

Fighting the far right in Germany

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Explaining the rise of Alternative for Germany

DN: The polls are showing that the racist, xenophobic and anti-Islamic Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland, AfD*) could be the leading party in the autumn 2019 elections in the East German states of Saxony, Thuringia and Brandenburg. How did things get this bad?

SK: That's a very complex question and the answer is complex too.

First of all, let's look at the development of AfD. It came onto the scene at the 2013 federal elections. At that point it was a mixed bag of mainly high-profile economists with a very anti-European Union, anti-euro position. Yet, even then AfD had a lot of people who were definitely in the far-right camp, but still in the minority. In those elections they didn't get enough votes to cross the 5% threshold for representation, but they certainly got a lot of profile.

Next, in a context of numerous internal faction fights, the AfD began to gain more support. The far-right, ultra-nationalist faction has now won the majority, with many of its high-profile politicians on the federal level advancing a far-right agenda.

The reason, or rather the trigger, for its ascendancy was the 2015-2016 mass refugee influx into Germany. The far right was able to exploit this opportunity to manoeuvre themselves, on the basis of outright racist, anti-refugee demagoguery ("Close the borders!"), into the AfD leadership and high-profile parliamentary positions, since the 2017 federal elections. That development, of course, also strengthened the AfD's anti-EU and anti-euro sentiment.

However, the background to all of this, particularly when it comes to the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) is the very uneven development between East Germany and West Germany since reunification. With the Wall having come down in November 1989, a government body was set up, the *Treuhandanstalt*, and it was put in charge of — in the terms they used at the time — "bringing the East's economy up to speed". However, what was carried out was a complete takeover of the East German economy by the West.

Outrageous things happened during that time, with companies sold for one German mark. West German enterprises taking over East German assets may have had to meet different conditions, like retaining the workforce for 12 or 24 months, but mass unemployment followed and even today unemployment rates in the East are still significantly higher than in the West. Wages are 15% lower on average. [This is a major issue](#).

That's one feature that makes the East significantly different from the West. But, of course, there

are other factors that come into play. During its life the GDR didn't have a high migrant population. There were Vietnamese so-called "contract workers", but who were segregated from the bulk of the population. So the GDR was never a multicultural society, unlike the West since World War II, which experienced a big influx of people, so-called "guest workers"— a problematic name, but that's a different issue.

So this is another reason as to why East Germany has been more vulnerable to racist populism than West Germany...

Despite its official socialist internationalist rhetoric?

Totally. In fact the East German population, even though the GDR may have been socialist in name, was totally depoliticised, was not involved in politics on a day-to-day basis, and had no experience of engagement with politics. That was determined totally from the top.

These are some of the key factors that have contributed to the AfD now finding more support in East Germany than in West Germany. Of course, in West Germany there's always been a latent residue of fascist sentiment and thinking. In studies that have been done the figure that is always thrown around is that 10% of the West German population has always had fascistic tendencies and remains racist and anti-Semitic.

So how was the AfD able to mobilise and organise this sentiment? What structural presence has it managed to build?

There have always been neo-fascist organisations in Germany, ever since World War II, but they never managed to gain as much of a footing in the electoral system, even though they had party-political structures. For example, the National Democratic Party (NPD) is one of those fascist organisations and since its founding in 1964 has only managed to win a few seats in state parliaments for short periods of time.

There has also been a campaign to declare these organisations unconstitutional. Whether we agree with this approach or not, these attempts at declaring them unconstitutional have failed because when these cases came before the German equivalent of the High Court, it was found that the German secret services have been so involved in their running — with the excuse of monitoring them and trying to uncover what they are up to — that it was impossible to declare these outfits unconstitutional. Basically, the courts had no choice but to rule that, given the high level of official agency involvement in them, they could not be ruled unconstitutional, essentially questioning whether the NPD, for instance, wasn't government-agency run.

Also, after reunification, the extra-parliamentary far-right groups, which had always had their little networks, saw an opportunity to gain members in the East. They targeted the East, moved there and made a big push on recruiting youth. With their networks and funds they set up or were involved in youth clubs in which they pushed right-wing ideology in a big way. The recent case of the [National Socialist Underground](#) (NSU), the terrorist group that killed non-German people over a period of six years, clearly illustrates how these small fascist organisations moved into the East to recruit.

