
THE MEN OF 1989*

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The German playwright and author Botho Strauß aroused great attention with the publication of his essay "*Anschwellender Bocksgesang*" in *Der Spiegel* no. 6 1993. The title is rather difficult to translate. "*Anschwellender*" means roughly "swollen" or "expanding" while "*Bocksgesang*" literally means "buck song", which in turn is derived from the Greek term for "tragedy". The attention he received was mostly of a negative nature, as someone who was up to that point was regarded as a man of the "left" now confessed his allegiance to the right. The essay has been re-published, this time as a longer and more sprawling version in the anthology *Die selbstbewusste Nation*,¹ where it is the point of departure for a number of writers grappling for the answer to the question of what ideas and themes the "new right" should base itself on. The "new" right is no new phenomenon, the label was applied already in the 1960's, but it is only more recently that it has been anything but a marginal political phenomenon.

What Strauß's essay which begins the anthology is really all about is difficult to say, but it has a mysterious power of attraction as it is thought to contain deep insight into the "spirit of the times" (*Zeitgeist*). He confesses, as stated above his allegiance to the right, as he means that it is from there that one can best understand the tragic contemporary circumstances we live in, where humanity's bloody side once again routinely confronts us. Liberal democracy's self understanding, the "1789 ideas", are thought to be entirely inadequate. Racism and contempt for foreigners is interpreted by Strauß as the emergence of that which has been repressed and as religious purification rituals. He continuously appeals for a departure from the "Mainstream", that is to say, the

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¹ Heimo Schwik & Ulrich Schacht (eds.), *Die selbstbewusste Nation*, Frankfurt/Berlin: Ullstein, 1994.

postulated liberal hegemony in Germany. He believes that liberal ideology proves deficient or fails, in among other things its ability to understand what ethnic war (in the former Yugoslavia and Soviet Union) is about: defence of one's own language and culture, blood offering and the mystical community. Furthermore, Strauß is of the opinion that the liberal is only liberal in that he or she takes a stand against anti-liberalism, in other words, liberalism is not a full rounded position but partial in that it is primarily defined in its negation of something else (the curbing of liberty). Liberal intellectuals are to Strauß an object of contempt, who only go with the flow and their love for foreigners is attached only a desire to destroy that which is "ours" (German).

Like a prophet he warns that modernity will not lead into post-modernism, but rather culture-shock. This will come abruptly to put a stop for all attempts at mediation. Today, he believes that there are only half hearted attempts at mediation which do not have the capacities to understand what is in the process of occurring, media where there is only collaboration and opinions which are not yet clear. Furthermore, he feels that the dominant anti-authoritarian socialization process only leads to even more indifference.

I believe that here I see a poet's despair over a totalizing alienation, where everyone speaks about nothing. This reveals a bit about his leftist background. In the 1960's and 1970's the rabid civilization criticism (*Zivilisationskritik*) came from the left - guilt for the plundering and exploitation of people and nature was ascribed to the capitalist mode of production, and the remedy to this was to be found in the socialist planned economy and the jettisoning of bourgeois democracy. Today's *Zivilisationskritik* comes from the right. This is not so strange as it sounds. There are, for example many marks of resemblance between "leftist" critics such as Theodor W. Adorno and Ernst Bloch and "rightist" critics such as Martin Heidegger and Arnold Gehlen. The resemblance consists above all in the anti-bourgeois tone and deep anti-economism and anti-capitalism. The conservative criticism of liberalism also played a significant role for Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.² Marx' and Engels' critique of the abstract nature of capitalist production, reification, etc. was already articulated in conservative thinking. It is therefore easy to concur with Strauß when he points out that today we see a new generation who are doing in principle the same thing as the previous generation: they break taboos and there by create their own identity. The new right cannot therefore be understood outside such a relationship - it is not just for something, but in the first place, *against* something.

