

‘POLITICS OF RESENTMENT’ IN ‘PLACES THAT DON’T MATTER’ – A COMPARISON OF WISCONSIN AND EAST GERMANY

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The election of Donald Trump as United States President, Brexit, and the electoral success of populist radical right parties in Europe have shattered political science on both sides of the Atlantic. Consequently, a rapidly growing number of publications tries to explain these events. One of the most innovative and influential attempts is Katherine Cramer’s ethnographic study of rural Wisconsinites. She argues that the key drivers of polarisation in the US are resentment against urban elites and public employees resulting from the massive economic inequalities caused by the 2008 financial crisis.

This raises the question in how far Cramer’s findings can be used to explain similar developments in Europe. To answer this question, I conduct a comparative case study of Wisconsin and East Germany, a region where political polarisation is high and populist parties are above-average successful. Therefore, I use a novel approach by comparing Cramer’s ethnographic results from the US with public opinion data from Germany. I argue, that resentments and polarisation in East Germany were not primarily caused by economic inequalities, but instead triggered by the 2015 refugee crisis and cultural change. In addition, I show that the economy plays a smaller role for ‘the politics of resentment’ in East Germany than in Wisconsin because of the stronger welfare systems in Europe.

1 .Introduction

Katherine Cramer's award-winning book 'The Politics of Resentment – Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker' begins with the description of a shocking conversation between the authors' friend Tom and a stranger at a gas station in Wisconsin. Tom, who drives a Prius decorated with bumper stickers that clearly identify him as a supporter of the United States (US) Democrats, aimed to start a chat with another car driver at the station. But after looking at Tom's car and recognizing him as a liberal the stranger simply said: "I don't talk to people like you" (Cramer 2016: 3). I myself experienced similar situations several times while working as a journalist with a strong urban appearance for a newspaper in rural East Germany. To describe the phenomenon that "people, in casual conversation, are treating each other as enemies" (ibid.) Cramer puts forward the term 'politics of resentment'.

In this light, I aim to explain the reasons for the increase in 'politics of resentment' in western societies by comparing the ethnographic results that Cramer produced in rural Wisconsin with public opinion data from East Germany. My main argument in this comparative case study is that besides the fact that rural Wisconsinites and East Germans have a similar mindset regarding community spirit as well as a strong anti-elitist and anti-urban attitude, the key reasons for the increase in 'politics of resentment' differ significantly. While the main driver of polarisation in Wisconsin is economic by nature, East German resentments manifest themselves in the cultural and anti-immigrant dimension. I discuss the reasons for this difference and conclude that the polarisation in the United States is a delayed consequence of the 2008 financial crisis and the comparatively weak welfare state, while the resentments in East Germany were primarily triggered by the refugee crisis and are facilitated by a difficult democratic tradition in the former communist part of Germany. This essay is structured as follows: In the first part, I define the concept 'politics of resentment' and describe the recent political developments in Wisconsin and East Germany. Secondly, I discuss different theoretical explanations for the increase of political polarisation as well as for the above-average success of populist candidates who surf on the underlying resentments and apply them to Wisconsin and East Germany. Thereby, I differentiate between economic and cultural explanations, an approach which is in line with the literature on public opinion (Kriesi et al. 2006,

Caughey, O'Grady and Warshaw 2017). Building upon this analysis, I discuss why the resentments in East Germany and Wisconsin manifest themselves in different dimensions.

Bearing the methodological literature in mind (Landman 2008, Slater and Ziblatt 2013), I designed this essay as a comparative case study. In other words: I aim to generate findings about developments that happen in several industrialised countries by a detailed comparison of two individual cases (Gerring 2008 and 2009). Obviously, the depth of the analysis involves certain trade-offs regarding the breadth of the results (Gerring 2009). Since the selection of cases always involves biases, it is a vital step in the research process which definitely affects the results of the study (Geddes 1990). Generally, two different approaches of case selection dominate: The most similar systems design and the most different systems design (Lijparth 1975, Meckstroth 1975, Anckar 2008). For the purpose of this study, I chose the former approach and selected Wisconsin and East Germany because they play vital roles in the respective political landscapes of their countries and since their economic and political situation is very similar, something that I will outline below in more detail.

