

The Extreme Goes Mainstream? Commercialized Right-Wing Extremism in Germany

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Introduction

The German right-wing extremist youth scene has undergone a radical transformation in the past decade, as youths have gravitated away from the singular, hard-edged skinhead style in favor of sophisticated, fashionable and highly-profitable commercial brands that deploy coded right-wing extremist symbols.¹ While the style of each brand varies slightly, what they have in common – compared with the traditional skinhead ‘look’ of a black bomber jacket, camouflage fatigues and high black combat boots – is their similarity to other mainstream youth clothing styles. Absent the coded symbols, in other words, the new right-wing extremist brands are virtually indistinguishable in style from other clothing popular with youths.

Some of the commercial products exploit – and drive – the complex coding evident in the game-playing culture that characterizes the new right-wing scene,

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such as the Thor Steinar T-shirt with an image of a fox and the words 'Desert Fox: Afrikakorps' – codes that refer to the nickname of Erwin Rommel, who commanded German troops in North Africa during World War II. Others are more straightforward, like the T-shirt with the word 'Aryan' sold by Ansgar Aryan. The coding phenomena are not unique to German right-wing extremists, of course – prison gangs and other youth subcultural groups in the US and elsewhere, for example, have had a long history of using coded symbols. Nor is the coding an entirely contemporary phenomenon – many of the current codes in play, for example, are modified versions of Nazi symbols used in the Third Reich. And commercial right-wing products have been around for some time, from the Nazi Kitsch of the Third Reich to the patches, buttons, stickers and T-shirts for sale through mail-order flyers and brochures or at right-wing rock concerts in the 1980s and 1990s.

But something new and different is happening. By marrying right-wing ideology and symbols with popular culture and style in what some refer to as 'high-quality Nazi clothing', Thor Steinar – and similar commercial entities, such as Erik and Sons and Ansgar Aryan – have effectively transformed right-wing extremist subculture. Buying a bomber jacket, shaving one's head and donning combat boots are no longer the 'entry points' to the right-wing scene. Thor Steinar is widely recognized as a right-wing extremist brand; it is banned in Parliament, as well as in several stadiums, some schools and at least one university. The Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Verfassungsschutz*) in Brandenburg contends that the Thor Steinar brand serves as a "scene-typical badge of recognition and demarcation."²

² "Szene-Kleidung von Rechtsextremisten: „Thor Steinar“ scheitert mit neuem Vertriebsweg," accessed September 23, 2011, www.verfassungsschutz.brandenburg.de/cms/detail.php/bb2.c.423435.de.

In a two-phase, long-term research project, I am analyzing German youth's deployment of right-wing extremist codes, the commercialization of coded symbols, and the impact of public policy strategies meant to combat the phenomena, such as school bans of particular brands, logos and symbols. The following essay describes some of this research and its hypotheses.

Digital Archive

There is very little academic scholarship to date on the transformations in right-wing extremist symbols or their rapid commercialization throughout the past decade. The data analyzed in this paper come from a unique digital archive I created, which includes thousands of contemporary

and historical images of Nazi and right-wing extremist propaganda, clothing and commercial products. The digital archive is enabling me to track the emergence of the right-wing extremist commercial scene and its use of symbols over time, and is the first phase in a multi-stage research project. In phase two (starting in late 2012), in-

depth, mixed methods fieldwork will take place in two German schools with large populations of right-wing youths. In this essay, I discuss the digital archive only, since fieldwork for phase two has not yet begun.

The images in the digital archive are drawn from four main sources. First, historical images from the 1930s and 1940s are drawn from the special collections of confiscated prints, photographs and Nazi propaganda at the John W. Kluge Center at the US Library of Congress. Second, historical images from the 1930s and 1940s are drawn from the digitized collections housed at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, which include photographs of insignia of various Nazi groups, digitized slides

<http://bb2.c.423435.de>.

from Hitler Youth propaganda films, and images of a wide variety of Nazi symbols on display at various events, such as an image of a Harvest Festival maypole decorated with Nazi symbols. Third, more recent historical images from the 1980s and 1990s, as well as contemporary images from the past decade, are drawn from the collections at the Anti-Fascist Press Archive and Educational Center in Berlin, which has an extensive historical archive and repository of right-wing extremist artifacts, including product catalogs, flyers, stationary, political brochures and other material objects on which logos and symbols are visible. The digital archive also includes screen shots of the websites of several commercial brands that sell right-wing extremist clothing and products, and digital images I captured on the street in Germany, including images, stickers, posters, graffiti, buttons, patches, banners, flags, clothing and other products I observed in locations such as subways, train stations and bus stops, public bathrooms, commercial stores and an anti-fascist rally. Finally, the digital archive includes thousands of contemporary images from the digitized collections of three professional German photographers who track the extreme right-wing throughout Germany, at neo-Nazi rallies and protest marches, as well as in everyday life settings (such as on license plates, at soccer games and on storefronts) and who gave me access to their archives. The digital archive, which enables me to track the explosion, fragmentation and commercialization of symbols among right-wing youth over time, is being coded and analyzed in Atlas.ti, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software program. The following sections describe four categories of codes I am analyzing.