² I have discussed the relation between criticism and conservatism in "Critique, Conservatism, Ideology", *Current Perspectives in Social Theory*, vol. 15, 1995.

It is not especially puzzling that Strauß's essay was followed by an extensive commotion in the mass media. Among other things, he was called a "path clearer" for dark, evil forces by the chairman of the central Jewish council in Germany. If not directly guilty, he was as close as is possible.

In the anthology, the new right attempts to conceptualize itself. In many cases this takes the form of an irritating attempt to construct a new Strauß derived jargon. Throughout the anthology, the importance of "roots" and attachment/belonging (to the nation and the family) are emphasized. The authors are thoroughly anti-economistic and emphasize that the nation must be built upon more than mere material standard of living improvements, as such a supposed reductionism builds upon a denial of the Communities which is primary to all else - the Nation and the Family. In this, the new right is like the old right, it is against liberalism, and will now, often in alliance with so-called communitarianism, re-elevate the cultural and social bonds to their appropriate status.

The publisher advertises the anthology as "the German Conservative Intelligentsia's manifesto". An important question then is whether or not it lives up to this billing. Twenty-eight authors contribute to the anthology, nine of whom are under the age of 40. Among the more well known contributors are Ernst Nolte, Birgitte Seebacher-Brandt (the widow of Willy Brandt), and the Jewish historian Michael Wolfsohn. Even though we have a great generational spread, it is especially among the younger authors - who assert the "ideas of 1989" - that engagement and the protest against the 1968 generation is strongest felt.

Among the younger and more significant authors is Rainer Zitelmann - an editor at the publishing house Ullstein, editor of *Geistige Welt* (a division of the daily newspaper *Die Welt*) and an influential actor in the rightwing of the liberal party FDP. In his programmatic essay he points out that the term "right" has long been a term of abuse in Germany. A television program entitled "Conversation with the right", for example aroused sensation and protests. Zitelmann polemically asks whether a program entitled "Conversation with the left" would have caused anyone to raise an eyebrow. He goes on to ask whether Nazism really was of the "right". The left has in the same manner questioned whether Stalin was of the "left". Despite this relativizing, Zitelmann retains the distinction between left and right, for among other reasons because surveys show that most citizens have a clear idea about where left and right stand in relation to each other on various questions. It is therefore natural to build upon the conceptions which citizens already have. An important argument to Zitelmann is that if there isn't a strong democratic right, the entire political space on the right will be left open

for rightist extremism, a thesis that is also supported by comparative historical research on fascism. Here in Sweden it is well known that the coalition between the Social Democrats (SAP) and the Peasants' Party (*Bondeförbundet*) which soaked up the potential energy which is easily exploited by extreme rightwing movements.

Zitelmann also calls for a new more humble disposition towards German history. The Third Reich is just as much a part of German history as the Weimar and Federal Republics. The same should also be the case for the GDR. The conclusion is that if the GDR is deamonized, then the risk is run of trivializing the Third Reich. The GDR cannot be seen as something exclusively evil, it must remain a part of the German consciousness as a part of its historical inheritance instead of being repressed. Zitelmann undeniably has a point here, even though one could also read the reasoning unsympathetically as a relativizing of the Nazi era. Similar historical reasoning even pervades the anthology which Zitelmann co-edited *Westbindung, Chancen, und Risiken für Deutschland*.³ Many of the authors in this anthology feel that the rest of the world hates Germany and this is the cause of a postulated total humiliation after the war. An extension of this way of reasoning leads down dangerous roads - should the crushing of the Third Reich be seen as a humiliation of Germany or its liberation. And why should Germany be different from other nations, that it should be so peculiar as to arouse so much hate?

