Ongoing Research

Practice, affect and membership of right-wing extremist internet communication (since 2021; with Jan Beek)

Under terms such as online radicalization, hate culture or the "radicalization machine internet" (Ebner 2019), popular scholarship analyses the relationship between the strengthening of far-right political movements and parties and social media as a resonance space for hate, alternative truths and conspiracy theories. Social media is considered a "digital accelerant" or "engine of right-wing extremism" (Fielitz and Marcks 2020). Memes are described as "red pills" that insidiously radicalize users and initiate them into far-right digital communities. Net activists themselves speak of a "leaderless digital counter-revolution" that is waging an online cultural war against political correctness and feminist identity politics, linking various digital communities with strategists of the new right (Nagle 2018: 19ff.). What metaphors such as the "radicalization machine" make us forget is that these are not technical or automated processes, but that there are people behind the screens who should be viewed as complex actors, but who have rarely been studied ethnographically. The BMBF joint research project "Memes, ideas, strategies of right-wing extremist internet communication (MISRIK) examines far right language and communication practices on social media as part of a larger metapolitical strategy. The aim of the anthropological sub-project "Praxis, Affekt, Mitgliedschaft rechtsextremistischer Internetkommunikation" (PAMRIK) is to develop concepts for understanding the gradual membership (1), the affective-emotional dimensions (2) and the establishment of alternative truth claims (3) of net activists of a new generation of the so-called New Right in social media. Research questions of the subproject are: How do actors assign themselves to collective communities in digital spaces and how is belonging recognized internally? How do actors experience the creation and communication of memes and what emotions do they want to arouse? How are far-right memes created and then shared and how do actors spread them from their small networks to larger groups on social media? How can the mainstreaming of right-wing discourses be traced ethnographically? What role do the affordances of the platforms used play? How are alternative truth claims established and made socially connectable?

Doing being parent. Performative Parenting in Côte d'Ivoire (since 2018)

The aim of the research project is to examine care-giving practices of young, educated, and socially and geographically mobile parents in Southern Côte d'Ivoire and look at their "doing being parents" (to paraphrase Sachs 1984) as identity work and as a way of enacting different forms belonging (such as to a particular generation, to a particular social class). The methodological approach chosen responds to the assumption that parenting practices are performative and competitive and therefore invite for ethnographic research. The project builds upon research that emphasizes the cultural underpinnings of kinship and denaturalized processes of creating relatedness but at the same time strives to avoid essentializing notions of parenting as culturally determined by paying attention to the structures and materialized or mediatized frameworks within which performative parenting practices evolve. Studying parenting as performance and as performative will help reconciling processes of doing kinship with the essence of being a parent, as has recently been argued for by McKinnon 2016.

Parenting as practice involves different actors, experts, texts and performances in the making of good mothers and fathers, a "proper childhood" and successful parenting. The research project approaches parenting practices as performances through the following questions: Who are these actors that are involved in parenting as performance? What are the stages parents chose to perform being a parent? Who are the audiences or addressees of performative parenting? In what ways offers parenting alternative models for living? How are gender roles, the relations between the nuclear and the extended family and towards the authorities of parenting professionals, such as elderly women and midwifes but

also towards "new" parenting professionals such as social welfare workers, parenting intervention trainers, day-care teachers and pediatricians renegotiated and re-evaluated? How do they craft being a mother or being a father against the backdrop of the widespread practice of social parenthood and fostering? What importance is attributed to descent from a praxeological perspective? How do parents grasp the social intimacy between their offspring and the social network of (temporal) care-takers, such as hired nounous, relatives, neighbors, local authorities etc? How is the nuclear family – privileged by state family politics as well as parenting intervention programs – lived in practice in these families? And in what ways do the materialized and mediatized expressions of particular models of how a proper family looks like feed back into parenting practices?

In order to research parenting as performative practice, I want to propose three conscious choices: First, I want to look at the way how parents navigate between different ideas of what constitutes good child-caring practices taking parents serious in their choices; second, by studying fathers and mothers as parents the project aims at avoiding methodological genderism, paying attention to gender differences as they emerge from the observations, not carry them along with a particular research design; and finally, doing fieldwork as a mother and with children will be used to experience interactive situations that invite for self-reflexivity and the explicit expression of taken for granted choices and practices.

