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Nationalism Online: The Case of ‚El Paraiso Verde‘, a Gated Community for Germans in Paraguay

Nationalismus im Internet: der Fall von „El Paraiso Verde“, einer Gated Community für Deutsche in Paraguay

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Abstract (English)

At the end of 2017, a couple from Austria began building up a settlement projected eventually to house up to 20,000 inhabitants in an area of 16km² in rural Paraguay, which they called “El Paraiso Verde”. To go to Paraguay, according to the promotion material available on their website and YouTube Channel, entails a rejection of the decisions taken by the European Union and disagreement with a lifestyle associated with it. By conducting a digital ethnography and analyzing the discourse and tropes in interviews that the couple conducted in 2017 to promote the initiative on their websites, and in the comment section of their YouTube Channel, I show that there is a strong nationalist component in their discourse. The ‘nation’ that, apparently, needs defending, rather than existing spatially, represents a set of ‘universal’ values (i.e., a transnational/deterritorialized form of nationalism) that may be relocated elsewhere. Moreover, I argue that digital media plays a crucial role, not only in bringing like-minded people together and helping them to create “imagined communities”, but also in providing a platform that serves the modern need for self-design, creating a sense of agency and reinforcing the national project as a matter of autonomy-seeking.

Keywords: Völkisch nationalism, Querdenker, Anastasia Movement, digital media, lifestyle migration

Abstract (Deutsch)

*Ende 2017 begann ein österreichisches Ehepaar mit dem Aufbau einer Siedlung, die bis zu 20.000 Einwohner*innen auf einer Fläche von 16 km² in einer ländlichen Region Paraguays beherbergen soll und die sie „El Paraiso Verde“ nennen. Nach Paraguay zu gehen, bedeutet laut dem auf ihrer Website und ihrem YouTube-Kanal verfügbaren Werbematerial eine Ablehnung der von der Europäischen Union getroffenen Entscheidungen und eine Ablehnung eines mit ihr verbundenen Lebensstils.*

Durch die Durchführung einer digitalen Ethnografie und die Analyse des Diskurses und der Tropen in einigen Interviews, auf ihrer Webseite und im Kommentarbereich ihres YouTube-Kanals, die das Paar 2017 zur Förderung der Initiative geführt hat, zeige ich, dass es eine starke nationalistische Komponente in ihrem Diskurs gibt, aber dass die „Nation“, die verteidigt werden muss, eher als eine Reihe von „universellen“ Werten (d. h. eine transnationale/deterritorialisierte Form des Nationalismus) dargestellt wird, die anderswo verortet werden kann. Darüber hinaus zeige ich, dass die digitalen Medien eine entscheidende Rolle spielen, nicht nur beim Zusammenbringen von Gleichgesinnten in einer „imaginierten Gemeinschaft“, sondern auch, wenn es darum geht, eine Plattform bereitzustellen, die dem modernen Bedürfnis nach Selbstgestaltung und der Schaffung eines Gefühls der Handlungsfähigkeit gerecht wird. Auf dieser Plattform wird das nationale Projekt als eine Frage des Autonomiebestrebens stärkt.

Schlagwörter: völkischer Nationalismus, Querdenker, Anastasia-Bewegung, Digitalen Medien, Lifestyle Migration

1. Introduction

1.1 Migration Against the Grain

It comes as no surprise that growing numbers of migrants being forced by often miserable conditions to leave their home countries from the Global South to the Global North has resulted in abundant research on migration. Generally, the migratory flows follow the directions marked by colonialism: from ‘peripheral’ underdeveloped states to ‘central’ developed states. But why do Europeans nowadays migrate to developing countries such as Paraguay, for example? What are the reasons driving their movement? What connections do they create with the receiving country? What imaginaries and conditions do they find appealing? How do they build their communities?

Within the study of this type of migration from the Global North to the Global South so-called “lifestyle migrants” are categorized as follows: as “*relatively affluent individuals of all ages, moving either part-time or full-time to places that, for various reasons, signify, for the migrant, a better quality of life*” (Benson / O’Reilly 2009b:609). Previous studies (Benson 2009/2013, Korpela 2010, O’Reilly 2020, Peraldi / Terrazzoni 2016, Scuzzarello 2020, Torkington 2012, Waldren 1996) have shown a distinct tendency regarding the destination countries chosen by European lifestyle migrants: Europeans generally opt for tourist destinations, such as the Costa del Sol, Mallorca, Algarve, Thailand, the Dordogne, among others; or former colonized states such as Algeria for the French, India for the British, or even Panama and Costa Rica for US citizens.

Paraguay, in this context, appears thus as quite an unusual migratory or tourist destination for a European citizen, even by regional standards. In 2019, Paraguay registered the arrival of 1.18 million tourists while neighbouring countries Argentina and Brazil received 6.9 and 6.6 million respectively (World Tou-

rism Organization [UNWTO] 2019). Paraguay is, all in all, not really a very common tourist destination. Nor has it ever, of course, been a colony of Germany (although it has a history of migration – albeit little known – of German citizens in its rural areas). In general, therefore, it seems that the remote and little-known nature of the destination country provides a migration project with a novelty and uniqueness, longed for by lifestyle migrants, consistent with the literature on the topic. In a similar vein, the German Tourism Analysis 2020 – for which the BAT-Stiftung für Zukunftsfragen surveyed 3,000 people aged 18 and over in representative interviews about their travel behaviour – showed that: “‘Individualität statt Mainstream’ lautet das Motto vieler Urlauber. Immer reiseerfahrener wollen sie wieder mehr Authentizität, Atmosphäre und individuelle Angebote vorfinden”.¹

The search for the words *auswandern* (emigrating) and Paraguay on YouTube, for example, yields numerous results, mostly with tips and recommendations for adaptation to the destination country. Furthermore, the videos emphasize migration as a possibility for “dropping out” (*aussteigen*) from the hectic life in Europe. Among these promoters of migration to Paraguay is the subject of this study, called El Paraiso Verde, started in 2017 when a middle-aged Austrian couple purchased a rural area of 1,600 hectares (16km²) 200 km from Asunción, in the district of Caazapá, Paraguay. Since then, Paraguayan workers and some “pioneers” who moved to the settlement from Germany, Switzerland, and Austria, have been working on opening streets, building houses, and undertaking agricultural work. The site currently hosts an estimated one hundred people and involves the work of about three hundred Paraguayans.