The theme and issue is raised again by Karlheinz Weißmann in his book *Rückruf in die Geschichte*.⁴ Yet again the thesis about Germany's "Sonderweg" is proposed, which in extension is a thought which entails that Germany should promote the liberal-democratic ideal and that Germany as the "Middle Kingdom" between the USA and Russia should be some type of "third way". The book consists of ideal variations of this theme. Among other things, it is claimed that the Federal Republic has been some sort of pathological interim regime. This trivializes parliamentary democracy by setting it up alongside kaiserdom, and left and right dictatorships. Neither does Weißmann shy away from discussing national characteristics, one of which supposedly is a special German penchant for self-hate which keeps them from becoming proud and united people.

To return to Zitelmann's essay, he is reflexive and conscious of the political game he participates in. He thus writes that "often it is sufficient

³ Rainer Zitelmann, Karlheinz Weißman & Michael Großheim (eds.), *Westbindung, Chancen und Risiken für Deutschland*, Frankfurt/Berlin: Propyläen, 1993.

⁴ Karlheinz Weißmann, *Rückruf in die Geschichte*. Frankfurt/Berlin: Ullstein, 1993.

to merely contribute an article to *Mut* to be considered an accomplice".⁵ *Mut* is a rather repugnant national-romantic journal, previously located on the far right, but now thought to belong to the democratic right. What Zitelmann wants to show is that among other things, the so-called "antifa-campaigns" (anti-fascist campaigns) really are targeting the democratic right. Here we see, like the conspiracy theories of the left, conspiracy theories conjured up by the right. The left needs an enemy, and vice versa, naturally. If we take this seriously, political positions are relativized. From a sober, social scientific perspective, it is difficult to discern where the truth lies. As Zitelmann here sloshes around in murky water it is even more difficult to strike his proposition that while previous leftist extremists can be accepted as respectable democrats after making proper utterances, the same is not true for comparable previous rightwing extremists.

Zitelmann sometimes appears to be worried that the old enemy, the left, is about to disappear. But this is a chimera - according to Zitelmann, the left's new utopias are now called feminism and multi-culturalism. He therefore wants to tie onto the right's classic task: criticizing all utopias, as these good thoughts very easily can bring about evil.

These new-conservative ideas are potentially attractive to many intellectuals; after postmodernism, it isn't so much further down the road to these ideas. The critical disposition towards faith in progress unites both of these camps, furthermore it can be tempting as a fashion or trend to learn a new discourse, canon, and jargon and thereby show that one is "with it" or even better, out in advance, on the cutting edge.

Even if one tries to read the German new right's more important works sympathetically, it is difficult to overlook the embarrassing connections and justifiable questions. For example, the Ullstein publishing company (which has a number of daughter publication companies), where Zitelmann, as already mentioned, is an editor, has been controlled since 1986 by Herbert Fleissner, a man out on the extreme right.⁶

Furthermore, it is striking that the new right reads largely the same literature as acknowledged rightist radicals and fascists (that is to say the works of the conservative-revolutionary troika, Martin Heidegger, Ernst Jünger and Carl Schmitt, as well as the Italian fascist philosopher Julius Evola⁷). Weißmann is an admirer of Evola, not the least because of

⁵ *Die selbstbewußte Nation*, p. 171.

⁶ See Hans Sarkowicz, *Rechte Geschäfte*, Frankfurt: Eichborn, 1994.

⁷ Thomas Sheehan "Myth and Violence. Evola and de Benoist *Social Research*.1981

Evola's strident anti-feminism. Here we see a glimpse of what could be the German new right's religious metaphysics. Many of the new right's intellectuals are ordinary Catholics and Protestants, but sometimes a longing for something more genuinely German surfaces. Some desire to root the idea of the "local community" (*Heimat*) not only in the German soil but also in the respiratory atmosphere. One should be able to feel oneself "at home" and not be ashamed of it. While this type of reasoning has a degree of power of attraction - they along with Strauß's essays describe a lived, experienced condition - they also resonate like a murmur from Heidegger (that is the type of murmur Heidegger created by among other things his famous comment that *es gibt Sein*, "there is being"⁸).

