

Rehashing ideological clichés

One year since Udo di Fabio published his book *The Culture of Freedom*

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Western civilization is in danger, “because a false idea of freedom has destroyed common sense,” wrote Udo di Fabio, the German jurist and neo-conservative, in the subtitle to his 2005 book *The Culture of Freedom*. The author then elaborated the supposedly correct notion of freedom in the form of an ideological crusade against an “over-extravagant welfare state” and the “dependency-thinking” fostered by modern society. He called for the revival of “elementary higher values.”

Di Fabio’s theatrical appeals fell largely on deaf ears. A year after publication, the unsold copies of his book are piling up at discount bookshops and the best advice one can give the reader is to save the money. Reading his hackneyed clichés about the meaningful role of the family, religion and homeland is excruciating. There is not an original thought to be found in the 300-page tome. Di Fabio has nothing more to offer than a pale version of the timeworn and moldy slogans of the old German Empire, combined with a banal hymn of praise to the 1950s. That does not prevent him, however, from indignantly waving his finger in the manner of an outraged school teacher.

To find any parallels for the idiocies contained in his book one must go back to the Nazi-imposed French Vichy regime in the summer of 1940, which raged against “the decline of French virtues” and sought to replace on public buildings the slogans of the French revolution—“Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité,” (liberty, equality, brotherhood)—with its own slogan—“Travail, Famille, Patrie” (work, family, fatherland).

Di Fabio’s book was part of an offensive last year by right-wing forces, supplemented by a section of Germany’s ruling elite. The Social Democratic Party (SPD)-Green Party government led by chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) and foreign affairs minister Joschka Fischer (Green Party) encountered growing opposition to their ferocious attacks on workers’ rights and living standards. The SPD lost large numbers of votes in a series of regional elections, and mass demonstrations and protests took place across the country against its punitive measures toward the unemployed—the Hartz IV laws.

When at the end of May 2005 the SPD also lost power in its heartland of North Rhine-Westphalia, influential business circles together with the conservative union parties—Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU)—and the free-market Free Democratic Union (FDP) pushed for a change of government. Udo di Fabio played a key role at that time in declaring the early elections to be legal, although it had been precipitated by a phony “no-

confidence” motion. Di Fabio is a judge on the Federal Constitutional Court and formulated the written judgment that declared the new elections permissible, although the German constitution allows neither a self-dissolution of parliament nor its dissolution by the government. A number of other legal experts confirmed that Schröder’s initiative represented a violation of the German constitution.

Di Fabio has made no secret of the fact that he regards his book as an important contribution to a “spiritual-moral turn.” In the course of several appearances for his book last summer he stressed that he wanted to begin a debate over political principles. In fact, any debate ended before it had even begun. As votes were counted after the parliamentary election last September, it was clear that the result was not favorable to Angela Merkel (CDU) and her conservative “team of experts.”

Voters had delivered their own reply to the offensive launched by the right-wing forces. Taken together, the camp of so-called ‘left’ parties—the Social Democrats, the Greens and the Left Party—received more votes than the right-wing camp of the CDU-CSU and FDP. Merkel was only able to take over the chancellorship due to the readiness of the SPD to form a grand coalition.

As a result, any interest in di Fabio’s collection of political platitudes died down quickly and the book, which had been so grandly announced, merely gathered dust on the shelves.

Di Fabio’s work is valuable in one regard, however: it provides a glimpse into the mental state of a section of the ruling elite in Germany, whose only answer to the problems of the 21st century is to dig up relics from the 19th.

Di Fabio lays down his central thesis right at the start of his book. In his opinion, any kind of social security provided by the state should be reduced, and even more radical cuts should be made in what remains of the German and European welfare state model. However, because the welfare state also plays a role in securing social order, social stability must be ideologically maintained by religion and nationalism, on the one side, and respect for national institutions, on the other. In place of any equitable distribution of resources and wealth, di Fabio proposes welding society together in the form of a religiously enlightened community—in one passage di Fabio even employs the phrase “community of fate” (Schicksalsgemeinschaft), a term used by the Nazis.

The notion of a “state-guaranteed basic provision for all” was able to “blunt the sword of revolutionary socialism,” di Fabio writes. But that has led to a situation where Europe has “long since grown accustomed to a quasi-socialist system of distribution.” Under these

conditions states with high levels of indebtedness such as Germany or France “could not take steps to reorganize financial transfer currents” without the threat of a “massive loss of political credibility.”

