, pp. 90–118 on *Männerparteien*). Adding to this, our data illustrate both the classical fascist concern with the loss of male virility and the dissolution of the (reproductive) family unit, as well as the creative and often contradictory integration of the reality of contemporary youth cultures in which women are (more or less) active and equal participants.

The complexity of this negotiation between past and present, between National Socialist ideology and (youth) cultures, involves more than simply reintroducing classical fascist styles (of discourse and of appearance) into a present setting. Rather, and as we have already noted above, we find that this re-embedding is partly accomplished by a shifting between what we call different imaginaries of authority and intimacy, respectively.

The notion of *imaginaries* employed here has been extensively theorised in both psychoanalysis (Lacan, 1994), political theory and philosophy (Castoriadis, 1987; Laclau, 1990), and sociology (Taylor, 2004). Although there are substantive differences between these approaches, one common denominator is that the imaginary is the realm of the idealised, the desired and even the utopian. As 'social imaginaries', the concept thus signifies forms and means through which a society comes to (selectively and positively) imagine and envisage its ideal constitution and

functioning, while, on the level of the individual, it points to the way in which the subject desires to construct an identity worthy of recognition or admiration. Thus, in speaking of imaginaries we are dealing with not just 'imagined' subjects (represented in the images) but with the idealisation of certain kinds of socialities both represented in and communicated by the image. In analysing images, that is, in identifying the imaginary they articulate, we point to how a certain image, either in the interaction between represented subjects or in the more direct addressing of the viewer, evokes, sustains, and communicates certain kinds of social relationships (across all three content-related themes).

This understanding of imaginaries therefore draws directly on Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), who point out exactly that images construct different kinds of imaginary social relationships: even if our actual (social) position might be untouched, we are invited – through the image – to imagine ourselves in another position (as addressee, follower, partner, or consumer). Kress and van Leeuwen suggest three types of imaginary relationships to be taken into account. Firstly, images entail an imagined relationship between their producer and their receiver; this is true simply by the fact of images being a semiotic element of communication. Furthermore, they can also establish such a relationship between the viewer and the represented subject (most obviously when the viewer is seemingly directly addressed – for example, through eye contact – by the subject represented). Finally, images where several actors are represented also involve the construction of imaginary relationships between the represented subjects; relationships which as such do not directly involve the viewer, but which he/she is observing as an 'invisible onlooker'.

Against this background, our analysis shows, first, the existence of what we call an authoritative imaginary (293 images). The latter entails the representation of a social verticality in which imperative semiotics or explicitly ideologically doctrinaire language addresses the viewer in a voice of unquestioned authority. In Freudian terms, this imaginary would be the one that aligns with the authoritative and repressive ideological superego (as encountered in psychoanalytic approaches to fascism (Adorno, 1991)). Thus, the kind the social relationship elicited in these images is one of demanded duty and obligation; one in which the subject is called on to 'fall into line', to respect and conform to the ideological dictums articulated through the authoritative voice (see Van Leeuwen, 2007 for a discussion of the linguistic aspect of this mode of legitimation). This is, for example, illustrated by Althusser (1971, p. 174) when he uses the image

of a policeman hailing an individual in the street as indicative of the ideological interpellation of the subject.