Next, they have managed over the years to create a stronghold in the martial arts scene — there's a lot of networks being developed there. In the area of security work, too. These are some of the areas where there's been a lot of networking taking place among the far right.

There are also other groupings that have come onto the scene in recent years, including at the academic level, which is quite a new phenomenon but in line with what has been happening in

Austria and some other European countries. These groupings present themselves in a very different way, much more educated, much more articulate in the presentation of their racist and anti-Semitic views. These ideological networks are getting bigger and bigger.

The Otto Brenner foundation, of the metal workers' union IG Metall, recently did a study that was released in one of the more left-wing newspapers here, taz. It found that since the last federal election in 2017, in which the AfD won 92 seats, it has been able to build up a workforce of fascists. The study found that at least 26 of the 300-plus Bundestag staffers who feed information to the AfD MPs are members of these far-right ideological groupings. So their networks are getting stronger, more consolidated and institutionalised.

The support base of the AfD

You say that the far right did a lot of work with young people in the East, but from what I've gathered it would seem that the social base — the voting base — of the AfD in the East is older workers who've got no future. Is that true?

I think that's definitely true, as well, but I have the impression — I can't quantify this — that this increased vote for the AfD among older workers and unemployed is a more recent phenomenon and that these would have been Die Linke voters, and of other parties also, who have now switched to the AfD. With reunification now coming up to its 30th year, a lot of workers lost their jobs and were never re-employed. So a lot of middle-aged people either had to move away from where they were living in the East or just remained unemployed or underemployed.

Apart from the uneven development that I was talking about earlier, wages, working hours and other conditions in the East are [still not the same as they are in the West](#). Some people would have gotten by over the past decades on petty casual jobs here and there, but with no future, no career path, no idea of where they are going. So these people have just become utterly disillusioned.

So while Die Linke — originally the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) — always had sizeable support in the East, about 20% to 30% depending on the state and often being the largest party, and people had hopes then for what Die Linke stands for in terms of social justice and economic development, they have seen few positive, concrete results coming through over the years. Given this experience, people who have been worn down over decades find the AfD's answers as to why they've been left behind — its scapegoating of migrants and refugees — credible as an explanation of their plight.

But Turkish migration and Syrian refugees have nothing whatsoever to do with their situation, which is the responsibility of German big capital and its governments. Are we dealing with a failure on the part of Die Linke in the East? Wasn't their message that they would do what they could to defend social conditions but that until there was a transformation at the level of the whole German state, it would be impossible to eliminate these structural inequalities on the basis of holding regional government in some Eastern states?

I would certainly argue that's the case. But we have to keep in mind that Die Linke is not a homogenous organisation. Within it there are different tendencies and ideological orientations. In the East the predominant tendency has been basically social democratic. So, with all the failures of social-democratic thinking, there have been no significant interventions and proposals.

So this is a product of mass desperation? Given widespread disillusionment, first with "communism" and then with the promises of reunification, race-hatred and ultra-

nationalism become a mass phenomenon?

Yes, and to understand why Saxony is such an AfD stronghold we also need to grasp that the far right has been very activist and consistently mobilised there. It started with Pegida (European Patriots against the Islamisation of the West) in October 2014 and has continued ever since, with weekly mobilisations of fascist cadre from all over Germany. Yes, there were always counter-demonstrations, but they were smaller because the activist left wingers weren't living there.

The AfD is trying to set up its own union. Is this because the established unions are associated — adequately or not — with the anti-fascist movement and it's hard for the AfD to penetrate the universe of organised labour while that's the case?

I think that this push is associated with the AfD trying to present itself as the true party of German workers, with the message that the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which still has the organised labour movement as its stronghold, hasn't delivered for German working people. So it's more this anti-establishment, anti-bureaucratic message: "They're not the ones representing you any more, we are."

That's very contradictory, because despite this rhetoric, neoliberal ideology is very strongly present in the AfD program, but it's the way they present themselves and want to be seen. Nonetheless, they weren't very successful at the last round of enterprise delegate elections. It's a bit too early to tell how this intervention will develop as there is not a clear AfD line here yet, but I suspect that they will have another crack at it.

Is there any overlap between the police forces and the AfD? I'm prompted to ask this by the Spanish state experience where there is a "police union", Jusapol, which is actually an organising medium for the far right.

