

## The current crisis in the city of Chemnitz: analyses, commentaries, and reflections

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the crisis in political and cultural debate and the media discourse that was triggered by the murder of Daniel H. on August 26, 2018, in the city of Chemnitz. Through a careful demarcation of the possible reasons for the reactions, primarily of the residents of East Germany, before, during, and after this event, the article seeks to uncover the xenophobic and racist – yet also complex – historical past and present that the city and its inhabitants have endured, particularly following German reunification. In addition, the article offers a critical reading of the hip hop song “Grauer Beton” (*Grey Concrete*) (2017) by the East German rap artist Trettmann. The exegesis of the video/song’s representational mode of giving voice to the idea of lost identity and lack of adequate representation, draws attention to its potential as political intervention. By taking on board cultural studies scholar Lawrence Grossberg’s concepts of “radical contextuality” and “conjunctural analysis,” the article contends that in East Germany, and in Chemnitz in particular, past *and* present are intricately interpellated by the so-called void – the impossibility of narrating an identity as East German – that has ensued in the wake of German reunification. Taking up current cultural and political debates from a selection of writers and scholars, the article, by providing a set of three comments, contributes to the discussion of the political impasse implicit in the present political crisis.

### Keywords

Chemnitz, crisis, Grossberg, East Germany, German reunification, xenophobia, Trettmann

### Introduction

In a recent interview, German singer, writer and dissident, Wolf Biermann, who was expelled from the GDR in 1976 while giving a concert in Cologne, stated that the current orgy of xenophobia, including the Hitler salute and racist yelling that took place in Chemnitz following the events of 26 August 2018, has been deeply disturbing (Biermann 2019, A1). He argued that such hate hysteria surrounding refugees is even more rage-blind in East Germany than in the West, because there has been less normal experience and interaction with foreigners there (Biermann 2019, A1). In addition, Biermann criticises the fact that during the GDR dictatorship, enlightenment regarding National Socialism was carried out half-blindly and – as was to be expected – completely dishonestly (Biermann 2019, A1). Therefore, and most unfortunately, the two generations that grew up during the GDR carry the legacy of two dictatorships in their bones (Biermann 2019, A1). It is these individuals who have been taking to the streets to demonstrate, who vote right-wing (AfD) and who have organised in right-wing clubs.

Taking up these ideas, in this paper, a set of three comments will be presented, building upon what has taken place since the events of 26 August 2018 in Chemnitz, the night when 35-year-old Daniel H. was killed by three men who apparently had migrant backgrounds. One of the offenders is believed to be the 23-year old Syrian asylum applicant Alaa S. The other, the alleged main culprit, still fugitive, is the 22-year-old Iraqi Farhad A., for whom an international arrest warrant has been issued. This murder triggered a political crisis from which public and political discussions have ensued – not only in Chemnitz, Saxony and Germany, but also throughout the whole of Europe – especially as regards the enormous spread of ferocious right-wing sentiment introduced by several political parties and far-right nationalist groups that are openly racist and xenophobic. In response to the murder, a number of these groups initiated a mass protest against immigration in which 5,000-7,000 people participated (estimates differ widely) – in a form of protest that is still going on and that has spread to other parts of Germany, Europe and even the rest of the world (e.g. response to the racially motivated mosque massacre on 15th of March 2019 in Christchurch, New Zealand). According to right-wing extremism expert David Begrich, the protesters in Chemnitz were not ordinary citizens who went out into the streets, but these people instead represented a mixed scene of neo-Nazis and hooligans at work alongside angry, racist citizens and ideologically-motivated people experiencing so-called *desire-angst* (Begrich 2018). This notion describes a fear of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. These right-wing extremists and their followers justify this racist behaviour based on their fear of a “great swap” of native Germans for Islamists, which, according to them, must be stopped at all costs. Among others, the leader of the AfD-party (Alternative für Deutschland, Alternative for Germany), Alexander Gauland, has also openly stated this as one of his party’s goals, thereby instrumentalising and justifying a longstanding Orientalist discourse, a discourse which Gayatri Spivak has termed “othering” (Spivak 1985, 247-272). The anxiety of others is used to confirm a hegemonic position of the majority culture through a language of hostility, debasement and fear-mongering directed toward and about migrants, refugees, or people of colour.

Until December 2018, right-wing nationalists demonstrated and marched in Chemnitz’s city centre every Friday afternoon, thus creating an atmosphere of fear, racism and xenophobia – in other words, of crisis. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, crisis denotes “3 *gen.* [a] turning point, a vitally important or decisive stage; a time of trouble, danger, or suspense in politics, commerce, etc., or in personal life” (*OED*, 6th ed. 2007). Applying this definition to the current situation, as argued elsewhere, “Europe is facing a systemic crisis, which seems to undermine the future existence of the European Union and its institutions, and shake at its foundation the delicate compromise and the balance agreed on after 1989” (Sandten et al. 2017, 12).