If the authoritative imaginary articulates an imperative duty, then, second, the imaginary of the 'intimate' (229 images) evokes a realm of emotional relationality. In conceptualising this, we draw on recent discussions of 'the intimate' within feminist scholarship. The notion of 'the intimate' or intimate spaces initially invoked a rigid public/political distinction and as such connoted a space 'off stage' or private as opposed to performances, discourses and self-presentations delivered in the clear consciousness that one is 'on display' (Shryock, 2004, pp. 10–14). More recent scholarship, however, has sought to move beyond such dichotomies and insist that a notion of intimacy is not by definition tied to the realm of the private/personal. Rather, and following Michael Herzfeld's (1997) notion of *cultural intimacy*, the intimate is a sphere which sometimes entails entire national communities. Intimacy is exactly to be understood as an 'imaginary' which can introduce a framing of 'close' relations through 'an aesthetic of attachment' (Berlant, 1998, p. 285). This can take different forms and emotive stances, from representations of romantic love and friendly silliness to the invocation of feelings of communion with nature and the cosmos. The analytical employment of the imaginary of 'the intimate' is thus not about separating a truly private, 'hidden' or 'behind the scenes' realm in opposition to public and political communication. What interests us instead is how intimacy becomes a vehicle in the public delivery and display of political identity. As such, the intimate imaginary differs from the authoritarian imaginary by invoking a horizontal social relationality, expressed in affectively invested interpersonal attachment. Rather than the imperative voice of authority, the articulations here are aligned with a 'personal voice' (Pratt & Roner, 2012, pp. 8–10). These are pervaded by elements of emotional warmth, humour, and irony, informality and unseriousness, centring on fun, pleasure, and 'off-stage', relaxed composure. This representation of the extreme right subject is thus all about the informal feeling and emotional closeness of spaces of intimacy.

In actually analysing the different images we have drawn on Critical Discourse Analysis and its multimodal branch (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; Machin, 2013; Machin & Mayr, 2012) in order to 'read images'. This speaks to the growing trend in the analysis of discourses to consider visuals as key sites of semiosis, all due to wider cultural trends towards visualisation; a trend also visible when it comes to the increasing analysis of far right images (Richardson & Wodak, 2009; Wodak & Forchtner,

2014). We furthermore agree with Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, pp. 17–19) when they point out that Barthes' understanding of image-text semiotics and visual communication contains crucial points. Although the authors stress that images are semiotic objects which can be analysed as such, they nonetheless accept Barthes' (1977) point that written texts which (in some instances) accompany or surround images often serve to 'anchor' the latter's meaning. This, importantly here, implies that images are an often more ambiguous, multivalent form of communication than speech and written text. As such, visuals can be a particularly useful medium in which to convey intended and unintended ambivalence, such as would be necessary in order to raise claims to truth and authenticity while, at the same time, opening a space of playfulness and irony. What our claims (both above and below) concerning the meaning of extreme right imagery do not, however, imply is the dimension of reception. We are fully aware that our approach is not able to cover this but, within the context of this article, insist nonetheless on the benefits of the proposed methodology.

Here we also want to focus on several concrete taxonomies for analysing images offered by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996). One of these is their aforementioned suggestion that images (a) either entail a demand (mediated by direct eye contact between represented subject and viewer) or an offer (where the viewer is constructed as an 'invisible onlooker'). But equally useful are their arguments linking (b) frame size to the represented 'closeness' of a social bond by way of introducing the difference between 'personal distance' (close enough to touch), 'social distance' (close enough for interaction), and 'public distance' (further away than either of the former, both of which can be further subdivided into 'close' and 'far' variants). In essence, they claim that the larger the represented subject is in relation to the frame, the closer a degree of association is indicated with the onlooker. Finally, they link (c) camera angle to the indicated hierarchy in an image and to the extent to which it invites 'involvement' in the image's subject matter. Vertically, a low camera angle indicates the superiority of the represented subject in relation to the onlooker, while a high camera angle does the opposite. Horizontally, a frontal angle, in relation to the represented subject, invites full involvement, while a more sideways angle, or even shots from behind, do less so. Establishing such 'ground rules' for image semiotics by constructing a set of fairly rigid distinctions, they nevertheless allow for the fact that rules are 'broken' or unorthodoxly combined. This is especially true for our material, where many of the aforementioned

conventions are easily detectable, but also often combined or neglected in surprising ways. Nonetheless, among images in the authoritative imaginary there is (as shown below) a general trend towards privileging the constitution of the imaginary relationship between viewer and represented subject, in the form of an (ideologically doctrinaire) demand. Conversely, images in the intimate imaginary tend to represent social relationships between represented subjects (for example, a romantically involved couple), with the viewer as 'invisible' or external onlooker. Here, there is no 'demand' but rather an implicit offer (for example, of such romance).

