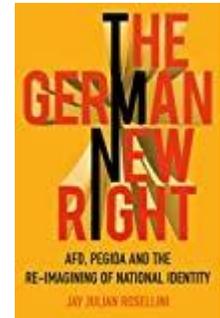




**Jay Rosellini.** *The German New Right: AfD, PEGIDA and the Re-Imagining of National Identity.* London: Hurst, 2020. xii + 200 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-78738-140-7.



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## The "Querdenker" in German Politics and Society

The Alternative for Germany Party (AfD) currently holds 89 of the German Bundestag's overall 709 seats, making it the largest opposition faction at the federal level, since the larger, conservative CDU and the left-labor SPD are currently joined in a Grand Coalition. The party was founded in 2013 on a platform of opposing the policies of the European Union. Euroskepticism is a political phenomenon that emerged in all EU member countries in the aftermath of the 2008-09 Great Recession, and the Syrian Civil War, which broke out on the Ides of March in 2011. That ongoing Middle East disaster resulted in millions of immigrants fleeing toward Europe, especially to Germany, so it is no surprise that a populist party would find a place in the German political system as a reaction to the immigrant crisis. The AfD is also active at the local political level, and currently is represented by 254 of 1,866 seats in state legislatures. But since the party has evolved into what many observers would label a right-populist and even

right-wing extremist direction, alarm bells have gone off in a way that has not happened, to nearly the same extent, in reaction to similar developments in other European countries (with the possible exception of Viktor Orban's Hungary). Jay Rosellini's book is an engaging and well-researched, if somewhat arbitrarily stitched together series of essays that help to make sense of the politics of resentment-fueled nationalism in Germany today, as right-wing populism has anchored itself in the mainstream of German political culture. In many ways right-wing populism in America and in Germany have converged. Today a contrarian "Querdenker" movement has taken to the streets in Germany to protest Coronavirus restrictions, to rail against "fake news," and to oppose the liberal elites.

In a short prologue, Rosellini lays out the rationale for his book, to "analyze the motivation and actions of those who are not in agreement with the construction of Germany characterized

by a generous welfare state, environmental consciousness, a striving for gender equality, a marginalization of the military and a blending of cultures (including religious culture)” (p. xi). In other words, he sets out to analyze intellectuals and political parties who reject the liberal-conservative consensus that has governed West Germany since the establishment of the Federal Republic in 1949 and that survived until recently in the enlarged Germany that came into being after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The book offers a chapter each on three German literary figures, an excursus on a French intellectual of similar tendencies, and an exposition of the AfD as well as Pegida, a now pan-European far-right movement, founded in Dresden in 2014, directed against what the group would call the “Islamization of Europe.”

Some difficulties emerge with Rosellini’s choice of intellectual voices for a new direction in German nationalism. The first, Thilo Sarrazin, is a renegade SPD policy wonk concerned with the future of the German welfare state; the second, Akif Pirinçci, a rabble-rousing novelist and provocative media personality; the third, Eric Zemmour, a French version of Pirinçci; and finally, Botho Strauss, an introverted hermit-like writer and playwright of romantic antimodern tendencies. As the children’s game has it, some of these things are not like the others, as Rosellini himself admits. In his view, what ties them together is their “discomfort” with contemporary German society, which they express in different ways (p. 126). One could argue, though, that what unites all of them is simply their ability to provoke strong feelings in their readers with stringent critiques of current German politics and society. An academic writing on the subject of German nationalism will find a lot of material that arises from the controversies they stir, but that does not necessarily make them representative or coherent as a group. Rosellini does not give us much more justification for his choices, and one is left wondering why exactly he chose them and not others. After all, there are many other German intellectuals, writers, and

academics who fit under the “uncomfortable” label. Botho Strauss, for example, became associated with a kind of right-wing critique of German culture with an essay, originally published in *Der Spiegel* and then reprinted in an infamous book of essays called *The Self-Confident Nation* in 1994. Of the twenty-eight authors represented in that volume, many, still quite active today, could just as easily have been examined in Rosellini’s book, including figures of intellectual substance like the philosophers Rüdiger Safranski or Gerd Bergfleth, the filmmaker Hans Jürgen Syberberg, the historian Karlheinz Weißmann, and the publisher and journalist Klaus Rainer Röhl. Another contributor, the historian Ernst Nolte, although recently deceased, is arguably a figure much more important for the New German Right than anyone discussed by Rosellini, and Nolte never receives even a mention in his book.

