

# H-Net Reviews

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**Jay Julian Rosellini.** *Literary Skinheads? Writing from the Right in Reunified Germany.* West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2000. xvi + 311 pp. \$25.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55753-206-0.



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Rosellini's study examines the phenomenon of a right-wing intellectual tradition from German Romanticism to post-unification Germany. The book, thus, does more than suggested by its subtitle, as it situates the contemporary authors and texts under investigation in a historical tradition. In his preface, Rosellini clarifies what he means by "right wing," and it is appropriate to repeat his definition here. "Right-wing" are those writers whose position in the political spectrum is to the right of the CDU/CSU yet who do not support fringe parties like the NPD. The intellectuals under scrutiny here do not, unlike many followers of the NPD and DVU, deny the Holocaust. Elitist in their orientation and self-definition, they are concerned with German high culture rather than with appealing to the masses, striving to effect a shift to the right outside of party structures. Given Rosellini's painstaking differentiation between his subjects and the violence-prone right, his title seems somewhat sensationalist and does not quite match his carefully researched and argued study, which, while highly critical of its subject(s), seeks to do scholarly justice to their work. What separates today's forethinkers of the New Right from their "neo-conservative" predecessors is unification and the often-repeated plea for Germany's status as a normal nation among other such nations. The German aspiration to normalcy after unification, which extends well beyond the right, of course, and is being pro-

moted by the current Social Democratic government, has been commented on and analyzed by a number of critics, including Stephen Brockmann and Stuart Taberner. Rosellini is one of the few scholars to focus exclusively on the intellectual right. The author notes correctly that the majority of the texts under discussion have not been previously available in English translation and I would add also that for those who do read German this study compiles and analyzes sources of which many scholars of German literature and culture might be unaware.

The main focus of Rosellini's book is an extensive discussion of two prominent authors and their "rightward drift" (p. xiii): Peter Handke and his notorious travelogue "Eine winterliche Reise zu den FlÄ½ssen Donau, Save, Morawa und Drina," better known by its alternative title "Gerechtigkeit fÄ½r Serbien," and Botho Strauss and his provocative 1993 essay "Anschwellender Bocksgesang." The study ends with a discussion of Martin Walser's highly controversial 1998 acceptance speech of the *Friedenspreis*. In addition to these three, well-known names, Rosellini analyzes in some detail the 1994 collection *Die selbstbewusste Nation*, which, in addition to a reprint of Strauss' above-mentioned essay, contains a number of texts whose political intent is summarized in the volume's title. Rosellini concludes his discussion of the thirty essays assembled in the volume, which range

in style and content from “whiny” to feminist-bashing, by noting that its editors must have sensed how isolated they are from the German mainstream (p. 61). The collection was put together by Ulrich Schacht, an East German dissident who came to West Germany in 1976 after having served a prison term in the GDR, and the West German Heimo Schwilk, both of them writers for *Die Welt*. (Even though *Die selbstbewusste Nation* went into several editions in Germany, only a few U.S. libraries bought it, underscoring how little attention is paid to the phenomenon of right-wing intellectuals in this country. While most readers of *Literary Skinheads?*, in general, will be familiar with the New Right’s predecessors from Novalis to Stefan George and Ernst Juenger, whose conservative politics are often viewed as tempered by their literary achievements, Rosellini’s research into lesser known figures such as Schacht, Schwilk, or the neo-fascist journalist Gustav Sichelshmidt, who have not gained much prominence as writers despite their often sizable output, emphasizes the fact that the notion of German high culture as a counterbalance to the dangers of modernity with its mixing of cultures continues to be promoted. (The public controversy over a German *Leitkultur* a few years ago comes to mind as a more popular version of this theme.) In an “Excursus,” Rosellini shows that the valorization of high culture is a common ingredient of right-wing anti-Americanism, which in its extreme versions does not shy away from conspiracy theories.

The assumption that a “civilization” might be in danger returns regularly and in different incarnations, most famously in the last decade with Samuel Huntington’s intervention. In the German context, Rosellini shows, this kind of thinking harks back to Romanticism and its attempt of putting the poet at the helm of its project of saving Christian-European civilization. Rosellini is to be commended for his nuanced assessments of the writers in question. While he makes his distaste for right-wing thought abundantly clear, he also strives for intellectual fairness. He defends, for instance, Peter Handke against the “confrontational activist” Tilman Zuelch, president of the Society for Endangered People, insisting that Handke’s travelogue must be read as such and not as a political treatise (p. 116). Similarly, he is careful to sketch a writer’s development and change in political views, as he does with both Heinrich and Thomas Mann. These changes, Rosellini points out, were not always noticed by others, such as in Gottfried Benn’s reception of Thomas Mann, cautioning us to avoid blunt categorization in fa-

vor of differentiated assessments. The case of Martin Walser, whose clash with Ignaz Bubis Rosellini sketches in the last chapter, presents a thorny issue because with his speech Walser, who cannot be fairly labeled a right-wing intellectual, did play into the hands of those pitting German high culture (the “poetic feet” invoked by Frank Schirrmacher in his laudation) against Germany’s history. The Walser controversy also shows that the distinctions between left and right are increasingly blurred in united Germany and in the context of its quest for normalcy.

The book ends with the argument that the influence of Peter Handke–Botho Strauss having retreated for the time being into the realm of aesthetics–must be viewed in conjunction with the fate of the Berlin Holocaust memorial and the public reaction to the changes in German citizenship law. (Rosellini also notes that neither young writers nor, with few exceptions, women have so far participated in the right-wing intellectual project.) The most recent round of discussion about the memorial revolves around the participation of Degussa, the chemical corporation whose predecessor produced the Zyklon B used in the gas chambers, in the construction of the monument. Peter Eisenman, the American architect of the memorial, was highly critical of the decision to withdraw the contract with Degussa, arguing that he refuses to be held hostage to “political correctness.”[1] This latest, and most likely not final, addition to the debate about German guilt and normalcy only underlines the importance of Rosellini’s study. In the end, I wished for a clearer assessment of the impact and importance of the New Right in relation both to the violent Right and mainstream society. There can be no doubt that these issues, which reverberate in the general public far beyond the controversies stirred up by the three prominent authors discussed in this study as well as their minor counterparts, continue to shape united Germany both in its own eyes and for the rest of the world. Rosellini’s study makes our picture of contemporary Germany more complex and complete.

Note

[1]. *Die Zeit* (October 30, 2003).

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