

Cultures of rejection at work

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Cultures of rejection at work: Investigating the acceptability of authoritarian populism

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journals.sagepub.com/home/etn**Alexander Harder**

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Abstract

This article introduces the concept of *cultures of rejection* as a framing device to investigate conditions of acceptability of authoritarian populism among workers in Germany and Austria. After situating the concept in the current scholarly debate on right-wing populism and discussing its main theoretical points of reference, we offer an analysis focusing on experiences of crisis and transformation. Two elements of cultures of rejection are discussed in depth: the rejection of racialised and/or culturalised ‘unproductive’ others; and the rejection of the public sphere, linked to the emergence of a ‘shielded subjectivity’. These articulations of rejection are then discussed as related to two dimensions of a crisis of authority: the crisis of state or political authority in the field of labour and the economy; and the crisis of a moral order, experienced as decline in social cohesion. In conclusion, we identify possible avenues for further research, demonstrating the productivity of the conceptual framework of cultures of rejection.

Keywords

Populism, cultures of rejection, Austria, Germany, crisis of authority

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This article seeks to contribute to the ongoing academic debate on the rise of authoritarian populism in Europe. We introduce the concept of *cultures of rejection* as a framing device that allows us to investigate conditions of acceptability of authoritarian populism among workers in Germany and Austria. Combining a conceptual framework derived from a re-reading of critical cultural studies with an anthropological approach to empirical fieldwork, we try to avoid the impasses often generated from the juxtaposition of ‘cultural’ vs. ‘economic’ explanations of populism while presenting findings from ethnographic field work conducted as part of the transnational and transdisciplinary research project. In this article, we focus on insights derived from research in four workplaces in Germany and Austria: two in the retail sector (Germany), and two in the logistics industry (Austria). Before we present and discuss our empirical findings, we locate our contribution in relation to current scholarship on authoritarian or right-wing populism and introduce the conceptual cornerstones of the theoretical framework of cultures of rejection. We then introduce our methodological approach before turning to our core findings regarding (experiences of) transformations and crises in the retail and logistics sectors and investigating articulations of rejection with elements of a crisis of authority. To conclude, we discuss how our findings may open avenues for new research.

Researching rejection: Approaches in political science and anthropology

The rise of right-wing parties has produced a rich field of scholarship shedding light on the ‘populist zeitgeist’ (Mudde, 2004) from a variety of angles. In 2016, the Brexit referendum in the UK, Donald Trump’s election as president in the US and the rise of the far-right AfD in Germany drastically demonstrated the global character of this development, even signalling for some scholars the rise of an ‘anti-immigration era’ (Parvin, 2020). Since then, this field of scholarship has witnessed a veritable explosion in research and publications. Broadly, it can currently be divided along three axes: (1) *supply-side approaches* focusing on far-right parties’, movements’ and politicians’ ideologies, policies and strategies versus *demand-side approaches* shedding light on voters’ and supporters’ opinions, demands and interests (van Kessel, 2013; Mudde, 2010); (2) *economic (or economicist) explanations* focusing on experiences of socio-economic precarisation and transformation which, in turn, produce uncertainties that embolden the ascent of right-wing parties (Fraser, 2019; Heitmeyer, 2018; Manow, 2018; Rodrik, 2018) versus *cultural (or culturalist) ones*, which interpret the rise of the populist right as a ‘cultural backlash’ and privilege the explanatory value of threats to social status and fears of socio-cultural decline (Illouz, 2017; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Reckwitz, 2019); and finally (3), studies that pursue a qualitative versus a quantitative (e.g. Rooduijn and Pauwels, 2011) methodology, even though attempts have been made to combine these methodologies or triangulate between them (cf. Hawkins et al., 2019; Poblete, 2015).

In this context, we employ an approach allowing us to move closer to the lifeworlds and practices of actors as well as to social processes and their ruptures, spaces and cultural architectures by emphasising, in the spirit of anthropological research, not the statistically representative but the culturally significant (Kaschuba, 1999: 195–196). This approach not only supplants standardised quantitative research with in-depth, qualitative and context-sensitive investigations, but helps to re-evaluate when, why and how authoritarian attitudes provide orientation by focusing on the points where politico-economic and socio-cultural elements converge. Anthropological research on populism and authoritarianism specifically could be placed within a broader tendency towards ‘dark anthropology’. Originating in the 1970s and 1980s, this tendency ‘emphasizes the harsh and brutal dimensions of human experience and the structural and historical conditions that produce them’ (Ortner, 2016: 49). Since 2016, it has undergone a renewed invigoration, producing a wide range of studies that have linked right-wing extremism to statist management of nationalist self-conceptions (Shoshan, 2016), teased out the historical lineages and lifestyles of fascist movements (Cammelli, 2018) and debated the ethical and conceptual implications of ethnographic work with right-wing actors (Pasioka, 2017, 2019; Teitelbaum, 2019). However, the current wave of anthropologies of authoritarianism draws heavily on an ‘internalist perspective’ (Blee, 2007) that focuses on the inner workings, motivations and mobilisations of right-wing actors and movements. Aimed at understanding the conditions in which right-wing attitudes take hold, our approach aligns more with studies that employ an ‘externalist’ perspective (Feischmidt and Szombati, 2016), explore multiple fields (Thorleifsson, 2018) and place populism within transnational political and economic developments (Holmes, 2000; Kalb and Halmai, 2011). Our inquiry into cultures of rejection thus aims to contribute to the research on authoritarian populism by (a) adding original empirical material to the (comparatively narrow) segment of qualitative studies; (b) arguing for an integrated approach to culture and economy that is neither economic nor culturalist (Biskamp, 2019; Sum and Jessop, 2013); and (c) taking a step back both from the supply-and-demand model and from ‘internalist’ perspectives while investigating the socio-cultural context of the current conjuncture with an eye towards the conditions in which ‘demands’ for authoritarian populist politics emerge.

