

The Authoritarian Roots of Contemporary Populist Movements: Explaining the Rise of the Alternative für Deutschland

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“After World War II, sifting through the ashes of the failed experiment in fascism, a number of social scientists connected the appeal of the fascist ideology to personality traits of marginalized people who sought an “escape from freedom” by relying on hypnotic leaders. These followers were said to have authoritarian personalities. Yet, as the rise of Trump suggests, such people exist in every society if circumstances push them hard enough, and it is more important to pay attention to the circumstances.”

– Robert Kuttner, *Can Democracy Survive Global Capitalism?*

“We have entered an age of fear. Insecurity is once again an active ingredient of political life in Western democracies. Insecurity born of terrorism, of course; but also, and more insidiously, fear of the uncontrollable speed of change, fear of the loss of employment, fear of losing ground to others in an increasingly unequal distribution of resources...”

– Tony Judt, *Ill Fares the Land*

Introduction

There is no single variable that satisfactorily explains the rise in support for the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) as an emergent far-right political party in Germany. However there are individual explanatory variables that if taken together, represent a whole that is greater than the sum of their parts. Like the parable of the blind men and the elephant, the perspective of each variable provides a different explanation that holds its own truth, and yet yields an unsatisfactory explanation of the whole. A more holistic approach that illustrates their interconnected nature yields a more contextualized view of AfD’s success, but such an approach necessitates a theory that can unify the parts by situating the AfD’s rise within wider historical and political dynamics.

Drawing primarily from Erich Fromm’s work, I employ the theory of Existential Insecurity to bind these parts into a cohesive whole. In its simplest sense, Existential Insecurity is as psychological state of mind of modern man deriving from threats to both cultural identity and

economic security. According to Fromm, the Authoritarian Personality is a psychological response to the condition of Existential Insecurity, predisposing its adherents to relinquish their freedom to authoritarian styled systems of political organization. Although there are worthy contours of exploration in the relationship between authoritarianism and populism, some of which will be explored in this paper, for the sake of my premise and as most authors would agree, within the Euro-American context, most manifestations of populism are characterized by far-right, authoritarian tendencies.

This paper will argue that the adherents of these populist movements are characterized by the Authoritarian Personality as a response to Existential Insecurity. This paper endeavors then to build a bridge between these wider historical events and the more contemporary explanations for the AfD's rise, diagnosing these particularized explanations as symptoms of dynamics taking place on a longer scale of time, within a wider context.

An explanation of Fromm's theory will be followed by a discussion of theories of populism and its relationship to authoritarianism. The proposed explanatory theory will be illustrated within an historical context of political dynamics in Europe, which will be considerably robust. This section will be followed by a discussion of specific theories proposed to explain the rise of the AfD with an application of the paper's primary theory, and finally a brief conclusion.

Existential Insecurity and the Authoritarian Personality

Existential Security is an idea that Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart propose as an axiom to their main hypothesis, the Religious Values Hypothesis, found in *Sacred and Secular*. Existential Security is defined as "the feeling that survival is secure enough that it can be taken

for granted” (Norris & Inglehart 4). In contrast to this idea, but not unrelated to Norris & Inglehart’s hypothesis, this paper will employ the countervailing concept, Existential Insecurity, which is defined by Marcuse as “the human psychological sense of pervasive danger, a deep and fundamental threatening anxiety, without a sharp focus on a specific danger” (924).

For the purposes of this paper, Existential Insecurity will be used as an umbrella term, meant to capture the meaning of the oft mentioned, but rarely defined terms: insecurity, uncertainty, and anxiety. These terms are often referred to through many iterations of related literature, such that they deserve to be brought into dialogue with a larger theory that can capture a more fundamental meaning about their authors’ intent that goes beyond these terms’ everyday usage. This would seem to be merited, given that so many authors have referred to these terms, with some consistency, but without conceptualizing their intended meaning. This paper endeavors to create that dialogue by citing the passages in which these terms are found.

Fromm did not explicitly cite the term, Existential Insecurity, in his seminal work, *Escape From Freedom*, but I contend the conditions he describes are most aptly characterized as the condition of Existential Insecurity. According to Fromm, the Authoritarian Personality is a psychosocial response to the condition of Existential Insecurity, which has its roots in the paradox of newfound freedom, born from the rise of market economies, which eventually we would recognize as capitalism. Writing in 1941, Fromm states that, “What characterizes medieval in contrast to modern society is its lack of individual freedom. Everybody in the earlier period was chained to his role in the social order” (40). However, “...although a person was not free in the modern sense, neither was he alone and isolated. In having a distinct, unchangeable, and unquestionable place in the social world from the moment of birth, man was rooted in a structuralized whole and thus life had a meaning which left no place and no need for doubt. A

person was identical with his role in society...” (Fromm 41). In this sense, a person’s cultural identity was pre-determined, and although unchangeable, at least it was stable and secure. “The social order was conceived of as a natural order, and being a definite part of it gave a feeling of *security* and of belonging. There was comparatively little competition. One was born into a certain economic position which guaranteed a livelihood determined by tradition...” (Fromm 41; emphasis added) The result of this ordering of society as such is the security of cultural identity and economic position, which effectively creates the basis for Existential Security.

