

The nationalist diatribe of a Left Party leader—a review of the new book by Sahra Wagenknecht

Part I: Volksgemeinschaft (“People’s Community”)

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Die Selbstgerechten (“The Self-Righteous”), the latest book by Sahra Wagenknecht, is a völkisch-nationalist diatribe. Wagenknecht, a leading member of the Left Party, venomously fulminates against cosmopolitanism and cultural openness while promoting protectionism and a strong state. She denounces migrants and refugees as wage depressors, strikebreakers, and foreign cultural elements, and seeks to drive a wedge between working people who have a university degree and those who do not. There are paragraphs in the book that can also be found almost verbatim in texts of the far-right AfD and the Nazis.

The book is a damning indictment of the entire political orientation of the Left Party. There have been isolated protests and demands for the expulsion of Wagenknecht inside the party, but that does not mean anything. Wagenknecht has been a member of the Left Party since its foundation, and remains its most prominent member. The German media are currently scrambling to win interviews with her and line up TV and radio appearances. The Left Party’s biggest state organisation in North Rhine-Westphalia selected her to be its leading candidate for this year’s federal election, shortly after the book was published. Janine Wissler, the Left Party leader with a pseudo-Trotskyist past, has appeared alongside Wagenknecht during the current election campaign.

The Left Party’s continued support for Wagenknecht says more about the party than a thousand empty election promises. History has repeatedly made clear that it is not possible to reconcile left-wing and right-wing political positions. In all those regions where the Left Party shares government responsibility, it has revealed itself to be a bourgeois party with policies identical to those of all other bourgeois parties. Wagenknecht’s latest book confirms that there is no demarcation on the right that the Left Party could not cross.

Volksgemeinschaft (“People’s Community”)

Like many other right-wing demagogues, Wagenknecht claims to speak on behalf of “so-called ordinary people,” which “capitalism has turned into losers.” Her version of “workers” and the “classical middle class,” however, has nothing in common with the real working class—an international class of billions of people, closely linked through the production process, who come from the most diverse backgrounds.

Instead, Wagenknecht conjures up the picture of a “community” strongly reminiscent of the Nazis’ “Volksgemeinschaft.” Its members are “predominantly sedentary and tied to the homeland,” have “deeply

internalised thinking within the framework of communities,” uphold values such as “achievement, diligence, discipline, order, security, stability and normality,” and set themselves apart from outsiders and migrants.

“Communities” can only exist, Wagenknecht claims, on the basis of differentiating themselves from external elements. “People live in communities and need social interaction. This is true for all times and ultimately for all social classes.” Every community is based on a distinction “between those who belong to it and those who do not.”

For Wagenknecht, the most important community is the nation. One chapter of her book is titled: “Nation-State and the We-Feeling: Why an Idea that has been declared dead has a future.” It states: “Nations are created through a common culture and language, shared values, common traditions, myths and narratives.”

Elsewhere she writes: “Shared identities are based on shared narratives that establish values, norms and rules of conduct. Many customs and traditions have value precisely in conveying commonality and belonging, thus creating mutual feelings of loyalty.”

Nations based on myths—Hitler’s propaganda chief Josef Goebbels would have readily agreed. The first modern nations to emerge from democratic revolutions—the American and the French—did not require myths. They broke with the myths and traditions of the Middle Ages and relied on the ideals of the Enlightenment, reason and universal human rights. The German bourgeoisie, however, fearful that a democratic revolution would play into the hands of the working class, entrenched itself behind the Kaiser and chancellor Otto von Bismarck, while propagating myths to unite the nation. The Nazis took these same myths to a new extreme, reducing nation to race, and race to blood.

One looks in vain in Wagenknecht’s book for the ideals of the Enlightenment. Even the famous sentence “All people become brothers” from Schiller’s “Ode to Joy,” which Beethoven immortalised in his Ninth Symphony, is too much for Wagenknecht to stomach. It does not follow from “the idea of human equality,” she salivates, “that we have the same obligations towards all human beings.” Those who claim to “see a brother in every human being” are, in reality, concerned with “no-one’s fate” and represent “a form of egoism disguised as internationalism.”