These imaginary relationships are also realised through more specific, semiotic choices (see Machin & Mayr, 2012, pp. 49–56 for the following), such as those concerning 'settings' (in what context are some practices 'naturally' situated – are these settings, systematically, referring to intimacy, or not?) and 'salience'. The latter turns on the fact that some features of an image will usually stand out, such as in the many cases of bricolage where it is the 'added value' which sticks out and creates the particular character. This is done through the use of potent cultural symbols, the size of elements, their colour (what sticks out, what not; see, for example, in the analysis of comics by Wodak & Forchtner, 2014), tone (brightness, possibly to attract the eye), focus (different levels of focus give or deny salience to elements of the visual), foregrounding (thus creating importance), and overlapping (the element which is placed in front of another is foregrounded).

Having introduced the toolkit through which we approach our data, we now turn to the analysis of images. Here, we introduce the three cultural themes as they appear in the two imaginaries (from authority-history (the 'Third Reich'), authority-nature, authority-gender to intimacy-gender, intimacy-nature, and intimacy-history (the 'Third Reich'). We do so by, first, reflecting on their respective general characteristics before illustrating these through a discussion of one exemplary image. While not every image in the respective category will be as clear-cut as the one we choose below, the aim of this detailed analysis is not to claim a strict sense of 'representativity' but rather to present an informative example.

Articulating authority: Leaders, wolves, and mothers

We encounter the strongest expression of traditional, extreme right positioning – what one might expect to see when approaching neo-Nazi material – when the theme of history (the 'Third Reich') is represented in the authoritarian imaginary. The typical content of such images

includes authorities of the 'Third Reich', that is, famous leaders in either ceremonial or otherwise ideologically loaded settings. In many cases, these depictions include superimposed text of some kind of ideological relevance, a quote, or doctrinaire extolment. As such, this category not only admits of and valorises its connection to the ideological heritage and legacy of classical Nazism, it also controls the 'message' of the given image most forcefully. Any ambiguity of the images is as such often 'anchored' by textual overlays or very conventional compositional and content choices. Apart from a plethora of Nazi leaders, common content includes Nazi recruitment posters, patriotic drawings, or photos of heroic frontline soldiers.

Focusing on the images of Nazi leaders, we find an indication of a 'demand' directed towards the viewer. This is part of a marking of authoritative power also evident from the imperative language textually superimposed on these images and from the generally low-angle shots signalling the superiority of the subject represented. While many of these images frame the represented subject in a 'personal distance' by depicting it from the waist up, this does invite involvement and interest, but not necessarily, as will be discussed below, intimacy (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, pp. 114–153). The major indicator of an image's 'demand' is, according to Kress and van Leeuwen, eye contact, which is present in a number of images. Yet in several cases, the photos neglect eye contact in favour of depicting leaders as gazing over the top of the viewer's head. Indeed, this angle puts the viewer almost inside a crowd listening to their leader. Clearly, this does not diminish the authoritative stance and demand represented, but renders it in a different way, linking the viewer to an imagined crowd and to the leader.

An extreme example is offered by an image of Goebbels, bearing the quote 'We think with our blood' (Figure 2), in which the unconventional cut eliminates any possibility of eye contact. Yet what remains is by no means less authoritative. Instead, the exclusion of the eyes shifts the viewer's focal point to other elements, thus superseding, expanding, and supplementing the imperative. What becomes foregrounded is the mouth, the fist, and the leather jacket, that is, references to the force of the leader's rhetoric, the violent vitalism of the doctrine, and the celebration of a certain style which connotes activism and self-assuredness. In addition, it is notable that the central term, blood, is not only rendered in the colour red (given the colour of the referent, this might not surprise; red, however, is also a colour which draws our immediate attention and thus carries a semiotic surplus against the background of the traditional

Figure 2. Authority – 'Third Reich'. Revolutionistmachbar.blog (2015): image posted on 19 October 2015. Online at: https://www.facebook.com/Revolutionistmachbar.blog/photos/pb.658161427577422.-2207520000.1457622905./967145476679014/?type=3&theater (14.03.2016).

black and white photo – another claim to authenticity) but also is written in a particular font type publicly associated with National Socialism. The meaning of blood (essence, that which is timeless and of ultimate authority) in combination with this font type (the political project built on and supposed to defend 'our blood'), thus support the very manifest interpellation of an ideal right subject present in such authoritative image composition.