The consequence of the rise of the market economies leaves, “The medieval social system destroyed and with it the stability and relative security it had offered the individual,” with the result that, “The individual was left alone; everything depended on his own effort, not on the security of his traditional status” and transformed his “personal situation into one of *insecurity*, isolation, and *anxiety*” (Fromm 59, 60; emphasis added). To summarize, “freedom from the traditional bonds of medieval society, though giving the individual a new feeling of independence, at the same time made him feel alone and isolated, filled with doubt and *anxiety*, and drove him into new submission” and hence, to seek an escape from this newfound freedom (Fromm 103; emphasis added). Hannah Arendt wrote of a related and similar psychological process, in which she believed that:

...the masses are obsessed by a desire to escape from reality because in their essential homelessness they can no longer bear its accidental, incomprehensible aspects ... The masses’ escape from reality is a verdict against the world in which they are forced to live and in which they cannot exist, since coincidence has become its supreme master and human beings need the constant transformation of chaotic and accidental conditions into a man-made pattern of relative consistency. (352)

Taken in historical perspective, *Escape from Freedom*, written in 1941 and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, written in 1951, both arrived on the heels of the chaos of two world wars, the Russian Revolution, Nazi Germany, Stalinism and the resulting multiple periods of severe

economic depression and societal breakdown. The authors were certainly witnesses to some of the most catastrophic events of the 20th Century, which undoubtedly produced some of the most extraordinary threats to almost any person's sense of Existential Security. Exacerbated by such existential threats, the masses were primed for a particular psychological response, the Authoritarian Personality, which is characterized by the masses' ready submission to an authoritarian regime. As described by Fromm, individuals overcome unbearable feelings of powerlessness by surrendering to "a person, an institution, God, the nation, conscience, or a psychic compulsion" (154). As a result, these individuals relinquish their integrity and surrender their freedom; however through submergence and participation in this larger power, they gain a new "*security* against the torture of doubt" (Fromm 154; emphasis added). The individual is relieved of "the final responsibility for the fate of his self", and the "meaning of his life and the identity of his self are determined by the greater whole into which the self has submerged" (Fromm 155). The fundamental process described by Fromm functions as such; the individual makes an exchange with a power perceived to be greater than the self; exchanging his freedom for existential security; and paradoxically using his free will to choose a new condition in which he has forsaken his free will to choose a condition at all, but one in which he gains relief from Existential Insecurity. This is the basic psychological mechanism by which authoritarian regimes gain and maintain their power.

Authoritarian regimes exploit this psychological predilection of modern man by providing a narrative which manifests a sharp focus on an object of fear, be it through nationalism, racism, antisemitism, homophobia, economic collapse, or the existential threat posed by a determined enemy, despite that these threats may be real or imagined. The authoritarian regime then goes on to solve or promise to solve these existential threats, for which

an authoritarian regime may have been guilty of having created in the first place, and thus providing existential relief for the regime's affected adherents. Through repetition, this process in turn creates a self-reinforcing loop, as an authoritarian maintenance cycle as it were. Just as Hannah Arendt had noted in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, this process must be repeated for the sake of maintaining power. Either an authoritarian regime must exploit the existential threat posed, for example, by a terrorist attack, or it must exploit modern man's fears of foreigners, intrusions upon sovereign jurisdictions, and those who represent the *other* in contrast to what is considered traditional, and so forth. By reminding modern man of his precarious state, and providing paths to secure it, authoritarian regimes gain and maintain their power. This is the framework of analysis in which the rise of the AfD will be explained.

Before proceeding further however, several qualifications are in order. No abstracted definitions of cultural and economic threats will be provided; rather these threats will be demonstrated by continuously citing writers' analysis of real world phenomena that come to represent existential threats. They will be referred to as cultural and economic threats to Existential Security and at times, these threats will overlap. Helen Milner admits that "Disentangling the two forces" of economic and cultural change that contribute to the rise of "authoritarian populism" is "difficult if not impossible" (26). With this in mind, a holistic examination that accounts for both variables and their overlap will yield more explanatory value than attempting to isolate the variables from each other.

Further, a brief discussion of what is meant by the term, Authoritarian Personality, is warranted. Jan Müller expresses why he has an aversion to ascribing populism's causes to psychosocial theories, and he takes specific aim at Lipset for modernization theory. Müller writes that "Lipset, for instance, claimed that populism was attractive for 'the disgruntled and the

psychologically homeless, ...the personal failures, the socially isolated, the *economically insecure*, the uneducated, unsophisticated, and authoritarian personalities’”, but warns against conflating “the content of a set of political beliefs with the socioeconomic positions and the psychological states of its supporters” because it is “not really an explanation” to attribute populism to “an inarticulate political expression on the part of the supposed ‘losers in the process of modernization.’” (16-17; emphasis added).

