

Steffen Krüger
**Barbarous
Hordes, Brutal
Elites: The
Traumatic
Structure of
Right-Wing
Populism**

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“Sexual assaults of female high school students by refugees; the case is hushed up”; “An older woman gets raped and dies of the consequences”; “A thirteen-year-old is attacked, robbed, and injured by four Syrian asylum seekers, the family receives death threats. The police keep the case, as well as ten other cases, secret”; “Parents and students in a school in Wurzbach are asked not to put liver sausage on students’ sandwiches out of respect for the Muslim students.”
– hoaxmap.org¹

Since February 2016, Karolin Schwarz, an ethnologist living in Leipzig, Germany, has been collecting debunked reports, stories, and rumors circulating online and off about refugees and immigrants to Germany and Austria. Each tells of a fake crime that these refugees have purportedly committed and about the scandalous ways in which the German authorities have responded, or failed to respond. Schwarz has registered over 450 such cases so far. With the help of an embedded Google map, her web page, hoaxmap.org, maps these fakes onto the cities, towns, and regions to which they refer. Clicking on one of the pins opens a text box with a short description of the story’s main drift as well as a link to a mainstream news article debunking it.

Schwartz’s page helps us understand an emerging form of ethnocentrism in contemporary Germany. Reading the rumors collected here as one cohesive “fantasyscape” helps us to understand how populism is lived and experienced by the people to which it appeals.

There are two basic, nonexclusive ways to use hoaxmap.org. One can focus on individual rumors and analyze their development in depth, or one can use the map’s breadth and swiftly open one text box after the next, gliding from node to node in a network of hearsay and fantasy. Each single case that is marked on the map can be scrutinized, unpacked, and traced from hoaxmap.org to local and regional news platforms and blog posts. This makes for a chilling and fascinating experience. Looking at photographs of a retirement home rumored to be permanently transformed into a refugee shelter, casting its current residents adrift, exposes one to the mundane material realities to which the rumors attach themselves, exacerbating their harshness.

Yet the map’s true potential unfolds when using its breadth. Upon loading the page, the Google map confronts the user with chaotic clusters of pins. The map is so covered with pins that its contours are partly drowned out. With



The website hoaxmap.org maps debunked reports, stories, and rumors circulating online and off about refugees and immigrants to Germany and Austria.

each pin standing in for a rumor that has proved unfounded, the map's primary gesture is to the immense quantity of those rumors and the densely knit fantasyscape they weave. As a fantasyscape, however, these rumors tell us less about the refugees and migrants than about the people who planted them. The need on the part of official sources to debunk the circulating stories goes to prove their "spreadability," i.e., their resonance with significant parts of the German population. Like myths and legends, their ability to travel and replicate, to become told and retold as personal truths, relies on their touching upon and reverberating with preexisting dispositions – wishes and desires – that become unfolded and articulated in this way.

As Freud wrote about the fantasies of "neurotics," hoaxmap.org "possess[es] *psychical* as contrasted with *material* reality, and we gradually learn to understand that *in the world of neuroses it is psychical reality which is the decisive kind.*"² The lesson suggested by the map and other attempts at public enlightenment is not the "neurosis" at work in the fantasies shooting up all around us so much as it is their "reality-effect" for the people creating and circulating them. As with all neurotics, it is often more productive to first account for what makes this vision "the decisive kind" for the people holding to it, rather than bluntly trying to correct it immediately.

To the map's right, there is a box with labels categorizing the various crimes that the rumors entail. In the fashion of a "word cloud," the size of the labels is indicative of the frequency with which the imagined crimes show up in the collected material.

"Criminal assault," "robbery/theft," "Payments/Benefits," "rape," "damage to property," "business closure," "cover up," "waste of public funds" ... As informative as these juridical labels are, their variety actually makes the readings seem more creative and specific than they really are. The forty-eight distinct categories water down the sameness and repetitiveness that emerges from a reading of the material at large. Not only do the same rumors show up in various different places, often with minor changes in detail, but the entirety of the mapped stories points toward a strikingly limited number of traits.