Basically, di Fabio is outraged that a large majority of the population is ready to support a “state guaranteed basic provision for all” in the form of a welfare state system and is not prepared to accept more cuts in the social fabric in order to increase the fortunes of the rich and the super-rich. The mass demonstrations in France a few months ago, which forced the Villepin government, at least temporarily, to withdraw aspects of its plans for the dismantling of job protection laws, were symptomatic in this respect.

Judge di Fabio has two proposals aimed at breaking the back of this popular resistance: first, the revival of what he calls a “bourgeois-puritan performance orientation,” which in Europe, unlike the US, has “completely faded” and gone to the dogs. Second, the state must be given more powers. The lawyer di Fabio remains vague in this regard and is careful to avoid any overt call for an authoritarian system of government. But his warning that a situation could develop requiring a choice between social and “cultural fragmentation with the danger of civil war” or an “authoritarian stabilization of the state power” makes clear that he favors the latter option.

This campaign for a return to the type of authoritarian state that existed in Wilhelmine Germany in the 19th century is combined with wild salvos against the 1968 political movement, which di Fabio regards as the most pernicious development in recent history and which he makes responsible for the excessive “dependency-thinking” on the state and society. In his view the 1968 movement is responsible for the denial and undermining of all authority, the break-up of the traditional family and the declining birth-rate in Western countries.

In common with other conservative and rightwing demagogues before him, di Fabio also warns of the disappearance of the “traditional family.” For di Fabio, the family is not only the cell of the state and the basis for authoritarian education, but also the institution that should deal with social needs. As social gains are done away, the unemployed, pensioners and the sick are to be absorbed into the bosom of the family where they are to be sustained and financially supplied, or rather, allowed to vegetate.

Di Fabio presents his antiquated view of the family under the extravagant title “Support and loyalty as the mutual bond”: “The family was and is an original supportive community of mutual benefit: Parents provide for their children in the expectation that their children, when older, will reward their parents with respect, attention and welfare.”

While the Nazis set up and ran “convalescence homes for mothers” to increase the birth-rate and prepare for war, judge di Fabio is rather more selective. He favors an increased birth-rate for the elite and writes: “If today in Germany, in common with many other Western states, an ever greater proportion of the academically formed middle class remains childless, then the educational authority of nearly a half a generation of university graduates will be lost with foreseeable consequences for the state of society over the next decades.”

On this question, however, di Fabio has been forestalled by the current German Secretary for Family Affairs, Ursula von der Leyen (CDU), who has introduced subsidies for families that clearly favor the better-off.

Alongside “family” and “nation,” di Fabio inevitably includes “religion” in his political armory. Di Fabio regrets the “cultural vacuum” that has developed in Germany due to an excessive separation of church and state. He makes a plea for the restoration of

the influence of Christian churches. In the section of his book dealing with “Christianity and Islam—integration into a self-confident culture,” he demands an ideological offensive against Islamism and encourages xenophobic sentiments.

He repeatedly speaks of the danger of an increasing “domination of society by alien elements” and warns that the “our rationalized understanding of religion, moral and system of values” has begun to disintegrate.

Di Fabio sees the cause of the increasing “loss of cultural identity” as Enlightenment-based scientific thinking and democracy. He writes: “With the Renaissance, humanism, enlightenment, science, individualism and democracy, a consciously designed new world imposed itself onto an existing, growing one.” He adds that “Faith in the principle of reason” not only questioned every other faith, but also presented “the value system of society as capable of amendment”—and in so doing undermined society.

His alternative is: “[T]raditional points of view and common-sense wisdom formed over centuries and thousands of years. These ways of looking at life were nourished by religious traditions, conflicts with nature, the profound experiences of the joys of life, and by honor and respect. They have all dramatically lost meaning, but cannot be replaced by law, politics, economics or social technology.”

One feels like exclaiming: “Forward—back to the Middle Ages!”

Perhaps such reactionary twaddle and glorification of the Middle Ages are to some extent bound up with the author’s own biography. At the beginning of the 20th century, his grandfather left the Italian region of Abruzzi as an impoverished rural aristocrat for the German city of Duisburg where he found work as a steel worker. Although he had little hope of recovering his former property and wealth, it appears he held onto to his claim to nobility.

Di Fabio in his arrogance is firmly convinced that his red judges’ robes are a guarantee of his reputation and respect in the eyes of others. He seems to have glossed over the crass contradiction between his proposals for the dismantling of the welfare state and the evolution of his own career. After all, his ascension to the judiciary was only made possible by the reforms of the education system introduced by the SPD chancellor Willy Brandt in the 1970s.



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