

Beyond the Firewall. On infiltrating the far right and fascist masculinities

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The text is a revised transcription of a lecture and the subsequent audience discussion.

It was 15 years ago that I have started with my strange occupation. I infiltrate groups and movements, one should really steer clear of: I spent a considerable amount of time amongst Neo-Nazis and anti-democrats, anti-Semites and Islamists, lived in cults, visited militias and a wide range of fringe groups. But above all, I immersed myself within the far right – again and again. Just September 2024, just one month before the original lecture, I spent mostly amongst fascists and quite a few murderers. So, sorry if I may seem a bit tired and let's address the obvious question: Why would I, why would anyone pursue this line of work? What is the gain in knowledge, what's the journalistic benefit and what on earth is a sensible motivation to justify the occupational hazards? Here is the best answer I can offer: Fear.

We live in times full of great reasons to be frightened. We can be scared of the rise of the far right and authoritarians, frightened by the radicalization of western societies, terrified by the constant attacks on pluralistic and democratic values. But the scariest threats are those we do not understand, the ones that go thump in the dark. And I am a pretty anxious guy, I'm easily scared and terminally worried, so my research might be counter-intuitive, but it is an attempt to combat fear: I try to look behind the threatening facades of the extremists, try to tear down their intimidating display of grandeur and violence, I want to understand fanatics and their convictions. That doesn't make these people, their movements or their ideologies any less dangerous, but it makes them comprehensible. It makes them tangible and above all: human. And if we want to stop them, we need this comprehension.

Unfortunately, such a perspective on fanaticism is largely missing in public discourse, not even among those who oppose the authoritarian and neofascist backlash. When we talk about the far right and fascists, we tend to exoticize them. We

make the far right *the other*, creating an ideological and moral distance between *us* and *them*. As a rhetorical gambit, this allows us to portray *them* as strange or downright silly madmen and sadistic fanatics, to judge, ridicule and laugh about them and simply dismiss their ideologies – dismiss fascism as incomprehensible gibberish. It is a false, but alluring narrative: ‘These far-right extremists and fanatics must be sub-proletarian idiots, uneducated or lunatics from the fringes of society. Or, if they are not intellectually inferior to us, their inferiority must be a moral one: Their anti-democratic and hateful perspective must be a moral failure. These people must simply be evil.’ This false narrative is a more pleasant one than the sobering fact that the extremist’s hatred is always mirrored in the very heart of society and often times fueled by it. Fascist ideas are not raging at the edges of society, but just as well at its cushy center. It is a false dualism that diminishes the threatening nature of the far right, and it implies a moral self-aggrandizement: If the root of fanaticism are moral, intellectual and overall individual failings of *the other*, then *we*, as their counterpart, must be educated, clever and morally upstanding citizens. Hillary Clinton illustrated this latter aspect infamously during her failed election campaign 2016, when she gleefully stated that you could put half of all Trump supporters into “the basket of deplorables” (cit. in Reilly, 2016). This statement was met by cheers and laughter from her audience.

This way of arguing is all too familiar in Germany: In public and political discourse, time and time again, fascism is depoliticized and downplayed as a moral and psychological anomaly. This belief was extremely helpful for establishing a nominally ‘denazified’ post-war Germany. By turning the Nazis into the others, the rest of society could be exonerated, and all ideological convictions of the past did not have to be analyzed, understood or refuted. The past could be put in the past, Nazism was declared something diffusely dangerous and hateful with which we neither have, nor had any contact. After Germany’s reunification, the differentiation between *us* and *them*, this mostly fictitious red line, became elemental for the German self-portrayal, and somewhat recently it became a semi-official name: The Firewall, “*die Brandmauer*” (Wilke, 2023). The Brandmauer as a political slogan and a sort of lip service to democratic values, was popularized during the persistent rise of Germany’s far-right party ‘Alternative für Deutschland’ (AfD). In 2024, when millions of Germans took to the streets, protesting these worrisome developments, “We are the Brandmauer!” became their central rallying cry (van der Kraats, 2025). The message was clear: Even if there are differences in our politics, we stand united against the antidemocrats. It is a nice sentiment, but if one stops and thinks about this expression, its metaphorical idiocy becomes glaring: ‘Over there the ideological firestorm is raging, but here, behind our sturdy firewall, we’re safe and sound – no fire, no heat, no smoke. Only well-tempered convictions.’ This slogan contains a negation of any existence of one’s own bigotry, implying the German establishment and mainstream to be immune to any hateful, fascist or anti-democratic ideas. (In

