

# **Citizens under stress - an explanation for xenophobia**

K. Peter Fritzsche

## **Abstract**

The aim of this article is to apply the theory of social stress to the situation in post-socialist societies, especially in the united Germany, with respect to the conditions leading to the creation and the development of prejudices, xenophobia, and other racist attitudes. It is my thesis that the five New Länder are undergoing an extreme phase of political and social change, which is proving stressful for its political culture as well as for the personality structures of its citizens. Xenophobia will probably be one of the most obvious reactions resulting from their new problems and a new sense of insecurity.

## **0. Introduction**

Which are the reasons for today's widespread xenophobia? Why are people afraid of foreigners and why do they adopt xenophobic attitudes towards them? Why do many citizens feel threatened by foreigners? Does the reason lie in migration, in the increasing number of foreigners who come to live for a short or longer time in a host society? Or can xenophobia be explained by the personality of xenophobic citizens? Is it a consequence of the so-called authoritarian character? Or do economy, politics and society itself put too much strain on the citizens? These and similar questions are currently being discussed by scientists, politicians and pedagogues.

The modernization process, the migration and the personality structure are necessary, if insufficient variables in explaining xenophobia. The decisive factor is the combination of conditions at the level of the personality and the levels of society! When the pressures exerted by social structure and social change meet with a limited competence or inability of citizens to cope with this pressure, they provoke the feeling of stress. If objective social pressure encounters in people an incapacity to deal with this pressure, then stress builds up and produce defence strategies which employ prejudices and foe-images.

The manifestation xenophobia in the new Länder is new. It is to be interpreted as the product of cumulative, "really existing" pressure and insufficient mechanisms to cope with this stress: stress is no longer experienced as a challenge to be overcome, but as an impossibly excessive strain.

It would be a simplification if one wanted to interpret this merely as a consequence of those who had always been authoritarian. I argue that the particular susceptibility to xenophobia in post-socialist societies is a result of the specific stress situation faced there.

How can social stress be reduced or controlled? Pedagogy - including civic and citizenship education - will certainly soon discover its own limitations here, since one cannot "educate away" the burdens which have grown out of the transformation process! But one can help people at the subjective level to cope more easily with stress. Only then will the objective challenges no longer appear merely as impossible burdens. And only then will it be possible for our risk society to be perceived as more than just a society under stress.

## **1. Citizens under stress - an innovative approach**

Social prejudice and xenophobia were found in the former GDR long before October 1989; however, they were concealed behind a wall of international solidarity, where "virtue" was officially propagated. After 1989, however, there is a new wave of hostility in reaction to the difficulties and insecurities arising from the rapid changes now under way in the five new FRG Länder.

A new explanation for xenophobia, which overcomes some of the one-sidedness of previous

approaches, is given by the stress-theory. **It is social stress that makes citizens susceptible to xenophobia, intolerance and authoritarian reactions.**

The **present relevance of the stress-theory** lies in the fact that we are currently facing various processes of transformation worldwide, which present particularly strong stress constellations to the people concerned.

Stress research goes originally back to the practice of medicine and psychology. But models developed in these working areas have been - in a modified form - increasingly transferred to the field of social sciences. Stress-theories deal with the proportion of demands to people's capacity to meet them. In other words: They deal with the discrepancy between pressures caused by problems and the competence to solve these problems as well as with people's reaction when they experience this discrepancy.

If strain caused by the structure of society, social changes and/or by national tradition meets limited or lacking capacities to cope with it, if objective pressure caused by problems meets lacking competence to handle it, then people perceive this constellation as stress. The feeling of being challenged is replaced by the feeling of being overtaxed. Probable consequences will be reactions of defence and escape (Fritzsche 1998).

The past thirty years have witnessed changes in the way in which stress is conceptualized. The limitations of simple drive and tension reduction concepts have become apparent. Social stress is now viewed as a general rubric for somewhat different though related processes of person-environment transaction, in which demands tax or exceed the resources of the person. Such stress is neither simply an environmental stimulus, a characteristic of the person, nor a response, but a balance between demands and the power to deal with them without unreasonable or destructive costs. This model of stress is explicitly cognitive, emphasizing how the person appraises what is being experienced and uses this information in hoping to shape the course of events. This appraisal of the significance of an ongoing relationship with the environment for one's well-being leads to coping processes consistent with personal agendas. The effects of the coping are in turn appraised and reacted to as part of the continuous flow of psychological, social, and physiological processes and events.