We find many of the same elements embedded in a relationship of 'demand' when the theme of nature and gender is framed by an authoritative imaginary. The propensity to anchor these images with superimposed text is especially widespread here. Nature, for example, becomes either the majesty of the Fatherland (for example, spectacular landmarks, landscapes, or monumental settings) or a metaphorical shell of an authoritative ideological message: wolves, bears, and owls, each in their way, serve as metaphors for various ideal-typical elements in this kind of representation of 'extreme right subjectivity'. Figure 3 illustrates this (a black and white image, connoting the archaic) by showing a wolf in a harsh environment, ready to fight (showing its teeth), accompanied by the text 'Tame like a wolf'. The quality of demand in this image is realised

Figure 3. Authority – nature. Werwolf (2015): image posted on 6 October 2015. Online at: https://www.facebook.com/14werwolf/photos/pb.946387402101011.-2207520000.1457623249./947578708648547/?type=3&theater (14.03.2016).

by the direct eye contact, and the viewer's involvement with the image is further enhanced by the frontal angle of the shot. However, an unconventional element is still present as the text is also ironic, given that the wolf's demand is not to be 'tame'. Neither the wolf nor nature in a wider sense are 'tame' – or ever will be; and nor should the individuals following the extreme right be.

Besides animals, forests also reappear continuously – and not just due to their beauty, but as a privileged, authority-laden 'home ground' or safe zone (in one image, the forest is claimed for the extreme right by photographically connecting it to a sign saying 'NS-Zone'). In line with this, propagandistic posters warn that 'The enemy is listening' and couples this with the advice to go to the forest if speaking about important matters. This ideological use of and attitude towards nature is perhaps best condensed in a kaleidoscopic image of a winding forest trail, textually supplemented by the claim (in English) 'Nature is the ultimate fascist.'

Although the image in itself reveals no features which would bring us closer to understanding what exactly is supposed to justify such a claim, its implication is clear: nature, for the extreme right, is to be regarded as an authoritative model for their ideal society. Nature is that which is stable and resists the *zeitgeist*, that which *embodies* the long-term and the power of 'the natural'. This notion of the 'the natural' further connects to a strict idea of health and healthy consumption visible in, for example, numerous DIY images celebrating a vegan and straight-edge lifestyle which are supposed to keep the individual pure and fit for National Socialism.

In terms of the theme of gender roles, it becomes clear that while parts of the literature on the (post-)modernised extreme right stress the latter's slightly more relaxed relation to gender and sexual activity (Sanders & Jentsch, 2011; Staud & Radke, 2012), the extreme right cannot fully escape its ideological roots, which ultimately call the (gendered) subject to conform with traditional positionalities of meaning. Cultural expectations of what it means to be an authentic extreme right man or woman, which gender roles are legitimate and which are not, do regularly return to well-known stereotypes. As such, it is no surprise that most images we encounter in this dimension of gender representation deal with celebrations of 'natural families' and the heteronormative imperative. This happens through images which clearly position masculine and feminine activities, of pregnant women as well as demonstrations against 'gender mainstreaming' and attacks on homosexuality. A slightly more interesting example is given in Figure 4, which demands that: 'A German women must be a mother … ' This image has circulated in the online universe of the extreme right and is sometimes accompanied by a caption text which tells us of the origins of this quote (supposedly by 'Elfriede G.' in 1940). This is not only a way of mobilising an authentic voice but, in addition, connects well with traditional views on women in the German *Volksgemeinschaft* and is indeed authoritatively demanded through an imperative ('must'). However, there is arguably more to this image and the way it conveys such a demand. Beyond the text, there is little direct address to the viewer, no eye contact. In addition, the woman's posture, her back half turned, further distances her from the viewer. Indeed, the close personal distance of the cut combined with the externality and dis-involvement of the 'from the back' angle, positions the viewer as external from the crucial mother–child relationship. This does not, in other words, present itself as a straight-forward interpellation of the viewer in the female role of a 'potential' German mother. Rather it