Wagenknecht’s bogeymen are the “self-righteous,” who give her book its title. She also calls them “left-liberals” and “lifestyle leftists.” They live in the inner cities, are “cosmopolitan” and “open-minded,” worry “about the climate,” advocate “emancipation, immigration and sexual minorities,” consider “the nation-state to be an outdated model and themselves to be citizens of the world” and value “autonomy and self-realisation” more “than tradition and community.”

Wagenknecht explicitly includes among the “self-righteous” not only wealthy members of the middle classes but also “between 25 and 30 percent of the working population,” including members of the “new academic underclass” who keep their heads above water with casual jobs, temporary work, or as click workers. According to Wagenknecht, this stratum is also oriented “towards the narratives and values of the social group to which it belongs and in which it seeks to advance. That is why left-liberalism is extremely popular in this milieu.”

In some passages of the book Wagenknecht justifies her attack on “left-liberalism” with a critique of identity politics. Identity politics “is at the heart of left-liberalism and provides in practice the basic framework upon which the left-liberal worldview is based,” she writes.

Identity politics judges all social issues according to the criteria of race, gender and sexual identity. It rejects the Marxist standpoint that the fundamental division in society is between classes. It is an ideology that enables wealthy members of the middle classes to further their careers and divide the working class.

Wagenknecht attacks identity politics not from the left, i.e., from the class standpoint of the working class, but rather from the right, as do the supporters of the AfD and Donald Trump. For Wagenknecht as well, identity, not class, is the decisive political criterion. The only difference is that she defines identity on the basis of nationality and tradition, rather than skin color and gender.

She accuses the “left-liberals” of declaring war on “nationalism, backwardness, provincialism, racism, sexism, homophobia, Islamophobia,” of regarding “faith, nation and homeland” as “ciphers for backwardness” and of claiming to stand for “diversity, cosmopolitanism, modernity, climate protection, liberality and tolerance.”

The litany continues page after page: “Left-liberalism dismisses communal values either as outdated or condemns them as nationalistic and prosperity chauvinistic. It opposes to them its notion of an open society: a society open to anyone who wants to come, which has no place for common values and ties, is held together only by law and order, and permits equal rights to anyone who turns up.” (129)

Apparently Wagenknecht regards nationalism, racism and Islamophobia as positive—or at least legitimate—viewpoints and considers “faith, nation and homeland” to be progressive. A democratic society, on the other hand, in which everyone is equal under the law, regardless of origin and ancestry (“held together only by law and order”), is in her opinion, intolerable.

There are dozens of such quotes in her book, which we will spare the reader. Above all, the accusation of “cosmopolitanism”—a term frequently used with anti-Semitic undertones by Stalin—is her favorite form of abuse.

“The idea of an ‘open society’ and left-liberal cosmopolitanism, for which there is only one world and one humanity, therefore belong together,” she scolds. “At first glance, this sounds immensely progressive. All people become brothers, there are no more borders, everyone has the same rights.” However, “a society without membership” cannot constitute “a shelter. Where anyone can join, there is no togetherness and no special sort of solidarity.”

Wagenknecht even supports the demand for an obligatory “Leitkultur” (guiding culture)—a favored slogan of the far right: “If one wants to define the term Leitkultur meaningfully, one should understand it as the specific values and typical patterns of behavior within a nation, founded on cultural tradition, history and national narratives, which are part of its common identity and upon which its sense of belonging is based.”

Xenophobia

Wagenknecht excludes immigrants and refugees from her “community.” It has long been common knowledge that she holds xenophobic views, but she has now laid out her views in a coherent form in a 340-page book. The result is a worldview that is identical to that of the AfD.

Over the course of 30 pages in the chapter “Immigration—Who Wins, Who Loses?,” she lists her reasons why migrants should either not be allowed into the country or only when they fulfil strict conditions. She rants: “The demand for a lax immigration policy and a generally positive view of migration belong to the canon of thought of the lifestyle left, as does belief in the resurrection to Christianity. Anyone who deviates here is excommunicated.”