Conjunctures, cultures, rejection

Before we proceed to analyse and interpret our own empirical material, we introduce three concepts that form the basis of our conceptual framework: conjuncture(s), culture(s) and rejection.

Conjuncture(s)

In our focus on conjunctures, we draw on the founding texts of critical cultural studies, and in particular on Stuart Hall’s analyses of the articulations of politics

and culture in what he later came to term authoritarian populism (Hall, 1980a, 1980b, 1985, 1986; Hall et al., 1978). In this body of work, we find the outlines of a *conjunctural analysis* (Clarke, 2010, 2014; Davison et al., 2016: 2; Ege, 2019; Ege and Gallas, 2019). As his colleague Lawrence Grossberg put it, Hall's 'commitment to study the conjuncture' can be read as his project's specific intellectual quality, his widely scattered oeuvre as 'a conjuncturalist study of changing conjunctures' (Grossberg, 2015: 7). As a theoretical term, 'conjuncture' puts forward a three-fold argument. First, it designates a mid-level of abstraction. A conjunctural analysis is concerned neither with a concrete situation, nor with abstract social structures and mechanisms. Instead, it pays special attention to political, ideological and cultural aspects of a given social dynamic (as opposed to purely economic or psychological factors) (cf. Hall, 1986: 8). Reflected in its etymological roots – 'conjungere' in Latin means 'to connect' – a conjuncture needs to be understood in terms of the linkages, or articulations, between different discursive-affective-material elements. Second, this implies a specific temporal perspective. A conjuncture can be read as a particular period of time in which such elements connect and form a relatively stable constellation. As Hall put it retrospectively, 'A conjuncture is a period during which the different social, political, economic and ideological contradictions that are at work in society come together to give it a specific and distinctive shape' (Hall, in Hall and Massey, 2010: 57). This gives rise to a perspective that prioritises a focus on dynamics, crises, breaks and transformations. In the words of John Clarke, one of Hall's co-authors on the seminal conjunctural study 'Policing the Crisis', '[t]he concept of conjuncture highlights the ways in which moments of transformation, break, and the possibility of new "settlements" come into being. Conjunctures have no necessary duration [. . .]; rather, their time is determined by the capacity of political forces – the leading bloc – to shape new alignments or to overcome (or at least stabilize) existing antagonisms and contradictions' (Clarke, 2014: 115). Thirdly, the references to antagonisms, contradictions, crises and settlements lead us to the idea that a conjuncture is determined by the ways in which people and institutions deal with contradictions and conflicts. To analyse a conjuncture then means to understand how individual coping mechanisms translate into a relatively stable political 'settlement', including sets of practices, attitudes, values and affects that together contribute to a 'way of life'. Not unlike the model of Cultural Studies defended by Anne Alexander, a conjunctural analysis 'insists on a "deep" understanding of culture, which looks "up and out" at the structures of power, history and economics, but also "down and in" at the structures of feeling which animate it' (Alexander, 2016: 1434).

Culture(s)

Just as biologists cannot exhaustively define 'life', or media theorists 'media', we are not aiming at an all-encompassing definition of 'culture'. Instead, we want to highlight the perspective implied by researching cultures of rejection: a search for patterns in everyday life, an analysis of political, economic and technological

conditions and a sensitivity to ruptures and contestations. In *The Long Revolution*, Raymond Williams describes the work of cultural analysis as the ‘clarification of the meanings and values implicit and explicit in a particular way of life, a particular culture’ (Williams, 1961: 57), which includes art and learning but also institutions and ordinary behaviour. In the field of culture, members of society come to understand themselves, their wider social environment and the current historical moment (Gilbert, 2019: 108). In this sense, as Wolfgang Kaschuba provocatively writes, ‘culture is *life*’ (Kaschuba, 1999: 121). The ‘relative settlements’ of practices, attitudes and values mentioned above are found in the patterns of everyday life. Attempting to understand these patterns and their relationships to each other leads research into domains that are not always considered to be culture, as a crucial part of this attempt involves analysing ‘the organization of production, the structure of the family, the structure of institutions which express or govern social relationships, the characteristic forms through which members of the society communicate’ (Williams, 1961: 58). A description of cultural patterns remains incomplete if it ignores the conditions that shape these patterns, given that how exactly cultural, economic, political and technological conditions are assembled and weighted in a particular conjuncture is not predetermined but only revealed by investigation (Gilbert, 2019: 108). The routines of everyday life are where social conditions and their crises are processed, expressed and, crucially, contested. These routines serve as the ‘interface of all activities’ (Bargetz, 2015: 17) and, importantly, include affective dimensions that go beyond processes of signification (Thomas, 2013). Insofar as ‘everyday culture’ represents the sphere in which beliefs and attitudes are normalised, it encompasses coping strategies as well as critique. Situations where settlements disintegrate – where quotidian routines are interrupted, living conditions become unstable or production and reproduction fall into crisis – offer starting points for an inquiry into cultures of rejection.