Figure 4. Authority – gender. ReBelle.blog (2015): image posted on 25 October 2015. Online at: https://www.facebook.com/866299813448901/photos/a.866303166781899.1073741828.866299813448901/896566830422199/?type=3&theater (14.03.2016).

situates the viewer as the subject of a male gaze, or rather: the gaze of the ultimate National Socialist authority, the *Volk*, beholding this ideal German mother. The viewer thus becomes the subject, rather than the object, of the imperative statement, and is invited to make such a demand of female counterparts in the collective. Therefore, the ideological interpellation played out in this image goes as much to the representation and construction of a male extreme right subject as to those of a female.

That this ideal of woman as mother was core to gender roles in the 'Third Reich' is well known, even though 'Aryan' women were by no means sheer passive 'bystanders' to Nazi atrocities (Lower, 2013). However, a reductive image of extreme right women as tied to a reproductive function and role is even more problematic today, as it corresponds poorly to the comparatively active and equal position occupied by women over the course of the latter half of the twentieth century. This is in fact no less true when it comes to young women involved with the extreme right. Indeed, even male ideals of (contemporary) women which emerge in this subculture are not reducible to this classic Nazi image of the woman as mother. Instead, there is space for women as 'warriors' – something which reveals a tension at the heart of femininity in the extreme right. This tension, however, is one handled through shifts to an imaginary of the intimate.

'Intimate Nazis': Girlfriends, trees, and idolising Hitler

As Sanders and Jentsch (2011, p. 136ff) have argued, gender roles in the AN are, though certainly far from emancipatory, not simply mirroring old stereotypes. This is arguably true also for some other parts of the 'new' extreme right (as investigated here) which have been influenced by modifications pioneered by the AN. Thus, a specific challenge here is to capture (conceptually) in what sense women play a different and more significant role in contemporary, (post-)modernised neo-Nazi aesthetics. Indeed, it is noticeable in this context that while the overall percentage of women in the extreme right is significantly lower than that of men (in 2010, the *Office for the Protection of the Constitution Baden-Wuerttemberg* suggested that the percentage of women is 18.7%), the traditional party-wing of German neo-Nazism, the National Democratic Party of Germany (including its youth wing), unites even fewer (15.8%), while in those parts which include the AN, it stands at 23.2% (Esen, 2016, p. 296).

This need to transcend the classical National Socialist conception of women as reduced to a reproductive role is borne out by our observation that the authoritative framing of women and gender relations (as described above) is often supplemented with a much more intimate and often romantic imaginary. In some instances, this framing of women is achieved through inserting a female body into what is a typically 'male' role; that is, young women in balaclavas seemingly 'ready for street-violence' or in the woods, wearing a white balaclava and carrying an axe. However, the integration of women in this imaginary is similarly achieved by depicting them in more or less romantic mutuality with young men. What emerges are pictures which, in a highly recognisable 'youth cultural' style, depict images of attraction, flirtation, romantic relatedness, or appreciation. The image semiotics here are no longer clearly making a demand of the viewer. Rather, the viewer is often situated as the invisible onlooker, and therefore the image takes the form of an 'offer'. In Figure 5, the primary relation depicted is between the two represented characters who face each other, the male, in a 'caring' and gentle posture, fixing the balaclava of the female one. While a certain power hierarchy might be read into the fact that it is the male figure who is active, there is little in the image to support a reading of it as signifying male dominance or authority. Rather, it depicts a gesture of inclusion, a moment of personal connection within the wider political project. What the reader is 'offered' then is not actually an ideological dictum (there is no superimposed text anchoring this image to National Socialism and it could equally well depict