2. The concept of 'politics of resentment'

The prefatory mentioned situations are typical for societies that are deeply divided along partisan lines. In the United States, supporters as well as professional politicians of the Democratic and the Republican Party become increasingly further apart (Cramer 2016, Mason 2018). Actors of the political and the public sphere promote ideologically distinctive stands more often and are increasingly polarised. A consequence of this development is, that it "has allowed political, public, electoral, and national norms to be broken with little to no consequence" (Mason 2018: 3). Moreover, fundamental norms of mutual respect that once formed the basis of democratic competition are lost. In such an environment, conflicts are not about reasoned different argumentations on a specific policy anymore, but about "differences in our political points of view as fundamental differences in who we are as human beings" (Cramer 2016: 211). It seems, that people disagree and dispute more intense than they would normally do (Mason 2018). 'Politics of resentment' is therefore defined as: "a political culture in which political divides are rooted in our most basic understandings of

ourselves, infuse our everyday relationships, and are used for electoral advantage by our political leaders” (Cramer 2016: 211).

Empirical evidence for this phenomenon is widely given. It is argued that the extent of negatively stereotyping the respective political opponent in the United States has rapidly increased. In addition, intensified inter-party competition is seen as a result of the aggressive rhetoric of political campaigns, which is facilitated by the increasing amount of partisan media outlets (Iyengar, Sood and Lekles 2012). Hui (2013) shows that nowadays American partisans prefer to live in neighbourhoods which are dominated by members of their own party. In addition, opinion polls show that the number of party members who has very unfavourable views of their partisan opponents has increased dramatically (Pew 2016). Several studies indicate similar results regarding the polarisation of the German society (e.g. Pfaller 2012, Pokorny 2018).

3. The two cases of this study

3.1 Wisconsin: The Rise of Scott Walker and Donald Trump

In many ways Wisconsin is a typical American swing state, which means that it does not lean clearly toward Democrats or Republicans. It had the highest number of counties that went from George W. Bush in the 2004 presidential election to Barack Obama in 2008. For long, the state legislature was alternately controlled by one of the parties. However, in 2010 a sharp shift toward the Republican Party and their candidate Scott Walker took place. According to Cramer, the continuous partisan fights make Wisconsin an ideal place to investigate the fundamental issues of American politics (Cramer 2016).

Once Scott Walker was inaugurated as Governor in 2011, he initiated a so called ‘Budget Repair Bill’ which aimed cutting state employees’ wages, eliminating their bargaining rights and reducing their professional benefits. This bill was immensely disputed and resulted in mass-demonstrations against Walker. In addition, all Democratic state senators left the capital Madison to prevent the state legislature from voting on that bill. These incidents formed a significant political uproar in Wisconsin (Kersten 2011, Cramer 2016). Because of these political turbulences Scott Walker was challenged in a recall election. However, he was the first governor to win such an election and with 53.1 percent of the votes he was even more successful

than in the previous one. Walker’s electoral success was a result of the strong support he received especially on the countryside, where he clearly succeeded. This was probably because many rural Wisconsinites sympathised with his plan to cut the privileges of state employees (Marley and Stein 2013, Cramer 2016).

Regions like rural Wisconsin played a crucial role in the 2016 election of Donald Trump as well. Interestingly, not because the Republicans performed better in rural areas than the Democrats – it has been a general trend that rural people are economically and socially more conservative – but because it “was unexpected [...] how well Trump performed, and conversely how poorly Hillary Clinton performed, in the Industrial Midwest” (Brown and Monnat 2016: 229).