Certainly the official police position is that their role is to maintain security and public safety for everybody, but what that has resulted in is that the fascists have been chaperoned. Whenever there have been mobilisations of the far right and counter-protests have occurred to stop them or protest them, the police have certainly had the official position of protecting the fascists from the anti-fascists. When I say "anti-fascists" I'm talking about ordinary people, not the antifas who have got the reputation, rightly or wrongly, of being aggressive. We're talking about families that come out to protest.

There are no officially organised tendencies within the police unions that I know of, but because of the activities of the secret services — involving protection and membership of far-right organisations — that would equally apply to the police.

Present state of the anti-fascist movement

All of which presents the anti-fascist movement with a huge challenge. Could you explain its present state?

The anti-fascist movement in the West has always existed and always been active and mobilising. Ever since the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, antifascism — what is called antifa here — has pretty much become identified with the anarchist milieu, often referred to as the Black Bloc when it comes to demonstrations. It is youth-based and often associated with militant action and confrontation with the police. It has always been around, with a stable number of activists, almost forming a sub-culture. There have also always been a lot of anti-fascist individuals, unorganised people willing to come to demonstrations and mobilisations.

Well, that's the West, but none of that existed in the GDR. Of course, anti-fascism was part of official ideology and there were always a lot of people with strong anti-fascist views in the East, but that didn't mean that they were activists or organised in any activist way. So, when the AfD initially started to win seats in some of the state parliaments, there was a group of left-wingers from across the political spectrum — some from the Greens, some from the Social Democrats, some from Die Linke — who saw the need to develop coalitions to start organising against the growth of the AfD together with NGOs and individuals.

Because of everything I've just said, the organisation I'm involved in, Stand Up Against Racism! — which is just one of a number of these formations — is based more in the western states of Germany. But, as there'll be these three state elections in the East in September and October, opportunities are beginning to open up to start building anti-fascist organisational structures there as well. I would say this is quite a new phenomenon.

And this is something that has arisen spontaneously out of East German society, given that there was no equivalent to the movement in the West? I imagine it can't be an import from the West.

No, it's not an import, even though the movement in the West is trying to help, but it's clearly been motivated by events in the East itself. For example, there have been numerous occasions of incidents involving refugees and migrants—harassing women, altercations with local youths, street fights—that have been exploited by the far right to stage anti-migrant, anti-refugee protests. And the far right has been very good at that, because they already had the structures and the networks in place, almost as if waiting for these incidents to happen as triggers for their mobilisations.

All this coming together—these triggering events, the impending elections—created this reaction of people in the East: “We actually have to do something now, we actually have to develop the organisational structures to develop a force against the far right.” They then started working together with the existing structures in the West to try to set up these networks in the East. And that's where we are at the moment.

Work of the anti-fascist movement

What gains has the anti-fascist movement made to date?

Over the last few years the amount of people involved has grown significantly — that's a major gain. And because of the development of numerous coalitions, national but also state-based and local, there have been a lot of rallies and demonstrations with high public visibility due to an increase in street presence. The anti-fascist message is more present than for a long time: before it was more limited to the *antifa* sort of propaganda. A lot more organisations who previously weren't involved are now active.

The key example is the trade unions. They are part of the coalitions now, and when there are large mobilisations they provide infrastructure, encourage their members to come along and are visible at the mobilisations as unions. There's a lot more that could be said about their involvement — some would say that they could do more — but the trade unions certainly feel that they are a key player, especially in the East, and they want to be seen as that.

Next, let's look at the number of people involved in activism, taking Stand Up Against Racism! as an example. It started developing a workshop-type training program, using a very traditional term to refer to this training, to make it attractive to ordinary people. It's called training for the regulars (*Stammtischkämpfer*innen Ausbildung*), with “Stammtisch” meaning the table for regulars at the

local cafe, inn or club, for having a drink or playing cards, with the implication of being among your own kind.

The intention was to attract ordinary folk who may never had anything to do with activism, and to encourage people to come along and find out how to respond to far-right and fascist sloganeering. The goal was to help people who, in the family or at work, feel uncomfortable with some of the stuff that is being said around the lunch or dinner table but don't really have the confidence to interject or don't know exactly how to respond, perhaps from wanting to avoid conflict, in any case just sitting there uncomfortably. The goal was to equip these people to respond in such situations.

