

Germany's New Far Right - Marrying neoliberalism and racism

Sunday 3 April 2016, by [FERNANDEZ Anthony Fano](#) (Date first published: 20 April 2015).

In Germany, a “modernized” far right is marrying neoliberalism and racism. What will be the Left’s response?

The gap between ideology and reality could not be any more jarring: according to a European Center for Economic Research study made public in November, immigrants contribute a net plus to Germany’s welfare and social security systems.

The report’s author, economist Holger Bonin, demonstrates that in 2012, every resident of Germany without a German passport paid on average 3,300 euros more in taxes and contributions to social insurance programs than they received in state transfer payments. Yet surveys show that two-thirds of Germans are convinced that immigrants are burdens on their country’s welfare system.

Quite aside from the distastefulness of evaluating the worthiness of human life according to economic criteria, the juxtaposition of Bonin’s calculations with the polling offers a startling picture of the mentality of Germans today regarding immigration, and the convergence of the neoliberal reconfiguration of German society with racist modes of understanding these shifts.

When the neoliberal former finance minister of Berlin, Thilo Sarrazin, published his book *Germany is Abolishing Itself* [[1](#)] in 2010, few observers recognized that it heralded the emergence of a new, modernized far right in Germany, one that departed significantly from the old school Nazi and national-conservative *Völkisch* far right of previous decades. Abandoned were collectivist socio-political models and biological racism in favor of a marriage of modern neoliberal doctrine and culturalist racism.

This new far right is now coalescing into a coherent entity with well-defined contours and a division of labor between different components: an electoral party in the form of the Alternative for Germany (AfD); a militant extra-parliamentary wing in the form of Pegida (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West); and an ideological center in the form of the glossy monthly magazine *Compact*, edited by Jürgen Elsässer, a former radical leftist journalist who has become a far-right national populist.

Some effort must be made to disentangle the genealogy of the new movement, given that its components all have different origins: the AfD originated primarily as an electoral protest by anti-European Union conservatives against the euro rescue packages of Angela Merkel’s government, while the Pegida marches represent a grassroots mobilization with roots in the anti-Muslim racism that has permeated German public discourse for some time.

The magazine *Compact* represents Elsässer’s longstanding attempt to coalesce an “anti-imperialist” bloc around a phantasmal Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis to counter American hegemony. Nonetheless, since anti-Muslim racism serves at the moment as the point of convergence for these different forces, it makes sense to sketch the function of racist discourse directed at Muslims in Germany over

the last few years.

Writing in 2007, the sociologist Georg Klauda noted that a specifically anti-Muslim racism in Germany remained confined primarily to the intelligentsia [2]:

“Islamophobia has, at least in this country, its relevance not as a mass phenomenon, but as an elite discourse, which, shared by considerable numbers of leftist, liberal, and conservative intelligentsia, makes possible the articulation of resentments against immigrants and anti-racists in a form which allows one to appear as a shining champion of the European enlightenment.”

While this statement was undoubtedly true in the context it was written seven years ago, what Pegida represents is the transformation of anti-Muslim racism from an elite discourse into a mass phenomenon, something capable of mobilizing large demonstrations of more than 20,000 people.

The now-defunct Gruppe Soziale Kämpfe (GSK) attempted to theorize this shift in racist discourse as part of a specifically neoliberal “culturalization of the social question.” The GSK noted that racism in Germany in the immediate postwar period took the form of constructing the diverse guest worker population — predominantly Italian, Turkish, and Yugoslav — as primarily “non-German.” Racism directed against the guest worker population was rooted in their position as the lowest stratum of an industrial working class constituted by the Fordist social pact of the *Wirtschaftswunder*-era Federal Republic.

With the arrival of Helmut Kohl as chancellor in 1982 — part of the same conservative wave that brought Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher to power — the proclamation of a “spiritual-moral turn” brought with it a renewed turn to “values-oriented” conservatism. Similar to the conservative rollback in the Anglo-American sphere around issues such as abortion and gay and lesbian rights, there was a shift toward questions of “culture” and “identity” on the part of the right wing, and concomitantly a shift in racist discourse.

Over the course of the reunification, the first Gulf War, the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent wars against Afghanistan and Iraq, Southern European guest workers were racially and culturally constituted as “Muslims.”