On a website, <https://freiheitdurchauswandern.de> (a1), meaning “freedom through migration”, and a YouTube

Channel, the Austrian couple promote a gated community for German speakers. The brochure aims to reach people who feel “the security of their loved ones and the developments in the Western world” are under threat and invites them to migrate to a green paradise, where they will find peace and freedom and have the chance to live according to their own rules, in rejection of the decisions taken by the European Union and in disagreement with a lifestyle associated with it (specifically expressed as the ‘multicultural’ environment).

The narratives employed to summon people to participate incorporate clichés typical of the discourses of the so-called ‘new’ European right and align with ideas of survival in an approaching apocalyptic future, in tune with current conspiracist discourse widespread on social media. In this sense, there is a video on the homepage redirecting to an ‘alternative’ channel on the YouTube platform, mainly dedicated to spreading various conspiracy theories and esoteric content. In fact, the arrival of Covid-19 and the measures that the different states have had to take to contain its expansion also served as an extra argument – within this esoteric scene that touts the return to a more natural life – for the call to join this migratory project. The scarcity of vaccines and the precarious conditions of Paraguay’s health infrastructure served as an excuse to promote the country as an ideal destination for those, particularly German speakers, who did not want to be vaccinated. This trend lately gained the attention of the wider media.² The discourses for the call to migrate, take the form of populist Manichean rhetoric, Paraguay is imagined as the counterpart to Germany (and the other German-speaking countries), emptied of meaning and represented as ‘terra nullius’ and therefore constructed, according to colonial imagination, as a place where Germanhood may be performed and recreated. The advantages offered by the South American country

are always differential, i.e., expressed as a counterpart to Europe. This contrast is emphasized by a dominant imaginary in a certain esoteric scene, mainly circulated on the Internet and known as the “Anastasia Movement”, which, in an anti-modernist impulse, privileges rural life and nature over the hectic, corrupt and technological life of the cities.

By conducting a non-participant online ethnography³ and analyzing the discourse and tropes in interviews that the founding couple conducted to promote their initiative on their website, and in the comments section of their YouTube Channel, I show that the German nation that needs to be defended, rather than spatialized or seen in a material sense, is represented as a set of ‘universal’ values (i.e. a transnational / deterritorialized form of nationalism) that can be relocated elsewhere. In addition, this form of nationalism is particularly functional in the context of a migration project, as it is located within a definition of nationhood constructed and based upon 19th century fictions of autonomy (Huysen 1992:70); a central element in the call to migrate. In this sense, I argue that, partly reinforced by the promotional nature of the initiative (furthermore realized in the hyper-public and hyper-visible public space offered by internet platforms), nationality is constructed and presented as a set of values that may be adopted as a “lifestyle”, i.e. seen as within the realm of individual choices.

The primary sources for this study are the websites <https://freiheitdurchauswandern.de> and <http://erwin-annau.com> (a1 and a2 respectively) and three of a series of 9 interviews with the man behind the project at an “Alternative Media” YouTube channel (b1, b2, b3). Finally, this data is complemented with the analysis of the collection of comments from videos published on the “El Paraiso Verde” YouTube Channel between 3 November 2016 and 8 June 2020. This entails a total of 1055 comments from 312 different users (c).

1.2 Lifestyle Migration and the Postcolonial Question

Lifestyle migrants are active agents taking advantage of opportunities that are currently available to them on a global scale but, at the same time, they admire values and practices which they understand to represent the past (Benson / O'Reilly 2009a:24). Therefore, a recurrent theme in studies addressing this type of migration are imaginaries (Anderson 2006), and their crucial role in the material and social construction of particular places offering an alternative way of living, and in motivating individuals to abandon their home location in pursuing a better life elsewhere.

Since colonial imaginaries and neo-colonial relations are prevalent in lifestyle migration, Benson (2013:316) argues for post-coloniality – recognizing that its reach extends even into contexts that were not directly colonized – as a framework for understanding new lifestyle flows. In relation to the post-colonial question, in his study of German colonialism and its legacy, Friedrichsmeyer (1998:20) posed the question: *“To what extent do colonial thought patterns reverberate even in today's relations between Germans and so-called foreigners?”* The question is particularly relevant to this study, since, as I show, its discourse is rooted in a völkisch ideology and constructs an identity primarily based on hierarchical and Eurocentric understandings of (foreign) people.

2. Analysis

2.1 Alternative Media and the Alternative Right

The promotional text published on the website (a1) opens with five yes-or-no questions, imposing in that way a strong filter to access its reading (See Image 1). The text requires that these first five questions be answered with a yes for the reader to continue reading. It proposes a worldview where these values are taken for granted and addresses viewers according to these assumptions (that they are worried, feeling growing

discomfort etc.). Furthermore, it reproduces a dialogical model (a dialogue in absence) by fictionalizing the presence of its interlocutor.

The use of these rhetorical questions instead of assertions, functions as an intensifier and brings a sense of urgency, obviously accentuated using the present tense: Do you feel growing discomfort? We find, moreover, all of the stylistic features common to the genre of marketing in this excerpt: The spur to make a ‘good deal’, the urgency (“JETZT⁴”), appealing to a person in need (“*Fühlen Sie wachsendes Unbehagen?*”⁵), the use of the imperative verbal form (“*Kommen Sie zu uns*”⁶), and the promise to solve all of your problems through an economic transaction or “investment” (“*Sie können ein Leben in Freiheit genießen*”⁷) (a1).