Rejection

For a conjunctural study of authoritarian populism, the investigation of everyday culture is paramount. As populism articulates an *antagonistic* relation (to the ‘power bloc’ as well as to an ‘outside’), we must look for cultural patterns that constitute the conditions of acceptability of such antagonisms. Here, the notion of rejection becomes crucial. We consider ‘rejection’ not as a psychological mechanism or an individual set of preferences, but as a cultural phenomenon in the above sense. Thus, we analyse cultures of rejection as modes of living, or ways of being in the world, that are constituted by attitudes, values, norms and affects that reject a set of socio-cultural objects. While the objects of rejection may vary and form various constellations, they often include immigration, domestic political elites, ‘mainstream’ media, institutions of civil society, scientific or educational institutions, certain bodies of knowledge, shifting gender relations and racialised or culturalised Others. Where signs of difference tend to precipitate processes of stigmatisation, bordering and enclosure, they can lead to structures of subjectivity

that Wendy Brown (2010: 41; citing Eghigian, 2008) labels *homo munitus* and characterises as armed and shielded, or: rejective. Aiming for a conjunctural analysis, we look for *articulations* of rejection in a double sense: as expressions of cultural patterns and structures of feeling; and as linkages and connections people make, producing complex networks of meaning, experience and affect.

Conditions of acceptability

Introducing the three concepts as cornerstones of our theoretical framework should help to clarify that we do not seek to measure or interpret individual political attitudes. Instead, by constructing our framework around the notion of culture as described above, we investigate what Marco Revelli calls ‘populism-as-context’: a ‘politico-cultural climate’ that forms the conditions in which ‘populism-as-project’ can thrive (Revelli, 2019: 11). Taking from cultural studies the idea of a ‘conjuncturalist approach’ allows us to focus on antagonisms, contradictions, crises and settlements, and to ask how their conjugation contributes to a climate within which authoritarian populism becomes acceptable and even desirable for certain sections of society. This approach is decisively non-deterministic: It considers the articulations of rejection as concretely contingent, the product of a variety of past and present practices without an underlying essence connecting the themes and objects of rejection on a deeper level. It is also decisively non-aleatory: It rejects the idea that the themes and topics of rejection are the product of random encounters. Instead, a conjuncturalist approach asks, in the spirit of Foucault’s discussion of critique: ‘what constitutes the acceptability of a system?’ (Foucault, 2007: 61). What makes it possible, desirable even, to draw on the discursive, symbolic and affective resources provided by cultures of rejection to make sense of a changing world and one’s place in it?

Methodological approach

Our methodological approach towards a conjunctural analysis combines insights from anthropology and political science to investigate how and where structural and subjective elements link up and form ‘stable settlements’. Rather than researching predefined right-wing samples like ‘AfD voters’, ‘organised right-wing extremists’ or ‘masculinist filter bubbles’, this externalist perspective focuses on sites of transformation of socio-economic conditions and takes these as starting points for investigations into everyday life. Regarding his method for researching the everyday, Henri Lefebvre writes, ‘First of all, I find something, then I start to search for it’ (Lefebvre, 2002: 143), thereby highlighting an undeniable subjective sensibility as a part of this process. To guide this search and to offer an overarching research structure, work environments in retail and logistics sectors served as a common entry point. This decision was based on the conceptual view that labour constitutes a central element of contemporary socialisation without fully determining it. It was also grounded in the empirical observation that these sectors have

experienced major transformations in recent years that have rearranged labour relations and patterns of social reproduction for their workers. To investigate variegated responses, we sought out work environments: (a) both in inner cities and more peripheral regions; (b) with profound processes of labour transformations; and (c) in locations with prominent public disputes concerning right-wing populism. Rather than aiming for a comparative approach, we searched for shared conditions for practices of rejection across field sites and their concrete articulations. During our research in the second half of 2019, we conducted four sets of semi-structured interviews with workers in Austria and Germany (14 in each country), which followed a line of questioning that started with routines, transformations and challenges at respondents' workplaces, and moved to descriptions of patterns and disruptions in their private lives (Kruse, 2015). Interviews concluded with an inquiry into respondents' perceptions of, and self-orientation within, contemporary political processes and conflicts. Through mappings and a brief survey conducted alongside the interviews, we also gathered demographic data and an overview of digital and socio-spatial environments that respondents deemed relevant for their daily routines. These provide the necessary venues for our next two research phases that focus on (1) the interpretative frames offered in *networked publics* (Boyd, 2011) like Facebook, but also (2) on the practices and disruptions of social reproduction taking place outside of work, such as in neighbourhoods.¹ In the following sections, we present results of, and reflections on, the material gathered in work environments that allow us to sketch early insights into the acceptability of authoritarianism and right-wing populism. While they cannot paint an exhaustive picture of the current conjuncture, we present them as a modest contribution to the necessarily collective and cooperative effort to illuminate the current conjuncture as a 'problem-space', as Lawrence Grossberg (Grossberg, 2010: 58) puts it. We are fully aware of the need for further analyses – specifically of practices of social reproduction and the digital mediatisation of social relations. We are currently pursuing this ethnographic research, which goes beyond the scope of the material presented here, and hope to be able to publish further results in the near future.