this context, it must be borne in mind that the resurgence of the German far right in the early 2010s was largely fueled by the racist tirades of politician Tilo Sarrazin, a functionary of the social-democratic SPD.) The already problematic metaphor is made even worse by its geographical insinuation, referring to the old notion of an 'enlightened' West Germany on one side versus the 'backward countries' of the former GDR on the other.

The issues we will discuss today are not the problem of some separated far right, of a somehow closed-off circle of Nazi-ideologues. We are talking about a rapidly spreading ideology and omnipresent ideologemes. You find them throughout society. The rise of the far right does not only refer to a few far-right parties or fascist organizations. Yes, these movements reach for power with increasing success, are becoming more and more shamelessly blunt and give rise to violence, but significant parts of their ideas are either absorbed by the social mainstream or they are rooted there. In any case, these ideas are getting closer and closer to us; and the more often they are repeated, the more ordinary they sound. Of course, this is part of a well-tried far-right strategy: the widening of the Overton window.

We drink it up. All of us. And I literally mean: us. You and me.

That is the reason why I am drawn into the ideological abyss time and time again. Understanding extremists and the fringes of society means: understanding our society as a whole, understanding ourselves. I want to grasp what makes hate desirable; what are its political and individual promises? While I spend time with people who subscribe to the most vile convictions imaginable, the people themselves are as ordinary as anyone else, stemming from all walks of life. And while their dangerous ideas are capturing ever more minds, endangering and destroying ever more lives, many of *us* do not notice it. And just as many do not want to notice. Why should we? We're on the right side of the Brandmauer. We're the good guys.

It was in 2009 that I went undercover for the first time. Fittingly, I was researching for a play on the continuity of Nazism and Nazi ideology in German families, when I stumbled across a network of far-right think tanks and institutes, publishing houses and student fraternities. This network was the so-called New Right, the *Nouvelle Droite*, but this term and the existence of this network were unknown to me, as they were unknown to most people back then (Weiss, 2017). Driven by morbid curiosity and full of naiveté I picked up my phone, I called a far-right fraternity house in Munich. I could not imagine that you could simply walk in there. But I am a man, and I am white – and that's enough.¹ A few days later, I spent my first night amongst self-proclaimed fascists in their pompous mansion. My undercover alias: Tobias Günzburg. I couldn't think of anything better on the spot.

1 Due to the reactionary discourse at issue, I will only refer to a plainly binary, cisgender conception of 'men' and 'women.'

For all of you who don't have a picture of the time-honored German fraternity tradition in mind – It is a spectacle! Imagine university students in 19th century costumes, gold studded uniforms and feathered hats, nostalgic rites with hyper-nationalistic slogans and terribly heavy beer consumption. Several of these German frat boys proudly wear scars on their faces, the result of traditional fencing. And just as many of them belong to the far right. I knew that. Kind of. Of course, these bigoted and antiquated frat-boys were resented in my social circles – but they were the *others*. Silly fascists in silly mansions. But I didn't know what that actually meant.

I had entered a world of hate and alcohol, neither of which I was accustomed to in such raw quantities. And most importantly, I had never experienced this quality of hate before: ice-cold, rationalized, and studied, recited by young neo-Nazis who were working on their university degree. The ritualized excesses, I learned, all the highly disciplined binge-drinking, the military regimentation and hierarchization, all that was supposed to be a conditioning, a necessary return to a proper, Teutonic masculinity. I sat there, overwhelmed, and around me a seemingly endless stream of breathless elaborations gushed at me to explain the necessity of these measures: I learned about sinister plots against the German people and the “white race,” listened to stories about “cultural Marxists” that wanted to eradicate the ideas of nation states and traditional families via political correctness and homosexuality whilst the vengeful “Jewry” plotted the “great replacement,” overrunning the Western population with “alpha males” from the global south, destroying Christian values, and so on and so forth (Ginsburg, 2021a).