In this context, I will first present a set of ideas regarding the city’s history and contemporary political situation. Following that, I will borrow an example from hip hop music

and use the opportunity it provides for introducing some form of political intervention into my argument. Finally, I will try to make a few points for consideration in further discussion. By examining the problems of crisis through the lenses of politics, history, culture, literature and music video, it is possible to look for approaches that would allow intersections, interactions and crossings that could be seized upon to challenge the current dimensions of the crisis.

Therefore, I will present, as my first point, a brief summary of the historical context and political situation in Chemnitz, using Larry Grossberg's approach of "radical contextuality" and "conjunctural analysis" (2017a, 28-29; 2017b, 354). Grossberg claims that one of the "commitment[s] that is assembled into cultural studies is to think contextually" (2017a, 28). He further asserts that this approach "has profound implications for defining cultural studies: its object is always a context – not culture or some subset of cultural texts and practices, but how culture is articulated into and how it articulates historical social contexts." (Grossberg 2017a, 28)

In this framework, Grossberg maintains that "[r]adical contextuality' also means that neither theory nor politics can be the starting point of one's reflections and investigations" (Grossberg 2017a, 29), but that there is the need for a "critical response to the demands of some set [of] contemporary conjunctures or perhaps epochs" (Grossberg 2017, 29). In keeping with Grossberg's ideas, I will, in addition to an application of the concept of "radical contextuality," locate my own project, the "The Current Crisis in the City of Chemnitz," contextually, and, in what follows, employ Grossberg's idea of "conjunctural analysis" in order to be able to "understand [...] the contingent organizations of relations and power that we call social contexts" (Grossberg 2017b, 354) and "to articulate multiple crises, multiple contradictions, forces and determinations" (Grossberg 2017b, 354).

When addressing the concept of representation, or, when it comes to the representation of minority groups and cultures, the lack of it, language becomes an important discursive instrument. By "giv[ing] meaning to things through language" (Hall 2013, 16), literature, as will be argued, is embedded in the materiality of social and cultural life. It reflects on cultural phenomena and contributes to the construction and circulation of cultural meanings. Literary representation, thus, encompasses the ways in which class, race, ethnicity, gender, space, or national and cultural identity, are perceived. The language of literature, as well as the language practices employed in song, often, therefore, also offer an interventionist perspective on current societal problems. In this context, hip hop and rap music, as well as the accompanying music videos, can be considered a medium that provides the musician and artist with a voice. This voice then serves, in a wider framework, not only as an important feature in the quest for cultural and national or regional identity but also as a political or social commentary related to the speaker's and his or her group's own situation (Keyes 2002, 17-66). Although hip hop has been primarily associated with African-American youth culture,<sup>1</sup> its branching out into hybrid forms of cultural expression in other countries over the last four decades has shown how this

specific music style has triggered ample accounts of the struggles that many young people are confronted with in their daily lives. Even though hip hop has focussed frequently on the topics of violence, sex (misogyny) or the material life, it is, nonetheless, deeply rooted in political activism in urban spaces and has produced songs of protest that have been highly influential among the younger generation in each of the individual countries. In this context, the rap artist Trettmann, as I claim, addresses contemporary stereotypes about young men in East Germany by focusing on the vacuum that many young people there have experienced, especially in the years following reunification. In his music video/song, silhouettes of urban residences in large housing projects, dilapidated streets and walls sprayed with graffiti become a common visual marker, intended to ensure a local identification of music, musicians and listeners through reference to the original narrative. The focus of this paper is therefore on the interplay between history, culture, representation and the search of and quest for cultural identity. The Chemnitz crisis, with its intricately interwoven historical, political and cultural past *and* present undoubtedly invites such a reading of a selection of texts.