Figure 5. Intimacy – gender. Traditionsrebell (2015): image posted on 8 October 2015. Online at: https://www.facebook.com/traditionsrebell/photos/pb.1697699270463242.-2207520000.1457623835./1708273519405817/?type=3&theater (14.03.2016).

actors on the extreme left). The female figure is less the mother of National Socialism, and more the idealised 'girlfriend' of contemporary (youth) cultures. This is the transition from an imaginary of authority to one of intimacy. It is the move from a focus on socio-political performativity ('do your duty') to one of personal moments of affection and feeling. This might be connected to the point made by Schedler (2014, pp. 248–250 see also ANM, 2008) that even if conformism is ultimately retained (everybody wears balaclavas), the form of National Socialism embodied by the AN and, by now, beyond allows a greater scope for individuality and personal freedom characteristic of contemporary (youth) cultures.

While it might not seem overly surprising that an imaginary of the intimate is brought to the fore in depictions of what is the most traditional form of 'intimate relations' (that is, romantic connections between gendered subjects), the fact is that this imaginary likewise comes to 'supplement' the authoritarian inscription of nature and the 'Third Reich'.

In what might be termed the intimate depiction of nature, we see a similar choice not to superimpose ideological text on the images, but to prioritise the wider and more ambiguous depiction of an 'affective' experience or intensity. What is thematically highlighted in these images is not the imposing grandeur of the Fatherland's landscape, monuments, or landmarks, neither is it the instrumentalisation of natural elements, for example, animals as metaphors for extreme right virtues. Rather, nature

or 'the natural' becomes more intimate. Sometimes, this even relates to fun relaxation, such as the reframing of the ideological demands of political veganism embedded in a tableau of images depicting leisure time, cooking with friends and consumption in and of nature which should benefit one's health. Nature, and above all the forest, is thereby no longer simply an ideological 'safe zone' where political enemies are not listening, but becomes a 'milieu' in which the human can be affectively immersed, emotionally overwhelmed, and spiritually embraced. Nature, and in particular the forests, is thus turned into a fantasy of 'returning' or 'retreating' to a site of the most profound and intimate communion with the natural world. This situating of nature in an intimate imaginary is hardly a novel invention of the contemporary extreme right. Indeed, what plays out in these images is an anti-urban romanticism that has been at the heart of nationalist thinking about nature almost from its inception (Forchtner & Kølvraa, 2015). And yet, this idea of a 'spiritual' return to nature is given new force in the contemporary context because its basic anti-technological stance might paradoxically appeal all the more strongly to a youth-generation whose media and entertainment consumption has, with the aid of smartphone technology, expanded exponentially. Several images thus combine familiar smartphone iconography with images of nature, thereby signifying that immersion in nature is the ultimate 'offline' experience – something that would have made less sense to earlier generations.

This idea of nature as an anti-technological, anti-urban, and supremely spiritual space of experience is particularly visible in Figure 6, which is accompanied by a quote from Nietzsche in which trees and humans are claimed to share a deep communion in that both, while striving upwards, also need deep roots. Although a clear distinction is present in the image, here as elsewhere often realised in terms of angle and composition, between the 'little' human being and the towering greatness of the woods, there is no clear indication of an authoritative demand being made. It is, in equivalence with the above-treated depictions of relationships, rather an offer made to the 'invisibly observing' viewer, one suggesting that such symbiotic immersion in the natural is still possible. The image offers the viewer a highly aesthetic rendering of a moment of connection, indeed contemplation; but not one which immediately includes the viewer. Instead the bond of intimacy here represented is one between the woman in the front and the forest completely surrounding her. With her back turned to us, and because of her diminutive size, in a frame which would signal 'far social' if not 'public' distance, she is not positioned as the focal point of the viewer's relation to the image