Image 1. A screenshot of the webpage <https://freiheitdurchauswandern.de/> (a1). The titles read: “LIFE in FREEDOM in PARAGUAY” and “Are you LONGING for REAL FREEDOM?” Caption taken on 30 September 2019.

The topos of urgency (Wodak 2015:186) is, therefore, used in a double sense: to create the effect of a threat (politically motivated), and to frame the project as an ‘opportunity’. Moreover, it resorts to the ‘winning formula’, according to Bergmann (2020:2015), of contemporary nativist populists, found in the dual process of emphasizing fear and then scapegoating: *“First fear is created and then blame is attributed. The*

fear is used to legitimize their means of protecting the people, of putting up barriers, closing borders, ousting immigrants, exiting international institutions, emasculating the elite, and so on”.

The elements described are ostensible characteristics of right-wing populist discourse. Emotions and their affects are, to name an obvious element, central to right-wing populist mobilization, since its rhetoric is designed to tap into feelings of resentment and exploit them politically (Betz 2002:198). This explains why Ruth Wodak (2015) coined the term “politics of fear”. In this sense, and following this author, we see how in the selected fragment, the topos of the “force of facts” is reinforced by this closed question: “*Fühlen Sie wachsendes Unbehagen über die Bevorzugung von Millionen von Wirtschaftsflüchtlingen, die Überfremdung und über den Verlust unserer Heimat, unserer Kultur und unserer Werte?*”⁸ This, indeed, simply and questioningly takes for granted the premise it is centred on. Through the strategy of assuming a shared basis of understanding (interpretative framework), the narrative reinforces its ideas as ‘common sense’.

Among the typical strategies of right-wing populist discourse in its promotional texts and interviews we find the arrogance of ignorance (appeals to common sense and traditional conservative values linked to aggressive exclusionary rhetoric) (Wodak 2015:6), a rhetoric of exclusion (Wodak 2015:26), building in-groups and out-groups of Us and Them, the topoi of threat, the saviour and history, the creation of a homogenous ‘people’, strategies of justification and legitimation, as well as several forms of calculated ambivalence (Wodak 2015:94f).

The necessary toolkit of right-wing populist rhetoric (Wodak 2015:94ff), also includes strategies of “victim-perpetrator reversal”, “scapegoating”, “construction of conspiracy theories” (construction of unreal scenarios) and, finally, techniques linked to popular celebrity culture (Wodak 2015:27).

Of the latter, the most salient in our context is the manner in which the promoter of the project addresses the audience at the beginning of each of the videos he posts on YouTube with the statement: “*Hallo, liebe El Paraiso Verde Fans*”. But not only this: a salient element of the website is a link that redirects to a video interview between the person behind the project and a man called Robert Stein at a YouTube Channel called “*Stein Zeit*” (“Stone Age” / “Stone Time”) (see Image 2).

Through this video, the initiative is positioned within a particular field of signification and adheres to a singular kind of aesthetics and worldview. By means of this collaboration, “El Paraiso Verde” participates within the so-called ‘Alternative Media’, which have an online audience of their own that reaches millions of people every day. They are promoted as being a ‘media counterpart’ to the ‘mainstream or mass media’, which they usually refer to pejoratively as *Lügenpresse* (lying press), a term with roots in the National Socialist era. The Alternative Media channel “Stein Zeit TV”, which may be positioned within this sphere of discourse, has played a central role in the diffusion of the initiative: settlers (c) claim to have learned about El Paraiso Verde through this ‘alternative’ channel (and not through the project’s website or its associated YouTube channel).

The actors of the Alternative Media network forge a media-political network with voluntary, loose but stable contacts with the aim of influencing public opinion by setting issues and perspectives. Some German scholars (Fuchs / Middelhoff 2019) identify these networks as part of the so-called *Neue Rechte*, a categorization that, according to the political scientist Richard Stöss (2000:40), serves to distinguish between groupings that are oriented towards authoritarian or fascist methods of rule from the Weimar Republic (*Alte Rechte*) and those that strive for contemporary solutions adapted to the national and world political conditions changed by the results of World War II (*Neue Rechte*).

The categorization as *Neue Rechte* remains valid and only recently has the label *Alternative Rechte* been taken up by German-language scholars. Particularly noteworthy is the contribution made by the gender and media scholar Simon Strick (2021), who characterizes the *Alternative Rechte* as promoting what he calls “reflexive fascism”. Strick emphasizes that while the quintessence of this movement is to produce emotions and affections, it is also to propose alternative ‘escape routes’: “This right does not present itself as a fear producer – but as an agency for alternatives, and sometimes: optimism” (Strick 2021:27). He adds:

“The alternative right is not concerned with inculcating ‘popular anger’ against ‘the world’ in every citizen and radicalizing them for the ballot box. To induce ‘malaise’ as broadly as possible and to valorize this state of mind as a positive orientation achievement – these aspects are much more important than ideological doctrines like ‘racial’ superiority or supremacy” (Strick 2021:81).

His conceptualization of “reflexive fascism” provides a crucial basis for understanding how the ideological discursive elements of this initiative that ultimately converge in emigration to Paraguay are articulated. Returning to the theories of Ulrich Beck and his idea of the “risk society”, Strick (2021:117) argues that right-wing fantasies of media homogenization, anti-white racism, hostility towards Germans, cultural alienation, and the takeover of power by ‘cosmopolitan elites’ invert the accusation of fascism; the alternative right seeing the ‘others’ as the fascists.

Hence, reflexive fascism puts into practice culturally what Beck describes mainly in the realm of economics: the instruments of stabilization in post-fascist societies are reinterpreted as sources of risk and scenarios of danger for the established majorities (Strick 2021:117). Reflexive fascism is thus a mode of thinking and a form of agitation: political forms and social-media

relations are reinterpreted as sources of risk for “white populations”, thus linking local conditions and observations to a global situation of danger, i.e. an atmosphere that can be felt everywhere, in which “being white”, “being a man”, “being a patriot” and other majoritarian positions can be considered conditions of danger and precariousness (Strick 2021:120).