I am sure, you all heard these buzzwords and conspiracy theories before and far too often at that. Fragments and variations of these dark tales flood the Internet, can be found in best-selling books and major newspapers, can be heard in the speeches of politicians, from the mouths of more and more heads of state. But back then, in 2009, to me it sounded like sheer insanity. My impression was not entirely wrong. Much of what was said was exactly that: sheer madness, mixed with clever disinformation and age-old myths. But in itself, this narrative was congruent, its axioms easily understandable, its implicated call to violent action blatantly clear. And at its center stood a focus on masculinity: the threat to masculinity posed by modernity and ‘the foreign,’ the irrepressible urge to become ever more masculine, the *Männerbund* – the men's union, a lifelong band of brothers – as the nucleus of nationalist-reactionary resistance. An ominous realization, because these ideas are socially widely compatible. Yet, in public discourse on fascist movements, we tend to focus on the oddities, on the grotesque articulations of hatred and the shrill conspiracy theories. It is the false hope that pointing out the fanatic's *weirdness* would dismantle their ideology as a whole. But given time, pretty much anything can become normalized (or, in other circles, was never perceived as odd, to begin with). To stop the reach of these worldviews, we need to understand them and dismantle them as a whole, it is

not enough to point at the surface and laugh. I know that, and still, I fail from time to time.

A few years back, I spent quite some reading and evaluating a weird, esoteric krypto-fascist and the online space surrounding him: Mencius Moldbug was the quirky online pseudonym of an equally quirky character, a self-proclaimed neo-monarchist and thought leader of the so-called neoreactionary movement or NRx for short. Moldbug's central plea was to dismantle our decadent democracies and establish authoritarian micro-nations instead which should be run like companies – de facto dictatorships, ruled by wise CEOs and modern monarchs. His writings were not only filled with racisms and post-ironic fascistic slogans, they were meandering, intellectually convoluted and full of mistakes. In short: They were weird and wacky. A nerdy read for people who must deal professionally with esoteric extremism or spend too much time online. No need to tell the wider world about this fanatic and his few devotees ... Well, here we are. Today we know wacky antidemocrat Moldbug by his real name: Curtis Yarvin. US-Vice-President JD Vance speaks openly about the intellectual influence Yarvin's work has on him (Wilson, 2024), far-right billionaire Peter Thiel supports Yarvin and enjoys a close personal relationship to him (Pogue, 2022), and the *New York Times* just published a lengthy interview with him, including a very handsome photograph (Marchese, 2025). The 'lunatic fringe' runs across the whole of society and straight through the White House. So no, intellectual crudeness and superficial weirdness are not a criterion for the failure of ideological narratives. As a German, I really should have known that.

But let us return to the nexus of far-right extremism and hypermasculinity. I believe it is due to our obsession with the *weird* aspects of fanaticism that this topic receives so little attention. Yet this aspect, the mania for masculinity with its downright militant anti-feminism and anti-genderism is a pivotal one. In almost every manifesto, every video and every statement that neo-Nazi terrorists and far-right gunmen have belched out into the world, this idea can be found: The men of the West have become soft and emasculated, feminism has poisoned women and destroyed birth rates, to save our nations we need to return to 'true masculinity' and 'traditional family values.' Of course, this is not original. Fascism rarely is. As we will discuss later, very similar sentiments inspired Nazi ideology and today, they are once again part of the stock repertoire of rhetoric used by authoritarian and populist politicians: These sentiments were formative for the emergence of the Alt-Right and other modern far-right movements, and they stand at the very center of the 'anti-woke' backlash worldwide. So why is this ideological nexus hardly ever discussed, not even in Germany where far-right extremism plays such an important role in public discourse? I suspect it is due to the lack of spectacle. Because this topic is not considered weird enough, hatred of women and queer people is not exotic. Because these sentences do not necessarily have to come from a fascist. They are already familiar to

us; how could they be dangerous? How could something be fascist if I myself believe in it?