With these workshops there was a central development program and people were then trained in "train-the-trainer" style to deliver these workshops and then they were rolled out on a local level, by which I mean very local. For example, the group I'm involved with is just around the corner, four minutes' walk away. The attempt was always to bring people together in your own neighbourhood, your own local area.

And has this spread to the whole of Germany?

No, but it's spreading. If you go on [the web site](#) there's a little graphic which shows where all these local groups exist across Germany. And it is across Germany, going into Bavaria, and is now starting to get a presence in the East. The last figure I heard was that around 10,000 people have participated in these workshops. These are not people who would identify as activists, but it's the first step to bringing them closer, to encouraging them to become activists. I think this is really starting to show in the big mobilisations that have been happening.

It's confidence building, being able to say that we're opposed to this filth and this is why...

And how ordinary people can do that without putting themselves in danger. Part of the workshop is to use [Paulo Freire techniques](#) involving role-plays for handling tricky, potentially dangerous situations. Because the far right is getting more confident: with 92 Bundestag deputies they're getting cockier. There are more and more incidents of them carrying out provocations because they think they can get away with them, more and more attacks on people who look a bit different from the white, blue-eyed German. Our training is also aimed at making the far right less confident about getting away with that behaviour.

And you've said that this is now spreading into the East...

To give an example, there is now a group that is setting up in Saxony. Of course, they are being supported with some basic infrastructure, but it's all people from Saxony in the group, not people from West Germany being flown in. And the infrastructure can be self-multiplying. I would still say that's its early stages, but it's definitely happening. And my organisation is just one of many involved.

What other work does Stand Up Against Racism! do?

The community stalls that we do in areas where there is a stronger AfD vote are important. We distribute leaflets that don't only explain our work but also let people know how the AfD members of local councils, whom they may have voted for, behave: how they vote, what they actually do as elected representatives. The AfD has won numerous positions on local councils and their focus is to disrupt, disrupt, disrupt: to stop the work of the council by endlessly asking for information that can be used against migrant people and find reasons to have a go at migrants no matter what the issue is—supposed "privileged access" to childcare, for example.

Take as an example a stall I was involved in two weeks ago. We went into an area with a “low socio-economic profile”, borderline West-East in Berlin, with a sizeable non-German, migrant, population precisely because it is a poorer area. There are a lot of marginalised and disillusioned people living there.

We had a leaflet explaining the behaviour of the AfD local councillors and a specific leaflet on women’s issues and what the AfD actually says about women’s issues, for example that they only want to have mother-father-child accepted as a family, they are against terminations, for making divorce harder—all that stuff. We also had a nationally produced broadsheet about the forthcoming European Union elections.

We had our stall and the AfD also had a stall, surrounded by a lot of mostly older people while our people were mostly younger. It was very confrontational and some of the AfD people were—I was quite surprised—thuggish in their way of trying to physically intimidate us. They rode around and around us on a motor scooter, trying to invade our space, but without having a physical attack as such.

But the experience was that the people who are clearly opposed to the AfD were very encouraged to see us there and were saying when handed the AfD leaflet: “No, thank you. I wouldn’t vote for you.” So, our being there gave these people the confidence to do that. At the same time, people who maybe aren’t so sure whether they would be willing to vote for the AfD got the propaganda of both sides, and therefore now have an opportunity to go home and have a think about the issues.

I think that having a presence in these neighbourhoods is utterly important. The danger is that we are just leaving this sort of space to the AfD. If they are the only ones seen publicly there, then they are seen as the only people who are “doing something”.

Behind the rise of Indivisible

And all this work combines with ongoing mobilisations...

Of course. Last October 13, there was a mobilisation of a quarter of a million people in Berlin, which was the largest one of its kind for a while. How this came about was quite remarkable, because it was actually the work a group of lawyers (so-called “revolutionary lawyers”), who started sending out letters to all sorts of organisations, saying that “we really need to have a mass mobilisation”, not so much against the AfD—it wasn’t quite so targeted—but a mobilisation to present what sort of society we want, putting up a sign that this is what organisations and people at large are fighting for. The name of the mobilisation became—it didn’t have a name at the beginning—Indivisible ([Unteilbar](#)). The number of organisations that signed up to its founding statement was enormous.