### **Chemnitz: historical and political dimensions**

Chemnitz, named after its river, is the third-largest city in Saxony, and lies at the foot of the Ore Mountains. Officially, Chemnitz was first mentioned in 1143, and from then on was directly associated with mining in the Ore Mountains (*Chemnitz, Stadt der Moderne; City of Chemnitz*). “In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, more than one third of the town’s population was employed in the textile production” that had been created there (*City of Chemnitz*). The ensuing Industrial Revolution, with its machine-driven inventions, along with the construction of spinning and carding machines, led to Chemnitz’s emergence as one of the most important industrial centres in Saxony. It was later nicknamed the “Manchester of Saxony,” on account of its mechanised cotton mills, locomotive and other machine construction and textile industry (*City of Chemnitz*). New production plants, with modern engines and machines, took up large areas of the town and left their mark. In 1936, Auto Union, known today as Audi, established its headquarters in Chemnitz. The town’s population was experiencing tremendous growth: from 100,000 in 1883, to 320,000 only 30 years later (*City of Chemnitz*). In 1930, the city had 360,000 residents, the highest population in its history, and had thus grown into a major city, with all related amenities (*City of Chemnitz*). During the Second World War, as a war effort, businesses in Chemnitz intensified their manufacturing. However, the most destructive bombings to hit Chemnitz took place in February 1945 and on the 5th of March that same year. “At the end of the war, nearly 4,000 people had lost their lives, and over six square kilometres of the city centre and neighbouring residential areas had been destroyed” (*City of Chemnitz*). Under the GDR regime, reconstruction efforts were abandoned in the mid-1950s in favour of extensive new building projects in the inner city, giving it an entirely socialist appearance (*City of Chemnitz*). In addition, the remaining mid-nineteenth century buildings in the city’s historic

districts were neglected due to the GDR regime's anti-bourgeois sentiments and, at the beginning of the mid-1960s, large housing developments were built on the edge of the city (ibid.). These are also known as panel buildings or panel construction (*Plattenbauten*). Under the leadership of Walter Ulbricht, Chemnitz was renamed in 1953 to Karl-Marx-Stadt (despite the fact that there was nothing that would connect the city to Karl Marx) – as a model socialist city with a huge working class and, due to the industrial history of the city, a sparse middle or upper-middle class. As such, it continued to be a centre of machine construction and by the end of the 1980s, had 315,000 residents (*City of Chemnitz*). The profound political and economic changes that began in Autumn 1989 led to the exodus of 75,000 citizens in the following years (*City of Chemnitz*), especially well-educated young women and men who left to find work and a future in western Germany, leaving behind a downtrodden, post-GDR cityscape. Even though the city's appearance has been transformed by the construction of new residential buildings and businesses as well as the renovation of listed buildings in residential art-deco areas, Chemnitz still struggles with population demise: In terms of age demographics, it is the oldest city in Europe, and now has only 240,000 citizens. The exodus and ensuing brain drain has left its mark not only on the city's outward appearance, in terms of huge numbers of abandoned buildings, but also on the people's minds and their political attitudes.<sup>2</sup>

In this context, it must first be pointed out that, after the Second World War and the establishment of the GDR regime, anti-fascist politics were primarily practiced and taught from above, and the blame for National Socialism was said to lie solely with West Germany, an argument that Wolf Biermann has also ascribed to. Secondly, following reunification and the major reconstruction of East Germany to assimilate it as part of the political system of the West, which took place within only two or so years, the West and Western capitalism had appropriated East German industry (or what was left of it), had bought up East German property at extremely low prices, and had repudiated any positive outcome from the GDR, its culture, history, industrial products or educational system. A population was thus created that felt insecure, subjected, suppressed and deprived of their past *and* present, who had lost their jobs and were at a great disadvantage when confronted with the western capitalist system. As the journalist Jana Hensel stresses in an interview, the collapse of the East German society was utterly comprehensive and took place at such an unprecedented radicalism and speed that the like of it has perhaps never before, in this fashion, been seen in the world (Engler and Hensel 2018b). An interesting question, however, is: How has West German society reacted to all this? Many people in the former West Germany thought that the solidarity surcharge, which was introduced in 1991 to, among other things, help finance the costs of German reunification, was paid only by them – which was not true. In addition, their response to East German problems has often been: "Don't complain so much" – since the East Germans apparently – and ironically – got what they wanted: the D-Mark, bananas, cars and the freedom to travel.