While fascist ideologies and aesthetics, historical as well as modern permutations, have this obsession with masculinity, the far right as a whole builds on the ideas of the patriarchy. It is one of very few foundational aspects uniting all the different milieus, scenes and schools of far-right extremism. Based on its inherent desire for strength and contempt for any perceived weakness, it is logical and inevitable for any far-right ideology to be patriarchal and obsess over masculinity, gender and manliness. But furthermore, the topic of masculinity is of strategic importance for the far right because it holds such a low threshold: Living in a patriarchal society it is immensely easy to reach out to *normal folks* via these topics. The far right desperately needs to radicalize young men, being dependent on new blood and manpower, its methods of outreach and radicalization are carefully considered and therefore honesty is not an option: In a post-1945 world, the battle cry to create an ethnostate or defeat the 'world Jewry' is fortunately still a deterrent for the vast majority of people. But the question of masculinity offers a simple first step: 'Shouldn't we be real men again? Real men! Manly men! Remember when men were men?' And people seem eager to remember, they want to remember: 'Oh, yes, I remember, back in the 1980s or the 1960s or the 1930s or during the crusades.' It is a nostalgia for a time filled with pure, empowering masculinity. Nostalgia for a time that never was. It is frightening how often I have witnessed particularly young men driven to radical extremes by this fictitious nostalgia, these insatiable longings.

Traditional masculinity is a diffuse construct, its concrete symbols, aesthetics and habitus are interchangeable; as much as these specifics are talked about, they do not really matter. What does matter is the structural narrative underneath, a narrative of constant crisis: You are not enough man, your manhood is under attack, masculinity itself is under attack, you have to become *more* man, you have to fulfill your destiny as a man. German sociologist Klaus Theweleit elaborates on this in his 1978 book "Männerfantasien," his seminal study on fascist constructions of masculinity. He describes traditional masculinities as a dynamic building on fear, feeling of insufficiency and loss of power and privilege. The utopia of the fascist man, Theweleit explains, is the mastery and transformation of the body: the disorganized teeming of flesh, fat, skin and bone is to be turned in drill into a controllable instrument for the cause, a machine, functional and functioning. You can find this obsession with the functionality of the body not only with Nazism, but with all kinds of fanaticisms. The body has to attempt to fulfill its gendered and ever-growing duty: Women cannot ever have enough children, men cannot do enough for the grand idea, cannot be tough enough, disciplined enough, drunk enough, sober enough, brutal enough, educated enough, and so on. Whatever the details of your ideological construct may be: your body has to become a pure instrument to fulfill its goals. It is the unfulfillable longing to be 'more of a man,' and it has given rise to an entire industry of men's

coaches, red-pill-activists and pick-up artists, and it is no wonder that reactionary and even far-right ideas prevail in this scene.

As a wanderer between the different milieus of the far right, it is astonishing how much the gender performances change, how vastly different the roles are that I have to slip into, ranging from the gruff thug or nerdy edgelord to the flamboyant intellectual, from strict military discipline to black-out drunken excess. In classic neo-Nazi structures, to little surprise, an aggressive blue-collar machismo prevails, but at the same time the mythical idea of the Valkyrie is kept alive: Women are allowed to fight for the German *Volk* and partake in the battle for survival (Ginsburg, 2021b). They are to be respected and, in some cases, even take on central roles in these structures. The so-called New Right on the other hand, which tries so very hard to appear modern by putting pretty young women with braided plaits in their front row, is driven by an astonishing contempt for women. While the men present themselves as Germanic gentlemen and intellectual sophisticates, women in these structures are generally considered to be housekeepers, mothers or mothers-to-be – and if they are involved in the activist field, then they are widely understood as aesthetic ornaments and expected to keep their damn mouths shut. But as different as the far-right conceptions of gender may be, masculinity is unanimously defined by a fragility, perpetually threatened by effeminization. Accordingly, feminism and queerness, the culprits behind society's emasculation, are the enemy that needs to be stopped or wiped out in its entirety (the ominous 'cultural Marxists,' i.e. the Jews, are only found as the big bads when you go a little further down the rabbit hole). And since diffuse fears of sexual minorities and resentment against feminists are firmly anchored in society as a whole, and since trite jokes about trans people and blue haired feminists are very much mainstream, the far right can reach a wide audience with its narrative. If only we could get rid of the influence of femininity, so the story goes, then we could return to actual masculine strength. It is unsurprising that this far-right narrative garners such a success throughout society, after all this specific kind of disdain for women has a long tradition in Germany.