The German "new right" can perhaps be labeled an "extremism of the center".⁹ What ever one thinks about the new right, it is found squarely in the center of Germany in all respects, and in most of the political parties. Or, as the political scientist Kurt Lenk put it, "it is precisely in the extreme positions that the structures are discernible that impact the daily discourse of the positions of the center".¹⁰ Something has happened also in the political middle ground; thoughts and themes which earlier had only been seen on the extreme right have become "normal" and "acceptable, even in good company".

To reduce the new right in Germany to *Republikaner* sympathizers would be wrong. Instead, it is more rewarding to localize the dominant theme: *Cultural pessimism* and the tragic awareness which is most evident in Botho Strauß. This is related to his *pessimistic anthropology* in the spirit of Thomas Hobbes where the conclusion is that the bonds of the family and the state must be strengthened. There is also a strong affection evident for the concept of collectivities, there is less talk about the individual in favor of the People, the Nation, Destiny and Community. Their anti-economism means that the *political* is seen as the primary dimension of life- in an empty world the will to fill the world with meaning is revered. The primacy of politics is also reflected in the new right's cynical, power oriented realism.

Because it is these themes which dominate the new right, I at least say "no thank you" to this option, regardless of how near the an

⁸ Rüdiger Safranski discusses in his book *Ein Meister aus Deutschland. Heidegger und seine Zeit*, (München: Hanser, 1994) Heidegger's preferences for such a valent verbs, that is verbs which do not refer to any other subject than "there" or "it".

⁹ In any case if you can believe the articles in the anthology edited by Hans Martin Lohmann *Extremismus der Mitte, Vom rechten Verständnis deutscher Nation*. Frankfurt: Fischer, 1994.

¹⁰ Kurt Lenk, *Rechts, wo die Mitte ist*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1994, p. 7.

supposedly allied with openly rightist totalitarian forces (a question that certainly should be discussed and illuminated). What one can however learn from them though is their anti-utopianism. But this is certainly something that was present already in the old right.

Finally, I must mark a small reservation. The German "new right" is far from a unified tendency, up to this point I have chosen to highlight the commonalities of a shared mentality among a number of German intellectuals. I believe there is a widening rift emerging within the new right. Zitelmann, Weißmann and the group centered around *Junge Freiheit* can be seen as a type of "reformist" phalange who accept (sometimes against their will) parliamentary democracy and a mixed economy. Today they are careful about calling themselves a part of the "right". Of significance is that when I recently met *Junge Freiheit's* editor-in-chief, Dieter Stein and broached the question about the currency of the "conservative revolution", he shrugged and said that it is just an empty slogan, far from today's reality. This sounded odd, for only a couple of years ago *Junge Freiheit* was the battleground for a new generation anxiously thirsting for the conservative revolutionary ideas of the Weimar era. Stein and Zitelmann have either reached or are approaching the thirty year old mark and seem to be distancing themselves from their earlier youthful, revolutionary excesses which allows them to enter into public debate.

Ironically enough, it is the previous generation in the German new right who represent the "revolutionary" wing. Among this generation one finds Armin Mohler¹¹ and Günther Maschke¹². In common with their French brother Alain de Benoist, they believe that they are above left/right classification. Here we clearly see a line of descent with conservative revolution's left wing movement, so-called national Bolshevism, whose primary exponent was Ernst Niekisch.¹³ A second important difference is that while the "reformists" often attack "ecological hysteria", the more revolutionary oriented give the environmental question central importance and hold fast to a strong anti-capitalist perspective.

¹¹ Mohler is the primary exponent of the ideas of "conservative revolution" and the author of the (controversial) standard work *Die Konservative Revolution in Deutschland 1918-32*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989.

¹² Maschke is a theoretician and Carl Schmitt expert, see, for example, his *Der Tod des Carl Schmitt*, Wien: Karolinger, 1987.

¹³ Louis Dupeux, *Nationalbolschewismus in Deutschland 1919-33*. München: C. H. Beck 1985.