She makes refugees the scapegoat for social cuts: “Every euro spent on one thing is at the expense of all other things. Social housing, teachers, day-care places and nursing staff are, after all, also in short supply and have to be financed.” She denounces immigrants for “depressing wages or even functioning as strike breakers” and claims that the “most important interest group that has always had a pronounced interest in migration” is “the employer’s camp.”

Elsewhere she writes: “Any genuine solidarity system must keep the number of payers and recipients in a certain balance in order not to collapse. ... Social security at the level of Western countries would of course be *unaffordable* on a global scale.” (emphasis in original)

From migrants who make it into the country despite all obstacles, Wagenknecht demands “the willingness to engage with the majority culture and its values, to respect its reservoir of common ground and to begin to understand themselves as citizens of the state in which they want to spend their lives.” She stokes up Islamophobia, declaring that “a religion like political Islam, which preaches separation and hostility, cannot be part of a country like Germany, if only because it has not the slightest inclination to belong to the culture and society here.”

Wagenknecht praises the trade unions for their chauvinism. They had already “largely stopped migration from Eastern Europe” in the Weimar Republic and ensured in the post-war period that immigrants had “hardly any access to the normal labor market of the industrialised countries.” The latter often worked in the same company as native workers, “but under clearly defined legal conditions. They were thus not in direct competition with the local population.”

“The more organised the unions were in certain industries,” she concludes, “the stricter were the restrictions. In some workplaces they even managed to prevent the employment of immigrants altogether.” They did this not for racist reasons, Wagenknecht claims, but because only then did they have a chance to press for higher wages and better working conditions for their members.

Wagenknecht also denounces refugee organisations such as the German “Seebücke,” which makes great sacrifices to try to prevent mass drownings in the Mediterranean, and movements such as “Fridays for Future,” which oppose climate change. According to Wagenknecht, both organisations are frontrunners in the global drive for profits.

Hitler, Gauland and Wagenknecht

A comparison of texts by AfD leader Alexander Gauland and Adolf Hitler shows how closely Wagenknecht’s nationalist tirades are based on fascist models.

Gauland published a guest article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on 6 October 2018, in which he—like Wagenknecht—claimed that his party defends the interests of the “bourgeois middle class” and “so-called ordinary people” against “a new urban elite.”

The members of this “globalised class,” he wrote, “live almost

exclusively in big cities, speak fluent English, and when they move from Berlin to London or Singapore to change jobs, they find similar flats, houses, restaurants, shops and public schools everywhere. ... As a result, the ties of this new elite to their respective home countries are weak. In an aloof parallel society, they feel like citizens of the world.”

The leading German historian Wolfgang Benz demonstrated that Gauland’s article was based on a speech Hitler made to Siemens workers in Berlin on 10 November 1933. In the speech Hitler denounced a “small rootless international clique” intent on setting peoples against each other: “These are people who are at home everywhere and nowhere, who live today in Berlin, tomorrow in Brussels, the day after tomorrow in Paris and then after in Prague or Vienna or London, and who feel at home everywhere.” (Shout from the audience: “Jews!”) “They are the only ones who can really be regarded as international elements, because they can do business everywhere.”

Wagenknecht’s version reads as follows: “The typical lifestyle left lives in a big city or at least a fancy university town and rarely in places like Bitterfeld or Gelsenkirchen. He studies or has a university degree and good foreign language skills... He revels in his travels—with the exception of the Corona period—and usually flies particularly far, because mobility and expansiveness are, after all, part of his DNA.”

Hitler opposed the “international clique” with the “people” as a national element: “...the people is chained to its soil, is chained to its homeland, is bound to the opportunities of life afforded by its state, the nation. The people cannot simply follow in their footsteps.”

Gauland wrote: “...they are at the same time those for whom homeland is still a value in itself and are the first to lose their homeland because it is their milieu into which immigrants flow. They can’t just move away and play golf somewhere else.”

For her part Wagenknecht declares: “For people who are oriented towards communities, their family is not just any family, their home region is not just any stretch of land, and their country is somehow different from other countries. That’s why they feel more closely connected to citizens of their own country than people who live elsewhere.”

To be continued



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