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Commentary
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An Alternative Identity for Germany in the 21st Century

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As a result of the federal elections in Germany on September 24, 2017 both parties in the previously-governing Grand Coalition of CDU/CSU and SPD emerged weakened. The SPD (reduced to 153 seats as opposed to 193 in the previous Bundestag) quickly announced its refusal to consider any further coalition with the CDU/CSU. The latter (now with only 246 seats as opposed to 311) entered into difficult negotiations with the FDP (80 seats) and Greens (67 seats) in the hope of concluding an agreement to govern together. These negotiations subsequently collapsed.

A second round of negotiations was later undertaken, this time between CDU/CSU and SPD, and on January 12th 2018 it was announced that an agreement in principle had been achieved between the two groups in order to form another “Grand Coalition”. This was, as just mentioned, despite the SPD’s earlier statement that they would definitely not enter another such coalition.

Previously without representation at the federal level, the new party in the German political landscape, the “Alternative for Germany” (Alternative für Deutschland – AfD), emerged from the

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elections with 94 seats, and as such it is the third largest group in the Bundestag. However, it was totally excluded from both rounds of coalition negotiations.

This deliberate exclusion raises questions about the nature of the AfD programme, its implications for Germany, and, by extension, its implications also for Germany and the EU. Consequently, it is worth considering just what the party programme says about these significant matters.

To provide a perspective, positions taken on these topics in the preliminary CDU/CSU-SPD coalition agreement of January 12th will also be examined. This agreement, *Ergebnisse der Sondierungsgespräche von CDU, CSU und SPD, finale Fassung 12.01.2018* / Results of the Exploratory Discussions between the CDU, CSU and SPD, final version January 12, 2018, represents the very broad areas of agreement on all central matters of German politics, life and identity between the major parties representing the majority of German voters. Examination of the document will help to explain both the exclusion from coalition negotiations and also the revolution in German politics which the AfD represents.

In order to throw further light on this point about the AfD, the examination will then be followed by a more in-depth analysis of its party platform for the 2017 elections (*Programme für Deutschland: Wahlprogramm der Alternative für Deutschland für die Wahl zum Deutschen Bundestag am 24. September 2017* / *Programme for Germany: Electoral Programme of the Alternative for Germany for the German Bundestag Elections on 24 September 2017*), and in particular on the central topic of its vision of German identity in the present and the future.

The EU and Important European Policies

a) The Preliminary Coalition Agreement

- The three major parties are in agreement on the significant benefits which the European Union has brought both to Germany and Europe.
- In view of international developments, they agree also that Germany must contribute to strengthening European integration. This includes both the promotion of liberal values within the rule of law and also the commercial competitiveness of the EU in the context of globalisation. Consequently, the parties oppose any protectionist, isolationist or nationalist tendencies.

- The European Parliament is to be strengthened.
- There should be an increase in the comparability of educational standards.
- The EU should play a prominent and exemplary role in the area of climate protection, including effective implementation of the Paris Climate Agreement.
- To help achieve these goals and strengthen the EU's ability to act, fiscal control and economic cooperation are urged both within the Eurozone and also within the EU as a whole. This field includes solidarity between member states, just as it includes also solidarity in budgetary matters, including within the EU budget.
- The economic goals include also strengthening and reforming the Eurozone, including the transformation of the European Stability Mechanism into a European Monetary Fund.
- Among the measures proposed to strengthen the EU economically is a willingness to increase Germany's contribution to the Commission budget.
- The shared goals include promotion of the fundamental principle of gender equality, workplace equality, and particularly within the public service as a model.
- In the areas of refugee and migration policies the EU must fulfil its humanitarian obligations.

b) The AfD Manifesto

- The future of Europe does not lie with the European Union in its current state and certainly not in further centralisation. It lies rather in a Europe of sovereign states working together in partnership.
- This means that the European Union should return to being a loose confederation of sovereign states. The notion of sovereignty is closely linked to essentialist principles of ethnicity and heritage (see below for more information on the latter point).
- Fiscal or economic solidarity between states is rejected, as is also the European Central Bank. Consequently any "EU Economic Government" is also to be rejected.
- This, in turn, leads to the conviction that Germany should terminate the Transfer Union and leave the Euro zone.
- Supranational courts are rejected.
- The value of climate protection policies is denied.
- The Bologna Process has failed. Germany must return to *Diplom* and *Magister* programmes.