The interview with Robert Stein functions as a supportive element in relation to the general arguments justifying migration to Paraguay (i.e. the conditions in German-speaking countries that force and validate the decision to migrate). In this video (b1), E.A. describes himself as a *Querdenker* (lateral-thinker) who is looking for freedom and independence. By describing himself in this manner, E.A. sends signals towards a specific audience and positions his speech within a specific discursive field. The concept of “Querdenker” – which has become public knowledge following demonstrations in several German-speaking cities against the measures taken to stop the advance of Covid-19 – serves to define a very specific subject, who claims to be part of a counterculture, and to think for him or herself.



Image 2. Erwin Annau as a guest of Robert Stein (b2), holding the N°10 ‘Spezial’ Magazine “Compact”, the cover of which reads: “Islam: Gefahr für Europa” (Islam: A Danger for Europe). Caption taken on the 13 May 2021.

The word, furthermore, has been appropriated by different political movements in the German language, as a way of unifying a position that transcends the traditional left and right in politics through the category of *Querfront*. Although decentralized and heterogeneous, *Querfront* constitutes a right-wing populist network formed by different journalists, politicians and content producers who, using both the traditional media and the new digital media, promote a heterogeneous set of ideas typical of right-wing, conservative, racist and often radical ideology which, as we saw with Wodak (2015:94), also uses conspiracy theories to justify its prejudices.

In total, E.A. and Stein produced nine video-interviews. Among them, one entitled “*Migration – Bedrohung der Deutschen Werte?*”⁹ (b2) stands out for its highly ideological content, which is presented as a support to justify the need for migration to Paraguay, namely, reinforcing the sentiment of “not feeling at home” anymore. The content of this video, uploaded on 14 February 2017, built upon a wave of populist stigmatization against Muslims: the results of the Leipziger Authoritarian Study from 2018, showed the rise in devaluation of groups perceived as “foreign” or “deviant”, such as the Sinti and Roma, asylum seekers and Muslims (Decker 2018:18).

The anti-immigrant positions expressed in this interview are explicitly xenophobic and racist, but they also show discursive strategies that are typical of the new right, whose advocates do not generally resort to overt race-based racism, but to what is called cultural or differentialist racism. “Not feeling at home anymore” is the metaphor used to express such racism, but we will see below other ways in which it is expressed, also disguised in its “cultural” variant. The following statement in the description of the video is particularly striking, as it anticipates the type of nationalism or nativism that the interview advocates, which goes further ideologi-

cally speaking. It is a nationalism that can dispense with territorial attachment because it is rooted in an imaginary in which the depositaries of national values are the members of a people or Volk. The phrase reads: “*Deutschland ist nicht dort, wo wir es auf der Karte finden. Deutschland ist dort, wo die deutschen Werte noch etwas gelten*”¹⁰ (b2).

The following excerpt serves to better understand the ideological spectrum in which this phrase is located:

RS: Es ist utopisch glauben zu wollen, dass die, die jetzt alle kommen, die sich in ihre eigenen Enklaven sich zurückziehen, in Berlin-Neukölln oder sonst irgendwie. Dass sie auch nur ansatzweise sich als Deutsche fühlen, vor allem wenn wir Deutschen uns gar nicht selber als Deutsche fühlen wollen.

EA: So ist es.

RS: Warum sollen?!

EA: //Du darfst ja heute nicht einmal sagen du bist Deutscher, [da] bist du gleich in der rechten Ecke//

RS: // Warum sollen die Migranten Lust haben, sich quasi in einer Volksgemeinschaft einzureihen, die sich selber gar nicht als Deutsch gerne sehen darf?

EA: Die sich schon selbst abschafft. Genau.

RS: Das ist ja quasi vom Gesetz verboten sich als Deutschen zu fühlen. Wenn ich Claudia Roth anschau und andere Politikerinnen die Banner vor sich hertragen, wo sie draufsteht “Nie wieder Deutschland”, und so weiter//, die sich als stellvertretende Bundesstadtpräsidentin [sic] darum, dann frage ich mich...

EA: //Ich weiß. Deutschland schafft sich ab.¹¹ (b2, Min. 9.40).

In this excerpt, the interlocutors use the strategy of victim-perpetrator reversal and justification to validate their nationalism: They are forced not to be or feel like Germans (while the migrants are not forced to resign their nationalities, it is implicitly stated in a parallelism). The statement presupposes inevitability for any migrant to feel like a “German” to live in Germany. More striking, however, is the fact that Robert Stein uses the concept “*Volksgemeinschaft*”

accompanied by the verb “einreihen” from the military semantic field. The use of this concept is an unmistakable indicator of extreme right-wing ideology in Germany, since the use of the term “*Volks-gemeinschaft*” goes hand in hand with an ideology of human inequality (Röpke / Pöhlmann / Duwe 2020:6).

This obliges us to consider the ‘deteritorialized’ character of the kind of nationalism proclaimed in the interview on migration as a threat to German values and its phrase “Germany is not where we find it on the map”: because in accordance with the *völkisch* worldview, the German people are not equated with the citizens of the Federal Republic of Germany but are defined ethnically:

“Historically, the völkisch movement at the beginning of the 20th century tried to counter the supposed uprootedness of a modern, industrial society with roots in a community that had supposedly grown naturally. The feeling of belonging to an avant-garde of German blood welded people together. From around 1900 onwards, the term “völkisch” became established in German usage. Behind this is a racist point of view and the desire for the radical transformation of a democratic society” (Röpke / Pöhlmann / Duwe 2020:6).

It is worth pointing out that the political right, here especially of course National Socialism, for all its rhetoric of inclusion, conceived of the “*Volks-gemeinschaft*” primarily in its exclusionary dimension (Wildt 2014:2).

