

ELECTIONS

Commentary on Germany's 2002 Elections: From *Sonderweg* to *Deutscher Weg* - Nationalism Goes Mainstream

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Nationalism is often seen as an intractable phenomenon that is best studied from the safe distance of history. At times, however, it is tempting to forego the benefits of hindsight and catch a glimpse of how nationalism is constantly reinvented to fit the exigencies of the here and now. The campaign leading up to the September 2002 general elections in Germany affords such an opportunity, as it illustrates how mainstream politicians are redefining German nationalism in order to pander to an increasing number of voters who are aching for a “healthy” national consciousness free of the stigmas of anti-Semitism and xenophobia. The *Sonderweg* theory sees the “unique path” of German historical development as proof that such a separation is not possible, arguing that Germans are (for whatever reason) particularly susceptible to a radical nationalism fuelled by anti-Semitism, militarism, and authoritarian structures. By contrast, the newly re-elected German government of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder has been advocating a new *Deutsche Weg*, or “German Path,” which is supposed to lead towards a new German nationalism that will focus on political self-determination rather than ethnic differentiation.

In the September 2002 general elections, German voters further marginalized those parties and individuals promoting what could be called the “old-style” nationalist rhetoric of “us vs. them.” Evidently, the appeal of parties on the political right, such as the Republikaner or the National Democrats (NPD), with their “Germans first” rhetoric has eroded. Similarly, the so-called “populists” in the mainstream parties who curried favour with voters on the political far right by making “old-style” nationalist statements were quickly ostracized. In the spring of 2002, for instance, the deputy chairman of the Liberal Party (FDP), Jürgen Möllemann, caused public outrage when he stated that he could empathize with Palestinian suicide bombers who were taking their fight inside Israel since Israel was obviously occupying their homeland. When criticized for his stance by the leaders of the German Jewish community,

Möllemann blamed their “intolerant and spiteful ways” for fuelling anti-Semitism in Germany, and maintained that he was mainly being chastised for violating the unwritten rule that Germans should not publicly admonish Israel. Möllemann’s criticism was deemed anti-Semitic, and by late October 2002 public censure had forced the unrepentant Möllemann from office. Similarly, two high-ranking members of the governing Social Democrats (SPD), who were on record for making remarks about “the Jewish lobby masterminding Washington’s Iraq policy” (former Minister of Defence Rudolf Scharping) and comparing, however obliquely, the methods of George W. Bush to those of Adolf Hitler (Minister of Justice Herta and Paul Paulsen), were publicly dressed down by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder.

The simultaneous decline of the nationalist splinter parties and the increase in public censure of any kind of anti-Semitic utterance could be interpreted as a sign of the continued linkage (and rejection) of anti-Semitism and nationalism in the political conscience of the vast majority of Germans. Other developments, however, suggest that this link is being broken and that a new German nationalism – without the historical overtones of anti-Semitism – is being cultivated as a permissible and even desirable stance for future German policy. One of the first indications of this change came in the form of the debate, begun in late 2000, over whether German culture should form the *Leitkultur*, or “lead culture,” for anyone wanting to immigrate to Germany. At first glance this debate may seem to be an affirmation of the “old-style” xenophobic nationalism, as it negates the professed goal of establishing a multicultural society in Germany; upon reflection, though, the debate is remarkable in that for the first time it acknowledges that Germany is *de facto* an immigration country, a reality denied and opposed by the “old-style” nationalists on the political right. Thus, as Germans publicly debate the possibility and desirability of a national culture enriched by immigration, they are pushing the redefinition of German national identity from bloodline to acculturation and beyond. Parallel to this shift in the definition of national identity, demands have arisen for a “civil” German nationalism, which would pursue the new Germany’s interests on the foreign policy stage in a more assertive manner.

German mainstream politicians have responded to this increasing public desire for the political expression of a “healthy” nationalism with the *Deutsche Weg* or “German Path,” a new foreign and domestic policy that resolutely places German interests first. The term was coined by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder in August 2002 to describe a new Germany whose policies would be made in Berlin and in Berlin only. The *Deutsche Weg* has raised many eyebrows outside Germany, where it has renewed historical fears of German unilateralism and hegemony. Inside Germany, however, the *Deutsche Weg* has

been warmly received as the overdue political emancipation of Germany. At the same time, it presents an opportunity to address a dilemma that has plagued the reunited Germany for the last decade: how to respond to its allies' pressure to participate in "policing" global affairs without conjuring up memories of German territorial aggression. Here the *Deutsche Weg* offers an unexpected option; rather than using its newly proclaimed self-determination to enlarge its international influence, Germany might tread more cautiously and even fall out of step with its allies by determining -- as independently as possible -- where it wants to step in the first place. This is exemplified by Schröder's energetic first stride on the *Deutsche Weg*: Germany's refusal to take part in the anticipated British-American campaign against Iraq. Schröder's very public refusal to toe the "ally line" marred German-American relations, particularly since the Americans had never demanded German participation in the first place. Consequently, some observers have argued that Schröder's evidently unnecessary snub was a calculated election feint designed to clinch the tight vote for his government by pandering to the increasing desire among mainstream voters for German self-determination. Regardless of whether the *Deutsche Weg* is indeed the expression of a newfound national consciousness or but a short-lived campaign tactic, the fact remains that the "new-style" nationalism inspiring the *Deutsche Weg* evidently holds considerable appeal for the German voting public. We have not seen the last of it.