The “Trabi” (Trabant) – an automobile that was produced from 1957 to 1990 by the former East German car manufacturer VEB Sachsenring Automobilwerke Zwickau (in Saxony and close to Chemnitz) might also be seen as a symbol for what no longer seemed suitable under the new conditions after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Generally speaking, residents of East Germany have had to permanently undergo an external and internal perception of collapse: The collapse of East German society was all-encompassing, similar, perhaps, to a catastrophe (Engler and Hensel 2018b). During a radio interview, Wolfgang Engler, a sociologist and lecturer at the Ernst Busch Academy of the Arts, and Jana Hensel, an author and journalist, therefore discussed the great euphoria of 1989 (when the wall came down), arguing that this event was immediately side-lined by the great collapse, leading to problems of financial insecurity, identity crisis and the question of belonging, accompanied by a tremendous feeling of loss regarding past *and* present, culture and self-esteem (Engler and Hensel 2018b). German reunification has, as Engler and Hensel argue in their spirited and engaging conversation, *Wer wir sind (Wo we are)*, (Engler and Hensel 2018a, 57), thus, caused a deep void – the impossibility of narrating an East German identity that portrays many perceptions, feelings and realities of many East Germans. According to Hensel, the East German narrative remains the one in which it sees itself as insufficient, subordinate and marginal, and often basically simply overlooked (Engler and Hensel 2018a, 57). In addition, the lack of adequate representation at the level of culture, politics, economics and emotions is another part of the East German experience. As Hensel indicates, the quasi-migrant experience of the East Germans was to become foreigners in their own country, without having even left their own country. This, as she writes, is part of the greater process of marginalization (Engler and Hensel 2018a, 60). By 1993, 1.4 million people had left the East; there had not been a comparable level of migration in Europe since the Second World War (Engler and Hensel 2018a, 68).

In Chemnitz, these sentiments are exacerbated by the phenomena of the presence of a large working or lower class, which, after reunification, had been confronted with unemployment, and the growing insecurity within the rather sparse middle class. All of these aspects intertwine, and many of those who feel this insecurity in their own lives, who have felt it for some time, respond by being what could be termed open to the right-wing discourse. This right-wing and, moreover, racist, discourse is, however, not new:

As people in the GDR were not confronted with migrants, at least not in the way that West Germans were, racist and xenophobic sentiments were common among them. Migrants from other socialist countries, such as Vietnam, Mozambique, Cuba, Angola, or Poland were allowed in as contract-workers, and they lodged together in temporary housing.<sup>3</sup> They were supposed to return to their home countries after a certain period of time. For instance, many contract workers from Vietnam were forced to work off Vietnamese debts in East Germany and were, in addition, treated most restrictively before and also after reunification.<sup>4</sup> In this context, pictures of violent xenophobic riots come to mind: August 1992 – Rostock-

Lichtenhagen, only three years after the coming down of the Berlin Wall. In Rostock-Lichtenhagen, the violence came about because the police, the court and the administration were still in the process of being set up, and so gaps were created that made this violence possible.

Although the subject of right-wing extremism and racism is now being dealt with more seriously in Saxony, Chemnitz, as David Begrich claims, it is not a blank page as far as the question of the history and presence of right-wing extremism is concerned (Begrich 2018). In Chemnitz, there was the connection to the national socialist underground (NSU), there was a nationally-known dispatch for right-wing extremist rock music, there has been the right-wing organisation, the National Socialists of Chemnitz, which laid the groundwork for the genesis of the current new right movements (Begrich 2018). Therefore, people today – under the guise of democracy – are protesting in an uninhibited and blatant fashion, espousing openly nationalist and racist slogans.

### The cultural dimension: hip hop as a site for political interventions?

As my second point, to favour an understanding the “Crisis in the City of Chemnitz,” I will discuss the hip hop song “Grauer Beton” (*Grey Concrete*),<sup>5</sup> by the Chemnitz-born rap artist Trettmann (alias Stefan Richter), who currently lives in Leipzig, works in Berlin and who was awarded the “Prize for Pop Culture” on 18 October 2018. The song was released in 2017, and what is visualised and acoustically perceptible in the song/video expresses what many East Germans have perhaps been thinking these days. The line, “We were forgotten there at the beginning of the nineties” (*Man hat uns vergessen dort, Anfang der Neunziger Jahre*) is what Trettmann sang to 65,000 people in his hometown of Chemnitz on September 3, 2018. This was part of the #wirsindmehr concert (*we are more*) performed in response to the right-wing led demonstration held a few days earlier, which had been declared as a “funeral march”. This funeral march was initiated by the ultra-right football fan group “Kaotic Chemnitz” together with “Pro Chemnitz” and the AfD, and took place the day after the tragic death of Daniel H. According to Robert Claus, an expert on fan scenes and right-wing extremism, “Kaotic Chemnitz” has had personnel overlaps with the now-banned “National Socialists of Chemnitz,” so it is an integral part of the extreme right-wing scene (Claus 2018). Claus stresses that there is a long history in Saxony of a well-connected, very agile group of hooligans who commit right-wing violence (Claus 2018). He adds that the scene has always been well-networked, but in the political debate and the shift to the right in the past three to four years, it has become much more visible (Claus 2018). Claus further maintains that with the Pegida organisation (*Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes* – patriotic Europeans against the islamisation of the Occident), many hooligans were involved from the very beginning, both within the law enforcement services and among the demonstrators (Claus 2018). This was even more rampant in Legida (*Leipziger Europäer gegen die Islamisierung*

*des Abendlandes* – Leipzig Europeans against the islamisation of the Occident), because this group was supposed to be even more radically right-wing nationalist than Pegida.