“Instrumentally or culturally, collective actors would tend to make their discourses resonant in the publics they want to address, by bridging (i.e. linking) their own traditional frames with those present in the environment” (Caiani / Della Porta 2010 2). The word “*Volks-gemeinschaft*”, in this sense, provides an interpretative framework and, as has already been argued, a very specific one. The phrase “*Deutschland schafft sich ab*”, which E.A. repeats twice in the interview, works in the same manner. The phrase is not of course his creation but

is a direct reference to the bestselling book by Thilo Sarrazin – former member of the social democratic SPD party – *Deutschland schafft sich ab: wie wir unser Land aufs Spiel setzen*¹² (2010).

In the book – which created such a controversy that the author was forced to resign from the SPD – Sarrazin condemns immigration policy and the benefits of multiculturalism. Such positions are inscribed in the political trend towards nativism in Europe, which is a core ideological feature of the far-right based on perceiving all ‘non-natives’ (people or ideas) as threatening. *“In most European countries the nativist goal of a monocultural state and the contemporary reality of a multicultural society create significant problems for the populist radical right”* (Mudde 2007:144).

Intrinsic to nativism is the idea that foreigners or immigrants must integrate or adapt to the host culture in order to be part of society. E.A. refers in the interview to the time he lived in the United States when he had to learn the language perfectly and adapt to the local culture: *“Ich musste die Sprache lernen. Ich habe mich mit der Kultur auseinandergesetzt. Man muss sich in der Gesellschaft, in der man lebt, doch anpassen”*¹³ (b2, Min. 13. 8). What stands out in this statement is his emphasis on culture (and no longer on ethnicity or race). While racism emphasizes biological or cultural difference and, thus, ultimately demands the exclusion, marginalization or even eradication of ‘the others’, ethnocentrism considers one’s own superiority to be a commodity that is to be mediated and tends to assume that other peoples or ethnic groups must assimilate (Butterwegge 2002:56).

E.A. frames his words in an attempt to distance himself from being labelled right-wing, nationalist or even, at worst, a racist:

“Und jetzt kommen wir zum Thema Deutschland. Die Leute fragen mich immer: Bist du ein Rechter? Nee, überhaupt nicht. Deutschland ist nicht der blonde Blauäugige, das hat mit Deutschland

*nichts mehr zu tun. Ja? Das ist schon lange aus. Das haben wir schon lange begraben. Deutschland ist eine Wertegemeinschaft. Eine Wertegemeinschaft. Nämlich eine Wertegemeinschaft, wo Menschen sich in einem Land zusammengefunden haben. Auf der Thema der Freiheit, der Solidarität, der Freundschaft, des Mitgefühls, der Ehrlichkeit, der Handschlagqualität, des Verantwortungsbewusstseins, der Verlässlichkeit! Das ist Deutschland!*¹⁴ (b2, Min.19.57).

As this excerpt shows, xenophobic claims are mostly tempered with a form of cultural racism. By justifying these ideas through culture, they offer a justification for racism that is less open to attack than biological variants. According to Balibar (1991) it is a racism which, at first sight, does not postulate the superiority of certain groups or peoples in relation to others but ‘only’ the harmfulness of abolishing state borders, the incompatibility of lifestyles and traditions; in short, it is what P.A. Taguieff (Cited in Balibar 1991:21) has rightly called a “differentialist racism”.

The homogenization of a national people and an essentialization of its culture, a typical strategy employed in populist discourses, goes hand in hand with the harnessing of empty signifiers (Laclau 2005:69), of which ‘freedom’ is generally one of the favourites. This strategy is clear in the next excerpt:

*“E.A: Und selbst wenn ich nicht Christ bin. Das sind auch Werte, die drin du in Buddhismus findest, die findest du wahrscheinlich auch in einen Gewissen aus dem Islam, ja? Diese Werte, das ist Deutschland. Deutschland ist eine Wertegemeinschaft, die auf Freiheit, auf Solidarität, auf Verlässlichkeit, auf Handschlagqualität, auf dem aufgebaut ist. Das hat Deutschland groß gemacht. Und die schwarze, schwarze Afrikanische, Serviererin in Kaffeehaus in Hamburg, die auf Leute offen zugeht, die den in den Augen schaut, die lacht, die eine positive Energie rüberbringt: das ist eine Deutsche für mich!*¹⁵ (b2, Min.20.40).

As is the nature of populist discourses, the listed values are so general (and devoid of content) that, as E.A. himself states, they can be found in almost any religion. The usefulness of empty signifiers, however, and what makes them so effective in the populist discourse, is their openness to interpretation: *“the so-called ‘poverty’ of the populist symbols is the condition of their political efficacy – as their function is to bring to equivalential homogeneity a highly heterogeneous reality, they can only do so on the basis of reducing to a minimum their particularistic content”* (Panizza 2005:40). Moreover, since it is such subjective characteristics that could define German nationality (smiling, having “positive energy”), it necessarily falls on the observer (a ‘bio’ or ‘legitimate’ German, perhaps?) to recognize the other as a co-national.

2.2 Conspiracy Thinking and the Anastasia Movement

In a study in psychology which acknowledges conspiracy theories as a means of constructing and communicating a set of personal values, Raab et al. (2013:1) claim: *“By suggesting that our personal freedom is at stake, conspiracy theories create awareness for the (potential) threats to human autonomy and individuality. Conspiracy theories function, therefore, as an attempt to emphasize a personal set of values and thus to organize and regulate one’s life experience in a meaningful way”*. In this way, a migratory project of this magnitude (which implies a real leap into the unknown, offered as an opportunity to lead a truly autonomous life, even severing the ties of citizenship with a nation state – not only as a political order but also as an organizer and regulator of community life) appears as an excellent opportunity to regain that agency and sense of autonomy.