Müller then would also certainly disagree with David Neiwert’s psychosocial diagnoses of what Neiwert calls “Alt-Americans” who he characterizes as “Right Wing Authoritarians.” Drawing on the work of Robert Altemeyer, Neiwert enumerates a set of potential criteria for those who have an “Authoritarian Personality” in order to explain their support for authoritarianism (42-43). Yet contrary to Lipset’s findings of those with Authoritarian Personalities, Neiwert finds that “various studies and polls of subscribers to conspiracy theories and Patriot movement beliefs have shown that the majority of Alt-Americans are better educated than the average American and have incomes well above the median” (39). In contrast to these views, the research for this paper found that there is no singular demographic trait that helps explain support for populist authoritarianism, and if an explanation cannot be divined from such specific individual traits, it stands to reason that another approach would be in order.

Neither Müller nor Neiwert make reference to Fromm’s, nor Arendt’s conception of the Authoritarian Personality. Therefore, the territory which they contest is of no concern to this paper beyond the previous statements to ground this contrast in adjacent theories. This paper will build primarily from Fromm’s conception of the Authoritarian Personality in a way that focuses on external political and historical forces, rather than internal psychological forces. For our purposes, the most basic conceptualization of the Authoritarian Personality is that it is a reaction

to Existential Insecurity that causes those who experience Existential Insecurity, based on the perception of existential threat, to lend their support to authoritarian conceptions of political organization, irrespective of whether that organization is a state or a party.

Populism's Relationship to Authoritarianism

The early 21st century is characterized by a number of regimes that have eluded easy categorization of their political system, and there has been a resurgence of populist movements in several states that have strong traditions of democracy, like Germany. Kuttner and Müller reject Zakaria's definition of "Illiberal Democracy" for such governments as Poland and Hungary that have evolved toward authoritarianism, while they have still maintained the semblance and formality of democratic processes. Müller argues that it would be a mistake to label Hungary and Poland authoritarian because authoritarianism is too broad a term and that labeling such states as authoritarian risks comparison to states like North Korea, while conversely labeling these states "illiberal democracies" risks going too far in the opposite direction, and by extension, bestowing a legitimacy of democratic order that they do not honor. On the basis that these states allow some press freedoms and opposition candidates in elections, Müller argues these states should not be labeled authoritarian for authoritarian states would never allow these activities. And yet Kuttner argues that just because Putin allows opposition candidates and allows elections does not mean that Russia fails to meet the criteria of an authoritarian state. It would seem then that whether an authoritarian styled state allows the veneer of elections, opposition parties, or a free press, or it does not allow these hallmarks of democracy, if the result of the political organization is the same, it is a distinction without difference.

Why then do authoritarian states continue to maintain the appearance of Democracy? Certainly it must be more than a case of hypocrisy as the compliment that vice pays to virtue. Müller argues that cost for outright authoritarianism is too high because “*Officially* abolishing or at least suspending democracy comes with enormous loss of international reputation...” (50; original emphasis). Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes posit the Imitation Imperative theory, which is an incisive analysis that sheds light on the benefits of maintaining democratic vestiges for authoritarian states like Hungary and Poland, but the authors are otherwise satisfied in labeling populist leaders like Hungary’s Viktor Orban, as authoritarians.

Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser resolve some of the definitional difficulties of populism’s political function by labeling populism as a “thin-centered ideology” that essentially acts as a form of conveyance for concepts from other ideologies (6). Populism is often absorbed or attached to other ideologies, facilitating their mobilization within a spectrum between liberal democracy and full blown authoritarianism. However they note that, “Whatever its manifestation, the monist core of populism, and especially its notion of a ‘general will,’ may well lead to the support of authoritarian tendencies” and “can legitimize authoritarianism...” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 18). Within our European context, Mudde and Kaltwasser find that “It was only in the late 1990s that populism became a relevant political force in Europe” and manifested in a number of “populist radical right parties” which “combine populism with two other ideologies: authoritarianism and nativism” (34).

For the sake of our argument then, within the Euro-American context, populism is a conveyance for authoritarianism. When viewed from this perspective, the success of 21st century populist movements can be seen as having a similar dynamic to its 20th century predecessor, Fascism, in that their successes are predicated upon threats to the cultural identity and economic

security of their adherents. For Nazi Germany, fascists manifested antisemitism as a cultural threat while the economic threat was actual economic collapse. Both of these exigencies, imagined and real, created a sense of Existential Insecurity that manifested the Authoritarian Personality in its supporters. In present day Germany, the AfD gained its support from the economic threat the Eurozone crisis posed to economic security and the AfD gained support by exploiting the threat of the refugee crisis to cultural identity, effectively replacing Jews with Muslims as the focus of fear. (Klikauer 614)

As crises, these events represented opportunities for European populist movements to leverage the narratives of existential threat, real or perceived, to mobilize their adherents. Müller writes that, “A ‘crisis’ is not an objective state of affairs but a matter of interpretation. Populists will often eagerly frame a situation as a crisis, calling it an existential threat, because such a crisis then serves to legitimate populist governance. Put differently, a ‘crisis’ can be a performance, and politics can be presented as a continuous state of siege.” Müller is pointing to the idea that a crisis may be real or perceived, so long as the narrative is believed, it will have the same effect – essentially creating a sense of Existential Insecurity – and this of course echoes what Arendt wrote about how authoritarian systems maintain their power, and so in this sense, both far-right party and state attempt to use a similar lever of power.