Transformations and crisis in logistics and retail

Back in the day it was, kind of, more humane. Employees were taken care of. But nowadays, it's all about money. Getting as many orders, as many goods in as possible, with as little staff as possible. Every square metre is being stuffed to the max. (AT-Int12-Log2-m62)²

Early indications of the ways in which 'various crises and contradictions of a conjuncture are articulated and lived' (Grossberg, 2010: 58) are found in the narratives of transformations of work environments that interview subjects in Austria and in Germany shared with us. Union representatives helped us establish access to our respondents either by connecting us individually or enabling us to

visit the workplace, chat with workers during their breaks or attend and introduce ourselves at staff meetings. Although we clearly were outsiders to the workplace, we approached workers by expressing our interest in their work routines, their daily lives and its challenges and their political and social views and grievances. Most were pleasantly surprised that someone would take the time to research their lives and perspectives, and a number of those interested agreed to a more in-depth interview either at the workplace – if possible – or outside of work in a setting of their choice, be it a local café or the neighbourhood bar.

Proceeding in this way, we interviewed workers at two logistics sites in Austria: a warehouse and distribution centre for textiles, and a freight-forwarding terminal, the former located on the outskirts of the city of Vienna, the latter in an industrial area in Lower Austria, with around 300 and 600 employees, respectively. Both Austrian field sites had been growing substantially and continue to do so in accordance with the boom in the global circulation of commodities, which leads to higher demand for a logistics workforce (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2019). The result is an ever-increasing number of employees as well as spatial densification. Workers report a growing intensity of labour and a lack of space, which is experienced as stressful. As the respondent quoted above puts it, ‘every square metre is being stuffed to the max’, both with people and with products. At both sites, managers report an ongoing expansion of the labour force leading to difficulties in recruitment of both skilled and unskilled labourers. At the freight-forwarding terminal, intensification of labour is combined with an increase in the use of digital monitoring and tracking technologies. Older truck and lorry drivers told us how GPS tracking and rationalisation of loading and unloading at the freight terminals led to the disappearance of waiting time, which for the workers had meant informal breaks and time to socialise with colleagues. We could see this process as a classic example of what Marx called ‘a closer filling up of the pores of the working day, or condensation of labour’ (Marx, 2010[1867]: 413) in his discussion of large machinery in the early stages of capitalism.

In Germany, our approach took us to two stationery retail companies: a department store with 250 employees located in the historical inner city of a northern Bavarian city, and a large furniture store with about 320 employees on a highway that connects Saxony-Anhalt and Saxony. The profound processes of transformation in these workplaces starkly contrast with those in Austria.

It’s like I just said, that we used to be three people and now I have to do the work alone. We have no one else who is helping me because we are not enough, it has become more stressful. (Ger-Int6-Ret1-f56)

Most of the workers at both stores, the majority of whom are women, have been employed on stable, yet low-salaried contracts for at least five years. However, they have been watching their workforce dwindle, both in numbers and working hours. Salespeople mention their feelings of loneliness and isolation on the shop floor and describe transformations of their labour tasks from customer service and

personal consultation to the management of inventory or customer flows with the help of digital tools for mobile data entry, self-checkout and online orders. As the workforce shrinks, labour intensity increases and more tasks have to be handled simultaneously, reducing the time that was once spent bonding with customers or chatting with colleagues. The heightened pace, isolation and stress on the shop floor are experienced differently: Employees of the department store have witnessed a string of company insolvencies threatening their livelihoods, wage stagnation and largely unsuccessful attempts to adapt to changing customer needs, whereas workers of the furniture house have seen their employer grow and adapt successfully to online retail. At the same time, however, the toll of the work appears to grow beyond the latter group's psychological and physiological capacities, leading to exhaustion and high sickness rates.

The experiences of workers in the Austrian and German field sites do not constitute isolated instances of a crisis of stationery retail on one hand and a rise of e-commerce on the other. We view them as aspects of an immersive, integrated process that might be termed *logistification* and is aimed at the seamless integration of production, circulation and consumption (Mann et al., 2017). Digital inventory management, minimisation of storage costs, calculations of customer behaviour and fast commodity turnover constitute crucial elements of a process that aspires to the unencumbered movement and distribution of goods rather than congestion and density (LeCavalier, 2016: 6). It implies transformations of labour but also ruptures in patterns of social reproduction and everyday life (Arnold et al., 2018).