Wisconsin is a state with a pronounced urban-rural divide. While the city dwellers in Madison and Milwaukee are either employed in modern services industry or work for public institutions such as the state government and universities, rural Wisconsin is facing massive economic and social challenges (Marley and Stein 2013). The economy is still dominated by agriculture and classic industries. Poverty levels, mortality and unemployment rates are above-average. In this light, the strong support for Scott Walker’s ‘small government policies’ by rural Wisconsinites is surprising, since this region is dependent from financial transfers, public jobs and government investments. It seems irrational that voters living in rural Wisconsin, “who might benefit from more government instead prefer far less of it” (Cramer 2016: 5).

3.2 East Germany: The Rise of the Alternative for Germany (AfD)

When the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) joined the Federal Republic of Germany in 1990, it became clear that East Germany would have had to implement serious economic and social reforms to catch up with the other countries of Western Europe. In some parts of East Germany these reforms led to mass-unemployment and serious social problems (Rödter 2009). During the late 1990s, the alt-right National Democratic Party of Germany was profiting from these developments and achieved remarkable results in several local elections (Edinger and Hallermann 2001). Besides that, the voting behaviour of East Germans did not differ significantly from their West German counterparts. The rise of the right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany (AfD) was therefore surprising for most political commentators and scientists. In 2013, the party was founded as a single-topic Eurosceptic party, which adopted

several neoliberal economic positions. In 2014 already, the AfD got 4.7 percent of the votes in the German federal election. At this point in time the party was dominated by West German elites and therefore often labelled as 'party of professors' (Lees 2018).

However, within two years the direction of the party changed sharply, and West-German elites were pushed out by East German right-wing activists. Quickly, the party began instrumentalising "popular fears about uncontrolled migration, European 'welfare tourism', bogus and criminal asylum seekers and trans-border crime, dual citizenship and demanded public referenda to decide on the building of mosques and minarets" (Grimm 2015: 273). Especially in East Germany the party adopted "a xenophobic, nativist and law and order rhetoric" (ibid.). The party criticised the decisions of the German government in the 2015 refugee crisis harshly and is therefore widely seen as the only anti-immigration party in Germany. Regarding the economy, the AfD adhered with the neoliberal positions and promotes cuttings of social security benefits, sanctions for long-term unemployed citizens and reductions of the welfare system (Rosenfelder 2017). Nowadays, the AfD is an established actor in Germany's political landscape with a very strong base of supporters in East Germany, where opinion polls see them currently as the strongest of all parties (Crossland 2018).

Like Wisconsin, East Germany's economy is primarily dominated by agriculture and a few remaining classic industries. Economic data reveal that the living standard in East Germany is worse than in other parts of the country: the average life expectancy, salaries, pensions and employment rates are lower than for instance in rural West Germany (DIW 2018). Even after the influx of many refugees, the share of immigrants in the most regions of East Germany is still low. It seems therefore, that the strong support for the AfD in East Germany could be characterized as 'irrational' as well, because East Germany is neither suffering from mass-immigration, nor would lower public expenditures be beneficial for most East Germans.

4. Explanations for the Rise of 'Politics of Resentment'

Thus far, I have shown that in both cases polarisation is increasing. At the same time parties and candidates that surf on the underlying resentments are significantly more successful than in other parts of the United States and Germany.

These actors promote neoliberal policies to reduce public expenditures by using populist (and in East Germany also xenophobic) rhetoric. This is especially striking because rural and post-industrial areas such as Wisconsin and East Germany profit significantly from public investments, public jobs and are partially dependent from financial transfers by the central government. It is therefore often said in the public discourse that the electorate votes 'irrational' without considering economic relationships properly. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss the literature on possible reasons for this paradox. I will follow the common sense in the literature on mass public opinion, according to which voters form their opinions along the two dimensions of culture and economy.