In 1902, German ethnologist Heinrich Schurz coined the term *Männerbund*. Schurz came to the conclusion that all social progress was due to the unions of exclusive groups of men. Women, Schurz argued, were only capable of taking care of procreation and the family unit, so men always had to break away from them and join forces. Only in this way could the capable types have created civilizations and given birth to cultures. The male alliance was therefore the nucleus of the modern state, Schurz wrote. Then he died of appendicitis. But his profoundly wrong theses lived on and soon the idea of the *Männerbund* developed into a veritable theory of the state. Above all, it was the writer Hans Blüher who started to develop his theory in 1912. Since a strong nation-state can only come from strong men, Blüher explained, it needs strong leaders. Such a "charismatic male hero" would be able to wrest German boys from the clutches of women, from the "soft and sultry" relationships

with their mothers and family associations, and to awaken in them a man-male eroticism. This eroticism would hold the male alliance together in the first place, could reinforce the masculine virtues of the “Germanic race,” and thus end the “feminist age” (Blüher 1912, translation by the author). The masculine nation-state was within reach.

Today Blüher’s theses may sound bizarre, but at the time they inspired a whole lot of men, from Thomas Mann to Franz Kafka, from Kaiser Wilhelm II. to Heinrich Himmler. Particularly for the reactionary anti-democrats of the Weimar period (i.e., the proto-fascists whose work today’s New Right cites as its ideological basis), Blüher’s basic idea, the political ideal of the *Männerbund*, became a central idea (Bruns, 2008).

Accordingly, it significantly influenced the Nazi’s ideology and the structures of the *Männerbund* live on unbroken in the current far right: The curious love of all things masculine, the worship and fetishizing of muscles and the male body, the contempt for everything feminine and feminized, the sultry love between comrades. With the political backlash, these seemingly strange obsessions are gradually finding their way back into the mainstream.

One could cite all sorts of examples: AfD-politicians such as flagship fanatic Maximilian Krah praises the rediscovered manliness of the German right on TikTok while sucking on Freudian cigars (Schiffer, 2024), and all kinds of far-right figures in the USA insist on awkwardly calling their beloved president “daddy” (most recently, Hollywood’s favorite anti-Semite Mel Gibson treated us to this sentence: “Daddy arrived and he’s taking his belt off” (Skinner, 2025)) – but the focus on masculinity with homoerotic undertones is particularly noteworthy when it comes to describing the ‘enemy.’ In German context that is when referring to Muslim men.

Historically, Europe’s Neo-Fascists, who directed their hatred mostly against ‘foreigners,’ did not consider Islam as a main antagonist, on the contrary, many even held a certain degree of respect. It was only after the attack of 9/11 that Europe’s fascists adapted to the Islamophobia of the political mainstream. Of course, the anti-Muslim panic could be seamlessly combined with their racism and profound xenophobia. But still, in the racist and ethnoexist hatred of Islam, as represented by the AfD, the neo-Nazi’s admiration for the imaginary Muslim man and the fetishization of his masculinity still seeps through: Muslim men are dehumanized, portrayed as uncivilized savages and hypersexual animals – sweaty, bearded hordes of rapists. In this depiction lies a bit of lust. The tale of the hyper-masculine beasts offers not only great targets, it also creates objects of desire, virile role models. Desire, envy and contempt go hand in hand. ‘If the foreigners are alphas, then we, the white men, must become even more alpha!’ I heard this talking point in slight variations from alt-right activists in the US (switching Muslims for Latinos, of course) and clerical fascists in Poland, it is pushed onto young men throughout the

menosphere, and it was a central tenet of a crew of Nazi rappers, I accompanied quite a while, observing their disconcertingly successful radicalization of lost boys.