Crises of authority and cultures of rejection

In this section, we present insights derived from our empirical research in the workplaces described earlier and offer some interpretations within the conceptual framework of a conjunctural analysis of cultures of rejection. We proceed in two steps. First, we address two examples where we encountered elements of cultures of rejection among our informants: a contraction of social relations, which involves a rejection of the public sphere; and a re-negotiation of the notion of 'justice', which is premised on the rejection of a discursively constructed, supposedly non-productive Other, often linked to the figure of the refugee or asylum seeker. In a second step, we contextualise these elements of rejection within experiences and narratives of crisis that we interpret as indicative of a wider *crisis of authority*: a crisis of political authority in the sphere of the economy, articulated through the naturalisation of economic relations and conditions in the workplace; and a perceived crisis of moral order, articulated through a narrative of decline of social cohesion.

Elements of rejection I: Solidarity among the industrious, rejection of the unproductive

Anna is a 24-year-old worker who moved to Vienna from a Latin American country with her mother when she was still a teenager. In our conversations she speaks

very quietly; most often her answers and reactions consist only of a few words or a gesture. During our interview, she reacts defensively when asked about anything beyond her immediate surroundings. She often responds with ‘I don’t know’ when asked her opinion about society and politics, and repeatedly says that she does not watch any news channels, does not read the newspaper and does not follow any political content online. During this interview – the briefest one in our sample – there is but one moment where she opens up, speaking louder and for much longer than before. Asked if there is anything that makes her angry about society, she quickly replies: ‘Yes, that the job centres give so much money to asylum seekers’. She then adds an anecdote about her sister not getting financial assistance for a job training programme she applied for because ‘they don’t have money for that. And then I think: These people [refugees] don’t go to work, these people just fool around and they get more than a person who really wants to do something. I don’t like that, that’s not right!’ (AT-Int7-Log1-f95). During the rest of the conversation, she keeps coming back to the issue of refugees and asylum seekers:

Vienna is great. But there are also things that are not so good here. For example, the thing with the refugees. And that Chechens and such people come here. They are unproductive. They, these people – they’re not doing anything. (AT-Int7-Log1-f95)

Anna’s phrasing is quite typical for an element of rejection that we observed in all four workplaces. We found that many of our informants expressed overt or covert rejection of ‘unproductive’ Others in connection with the issue of (social) justice or fairness. Even though their own descriptions of their working and social life were often rife with examples that they could have framed as ‘unfair’, they mostly chose not to do so. When asked if they felt that they live in a just or fair society (‘gerechte Gesellschaft’), they did not relate this question to, for example, mandatory extra hours, low pay, stressful working conditions or the high cost of housing and living – all issues that they had mentioned before as negatively affecting their lives. Instead, our informants most often chose to link the topic of social justice and fairness with the figure of the undeserving Other: What they saw as unfair was the fact that some people get something they allegedly do not deserve. Deservedness here is unequivocally connected with (waged) labour and the hardships it entails. One female employee in Germany made this connection almost palpable when she talked about the strain of having to get up early every morning:

I don’t have nerves for this anymore. It makes me mad. I have to get up early every day, with my 53 years, and go to work, and you, with your 35 years, roll over and sleep in? That can’t be it. For me, these – quote unquote – social parasites, they make me so angry! (Ger-Int4-Ret1-f65)

The antagonism emerging here is focused on an undeserving figure of the Other, which is clearly racialised and/or culturalised, and often directly identified with the ‘refugee’ or ‘asylum seeker’. At the same time, it is important to note that the

process of othering and bordering that takes place here is a complex one that can include 'foreigners' in the community of the hard-working, industrious labourers while also allowing for a sense of solidarity towards those in need of support due to circumstances not of their own choosing. When asked who in their opinion would deserve support from the state, informants mentioned the elderly, the sick, single mothers and homeless people, or, as the retail employee quoted above put it: 'our own people. How should I put it, from the homeless up to the... whatever. So that we have money first and foremost for people who are in such a situation through no fault of their own' (Ger-Int4-Ret1-f65). Here, what Etienne Balibar calls a 'community created by racism' (Balibar, 1991: 18) is constructed around a sense of identity as industrious and rational and based on an ideology of merit: To belong to 'our own' means to be able to make legitimate claims on the institutionalised solidarity of the welfare state. Should you find yourself unemployed or in financial duress, it will not have been your own fault.

Elements of rejection II: Retreat into the private sphere and rejection of the public

Christian is 43 years old and began working at the furniture house four years ago. After a long time of unstable self-employment, he now enjoys the security of a fixed working contract, even though his income is sparse. Since the birth of his son, his wife has been doing the lion's share both in terms of maintaining the household and earning income. Talking with him about his social life and his perspectives on society, he often shrugs. 'You know, right now', he tells me while taking a drag from an e-cigarette, 'I am too concerned with myself, with my family and my job to care about anything else that's happening. I think it's alright, how things are going at the moment' (Ger-Int12-Ret2-m77). Not all respondents share Christian's feelings of indifference, but many share his perspective on social life. Flexible working hours and, in most cases, family matters, leave little time for plentiful social connections, hobbies or other activities. Sometimes, interviewees articulate remorse about this situation, but more often they adapt and organise their time outside of work in a way that suits these conditions: by focusing on activities that can be done alone and by reducing their main social contacts to their surrounding family. Mappings we conducted with respondents highlight that beyond work, home and nature – for taking walks – are seen as the primary pillars of everyday life. Regular participation in cultural, political or social organisations was almost non-existent and seen as incompatible with a desire for flexibility: 'I always feel that it is too fixed. I somehow like to be self-determined' (Ger-Int10-Ret2-f82), a colleague of Christian tells me. While many echo his modesty regarding social life, in some cases this retreat into the private sphere is articulated as explicit rejection. An Austrian worker states, 'I am antisocial [laughs]. I don't talk to anyone. I don't like that. My private life is my private life. I mind my own business' (AT-Int7-Log1-f95). 'We don't have a lot of outside contact. That's just how it is', answers one German retail employee. 'Both of us don't really care, I think. [...] [W]e're not

freaky in that way, that we think we have to have best friends somehow, like in a sitcom' (Ger-Int5-Ret1-M69).