4.1 The cultural dimension

4.1.1 Rural Consciousness

One of the main findings of Cramer's qualitative study is that Americans living in rural Wisconsin define themselves not as members of a particular class but primarily as 'rural folks' and that they use these "social identities to think about politics" (Cramer 2016: 211). She calls this collective identity 'rural consciousness' and builds upon a much broader idea in social sciences: The one that thinking, reasoning and creating knowledge are inherently societal and derive from collective processes (Berger and Luckmann 1967). To illustrate this social-constructivist view on politics, Anderson argues that for instance maps or museums are manifestations of collective processes by which knowledge is generated and identities are shaped (Anderson 2006). By using group experiments, psychologists showed that such collectively developed views and ideas are very stable (Kolbert 2017). In this light, it becomes clear that for these authors "political understanding is not about facts; it is about how we see facts" (Cramer 2016: 210). Cramer argues that 'rural consciousness' is by far more than the attachment to living on the countryside. Rural identity "includes a sense that decision makers routinely ignore rural places and fail to give rural communities their fair share of resources" (ibid.: 5). This attitude includes strong resentments against city dwellers, elites and public employees. It is likewise argued that the development of a rural identity is typically caused by political modernization because "the city dweller's feelings of intellectual superiority [...] are matched by the country dweller's feelings of moral superiority [...]" (Huntington 1966: 72). Due to political modernization cities become the centre of innovative economies, cultures and new social classes, what intensifies hostilities in the

traditionbound countryside. Therefore, “city and the countryside become different nations, different ways of life” (ibid). Inglehart and Norris build upon the same idea and draft the concept of ‘A Silent Revolution in Reverse’, which argues that support for authoritarian policies on the countryside stems from a backlash of cultural change in the cities (Inglehart and Norris 2017).

While Cramer’s results are unambiguous regarding the consciousness of rural Wisconsinites, it is questionable what rural identity includes in East Germany. Several surveys and opinion polls show that the vast majority of East Germans still defines themselves as ‘former citizens of the GDR’. In 2016 for instance, 64.1 per cent of East Germans confirmed in an opinion poll that they still feel themselves “strongly connected” to former communist Germany (Buntfuß et al. 2018). The public discourse on East German identities is dominated by metaphors such as ‘second-class citizens’, ‘West German colonialism’, and ‘West German hegemony’ (ibid.). However, it is unclear in how far this general ‘East German identity’ differs from ‘rural East German identity’, since the data do not allow this differentiation. Nonetheless, it seems logical that East German consciousness is stronger on the countryside than in the urban centres and I conclude therefore, that like Wisconsinites, East Germans have a sense of ‘rural consciousness’.

4.1.2 Resentments against urban elites and public institutions

As outlined above, resentments against people living in urban areas, against political institutions and elites in general are vital parts of Cramer’s concept of ‘rural consciousness’. Moreover, these elements are ‘building blocks’ of the most influential conceptualisation of populism as well (Mudde 2009, Müller 2016). Bearing in mind that modern populism is something that is widely acknowledged as undertheorized, it is said that being critical of elites “is a necessary but not sufficient part of the definition [of populism]” (Müller 2016: 2). A second crucial element of populism is anti-pluralism: “populists claim that they, and only they, represent the people” (ibid.: 20). Thereby, ‘the people’ are often described as something unified and morally pure, which is opposed by “elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior” (ibid., Mudde 2009). Populists see ‘the people’ as a homogenous group with undivided interests (the ones of the populists), who can be represented by one single politician, while all others are ‘not really the people’ (Rosenblum 2010). In modern democracies “the deliberative process and day-to-day supervision are [normally] well protected from

the influence of the masses” (Przeworski 1991: 13). Populists challenge this paradigm by promising to bring the masses back into politics.

Similar patterns of populist reasoning are observable in the reception of Scott Walkers ‘Budget Repair Bill’ among rural Wisconsinites. These ‘rural folks’ identify themselves as ‘hard working people’, what excludes (for them) automatically all people who are public employees. Rural Wisconsinites argue that they have a different work ethic than people who work for the government, which stylizes themselves as somehow morally superior. They say that as hard-working people they deserve a bigger share of financial benefits than people who work for the government. These resentments sum up in the formula: “Too many people get too much for nothing” (Cramer 2016: 194).