Coyne and Lazarus give a good overview of this process-oriented stress perspective (1981, pp.146):

Primary appraisal refers to the cognitive process of evaluating the significance of an encounter for one's well-being, answering the question "Am I okay or in trouble?" It comes in three forms: judgments that the transaction is (1) irrelevant, (2) benign-positive, or (3) stressful. An encounter evaluated as irrelevant is one that is considered to have no personal significance and therefore one that can be ignored. A benign-positive encounter involves a judgment that a state of affairs is beneficial or desirable. Stressful appraisals involve judgments of harm-loss, threat, or challenge; all three involve some negative evaluation of one's present or future state of well-being, but challenge provides the least negative or most positive one.

If primary appraisal answers the questions "Am I okay or in trouble?" then secondary appraisal can be seen as an answer to the questions "What can I do about it?" Secondary appraisal refers to the person's ongoing judgments concerning coping resources, options, and constraints. The essential difference between primary and secondary appraisal is in the content of what is being evaluated. Actually, the evaluative processes are highly interrelated and even fuse. A firm sense of self-efficacy (secondary appraisal) can lead one to appraise transactions as benign or irrelevant that would otherwise be threatening; in contrast, if one believes that his coping resources are depleted, then he may perceive a transaction as threatening where it otherwise would not be.

Reappraisal. Cognitive appraisals are not static, but rather shift in response to changing internal and external conditions. Reappraisal refers to the changes in a person's evaluative judgments; it is evident in changes in the patterning of emotional response and coping or in the person's depiction of the situation. Reappraisal is a feedback process and takes two forms. The first involves new

information or new insights about the changing person-environment relationship and its significance for well-being. The other, defensive reappraisal represents cognitive maneuvering to reduce distress rather than to assess accurately the troubled person-environment relationship with a view to changing it. What was originally appraised as harm-loss or threat is reappraised and nonthreatening or desirable. The appropriateness of such reappraisals must be judged relative to the observer's vantage point and the transactional context of the appraisal.

Coping. Defensive reappraisal represents the interpenetration of cognitive appraisal processes and coping; depending on the observer's purposes, either aspect of it can be emphasized. Lazarus and Launier (1978, p. 311) define coping as "efforts, both action oriented and intrapsychic, to manage (that is, to master, tolerate, reduce, minimize) environmental and internal demands and conflicts among them which tax or exceed a person's resources."

Coping strategies can be distinguished along a number of dimensions in addition to function. Noting that the lack of an adequate taxonomy has hampered the study of coping processes, Lazarus and Launier (1978) have proposed a working classificatory scheme. Full discussion of it is beyond the scope of this chapter, but it may be noted that coping strategies can additionally be distinguished according to mode employed (direct action, action inhibition, information search, or cognitive).

Stress develops at different levels. We have to differentiate between micro-social and macro-social stress. Stress in the immediate environment, i.e. in the family, at school or at work, and stress due to political, economic, cultural or ecological constellations. As for macro-social strain the question is in how far citizens recognize and perceive it as significant strain and how the real stressors can be identified correctly.

The innovative aspect of the interactive stress conception lies in its assumption that there is no absolute strain causing stress. Instead, stress always depends on the personal assessment of the situation. Stress is neither solely a result of objective stressors nor of lacking competence. It rather develops out of a process of assessing the demands and one's own capacities to react successfully.

## 2. Stress and xenophobia

Social stress deals with the proportion of social and political demands to people's capacity to meet them. In other words: It is about the discrepancy between pressures caused by problems and the competence to solve these problems and people's reaction when they experience this discrepancy. If strain caused by the structure of society or by social changes meets limited or lacking competence and resources to handle this pressure, the people concerned perceive this constellation as stress: the feeling of being challenged is replaced by the feeling of being overtaxed. Probable consequences will be reactions of defence and escape.

The tolerance threshold in a society can thus be conceived as stress threshold: The higher the social stress, the lower the probability that stressed citizens act in a tolerant way. As an example we might consider the number of foreigners tolerated within a society. No absolute figures or proportions of the number of migrants tolerated can be given. The number rather depends on the ability and willingness of the citizens to accept foreigners in their society. This tolerance threshold does not give any information about absolute strain, but it reveals the personal assessment of strain as well as the feelings aroused by these assessments. The tolerance threshold is a result of the existing competence of tolerance and of the level of a society's culture of tolerance.