- The value of the “traditional family”, which implicitly but clearly includes the idea of stay-at-home mothers, is repeatedly emphasised.
- The importance of “Equal pay” is rejected, as are also measures to promote the proportion of women in the work place.
- There is no support for immigration; quite on the contrary.

It is fair to say that the two positions are diametrically opposed. The major parties of CDU/CSU and SPD are advocating unrestricted support for the EU. They also wish to promote liberal values, further European integration and Germany’s role within the EU. The latter is carefully balanced with repeated references to cooperation with France on important issues. Their joint position represents a continuation of the policies which have guided German politics over approximately the last half century: active participation in the European Union and contribution to its strengthening and development.

On the other hand, the AfD is advocating what is tantamount to a programmed debilitation of the EU and its value-system, counterbalanced by an increase in the importance of “national sovereignty” and conservative social values. It is, in fact, a denial of the developments in Western and (later) Central Europe over the past fifty years. It represents an atavistic return to the *status quo ante* in Europe.

Much of the positions of the two political rivals contain by implication questions of group and national identity. For the CDU/CSU and SPD, Germany is above all EU-European; for the AfD Germany is European in a very different sense: i.e. European by culture, religion and language. The difference is immense. For this reason it is important to explore further just how the AfD sees German national identity.

The AfD and German National Identity

Briefly, the AfD position on Germany and German identity has two thrusts which, initially, might appear contradictory: On the one hand German ethnicity and culture, and on the other the German *Grundgesetz* or Federal Constitution. However, the two are shrewdly melded, and together they can perhaps contribute to explaining something of the new party’s electoral success.

Firstly, German ethnicity and culture. For the AfD, the fundamental position is “national identities, cultures and languages have developed in historical processes lasting centuries”, and the “nation states represent an indispensable area of identification” (1.1). “Nation” is clearly in the sense of an ethno-cultural-linguistic nation and contains an essentialist component; and nation states are the political manifestation of this.

Ethnic identity is expressed through the term *Volk*, either directly or by means of related references. Fundamentally in German, the term *Volk* expresses ethnicity, the ethnic nation. As such, it has, or can have, a significant exclusionary component; also, it is related to a notional set of characteristics and values allegedly innate in the national psyche. This is the essentialist element it has for the AfD.

In the view of the AfD, this German ethnic identity is absolutely inseparable from the existence of the German state, in other words it is very much a nation state in the sense of a “nation” as indicated above.

German ethnic identity is also inseparable from the notion of national culture and scarcely separable from the idea of location. This leads to the importance of two terms employed in the manifesto and directly related to German identity: *Heimat* and *Leitkultur*.

Briefly, *Heimat* (approximately: homeland), expresses above all an emotional tie to an idealised location, often a rural or regional past in the town or area where the individual was born and grew up. It communicates a source of comfort, of security, of personal and group values, of personal and group identity, of ontological certainty. It has been seen as a “symbol of the collective”,² which in a very recent view has taken on new urgency in an era of immigration.³

Leitkultur is “defining culture”, and has become a highly politicised term used over the past twenty years⁴ particularly by parties on the Right and Centre-Right in the debates over immigration and national identity. Both *Leitkultur* and *Heimat* are loaded with emotional overtones and consequently have particularly strong appeal.

² Ecker G. (1997), “‘Heimat’: Das Elend der unterschlagenen Differenz”, in *Kein Land in Sicht: Heimat—weiblich?* ed. Ecker G., Fink, Munich pp.7-32.

³ Costadura E. and K. Ries (2016), “Heimat, ein Problemaufriss”, in eds. Costadura E. and K. Ries, *Heimat gestern und heute: Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven*, transcript, Bielefeld, pp. 7-24

⁴ Manz S. (2004), “Constructing a Normative National Identity: The *Leitkultur* Debate in Germany, 2000-2001”, *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 25: 5&6, 481-496;
Pautz H. (2005), “The Politics of Identity in Germany: the *Leitkultur* Debate”, *Race & Class* 46:4, 39-52.

It must be pointed out that both these terms are fundamental to the idea of the ethnic or ethno-cultural nation. As noted above, for the AfD sovereignty lies in the ethnic nation in general and this notion is, the party claims, the guarantee of a democratic government. But as the numbers of the ethnic nation are diminishing, and their proportion in the population as a whole is also declining, then democracy is endangered. Revealingly, the section on family life and population trends (Section 7) closely follows the thesis and arguments of Thilo Sarrazin's best-selling book *Germany is abolishing itself: How we are putting our Country at Risk*,⁵ first published in 2010 and to date with a sale of at least 1.5 million copies. Its publication was accompanied by massive media attention reaching further millions of people, with the result that Sarrazin's ideas reached a massive proportion of the German population. His position is that the declining the German birth rate and the high rate of Muslim immigration lead to a dumbing down and loss of German identity. Consequently, social policies should be introduced to encourage stable (German) families with more children.