In *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, Wendy Brown touches on the idea of *homo munitus*, coined by Greg Eghigian. Desiring security, shelter and fortification, the walled subjectivity Brown describes is 'conformist, passive, paranoid and predictable' (Brown, 2010: 41), and in these cases we can indeed see suspicion towards those with too much 'outside contact', not 'minding their own business'. In most interviews, constructions of an external Other are less common than desires for a secure 'us', shielded from outside interference. 'My family makes me feel secure' (Ger-Int12-Ret2-m77), Christian tells me, and in his and many other cases, the family serves as a secure site for the exchange of everyday grievances, current events and opinions. 'I talk with my partner at home. I mean, he knows what makes me tick, I know what makes him tick. You cannot really talk with the people anymore anyway, I feel' (Ger-Int9-Ret2-f63), an employee at a furniture house explains. 'I talk a lot, talk a *lot*', another opinionated employee proudly stresses, before adding, 'but only in my own four walls with my husband' (Ger-Int4-Ret1-f65). One of Christian's colleagues, a 30-year-old customer service employee, has consciously stopped reading or watching news programming: 'I have to admit, I am not really super informed about day-to-day politics, but I feel good about it, it's a conscious decision', she tells me. She avoids all discussions concerning politics, saying 'I always feel that relationships, friendships and families are unnecessarily burdened if you are not of the same opinion' (Ger-Int11-Ret2-f88). In these cases, rejection is articulated in the form of 'hunkering and huddling' (Brown, 2010: 42) in the privacy of one's home, connected both to material constraints as well as a suspicion towards 'outside contact'.

Crisis of authority I: The naturalisation of the economy and the crisis of political authority

In almost all the interviews we conducted during our field visits, we encountered a rigid separation drawn between experiences at the workplace and the sphere of politics. Even though workers often expressed grievances related to their work-life such as low pay, long working hours, congestion of working places, and fear of poverty after retirement, these issues were hardly ever picked up when they talked about their views on and expectations of politics and the state. This peculiar absence of labour issues, and economic issues more generally, remains striking. In the rare cases where these topics were addressed in this context, the narrative was one of a perceived impotence and/or unwillingness of the state and political actors, including trade unions, to make a difference for the better from the workers' point of view. One such issue was the question of the wage contract. In one of the logistics workplaces we visited, labourers were covered by the collective bargaining agreement of the retail sector, although they were clearly performing tasks that would put them into the category of logistics workers, whose collective bargaining agreement is more favourable (the minimum monthly wage for logistics

workers in Austria is ca. 200 Euros higher than the one for employees in the retail sector). Two workers mentioned this as unfair but felt that nothing is being done about it. One female worker complained:

From the type of work we are doing here, that we are not employed as logistics workers, that they give us retail contracts, that is what hurts me a little bit. Talking to the shop steward, to the trade union doesn't work. I talked to them and they promised to look into the contracts, but that's just blah blah blah, it's been three years now and nothing has happened. (AT-Int2-Log1-f70)

One male colleague related this problem directly to the authority of the state when I asked him why he thinks that he is working under the 'wrong' contract:

Because the law doesn't support it, because there is no law that says: you have to employ your worker according to what he basically is. [The employer] can give you any contract he wants. [...] If there were basic rules where the state makes sure everyone gets their correct contracts, not the company [...], then you would have a system, you would have order. (AT-Int5-Log1-m91)

The experience of the state and politics lacking authority in the workplace is mirrored by a narrative of economic development in the workplace and of the actions of the employers as almost natural, or god-like, unchangeable processes. For one younger female worker in the same company, the acceptance of the state of things at the workplace includes mandatory extra hours that she is asked to work, even though her boss had not told her about this aspect of the job when she started at the company. This acceptance is most clearly illustrated in the way workers talk about the introduction of shift work, which took place at one logistics warehouse during our research phase. Even though most workers experienced the introduction of morning and night shifts as significant change that negatively affected their well-being, they talked about it as something they just had to adapt to:

The business is growing and growing [...]. Sometimes this scares me, because the warehouse isn't getting any bigger. This is why we now changed to shift work. [...] Now, in this phase, it [the introduction of shift work] is not optimal for us. [...] But we have to try it at some point in time, so when the boss says now is the time, then why not? Let's see how it goes. (AT-Int6-Log1-f69)

One female worker described the introduction of shift work, which dramatically affected her daily routines, in an almost meek, submissive way: 'Naturally, as with every job, there is something new, something's changing all the time, that's the times we live in now, isn't it?' A little later, when talking about changes in her work routines more generally, she stated that for her, this situation is 'quite okay, I accept it anyway, my God, what happens, happens' (AT-Int2-Log1-f70).