Commercialized Codes and Symbols³

The first category of symbols is what I call the **historical and fantastical past**. Here, youth and commercial entities appropriate symbols

³ The following analysis of specific codes is indebted to the description of codes in *agentur für soziale perspektiven e.V.* (2009, 2011) and conversations with local experts on scene-typical right-wing extremist codes.

from the Third Reich (such as swastikas and modified swastikas), as well as from the mythical or fantastical past (such as Viking gods, runic letters and Celtic symbols). Thor Steinar, the largest and most successful right-wing extremist commercial brand, designs much of its clothing with Nordic references. Its product lines are rife with names such as the 'Nordvendt' jacket and the 'Fjord' cardigan; its store names (Tønsberg, Tromsø, Larvik, Oseberg, Haugesund and, most recently, Brevik) are the names of Scandinavian towns; catalog images show blond, athletic men and women in a variety of settings that evoke or make direct Nordic references – sailboats, bridges, snowy ski slopes, glaciers and boatyards. Another popular brand, Erik and Sons, uses the Nordic spelling of Erik and the tagline 'Viking Brand' on its website and product catalogs, and also relies heavily on images of classic sailboats and coastal scenes in its catalogs. Erik and Sons sells T-shirts with the Danish flag and the words 'Nordland', along with a range of other Viking, Norse and Germanic mythological references. Historical references not drawn from Germanic and Norse mythology are also central. In addition to the use of modified banned symbols that are directly borrowed from the Nazi era, coded symbolic references to both the Third Reich and the colonial era abound in the commercialized clothing. More recent historical references are important as well; some of the commercialized symbols are coded with east German cultural elements, such as the phrase '*Sport Frei*', which was a standard opening call to physical education class in East Germany and became appropriated, after unification, by right-wing soccer hooligans who answer the '*Sport Frei*' that opens soccer matches with the call, '*Heil Hitler*'.

A second category of symbols is the use of **alphanumeric codes**, which abound on license plates, T-shirts, tattoos, and even giant Styrofoam letters in football stadium stands. The number 18 represents the first and eighth letters of the alphabet, AH, which in turn stand for Adolf Hitler, while 88 is used for HH (Heil Hitler). The number

28 is used for Blood and Honour, an organization which was banned until 2010. The number 14 is used in reference to the number of words in a quote from the late American Neonazi David Lane (“We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.”) (see Michael 2009). The code 168:1, set up like a soccer score (168 to 1), refers to the number of victims of the Oklahoma City bombing versus the US government’s execution of Timothy McVeigh. ‘Kategorie C’ is a code co-opted from the German police, who track football hooligans and right-wing extremist youths and keep a list of those considered dangerous (‘category C’). Declaring oneself to be ‘Kategorie C’ thus conveys a willingness to be violent and a sense of pride and ownership in that designation. A wide variety of other numeric and alphabetical codes is also in play.

The third category of symbols is what I call the **performance of pride**. Elsewhere I have argued that German youths resist what they perceive to be a continuing taboo on national pride (Miller-Idriss 2009). The right-wing aggressively markets itself with national pride slogans, aiming to exploit the power that the concept has for disenfranchised youth. One right-wing group advertises a perfume called Walküre, describing it as “the flowery scent for today’s national woman,” and promising female customers that “with this perfume you are guaranteed to be attractive to every patriot.” Commercial products using national pride slogans typically pair the slogans with colors and scripts that evoke historical eras, such as the black-white-red colors of the North German Confederation, German Empire and Third Reich, as well as animals on coats of arms with pride slogans that imitate the imperial eagle of the German empire or the coat of arms eagle of the Third Reich (Kohlstruck 2005, 58–59). The most successful commercial right-wing

extremist companies market with national pride in several ways. Some, like Ansgar Aryan, directly reference pride; the entity’s tagline on its website and product catalogs is ‘Patriotic Ink’. Others use the concept of the nation to foster a sense of belonging and identity, drawing on national references from the colonial era as well as more recent historical military references. Thor Steinar uses eagles and military and runic symbols to evoke historical national eras, particularly the Third Reich.

In the fourth category, **transnational appropriation**, I trace symbols that are borrowed from non-German movements as well as symbols

used across national movements by right-wing and pan-Aryan extremists across the globe. Right-wing German youths display T-shirts with the symbols of the Ku Klux Klan, wear Palestinian scarves, wave banners referencing 9/11, and use the code 168:1. Here I also include the

appropriation of non-extremist products that have been assigned new meaning, such as New Balance sneakers (because the capital N stands for Nazi) and Lonsdale T-shirts (because when worn with a half-zipped bomber jacket, they display four of the letters – NSDA – of Hitler’s party, NSDAP), as well as symbols and codes that are in languages other than German. The winter 2011–2012 Erik and Sons collection, for example, includes a women’s T-shirt (available in lilac or black background) with large block letters declaring ‘MY FAVORITE COLOR IS WHITE’, as well as a women’s T-shirt stating ‘Erik and Sons/For Viking Girls’, with the two phrases separated by a pair of bright blue wolf eyes.