Yet however notable these two recent European crises are, they are only acute inflection points on a longer scale of time on which cultural and economic threats have evolved to create a sense of Existential Insecurity. Now let us turn to a discussion of the postwar period in Europe.

Europe: Postwar to Present Day

The postwar Euro-American order is characterized by a robust incarnation of progressive social democracy, rooted in Keynesian economic policies, and designed to temper many of the disruptive forces of unfettered capitalism. But by the 1980's, the neoliberal agenda of deregulation was demolishing many of the systemic protections that had previously guaranteed some basic economic security for most citizens. As capital streams were unleashed from antiquated regulations to chase down cheaper labor and to juice markets, a process of deindustrialization kicked off. In *Postwar*, Tony Judt writes that during this time frame from the late 1990's to the early 2000's, "slower growth combined with vulnerability to global economic forces was exposing many working people to a level of *economic insecurity* unprecedented in living memory" and wrought in large part by neoliberal policies" (742; emphasis added). He describes the consequences of deindustrialization, privatization, and opening of financial markets in Western Europe that benefitted the few, not the many, and whose social costs were made obvious to a wider public by advances in technology. "It was this sense of glaring contrasts between wealth and poverty, prosperity and *insecurity*, private affluence and public squalor, that drove a growing skepticism in Europe about the loudly touted virtues of unregulated markets and untrammelled globalization..." (Judt 737; emphasis added). As a result, it was not necessary to become one of the actual losers of the globalized economy in order to become aware of its potential economic threat, though there were many. Burgeoning advances in communications technology meant that people required little imagination to conjure thoughts of their own economic insecurity; populist-styled leaders surely recognized this potential exploit.

In his discussion of the origins of Populism, Müller briefly touches on, though not necessarily subscribing to, the idea that "...Social Democratic parties have abandoned the task of offering a real alternative to neoliberalism; their convergence on a 'Third Way' reinforced the

sense among voters that they were being offered ‘elections without choice’...” such that electors had little choice in whether neoliberal principles were being applied by most political parties across the board in most modernized democracies (53). In contrast, René Cuperus attributes the political causes for the acceleration of globalization to leaders inspired by social democracy who essentially acquiesced to neoliberalist demands. Cuperus correctly recognizes the consequence of this political acquiescence when he writes:

First, right-wing governments and later the more or less social-democratically inspired “Third Way” administrations like those of Britain’s Tony Blair, Holland’s Wim Kok and Germany’s Gerhard Schröder fell in line with the neoliberal “Washington Consensus” of the IMF and the World Bank, with its ideology of a world in flux, a world of permanent change, all of it in the same direction. Much more than people realize, this has created a climate of huge *uncertainty*... (97; emphasis added)

Uncertainty and a sense of economic insecurity have only grown more acute as the consequences of globalization have grown in magnitude and severity, including economic downturns like the global financial crisis, the resulting Great Recession and Eurozone Crisis, and the continued hardship of austerity policies applied in the EU, all of which have helped to deepen a sense of Existential Insecurity that European populist authoritarians thrive upon.

In *Can Democracy Survive Global Capitalism?*, Robert Kuttner contends that liberal democracy plays a pivotal role in the prevention of populist parties coming to power as authoritarian regimes via liberal democracy’s particular implementation of economic policy. As he sees it, liberal democracy is supposed to reign in unfettered capitalism through a series of Keynesian economic policies designed to provide the most social good for the largest number of people. When governments fail to do so, when such governments in fact promote classic laissez-faire capitalism characterized by deregulation, fiscal austerity measures, and stripping unions of their power, the result is that economic downturns are more frequent, more severe and tend to

last longer, and this in turn has the attendant result of providing fodder on which populist parties thrive.

According to Kuttner, in poorly regulated market economies, wealth tends to become concentrated in the hands of the few rather than the many, and as a result of these processes, the masses suffer the brunt of the economic hardship, and these periods are characterized by huge disparities in economic equality, similar to what Judt explained earlier. Since wealth tends to buy more political access and influence, and since political leaders appear more concerned with the needs of the elite, the masses become disenfranchised from democratic processes of recourse and they are left with a sense that government does not serve them, but rather only serves those with money.

Kuttner sees the relationship between democracy's legitimacy and its ability to mitigate market forces inextricably tied together in mutual beneficial symbiosis. "When the system is in balance, strong democracy tempers market forces for the general good, in turn reinforcing democratic legitimacy" (xvi). When democracy is reigning in capitalism, it can perform its role as, "both a bulwark against totalitarianism and a shield against economic concentration" (14). From a historical perspective, Kuttner argues that, "Fascism thrived on the failure of parliamentary democracy to solve urgent problems. In the aftermath of World War I, these included national humiliation and economic catastrophe, never a good combination. The failures, in turn, discredited democracy itself, to the point where people were willing to turn to dictators" (263). It is no surprise then, that when the Weimar Republic employed extreme fiscal austerity policies, it only deepened its depression and left itself more vulnerable to usurpation by a dictator. As depression and austerity become the hallmark results of contemporary political

processes, and as the people most affected perceive they have no recourse through the prevailing political parties, so populist movements gain political supporters.