Let’s take them one by one. Thilo Sarrazin, born in 1945, is an economist, politician, and author who has stirred public discussion in Germany with a number of controversial publications, including most famously a book whose title Rosellini deftly translates as *Germany Digs Its Own Grave* (*Deutschland schafft sich ab*, 2010). He had been a member of the Social Democratic Party since 1973, but very recently, in July 2020, had his party membership revoked, a decision that currently he is appealing. Sarrazin has held many high posts in government, serving as finance senator in Berlin, a director of the German train system (Bundesbahn), and a governor of the German Federal Reserve (Bundesbank). He came to public attention with an interview in 2009 in which he stated that many immigrants in Germany refuse to assimilate, and raised particular furor when he criticized the German welfare system as promoting laziness and selective benefits for the social underclasses.

Sarrazin’s *Germany Digs Its Own Grave* elaborated on ideas he first discussed in articles and public interviews, and contains pages and pages of charts and graphs supporting his critique of the

social welfare system in Germany. Sarrazin might be thought of as Germany's Charles Murray, a social scientist who espouses policies that can be used by the right-wing, even though Sarrazin is politically a social democrat and the American Murray describes himself as libertarian. Both thinkers have a tendency to think about social policy in terms of genetics and like to propose large, radical rethinking of social programs, such as, in Murray's case, arguing for a universal minimum wage in exchange for canceling most government entitlement programs and, in Sarrazin's case, suggesting that the German civil service be entirely abolished. If one just reads the headlines, one could conclude that Sarrazin is a xenophobic crank, but in fact Germany, like most advanced industrial societies, indeed has long-term fiscal problems related to demographics—it has an aging population with a large social safety net—and to fraught issues around immigration and labor needs. Sarrazin's analyses of these difficult, often politically incendiary topics are based on coldly objective, solid evidence, and his policy suggestions are thought-provoking and pragmatic, if often too bold for implementation any time soon. Rosellini is careful to defend Sarrazin from critics who label him an extremist (as he notes, often without having read his books) and bemoans that so “few people have been willing to engage in a serious dialogue with him” (p. 29). But by writing such a long chapter about him at the beginning of a book titled *The German New Right*, one can hardly help concluding that Rosellini wants to make him at least partly responsible for ideas that have elevated the prospects of German right-wing parties.

The transition from the chapter on Sarrazin to Akif Pirinçci is a sudden leap, like watching a fact-based documentary and then switching to a mad-cap zany comedy. Pirinçci was born in 1959 in Istanbul and emigrated with his family to West Germany as a ten-year-old. Already as a teenager, he made himself a literary name by writing radio and television plays. He became internationally

