

# **The Right-Wing Shift in East Germany: A Phenomenological and Design- theoretical Analysis**

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The rise of right-wing populist movements and parties in East Germany cannot be viewed in isolation; it is symptomatic of a deeper crisis within the European project and the liberal democratic order. What we are witnessing is a dual process: the resurgence of repressed nationalist and authoritarian tendencies, and the collapse of the symbolic order that structured post-communist Europe. To understand the rightward shift in East Germany, we must analyze these phenomena within a broader historical and ideological framework.

## **Phenomenology of Alienation**

From a phenomenological perspective, we must first focus on the experience of alienation that has permeated the East German population since reunification. The experience of the Wende (the turning point) in 1989/90 was not merely an economic and political rupture but, fundamentally, an existential one. The upheaval that many East Germans experienced after the collapse of the GDR led to a profound identity crisis. This experience of alienation can be described phenomenologically as a "fracture of the lifeworld." The familiar social structures and networks of meaning disintegrated and were replaced by the abstract logic of Western capitalism.

Reunification was therefore less a unification of two equal states and more the subjugation of the East to the neoliberal market mechanisms of the West. East German citizens became objects of a design that did not reflect their own needs and experiences. They found themselves in a system imposed upon them, in which their previous ways of life and identities were dismissed as obsolete and backward. This experience can be described as a form of "phenomenological violence," where the lifeworld of an entire population was dissolved and replaced by a new, foreign system.

## **The Symbolic and the Real**

The rightward shift in East Germany can also be understood through the lens of design theory. Here, the focus is on how political and social structures are "designed" or constructed, and how this design impacts the subjects living within these structures. Drawing on Jacques Lacan, this can be analyzed through the relationship between the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real (cf. Lacan 1977; Žižek 1991). The Symbolic is the order of language and social norms, the Imaginary concerns how subjects represent themselves and their world, and the Real is that which escapes the symbolic order and cannot be fully integrated into the Imaginary.

After reunification, East Germany was integrated into the symbolic system of Western capitalism. The new political and economic structures that shaped daily life in East Germany were essentially a "design" based on Western ideals and norms. However, this design was incompatible with the specific historical experiences and realities of many East Germans. Here we see the failure of the

symbolic system that Western German politics attempted to impose after reunification: it could not integrate the Real of the East German experience.

The rightward shift thus represents a return of the repressed – the Real that could not be incorporated into the symbolic system. Right-wing populist movements offer an imaginary identification that allows people to symbolically process their experience of alienation and "not belonging." The ideological narrative of "foreign infiltration" and "cultural conflict" provides a simplistic, binary explanation for the complex social and economic problems facing East Germany. At the same time, this narrative is reinforced by an aesthetic design rooted in national pride, tradition, and "authentic" culture – elements that find little room in the neoliberal symbolic system.

### **Nostalgia and the Unease in Culture**

Another critical aspect is the role of nostalgia in East German identity. This "Ostalgie" can be understood as a reaction to the phenomenological experience of alienation. In returning to memories of the GDR, many East Germans seek an imaginary space where they can again experience themselves as subjects of a coherent symbolic system. The GDR is idealized in these memories as a time when life was still meaningful and ordered, before Western structures disrupted everything.

Žižek would likely draw on Freud's concept of "The Unease in Culture" (1930) here (cf. Žižek 2022; Ramm & Žižek 2016). The unease that many East Germans feel is an expression of the fundamental contradiction between the individual's need for meaning and coherence and the anonymous, alienating logic of global capitalism. The success of right-wing populist movements is therefore not just a political phenomenon but a symptom of a deeper cultural and existential crisis. These movements offer a "solution" to this unease by promoting a simple, dualistic worldview in which there are clear enemies and culprits.

### **The Failure of the Liberal Left and the Return of Repressive Design**

Some may describe this as a failure of the liberal left. The neoliberal left has failed to craft an alternative narrative that integrates the specific experiences and needs of the East German population. Instead, it has embraced a technocratic politics of "no alternatives," which negates any space for radical change. This politics is represented by a design that is aesthetically and symbolically reflected

in the coldness and sterility of modern bureaucracies – a design that offers no warmth, no community, and no meaning.

In this context, authoritarian and repressive designs that are tied to the legacy of the 20th century are making a comeback. The success of the right is also an aesthetic rebellion against the symbolic emptiness of neoliberal capitalism. Right-wing movements present themselves as the true guardians of tradition, order, and culture. They offer a return to a clear, authoritarian design that promises security and identity in an uncertain and fragmented world.

### **The Struggle Over the Symbolic Order**

The rightward shift in East Germany is thus not only a political challenge. It is about the struggle over the symbolic order and the question of how this order is designed and experienced by subjects. As long as left-wing politics fails to offer a convincing alternative that takes the specific experiences of East Germans seriously and designs a symbolic system that integrates their lifeworld, the rise of right-wing populism will continue.

What is needed is a radical break with the logic of neoliberal capitalism and the design of a new symbolic order that gives people a sense of belonging and meaning again. This new design must be not only politically but also aesthetically and culturally compelling – it must offer a design that resonates with people and provides a genuine alternative to the outdated narratives of the right. Only then can the rightward shift in East Germany be effectively countered.

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