Toril Aalberg et al. have recently defined right-wing populism of the kind exemplified by hoaxmap.org as a "complete populism." This is because it combines an appeal to the people with a double rejection of both "the elites" and an outgroup.³ Hoaxmap.org allows us to see how this double rejection manifests itself in the structure of populist rumor along the lines of barbarism and brutality respectively. Time and

time again refugees are imagined as barbarous – uncultured, uncivilized; rude, rough, wild.⁴ The "elites," by contrast – i.e., the government, politicians, intellectuals, and first and foremost, Angela Merkel – are imagined as brutal, i.e., reckless, careless, and "coarsely cruel."⁵ In other words, while refugees are fantasized as uninhibitedly following their sexual and bodily instincts, brutality is located in the "elites" who knowingly and cynically abstain from protecting "the people" from the barbarous hordes. This is how populism is imagined and experienced in the reality constructed by the fantasies.

In the vast majority of cases, the imagined wildness and barbarousness of the refugees coincides with an equally imagined and invariable young male identity. Fittingly, their victims are nearly always ethnic German women. In general, the rumors are intensely sexualized: rape is the second-most imagined crime (seventy-one cases), after "robbery/theft" (eighty-four cases). Frequently, the victims are imagined to be either very old, or extremely young – children. The younger the children, the less important the gender becomes; although they rarely attack elderly men, the projected sexual appetite of the refugees apparently does not discriminate between small boys and girls.

Yet, the kind of sexualization attaching itself to the migrants appears most clearly in the many rumors that entail an unmitigated, uninhibited orality. Repeatedly, refugees are imagined to steal horses directly from the fields of their German owners and eat them; pets from children's zoos are slaughtered, barbecued, and devoured on the spot; dogs are eaten, swans on a city lake caught and consumed; supermarkets are driven into ruin through uncountable small acts of shoplifting. These fantasies bleed into more clearly and aggressively sexual ones in which refugees grab, fondle, and molest schoolgirls or female cleaning personnel in their shelters. A rumor originating in the Zwickau area has several "dark-skinned men" jumping out of some bushes by the roadside, in front of the car of a female driver who they then harass. That rapes are frequently imagined as being perpetrated by large groups of "men of color" who force themselves on one single German woman itself reveals an oral dimension: the high number of attackers triggers associations of *consuming* the victim, of *using her up*.⁶

"Oralization" continues even in imagined acts that have no obvious sexual dimension. When outright brutality is attributed to refugees, it is for utterly trivial reasons. A refugee sees a two-euro T-shirt in a shop and beats up the clerk in order to get it. The cheapness of the shirt is intended to signify refugees' proximity to primitivism, and their eagerness for antisocial

11. Oktober 2015 16:10 Uhr

LANDKREIS

Flüchtlinge: Der Mythos vom „Nutten-Bus“

Asylhelfer bekommen immer wieder viele Vorurteile zu hören. Was es damit auf sich hat. *Von Jens Carsten*

 Gefällt mir 24  Teilen    



Angeblich sollen Prostituierte busweise zu Asylbewerberunterkünften gekarrt werden. Nichts daran ist wahr.

Foto: dpa

Schlagworte

Kadeltshofen s | Landratsamt Neu-Ulm s
| Syrien s | Afrika s | iPhone s | Polizei s

Mehr zum Thema

KREIS NEU-ULM
Der Mythos vom "Nutten-Bus"

Ihr Wetter in Illertissen

12.06.17	13.06.17	14.06.17
		
12 C 24 C	13 C 23 C	15 C 25 C

Ihr 7 Tage Wetter >

Das Wetter aus Ihrer Region

Suchen

Nachrichten in Ihrer Region



An October 2015 article in *Augsburger Allgemeine* entitled "Refugees: The Myth of the 'Slut-Bus'." See <http://www.augsburger-allgemeine.de/illertissen/Fluechtlinge-Der-Mythos-vom-Nutten-Bus-id35747677.html>.

reversion. In another case, petty cash starts a brawl; in another it is a purse; in yet another it is the small change in the cash register of a local shop. Invariably, refugees are thus fantasized as spontaneously resorting to brutality in order to satisfy immediate, bodily urges and drives. This same body is then perceived as the refugees' only source of power. The reduction of refugees to mere existence or "bare life" when they arrive in their host countries is perfectly misrecognized: it is not seen as powerlessness, but rather as a dumb, "corporeal" power. Refugees are imagined to use their bodies in order to force their will on others. One recurring fantasy sees them suddenly entering the car of an unsuspecting German citizen and violently demanding to be driven to a shelter or a registration office.

