Germany: growing social polarisation provokes opposition

Martin Kreickenbaum
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All recent studies investigating changes in the distribution of wealth in Germany show that the gulf between rich and poor is growing ever larger. This process has accelerated considerably since the Social Democratic Party/Green Party coalition entered government in 1998.

Moreover, a far-reaching study by Bielefeld University reveals that the general population is now far more conscious of this increasing social polarisation and that the consequences of the profit system are widely rejected. Increasingly, growing anger with the social crisis is being directed against the ruling elite in politics, business and the media.

Since 2002, the Institute for the Study of Conflict and Violence at Bielefeld University has conducted an annual survey concerning the political and social views of approximately 3,000 people. The results of the research, which is to run for 10 years, are published in an annual report. It is now possible to review the three volumes that have so far been produced.

The study is largely directed at establishing the extent and causes of hostility against foreigners, ethnic minorities and fringe groups, which it calls “group-related hostility.” The study by Wilhelm Heitmeyer and his fellow researchers follows the thesis that the general population is becoming more receptive to authoritarian forms of rule as a result of the continuing social crisis, and is politically turning to the right. However, the data they have produced does not support this correlation. Quite the opposite; broad sections of the population are turning to the left and are expressing growing opposition to the capitalist system and its consequences.

In contrast to the mainstream of sociological research into inequality, which is increasingly abandoning any analysis of material inequalities and only examines various lifestyles and value systems, Heitmeyer’s team still maintains that “the traditional vertical inequality structures remain relevant.”[1]

The figures presented, obtained from various studies into wealth distribution in Germany, strikingly support the significance of material inequality. Government reports on poverty and wealth show that in 2003, private wealth in Germany amounted to €5 trillion—an average of €133,000 per household. However, this wealth is distributed very unequally. The bottom half of the population possesses only 4 percent, whereas the top half owns 96 percent of all private wealth. This relationship is even more striking the closer the figures are studied.

The lower fifth of the population possesses no wealth at all, but has only debts related to consumption and housing. The upper fifth, however, owns two thirds of all wealth. And the upper tenth possesses 46.8 percent (almost half) of all Germany’s wealth in the form of money or property.

However, the private wealth of the rich is drastically underestimated, since the report is based on a random sample of incomes and consumption, in which the super-rich are chronically underrepresented. A study by management consultants Cap Gemini Ernst & Young in 2000 provided a far higher estimate of private wealth, at some €8 trillion. Accordingly, in 1999, 365,000 people, or 0.5 percent of the population, possessed wealth totalling €2 trillion—i.e., 25 percent of all wealth. If only those with wealth of more than €30 million are considered, then there remain 3,700 super-rich, who together personally own €612 billion, or 7.9 percent of Germany’s wealth.

Moreover, the last 10 years have also seen an enormous redistribution of private wealth from the bottom to the top of society. Between 1993 and 2003, excluding property, the net financial resources of the richest quarter of the population rose by 27.5 percent in west Germany and by 85.8 percent in east Germany. At the same time, the assets of the poorest quarter sank in west Germany by 49.5 percent and by 21 percent in east Germany.

The proportion of poor people whose income is less than 60 percent of average earnings increased between 1998 and 2003 from 12.1 to 13.5 percent. Between 1970 and 2004, the year in which unemployment benefit and welfare assistance were merged, the number of people on social security benefits increased sixfold. While in 1970, approximately 500,000 people claimed welfare benefits, last year it was almost 3 million. Those particularly affected are children and young people. In 1965, only 1 in 75 children were in households dependent on welfare assistance, today it is 1 in 8. Some 500,000 people now rely daily on soup kitchens, including many ordinary families whose income no longer stretches to providing basic nutrition.

The study registered “clear polarising tendencies” and expressed the expectation that “political decisions made under the crisis of economic growth and financial pressure (e.g., tax legislation), would mean distribution from ‘below’ to ‘above’ will grow more acute, so that social difference will be further intensified, increasing [social] polarisation.”[2]

The growing social gulf between the rich and the poor, and the increasing pauperisation of broad social layers are reflected in the expectations for the future of those surveyed. Within just two years, the fear of unemployment among those who currently have jobs has risen from 27.8 to 38.5 percent. One in four people asked no longer excluded the possibility of losing their job. Between 2002 and 2004, the report also found that the number of those who indicated that they have “less than they need” has risen. Thirty percent of respondents declared that they had “less than their fair share.”

Forecasts of one’s own personal economic and financial situation were correspondingly gloomy. In 2004, 40.2 percent of those asked thought their situation would worsen in the next five years. This has almost doubled from 2002, when it was 23.8 percent. In contrast, the proportion of those who felt they would be well provided for in old age has halved. Only 6.6 percent (2002, 10.1 percent) thought they could enjoy a financially secure old age.

The establishment parties and media propaganda declare the growth of economic uncertainty and precarious prospects for the future a matter of individual responsibility, but for broader sections of the population, they are seen as the consequences of a capitalist system that they increasingly reject. In 2004, 61.4 percent fully supported the statement, “The rich

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always get richer and the poor always get poorer," whereas in 2002 it was "only" 53 percent. In addition, 29.2 percent partially agreed with the statement; in 2002, it was 32.8 percent.

A similar picture can be seen in responses to the statement, "In Germany, ever more people are pushed to the periphery." Last year, 49.7 percent agreed fully with the statement (in 2002, 40.4 percent) and 34.7 percent tended to agree (in 2002, 37.2 percent). In other words, between 85 and 90 percent of the population are aware of the redistribution of social wealth. But that is not all. The lines of conflict between the rich and the poor are ascribed great significance by 58 percent in west Germany and 72 percent in east Germany. The researchers reach the inevitable conclusion: "Social divisions can become social tensions between the poor and the rich, and occupy a central position in the consciousness of German citizens."[3]

What is expressed here in somewhat coded language is nothing more than the conclusion that the obscene accumulation of wealth by a narrow elite at the expense of the broad mass of the population increasingly encounters opposition, and once more places great social conflicts on the agenda.