These examples echo recent insights from the field of labour sociology in Germany. Based on interviews and group discussions among industrial workers, Wolfgang Menz and Sarah Nies found that ‘normative expectations of political authority over the economy and the labour process have diminished immensely’. They differentiate this phenomenon from a crisis of legitimacy because that would presuppose the existence of unfulfilled claims and demands. Instead, it is the claims themselves that are eroding: certain normative expectations are not even articulated anymore because their fulfilment seems illusory. ‘The nexus between ‘labour’ and ‘politics’ is simply broken’ (Menz and Nies, 2019: 216). If such a nexus has ever existed in the world of retail and logistics, it is now certainly broken there as well. We do, however, read the naturalisation of economic processes and working conditions on the one hand, and the rejection of politics as such on the other, as two aspects of a crisis of political authority that becomes operative in contemporary cultures of rejection.

Crisis of authority II: Decline of social cohesion and crisis of moral order

In retail field sites, shifts in working routines from customer service to inventory management, but also employees’ personal experiences of insolvencies, wage stagnation and de-qualification contrast the sentiments of pride they describe when they started their jobs. ‘Ooohh, I was so proud that I could start in the department store because it was a fantastic place’, Eva reminisces about her first experiences at the store:

With customers and customers, who demanded sales and good service, and you were with the customers and could sell and show them this and that, the whole package [...]. I was very proud that I was allowed to work there and got the position, and in the stockings department, which used to be big, really big, with a lot of brands. (Ger-int3-Ret1-f61).

Martin, a colleague of Eva, takes similar pride in his work. He has been working the register for more than 20 years and generally enjoys contact with customers. As a first responder, Martin takes care of health emergencies in the store. One incident at work is emblematic for wider developments he sees in society: ‘We had an incident where a person was lying on the ground and the ambulance was there, and people just stepped over the person’ (Ger-Int1-Ret1-m74). Disrespectfulness and indifference shake Martin to his core. Narrations of a loss of respect, care and attention on one hand, and a growing sense of hecticness, egocentrism and hostility on the other, are widespread amongst his colleagues, and they tell a well-worn story of the decline of social cohesion by way of a brutalisation of society and people in general. Society is breaking apart and ‘humanity – I don’t know – is totally different today’ (Ger-Int4-Ret1-f65), an employee tells me. ‘You just look at the people and when they open their mouth, I know immediately, “No, you are not it” [laughs]. “You are just totally wrong”’ (Ger-int4-Ret1-f65). Customers’ attitudes

and behaviours figure prominently in respondents' narrations, and the shop floor serves as a prism for society in general. 'It totally changed – [quietly] in the past, the people were completely different, they were completely different in the past' (Ger-Int6-Ret1-F56), a saleswoman tells me in a hushed voice, pointing to the chaotic, hectic, aggressive and 'non-German' nature of people frequenting the store that day.

In these narrations of social decline, employees link a perceived brutalisation of society, insulted professional pride and crises in the workplace with a diverse array of objects of rejection. The figures inhabiting the hostile 'outside' range from egocentric customers to criminal migrants, from predatory refugees to the coddled unemployed, from lying media to corrupt politicians. Employees' articulations of rejection appear to serve, in part, as responses to a crisis of what Benjamin H. Snyder terms 'moral order': 'the shape and direction [workplaces] give to a worker's sense of selfhood' (Snyder, 2016: 18). Personal customer service, which employees connect with an air of professional authority, gives way to other, less qualified tasks, as well as to insolvencies, wage stagnation or dependency on state subsidy. It is in the context – not as a result – of this crisis of the employees' moral order that reactionary narratives of growing hostility and social decline take hold and enlist 'migrants', but also 'the youth' and 'social parasites', as figures of rejection that threaten social cohesion.

Conclusion

Employees both in retail and logistics field sites experience socio-economic transformation. They are confronted with labour intensification and stress as their working conditions adapt to new patterns of production and consumption. A wider process of logistification and digitalisation of production and consumption regimes forms the conditions in which our respondents rearticulate concepts of justice and fairness as tools for 'kicking down' and delimiting the 'unproductive' and 'undeserving'. They also feed into desires for retreating into the private sphere and fortifying oneself against an overwhelming and suspicious public. These practices are undergirded by a shielded subjectivity bent on erecting and fortifying boundaries to secure what is considered one's own.

