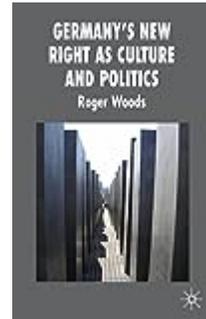




**Roger Woods.** *Germany's New Right as Culture and Politics.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. 183 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-230-50672-5.



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## The Rise of the Intellectual Right in Germany

Roger Woods's *Germany's New Right as Culture and Politics* is a welcome addition to the all-too-scant literature on this topic in English and a thoughtful contribution to the scholarship. The demise of existing socialism probably did not intensify public attention to the German radical Right: both the East German government and elements of the West German Left were prone to characterizing the Federal Republic as the successor state to the Third Reich. Yet, the paring down of the possible challengers to the liberal democratic order that accompanied reunification, and the concomitant releasing of rightist impulses which had been to some extent suppressed in the GDR have opened a space for more thorough and extensive consideration of both the National Socialist past and the dangers of today's extreme Right.

Indeed, Woods's book is particularly timely. The horrendous attacks on men of Indian descent in the Saxon town of M $\ddot{u}$ geln can be seen in terms of larger patterns of extreme Right violence occurring across Germany, if preponderantly in the federal states of the former East Germany. As is so often the case, the development of the subsequent controversy has more clearly illuminated the

actual situation in Germany with respect to questions of right-wing extremism. M $\ddot{u}$ geln's FDP mayor Gotthard Deuse's blanket assurance that no right-wing scene exists in the town (or that the rioters had come from somewhere else) is a depressingly familiar example of political spin. Furthermore, his interview with the German New Right newspaper, *Junge Freiheit* and his later claim of ignorance as to the paper's political affiliation highlight the need for heightened scrutiny. The Berlin Republic is not Weimar, but this difference does not minimize the threat to democratic culture posed by the subtle mainstreaming of far Right ideas into the political mainstream.

The title of Woods's book immediately calls for the answer to two questions: What is the New Right, and how does culture function in its view of politics? The New Right is comprised of a broad range of political organizations, think tanks, press organs, and publicists. They occupy the space (political scientist Susanne Mantino referred to it as a "gray zone") between the parties of the mainstream parliamentary Right and the fringes of the extreme Right existing on the edges of legality. The elements of the New Right tend to coalesce around insti-

tutions of ideological production. For instance, the far-right political party *Die Republikaner* is associated with the journal *Junge Freiheit*; the Kassel-based Thule Seminar, a think-tank run by the journalist Pierre Krebs, publishes the journal *Elemente*; and the Institut für Staatspolitik, a think-tank founded in 2000 and run by journalist Karlheinz Weissmann and former *Junge Freiheit* editor Goetz Kubitschek, publishes the journal *Sezession*. Woods also focuses on independent publicists such as Botho Strauss, who gained fame (or notoriety) in 1993 when his conservative jeremiad “Anschwellender Bocksgesang” was published in *Der Spiegel*. Journals like *Criticon*, which are not linked to a particular political organization, also come under consideration. Taken together, these groups and figures comprise a network for the dissemination of scholarship and propaganda, but one whose political commonalities are difficult to pin down with clarity. Indeed, identifying the main players of the New Right is easier than specifying precisely what connects them. Woods sees the German New Right as a part of a broader grouping of parties and ideologists that have taken root across Europe. Woods highlights this supranational network of the Right by tracing the similarity of the ideas of the German New Right and similarly oriented groups and thinkers in France, most prominently Alain de Benoist, whose works have found wide influence in rightist circles east of the Rhine. Woods also locates the New Right as a part of the historical development of the German Right since the 1970s; the consequence of a moment when elements of the extreme-right NPD sought to move away from the atavism of Nazi-tarnished ideology of *völkisch* community. Evidence of this divide can be seen in the frequent use by New Right authors of the term “ewiggestrigen” as a term of abuse for the Old Right.