Applying the considerations of the stress theory to xenophobia we come to the following conclusions:

\* **Feelings of being overtaxed:** Only the coincidence of too much strain and not enough competence will cause stress. It cannot be generally determined, however, in how far xenophobic or authoritarian reactions are a result of the citizen's personality and his lacking competence or in how far they are a consequence of the strain put on him by a particular situation. Only a concrete

analysis of the respective discrepancy between strain and competence will reveal the individual stress constellation.

\* **Tolerance threshold:** Consequently no absolute figures or proportions of the number of migrants tolerated within society can be given. The number rather depends on the ability and willingness of the citizens to accept foreigners in their society. Tolerance thresholds can thus be considered stress thresholds, which do not provide any information about absolute strain, but about the personal assessment of strain as well as about the feelings aroused by these assessments.

\* **Strategies of prejudice:** Prejudice plays a crucial role for the subjective approach to handle stress. People who feel overtaxed are likely to react to stress with prejudice and for images with their inherent simplifications, their debasement of foreigners and glorification of oneself and with their regulation of fears. Prejudice leads to a distorted perception of reality, including the stress situation itself. Migrants or foreigners can be regarded as stressors, even though they may not be responsible for the strain. In this way, the principle social, economic, political and cultural stressors, e.g. uncertainty about processes of modernization and transformation, become less important. The personal advantage of interchanging the stressors is the feeling that it is possible to reduce stress, since the challenge represented by foreigners seems to be easier to cope with than the processes of modernization and transformation.

\* **"Artificial" stress:** Stress and the exchange of stressors can also be artificially produced by the discourse of the political class. The fear of being threatened can be aroused and increased by politicians talking about the "full boat" of the receiving societies. Especially those people who have had only little experience with migrants, are inclined to take the image of the "full boat" of the receiving society as an orientation for their own ideas and attitudes. The individual stress of the citizen develops as a consequence to the supposed "stress of society" and the public finances. The discourse about the "full boat" suggests lacking resources in order to cope with the challenge of migration.

\* **Violent reactions:** Violence can also be one strategy to reduce or cope with stress. There are certainly various stress constellations leading to violence. One of the functions of violence is to turn the feeling of helplessness into success and power, to turn confusion into clearness, neglect into attention. Stress underlying violence is not only - if at all - a result of increasing social pressure, but also a consequence of subjective incompetence to meet everyday challenges. There are no sufficient values and norms for the interaction with others; as a consequence conventional scruples preventing people from exerting violence and forming a condition for social life are loosening. However, it is to be taken into account why and in which context violence is exerted. Do we face politicized violence or violence as an end in itself. The stress-theory is not the appropriate approach for those who hurt and kill others just for fun.

### 3. Stress in post-socialist societies

The stress theory seems to be particularly apt to explain the development of xenophobia in post-socialist societies. The current stress constellation in these societies is based on two dimensions: one dimension of cumulating strain (potential stressors) and another dimension of not developed or lacking competence to handle the diverse stressors.

1. Cumulative strain comes from the confrontation with three unknown factors:

- confrontation with economic competition
- confrontation with political and ideological uncertainties
- confrontation with multicultural diversity

2. During the process of socialization there was no possibility to be prepared for political and economic competition and for intercultural dialogue.

3. Finally, a very important aspect is the fact that those social forces which could foster social

integration and reduce stress no longer fulfil their roles. Social resources - parents, working place and school - do not give sufficient support to people, but confront them with new uncertainties.

The new freedom of democracy is therefore often experienced to be dangerous and more confusing than profitable. Democracy does not only bring about the realization of freedom and hope for prosperity; it equally brings about a new "fear of freedom", a fear of the new freedoms.

Due to the application of the stress theory we can overcome the onesidedness of approaches interpreting the development of xenophobia in post-socialist societies as a pure consequence of the socialist "heritage". But also analyses seeing the origin of xenophobia solely in a particular situation exerting too much pressure do not comprise all aspects (Oesterreich 1993). The significance of the coincidence of new demands on the one hand and not yet developed competences on the other hand has become apparent. Citizens in the post-socialist societies are more susceptible to xenophobic and intolerant reactions, because the processes of transformation and modernization produce special stress constellations for them.

However, xenophobia and even racism have escalated in many established European democracies as well (Hainsworth 1992). Stress constellations can be identified in these societies, too. Apart from normal uncertainties due to modernization, many western democracies are currently facing additional uncertain and unclear situations. The collapse of socialism and of the politico-military power of the East have not only brought about a new freedom and the disappearance of a constant threat and of familiar foe images, they have also highly contributed to a disorientation of politicians and citizens of the western democracies.