It is thereby principally not surprising that people blame someone or something for the precarious situation they see themselves in. One could expect that Americans living in rural Wisconsin blame banks, large corporations, or simply ‘the Wall Street’ in the years after the 2008 financial crisis. However, Cramer observes that people primarily blame ‘the Government’. It is especially remarkable that Cramer recognizes this tendency in both, democrat and republican groups, in rural Wisconsin. While liberals were complaining that “economic policy was flawed because the government was in cahoots with the rich as it leached off of ordinary taxpayers”, the conservatives argued “that the government was too large and not run enough like business” (Cramer 2016: 173).

Again, it might be true that blaming the government is common in urban environments as well, but Cramer notes that people in small towns talked like they had special rights because they were ‘rural folks’. For these people it seems to be clear that the economy is generating profits, but that these profits do not reach the true Americans – so people who are not working for the government (Cramer 2016). Likewise, people blamed not only public employees but also public institutions in general, as for instance Wisconsin’s big universities (ibid.). This is remarkable, because several Western governments undertook various efforts to improve the economic situations in rural areas. Since governments tried to substitute economic growth by higher public expenditures, public employment rates are often higher in poorer rural regions than in the richer cities (Rodriguez-Pose 2018).

While rural consciousness in Wisconsin is primarily made of resentments against people that live in cities, public employees, and politics in general, it is doubtful if the rural identity of East Germans

incorporates these features as well. Similar to Wisconsin, the satisfaction of 'rural folks' with politics and democratic institutions in East Germany is fairly low. According to the polls, only 42 per cent of East Germans are satisfied by the current political system (in comparison to 77 per cent in West-Germany) (Köcher 2019). Likewise, less East Germans think that the government fulfils basic tasks effectively. *Prima facie*, it seems therefore that East German and Wisconsin consciousness share several characteristics.

But in contrast to Wisconsin, resentments against public employees do not play an important role. Instead, hostile attitudes towards immigration and a generally authoritarian mindset are important parts of the East German identity (Brähler et al. 2006 and 2018). A large qualitative study of the Göttingen Institute for Democracy Research in 2017 proved that xenophobia and racism are historically and culturally rooted in large parts of East Germany. The scholars conclude that East Germans established a specific political culture of protectionism against everything strange and different (Walter 2017). It is said that such tendencies are generally stronger especially in the rural parts of East Germany because of the condensed political peer pressure in smaller countryside municipalities (Niedermayer and Stöss 2007). Empirical evidence for these results derives firstly, from the high number of xenophobic hate crimes in East Germany (Goulard 2016) and secondly, from a recent survey which revealed that 75 per cent of East Germans are in favour of limiting the number of immigrants in Germany (Köcher 2019). These results are especially remarkable since Cramer does not mention xenophobia as an element of rural consciousness in Wisconsin.

4.2. Economic Explanations for the 'Politics of Resentment'

4.2.1 Economic Inequalities

Drawing back upon calculations of the American labour-economist Thomas Kochan, it is said that the average household income in the United States in the last decades rose significantly slower than the productivity (Kochan 2012). Taking the increased intensity and flexibility that modern labour requires into account, it is argued that the living conditions for the average working- and middle-class members became worse (Streeck 2014). For capital holders the situation looks different, because "not less than 93 per cent of the additional US income created in 2010 – 288 billion US-Dollar – had gone to the top 1 per cent of taxpayers" (ibid.: 53). Streeck argues that there is a strong negative correlation between political participation and regional unemployment or welfare dependence. For instance, low turnout

is a consequence of resignation not of satisfaction. The massive economic inequalities also provoke questions in the light of democratic theory and stability. "From Aristotle down to the present, men have argued that only a wealthy society in which relatively few citizens lived in real poverty could [...] develop the self-restraint necessary to avoid succumbing to the appeals of irresponsible demagogues" (Lipset 1959: 75). Undoubtedly, there is still a strong correlation between wealth and democratic stability. However, the problem of economic inequality becomes obvious by looking at Lipset's variables. One of them is the number of citizens per motor vehicle. He argued for instance that the relative number of cars is higher in more democratic countries than in the more dictatorial ones (ibid.). Nowadays, a car belongs to the fundamental goods that an average household in the Western World is used to own. The problem is therefore not that a large part of the society cannot afford a car but that a very small group of the society could in theory buy thousands of cars. To put it in other words: The primary economic goal for many citizens in a Democracy in the 21st century is not about "elementary values" such as "to eat [and] to be free from hunger" anymore (Przeworski 1991: ix), but to get a fair share of the common good.