While the old *Völkisch* and fascist forms of racism never disappeared entirely — one only has to refer to the pogroms in Rostock-Lichtenhagen in 1992 or the murderous attack on a Turkish family in the West German city of Solingen in 1993, or the electoral success of the openly fascist National Democratic Party (NPD) in Saxony in 2004 — a slow process of metamorphosis occurred wherein it turned into the new “culturalist” racism. This iteration blends a utilitarian neoliberal ideology that evaluates foreigners in terms of their “usefulness” for “our society” with the construction of a narrative that explains the misfortunes or lack of success of those at the very bottom of the social ladder in terms of their cultural “otherness” and their “lack of willingness” to “integrate” into “German” or “Occidental” society because of an inveterate commitment to “Islamic” religious or cultural ideals.

It goes without saying that this culturalist narrative often has little understanding of the reality of those German citizens or residents of Turkish and Kurdish heritage — who are just as often as not secular and politically leftist — nor for the diversity and contentiousness of actual Muslim communities in Germany. Rather, the narrative serves to rationalize the zero-sum game of neoliberal capitalism in terms of the willingness or failure of the “entrepreneurial self” to take one’s destiny into one’s own hands.

Perversely, this neoliberal culturalist racism represents a “victory” of sorts over the old *Völkisch*

racism. In 2000, when the relatively new SPD-Green Party coalition government was attempting to institute a “green card” program in order to attract highly qualified foreign workers in IT and other high-skill fields, the chairman of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, Jürgen Rüttgers, coined the racist mobilizing slogan “*Kinder statt Inder!*” (“Children instead of Indians!”) to summarize the CDU’s position in favor of training native Germans for high-technology careers rather than importing skilled workers.

During the years of Red-Green, the CDU-led states were also able to successfully block plans to implement a dual citizenship law for those wishing to acquire or maintain German citizenship while still retaining the citizenship of their country of origin. Now, in 2014, the CDU has committed itself to the implementation of a dual citizenship law with its coalition partner, the SPD, and the old-school racism of a Rüttgers is completely out of place in the modernized, neoliberal CDU of Chancellor Angela Merkel.

What traditional-national conservatives frequently bemoan as the “social democratization of the CDU” represents in fact a convergence between the SPD and CDU on the basis of a common commitment to neoliberal ideology and the “culturalization of the social question.”

Against this backdrop, one can grasp the new far-right of AfD, Pegida, and company as a radicalization from below of what is essentially a mainstream discourse. A vanguard role in this respect was played by Sarrazin. Serving under SPD mayor Klaus Wowereit between 2002 and 2009, during the period of the “Red-Red” coalition between SPD and PDS (one of the predecessor parties of Die Linke), Sarrazin made a name for himself both for his two-fisted implementation of fiscal austerity in bankrupt Berlin and his inflammatory statements about the poor and other marginalized people.

In an interview with the newsweekly *Stern* [3], Sarrazin claimed that recipients of long-term unemployment insurance benefits (“Hartz IV”) were spendthrift in terms of dealing with energy because they are “at home more often, they like having it warm, and they regulate the temperature with the window,” and argued for changing the welfare system so that “one cannot improve one’s standard of living by having children, which is the case today.”

After leaving behind Berlin for the greener pastures of a stint on the board of the Bundesbank in Frankfurt, during an interview with the magazine *Lettre Internationale* about his time as finance senator, Sarrazin made this statement about Berlin’s Muslim population: “I don’t have to respect anyone who lives off the state, while rejecting this state, does not provide reasonably for the education of his or her children, and constantly produces new little headscarf girls.”

All of this was a prelude to his 2010 publication of *Germany is Abolishing Itself*, a hyperbolic downfall scenario of a Germany plagued by a declining birth rate of its domestic population and an alleged decline in the national collective IQ due to “Muslim” immigration contributing to the growth of a permanent underclass.

A runaway bestseller, Sarrazin’s book hit the nerve of the *zeitgeist* while providing a sort of manifesto of a radicalized version of the new neoliberal-culturalist racist synthesis. This new racism still incorporated echoes of the old racism, such as Sarrazin’s antisemitic lamentation that “the Turks are conquering Europe exactly like the Kosovars conquered Kosovo: through higher birthrates. I would prefer if it were Eastern European Jews, with a 15 percent higher IQ than the German population.”

While Sarrazin’s book was an immediate hit with the German population, it would be a while between its bestseller success in 2010 and the electoral success of the AfD and the emergence of

Pegida in 2014. An ideological “bridge” of sorts was fulfilled by the founding of Compact in 2010, under the editorship of Jürgen Elsässer. The inaugural issue featured as its cover a photo of Sarrazin with the headline “The Next Federal Chancellor?”