If the obscene closeness of the *Fremdkörper*, the alien body, drives the above set of fantasies, in another, this same body loses its individuality so that the many are turned into one big organism. In these cases, refugees are imagined to cover the body of the country or the self like a plague, feasting their way through the land and leaving behind destruction and barrenness. The rumor of the supermarket that has to close due to a massive onslaught of stealing migrants shows up all across the map: from Freiburg to Donaueschingen, Meßstetten to Münsingen, from Roth to Erfurt, from Eisenberg to Dresden. The pettiness of the crimes, their uninhibited, hand-to-mouth nature, again appeals to the sexualized character of the acts; it describes people who are naturally compelled to steal, grab, and incorporate – dumb, unthinking, headless, and purely instinctual masses, one gigantic mouth that demands infinite feeding.

At times, the emphatic corporeality of the imagined migrants is extended into the magical and totemic. In these cases, refugees are envisioned as attacking Christmas trees in market squares and other public places, because they identify them as tokens of a tabooed Christianity. Other narratives again complement this associational logic with that of contagion: a physical therapist is rejected because she is a Christian; mattresses are not accepted because Christians have slept on them; cooking utensils are refused because they have been used to prepare pig meat. In these latter cases, the refugees, whose corporeality is otherwise imagined to be crudely oral and a sign of their primitiveness, are characterized as hysterically anal, i.e., scrupulously and squeamishly focused on a notion of purity that the overall direction of the rumors has flatly denied them. Thus, kitchens, bathrooms, toilets, beds, and all kinds of furniture are imagined to be ripped out of

flats, thrown out of windows, hacked into shreds or burned in the yard, out of a fetishistic wish for purity that can only appear as absurd in view of the dirt and mess that the foreigners allegedly make. The rumor that captures both ends of this logic goes as follows: "Afghan refugees cut open the seats of [regional] trains and relieve themselves into them, because Christians have sat on them."

All across the hoaxmap, the refugees' barbarity is characterized by a sexuality that careens between the extremely oral and anal, i.e., the totally uninhibited and the hysterically controlled. The result is that a perverse notion of innocence emerges: these fantasy-foreigners are a force of nature and, as such, they simply cannot be blamed in any conventional sense for their wrongdoings. They are beyond the reach of rationality. They cannot be reasoned with; they can only be stopped by other means. This putative irresponsibility of the refugees is crucial, because it allows for the entire responsibility for their imaginary crimes to be placed at the feet of the elites.

The first theme that emerges in how the authorities – the "elites" – are presented in the rumors is that of disappointment. Commonsense surely demands a heavy-handed response to the refugees' rumored behavior, but, inevitably, the reaction of the authorities is nowhere near sufficient. Instead, the authorities are depicted as willfully ignoring the refugees' barbarities, while treating ethnic Germans with the contempt that the refugees seemingly deserve. It is this scandalously unequal treatment that creates the image of an utterly cruel and brutal "elite." A significant number of stories envision crimes of all kinds to be hushed and covered up by the police and/or other state authorities; e.g., parents of harassed, even raped children are forcibly silenced and threatened with retributions – apparently in order to cover up the true nature of the immigrants who are let loose on the Germans. Other fantasies deal with situations in which the local authorities talk shop owners and supermarkets into secret deals so that the refugees can continue to steal from them without being prosecuted. Businesses are offered reimbursements so that the refugees can do as they like, without their crimes becoming public. In other examples, the authorities tacitly tolerate stealing and theft. The obvious ingratitude of the migrants towards their host country is another related theme; the state is imagined to respond to this naive ingratitude with even more financial support, gifts, and privileges. Whereas ethnic Germans are forcibly expropriated and thrown out of their homes to make room for foreigners, these foreigners, who are spoiled rotten, move into the Germans'

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homes and are given brand new furniture – and we’ve heard what they do with that.

