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The Conservative Turn: Political Journalism’s Crisis of Direction in the Berlin Republic

Lutz Hachmeister is ideally placed to write about journalism, politics, and their leading figures in the Berlin Republic. *Nervöse Zone: Politik und Journalismus in der Berliner Republik* masterfully combines Hachmeister’s professional experience and contacts with academic reflections to investigate the interaction of politics and political journalism in the Berlin Republic from 1998 to 2007. Both an observer and practitioner, Hachmeister has worked in film, TV, and print media for over twenty years. Amongst other projects, he has directed documentary films, including *Das Goebbels-Experiment* (2005), and headed the Deutscher Fernsehpreis jury from 2000 to 2002. In 2006, he was the founding director of the Institut für Medien- und Kommunikationspolitik (IfM) in Berlin, an independent research and consultancy institute, whose sponsors range from ZDF to major commercial media enterprises like Springer and Bertelsmann. Hachmeister’s position, straddling the milieux of journalism, politics, and research, thus makes his work a valuable and well-informed overview of media in the Berlin Republic, its problems and practices.

Hachmeister’s main sources include approximately twenty of the leading lights in media, including Harald Martenstein, Sabine Christiansen, and Frank Schirrmacher, alongside newspaper articles and literature. Hachmeister’s main thesis is that high-level journalism and politics have become increasingly interdependent in the face of new technological and economic supersystems, namely the Internet, the expanding entertainment industry, and globalization. To paint his conclusions in broad brushstrokes, Hachmeister believes that, although politics has been surprisingly resilient, journalists of all colors have become neoconservative centralists, leading to the development of a “spätbürgerlichen Neo-Journalismus” (late-bourgeois neo-journalism) (p. 13). This development is his main focus. His book explores these issues through four main case studies of the most important recent politicians and media figures: Gerhard Schröder, Sabine Christiansen, Frank Schirrmacher, and Horst Köhler. The book will thus be particularly useful for those working on contemporary German media, politics, and communication studies.

Hachmeister aims to present another perspective on
relations between journalists and politicians. Bemoaning the lack of self-reflection and investigation within the journalistic milieu, he sets out not only to describe how journalists and politicians mutually stabilize their respective positions but also the consequences of the ideological vacuum and prioritization of the economy created by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Two thinkers, Carl Schmitt and Marshall McLuhan, represent for Hachmeister the poles of the new challenges for the Berlin Republic: the paradox of simultaneously conceptualizing “die Resistenz des Politischen” and “die Ausweitung des Medialen” (p. 14). While Schmitt theorized that in an age of depoliticization, successful politicians are those who master new technology and new friend-enemy constellations, McLuhan believed that the media would destroy traditional politics, just as television and computers had undermined the nation-state. Had Hachmeister been writing in 2010, President Barack Obama’s success with Internet campaigning would certainly have provided an excellent example to back up his use of Schmitt.

In chapter 2, “Journalismus und Politik im Spiegelzelt,” Hachmeister describes the habitus of journalists in the Berlin Republic. He illustrates how the move of the capital from Bonn to Berlin created a new medial superstructure, characterized by increased “Prominenzjournalismus” (“das Amalgam von Publizistik, Politik und Entertainment” [prominent journalism, the amalgamation of publicity, politics, and entertainment], p. 23), political TV talk shows, a decline in investigative journalism, a rise in media consultancy and politicians’ media presence, and finally, generational change with the deaths of great postwar figures like Spiegel editor Rudolf Augstein (1923-2002), Marion Gräfin Dönhoff (1909-2002), and Joachim Fest (1926-2006). This development has been accompanied by a drastic rise in media employees from 14,000 in the 1960s to 48,000 in 2005, along with an increase in PR experts and associated fields (p. 52). Due to these developments, Hachmeister believes that journalism must now be seen as “eine Art Fashion Industry” (a sort of fashion industry, p. 52), which constantly pursues that which is new, or else attempts to revive the old. Yet, journalists did not start this search for the new solely in the last ten years; more about journalism in the Bonn era would help the reader to understand fully the extent of the changes Hachmeister describes.

In each of the next five chapters, Hachmeister presents a case study, concentrating on one protagonist, relating each biography and the history of the position or the milieu within which the person operates. Chapters 3 and 6 focus on the top political figures in Germany, Schröder and Köhler, framing Hachmeister’s examination of two major media figures in television and print in chapters 4 and 5.

Chapter 3 focuses on Gerhard Schröder and the entry of politics into journalism. Hachmeister explores journalists’ construction of Schröder as the consummate Medienkanzler (media chancellor), demonstrating that he was much more an old-style industrial politician, whose media policy was always rather spontaneous and unplanned. As an example, he cites Schröder’s overblown appearance in the so-called elephant round (Elefantenrunde) following the election on September 18, 2005. Hachmeister sees Angela Merkel, on the other hand, as more skilled at working behind the scenes to avoid criticism in the media (although he might think differently in 2010, given criticism of the current CDU-FDP coalition.)

Chapter 4 explores the effects of Sabine Christiansen’s political television chat show, which aired on Sunday nights on ARD from 1998 to 2007, reaching five to six million viewers on average and a market share of 17 to 27 percent (p. 160). Hachmeister describes her show as becoming more important than the Spiegel for raising politicians’ profiles and discusses how the talk show format spawned many imitators, coming to define the appearance of contemporary politics on television. Hachmeister then turns his attention to print media in chapter 5, examining the role of Frank Schirrmacher, an editor of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, in creating some of the most prominent “scandals” of the Berlin Republic (Christa Wolf, the Walser-Bubis debate, Günter Grass’s membership in the SS) and forcing debate about sociological and technological issues such as an aging German population in his bestseller, Das Methusale-Komplott (2004).

Chapter 6 returns to politicians and illustrates how journalists in part invented Horst Köhler’s public personality and understanding of his role as president. For Hachmeister, Köhler is the first president of postwar Germany portrayed as a type of “Über-Kanzler” (p. 217). The journals and newspapers Bild, Focus, and Spiegel have presented Köhler as an independent, active president, or, as Hachmeister succinctly puts it, “something like a democratic Hindenburg” (so etwas wie einen demokratischen Hindenburg), with surveys indicating that 77 percent of Germans approve of the president’s intervention in daily affairs of state (p. 228). However, Hachmeister does not provide explicit causal evidence linking this view to newspaper reports or other factors.
Finally, chapter 7 presents Matthias Matussek’s 2006 book describing his _Deutschwerdung, Wir Deutschen_, as the prototype of myriad books in the decade after 1997 that proclaimed a “nationale Ankunftsprosa” (national prose of arrival, p. 245). Hachmeister uses Matussek as his prime example of the conservative values underlying contemporary German journalism: “Work, Family, God and the Fatherland” (Arbeit, Familie, Gott und Vaterland), which he provocatively terms the updated version of Marshal Pétain’s dictum “travail, famille, patrie.”

In sum, Hachmeister’s intimate knowledge of and involvement in journalism make this book an excellent overview and analysis of the media landscape in the Berlin Republic. Hachmeister’s book is both pithy and to the point, such as when he describes the media chancellor as “the democratic version of a minister of propaganda” (die demokratische Variante eines Propagandaministers, p. 130). The conclusions may be overly pessimistic, but the work’s critical approach will provide much important information and food for thought for graduate students and professors concerned with the interaction between media and politics and the history of contemporary Germany.

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