The second question, that relating to culture and politics, leads to the broader argumentative agenda of the book. Woods seeks to show that the distinctiveness of the New Right lies in the attempt by its publicists to broaden what they see as the narrowness of the political views of mainstream politicians. “[T]he New Right,” Woods writes, “is engaged in a political and cultural response to Modernity” (p. 21). This response amounts to the reassertion of Germany, or of the West, in response to a perceived disintegration of traditional values brought about by or underlying modernity. Woods writes of the “culturalization of politics,” by which he means to describe the substitution of revived cultural values for the customary basis of the politics of the European Right: race. In an interesting moment of intellectual borrowing, Woods notes that one basis for this new approach from the Right is the

appropriation of Antonio Gramsci’s account of cultural hegemony. Thus, the New Right, following a line promoted by Alain de Benoist, seeks to promote its politics by influencing cultural values and by achieving a position of cultural hegemony through the dissemination of their chauvinistic patterns of cultural value.

Woods pursues the question of the “culturalization of politics” and its role in the political strategies of the New Right via two related lines of analysis. The first of these is a study of the ideological substance of New Right politics, conducted through an analysis of writings of major figures (for instance Strauss, Weissman, Günter Rohrmoser, and Krebs), as well those of more minor journalistic figures, principally (although not exclusively) in periodicals such as *Junge Freiheit* and *Wirs selbst*. The denizens of the New Right, as Woods shows, do not have a common ideology either in positive or negative terms. This result is somewhat expected. Political groupings of both the Right and the Left must be analyzed ideal-typically, especially when the groups in question are not members of a single political-ideological organization. On Woods’s account, it is unclear whether any such organization exists for the New Right. While *Die Republikaner* and the DVU are usually considered political parties of the New Right, this designation is by no means universally accepted.

What becomes clear is the fundamental contradiction running through the political writings of the New Right. New Right authors cannot seem to find consensus (sometimes even internally) on whether the appropriate stance is pride in the accomplishments of German (or Western) culture, or lamentation at its ineluctable disappearance. Woods attempts to clarify this contradiction by distinguishing positive and critical moments in the ideological productions of the New Right. The former he designates “feelgood culture,” while he groups the latter under the rubric of the “culture of pessimism.” At the “feelgood” end of culture, Woods notes, “it is made to do service as the reassuring certainty and the foundation for political values in the midst of uncertainty and loss of direction” (p. 35). At the other pole, we find the critique of modernity as it has appeared various forms since 1789, rehearsing such themes as loss of moorings in organic solidarity relations with others and the denigration of politics as a ritual for the division of spoils. In practice, much of this so-called culturalization comes down to attempts to intellectualize right-wing views as a means of overcoming the association of the politics of the far Right with football hooligans and skinheads, and thereby moving it toward the mainstream.

New Right authors consistently seek to break with those who look back fondly on Hitlerism. At the same time, they make a concerted attempt to rehabilitate and/or re-deploy the ideas of a range of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century thinkers. Woods devotes extensive consideration to the various ways that New Right thinkers have sought to make use of the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, Weimar conservative revolutionaries such as Gottfried Benn, Ernst Jünger, and Oswald Spengler, and authors of the scholarly Right such as Carl Schmitt and Martin Heidegger. In the hands of Krebs, Nietzsche is made the progenitor of a concept of health that involves Germany regaining its “values and ideals, its intellectual sovereignty, its spiritual roots and its sense of history” (p. 94). The irony is that most of the items listed were matters about which Nietzsche expressed withering skepticism, which seems lost on Krebs, much as it was lost on men like Alfred Baeumler and Richard Oehler during the Nazi era. Spengler and Jünger make better targets for appropriation, not least because they did not explicitly reject the ideas for which they are being marshaled to support. Yet, they too pose considerable problems stemming from the cultural pessimism that is so prominent in their works. For authors of the New Right, culture is made to play the role of a basis for an organic, unified society. It is the alternative to a liberal capitalist society based on Enlightenment conceptions of reason. The fact that modernity caused these systems of value to disintegrate causes the literati of the New Right to shift towards a Heideggerian attitude of “*Entschlossenheit*” in which the basis of values essentially amounts to one’s will to espouse them.