The brutality of the authorities thus resides in standing by and letting the “barbarians” come over and defile native Germans; they are even imagined to invite this onslaught, to facilitate and extend it artificially, all while cruelly savoring the unfolding scenes of suffering, like a cinematic Roman emperor consuming the sight of gladiators devoured by animals. One of the most repeated rumors has regional authorities handing out “brothel vouchers” to immigrants, or hiring “sex workers” and bussing them to the refugee shelters, apparently in order to abate the uncontrollable sexual hunger of the incoming male hordes. In the logic of the fantasyscape, such an arrangement amounts to the prostitutes – German women – being used as animal feed, as pieces of meat thrown into a piranha tank.

In this constellation, only the elite are granted any sort of agency, and this is what defines their brutality. Whereas the refugees’ barbarism arrives without any self-awareness, as an instinctual, infantile force marked by its orality, there is control, purpose, and design in the authorities’ cruelty, even if this purpose remains vague and conspiratorial. In a way, then, this constellation puts ethnic Germans and immigrants on par; since neither has control over their situation, they are like antagonistic, underage siblings in a seriously dysfunctional home. With Angela Merkel as the German chancellor, this familial dimension comes clearly to the fore. Merkel is the mother of the nation – *Mutti*, as she is ironically called – who, according to the circulating rumors, prefers her newborn “bastard” offspring over her older, rightfully conceived children. The German people in this populist fantasyscape are thus identified as abused, neglected, or otherwise unfairly disinherited children.

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The Structure of Trauma in the Experience of Populism

The figure of the abused child recalls a classic formulation in trauma theory. In his 1969 “Trauma and Object Relationship,” Michael Balint argued that it is not merely the experience of something excessive – excessively cruel or close – which accounts for trauma. Rather, trauma is only completed when, in the subject’s subsequent attempts to have her experience acknowledged by a significant other, this other denies the reality of the experience. “What happens quite often,” Balint explains, “is a completely unexpected refusal. The adult behaves as if he does not know anything about the previous excitement or rejection; in fact, he acts as if nothing had happened.”⁷ Only then, after this refusal, is the experience sealed as a traumatic one – only then does it become locked away beyond the grasp of our conscious means of elaboration.

Reading Balint’s structural suggestions into the fantasmatic experience of populism captured by hoaxmap.org has the hoaxers effectively identifying as traumatized children, abused by their primitive “bastard stepbrothers,” unacknowledged and refused by their parents. This traumatization is reproduced over and over again in the fantasies. What’s in it for those who identify with such traumatization?

The answer I want to offer is a speculative one, based on a rather cursory observation. In a study I recently conducted on right-wing anti-asylum pages on Facebook, the comment that the refugees were “all traumatized” appeared repeatedly.⁸ Thus, on these Facebook pages, it is not the ethnic Germans that receive the label of

trauma, but the refugees themselves. “Those poor traumatized asylum seekers, they are harmless and would never touch German women”; “They are all traumatized, those apes”; etc.⁹ The intention of this cynical litany on the part of the pages and their followers is to decry any display of empathy with the refugees. Traumatization is set up *in advance* as the “elite’s” apology for the refugees’ excesses. *Don’t tell us fairy tales*, goes the rebuke addressed to the “elites” and mainstream media, *those foreigners are neither “poor” nor “traumatized.”* As the fantasies gathered on hoaxmap.org testify over and over, a quasi-natural, primitive state of savagery must be maintained as the root of the immigrants’ crimes, in order for the elites to bear responsibility for them. This is why all official talk of trauma on the part of the “elites” must be discredited as covering up the barbaric nature of refugees, and by extension, the brutal cruelty of the elites.

The idea, however, that barbarousness can be covered up, or at least apologized for, with a reference to trauma is key to understanding why the structure of trauma emerges in the rumors collected on hoaxmap.org. After all, if the authorities can excuse the refugees’ barbarity by calling them traumatized, this excuse might serve the ethnic Germans as well. In other words, by imagining themselves as traumatized and victimized, the “German people” also have access to the excessiveness, primitiveness, and barbarousness associated with refugees. If they now act savagely in turn, who can blame them? As minors with a history of serious parental abuse, they can neither be held responsible nor deemed guilty. But those who traumatized them, they had it coming. Crudely put, imagining themselves as traumatized makes it possible for ethnic Germans to turn the whole palette of sexualized barbarisms ascribed to the refugees against the latter – one murder, one rape, one assault at a time.