**Table 1: Xenophobia among young people**

Items	West	East
1. Violence towards others to win through can be categorized as normal human behaviour.	15 %	22,5 %
2. I am prepared to use physical violence in certain situations to carry through my interests.	16,7 %	22 %
3. I am willing to take advantage of others to protect my own interests	8,3 %	12,9 %
4. There will be no progress unless the survival of the fittest is assured.	19,6 %	38,9 %
Item	West	East
5. If others crowd our living space we need to show them who is in charge.	31,9 %	46,9 %

6. Most of my troubles are related to the presence of foreigners. Therefore we need to convince them by all means to return to their home countries.	11,9 %	19 %
7. It is obvious that foreigners in our society will be treated worse than natives.	29,5 %	42,3 %
8. I am certainly prepared to discriminate against foreigners so that they know what their place is.	13,3 %	20,4 %

N: 1709 (West), 1692 (East)

Source: Heitmeyer, W.: Gewalt. Schattenseiten der Individualisierung bei Jugendlichen aus unterschiedlichen Milieus, Weinheim und München 1995, pp 138

**Table 2: Attitudes in East- and West-Germany 1998 (%)**

**West East**

Autoritarianism 10 16

Nationalism 13 13

Xenophobia 14 20

Welfare-Chauvinism 23 39

Pro-Nazism 6 5

Antisemitism 6 5

People over 14, N= 3764

Source: Richard Stoess: Rechtsextremismus im vereinten Deutschland, Bonn (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung) 1999, p 30.

**4. What can we do?**

After what has been said so far, it should have become clear that the question cannot be how to create a world without stress. The development of modern societies is much too dynamic, confusing and bringing about new uncertainties to avoid social stress. What is important however, is to prepare people to social stress through the means of civic and citizenship education.

We must, however, realistically consider the influence of political education, since there are two other factors playing a significant role, i.e. politics and family. When stress is partly caused by migration, economic crises, modernization or political transformations, education cannot directly change the situation. And when family life leads to an unsuccessful process of socialization, education cannot intervene, but only try to correct the process.

The following resources of people concerned have proved to be successful in reducing or coping with stress:

a. Education: Which knowledge do I have to analyze the situation adequately? Have I learnt to learn?

- b. Assessment of one' s own capacities: What are my capacities? What do I think I am capable of doing? A strong, self-confident person might regard certain strain as pressure, but not as stress.
- c. Cultural traditions, values and moral awareness: What am I allowed to do? What is expected of me? Rootedness in cultural traditions, the acceptance of social values and moral awareness facilitate the orientation and help inter alia building barriers to violent reactions.
- d. Supporting factors of social integration and social networks: Who can help me? Confidence in or knowledge of support from other people reduces the feeling of helplessness.

The higher the number of such resources, the easier it will be for the people concerned to develop "stress-competence". The lower the number of resources, the higher the probability that people will feel overtaxed.

Civic and citizenship education does have a chance to develop resources for "stress-competence". I would like to summarize this in 8 points:

1. To learn to learn in order to become more flexible and self-assured in view of social and cultural processes of transformation
2. To strengthen one' s self-esteem and thus reduce the danger of undermining people' s sense of security. People who like themselves do not see the necessity to debase and exclude foreigners.
3. To make possible experiences of cooperation in order to decrease the danger of hurting one' s self-esteem and its damaging social consequences
4. To exercise practical tolerance by making people understand other perspectives.
5. To strengthen the moral awareness (instead of imparting values) and to help develop an awareness for both the protection of one' s own human rights and the respect of the rights of others.
6. To enable people to critically deal with published opinions and to analyze "official" statements about "threatening situations".
7. To offer political and cultural integration for young people by all democratic groups, organizations and movements so that alternative offers from groups and organizations of the Extreme Right do not have any chance.
8. To develop alternative forms of coping with stress in form of non-violent behaviour in conflict and protest situations.

What we need is not just a new way of thinking - as is currently often demanded - but also a new competence! We need skills to cope with the new freedom, the possibilities and the risks of modern societies both in the East and in the West. In this sense, the old concept of politics as the art of the possible has to be extended: What we need is the competence to deal with the possibilities of modern societies. Here, civic and citizenship education has a genuine area of responsibilities. This skill could achieve that what we consider to be a burden today might be regarded as a challenge tomorrow. When the "fear of freedom" gives way to a perception of the chances lying in the modern world, then one of the strongest roots of the fear of everything that is not familiar will be gone. In this sense, the preparation for the risky freedoms of modern society is certainly a strong prevention against xenophobia.

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