Woods provides a compelling account of the ways in which the basic conceptual certainties of the New Right are, in fact, contested even within the public sphere of the New Right itself. The “New Right mentality” (as Woods terms it) is always in search of fixed points. The nation would seem to present this point, but as Woods notes, even this foundation of right-wing politics has become problematic. What defines belonging to the nation? Since ethnicity is to be excluded, can membership in a linguistic community fulfill this lacuna? What is the relationship of such a community to systems of value? As Woods makes clear, the New Right has yet to develop a consistent set of answers to these questions, and the failure to do so is intimately connected with problems raised in their own diagnoses of the times. This lacuna is even greater evidence in New Right analyses of religion in the era of modernity. Religion has commonly been employed as basis for eternal values in the discourses

of the Right. Woods cites New Right journalist Klaus Motschmann, who argues for the capacity of religion to provide a “higher purpose and a sense of belonging” (p. 115) that modernity lacks. In contrast, prominent New Right journalist Rohrmoser argues (citing Nietzsche) that religion cannot be used for political purposes. Later, in the same work, arguing that there was no cultural force in the Federal Republic capable of countering the spread of “technological nihilism,” Rohrmoser directly contradicts his earlier view. Woods notes that this contradictory approach parallels the New Right approach to nationalism. He writes that “[r]einstituting religion after it has been devalued parallels the idea of reviving and expanding nationalism in the age of nihilism even though nationalism has already been dismissed as a defunct value or as ineffective in an age of globalization” (p. 116). Thus, on Woods’s account, the attempt to achieve cultural hegemony is cramped by the failure to achieve consensus within the New Right public sphere.

The second element of Woods’s account of the New Right’s cultural-political agenda is his discussion of the ways in which these groups and individuals attempt to work as a sort of intellectual mediation between the centrist and the extra-parliamentary Right. Some analysts, such as Armin Pfahl-Traughaber, have tended to lump writers of the New Right with extra-parliamentary extremists. Others, and Woods may be numbered among this group, see the New Right as functioning as a hinge (“*Drehachse*”) or bridge between the far Right and more mainstream conservatism. This role involves operations in two directions. New Right publicists seek to legitimize the positions of the extreme Right, while at the same time encouraging and radicalizing those on the rightward wing of the CDU/CSU. Attempts on the part of the New Right to broaden the influence of ideas and values off the rightward edge of German (and European) political culture, cast in terms of either Gramscian manipulation or of messianic rebirth, are hamstrung by the problems alluded to above. Although the New Right seeks to present itself as an ideologically coherent movement based upon a homogenous cultural basis, it founders on the fact that even its most dearly held political concepts are prone to melt into air.

Woods’s book provides an excellent introduction to the topic, one that highlights the need for further study. While Woods makes occasional references to figures in social theory and sociology whose work might lead to a more extensive theoretical understanding of this movement (Gramsci, Jürgen Habermas, Zygmunt Bauman), the main thrust of the work is illuminating the process

by which the New Right has sought to insinuate its cultural and political precepts into the mainstream. Woods's book makes an excellent start, but a broader analysis of the New Right (one to which this book does not aspire) might offer better purchase on the question of whether or to what degree this new variety of rightist thought constitutes a danger to democracy. The problem for conservatives of the far Right is that, given the havoc wrought by modernity, what remains to be conserved? Based on Woods's analysis, one might conclude that a major problem for the New Right is that they are, so to speak, neither fish nor fowl. While their romantic anti-capitalism makes their views hard to swallow for the bulk of the mainstream Right, their concern for the vicissitudes of moral and political philosophy probably carries little weight with the proponents of even further Right street politics. Nonetheless, Woods' book provides valuable insight on the latest developments in the right-wing public sphere and the goal of the New Right of bringing its values into mainstream currency.

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