Concomitantly in the midst of these economic threats, immigrants and refugees represented a complimentary cultural and economic existential threat. Immigrants embodied different ethnic and national loyalties, and different traditions, religions, languages, and value systems. As an economic threat, they represented either direct competition in labor markets or as beneficiaries of social welfare policies to which they were not ostensibly entitled.

Judt describes a post-communist Europe characterized by the rise of populist parties led by Jörg Haider, Pim Fortuyn, and Jean-Marie Le Pen, the forerunners of the contemporary manifestations of populism that we see today in Europe, who leveraged fears over immigration from Central and Eastern Europe to gain political traction. Judt writes that “The fear that Western Europe might be ‘overrun’ by ‘economic refugees’, illegal immigrants, asylum-seekers and the like contributed to a widespread lack of enthusiasm for EU enlargement” and that:

The presence in increasing numbers of a visible and culturally alien minority in their midst—and the prospect of even more foreigners feeding at the welfare trough or taking 'our' jobs once the floodgates from the East were opened—was icing on the cake for the new Right. Charging that the 'boat is full'—or that their governments had abandoned control of its frontiers to 'cosmopolitan interests' or the 'bureaucrats of Brussels'—populist demagogues promised to stop immigration, repatriate 'foreigners' and return the state to its embattled white citizenry, outsiders in their own country. (742)

Cuperus echoes much of this sentiment, writing that after social democrats offered nothing more than neoliberalism-lite, the impression was that “According to many people, the welfare state no longer offered – or was perceived as no longer offering – a safety net. And what *security* remained went – or was perceived as going – to those with no right to it: undeserving recipients of long-term disability benefits, recent immigrants, tax exiles, and so on” (100; emphasis added).

In the extreme, and in part due to an actual slowing of birth rates by traditional Western Europeans, immigrants have come to represent The Great Replacement, a white nationalist conspiracy theory popularized by Renaud Camus, in which white Europeans will be replaced by the mostly brown, mostly Muslim people. We can see now that the threat of the *other* to cultural identity has evolved from Jews, to Central and Eastern Europeans, and in the present day, to refugees and immigrants from the Middle East and Africa.

Notably in the late 2000's, Western Europe was not overrun by unassimilable immigrants upon the accession of states to the EU from Central and Eastern Europe; rather instead Western Europe stemmed its loss in population by drawing in the young and talented populations from these regions with the promise of Western prosperity. However this dynamic had the converse effect of demographic decline in Central and Eastern Europe. Coupled with the refugee crisis of 2015, this demographic decline posed a threat to cultural identity for many of the states in Eastern Europe where populist authoritarianism thrives. Krastev and Holmes write that, "*Anxiety* about immigration is fomented by a fear that unassimilable foreigners will enter the country, dilute national identity and weaken national cohesion. This fear, in turn, is fueled by a largely unspoken preoccupation with demographic collapse" (37; emphasis added). During the period of 1989 to 2017, the authors cite large losses in population across Eastern Europe, including the former East German provinces; they argue that, "The combination of an ageing population, low birth rates and an unending stream of emigration is arguably the principal source of demographic panic in Central and Eastern Europe" (37).

Yet they mention an important caveat about the cultural threat that immigration poses; it need not be real, only perceived:

Hysteria about non-existent immigrants about to overrun the country represents the substitution of an illusory danger (immigration) for the real danger (depopulation and demographic collapse) which cannot speak its name. Fears of high birth rates among allegedly invading non-European immigrants may reflect unspoken anxieties about a native birth rate below the replacement level compounded by continuous emigration. (Krastev & Holmes, 38)

This bears mentioning once again; a threat may be real or perceived, but so long as it has the effect of creating a sense of Existential Insecurity, the outcome is the same. As should be clear by now, a sense of Existential Insecurity is the consequence of the aforementioned evolving threats to cultural and economic security. Populist authoritarians are able to leverage these threats of Existential Insecurity to galvanize and mobilize political support.

Cuperus attributes the rise of contemporary populism to the economic and cultural threats, that were brought on by “globalization, post-industrialization, individualization, immigration and meritocratization” and which accelerated the process of “economic, social and cultural modernization” (93). According to Cuperus:

As for the most fundamental cause underlying the rise of right-wing populism in Europe today, Betz and Kitschelt state that “the emergence of populist parties is a consequence of a profound transformation of the socio-economic and socio-cultural structure of advanced Western European democracies”. (92-93)

The result of these processes of modernization wrought winners and losers; according to Cuperus, these “Modernisierungsverlierer” or “modernization losers” as they are called in the German debate, are characterized as unskilled and semi-skilled workers in largely modernized societies who have little in the way of cultural capital, and as a result, form the potential electorate of the right-wing populist parties (85). Cuperus asserts that a “change in their political preferences can be empirically established: a shift towards right-wing authoritarian ideas” (85).