Trettmann's video/song captures most fittingly the situation that Wolfgang Engler and Jana Hensel discussed in their conversation *Wer wir sind (Who we are)* (2018a). The primarily black-and-white filmed video of "Grauer Beton" (*Grey Concrete*), together with the text, presents the devastating, hopeless and desolate situation of the younger generation, those who have experienced the void brought about in the 1990s by the non-violent revolution and Germany's reunification. This semi-autobiographical, or even autobiographical, song, typical of rap and hip hop musicians, captures many sentiments that have been described in this paper, as Trettmann himself grew up in a panel construction, a *Plattenbau*, in the notorious Heckart neighbourhood at the outskirts of Chemnitz, and puts himself visually and literally at the centre of the song and video.

The song consists of seven stanzas, with the first stanza repeated at the end of the song. Stanza three is also repeated in full in stanza six. Generally, the song uses repetition, rhyme, often also the half or imperfect rhyme typical of hip hop, and narrative as its main aesthetic devices. The song shares an important story with its listeners who, it can be assumed, are primarily young people interested in German rap music. As typical in rap music, the singer presents the hardships and predicaments he faced as a child and young adolescent growing up in the eastern part of Germany during the times preceding and following reunification. The line "Images blurred, don't turn back" (*Bilder verschwommen, kehr' nicht mehr um*) epitomise the idea that the past in the GDR is experienced as a wrong life to which the addressee should not return. As the song starts, with a slow electric beat, perhaps representing a heartbeat, the video, in black-and-white, captures the downtrodden urban environment of the notorious Heckart district in Chemnitz. As the song progresses, the pronouns change, starting with an indirect addressee, who is told not to turn back, but to follow child of change (*Folg' dem Wendekind*). In the line, "Nobody's telling you it's gonna end well," (*Dir niemand sagt, das es'n gutes Ende nimmt*) the addressee is mentioned directly, however, this time, the speaker actually is implying himself as the addressee, speaking in the second person, thus putting himself forward as someone who is naïve and does not have an overview of the entire situation. In several instances in the song, the speaker speaks in the first person, giving his account of the situation, referring to the past, when he, his friends and neighbours were forgotten at the beginning of the 1990s.

The overall mood of the song is rather dark and filled with hopelessness, which is underscored by the black-and-white video, throughout which are interspersed colour photos from Trettmann's own past, which are juxtaposed with images from contemporary times, and the song's electric beat, which generally remains steady throughout the song. The tone, or overall feeling, of the song is one of wretchedness and emptiness, with the repeated line, "Up and away, not another season" (*Auf und davon, nicht noch eine Saison*), indicating that the

speaker, and perhaps many other people, have not been able to stay much longer in the East, and sounding almost like a desperate plea. Throughout the song, Trettmann emphasizes his feelings of hopelessness when mentioning the “soul catchers” who “do business with hope”. They try to draw young people into criminal activities, but perhaps also into following right-wing groups. As the soul catchers instrumentalise the notion of hope to achieve their ends, he is destined to leave.

The progression of the song takes the listener/viewer from being confronted with the desolate urban environment – Trettmann shows himself in a black t-shirt, black trousers, black sun glasses, and white baseball cap, framed in an abandoned, windowless *Plattenbau*, covered with graffiti – to his own critical position, reflecting on the time of the 1990s. The singer thus creates a confessional mode within a narrative style. The title and the first line of the song symbolise the desolate urban environment as a downtrodden, unhomey space. Trettmann uses the metaphor of “grey concrete” to refer to the specific place, people, and situation of his youth and to show his frustration with the limitations and dangers he had to face during this particular time. Song text and video underscore the desperate time of the 1990s, when people in a place like the Heckart were forgotten by politicians, misrepresented by a negative hegemonic media discourse, and were impoverished as a result of the collapse of the GDR industry.

Thus, the line “Up and away, not another season,” epitomises the idea that, following reunification, the only solution for many East Germans to obtain economic security was to leave, since the collapse of the East made it impossible for the government to provide this. For many East Germans, it was a difficult time of discontinuation. With the line “Freedom won, however lost and gone” (*Freiheit gewonnen, wieder zerronnen*), with its (intentional) similarity to the saying “easy come, easy go” the idea is implied that many East Germans who had gained freedom after the Berlin Wall came down were not able to actually experience life in this freedom, as it was lost immediately afterwards due to the economic collapse. Another reading of the line suggests that people felt like the losers in the new capitalist system to which they were being forced to adjust, but which was happening at such high speed that they were not able to do so. The new system had robbed them of their freedom and confined them to what can be called the void, a lack of identification, or the impossibility of identifying with the given situation, as well as a feeling of a lack of representation of East German issues in politics, culture and social life.