Anti-vaccine positions which abound in the YouTube comments section (c) are often defended stringently by the channel’s Community Manager, who is also in charge of filming and editing

the videos. Following the endeavour of discrediting everything related to Germany and promoting migration to Paraguay, this person portrays a simplistic comparison of the two countries, with Germany and Europe depicted as overregulated and with a lifestyle based on consumption, and Paraguay as a country in which people are happier and healthier:

“(...) Mit dem ganzen ‘know how’ der Deutschen, also die gelernten Bedürfnisse, Autoversicherung, TÜV, Lebensversicherung, Morgen- u Abendcreme, 2x im Monat shoppen gehen – natürlich kommt man dann als Europäer damit nicht hin. Aber hast du ein kleines Stück Land, bebaust es, oder wohnst zur Miete aber im paraguayischen Stil, lernst es ohne Klimaanlage klarzukommen. u u u. Dann brauchst du wirklich viel weniger als in Europa, vor allem wächst hier ja alles an Früchten, Gemüse u u u. sehr schnell.”¹⁶ (c)

From the psychoanalytic developmental theory of separation–individuation, it is accepted that in favouring independence, a euphoric reaction ensues after the decision to migrate and is the result of the operation of defence mechanisms that made this decision possible. Among these mechanisms are a manic denial of dependency needs, devaluation of the homeland, and idealization of the new country (Mirsky / Peretz 2006:52). However, in this long commentary, in which the emigrant retaliates against his country of origin, it is also observed that the idealization of Paraguay extends even to the idealization of poverty, and is used as an argument to defend his ideas against traditional medicine:

“Die sagen wir mal, armen Menschen hier haben eine viel höhere Lebensqualität als die Sozialhilfeempfänger in Deutschland und vor allem lächeln sie den ganzen Tag. Ich habe in den eineinhalb Jahren wo ich jetzt hier bin erst einen Rollator bei einer Person gesehen, und ich bin in Paraguay schon viel rumgekommen – also die sind hier alle viel gesünder, können die Krankenkasse nicht bezahlen, was

vielleicht der Grund für ihre Gesundheit ist – kein Arzt, keine Pharma, keine Krankheit”¹⁷ (c)

These statements are congruent with the general worldview of the members of the Anastasia Movement, for whom *“there should be nothing ‘artificial’ used in the process of healing: no medical interventions, no pharmaceutical products. Everyone is believed to have the ability to recover from disease on their own, if they lead healthy ‘natural’ lives and heal using natural remedies”* (Ozhiganova 2017:191). The Anastasia Movement is based on *The Ringing Cedars of Russia* series by Vladimir Megre, which is comprised of ten books published between 1996 and 2010 and which *“beneath all their esoteric and cosmological details, advocate (...) a society based on self-sufficient, multigenerational homesteads practicing small-scale agriculture”* (Davidov, 2015:3). The protagonist of this series is Anastasia, whose *“desire to create the ideal society and the ideal human could be achieved through acquiring ‘patrimony’, in the form of a plot of land of at least one hectare, where families would settle in accordance with her teachings”* (Ozhiganova 2017:180).

Readers of Megre’s books tend to share a complex of ideas and practices characteristic of the New Age milieu, such as a fascination with Eastern philosophy, an aspiration toward naturalness, vegetarianism, belief in the materiality of thought, positive thinking, alternative approaches to the history of Russia, and the predominant idea – the dissatisfaction with the contemporary path of development of technocratic civilization, combined with belief in the possibility of building a bright future here and now (Andreeva 2018:89). Although the settlement is not specifically promoted as such, many sectors of the planned colony carry the name “Anastasia Circle” (See Image 3), and many of the precepts of this New Age movement – such as the application of permaculture principles, the focus on health and alternative healing methods, a spiritual connection between indivi-

dual and nature, as well as the emphasis on developing an autonomous and self-sufficient life – are present in the promotional discourses of the initiative.

While it is tempting to label this movement as something “new”, as an original and unique phenomenon, emerging entirely from the darkest recesses of the Internet, this is of course not the case. Right-wing extremist networks in German-speaking countries that propagate *völkisch* ideology or promote the retreat into such settlements (under the title of Anastasia or others) are definitely not confined to the Internet. As Röpke and Speit (2019) detail after extensive research, the structures used by the right-wing reach into parliament and established politicians, and they use digital as well as traditional media. The book series *Anastasia*, with the subtitle *The Sounding Cedars of Russia*, has also been finding more and more enthusiastic readers and followers in Germany, especially in the esoteric scene (See Pöhlmann 2019).

among followers outside of Russia, and specifically in German-speaking circles. In fact, the idea of the return to nature, central today in so-called lifestyle migration, was also central in the migration that took place from Germany to South America and also particularly to Paraguay during the late 19th century. Paraguay, in the discourse of this migratory project is imagined as pre-modern, in juxtaposition with the ‘rural’ world. In speaking to a group of Paraguayan politicians and neighbours (with a simultaneous translator) E.A. addressed his neighbours in the following manner: “*Ihr seid Indianer und Indianer sind um so viel weiser als die Europäer oder Amerikaner, die sich ach so Obergeheißlichkeit vorkommen. Ihr alle habt meinen vollen Respekt*” (a2).¹⁸ In this speech, he discursively reverses the ‘progress’ and ‘civilization’ paradigm: “Indians” are depicted as the real winners and Europeans the losers of this long process of colonization and the modernization program that came with it.



Image 3: A screenshot of a video published at the YouTube Channel “El Paraiso Verde TV”, where the name ‘Anastasia’ is used to name different sections of the settlement. Caption taken on the 18 April 2021.