There is something uncanny arising from this reverie of traumatization. The sexual dimension in the crimes associated with the refugees really belongs to the fantasizing subjects. It is *their* hunger that will leave behind destruction and barrenness. Freud, in his text on Daniel Paul Schreber, suggests a sexualization and desublimation of the “social instincts” as his understanding of Schreber’s paranoia.¹⁰ The sexualization at the core of the psychic reality emerging from hoaxmap.org points toward another such desublimation of “the ties that bind.” The strong sexual element in the fantasies points to the leaking out into the social of a violent energy that makes people feel that others come too close to them and, in response, turn against each other. It is the “fuck” in “fucking it

all up” – the first, exciting impulse towards an utterly nihilistic act, and the innuendo for something sinisterly orgasmic. Since trauma is not consciously remembered but immediately and unconsciously acted out, it legitimates the longed-for eruption of violence by reason of insanity.

The temptation is to end on such a forcefully Schopenhauerian note. But that would be to give in to the seductive elements in the rumors and even reproduce them in my own writing. What, then, could be an adequate response to the self-traumatizing logic of populism?

This logic is captured in a recent court case in Germany in which two men in their mid-twenties confessed to having thrown Molotov cocktails at a house where refugee families were living.¹¹ During the trial, the culprits begged forgiveness and said that, in hindsight, they related to their deed as to a bad dream and were relieved that nobody got hurt. The judge, however, was not impressed; he gave them prison sentences of several years – not so much *despite*, but exactly *because* of their show of regret and remorse, it seems. After all, what these feelings of regret imply is that the men have a fantastical belief in their non-culpability, as though the two understood their actions as entirely driven by their circumstances. In the eyes of the judge and in the binding reality of the judiciary, however, these two men did not pass as traumatized kids, but as fully accountable and liable grown-ups. And they were convicted as such.

In this respect, then, the most adequate response I can give to the circulating fantasies, as well as to those harboring them, is the following: *We see you, we recognize you, and acknowledge you, as we hope you see and acknowledge us and others. Our actions have consequences. Therefore, whatever it is you imagine that others have done to you, do not do it to them, do not do it to us, and inevitably, do not do it to yourselves.*

x

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1

If not otherwise indicated, all translations from German to English are the author's.

2

Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1916–17), trans. James Strachey (New York: Penguin, 1973), 415.

3

Toril Aalberg and Claes H. de Vreese, "Comprehending Populist Political Communication," in *Populist Political Communication in Europe*, eds. Toril Aalberg et al. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 3–11, 7.

4

"Barbarous," *Oxford English Dictionary*.

5

"Brutal," *Oxford English Dictionary*.

6

Diego Semenero has connected the act of the "gangbang" to the notion of "feasting." See Diego Semenero, "The Female Target: Digitality, Psychoanalysis and the Gangbang," *CM: Journal of Communication and Media* XI, no. 38 (2016), 179–204, 190.

7

Michael Balint, "Trauma and Object Relationship," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 50 (1969): 429–35, 432.

8

Steffen Krüger, "Virtuelle Gewalt – 'Nein zum Heim' Facebook-Seiten und die Entstehung politischer Gewalt," *Psychoanalyse – Texte zur Sozialforschung*, February 2016, 147–67.

9

Comments on the Facebook page "Nein zum Heim in Guben."

10

Sigmund Freud, "Psycho-Analytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XII (1911–1913)* (London: Hogarth), 1–82, 62.

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"Rechte Brandstifter zu jeweils fünf Jahren Haft verurteilt," *Spiegel Online*, March 7, 2016 <http://www.spiegel.de/panorama/justiz/rostock-rechte-brandstifter-zu-jeweils-fuenf-jahren-haft-verurteilt-a-1081083.html>.