After the collapse, however, staying would have been impossible, as life had become harsh, as epitomised by the words “rough jargon” (*rauer Jargon*). In addition, the past was becoming blurred (“Images blurred, don’t turn back,” *Bilder verschwommen, kehr’ nicht mehr um*) and the addressee is told not to look back anymore. Thus, it has become necessary to erase and nullify the past.

The lines “I’d rather live fast, restless / Instead of on a side track, without destination

station” (*Lieber schnell leben, ruhelos/Statt Abstellgleis, kein Zielbahnhof*) suggest that it is perhaps better to live under and adjust to the fast-moving capitalist system than to stay in the East without any future. The idea of the “side track” describes quite fittingly the East German identity of the 1990s, which was characterised by a feeling of devaluation and loss of dignity. That which they had lived and worked for day in and day out was suddenly gone and, on top of that, devalued. Moreover, no transitional process or support was provided to the East German population, e.g. a tool kit that could help them learn how to function in or to adjust to the new capitalist system. Moreover, the years of a childhood that had been socially secure were over too quickly over and the future had become unpredictable, friends had hardened and become unscrupulous.

The lines “Soul catchers sneak around the block and / Do business with hope” and “Behind almost every door lurks a precipice” (*Seelenfänger schleichen um den Block und/Machen Geschäft mit der Hoffnung/Fast hinter jeder Tür lauert 'n Abgrund*), which are repeated several times in the song, thus forming a second refrain, show what has been going on most recently: Unemployment, a low level of education and the feeling of the void (or even an abyss), have led people to join right-wing and fascist groups in order to gain a sense of self-esteem and a feeling of belonging.

A look at the photos of the protesters participating in the demonstration (“funeral march”) on 3 September 2018 reveals that the people in the photos are primarily men in their 30s to 50s – those who lost their jobs immediately after reunification and were not educated enough to be able to leave for the West or create their own businesses – and their sons, those who were born into this void in the early 1990s. In spite of the fact that the latter were not brought up in the GDR, it can nonetheless be assumed that they have been influenced by their parents and grandparents about the feelings of loss, accompanied by feelings of rage as well, which are also often expressed in a criticism of the entire system, which they feel has to be fought. The younger generation has also been stuck in the confines of a post-industrial worker’s environment from which they have not been able to escape (through education), since they have instead identified with their parents’ victim role. Right-wing extremists, whom Trettmann calls “soul catchers,” have, as the song suggests, occupied this void.

The line “Just so you know where I come from” (*Nur damit du weißt, wo ich herkomm*) seems to be a matter-of-fact statement, addressing the listener / reader directly, as if in dialogue. On the one hand, it entails a justification of where the speaker comes from, on the other hand, the line addresses the speaker’s narrative of belonging. With his song, Trettmann offers a critical reading of the historical and current situation in Chemnitz and the on-going feeling of the void with which East Germans have been confronted, e.g. capitalism with its money rules mentality, advertising that lures into buying and having (“New colourful bank notes speak their own language,” *Neue bunte Scheine sprechen eine eigene Sprache*; “White sneakers more worth than a million,” *Weißer Sneaker mehr wert als Millionen*).