Figure 6. Intimacy – nature. Reinigung des Geistes (2015): image posted on 27 May 2015. Online at: https://www.facebook.com/1007334825949675/photos/pb.1007334825949675.-2207520000.1457623998./1130135673669589/?type=3&theater (14.03.2016).

content. Rather, she serves – because of her raised head looking upwards and the stance of literally having been 'stopped in her tracks' – only as a means of directing the viewer's gaze to the image's primary subject: the forest which in fact faces us head-on, filling and spilling out of the frame. The distance which matters here is as such not that between the viewer and the woman, but rather the non-distance of the embrace between human-subject and nature; the total intimacy of the 'little' human's total immersion in the woods.

Turning, finally, to the theme of intimacy — 'Third Reich', we encounter what is maybe the most striking, that is, unexpectedly playful and

ironic, attitude characterising this new generation of neo-Nazis. It is through these characteristics that highly complex, affective relationships with authority become possible in the first place. While authoritative references to leaders (as shown above) are still common, what we find here is also a subtle move towards a more horizontal and intimate bond with Nazism. These images deal with what is enjoyable and amusing in particular 'Third Reich' lifeworld contexts; they include showing Wehrmacht soldiers not fighting the Soviet arch-enemy, but in a relaxed atmosphere of, for example, eating ice cream or having fun with their comrades. Indeed 'the intimate' is achieved by seeking out historical images of 'the private lives of soldiers'; kissing their girlfriends on leave, laughing and 'goofing around' with friends behind the lines, balancing on cannons, or making silly faces and postures for the camera. Even the authoritative figures of classical National Socialism are not exempt from this intimacy of silliness, fun, and more straight-forward 'friendly' emotionality. For example, and in addition to the above, an image circulated by FSN.tv employs an ironic element when stating that 'We know who the Babo is', with a close up of Hitler in the background. Significantly, the notion of 'Babo' has entered German language (it became the official 'youth word of the year 2013') through the migrant community, meaning 'boss'. The irony here is, however, not only due to the intimacy between *us* and *our* Babo, but the implication that *this* Babo is going to 'deal' with those who got the word into the German language.

A similarly relaxed, almost coy, relationship with the leader is visible in Figure 7, in which Hitler, at centre stage, sees his status as the authoritative leader moved into the sphere of the intimate through hearts being added (very much like stereotypical ideas of schoolgirls drawing hearts on a poster showing their pop-star idols). The energetic leader does not simply lead the way (against what seems to be headwind), but is turned into, literally, the 'poster-boy' of totalitarian authority. Here too, the image is posted along with a comment, exclaiming 'Who the fuck is Clark Kent?!'; thereby intertextually offering Hitler as the 'real' Superman, an intertextuality established through the object of a cape which is not graphically added. Importantly, the image does not provide us with a close-up, a natural way of inviting intimacy. Yet, through the frontal angle of the shot, the viewer is being positioned on the same level as *der Führer*, and, most importantly, the painting of red hearts inscribes Hitler in a form of bricolage, where one would expect to find boy bands or other pop stars. The consequence is a shift of the focus from the ideological imperative that this man embodies, to the much more intimate,

Figure 7. Intimacy – 'Third Reich'. ReBelle.blog (2015): image posted on 6 September 2015. Online at: https://www.facebook.com/858103454259520/photos/pb.858103454259520.-2207520000.1457623650./874956592574206/?type=3&theater (14.03.2013).

private, individualistic, and unthreatening realm of the adoration and emotional connection between a 'fan' and his/her idol.

What we have illustrated in this analysis of images and the imaginary relationships that they enable, is a complex simultaneity in and through which the ideal extreme right subject is constructed and represented. While authoritarian demands persist, we have pointed to an additional dimension in this representation of subjectivity, a dimension involving a more intimate and post-modern linking of the political ideology to its contemporary, 'youthful' enactment.