October 13 was an anti-racist mobilisation, of course. But it also involved activists against climate change, the LGBTI community and others. It involved all kinds of people expressing aspirations for a decent future for all. It was such a success that it was decided to keep the organisation together as a coalition. There’s regular organising happening with, again, a focus on East Germany, with a mass demonstration set down for August 24 in Dresden, prior to the autumn elections in the East. Other initiatives are planned by this broader coalition, and by a lot of other organisations. This is the first time since reunification that there’s been such mobilisation in Germany—it’s a very big thing. The amount of people mobilised at the moment is enormous.

And what impact is this having on normal, institutional politics?

It goes across parties, because you have activists with strong social commitment and anti-racist

commitment in the Greens and the SPD as well as Die Linke, and people are being mobilised across the parties and working together in this coalition. This movement is already so big that political parties can't not be part of it, if only as a question of prestige and of being seen to be involved.

And would the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) have had to take a stand about a demonstration like October 13?

Well, of course, they didn't. But the movement is certainly in the mainstream media, and politicians are having to answer questions about it. Also, there's a lot of pressure on the CDU, given the expected gains for the AfD in the elections in the East, to publicly commit to not going into a governing coalition with the AfD. That's a big point of discussion in the anti-racist movement, and I think the mobilisations that Indivisible is doing—and other mobilisations—will put pressure on the CDU, so they can't just get away with that. Whether that pressure will be strong enough to stop them, well, we shall see. But the visibility, the public pressure, the public knowledge is definitely spreading.

And the churches?

Individual churches are involved, but the churches as institutions are not. Maybe that is because they are not as strong as they used to be.

Are any of the parties—the SPD comes to mind—trying to establish some sort of hegemony within the movement?

No, that's not happening, and it's simply too big for it to happen. At this stage, definitely not and I can't actually see that happening, either.

How do decisions get made within such a broad space?

There are regular meetings where all coalition partners are invited to attend. Very small organisations are part of this, such as—one that comes to mind—Association of Victims of Persecution of Fascism, small organisations that we might call NGOs, but they are all part of Indivisible. There are big meetings where anyone can come, and general directions are decided, and in terms of day-to-day decision-making there's a coordinating circle—anybody can be part of that—which meets by phone hook-up. And, because of donations, there's a very tiny office with two or three paid staff and volunteers.

And Stand Up Against Racism! is an affiliate of Indivisible?

It's not as formal as that. Basically, prior to October 13 last year, Indivisible set out a statement and invited organisations to sign on to the statement, which was basically how it was formed as a coalition.

The SPD and the Greens would have signed?

Not as federal organisations, but local SPD and Greens branches and individuals would definitely have signed.

So this is healthy?

Very healthy, because it's been set up in this, let's say, loose way. If you were sceptical you might say that there's a potential to dominate, because there are no election processes in place. But, keeping in mind that this is an organisation less than a year old, maybe that will develop, I don't

know. Or if threats like that should develop, maybe there would be a need to set up structures. But I think this arrangement has happened by default. Because of the success of October 13, the reaction was, all of sudden: “Well, what are we going to do now?”

“Are we an organisation?”, “What are we?” There was a lot of self-questioning and what’s happening at the moment is by chance, not planned, not organised. It’s in relation to concrete goals—making the next agreed initiative happen.

Tactics against the far right

Is there a debate with the anti-fascist movement about tactics towards the fascists, about whether or not anti-fascism should try to drive them out of public space (“shut them down”) or whether the best strategy is one of counter-mobilisation?

It’s very complex here, because of Germany’s history. For example, even within Die Linke when the debate took place around making the [NPD](#) illegal, the majority position would have been in favour of them being declared unconstitutional and therefore having to “shut them down”. In general, that position is much more widespread here than it is in other countries with a different past.

At the same time, when you look at today’s context of the concrete AfD threat, the general position is to have mass counter-mobilisations. However, because more and more different groups are coming together to mobilise against the far right, you will always have the anarchists trying to be more confrontational, but there is also a strong sentiment among non-anarchist activists to use civil disobedience to disrupt—that’s certainly strong. I wouldn’t say that these activists are in the “shut them down” camp, but there’s strong support for having street blockades and sit-downs to prevent the far right from marching, not allowing them the space that they want.

