

Mike Schmeitzner, ed.. *Totalitarismuskritik von links: Deutsche Diskurse im 20. Jahrhundert.* Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007. 405 pp. EUR 44.90, cloth, ISBN 978-3-525-36910-4.



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Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

This volume of essays on left-wing theorists of totalitarianism makes no pretense of completeness. The "German discourses" of the subtitle refers to the fact that not everyone under review was German. Nonetheless, the essays touch upon the major discussions and controversies that animated the Left in its attempts to understand the unexpected developments of the twentieth century.

During the 1920s, two groups of recently marginalized Marxist intellectuals converged in their analyses of fascist Italy and Bolshevik Russia. They were among the first to bring a comparative approach to these phenomena and to develop the concept of an overreaching totalitarianism that would define political analysis throughout the century. One group centered on Karl Kautsky. It included intellectuals who had previously served as the guiding lights for the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) but whose opposition to the First World War left them without an audience within this party and whose refusal to join the pro-Bolshevik radical Left after the war left

them without influence in this direction either. Alexander Schiffrin and the exiled Mensheviks who fled to Germany during the 1920s represented the other group. The Mensheviks had once dominated the Marxist scene in Russia, but their timidity during the revolutionary upheavals led to their ultimate marginalization by the triumphant Bolsheviks. Two fine essays by Jürgen Zarusky and Uli Schöler focus on the fate of these respective thinkers as they attempted to influence groups more conservative than themselves. In Kautsky's case, the focus of attention was the SPD during the Weimar era. The Mensheviks eventually collaborated with the American foreign policy establishment during the Cold War.

By the late 1920s, Germany had supplanted Italy as a focus for left-wing commentators. The majority of essays in this collection take up the German-Russian nexus as it was played out by successive waves of theorists. Each country represented its own analytical difficulties. Russia combined socialist ideology with state domination and capitalistic production methods, whereas Ger-

many was understood variously as a regressive counter-revolution, political hegemony by the dominant capitalist-monopoly class, and/or a new, more sophisticated stage of state-managed society. Did fascism represent capitalism's past, present, or future? No one seemed certain.

The biographically oriented essays are some of the most successful within this volume. Clemens Vollnhals describes the political and intellectual evolution of Franz Borkenau, a dissident Communist Party member who critiqued fascism, but who increasingly saw a silver lining in authoritarian solutions to social problems. Mario Kessler focuses on Arthur Rosenberg. Quicker than many others to decipher the essential characteristics of both fascist and communist regimes, Rosenberg drew closer to his Jewish heritage during his exile in the United States. An essay by Mike Schmeitzner, the volume's editor, surveys in considerable depth the published and unpublished writings of the council communist Otto Rühle, although ultimately his lack of sympathy for Rühle's ideas winds up justifying Rühle's marginalization by his contemporaries.

If the biographical essays situate theorists within their historical context, the essays that survey entire schools of thought in order to show the evolution of ideas over time are equally successful. Alfons Söllner contributes an excellent essay on the early Frankfurt School, with its seemingly off-kilter focus on the authoritarian personality at a time when everyone else attempted to unravel the economic and political traits that led to fascism's success in Germany. The Frankfurt School's focus paralleled its hesitancy to engage politically or say too much critically about the Soviet Union. A further piece on Herbert Marcuse by Eckhard Jesse divides his intellectual evolution into three distinct periods, although these might alternately be viewed as three phases of his lifework. Another essay by Bernd Faulenbach traces the softening of views towards the Soviet Union and the declining interest in theories of totalitarianism within

West Germany during the decades that preceded the collapse of the east bloc in 1989.

The weakest essays contain long, undigested quotes—as if we are viewing talking heads who have been placed before a movable backdrop that represents the historical timeline. The wisdom of examining individual authors and documenting what they said at particular moments is never theorized. Virtually everyone who wrote about international politics had something to say in one context or another about totalitarianism, and it is not at all clear what is to be gained by a review of individuals whose perceptions were sometimes quite accurate and other times wrongly aimed, if not outright mistaken. The essays about lesser-known figures in particular need to justify the significance of their focus. Otherwise, these individuals too easily appear as repackaged versions of the theorists who continue to attract attention.

For virtually all the theorists under consideration, totalitarianism was defined through denunciations of it, its excesses and abuses, its violence and inhumanity. This stance, too, keeps the discussion overly restrictive. Germany and Russia are viewed as systems of domination and hardly ever as cultural entities, a particular blindness that continues to haunt political analysis to this day, with its inability to anticipate the collapse of entire regions of the world. Few of the essays discuss their subjects' views of democracy. The essayists never ask what consequences the critique of totalitarianism had in their subjects' ability to discuss frankly the social systems that they defended. Some essays make the rehabilitation of social democratic political thought an unabashed goal. Accusations that figures like Rosa Luxemburg and Otto Rühle harbored crypto-totalitarian attitudes bring home the tangential nature of too many of the contributions included in this collection.

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