As threats to Existential Insecurity emerge, real or perceived, so people may turn to towards authoritarianism. And similar to Judt, and Krastev and Holmes, Cuperus finds that the perception of potential threat is enough to bring about a feeling of Existential Insecurity. “Those affected are not just unskilled workers and the unemployed, but also private-sector professionals, members of the middle class and small businesspeople who fear social decline and loss of status” (Cuperus 94). More evidence for this proposition will be provided as we turn to our next section.

The AfD Examined

Several authors examined for this analysis found the rise of the AfD to be an atypical example of a populist party’s rise to political power and there are several confounding reasons for this. Germany has a fairly strong tradition of democratic ideals and norms for the past 75 years while exhibiting a strong aversion to far-right extremism and nationalism that characterized Germany’s disastrous history when these ideologies were the basis of its political organization. So how did a far-right extremist political party manage electoral victories that sent its members to the Bundestag, an institution analogous to the U.S. House of Representatives?

To begin with, the AfD did not begin as the extremist party that it has evolved into in the present day. The party was launched in 2013 as a response to the Eurozone crisis with its founding members opposing any bailouts for other states. These founding members believed that Chancellor Merkel’s policies were “Alternativlos – ‘without alternative’”, hence the party’s namesake (Bochum 10). Given the high bar for establishing a new political party in Germany, Andrea Althoff provides a very practical explanation for the AfD’s establishment; business associations, parts of the middle class and elements of the established political class were critical of Euro-rescue policies. According to Althoff, “This helped the subsequent founders of the AfD

to establish a broad network and to get access to the financial resources that were necessary to establish a party” (343). The AfD’s founder, Bernd Lucke, was “an economics professor, active Protestant, and married family man [that] was crucial for providing the party with legitimacy, eligibility, and an impression of competent authority. According to journalist Melanie Amann, Lucke was ideal for founding the party because of his absolute integrity and his enormous commitment” (343). In this way, the AfD is established with a cache of legitimacy that is not normally bestowed upon extremist parties, and Althoff goes on to argue that extremist elements have since usurped the party leadership in order to hijack a platform of legitimacy that they would not otherwise have.

While most authors would agree that economic concerns were the driving factors for the establishment of the AfD, these factors do not sufficiently explain its continued success, so the Eurozone crisis is necessary for the AfD’s formation, but not sufficient in providing an explanation for its continued existence. Due to Germany’s quick recovery from the fallout of the Eurozone crisis, a crisis that was initially an economic threat *should* have failed to continue to resonate as a political issue. Davide Cantoni writes that:

Social scientists have long wondered how the AfD's good election results come about. Why are right-wing populist parties in other European countries successful, the Sweden Democrats, Le Pen in France or Geert Wilders in the Netherlands? This is often justified with unemployment, the loss of well-paid jobs in the industrial sector or the feeling that Muslim parallel societies have emerged in large cities. However, these factors do not fit so well in Germany. For the past ten years, Germany has been the country in Europe where unemployment has fallen, where industry is still strong. (ZEIT ONLINE)

Because the economic argument does not hold water, most authors examined find the refugee crisis as the next inflection point in the AfD’s evolution. Most authors concur that the battles for the party leadership have dragged it further to the right politically and shifted the party’s focus

from economic threats to cultural threats in the form of the refugee crisis, upon which the party's present-day success hinges.

Frank Decker writes that, "The [refugee] crisis proved to be an unexpected gift for the AfD" (10). The refugee crisis provided the AfD with the ability to fold cultural and economic threats together, just as was reviewed earlier. Charles Lees, Adina-Elena Cincu, Thomas Klikauer, and Penny Bochum recognize that migrants were framed as taking advantage of social assistance programs to which they were not entitled, echoing Judt's observation from an earlier period in Europe. Klikauer argues that "The AfD features classical scapegoatism directing many frustrations away from neoliberalism and towards foreigners" (619).

Using voter data, Cantoni, Hagemester and Westcott find that voting for the AfD has shifted away from districts more concerned with the AfD's initial focus on fiscal policy, and has since the advent of the refugee crisis, moved towards voting districts that expressed strong support for the Nazi party in the 1933. This aligns somewhat with Klikauer's contention, which is that Germany never actually de-nazified and that the AfD "carries strong connotations to Nazism seeking a Volksgemeinschaft with a strong leader or Führer" (617-618).

Although Cantoni, Hagemester and Westcott find overlap in voting municipalities, Cincu and Lees note that there does not seem to be an easily discernable voter profile for the AfD; there are trends to be sure, but not necessarily a set of demographic traits that are typical of an AfD voter. While most AfD voters are located in the former East German provinces, recent elections showed growing signs of support in parts of western Germany. Althoff explains this support by western German voters in terms of an alignment of values with the AfD's platform. These religiously conservative voters feel that the center-right CDU party has moved too far left on cultural issues and that the AfD provides them with a value-aligned party.