recognized in 1989 with the publication of a best-selling crime fiction novel revolving around cats called *Felidae*, which came out as a popular film in 1994. Even though his career was probably helped by the fact that he was an “immigrant author,” he steadfastly refused to identify himself as such, and may have turned toward German nationalism as a result of the resentment he felt at being pigeonholed into that category. In any case, around 2009, after becoming quite wealthy with a series of novels, some in the fashion of the Beat generation, others more in the horror or science fiction genres, he began to speak out politically. Undoubtedly Pirinçci can be classified as a right-wing social critic in the sense that Rosellini is portraying as “the German New Right.” He unabashedly identifies with the AfD and the anti-Islam movement Pegida, speaks at the latter's events, and writes for right-wing publications. He publicly attacks immigrants, political correctness in all forms, homosexuals, and what he would call radical feminism. In October 2015, he was convicted by a Dresden Court of public incitement to violence (*Volkshetze*). But as the many examples that Rosellini provides show, his public pronouncements and social media posts have become ever more lewd, bizarre, and incendiary. He is a comic provocateur along the lines in America of an older version of Milo Yiannopolous or a male counterpart to Ann Coulter. His latest book (2016), with the revealing neologistic title *People Inversion (Umvolkung)*, was brought out by the New Right publisher Antaios, under the direction of the right-wing activist, think tank director, and publicist Götz Kubitschek. Undoubtedly Pirinçci is a good example of a public figure in Germany today who espouses a semi-coherent right-wing ideology, and Rosellini follows his career and the scandals that have erupted around him quite revealingly, but whether he is exemplary of the movement in general is questionable. The aforementioned Götz Kubitschek, for example, has been writing for right-wing media and agitating in politics for much longer than Pirinçci, and would

have been an apposite figure to cover, with much more substance, and therefore more representative of the German New Right. Rosellini does briefly cover Kubitschek in the postscript to this book but finds him for some unknown reason to be an elusive figure, and Rosellini is more interested in his role in a confrontation between self-styled antifascists and right-wing publishers that erupted at the Frankfurt Book Fair in October in 2017.

The third major chapter of the book is about the writer Botho Strauss. Again, we are suddenly jolted into an entirely different literary universe. When Strauss burst onto the scene in the 1980s, he was considered a daring avant-garde playwright, who dazzled theater audiences with his linguistic mastery, hip depictions of urban subcultures and their lingo, and intricate plot lines that addressed cutting-edge social and political issues of the Cold War era. But when Strauss veered to the right in the early 1990s and became a beacon for German intellectuals who wanted Germany to develop into a “Self-Confident Nation,” he quickly lost the “cool factor” with younger readers and the theater-going public. Strauss aged into a cranky cultural pessimist, which has a long and fabled tradition in German letters (think of the Young Hegelian Bruno Bauer, or closer to our times, the playwright Heiner Müller). Strauss now lives in splendid rural isolation, as his spiritual mentor Ernst Jünger did after World War II, and dreams of a return to the Romantic age of German deep poets and thinkers. Rosellini does a spirited job of establishing Strauss’s relevance for the German New Right today, but it is clear, even from Rosellini’s perspective, that Strauss remains an important but relatively marginalized figure in German cultural life.

The chapter on the AfD is perhaps the best in the book and does make a purchase directly on the title, since it directly addresses the rise of the New Right movement, highlighting its ideology, infighting, main public tactics, and leading personal-

ities. AfD is a force to be reckoned with, since it represents the largest opposition party in a Bundestag that has the Christian Conservatives and the Social Democrats in a Grand Coalition. The next election must be called by the summer of 2021, but it is possible that the AfD is already past its sell-by date. The party has lost ground in the polls and now sits around 10 percent, down substantially from a high-water mark of 18 percent in 2018. The New Right in Germany today has moved in a more conspiratorial direction, embracing QAnon and Donald Trump. The next book about the German New Right may have to present the AfD in a supporting role, not as the lead actor.

Overall, Rosellini’s book is timely, well researched, and written with flair, hitting the right notes between passion and sobriety. Rosellini lets readers know that the strength of the New Right in Germany today makes him nervous, but he mostly shields his personal opinions. His anxiety comes through in the interrogative: “isn’t it strange that ...” or “one wonders what else could...” Sometimes he can’t help himself, erupting at one point in the concluding chapter with the declaration, “It is incomprehensible why he chose to ...” (p. 123). Essentially, this is a book of essays, sometimes personal, sometimes in observation mode, held together tenuously at times but offering a coherent scholarly x-ray of current German right-wing parties as well as finely etched but loosely connected portraits of renegade thinkers and activists on the conservative and radical conservative *Querdenker* side of German intellectual life today.

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