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Focus Germany

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Two events have in recent weeks moved Germany into the center of European attention: the anti-immigrant riots in the East, especially in Chemnitz, and an effort – *Aufstehen*, meaning stand up! – to break and rebuild the German political party system on the Left, in response to the rise of a new party, the AfD, on the Right. For a time Chemnitz overshadowed *Aufstehen* as dramatic images spread in the European press of demonstrations, street fighting, Neo-Nazis shouting *Heil Hitler* and rock bands giving free concerts in protest. Similar things have happened elsewhere, only recently in Italy but also in France and the UK, with national modifications in the symbols used. But Germany is special.

Among the East German conditions conducive to right-wing radicalization is a regional society that has not nearly recovered from its disruption in 1989, severely under-integrated, disorganized, with hardly any trade unions, and with political parties without members connecting them to the social grassroots. Moreover, East Germany is still economically dependent on the West, with a stagnant GDP per capita of a little more than seventy percent of that of the country as a whole, its political, economic and cultural elites imported wholesale from the West, threatened by further economic decline, and deserted even by the mainstream of its traditional regional party, Die Linke, which has ideologically moved westward.

Ugly and depressing as the Chemnitz events were, there is no fascist takeover imminent in Germany. The radical Right is socially and culturally isolated, and its rioters are considered the scum of the earth by almost everyone, except perhaps an unknown number of AfD activists. Connections to the capitalist class do not exist, nor is there active support from inside the government bureaucracy or the military. The AfD thrives on fear of unlimited no-border immigration, as declared to be inevitable by Merkel in 2015 and morally obligatory by

liberal internationalists. That fear is independent from how many immigrants people encounter in their local communities; it is strong in the East, where there are few immigrants, and in regions in the West, especially the prosperous South-West, that have absorbed more than their share of the recent inflow. Immigration is a divisive issue both in weakly integrated and in well-to-do local societies where people love and fear for their traditional way of life.

As to *Aufstehen*, it responds not just to the AfD but also to the decline of the SPD, which is as predicted unable to renew itself in government and seems destined to the same decline as the once so proud center-left parties of Sweden, Austria, the Netherlands and Italy. It is an attempt to collect those among the SPD, the Greens and the Linkspartei who are fed up with the stagnation of German politics that is the hallmark of the Merkel era, and also win back former SPD voters that have changed to the AfD or are no longer voting. Its working hypothesis is that there are more important issues than migration and asylum, which can in principle be sorted out if agreement can be reached that unlimited no border immigration is neither economically nor politically viable. Among the problems that the government keeps from public attention by focusing on the moral-cultural war against the Right are the “debt break” – the balanced budget constitutional amendment – with its disastrous austerity consequences for the Eurozone, the crumbling physical infrastructure, growing inequality between classes and regions, also in the West of Germany, poverty especially among single-earner families with children, the promise to Trump to raise defense spending by more than fifty percent, the aggressive stance taken in relation to Russia, the foreseeable failure to meet the climate goals, and the complete crash of the old centralist, bureau-technocratic model of European integration – manifested in rising conflicts with the new member states in the East, deep divisions between Northern and Mediterranean countries, and the impending Brexit. If Germany, the largest power in the EU, fails to address these and other long-standing problems, who will?