It is undoubtedly true that the increasing economic inequalities also affected the social life in rural areas such as Wisconsin or East Germany negatively. Especially younger people had to move to the city in order to get a job, resulting in decreasing numbers of societies and clubs in the countryside. The 'character of the civic life' is known to have an impact on the performance of democratic political institutions because "public affairs are more successfully ordered in the more civic regions" (Putnam 1994: 113), so places with a stronger associational life, more trust, solidarity and civic engagement. It is therefore not surprising that the decreasing quality of 'civic life' in areas like Wisconsin and East Germany led to the above-mentioned resentments against the state.

Psychological explanations for the increase of polarisation often build upon socioeconomic inequalities as well. It is said that people who live in "places that don't matter" (Rodriguez-Pose 2018), also called "landscapes of despair" (Shannon and Brown 2017), are frustrated by being told that the future offers no opportunities, no jobs, and no hope for them. Therefore, they are exercising 'revenge' (Evich 2016, Rodriguez-Pose 2018).

I argue in this light that the economic inequalities affect the life of rural people and have limited their social rights as democratic citizens. In contrast

to civic citizenship (equality before the law) and political citizenship (general suffrage), social citizenship according to Marshall includes “a whole range” of rights,” from “welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in society” (Cohen 2010: 83). It is asked: “should not every citizen also be equipped, knowledgeable, and secure enough to enjoy her or his civil and political rights and fulfil responsibilities that come with them” (ibid.). If so, then a decent quality of life, education and health must be a part of citizenship. Together with civic and political citizenship, social citizenship “fortifies the foundations on which [democracy] may flourish” (ibid.) One possible explanation for the increasing resentments in places such as rural Wisconsin or East Germany is therefore that people feel significantly constrained in their social citizenship rights because of the increasing economic inequalities.

Cramer shows in her study that economic inequalities play a vital role for the increase of ‘politics of resentment’ in Wisconsin. The resentments of rural Wisconsinites against public employees and city dwellers are inherently economic by nature. They argue: Public employees get more than they deserve, they profit from generous health-insurances and they can afford a better lifestyle. However, survey data from East Germany do not support these findings. Almost 80 per cent of East Germans that participated in recent polls said that the year 2018 was a good one from an economic point of view. Only 14 per cent are worried about their economic situation in 2019 and only 18 per cent said that their economic status decreased because of increasing globalisation. On the contrary, every third recognized an improvement of their economic situation during the last years (Köcher 2019). I conclude therefore that economic considerations play a minor role in the explanation of polarisation in East Germany only.

4.2.2 National Sovereignty and the Market

In addition to the economic inequalities, Streeck sees a more general problem in ‘democratic capitalism’. Since the control of the economy shifted during the last decades “from politics to the market. (Streeck 2014: 5). He is worried about a “splitting of democracy from capitalism through the splitting of the economy from democracy” (ibid.), since the complexity of the international financial market has made it difficult for elected politicians to influence it strategically. Another problem of democratic capitalism that goes along

with the de-democratization of the economy is the high government debt of various countries. This created an “intermediary system between two conflict environments” (ibid.: 81): The *Marktvolk* (people of the market) and the *Staatsvolk* (general citizenry). While the latter is bound to its respective state and can express its opinions only in form of periodic elections, the former is a multinational body, consisting of different investors with particular interests, who can continually influence politics via mechanisms of the market. “Democratic governments must manoeuvre between their two categories of stakeholders, keeping them both at least sufficiently happy” (Streeck 2014: 83). Without going into the depth of the ‘topsy-turvy world’ of international finance it seems, that by trying to balance the interests of investors and citizens, western governments too often decided in favour of the former. Consequently, national sovereignty as well as national democracy are partially “de-legitimized” (ibid.: 96).

