



Whose moods? Anthropologists in a bubble

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Comment on Borneman, John, and Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi. 2017. "The concept of *Stimmung*: From indifference to xenophobia in Germany's refugee crisis." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7 (3): 105–135.

I am not qualified to comment on this article from the angle of the philosophers and psychoanalysts who supply its theoretical inspiration. Some Germans suggest that Martin Heidegger, were he alive today, would surely endorse the Alternative für Deutschland party, which features negatively in this article. Be that as it may, I am struck by the authors' ambition in constructing an anthropological analysis of "mood shifts" at the level of the German nation-state. They do so primarily on the basis of two fragmentary individual cases and a description of an awkward encounter with two refugee-strangers at a summer party in Berlin organized by the modern *Bildungsbürgertum*. I wonder how US-based anthropologists would react to a contribution by a European who analyzed the Trump rollercoaster of 2016–17 on the basis of a few longstanding friendships in Washington, reporting gleaned from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, and an ethnography of a birthday party to which a few young "dreamers" and even a few older irregular migrants from Mexico were invited along, to express the political solidarity of intellectual elites. To be fair, this garden party in Berlin is not in the same league as the Manhattan *radical chic* immortalized by Tom Wolfe. The authors make it clear that the capital of Germany is not representative of the country, and that their two interlocutors are hardly representative of the capital. Yet they wish to generalize



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about changing moods and emotions in a population of more than eighty million. How is this possible?

Apart from references to earlier analyses by social scientists, criminal statistics, and opinion poll data, the main source materials are three incidents that went viral in the German media between July 2015 and January 2016. As a resident of the country in this period, I can confirm that these cases are well known. The impact of the German-speaking Palestinian refugee girl's meeting with Chancellor Angela Merkel is perhaps exaggerated in this article. The context needs elucidation. The dog days of summer are a "dead" time for the German political classes and the press. Large swathes of the population take their vacations at the same time as US professors. In 2015, however, one subject was nonetheless attracting high levels of attention: the Greek debt crisis. The bailout referendum of July 5 highlighted tensions between Germany and Greece. It was followed by the unexpected capitulation of the Greek government to the forces of the Eurozone barely a fortnight later. During these weeks the German government was widely perceived to be arrogant, intransigent, and lacking humanitarian sympathy for the suffering of fellow EU citizens. This image was prominent in the media coverage at home as well as in Greece. In comparison with this unfolding story, the plight of Reem Sahwil attracted little attention.

This is pertinent to grasping the import of the second image discussed by the authors, that of Aylan Kurdi, the Kurdish child who drowned in the Aegean in early September when trying to reach Greece with his family. Photographs of this child certainly influenced the reception of Mrs. Merkel's dramatic gestures toward large waves of refugees/migrants that month. Without consulting other EU governments, she displayed a generosity that contrasted with her seemingly heartless replies to Reem Sahwil just six weeks earlier. The word *Willkommenskultur* entered the German language overnight, facilitated by selfies showing the chancellor smiling in the company of deserving refugees. These images quickly replaced those of the drowned infant. By now Hungary had joined Greece as the "repugnant other" of noble Germans, carrying out their duty to uphold the moral integrity of Europe. As Heath Cabot (2015) wrote shortly afterwards, "Thanks to scapegoats on the borders, certain European leaders and member states can then lay claim to humanitarian outlooks: Hungary becomes the new pariah, while Germany comes out smelling like a rose."

Unfortunately, the odors turned unpleasant within a few months, as exemplified by the sexual aggression in Cologne on the last evening of the year. The authors do not follow up their media-based account of this event with an individual case study. I can report from memory how the selfie images of Merkel with refugees were posted again and again throughout 2016, following each new terrorist outrage, in order to hold the chancellor responsible not only for a frightening security situation but also for deeply disturbing intercultural encounters throughout Germany. In 2017 the problems persist. The authorities still struggle to process over a million asylum applications. Public opinion is deeply divided on issues such as refugee entitlements to bring additional family members to Germany, and how to deport those whose claims for asylum are rejected. Dissatisfaction was reflected in the results of many regional elections (not just those noted in this article) and was confirmed in the triumphant performance (third place) of the Alternative für Deutschland party in the federal elections of September 2017.