Correspondingly, the manifesto chapter on the family and population is introduced with a lament for the “shrinking of **our** native population” (*unsere angestammte Bevölkerung*) and the desire to transmit **our** inherited and actively lived values “to **our** descendants”, rather than letting such values be “squandered” or “plundered”. To make the reference to Sarrazin's anti-Muslim-immigration position absolutely clear, the following paragraph (7.1) has the heading “Do not abolish Germany” (*Deutschland nicht abschaffen*). This can only be achieved by increasing the birth rate of the indigenous population (*Erhöhung der Geburtenrate der einheimischen Bevölkerung*). The primarily ethnic identity characteristics explicit in the above statements are “native” and “indigenous” and are emphasised by the use of “our”. In order to maintain German ethnic and political identity the manifesto repeatedly emphasizes the traditional family: father married to mother plus several children (7.7) and the responsibility of the state and the nation to maintain and support the *Staatsvolk* (i.e. persons with citizenship and therefore able to vote and thus be directly part of the state) as the bearer of national sovereignty” (7.7). The implication is quite clear: the *Staatsvolk* should be ethno-culturally German.

It is important now to consider what the manifesto says about *Leitkultur*. This “defining culture” is “based on the values of Christianity, Classical Antiquity, humanism, and Enlightenment” (9.1).

⁵ *Deutschland schafft sich ab: Wie wir unser Land aufs Spiel setzen*, Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt 2010 and subsequent years, including now paperback and kindle / E-book formats.

It thus excludes the majority of extra-European cultures with a different past, religion, and background. The definition continues, “In addition to the German language, it includes **our** customs and traditions [which are related to the notion of *Heimat*], **our** intellectual and cultural history”. It then adds, “**Our** liberal constitutional state, **our** appreciation of education, art, scholarship, and the social market economy as an expression of human creativity, energy and drive are all linked in the closest possible way to this defining culture”.

There are four things to note here: a) this is a vision of a purely European-German identity; b) it is socially very conservative; c) in its extensive use of “our” it is very exclusionary, and d) it is set up to be in absolute contrast to Islam. More on this later.

I will now outline the constitutionalist side of this party’s presentation of German identity and then come back to the important implications of the way in which the total rejection of Islam is presented.

A preliminary remark is necessary: the expression “*die freiheitlich-demokratische Grundordnung* / the free and democratic rule of law” is a statement frequently used by **all** parties to refer to, and express support for, the existing German constitutional order and values. It is a key term in German political discourse, summarising the fundamental, praiseworthy nature of the German republic and its constitution.

What I wish to argue here is the particularly close relationship being created by the AfD between the people, “das Volk” or, importantly, “das Staatsvolk” in the ethno-cultural sense outlined above, and the German state as represented by constitutional values. This means, I am arguing, that recognition or acceptance of the “free and democratic rule of law” is being presented as an established part of the national identity, universally accepted and internalised by all Germans. In other words, what we have with the AfD is on the one hand a striking combination of a conservative and essentialist view of national identity, and on the other a version of the Sternbergerian-Habermasian⁶ concept of *Verfassungspatriotismus* / constitutional patriotism.

The constitutional values identified by AfD as components of national identity are the following:

- The nation (das Volk) as source of sovereignty (1 and passim)

⁶ Habermas, J (1990), „Verfassungspatriotismus: im allgemeinen und im besonderen“, in Habermas *Die nachholende Revolution*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main, pp. 157-166. Sternberger, D (1990), *Verfassungspatriotismus*, Insel, Frankfurt/Main.

- Our value system (6)
- Our legal system (6)
- German law being above the religious law and customs of migrants (6)
- The right of free expression of opinion and artistic expression (6)
- The equality of religions (6) [though this is clearly and repeatedly negated]
- State neutrality towards religions (6) [again, clearly negated]
- Equality of the sexes (1.15; 6)
- Right of national self-defence against alien forces (3.3)
- Freedom of individual personal development (6) [in the party's view of women, this is also questionable]
- Protection of the family in the form of husband, wife, children (7.2)
- The right to educate children as parents see fit (7.7.1)
- The German language as the basis of national identity is to be enshrined in the constitution as the National Language.