Because of the increasing Europeanisation, the Euro and the refugee crisis these considerations play a more important role in the public discourse in Europe than in the United States. For instance, the AfD started as a purely Eurosceptic party, which was promoting policies to regain the ‘national sovereignty of Germany’ and to leave the Euro-zone. Until today such policies can be found in almost all party manifestos of European Right-Wing Populist Parties. However, it is questionable in how far these attitudes are important for voters of these parties (Mudde 2007).

Obviously, this essay will not assess the relationship of capitalism and democracy in depth. There is a rich literature that tries to assess if capitalism and democracy support or harm each other, with valuable arguments on both sides of the debate. One of the most profiled critics of capitalism was Karl Polanyi, who blamed capitalism for indirectly promoting ‘fascist solutions’ (Polanyi 1944). “Whenever the profit-making impulse becomes deadlocked with the need to shield people from its harmful side effects, voters are tempted by the ‘fascist solution’: reconcile profit and security by forfeiting civic freedom” (Crain 2018). Others argue instead that capitalism is a prerequisite of democracy: “To put it more formally, it looks to be the case that market-oriented economies are necessary (in the logical sense) to democratic institutions [...]. And it looks to be the case that state-owned centrally directed economic orders are strictly associated with authoritarian regimes” (Dahl 1990, as cited in Almond 1991: 468). Bearing the arguments of both sides in mind, it is said that

“democracy and capitalism are both positively and negatively related, that they both support and subvert each other” (Almond 1991: 473). However, at least for the case of partisan polarisation, I argue that the massive economic inequalities, which were caused by the current economic system, facilitated ‘politics of resentment’ in western democracies to some extent. This proves again that Fukuyama’s forecast according to which the world has reached ‘the end of history’, because capitalism and democracy would spread out globally after the collapse of the Soviet Union was wrong (Fukuyama 1989, Lee and Stanley 2014). On the contrary, in regards to ‘politics of resentment’ capitalism has facilitated a threat to democracy.

5. Discussion

Thus far, I have shown that in Rural Wisconsin as well as in East Germany, politics of resentments and political actors that surf on these resentments are on the rise. On one hand, these phenomena result from a specific rural mindset and on the other hand side, from the rapidly increasing economic inequalities between urban elites and ordinary rural people. However, while rural consciousness in Wisconsin manifests itself in anti-elitism, anti-urbanism and resentments against public employees; rural East German identity emphasizes xenophobia and authoritarianism instead. Another significant difference is, that economic inequalities play a bigger role in the United States than in Germany, while at the same time the fear to lose the national sovereignty is more crucial in Germany. In the following, I will discuss these results in regard to their causes.

5.1 Why are economic inequalities less important in East Germany than in Wisconsin?

Unlike most other western democracies, the effects of the financial crisis of 2008 were almost invisible in Germany. On the contrary, it is mentioned that Germany was a winner of the crisis (Financial Times 2010). One might argue therefore, that economics did not influence the East German identity recently. Indeed, life expectancy, economic growth, and unemployment rates in rural East Germany are generally worse than in other parts of Western Europe, but in comparison to the 1990s the circumstances have improved significantly. In Wisconsin and those areas similar in other western countries this is different. While they were economic powerhouses in the past, they face the economic and social challenges of structural change nowadays. This dynamic was facilitated by

the financial crisis, which “cut deep into the lives of whole generations and [turned] the conditions of social existence [in the United States] upside down” (Streeck 2014: 6). Bearing the literature on the voting behaviour of ‘modernisation losers’ in mind (Betz 1994), I argue that the losses of rural Wisconsinites in recent years were more dramatically than the ones of East Germans and that therefore economic incentives play a bigger role in explanation of polarisation in the United States.