Elsässer’s political biography is a fascinating illustration of how the new far-right manages to incorporate elements of the “Left” as part of a broader attempt at coalescing a new “conformist rebellion.” Previously a vocational school teacher in Stuttgart, Elsässer first achieved prominence on the political stage as a member of the Maoist Kommunistischer Bund in 1990 during the demonstrations that led to the dissolution of Germany Democratic Republic.

In an article for the KB’s newspaper *Arbeiterkampf* titled “Why the Left has to be Anti-German,” Elsässer simultaneously articulated the fears of the West German radical left concerning the possible reemergence of a unified Germany as a great power, while christening what would, over the course of the next decade, emerge as a distinct tendency within the German radical left itself.

As a reporter for the left daily *junge Welt*, a cofounder of the weekly *Jungle World*, and eventually as an editor of the venerable far-left monthly *konkret*, Elsässer spent most of the following decade as a resolutely anti-nationalist reporter writing against the emergence of a perceived German “Fourth Reich” — a scenario that seemed to be confirmed by Germany’s role in the breakup of the former Yugoslavia by then-foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher’s recognition of the republics of Slovenia and Croatia in 1991 and Germany’s participation in the 2000 Kosovo War.

When the Second Intifada broke out in September 2000, Elsässer began to regard Israeli prime minister candidate Ariel Sharon as a sort of Levantine Slobodan Milošević, a beleaguered “anti-fascist” head of state falling victim to a hegemonic human rights imperialism under German leadership. However, after the reassertion of American global hegemony during the 2001 Afghan War, and then the Iraq War, which prompted opposition from France and Germany under the respective leadership of Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schröder, Elsässer was compelled to fundamentally recalibrate his theories. Germany, after all, despite its stature within the European Union, was revealed to be a second-tier regional power, wavering between trans-Atlanticism and renewed bids to constitute a rival “great power.”

Elsässer began publishing books and articles arguing for the constitution of a “Berlin-Paris-Moscow axis” in opposition to Washington. After a series of explicitly nationalist interventions got him booted, successively, from pretty much every major left-wing publication of note, Elsässer started *Compact*, thus creating a coherent ideological center for a new type of far-right politics: resolutely German nationalist, explicitly adopting traditional far-right tropes against “finance capital,” positing the formation of a “Eurasian” power axis as a counterpole to the United States, and resolutely anti-immigrant in terms of domestic policy while supporting “anti-imperialist” countries such as Iran or Syria abroad.

This unique mixture has found an enthusiastic audience in the new far right, and elements of the ideology are deeply rooted in the middle of German society itself, to which the prominent displays of Compact in train station newspaper shops are testament.

It was thus inevitable that Elsässer would enthusiastically greet the emergence of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) electoral formation. Initially founded in 2013 as a single-issue party against the eurozone, the AfD articulated the interests of a conservative right-wing that no longer saw its interests represented by Merkel’s allegedly “social democratized” CDU.

With a leadership comprising former University of Hamburg economist Bernd Lucke and former *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* editor Konrad Adam, the AfD initially attempted to maintain a

resolutely “bourgeois” profile, distancing itself from traditional neo-Nazi parties like the NPD and German People’s Union (DVU).

But this unique combination of national-conservatives who see Germany’s sovereignty as being compromised by multilateral institutions such as the European Union, as well as hard money austerians without a political home in the wake the right-liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) collapse, became an irresistible political magnet for all manner of right-wingers who saw the AfD as the venue from which a powerful electoral formation to the right of the CDU/CSU could be created.

With Lucke and Adam’s impeccable bourgeois credentials, the AfD seemed well-positioned to finally break the postwar taboo, famously expressed by longstanding chair of the Bavarian CSU Franz Josef Strauß, that “there can be no party to the right of the CSU.” While the AfD failed to reach the necessary 5% mark for obtaining seats in the Bundestag during the 2013 federal elections, it achieved 7.1% during the 2014 European Parliament elections, sending seven parliamentarians to Brussels. During the state elections in the Eastern German states of Saxony, Brandenburg, and Thuringia, the AfD received an impressive 9.7%, 12.2%, and 10.6% of the vote, respectively.

The political substance of the AfD wavers between the “respectable” liberalism of Lucke, which sees itself as situated in the tradition of postwar economics minister Ludwig Erhard and the pre-Merkel CDU, and a more hardline right-wing represented by Saxony state chair Frauke Petry.