Theoretical Mechanisms and Explanations

The popularity of coded symbols among right-wing extremist youth – and the recent successful commercialization of those symbols – likely has several explanations. I have been using

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two sets of theoretical frameworks to generate working hypotheses, which I will explore in greater detail during interviews, observations and a survey of youths and teachers in two schools with high populations of right-wing youths. Space constraints here do not permit a full analysis of these frameworks, but I offer a brief discussion.

The first set of theoretical frameworks draws on scholarship on nationalism, identity, masculinities and branding. Using these literatures, I hypothesize that coded right-wing symbols are salient to youths because they strengthen a sense of belonging and identity. Symbols of nationhood may be increasingly important to youths who are negotiating an ever more multicultural Germany (Miller-Idriss 2009). Right-wing extremist commercial products' use of codes drawing on Norse and Germanic mythology may help to foster a sense of connectedness and identity (see Schuppener 2007). Moreover, during stressful economic, political or social periods in a nation's history, images of males and females may become increasingly idealized and romanticized (Kimmel 2005). For right-wing youths, hypermasculine symbols like the inflated biceps of Viking gods depicted in right-wing tattoos or the broad-shouldered sailors in Thor Steinar catalogs could reflect youth fantasies of a romantic, pure and untroubled past (also see Claus, Lehnert, and Müller 2010; Virchow 2010) and may facilitate a sense of bonding with other young men. Youth consumption of coded right-wing extremist brands might enable them to feel socially integrated and express both individual and group self-identification (Aronczyk and Powers 2010; Bauman 2007). Symbols may provide a source of meaning in an otherwise overwhelming and disorienting world (Martin 1997), and a sense that youths are part of something larger, stronger and more powerful than themselves (Watts 2001). In this light, the consumption of coded commercial products helps to create a sense of community and belonging among fellow peers.

Another set of explanations rests less on the

sense of identity and belonging of youths and more on elements of youth resistance and opposition to mainstream society. Here, I hypothesize that coded, commercialized symbols act as conduits of youth resistance to a perceived pressure to conform to societal expectations about what youth should be (Wallace and Kovacheva 1996). The expression and manipulation of symbolic codes – many of which are abhorred by the general public – thus create agency for youths who feel constrained by the adult world they are entering. The game-playing aspect of subverting bans may provide youths with a sense of power and secrecy. In light of the high economic disenfranchisement that characterizes the overwhelmingly male, working-class youths who comprise the bulk of memberships and affiliations in the German right-wing (see, e.g., Schnabel and Goldschmidt 1997), the display of banned and abhorrent right-wing extremist symbols may thus be a form of protest and youth resistance – of what Scott (1985) called “weapons of the weak.” Coding and the use of cryptic symbols could enable members of a group who feel powerless to exert control through protest, both by selectively disclosing and concealing aspects of their identity (Simi and Futrell 2009) and by manipulating symbols and coding in reaction to both the ‘hard’ repression of official bans and censorship and the ‘soft’ repression of stigma, ridicule or silencing (Linden and Klandermans 2006). Moreover – in a link to the literature on branding above – it might also be the very notion of resistance that appeals to youths; one of the most subtle and complexly-coded extremist brands, Reconquista, has a series of taglines flashing across the top of its commercial website, including the phrase ‘*Widerstand ist anziehend*’ (resistance is attractive). Reconquista thus uses the notion of resistance to market coded extremist clothing. In this light, resistance itself becomes commodified.

Conclusion

The rapid commercialization of right-wing consumer products and clothing, which is

successfully blending mainstream pop culture with right-wing symbols and ideology, is an astonishing development. The lack of scholarly analyses or empirical research on this phenomenon means that there is much that is unknown about the reasons for the popularity of these commercial brands, their connection to extremist ideology and behavior, and the impact of strategies meant to combat them (such as school bans of brands and symbols). Significant further qualitative and quantitative research with consumers and producers of right-wing extremist commercial products clearly is needed. Moreover, such a short essay has necessarily glossed over many of the subtle details of this transformation in right-wing extremist youth subculture that I explore in greater depth in the full study.

The analysis of the digital archive in conjunction with fieldwork with right-wing youth is critical, because it enables me to categorize and decode right-wing symbols and commercial products so that I can design interview schedules and survey instruments around the meaning of particular

popular symbols and codes. Without the archive, I would likely overlook dozens of coded symbols, key images, and right-wing clothing and products that youths display and wear. The archive on its own is also inadequate, however, because the images alone cannot tell us why youths are utilizing these symbols, how they select which symbols to display, how they use and manipulate symbols in their everyday lives, or whether and how the consumption of symbols relates to extremist attitudes and violence. Interviews will also likely reveal additional symbols and codes that were not captured in the digital archive, either because they were overlooked by photographers or because the rapid nature of the transformation of symbols means that new ones are constantly emerging. The extreme right-wing has successfully utilized digital technologies in the commercialization and commodification of symbols; this project represents a first attempt to combine the same technologies with traditional empirical data-collection methods in an effort to understand this fascinating and disturbing phenomenon.

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