With the lines “All good things come from above / The zebra finch flew to me” (*Alle guten Dinge kommen von oben / Der Zebrafink ist mir zugeflogen*), the singer, in a more ironic tone of voice, addresses both the idea that a tiny exotic animal has arrived just by chance, which might imply the notion of hope, and that a tiny bit of the whole has fallen off. However, with the idiom that “all things come from above,” which is used to address something great and godlike, and by juxtaposing this with a tiny exotic, however sociable bird, such as the zebra finch, two very different semantic possibilities emerge. The good things that come from above can most definitely not be fulfilled by the zebra finch. The hope that the bird gives rise to, is immediately extinguished again, as a zebra finch will not bring much relief. Reading the zebra finch together with the now-and-then delivery of melons trucked in from Bulgaria and the adoration of new idols from overseas, as the next lines disclose, the singer describes perhaps quite fittingly the void that has materialised. There is nothing of the former life left, and the new life is suddenly filled with items, idols and food that seems to be strange, “overseas,” exotic, suddenly too much. What dominates life in the 1990s, however, is a “desolate situation” (*Desolate Lage*). Of course, the situation is much more complex than what Trettmann portrays, but, by talking about it openly and by interlacing past *and* present in a black-and-white video collage, interspersing colour photos from his own childhood, his song can also be read as a means of intervention, as a mode of resistance to and subversion of the current political discourse about East Germans, Chemnitz and the new right-wing drift. His song can be interpreted as a form of literary and practical political intervention, as song and video challenge the perception of contemporary society by giving a moving account of the situation faced by the second generation of East Germans after reunification. In conjunction, song and video provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the uneven power relations, social disadvantages and the void that East Germans have been experiencing since reunification. The song thus attacks the dominant political and media discourse. In addition, the explicit emphasis on a spatial consciousness and an identity-creating local reference are identified as the decisive characteristics of Trettmann’s song/video. More clearly than in other genres of popular music, these urban spaces in the downtrodden area of the Heckart *Plattenbau* serve as the central organisational principles of meaning-making, values and actions (Forman 2000, 66; Mager 2007, 199-212). Trettmann obviously is criticizing the fact that some young East Germans have become stuck in a dysfunctional broken world, apparently incapable of getting out, searching for cultural identity and misrepresented by a West German hegemonic discourse. With more than 8,000,000 views on YouTube (August 2019), it can be claimed that the rap artist is reaching a wide audience and thus practising a form of political intervention, using his own voice to enact and narrate, in rap fashion, his experience of the ghetto, depicting himself as the underdog, who has been denigrated and oppressed by the dominant majority culture, but who has been able to get out and move on.

### Some reflections on how to find a way out of the current impasse

So far, I have looked at a few phenomena that are characteristic to the developments in East Germany. A number of aspects have a genuine East German context and have to be read through the lens of “radical contextuality” and “conjunctural analysis” (Grossberg 2017a, 28–29; 2017b, 354). Thus, I suggest that the new right-wing movements that are particularly strong in Chemnitz and, more generally, in East Germany, show that in the years since Rostock-Lichtenhagen everyday racism has become entrenched in the minds of people living in the East.<sup>6</sup> Until August 26 2018, regular right-wing demonstrations took place, primarily in Berlin, for instance, the so-called Monday demonstrations under the slogan “Merkel muss weg,” (*Merkel has to go*) that were initiated by “Wir für Deutschland” (*We, for Germany*), the Wednesday demonstrations initiated by the AfD, or the Bär-gida Monday demonstrations (the “Bär,” the animal *bear*, is the symbol of the city of Berlin). In Dresden, there were the Pegida Monday demonstrations, in Halle, the regular Monday demonstrations, in Cottbus, the “Zukunft Heimat” (Our Homeland’s Future), in Erfurt, the “Erfurt zeigt Gesicht” (Erfurt shows Character), in Kandel, the Frauenbündnis Kandel (Kandel Women’s Alliance), or in Rathenow, the Bürgerbündnis Havelland (Citizen’s Alliance). Prior to August, Chemnitz was also one of the demonstration locations with “Cegida,” an offshoot of the Pegida movement. At its peak in February 2015, there were weekly demonstrations with a maximum number of participants of about 400. Rallies were held at the foot of the Karl Marx Monument<sup>7</sup> and demonstrators marched throughout the city. Counter-demonstrations were organised with about 400 participants. Following the event of 26 August 2018, this has dramatically changed. Generally, as Engler and Hensel maintain, this new right-wing movement has taken on a radicalised tone, has been followed up with racist, anti-democratic, anti-European and xenophobic actions, and has, for parts of society, become the only identity-forming narrative (Engler and Hensel 2018b).

The question as to why there are no ties of loyalty, so to speak, other than xenophobia and racism leads me, again, to the conversation between Wolfgang Engler and Jana Hensel, who argue that the fundamental paradox of the post-reunification experience in eastern Germany, that is, at the moment the East Germans achieved the goal they initially pursued, namely, to attain political and civil rights, they experienced immeasurable economic insecurity and collapse. Even though it was clear to the majority of East Germans in 1989 and well into the 1990s that economic survival, in particular, could have not continued for much longer, that much of the East German economy had been subject to deterioration, that there had been a lack of innovation, that there had been no real competitiveness – the fact that it then fell to null was still incredibly sudden and all-encompassing (Engler and Hensel 2018b). The right-wing movements in Chemnitz, Saxony, Germany, the US and throughout the whole of Europe could be related to the numerous crises that have stricken the global world system. First and foremost among these is the financial crisis of 2008, which made many people feel that they were being forced to pay for the mismanagement of banks and financial centres. This crisis