Was the collective mood of the German nation really as volatile as the authors' media analysis over a six-month period implies? The two individuals interviewed by the authors do not seem unstable. Living as I do in a provincial city in the former East Germany, without having carried out any systematic research, I would suggest that the authors of this article are trapped in a bubble with predominantly liberal elites, the enthusiastic supporters of an ephemeral *Willkommenskultur*. These sentiments dominate at my research institution, and probably in my faculty at the local university. But these colleagues are cosmopolitan academics, most of them only temporary residents in this East German city. It is true that, in addition to those for whom the migrant crisis created new income opportunities, here as elsewhere, many citizens volunteered to help without remuneration during the last months of 2015; but a good many of these civil volunteers were disillusioned well before New Year's Eve. In pubs, sports clubs, doctors' waiting rooms, and more intimate social groups, the voices tended to be very different from that of Klaus—not xenophobic, but consistently skeptical and even cynical.

I suggest that what the authors term “xenophilia” was never embraced by more than a small fraction of the German population. The authors do not address the most interesting questions. How was it possible that, over several months in late 2015, media elites were able to purvey messages that were overwhelmingly uncongenial and implausible to most of their audiences? I recall hearing day after day on prime-time public television the reassurances of respected politicians and authoritative journalists that the population influx would benefit the German economy, and that no native German need worry about losing his/her job to a newcomer. In fact, as the authors correctly note in footnote 25, labor market competition is a reality for nonelite segments of the population (it is generally agreed that the newcomers can only be integrated when they have found work). It follows that, for many natives, in this sense at least, suspicion of foreigners has entirely rational grounds. Such natives are easy targets for propaganda of a xenophobic and often racist kind. This susceptibility increases when liberal elites ignore or deny the very real problems associated with such large-scale immigration—because they do not experience these problems in their own privileged life-worlds.¹

In short, to understand the “public moods” discussed by the authors, it is necessary to contextualize them and to disaggregate. The broad context is Germany's hegemonic position in the Eurozone, which in the summer of 2015 meant imposing austerity on fellow EU citizens. When Alexis Tsipras ignominiously caved in to the demands of the Eurozone ministers, many liberal and left-leaning Germans felt bad, even guilty. Angela Merkel recognized that the ensuing refugee crisis offered an opportunity to restore the “feelgood factor” in this influential section of the population, while at the same time serving the interests of German capital by lowering labor costs (Hann 2015). This economic context is neglected by most Western

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1. Particularly in the Pegida movement (mentioned by the authors), one of the most potent mobilizing words in these months was *Lügenpresse*. This can be seen as a forerunner of accusations of “fake news” in the Anglophone media of the Trump era; the main difference is that, since *Lügenpresse* harks back to a taunt of the Nazi era, it cannot be readily articulated in the public sphere, not even by leaders of the *Alternative für Deutschland* party.

journalists and academics alike, who find it convenient instead to pillory the populist politicians who exploit these conditions for their self-serving purposes. Continuing resistance in the Visegrád states to the imposition by the EU of “migrant quotas” is thus reported as a failure to display solidarity and humanitarian empathy. Closer inspection reveals that large sections of the populations of these states are obliged to migrate westward to obtain a job to support their families. They are the victims of a dysfunctional system in which the former Western Germany is the major winner. Within Germany, nearly thirty years after reunification, it is still common to hear West Germans speak disparagingly of their East German compatriots, who do indeed resent the continuing domination of West Germans in their own *Länder*, show a higher propensity to indulge in xenophobic behavior, and to vote for the Alternative. Yet this new party also managed to attract double-digit support among voters in the west in the federal elections of 2017.

Finally, can the psyche of such a divided society in the divided macroregion of Europe be grasped anthropologically on the basis of “interlocutor-based ethnography” of the kind provided in this article? The authors generalize about “Germans,” who are said to “attribute their support for migrants to many sources” (p. 120). It is certainly instructive to inquire into whether and how Germany’s distinctive history and an “originary collective experience” of being a refugee have a bearing on the way in which (some) refugees can function as “transformational objects” today. This seems to be a significant factor for “some Germans” (50 percent of the examples presented, i.e., Hans). (The authors are silent concerning the biography of Klaus.) Yet it is well known that the Associations of ethnic Germans forcibly resettled in the new boundaries of the Federal Republic in the wake of World War II are extremely conservative and deeply unsympathetic to all forms of non-German immigration. More recent non-German immigrants (the *Gastarbeiter* and their successors) also tend to be critical, publicly and privately, of current policies, which are prejudicial both to their opportunities on the labor market and more generally to their standing in German society.

None of these critical comments are intended to refute the authors’ stimulating suggestion that 2015 may have inaugurated a new era, analogous to the end of the Cold War in 1989. However, a balanced anthropological account of mood shifts needs to be grounded in more systematic research. It should pay more attention to those large sections of the population whose opinions, values, and emotions are far from fickle, and who have felt let down (if not entirely abandoned) by their traditional political parties right across the spectrum throughout the highly mediated events of the last two years.

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