Another significant difference between the two cases concerns the welfare state and the political cleavages. Obviously, the welfare state in Germany is a lot stronger than in the United States and has absorbed negative consequences of the financial crisis better. Therefore, economic inequalities are on average lower in Germany than in the United States (OECD 2015). Bearing this in mind, it is also important to highlight that there is no classic political cleavage between voters who prefer ‘less government’ and those who prefer ‘more government’ in Germany (Müller 1999). Therefore, it is unattractive for parties to mobilise along these lines. This applies especially to the eastern part, where many people are used to a strong, almost omnipresent state. In the light of similar observations, it is said that the economy is generally only of minor interest for right wing populist parties in Europe (Mudde 2009). Nonetheless, a strong welfare state and comparatively small economic inequalities cannot shield a country from becoming polarized and affected by populism, as for instance the Scandinavian countries show.

5.2 Why are Xenophobia and Authoritarianism more important in East Germany than in Wisconsin?

Firstly, one might argue that Xenophobia and Authoritarianism are more important in the United States since Donald Trump became president and that Cramer simply missed these features of rural consciousness when she was undertaking her fieldwork. Indeed, it currently looks like that most Trump voters are favouring his xenophobic and authoritarian rhetoric. Nonetheless, I agree with Cramer that these anti-democratic elements are no typical features of rural identities in the United States per se. One crucial difference between East Germany and similar regions in the western world like Wisconsin is the lack of democratic tradition in East Germany (Fuchs 1999, Finkel, Humphries and Opp 2001, Pfaller 2012, Walter 2017, Brähler et al. 2018, Pokorny 2018). While people in Wisconsin were raised in an environment of political pluralism, of election campaigns and with a free press, all

these elements of a democracy were fairly unknown for East Germans in the beginning of the 1990s. They were used to mistrust the public institutions, the press and everything foreign. Naturally, this political socialisation affects politics until today and makes voters more vulnerable for populist political actors that mobilise with help of the given resentments.

When comparing the different drivers of polarisation in the United States and Germany another difference that is not far to seek is the refugee crisis of 2015. Obviously, the large influx of immigrants and refugees has changed the political landscape of Germany dramatically and is widely regarded as the most important factor for the rise of the AfD, which positions itself as a clear anti-immigration party (Walter 2017, Brähler et al. 2018). This accounts especially for their electoral successes in rural East Germany, where the share of immigrants was vanishingly low until recent years. In the same places the medical, educational, and economic infrastructure is fairly tenuous so that several municipalities struggled with providing the necessary social services for locals and managing the newly arriving immigrants at the same time, which created an 'explosive atmosphere' in several towns in East Germany (Brähler et al. 2018). Having the afore explained political socialisation in mind, it is said that the influx of immigrants, new cultures and the relating social change has led to a "refuge into authoritarianism" (ibid.) of rural East Germans. At the same time, it is still unclear how far this development holds on, yet is undoubtedly true that the refugee crisis is the key motivation for resentments and polarisation.

6. Conclusion

I began this essay by defining the concept of 'politics of resentment' and proving that both the United States and Germany are currently in a period of political polarisation and divide. Secondly, I discussed the reasons for 'politics of resentment' in regions like Wisconsin and East Germany, paying special attention to the role of anti-elitist and anti-urban rural identities and economic inequalities. I showed that the key drivers of polarisation in Wisconsin are resentments against urban elites and public employees resulting from the massive economic inequalities caused by the 2008 financial crisis. Instead of economic considerations, resentments and polarisation in East Germany stem from the difficult democratic tradition and were triggered primarily by the 2015

refugee crisis. Moreover, I argue that the economy is less important to understand the polarisation in East Germany because of the comparatively strong role of the welfare state.

Nonetheless, the findings of this comparison need to be proven by further research. Why are xenophobia and authoritarianism only secondary for rural consciousness in the United States? In how far are resentments in East Germany influenced by the economy? Answering these questions requires more research, for instance by applying Cramer's ethnographic method of listening explicitly to these factors. However, since the literature on the 'rise of populism', 'politics of resentment' and similar phenomena is in full swing, there is good hope that the academic discourse will come up with answers to these questions soon.

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