Conclusion

The Internet in its current configuration is in fact, to a large extent, a medium of images, rather than one simply of text. What we hope to have shown is that the 'new' extreme right is utterly at home in such a medium, and that its composition of images is many-facetted. As we have seen, the imaginary social relationships these images make available are complex: they include authoritarian ones in which the subject is supposed to accept claims to truth based on what are presented as authentic demands by the ideology. Yet the relationships evoked here also include intimate moments, intimacy with fellow 'soldiers' of the extreme right, with 'the ideological leader-figure', and with the other sex as well as with that which offers ultimate stability: nature. While differences between the authoritarian and the intimate imaginary might seem to reveal a deep and ultimately unsustainable contradiction in the online communication of the extreme right, this is not necessarily the case. In fact, the ease with which communication shifts between the two, and the fact that all and any (cultural) theme can seemingly be represented in both, does not indicate that differences between them are perceived as a problem or as constraining these actors. In fact, we would claim that it is exactly because they can make use of, or 'play' with, these different imaginaries, that the otherwise perilous connection between a contemporary 'post-modern' youth culture and an ideology with its original context in the interwar period can be constructed without debilitating anachronism. As such, Hitler is lifted into the present by re-representing him in the framework of a 'fan-culture' that is eminently contemporary; the ideological bio-politics of German Motherhood is retained, but interwoven with the intimate idealisation of the balaclava-wearing, axe-wielding girlfriend as a contemporary, fellow extreme right fighter; and though wolves and the likes are still employed as metaphors for desirable qualities, a more intimate nature is used to articulate contemporary concern with environmentalism and the classic anti-urban dream of deep communion with the woods of the Fatherland.

Thus, while it is true that the (life)style adopted by these extreme right actors is a (life)style which not only originated in the far left but is also intrinsically linked to many elements of its ideology, such as decentralisation and participation, we should indeed be careful not to assume that this necessarily leads to a debilitating contradiction between lifeworld practices and ideological rigour. Many (Häusler & Schedler, 2011, p. 316, 321; Häusler & Sturm, 2013, p. 447; Puls, 2011: 130f; Schedler, 2014: 253ff;

Schlembach, 2013, p. 313) have argued that such a contradiction might have detrimental consequences for this extreme right and ultimately limit its (post-)modernisation; but 'ideological dilemmas' (Billig et al., 1988) are nothing specific to the extreme right. We all live our lives in contradictory manners, something that only becomes a problem if life (and ideology) is viewed as a complete, unifying system of beliefs. Furthermore, contradictions can be enabling, not limiting; productive, not repressive. This is because such a 'contradiction between possessing a theoretical ideology and at the same time living within a society whose everyday life seems to negate that ideology' (Billig et al., 1988, p. 27) might provoke creativity, experimentation and development, rather than simply fragmentation and decay. This seems to describe the contemporary extreme right and the way these actors have succeeded in (re)negotiating its existence in an environment, that is, vis-à-vis (youth) cultures, which do not 'naturally' conform to the original ideological dictums and ideals of National Socialism.

Our analysis thus points to a possible way in which these dilemmas and contradictions can be lived and balanced – without leading necessarily to the demise of this revival of Nationalist Socialist activism and thought. As such, this extreme right might well be able to maintain an apparently 'authentic' relation to the major totalitarian ideology of modernity, while nonetheless dressing, acting, and aesthetically representing itself in ways that are recognisable and even attractive within the much more irreverent, ironic, and humorous language of contemporary 'post-modern' (youth) cultures.

Notes

1. As remarked by one anonymous reviewer, this argument has a Marxist form. While we agree, we would add that the Marxist logic is marginalised here by a Bakhtian (Bakhtin, 1984) one entailing dialogism and polyphony of discourses and subject constitution. This combines well with our focus on the extreme right as being thoroughly post-modern.
2. While fascism should not simply be confused with National Socialism, there are large overlaps, for example concerning their shared revolt against rationalism and materialism (that is, their organic nationalism, anti-liberalism, anti-individualism; see Sternhell, Sznaider, & Asheri, 1994, p. 6).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by People Programme (Marie Curie Action) of the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007–2013) [327595].

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