However, this is becoming harder and harder to implement because of the role of the police in cornering off the space where the fascists are to march and chaperoning them.

In any case, given that the movement is so heterogeneous, wouldn’t it be impossible to impose a tactical line on a demonstration?

Well, these things are done through negotiations among the participants in a specific demonstration, and sometimes it will work and sometimes not. In general, there is very little coordination when it comes to trying to agree on tactics, but that doesn’t mean that in the future, if there is a particular event, that maybe the different forces and tendencies won’t come together when the need for better coordination is obvious.

Take this year’s May Day counter-demonstration to the AfD in Erfurt (capital of Thuringia). The AfD decided five or six months ago that they wanted to pick May Day, which they are trying to claim as theirs inasmuch as they are the representatives of German working people, as the day to launch their election campaign. When this was first announced they said that 10,000 AfD supporters would mobilise for the launch.

Immediately, all the different anti-fascist groups and coalitions announced that they would counter-mobilise in Erfurt on that day, so as not to give the AfD the space. Next, in the weeks leading up to May Day, a revised figure came out from the AfD to the effect that they were now expecting 2000 supporters and that the election campaign would be launched by two of their highest-profile figures.

On the day itself they managed to mobilise 500 people—pitiful—and all the anti-fascist forces mobilised 5000 to counter them, a big success. And that is the important part: to march around the streets of Erfurt where there will be a lot of AfD voters and show how strong anti-fascism is and how

few AfD supporters there are.

That doesn't mean that people aren't going to vote the way they are going to vote, but this show of strength was so important as part of the battle for hearts and minds.

Impact on political consciousness

How much is the broad movement of Indivisible, standing for human values that are antagonistic and incompatible with the rule of big capital, helping—if at all—the growth of anti-capitalist consciousness, socialist consciousness, while not necessarily being expressed in its language?

I don't know if I can answer that question. But look at other developments that are happening at the same time as Indivisible, like Fridays For Future, which the public knows about and which is spreading across the schools and has a lot of following in Germany, with massive rallies. That reflects the fact that in the schools today there's a little bit more encouragement for students to be more pro-active and outspoken about their concerns. This is also giving rise to young people getting their school to declare itself anti-fascist: it's still an isolated phenomenon but it's growing.

We're dealing with a process but I think that at the moment it has a strong basis on which to grow. How successful it will finally be is impossible to tell, but at the moment everything is working in favour of it being able to consolidate and spread.

Wouldn't you think that this process would at least feed through into an increased vote for the left in the broadest sense — SPD, Greens and Die Linke — as against the right?

I would think so, but Indivisible has arisen since the 2017 election, when the AfD replaced Die Linke as the third largest party in the Bundestag. We'll have to wait to see the impact on federal politics, but in immediate terms Indivisible is striving to contain the AfD advance at the forthcoming state elections in the East. The measure of success here won't be so much the advance in the vote for the left-of-centre forces, but how much the AfD vote is constrained.

The social basis of AfD support is desperation and the sense that there is no future. The anti-fascist movement can mobilise to show that the AfD represents a dead end, but it can't in itself represent an alternative future. Indivisible is a statement of the values of the future we want, but presents no strategy. Where do we go from here?

Well, these aspirations have to turn into political demands. But I think there is a dynamic here. To illustrate with an example from Berlin. Right now, there is a referendum in progress for the nationalisation of big real estate companies that own more than 3000 rental apartments, so as to address the enormous housing inequity that is developing, not only in Berlin but in many other German cities.

This is the first referendum of its kind, and it's posing the question of the nationalisation of private property in order to address the shortage and high price of rental properties—that's a very concrete political demand. The dynamic is the interaction between the aspiration for a socially just and sustainable society and the concrete demands like this that are coming through—they bounce off each other. Maybe this is the way it will play itself out: maybe it's a question of people being encouraged to put forward concrete demands in particular areas and then political parties being forced to take on these demands.

So, to take this referendum, Die Linke has no problem with it, but it produces a debate in the Greens, with individual Green MPs coming out in support and others not. It stirs a battle within the

SPD as well: officially the party is opposed, but individual members are not. I think that process, if continued and further developed, can only push those parties further to the left or split them.

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