Bochum explains East German voters in terms of several notable dynamics including the migration of over 1 million Germans from eastern to western provinces. In this way, the effect is quite similar to what Krastev and Holmes described; former East German provinces, like other eastern European countries, face a demographic crisis where:

Many of those who migrated were young people: more than a quarter of the eastern German population between the ages of 18 and 30 migrated to the west. This migration, together with a fall in the birth rate in the east, triggered a demographic crisis which has resulted in an ageing population, loss of tax revenues and loss of social infrastructure such as schools, hospitals and leisure facilities. Furthermore, many of the migrants from the east move from rural areas, areas in which the AfD is strongest today. (Bochum 46)

And this may help shed light on Cantoni's question of why people continue to vote for the AfD, despite German economic success, because while that may be true for Germany on the whole, the former East German provinces function more like a microcosm of dynamics found in other eastern European countries that have turned to authoritarianism. Quoting an interview with Gysi, Bochum writes that East Germans “start with the assumption that they are the losers of history, because they were occupied by the Soviet Union and not the western powers” and that this historical position never endowed them with the tolerance for multicultural society that is characteristic of western German provinces, which is a function of the form of political organization, liberal democracy (44). As a result, East Germans have never had the opportunity to gain any measure of tolerance for Muslims, who characterize most of the refugee population from the 2015 refugee crisis. She also argues that many Germans from the former East German provinces still feel that the economic promises and commitments in the wake of Germany's 1989 reunification have yet to be fulfilled by the governing parties and as such, AfD voters feel like 2nd class citizens and have turned to the AfD for political recourse.

With regard to the AfD's strength in former East German provinces, Social Scientist Sheena Iyengar offers an insightful finding. In her observations of East Berliners, which she

made more than 20 years after Germany's reunification, Iyengar asked a question; why did East Germans long to return to their former system of government? Citing a survey she found:

A remarkable 97 percent of East Germans reported being dissatisfied with German democracy and more than 90 percent believed socialism was a good idea in principle, one that had just been poorly implemented in the past. This longing for the Communist era is so widespread that there's a German word for it: *Ostalgie*, a portmanteau of *Ost* (east) and *Nostalgie* (nostalgia). (61-62; emphasis original)

She concludes, based on Fromm's aforementioned theory, that East Germans longed for the security of their former government that their new form of government could not provide because of its foundation on a market economy. Krastev and Holmes made a similar observation about those who had lived under Communist rule and their perspective on a system of government that employed a market economy. Many Eastern Europeans held high hopes that they would enjoy the same economic prosperity as their Western counterparts, but that:

...these exorbitant hopes were mingled with *anxiety* and foreboding. As Hungarian sociologist Elemér Hankiss observed, 'People realized suddenly that in the coming years it would be decided who would be rich, and who would be poor; who would have power and who would not; who would be marginalized, and who would be at the centre. (19-20; emphasis added)

It bears recalling that East Germany's political system was modeled on the Soviet Union's system of Communism, a totalitarian system of government, and previous to this form of political organization, the eastern provinces of Germany were part of Nazi Germany, another totalitarian form of political organization. Essentially, East Germans lived under the most extreme form of authoritarian government, totalitarianism for over half a century, albeit systems of government reflecting two ideological sides of the same authoritarian coin. In *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt contends that Fascism and Communism are essentially the same form of government, totalitarian, even if their only difference is political ideology. Without parsing the differences between totalitarianism as an extreme version of authoritarianism, and based on our

discussion of how authoritarian systems of government maintain their power, suffice it to say that East Germans lived with a form of political organization that survived by creating and maintaining a sense of Existential Insecurity, and as a result East Germans have become accustomed to responding with behavior best characterized as the Authoritarian Personality described earlier.

On this basis, East Germans would likely still have a deeper inclination and sympathy to forms of government or parties that offered political perspectives aligned with this style of government. East Germans are essentially looking for a party offering a form of government that could assuage their need for Existential Security. This perspective helps to account for the difference in AfD voter support between western and former East German provinces.

There is a notable dynamic regarding this particular relationship between East German AfD voters and migrants; Bochum, Cantoni, and Decker find that generally, areas with the highest AfD vote shares have almost no contact with refugees. This is so because the refugees are concentrated largely in cities in the western provinces with the exception of Berlin. In fact, studies have shown that attitudes towards migrants change as more time is spent with migrants and such experience actually increases empathy for migrants' challenges. In this way, AfD supporters in the east need not actually experience migrants directly for the idea of migrants to develop into economic and cultural threat in the mind of AfD voters.