It is an utmost perfidious outreach program: It is based on teaching men that they are not only being betrayed and abandoned by society but that they themselves are insufficient on top. It is a narrative playing into male insecurities, driven to fight the seemingly hostile world around them. Virtually everything becomes a threat: Once feminism is perceived as a plot to deprive men and Western nations of their strength, every other progressive movement and the whole political system supporting these movements will soon be villainized as well. And lurking above it all is the danger of the migrant-Muslim-Latino-Black man, this mixture of sub-human and superman, whose virile and weirdly sexy masculinity we must surpass. In short: The far right's conception of masculinity is not only a fragile one, it is downright paranoid.

This narrative is effective because of its low-threshold, and it appeals directly to unstable males and to pretty much every 14-year-old boy. After all, what 14-year-old boy, what pubescent person is not unstable and fragile? And now the demagogues tell you some scary stories of why your fears are justified, and if you listen for too long, if you start to really internalize it all, then there is only one path left: radicalization. Maybe into the hate-filled power fantasies of the fascists, maybe into the endless self-hatred of the incels, maybe you spend all your money for some red-pilled men's coach ... The options are not great. But let me be clear: As dangerous as many of my acquaintances in these milieus and subcultures are, I don't despise them. These are people who get caught up in grim webs of ideas, who believe in horrendous things and, if pushed, may commit horrendous deeds – but up close, these are mostly pitiful stories. However, when you spent time with demagogues and predators who spread these ideas, who know exactly what they are doing, who openly brag about their financial or political profit – then you can't help but feel disgust and utter contempt.

So, why are we so ineffective in countering these demagogues and predators? Especially now, that politicians are calling with grandiose rhetoric for the protection of democracy: why is this protection so ineffective, why the institutional battle against the far right so helpless?

It is not as if there is a lack of analysis from the academic world, civic education programs or outreach from the political left. However, the tendency of leftists and academics is to counter the immensely simple, under-complex and low-threshold offers of the far right with overly complex counternarratives. Tragically, this lies in the nature of things: If I explain that masculinity is a construct, arbitrarily reinterpretable and the only distinct trait of 'traditional masculinity' is the perpetuating of its own crisis which is why it fits seamlessly into the fascist world view – then I might be correct, but it's a bit wordy. It will take some time to explain, I have to presuppose knowledge and to make matters worse: I will most likely use buzzwords the right,

not only the far right, has long discredited as ‘woke.’ The far-right populist narrative requires considerably fewer words: ‘Men have to become real men again, don’t let those deranged feminists get you down, fight for your nation and family and join my Alpha mindset course – link in bio, use the promo code, like and subscribe.’ That’s it. That is pretty concise. So, this is the issue we as publicists, scholars and writers concerned with the far right have to face head-on: how to reach a broad population and at the same time convey a complex message.

Historically, academics have always got lost in critical discussions on fascisms and the far right. Ideological wars were waged by liberals, socialists and communists over a suitable theory of fascism, various schools of political thought competed against each other, offered clever and not-so-clever explanations. But among most people, there is no broad understanding, no hermeneutic or practicable definition of fascism. This lack of definitions and basic knowledge makes us vulnerable. Presumably this is especially true for Germany, where a self-congratulatory pride on its apparent ‘*Erinnerungskultur*’ and ‘*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*’ (its ‘culture of remembrance’ and ‘coming to terms with the past’) stands in stark contrast to the frightening failure to understand the mechanisms of the far right and Nazism.

So, there is an educational emergency and to tackle that is a herculean task at hand. Especially young people need the tools to recognize fascism, expose its myths and mechanisms and we need concepts to convey the knowledge and expertise. How this is still to be achieved is a gigantic question. But if we want to stand a chance, we first have to rid society of its baseless optimism and smug ignorance: We have to tear down the rhetorical ‘*Brandmauer*’ and look beneath the surface. Even if it hurts.

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