This conclusion is supported by a line of questions that unfortunately were only posed in 2003, examining the implementation of democratic principles in political decision making. The general perception was of an "emptying of democracy," as the effect and activities of various social participants were queried.

The great majority of the population do not believe their personal interests are any longer represented in the political system, regarding politics as the servant of capital against which there is no outlet for opposition, neither in the media nor in the trade unions: 71.5 percent fully or partially agreed with the statement,"In the final analysis, it is big business, and not politics, that has the say in our country"; 77.7 percent thought that decisions made by big business were at the expense of democratic participation; and 84.7 percent held the view that there should be more rights of veto, so that the big corporations could not do everything they want.

The restriction of democratic rights also encounters broad rejection in the population, despite all reports to the contrary in the media. More than two thirds (68.4 percent) supported the statement, "The state is increasingly restricting the liberty of its citizens;" 83.6 percent said that security measures should not be at the expense of freedoms; and 41.1 percent said that anti-terror laws endanger liberties.

Moreover, respondents thought that the media fell far short of carrying out its investigative and oversight function. Thus, 60.5 percent held the view that journalists had exhibited more courage to tackle politicians in previous times, and 87.9 percent supported the statement, "Media reporting of politically controversial issues should be improved."

Finally, it is worth noting that 79.8 percent of respondents agreed with the statement, "There are too few protests against bad social conditions in Germany." This area of questioning revealed a clear loss of confidence in the trade unions, whose growing refusal to mobilise working people against cuts in welfare and wages and increases in the working week is carefully noted. Those whose social situation was the worst expressed the sharpest criticism of the workings of democracy.

These statistics reveal very clearly tendencies that even surprised Heitmeyer's research team. There is obviously a clear majority in the population expressing vehement opposition to the social division of society and pointing the finger at all those who are responsible for the situation. Opposition is directed against the omnipotence of big business, which dictates political decision making and against the so-called "representatives of the people" and media, whose true character as advocates for the interests of big business is very consciously perceived.

What the Bielefeld research team has uncovered is a largely politically unconscious but very sharply articulated move to the left in the population, who increasingly abhor the profit system and its political servants and are demanding social justice.

However, the Bielefeld Institute for the Study of Conflict and Violence is only interested in the question of whether increasing social polarisation and opposition to the prevailing social conditions leads to regarding other social groupings as inferior, and which can therefore be treated with hostility.

Here, the sociologists do not rely upon the knowledge they have uncovered, but obviously misinterpret the data in affirming their own prejudices—i.e., that any rebellion by the working class must inevitably take on a right-wing form.

Heitmeyer and his team display some sleight of hand in statistics and interpretation in order to confirm their theory of "group-related hostility." To explain their concept, they reduce their model of social stratification completely to those who stand at the edge of society or at its bottom-most level. Thus, they ignore the fact that xenophobia, anti-Semitism and contempt for the homeless are at least as strongly represented among prosperous sections of society. Anti-Semitic and racist delusions in the Weimar Republic in the 1920s and later in the Nazi dictatorship were above all a characteristic of the business and political elite at that time, something that the Heitmeyer study ignores.

The study is also completely blind to today's witch-hunting of immigrants and refugees, which the establishment parties and media all too often scapegoat for cuts in social provisions and stigmatise as potential terrorists and criminals. The criminalisation and disempowerment of foreigners serves the ruling elite to establish an all-powerful state and the preparation of authoritarian forms of rule.

Moreover, as Heitmeyer must admit, the conscious perception of social divisions means that "a critical attitude to society due to the existing structures of inequality does not lead, or only marginally leads, to increasingly misanthropic views." [4]

But sociologists like Wilhelm Heitmeyer regard it almost as a law of nature that a political movement of the working class must turn to the right. For Heitmeyer, growing social inequality, the dismantling of social rights and provisions to preserve Germany as a centre for industry and services, "maintaining its competitive ability in the rabid competition of the world economy," contains questions only "with regard to the authoritarian potential in society as a basis for authoritarian developments."[5]

Although he does open evoke so-called Critical Theory in his report, Heitmeyer nevertheless consciously adopts the theories of the Frankfurt School, which denied the working class any progressive political potential and which was instrumental to the stabilisation of bourgeois rule in postwar Germany.

For this reason, Heitmeyer regards the politicisation of the population arising from social divisions and social decay, which his own study has uncovered—such as the Monday demonstrations against the government's Hartz IV labour reforms in the summer of 2004—as a danger to social order that must be prevented atall costs.

He sees his study as a warning to the ruling elite not to push things too far and allow social divisions to become irrevocably pronounced. "The elites in business, politics, the media and culture who ignore these are neglecting their responsibility for social peace," Heitmeyer writes.[6] Sociologists such as Heitmeyer understand their role primarily as seismographs, whose role is to promptly point out to the ruling elite each growing movement of the working class.

Notes:

1. Wilhelm Heitmeyer (Ed.), *Deutsche Zustände. Folge 3* (*German Conditions, vol. 3*), Frankfurt/M., Suhrkamp Verlag, 2005, p. 40
2. Ibid. p. 52f
3. Ibid. p. 54
4. Ibid. p. 65

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5. Wilhelm Heitmeyer (Ed.), *Deutsche Zustände. Folge 2* (*German Conditions, vol. 2*), Frankfurt/M., Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003, p. 37f
6. Wilhelm Heitmeyer (Ed.), *German Conditions, vol. 3,* p. 68

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