While both wings endeavor to distance themselves from traditional Völkisch or biological racism in favor of a neoliberal-populism that argues for an immigration policy “in Germany’s interest,” i.e. for “economically useful” immigrants and a harder line against asylum seekers and “criminal foreigners,” the contours of the tension between the two wings can be seen in the controversy that emerged when four AfD members of the EU parliament — including Lucke and Henkel — voted for sanctions against Russia in the wake of the annexation of Crimea.

This prompted opposition from Petry and Alexander Gauland, former CDU member and director of the state chancellery in Wiesbaden. It wasn’t without reason that Elsässer described the emerging political conflict within the party as that between a “Pegida-wing” and a “US-wing” (as in, a wing maintaining the traditional trans-Atlanticist profile of the postwar CDU). Tensions came to a head earlier this year when Lucke made noises about changing the party structure so it would only have a single party chair (though eventually a compromise was reached between the two sides on this score).

And yet, the Pegida rallies are still a potent symbol of the mass base for this new far-right politics. The demonstrations — which during their height were able to mobilize over 20,000 every Monday for marches through Dresden’s city center — have been a major topic of discussion for most of the winter.

The movement’s name — Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamification of the Occident — initially suggests a single-issue orientation, restricted to a paranoid and ridiculous vision of an imminent Islamic takeover of Germany. But to take this at face value would be to underestimate the sly, tactical opportunism of the movement in coalescing a modern, anti-immigrant movement, for which “Islam” merely functions as a convenient codeword.

This is evidenced by how the network was formed: founder Lutz Bachmann, a curious figure with a petty criminal past, created the Facebook group Pegida in an attempt to mobilize protests against a march through the center of Dresden by sympathizers of the banned Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

In other words, despite the pretense of constituting a movement against “Islamification,” Pegida was

actually founded in order to mobilize against the supporters of a secular Kurdish organization currently engaged in a fight against ISIS.

It is a movement against immigrants, further evidence for which is given by the network's nineteen-point "Position Paper": demands for a "zero tolerance policy" against "criminal" asylum seekers and immigrants; for an immigration policy based on the "utility" models of Switzerland, Canada, and Australia; and for the "maintenance and defense of the "Judeo-Christian culture of the Occident" are found alongside bizarre denunciations of "Gender Mainstreaming" and paranoid calls for the prohibition of "Sharia law" and "parallel societies."

Support for improved caretaking and more humane conditions in the housing of asylum seekers are included in order to burnish Pegida's attempted image as a modern, "tolerant" anti-immigrant formation, but the openly racist orientation of the movement's base is clearly demonstrated by a series of unedited video interviews conducted by Panorama, a public television news program.

There, participants in the Pegida marches articulate standard far-right talking points about how Germany "is not a sovereign country," that "the orders come from Tel Aviv and Washington," and that immigrants are not "war refugees" but rather "parasites."

The racist character of Pegida moved Merkel to publicly criticize the movement in her New Year's address and urge citizens not to participate in its marches. But it has won political affection from a predictable source: in January, Petry invited the leadership of Pegida to a meeting with the parliamentary faction of the AfD in the state parliament of Saxony in order to discuss commonalities between the movement and the party. Petry also defended Pegida against charges of racism in the media.

But the same tensions inherent in the AfD project have also created an acute crisis for Pegida: the contradiction between the bid for bourgeois respectability and the need to maintain a base within and to appeal to traditional far-right constituencies. The discourse of anti-Muslim racism inherited from the liberal intelligentsia has helped the new far right get its foot in the door of discursive respectability, but to the extent that this approach results in talk-show invitations and professions of "concern" by politicians for the "legitimate" fears of citizens, it ends up in conflict with the unapologetically racist core of the movement.

A case in point was the controversy that arose around founder Lutz Bachmann over a photo of him on his Facebook page dressed as Hitler, as well as statements describing foreigners as "vermin" and "dirty scum."

While Bachmann initially made an ostentatious gesture of falling on his sword for the sake of the movement by resigning as chair of Pegida (which since December had acquired the legal status of a "registered association"), he nonetheless insisted on maintaining a presence in the organization, which led to the resignation of those grouped around Kathrin Oertel, the self-described "economic advisor" and "real estate expert" who functioned as treasurer of the movement and attempted to present the respectable bourgeois face of Pegida on a roundtable discussion on the eponymous talk show Günther Jauch.

Wary of the irrevocably tainted Bachmann, as well as resisting associations with the Leipzig-based Pegida movement, whose leadership personnel are more explicitly rooted in the organized far-right, the circle around Oertel founded the organization Direct Democracy for Europe (DDfE).