was followed by what is now most commonly called the “refugee crisis” of 2015, again, a situation that was supposed to have been solved top-down – as in the words of Chancellor Angela Merkel, in which she uses the *pluralis majestatis*: “Wir schaffen das” (we will cope). Therefore, Wolfgang Engler (Engler and Hensel 2018a, 15) sees in the success of the AfD, as a collecting basin for the protest voters, the greatest emancipatory act of the East German population, something that The Left (Die Linke) has not been able to achieve. And Jana Hensel (Engler and Hensel 2018a, 26) suggests that these protesters and right-wing voters are, above all, people who oppose an open and tolerant society, people who do not want to share their wealth, and who are afraid of losing their benefits. Hensel interprets this attitude as a defence mechanism (Engler and Hensel 2018a, 26) – perhaps accompanied by the East Germans’ perception of themselves as victims of German reunification. Chemnitz now has to struggle with this newly acquired image as a city in crisis, in which right-wing marches and explicitly open racism have become an everyday experience.

A rethinking of the incident in Chemnitz in August 2018 as a trigger for the eruption of a crisis might allow me to consider in a new light, the fact that Chemnitz has had to accommodate the remnants of the industrial era, in conjunction with GDR history, architecture and consciousness, East Germans’ fears, and their feelings of the void, often reinforced by a hegemonic discourse of misrepresentation leading to a low self-esteem. In addition, a racist smear-campaigning of the public discourse in an Orientalist mode, and the former right-wing underground that has dramatically and violently leaped to the surface, instigating violent actions against migrants, have contributed to the current racist sentiments. The discursive trivialisation of right-wing populism, the demand for the expulsion of foreign criminals, the request to abolish gender studies at universities (also on the part of the AfD), the claim for a ban on abortion – all in right-wing conservative and fundamentalist circles, and to mention only a few aspects, are illustrative of right-wing politics at work. Along with “ethical obligations” towards the other, to quote Judith Butler (Butler 2012, 135) and the demand for a “radical hospitality, co-belonging and openness” (Mbembe 2016, 3) as well as discussions, cultural events and more and better-qualified teachers – especially in rural areas around Chemnitz –, there is a need to openly stand up for a unified world society, many parts of which have been, and are still, subjugated, exploited and politically annexed within the wider framework of neo-colonialism and capitalist imperialism.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For further reading on hip hop and rap see Bakari 2002 and Rose 1994.

<sup>2</sup> For this section, see also Clauss and Kroll 2019, Liebold and Uhlmann 2018, *Chemnitzer Morgenpost* 2015, and the *City of Chemnitz* official website: <https://www.chemnitz.de/chemnitz/en/city-of-chemnitz/history/index.html>.

<sup>3</sup> As the historian Harry Waigel writes, in the GDR there was a fateful mystery about the smeared swastikas or about the violent attacks of racists on all those who looked “non-German.” In a society in which “friendship among nations” and “proletarian internationalism” were elementary postulates of ideology and propaganda, it did not fit when Africans, Arabs or Jews were hostilely rejected, attacked, or even killed. For the sake of maintaining its carefully crafted immaculate anti-fascist image, however,

the state was – at first and for years successfully – anxious not to let anything resembling this get out to the public. With this tactic, it prevented the necessary social conflict and anti-fascist resistance and ultimately helped the right-wing extremists to spread illegally (Waibel 2014, 93).

<sup>4</sup> The GDR's experience with migrants is a complex historical phenomenon and a recurrent issue of socio-discursive controversy. When the GDR collapsed, the Vietnamese, with around 60,000 people, were the largest group of migrants in the former workers' and peasants' state. As early as the mid-1950s, the GDR admitted Vietnamese as part of solidarity programmes. The peak, however, was not reached until the arrival of the so-called contract workers at the end of the 1970s (*Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk*, "Mein Leben, meine Geschichte": "Vietnamesische 'Vertragsarbeiter' in der DDR." March 16, 2016 <https://www.mdr.de/zeitreise/vertragsarbeiter-vietnam100.html>. Accessed July 27, 2019). For further reading related to contract workers from Mozambique, see van der Heyden 2015 or Bach 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Trettmann 2017. "Grauer Beton," produced by Kitschkrieg. 4:12 mins, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hHT\\_hEuTtxg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hHT_hEuTtxg). Accessed March 20, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> As Waibel writes, according to official figures provided by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV), over 300,000 neo-Nazi or racist-motivated propaganda and violent crimes have taken place in Germany since the GDR joined the FRG in 1990. During this period, several hundred people died and thousands were injured. The proportion of East German perpetrators is very high (3:1), measured by the number of inhabitants from the five new federal states (Waibel 2014, 10).

<sup>7</sup> The 7.10m-tall Karl Marx Monument, inaugurated in 1971, is the second-largest bust in the world and one of the most famous attractions in Chemnitz city centre.

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