We propose to understand this dynamic as indicative of cultures of rejection in the sense discussed above. This perspective connects with earlier descriptions of similar socio-cultural phenomena, such as those drawing on the concept of anomie (Dörre, 1997; Elchardus and Spruyt, 2016; Oliver and Rahn, 2016), or the 'hungering down' and (self-)constriction of social practices described by Robert Putnam (2007). However, it has considerable advantages over the existing and competing analytical frameworks associated with these descriptions. Notably, anomie, in the Durkheimian sense, is a phenomenon connected (or, in stronger formulations of the theory, leading) to socially deviant behaviour such as crime or, as in Durkheim's classical study, suicide (Durkheim, 2002[1897]; Marks, 1974). To describe what we encountered in the workplaces of the logistics and retail industry as deviant behaviour would be more than a stretch, as cultures of rejection in fact seem to combine competitive individualism with a desire and demand for social

conformism. Putnam's vivid picture of people 'hunkering down' and pulling their necks in like a turtle (Putnam, 2007: 149; cf. Sturgis et al., 2011), on the other hand, seems relevant to our observations. However, we prefer to draw a connection to Wendy Brown's *homo munitis* (Brown, 2010) than to Putnam's observation, which is based on the claim that *ethnic diversity* leads, at least in the short term, to lower levels of confidence in authorities, engagement in civil society, and general trust. In our cases, no such link could be detected. On the contrary, in workplaces that could be described as highly diverse, many of our interviewees described the day-to-day dealings with their colleagues as unproblematic and largely amicable. A 55-year-old warehouseman we met at the cargo hub outside of Vienna, one a few Austrian natives working there, told us smilingly and without any hint of cultural resentment how, a few years ago, they started to add an extra grill at the annual barbecue event so their Muslim co-workers could have halal meat. It is quite clear that the 'hunkering down' we found is not connected to the experience of ethnic diversity at the workplace. Rather, our analysis suggests that the conditions under which the practices and attitudes described become an acceptable and desirable response are marked by a crisis of political authority over the sphere of the economic and a crisis of a moral order that is unable to ameliorate the loss of professional authority and status.

We believe that, by focusing on the level of the conjuncture, or by 'study[ing] and understand[ing] the contradictory and complex realities that shape people's ordinary everyday lives' (Grossberg, 2015: 6), we are able to reformulate essential questions for understanding the ongoing rise of authoritarian populism while opening up potentially promising avenues for future research. In a more general sense, additional research is necessary to determine the connections between cultures of rejection as 'populism-as-context' for the strategies of 'populism-as-project' (Revelli, 2019: 11). Here, one might ask: How do individual and collective agents, i.e. right-wing populist political entrepreneurs and parties, articulate cultures of rejection directed at 'unproductive others', 'public matters', the 'naturalisation of the economy' and a perceived 'crisis of the moral order'? In conclusion, this leads us to three fields for further research in the study of cultures of rejection. First, more inquiry is needed into the naturalisation of economic conditions and the 'dislocation of the nexus between politics and economy' (Menz and Nies, 2019: 216). The experience of 'powerless' politics in the fields of labour and the economy impedes workers' perceptions of self-efficacy in everyday life and makes them susceptible to political interpellations that promise a re-sovereignisation of the state in other fields such as migration – fields that tend to represent their experiences 'within a logic of discourse which pulls them systematically into line with policies and class strategies of the Right' (Hall, 1979: 20). Second, this leads to the question of how political mechanisms that are, in theory, aimed at ameliorating market dynamics have lost their authority. What we have seen is that the unfettered extension of a 'specific formulation of economic values, practices and metrics to every dimension of human life' (Brown, 2010: 30) informs cultures of rejection based on deservedness, productivity and merit. The fortification of the private sphere and a

withdrawal from social connection among workers gesture towards possibilities for communality beyond ‘hunkering and huddling’. This challenge has been posed by the dismantling of what Brigitte Bargetz et al. (2019: 12) term ‘institutionalised solidarity’. Institutionalised solidarity includes the national welfare state, but extends to other forms of security against personal risk and market-dependency and, crucially, to spaces of contested universalism and a new sense of communality (Hark et al., 2015). Third and finally, digital infrastructures and communication technologies mediate the different dimensions of crisis and shape how rejection is articulated and contested. Alexander Brown highlights that the affordances of digital media encourage ‘forms of hate speech that are spontaneous in the sense of being instant responses, gut reactions, unconsidered judgments, off-the-cuff remarks, unfiltered commentary, and first thoughts’ (Brown, 2017: 303). Beyond these expressions, the referentiality, communality and algorithmicity (cf. Stalder, 2017) that characterise digital architectures shape and delimit how transformations and crises are experienced and made sense of, and how ‘affective publics’ may form around these interpretations (Papacharissi, 2015). Echo chambers or filter bubbles are not only conducive to rejective attitudes and affects, but can themselves serve as responses to crises of institutionalised solidarity and desires for stability (cf. Chun, 2016; Lovink, 2019). These trajectories point towards the fact that the acceptability of rejection is linked to a ‘multiple crisis’ (Houtard, 2010) that reaches beyond conditions of production and ranges from a crisis of political authority to one of the welfare state, affecting everything from patterns of social reproduction to the public sphere. Outlining the dimensions of this multiple crisis and analysing their various articulations in different local contexts is crucial if we want to understand the growing acceptability of authoritarian populism across Europe.

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Notes

1. The material as well as the methods presented here are part of an ongoing international research project that includes online and socio-spatial ethnographic fieldwork in Austria, Croatia, Germany, Serbia and Sweden. See www.culturesofrejection.net for more information.

2. All interviews have been anonymised and translated by the researchers. The codes refer to the respective (AT for Austria, GER for Germany) the industry (Logistics or Retail), gender (m/f) and year of birth of the interviewee.

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