

10. Berliner Colloquium zur Zeitgeschichte

**Two Lefts—Two Rights: On the Connectivity
of Twentieth-Century Ideologies**

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Interview

Berliner Colloquien zur Zeitgeschichte: Aren't »Left« and »Right« long outdated categories of the ideological twentieth century? Why then is this a topic??

As is often the case, this topic was the result of a simple observation. Whatever you might think of theories of totalitarianism and research into extremism, when you look at the lives and political activities of people like Ruth Fischer, Rudi Dutschke, Horst Mahler, Ernest Niekisch, Karl O. Paetel, Otto Strasser, Bodo Uhse, Fritz Wolffheim or Rudolf Scheringer, you can't help noticing that there were—and still are—many individuals who were side-changers, political wayfarers, and mediators between Right and Left. Does this merely prove the fact that people can change their political positions? Or does it perhaps mean that the ideologies have something in common; or at least that they contain certain compatible elements? We wanted to explore this and, by taking a biographical approach, we hoped to avoid the well-known pitfalls of equalizing, downplaying or dramatizing extremist tendencies, thereby clear our field of vision for more interesting, albeit more complex questions regarding the compatibility of the ideologies, their shared points of reference, and shared experiences and visions of the future.

BCZ: What sources and evidence can be drawn upon for such a discussion?

Naturally one shouldn't rely solely on the personal testimonials of these side-changers and wayfarers between the ideologies. They are often highly subjective documents of justification and indictment, frequently coloured by personal resentment. However, there are other written testimonials of the complex processes of disassociation and rapprochement, for instance in the discussions between the populist and socialist wings of the German youth movement or in the journalistic post-editing of Karl Radek's Schlageter speech. Equally interesting in

this respect are, for example, the calls for the leftwing of the NSDAP to split away, or the pamphlets of the Hamburg National Bolsheviks, or the periodicals *Aufbruch* and *Die sozialistische Nation*. Direct interpersonal contact among these figures was also not as unusual as one might imagine; for example the joint—but nevertheless sometimes confrontational—strike or electoral-campaign actions of the KPD and the NSDAP, and finally the cooperation that took place during the period of the Hitler-Stalin pact. And the battle lines were not clearly defined even in the second half of the century, for instance when the West German Left discussed the »national question« or when Rudi Dutschke's »national-revolutionist« theses met with widespread approval among leading figures of the New Right. Or recall the attempts of the National Democratic Party of Germany and other right-wing groups to gain a foothold in the anti-nuclear and ecological movements, the latter a sphere that was not primarily of interest to the Right in view of the advent of the Nazi *Blut und Boden* ideology but already in the late nineteenth century, the foundation phase of the movements to protect the homeland and the natural world it was occupied by the right wing.

BCZ: We have now named a wide range of areas where the »compatibility« between the dominant twentieth century ideologies can be seen clearly. Does this approach help to shed light on other shared concerns of Left and Right?

We can define these concerns in two ways. One way is to identify questions where there are thematic overlaps or parallels. The critique of capitalism and anti-Western attitudes was and is perennial common ground. We had a contentious discussion in the colloquium regarding the attitudes of German leftwingers toward Israel. Shared views with respect to international politics and shared geopolitical conceptions have always fueled attempts at rapprochement. In particular, since the 1970s, the New Right in France and its offshoots in other European countries have revived the interwar attempts to use anti-capitalist and anti-American sentiment to arrive at a new understanding of the nation-state concept, while simultaneously turning eastward in terms of diplomacy. Such advances are quite welcome among some parts of the Left—or they lead to efforts to co-opt these agendas for themselves so that they are not entirely ceded to the Right.

No less interesting are themes that have traditionally been ascribed to subcultural currents or linked to individual or communal lifestyles and worldviews, and only associated in secondary instance with large political projects. And then there are the various manifestations of life-reform movements, from nudism to ecological farming, the latter as seen in today's radical-right organic farmers, for example, in

Mecklenburg Western Pomerania. We can't completely disregard terms such as Left and Right in describing these milieus, although they are hardly sufficient in themselves.

BCZ: But aren't these marginal phenomena? How can the preoccupation with such milieus lead to a greater understanding of the major ideologies of the twentieth century?

For one thing, the relevant milieus such as the Wandervogel and the nudists certainly carry weight if merely owing to their numbers. But, more importantly, they raise central biographical and sociological questions. Is the overarching lifeworld milieu, be it that of the Wandervogel or the ecological movement, stronger than the ideological differences within these milieus? Or phrased differently: what is more important for one's self-conception? When and why does the emphasis change, and what are the circumstances which might precipitate a rupture? For in many cases we are not talking about the »infiltration« of a certain scene by ideologically-driven party activists but parallel biographies that only gradually diverge under the pressure of ideological conflicts, or not. To cite just one example: when does someone like Alfred Kurella stop seeing himself as a principal member of the Wandervogel movement, someone who can also get along with national-minded representatives of this movement and begins to conceive his political identity as being first and foremost that of a communist?

Ultimately we can observe, particularly during times of political incapacity, the opposite phenomenon, namely when representatives of marginalized groupings of the Left and Right become conscious of their biographical similarities and their structurally similar position vis-à-vis society as a whole and the state, consequently drawing nearer to one another. This phenomenon is not so widespread in Germany; but in authoritarian one-party states it is common.

BCZ: You are criticizing ideologized historical perceptions of the Cold War. How do you believe that those can be overcome?

Revisions are the daily bread of historians. It is an essential part of our professional self-conception and of our professional ambition to challenge established interpretive patterns. We were keen to define academic historical revision without revisionism as a methodological issue. Ultimately the structural comparison of Left and Right ideologies and their political practices proved to only be of limited usefulness because of the intrinsic tendency toward hierarchization and relativization. At the same time, any comparative history of

dictatorships always runs the danger of losing itself in highly politicized debates that owe less to methodology than to their firm embedment in bipolar Cold War thinking. On account of this disciplinary dissatisfaction, we favor two methodological approaches that we deem suitable to eliminate any relativization and to make hierarchizations superfluous. On the one hand, it is the biographical approach, both on an individual and collective level; and on the other, the history of entanglements and relationships. Instead of placing the emphasis on the similarities and differences of Left and Right, these approaches enable one to focus on what François Furet has termed the »reciprocal dependences« of communism and fascism in their pre-ideological origins and milieus as well as in the mutual contingency of their »revolutionary and ideological passion« and the regimes' politics of violence.¹ These approaches concentrate on the »permeability« of that separation between Left and Right and on the pragmatism of effective action that appears in the biographies of »wayfarers between the two worlds« and the politics of the Hitler-Stalin pact.

¹ François Furet/Ernst Nolte, *Feindliche Nähe. Kommunismus und Faschismus im 20. Jahrhundert*. Munich: Herbig, 1998; 32.