Also, the *völkisch* ideology has an anti-modern and anti-industrial component formed around the idea of a return to a natural life. This is a point upon which the Anastasian worldview is perfectly congruent with this ideology, and which could also explain its spread

He asked rhetorically: “*Ihr glaubt, dass ihr hier in einem rückständigen Stück Land fern ab von der Zivilisation lebt?*” (a2)¹⁹

The ‘inverse’ migratory movement is, in this sense, accompanied by an ideology that also symbolically inverts the poles between the ‘losers’ and ‘winners’ of globalization. E.A.’s discourse extolling indigenous knowledge, far from being a

de-colonial discourse, is inscribed with the fantasies of colonial imaginaries. As pointed out by Dussel (1993:65), modernity is not an exclusively European phenomenon but is constituted in a dialectical relation with a non-European alterity. Comparing the two realities again in a Manichean style (the Indigenous, rural, underdeveloped local and the 'modern' yet decadent Europe) E.A. aims to gain the sympathy of the audience by adulating and romanticizing their living conditions:

*“Ihr seht einen strahlend blauen Himmel. Ihr seht die Sterne und sogar die Milchstraße in der Nacht. Bitte geht vor eure Häuser schaut nach oben und dankt Gott, dass ihr den blauen Himmel und die Sterne, die er am ersten Tag geschaffen hat, sehen dürft. Die Menschen in Europa und den USA dürfen das nicht mehr sehen”.*²⁰

2.3 The Digital and the National

As noted by Eriksen (2007:1), despite the enthusiasm of the cyber utopian thinkers, also in the 'global era' of movement and deterritorialization, the Internet is used to strengthen, rather than weaken, national identities. The convergence of the factors motivating this migration is inscribed, moreover, in a specific moment of global economic development, modes of production, and cultural practices that are in line with it. What Comaroff and Comaroff (2001:15-16) called “the Age of Millennial Capitalism”, dispenses with social class, which comes to be understood as “yet another personal trait or lifestyle choice”. As Shoshan (2016:21) in his study of the Germany's right-wing extremist world explained, under late capitalism, “*the nation surfaces as an alternative to globalist consumerism and commodified subjectivity but at once, too, as itself a niche market and a consumer identity for the economically excluded*”. Digital media, moreover, and specifically the proliferation of digital platforms, have played a role in making digital nationalism and nations quali-

tatively different from their analogue predecessors. Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez (2021:333) discuss three such qualitative changes: diversification, polarization, and commodification. Firstly, the participatory affordances of digital technologies have enabled a wider range of actors to contribute to public communication, thus making national imagination and nationalisms potentially more diverse but also more unpredictable. Secondly, this diversity had gone hand in hand with a greater fragmentation and polarisation of national imagination, with individuals and groups clutching to 'niche' versions of national identity, as well as mobilising more extreme forms of nationalism. Thirdly, the prevailing political economy of digital platforms means that, in the online sphere, nations are increasingly imagined and communicated as communities of consumers.

As Giddens (1991:84) emphasized, “*with the increasing globalization of media, a multifarious number of milieux are, in principle, rendered visible to anyone who cares to glean the relevant information*”. If we add to this the fact that algorithmic functions help to create “Echo-Chambers”, that is an environment in which the opinion, political leaning, or belief of an individual about a certain topic are reinforced due to repeated interactions with peers who share similar points of view (Cinelli et al. 2021:2), we understand the role of digital media in helping to create imagined communities with very specific, almost niche ideas, such as those examined here, where the slightest difference is censored.

This, moreover, is superimposed onto the public stage of social networks, which imbues all content with a character of relaxed, individual life-choices. The binding character of the *Volksgemeinschaft* also functions in these circles, given its power to guarantee the production of autonomy, that of marking this border: it stages an act of sovereignty which, in the creation of a closed community – literally with

demarcated borders and security agents at the entrance – becomes a factual reality.

3. Conclusions

The listed questions opening the call for migrants on the website promoting the project of migrating to Paraguay, the too-often aggressive interactions among YouTube users when discussing conspiracy-related topics and political issues (migration, climate change or vaccination) and the continuous reference to sources such as Compact Magazine, among other right-wing Media, show that these ideologies are indexing the desired identities which the applicants must fulfil to become members of the new community. The migratory process implies the transfer from a virtual community, which gathers in networks (through so-called ‘alternative’ media) to a material community, settled in a territory.

As I have argued, the *Volksgemeinschaft* is built on the myth of camaraderie, but the concept has a merely instrumental character: the ‘community’ can only be created and maintained through the ‘violence’ or cohesion exercised by its leader; by the constant drawing of frontiers between ‘us’ and ‘them’. The novelty introduced by El Paraiso Verde is the use of a less overtly racist form of exclusion: a differential cultural racism which, sustained by a more accepted and undisputed Eurocentrism, leaves the acceptance or rejection of the perceived ‘other’ up to individual common sense, sheathed in the image of certain universal values.

Autonomy, furthermore, constitutes one of the main driving forces in this migratory project and is, certainly, the element that brings together all of the ideological elements analyzed in the previous sections. There, in the promise of autonomy, of real agency, lies the central force of this migration project where all elements described come together: the Anastasia Movement promises autarchy and independence, conspiracy theories seduce for the same reason, and finally lifestyle migration

offers the translation of these impulses into practice, since lifestyle migration is marked by choice rather than lack of choice; lifestyle migrants are agents of migration (Benson / Osbaldiston 2014:217). But, as Fromm (1965:223) indicated: “*Most people are convinced that as long as they are not overtly forced to do something by an outside power, their decisions are theirs, and that if they want something, it is they who want it*”.

The closed community in Paraguay offers, besides a complete change in life trajectory, a solution to the ontological need to draw borders: it is at a certain point the territorial material realization of that division (between deserving and not deserving citizens, between believers and non-believers). In this article, I have shown only some of the colonial aspects that permeate the project. Among the most striking is obviously the need to construct oneself as different from a distinct ‘other’ whose identity and lifestyle is romanticized and essentialized, by understanding it within the European dichotomy of modernism / anti-modernism.