As is evident by this point, there are various alignments of ideas among the authors mentioned thus far, but no author presented a theory that would help unify all these ideas in a cohesive whole. As was written earlier, there were a set of keywords that appeared in the literature reviewed: insecurity, uncertainty, and anxiety, however these terms were not conceptualized, with one notable exception. Decker writes:

The motivations driving AfD voters can possibly best be characterized through the dual term of *insecurity/anxiety*. *Insecurity* refers more to the social situation, meaning apprehensions about a deprivation in wealth, while *anxiety* aims to describe emotions of cultural alienation, the loss of a familiar social order and its moorings. Both motives are combined to form the desire of limiting government services and benefits to their own, native population – migrants that supposedly lack any sort of affiliation with the national community are to be excluded (welfare chauvinism). (11; emphasis added)

By pointing to the twin threats to economic and cultural security, Decker actually comes quite close to conceptualizing factors indicative of Existential Insecurity, and affirming the dynamic driving the AfD's rise. Cincu operationalizes our keywords in a similar manner:

The 2008 financial crisis, followed by difficult economic consequences, the ascending level of homegrown Islamic-salafi terrorism coupled with the social, economic and even psychological impact of the refugee crisis, have fueled growing frustration, *perceptions of insecurity, uncertainty* and fear in numerous European societies. Building on the growing frustration and disenchantment, far-right populism has won a fast path to the hearts and minds of some European citizens [...]. (3; emphasis added)

These authors have echoed the keywords our aforementioned authors: Judt, Krastev and Holmes, and Cuperus. Again, similarly, Bochum points to evidence of *perceptions of insecurity* among AfD voters from a Hans-Böckler Foundation report:

The report described a fear of decline felt by AfD voters across all social classes, linked to a pervasive feeling of *uncertainty* caused by changes such as digitalization and globalization. Fear of decline was more prevalent among AfD voters than voters of other parties, and the actual experience of decline, such as unemployment, had less influence than the fear of it.” (42; emphasis added)

This same Hans-Böckler Foundation report found that “Fears of social decline therefore reflect perceived social *uncertainty* resulting from the difficult material situation of people in the lower social strata. Yet this *uncertainty* is also prevalent among individuals who are not directly threatened by social decline” (Kohlrausch 5; emphasis added). Further, “It would therefore appear that it is not just a case of personal experience with social marginalization or social decline but rather the fear it will occur in the first place. [...] The AfD capitalizes on this rather vague feeling of social *uncertainty*” (Kohlrausch 6; emphasis added).

Within our framework of analysis, these perceptions of insecurity, uncertainty, and anxiety are indicative of Existential Insecurity, and it bears repeating at this point, that affected individuals need not actually endure an experience of economic or cultural decline in order for a sense of Existential Insecurity to manifest. This perspective may account for the fact that voters in the more prosperous and culturally liberal, western German provinces have started to support the AfD, beyond just their alignment with AfD's conservative values.

Because several battles for control of the AfD and its direction have played out over the duration of its existence, including the creation of splinter groups from the AfD's ranks, most authors agree that the AfD is extremely volatile internally. Because of its tumultuous leadership history, changing priorities, and that history has demonstrated "that populist movements are usually extremely unstable internally", most authors do not expect that the AfD is a viable party in the long term (Cuperus 90). Bochum would agree that the AfD's future is questionable, however she posits that if there were another crisis, the AfD might exploit that as they have the Eurozone crisis and the refugee crisis. These crises are opportunities to manifest perceptions of Existential Insecurity and gain supporters, and East Germans have shown themselves to be particularly vulnerable to this form of exploitation.

Populist parties are inherently unstable because of their dependency on these opportune, yet non-linear events, and especially so when populist parties are unable to latch onto a stable state apparatus that would otherwise provide them with the necessary state-party symbiosis normally required by authoritarian regimes to survive. However, the underlying dynamics that predispose citizens to support parties that facilitate authoritarian styled governments remain in effect, especially given the implementation of neoliberal policies that characterize most liberal democracies' economies. Additionally, the voters' perception of a lack of difference in

governing parties that implement these policies, looming demographic crises, patterns of migration, and other potential existential crises like climate change or a pandemic, will likely continue to provide more crises that will become the basis for populist parties' survival. Until liberal democracies can find a set of policies to adequately address the underlying dynamics that give rise to the crises that foster a sense of Existential Insecurity, liberal democracies' efficacy will remain in doubt. And until liberal democracies can locate an effective way to address potential crises, they may struggle to keep the support necessary to their own survival.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have reviewed the theory of Existential Insecurity and its historical roots, as described by Erich Fromm, in the rise of market economies. When people feel powerless against real or perceived economic or cultural identity threats, they may respond with the Authoritarian Personality, relinquishing their freedom in exchange for authoritarianism, which promises safe harbor from such threats. We have established that Euro-American styled populism employs a similar approach to that of authoritarianism in order gain adherents and establish political viability. As a result, the AfD's rise to electoral success can be grasped as being part of wider historical processes and political dynamics.

The authors examined for this paper offered various explanations for the rise of the AfD, but these explanations offered a more satisfying explanation once brought into dialogue with this wider historical context and once brought into dialogue with Existential Insecurity theory. Euro-American populist parties will continue to find ample opportunities to exploit perceived or real threats to people's sense of Existential Security so long as liberal democracies fail to address the underlying issues that heighten these threats. Consequently, they will find some of their

constituencies moving to parties veering to the far-right and in closer alignment with authoritarianism that challenges the liberal democratic order.

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