DDfE's initial "position paper" constitutes an attempt to broaden the initial focus of Pegida on Islam and immigration into a general movement in support of demands for plebiscites, popular petitions,

“freedom of speech,” “domestic security,” opposition to the envisioned USA-EU TTIP free trade agreement, and calls for the abolition of EU sanctions against Russia as a result of the Ukraine crisis — while still maintaining the image of petty-bourgeois respectability that took a major hit in light of the revelations about Bachmann being a run-of-the-mill racist goon.

The DDfE was only able to gather around 500 people for its first demonstration on the Dresden Neumarkt on February 8, while the rump Pegida around Bachmann turned out 2,000, much lower than the numbers just months prior.

What is interesting about DDfE’s split from PEGIDA is that its attempts to distance itself from association in no way imply an actual distancing from the content of far-right politics; indeed, its political “expansion” into a broader movement for popular democracy, against free trade, for a more conciliatory politics vis-à-vis Russia, etc. are perfectly in line with the course advocated by Elsässer and the “Monday demonstrations” of the new right “Peace Movement 2014.” Instead, DDfE’s bid for respectability is premised not on any repudiation of far-right politics, but rather on presenting an image of itself as simply being comprised of “normal” people from the “center of society.”

A January study by a research team based at the Technical University of Dresden lent credibility to this picture, pointing out that 70% of participants surveyed were working and not unemployed, the majority had incomes slightly above average, and had university educations or skilled vocational training. While other scholars from the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin and the public opinion institute Forsa criticized the study for not being representative (around sixty-five of those asked to participate refused to), the study nonetheless throws interesting light on Pegida in terms of its continuity with traditional far-right movements.

Although Comintern theorists in 1930s such as Georgi Dimitroff had erroneously theorized fascism as “the open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic, and most imperialist elements of finance capital,” Leon Trotsky and others correctly surmised that there was an autonomous class dimension to fascism rooted in a petty bourgeoisie plagued by fears of social decline.

Thus PEGIDA and DDfE’s far-right politics and attempts to present a “respectable” bourgeois image represent a tension inherent to far-right movements as a whole. The majority of respondents in the TU Dresden survey who claimed that their main motivation for participation was a general “dissatisfaction with politics” is further evidence of the apolitical spirit of the contemporary far-right.

Of course, any analysis dealing with any contemporary manifestation of far-right politics is inevitably confronted with the question of “what is to be done?” There have been admirable counter-demonstrations in West German cities against attempts by local Nazis to form local Pegida or similarly named “GIDA” groups, but the potential mass base for far-right politics in the historical West Germany is quite limited for the foreseeable future.

Far more impressive were the massive counter-demonstrations against the attempted Legida march in Leipzig, though conditions there were also more favorable due to the more openly fascist character of that movement and the continuity of strong anti-fascist politics within the Leipzig left.

One problematic element that hasn’t been sufficiently addressed in much radical discussion around the new far right is the reluctance of many leftists to address the specificity of anti-Muslim racism. While it is true that the openly expressed hostility to Muslims masks a wider agenda of racism toward foreigners, too often German leftists have been reluctant to deal with the topic of how mainstream anti-Muslim racism within the liberal intelligentsia and even parts of the radical left has

provided an opening for the far right.

An admirable opposition to the antisemitism that still plagues European society often led, over the course of the Second Intifada and Afghanistan and Iraq wars, to an ugly anti-Muslim racism within parts of the German radical left. Even those sectors that avoided this were nonetheless sloppy in confusing a general materialist critique of religion as such with a racist discourse that attempted to paint Muslims as particularly pathological or as threats to “the Enlightenment” or “civilization.”

The seamless transition of a figure like Elsässer from “Anti-German” poster boy to figurehead of the new nationalist far-right, should give pause to those within the German radical left who hastily attempt to avoid confronting specifically anti-Muslim discourses, and the permeable borders between defenses of “Enlightenment rationality” and movements for the protection of “the Occident.”

Anthony Fano Fernandez

P.S.

* “Germany’s New Far Right”. Jacobin. 2.20.15:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/02/germany-far-right-pegida/>

* Anthony Fano Fernandez is a Germany-based activist and author.

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/02/24/germans-more-or-less/>

[2] See available on ESSF (article 37600), [With Islamophobia against Homophobia? – On an “elite discourse”](#).

[3] <http://www.stern.de/panorama/gesellschaft/thilo-sarrazin--kinder-kann-kriegen--wer-damit-fertig-wird--3811444.html>