Completed Research

Performing the nation and subnational differences in African national days (2013-2019; with Carola Lentz and Marie-Christin Gabriel)

Subproject of the DFG 1939 Research group 'Un/doing Differences. Practices of human differentiation' at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. (P.I. Prof. Dr. Carola Lentz)

The project examined the staging and performing of the nation and subnational differences in African national-day celebrations. The nation is generally presented as a community superordinate to all other senses of social belonging (such as regional, ethnic and religious ties) and to differences like age and sex. In everyday life, nationality is a 'forgotten' allegiance; through national days it can be revived and made visible to members of the national community as well as to an international public. But nationality is an abstract allegiance mostly marked by only a few conventional symbols, like the national flag, the national colours, and the national anthem. Making national belonging more visible requires representing how it relates to other social affiliations and differences. The project studies how such subnational differences and their relationship to the nation are performed during national days. In this project, the researchers conduct comparative case studies to collect empirical data from Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso, countries with different extents of ethnical heterogeneity and different political histories.

African colonial soldiers, entanglement history and transnational memory practices (2015-2017; with Mareike Späth)

In both world wars and also in the wars of liberation in Algeria and Indochina, France used African recruits, particularly from the colonies in West Africa and Madagascar. This practice was already the subject of considerable conflict in the colonies as well as in France, materialized in protests and propaganda campaigns and was reflected in popular culture. While in recent years the public debate about the tirailleurs has primarily revolved around the question of compensation, the project discusses the tirailleurs in the context of a colonial and postcolonial history of entanglement and asks how the tirailleurs were used as emblematic figures for different agendas both in the former colonies and in France, and what role former tirailleurs themselves played in this. One of the findings from this project

was that French colonial soldiers became important actors in the reshaping of colonial and postcolonial relations after their return to their home countries in Francophone Africa - for example, by seeking to transform the social capital acquired through their army experience into political capital and by participating in emancipation movements in various ways. The project focused on public appearances and representations of the tirailleurs, both in the (former) colonies and in France. For this purpose we first looked at military parades and asked where tirailleurs took part in military parades and for what purpose, what was intended by the ritual makers with their participation and how this was received by the spectators (N'Guessan and Späth 2016). Secondly, the analysis focused on the representation of tirailleurs in popular culture. The tirailleurs proved to be particularly robust places of remembrance that also offer space for contradictory and ambivalent narratives and enable subversive appropriations, as the example of the Banania tirailleur shows (N'Guessan and Späth 2019). The colonial soldiers provided us with a catchy case study for more general thoughts on hero-making practices. Who are the actors involved in this process? Which media are suitable for the heroization of individual or collective heroes? How can the process of becoming and making heroes be described and what can we learn from an analysis of the longue durée?

Histories of independence (2009-2013)

In my dissertation project, I worked intensively on the inter- and transdisciplinary connections between anthropology and history and explored the methodological and content-related interfaces that opened up my interest in memory work, historiography and nation building. At the center of the dissertation project was the concern to understand how exactly memory work can be understood as identity-forming. That all remembering is social seems to be a commonplace of memory studies, but the actors often remain unsatisfactorily pale. An ethnological look at practices of memory work and history-making therefore offers a useful addition. Shortly after I had finished my field research on (competing) narratives of independence in Abidjan, the disputes over the presidency were also conducted in terms of a narrative of re-colonization or future independence. Incumbent Laurent Gbagbo and his supporters interpreted the election of his rival Alassane Ouattara as an attempt by France, 50 years after official independence, to once again install a "king by the grace of France" at the head of the former model colony. "How independent are we really?" was perhaps the most frequently formulated response to my research interest by actors in the field. The question of the genealogies of independence (into the past, the present and the future) was henceforth the focus of my interest. I have traced these narratives and genealogies through time (from the late 1950s to the present) and in different practices and media (national holidays, historiography, popular formats of social memory), always asking how these different formats relate to and influence each other and how different memory entrepreneurs simultaneously pluralize and fragment the narratives as well as strive to produce a single narrative (history as it really was!). In the book published by Brill in 2020, *Histories of Ivorian Independence: an Ethnography of the Past*, I analyze the relationship between power and truth, history as an instrument of power legitimation, forms of representation and symbolisms of the state, nation building as a process and link these to current debates in ethnology, political and social sciences (such as the question of how political populism works, the anthropology of historicities and multiple truths, the study of (political and intellectual) elites and the question of how collective memory or a collective identity is formed and changes).