4. Primary Sources

a1: URL: <https://freiheitdurchauswandern.de>. The website is not available anymore and redirects now to <https://paraiso-verde.com/>. The previous version of the website could be accessed here: <https://web.archive.org/web/20190901030102/https://freiheitdurchauswandern.de/> [accessed 20 December 2021].

a2: URL: <http://erwin-annau.com> [accessed 20 December 2021].

b1: Video: “Freiheit durch Auswandern - El Paraiso Verde” published on the YouTube Channel “Stein-Zeit” on January 30th, 2017. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-25T3iY87Xo> [accessed 20 December 2021].

b2: Video: “Migration – Bedrohung der Deutschen Werte?” published on the YouTube Channel “Stein-Zeit” on February 14th, 2017. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZmPKAhkmhc> [accessed 20 December 2021].

b3: Video: “El Paraiso Verde: gemeinsam in die Zukunft - Sylvia und Dr. Erwin Annau” published on the YouTube Channel “Stein-Zeit” on July 19th, 2017. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1adUb56553c> [accessed 20 December 2021].

c: Comments elicited from videos published on the “El Paraiso Verde” YouTube Channel between a video released on the 3 November 2016 and from 8 June 2020. This entails a total of 1055 comments from 312 different users. From the 15 July 2020 the comment section of the Channel was turned off and they are not accessible anymore. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/c/ElParaisoverde> [accessed 13 January 2020].

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Endnotes

1 “‘Individuality instead of mainstream’ is the motto of many holidaymakers. Increasingly, experienced travellers want to find more authenticity, atmosphere and individual offers”. All translations by the author, except where stated. URL: <http://www.tourismusanalyse.de/archiv/tourismusanalyse-2020/europaeische-reiseziele-2019/> [accessed 12 April 2021]

2 See: *German-speaking Covid Denialists Seek to Build Paradise in Paraguay*. 27.01.2022. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/27/paraguay-german-speaking-covid-denialists-settlement-new-paradise> [accessed 17 February 2022]; and *Der kurze Traum von der Impffreiheit*. 28.01.2022. URL: <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/amerika/paraguay-impfgegner-101.htm> [accessed 17 February 2022]

3 This online ethnography was carried out from late 2019 to mid-2020 and the data was collected in a systematic way. Online data collection methods offered me the opportunity to capture data without the constraints of geographical location: as the targeted audience are German speakers, they live mainly in Germany, Austria and Switzerland but even in other countries.

4 “NOW”.

5 “Do you feel a growing unease?”

6 “Come and join us”.

7 “You can enjoy a life of freedom”.

8 “Do you feel growing discomfort about the preferential treatment of millions of economic refugees, about foreign infiltration (Überfremdung) and about the loss of our homeland, our culture and our values?”

9 “Migration - a threat to German values?”

10 “Germany is not where we find it on the map. Germany is where German values still count for something”.

11 RS: “It is utopian to believe that all those who are coming, who withdraw into their own enclaves, in Berlin-Neukölln or somewhere else. That they will even begin to feel German, especially when we Germans don’t want to feel German ourselves.

EA: That’s how it is.

RS: Why should...?//

EA: //Today you are not even allowed to say you are German, [then] you are immediately a right-winger//.

RS: // Why should the migrants want to line up with a national community that is not even allowed to see itself as German?

EA: Which is already getting rid of itself. Exactly.

RS: It is practically forbidden by law to feel German. When I look at Claudia Roth and other politicians who carry banners in front of them that say: “Never again Germany“, and so on//, who are the deputy presidents of the German cities [sic], then I ask myself...

EA: //I know. Germany is getting rid of itself”.

12 “Germany is Getting Rid of Itself: How We Are Putting our Country at Risk”.

13 “I had to learn the language. I had to deal with the culture. You do have to adapt to the society you live in”.

14 “And now we come to the subject of Germany. People always ask me: “Well, are you a right-winger?“ And the answer is: well, not at all. Germany is not blond, blue-eyed. That has nothing to do with Germany anymore, nothing. It is long over. Yes? We buried it long ago. Germany is a values community, a values community. Namely a values Community where people have come together in a country on the theme of freedom, solidarity, friendship, compassion, honesty, quality of action, awareness of responsibility! Reliability! That is Germany!”

15 “And even if I am not a Christian. These are values that you still find in Buddhism. You probably also find them in a way of conscience in Islam, right?

They are the values. This is Germany. Germany is a community of values. To freedom, to solidarity, reliability, handshake quality, on which Germany is built. This is what has made Germany great. And the black, black African waitress in a coffee house in Hamburg, who goes openly to people, who looks into their eyes, who laughs, who brings a positive energy across. That is a German for me!”

16 “With all the “know how“ of the Germans, that is, the learned needs, car insurance, vehicle inspection, life insurance, morning and evening cream, going shopping twice a month – of course, as a European you can’t cope with that. But if you have a small piece of land, build on it, or live in a rented accommodation but in Paraguayan style, learn to get along without air-conditioning, etc., etc. Then you really need much less than in Europe, above all everything grows very quickly here in terms of fruit, vegetables, etc”.

17 “The poor people here, let’s say, have a much higher quality of life than the welfare recipients in Germany and, above all, they smile all day long. In the year and a half I’ve been here, I’ve only seen one person with a walker, and I’ve been around a lot in Paraguay – so they’re all much healthier here, they can’t pay for health insurance, which is maybe the reason for their health – no doctor, no pharmaceuticals, no illnesses”.

18 “You are Indians, and Indians are so much wiser than the Europeans or Americans who think they are oh so smart. You all have my full respect”. The full transcription is available on one of E.A.’s websites (a2) URL: <http://erwin-annau.com/paraiso-verde-trinkwasser> [accessed 20 December 2021].

19 “Do you think you live here in a backward piece of land, far from civilization?”

20 “You see a bright blue sky. You see the stars and even the Milky Way at night. Please go in front of your homes, look up and thank God that you can see the blue sky and the stars that He created on the first day. The people of Europe and the USA are no longer allowed to see this”.