

## Hitler in Parliament?

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The news of the month is the German election, and in particular the rise of a new party called AfD (Alternative for Germany). It won 12.6 percent, more than the ten percent that had been expected. Not a big deal, one should think, but the press both in Germany and abroad is hysterical. "Hitler in Parliament" was the summary diagnosis for what was declared to be a new era in German and European politics. But while the AfD is a bunch of opportunistic egotists (it has already started to break up into factions), and unpleasant and even disgusting to boot, it is not fascist. A fascist party, by everyone's book, comes with a paramilitary organization beating up opponents and all sorts of undesirables; it has secret links into the army and the police; it has all-powerful charismatic leaders; it enjoys the material support of the reactionary segment of the bourgeoisie; and it has ideologues drawn from the country's intellectual elite, or quasi-elite. Nothing of this here, and nothing like it even remotely in sight.

Reading the German and international press, the AfD appears to be in striking distance of taking power. But the truth is that nobody will deal with them. They are as excluded from government as the Left Party (*Die Linke*), and all they will be is one of three opposition parties, the biggest of them the SPD with slightly more than twenty percent, its worst result ever. There is an echo chamber effect here: alarmism in Germany comes back in the form of even more alarmism abroad, which justifies another round of alarmism.

What explains the AfD's success? In East Germany, the former GDR, where per capita income is 73 percent of the West (and has been for many years), it won more than 20 percent of the vote and is now the second-largest party, behind the Christian Democrats. (AfD and Linke,

the two outcasts of the German party system, together received 40 percent in the East.) In some regions of the West, where the AfD is as strong as in the East, its voters are former supporters of the SPD; here the problem is less broken promises than de-industrialization and sharply increasing inequality as a result.

But it is not only poverty that drives voters to the AfD; if this was so, *Die Linke* should also have benefited. A good share of the AfD vote is from relatively prosperous parts of the country where traditional cultural milieus are still largely intact, like Bavaria or Baden-Württemberg. Here, like in the ex-GDR, the rapid “modernization” of German society is felt to be particularly disruptive, and the parties of the center, and with them *Die Linke*, are perceived as driving forces of a social change causing high and rising insecurity, both economic and cultural.

Such insecurity is felt everywhere in Europe today, and nationalist parties seeking protection in national institutions where international ones have nothing to offer but “structural reforms” are now commonplace in European politics, the AfD being the German equivalent of, among others, the True Finns, the Lega Nord, UKIP and the Sweden Democrats. The Left has generally failed to understand that traditionalist resistance to modernization is not always reactionary but may be defending communal forms of solidarity without which a less market-driven social order will be difficult to build. Solidarity-eroding modernization is today associated with internationalization and the rise of international and supranational governance remote from electoral influence. In Germany in particular, none of these concerns were ever taken up by the established parties, which found them historically too contaminated; they were eager to be seen as modernizing internationalists taking the country into a new supranational “Europe”. Voters asking themselves questions like, Do we really have to have open borders? Is it really

necessary to centralize government even more?, were told that they were aiding and abetting AfD propaganda.

This backfired, especially after the 2015 “refugee crisis” in which Merkel lost credibility with many of her “conservative” supporters (the CDU vote declined by more than eight percentage points!). Growing numbers of voters had taken seriously what the government and the mass media had told them, namely that their concerns were AfD concerns. Moreover, looking at the AfD they may have thought that if there was no more to fascism than that, fascism can’t be as bad as claimed. While Merkel had masterfully orchestrated the AfD’s political and social blacklisting, at the end she paid a high price for this as the expulsion of the AfD from the German *arco costituzionale* turned out to be a major factor in its electoral success.

What will happen next? The SPD has decided not to continue the Grand Coalition. Its old leadership, however, losers in three successive elections, may wait to be invited back by Merkel if she fails to form a government with the Liberals, the Green and, importantly, the CSU. Forming such a government will be exceedingly difficult and may take a long time. Already in a year from now, the CSU must defend its absolute majority in its home state, Bavaria; having lost ten percentage points in this year’s federal election this may be difficult. Failure is not an option as it may force the party to withdraw from both the federal government and, indeed, its federation with the CDU. Another year later Merkel will have to oversee the transition to a successor; after the disastrous outcome of this election her party will not nominate her for a fifth term. Not much government will be possible in coming years, especially in “Europe”, as Merkel will rapidly become a lame duck. But of course, nothing is less safe in contemporary politics than predictions.