However, as previously indicated, a number of these constitutional values shade over into some of the more essentialist positions sketched earlier.

In the view of the political scientist Jan-Werner Müller of Princeton University,⁷ constitutional patriotism also includes two important features highly relevant for this commentary and the position of the AfD:

- 1) It did not reduce in the slightest the ethnically framed view of citizenship (page 35): this was enshrined in law up to 2000, and still is very prominent in many people's minds;
- 2) Citizens bear a significant responsibility to protect the constitution (p. 34), in particular in identifying illiberal and undemocratic practices or tendencies in society or politics (p. 51).

In fact, though without referring to scholarly positions such as that of Müller, the AfD is foregrounding both these impulses, but in a particular way: i.e. the protection of the German nation as the party views it.

⁷ Müller J-W (2016) *Verfassungspatriotismus*, edition suhrkamp, Suhrkamp Verlag, Berlin. Also available as Müller J-W (2007) *Constitutional Patriotism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton N.J.

Relevant for this discussion of the above constitutional elements of national identity, and also many of the traditional or ethno-cultural values mentioned earlier, are two forces which together seriously undermine them. In the view of the AfD they are:

- 1) The EU, and
- 2) Immigration.

As outlined above, the manifesto repeatedly makes the argument that both are destructive of national identity. In the first case it is asserted that the EU's pushing to create a "European super state" consequently reduces "the freedom and autonomy of European nations" (1.1). This weakening of national autonomy has also, according to the AfD, contributed to the near-catastrophic damage to German identity caused by immigration.

Second, immigration. This needs to be divided into two sub-topics:

- 1) inward movement as such, and
- 2) the value systems of the new arrivals.

Massive inward migration is depicted as a destabilising factor for both Germany and Europe. In other words, it is a potential threat to national identities as manifest in nation states, and a threat also to European identity. And Europeans are acutely aware that particularly since 2015 the majority of immigrants are Muslims.

In the above list of constitutional aspects of national identity many are taken from the same section of the manifesto, Section 6. This is headed "**Islam in Conflict with the Free and Democratic Rule of Law**". Here it is stated that Islam is completely opposed to these national identity characteristics arising from the constitution. It is not necessary to examine in this paper the assertions individually, but it is revealing to consider the basic argument on which the whole chapter is explicitly based and which underlies the numerous negative statements about Islam in other chapters. These often state not just the incompatibility of the two identities – Moslem and German – but also the clear and present danger which the former represents for the latter.

It is on this question of opposition to Islam that the two identity strands, essentialist and constitutionalist, come most clearly together:

Section 6, "Islam in Conflict with the Free and Democratic Rule of Law" / *Der Islam im Konflikt mit der freiheitlich-demokratischen Grundordnung*:

“Islam has no place in Germany. In the spread of Islam and the presence of over 5 million Moslems whose number is constantly increasing, the AfD sees a significant danger for our state, our society, and our values”. (6.1)

Section 9, “Culture and the Media” / *Kultur und Medien*

“Civil societies in functioning states are called upon to protect and develop their cultures on their own terms. This is naturally true for German cultural identity. The cultural and religious struggle (*Kulturkampf*) [against an alien force] already being fought in Europe between the West and Islam [which is] a doctrine of religious salvation and bearer of cultural traditions and legal obligations lying outside any possibility of integration can only be avoided by a set of defensive and restrictive measures which prevent further destruction of the European values of peaceful coexistence of enlightened citizens.” (9.1)

Unfortunately, this is not a new argument in German politics. The chain of argument is the following: An alien cultural-religious group unwilling and incapable of integration is both in our midst and on our borders; this alien group represents a totally destructive element to our German way of life and all that constitutes us as a nation; therefore, drastic measures must be taken against this clearly identifiable cultural-religious group. It is a position redolent of a past disaster.

Conclusion

While no single element in the party platform is new (and there are others relating to matters beyond questions of national identity), and even while using the unfortunate, but very real, chain of argument just mentioned, the AfD has packaged the seemingly contradictory elements of nation, constitution and tradition in such a way as to present a position undermining many liberal constitutional values, attempting to reverse any insertion of Germany into the web of the evolving EU, deligitimising the EU, legitimising xenophobia towards a particular group of people legally in Germany, many of them with German citizenship, and towards a whole religion and all its adherents. In addition, and to underpin its message, the AfD is using the familiar and highly emotive concepts of *Leitkultur* (defining culture) and *Heimat* (homeland) in such a way as to reinforce its nativist and strongly illiberal view of an alternative identity for Germany in the 21st century.