Jörg Baberowski's *Bypassing the People*: Fascism as a revitalisation of democracy

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It is hardly surprising that a book on democracy and its history written by a far-right professor is steeped in anti-democratic ideas, trivialises Nazi terror and hails the fascist Alternative for Germany (AfD) as a revitalisation of democracy. What is remarkable, however, is that Jörg Baberowski's latest treatise, *Am Volk vorbei—Zur Krise der liberalen Demokratie* (Bypassing the People—On the Crisis of Liberal Democracy), is being hailed and praised in countless media outlets. This can only be understood as a deliberate political campaign to secure the AfD a place in government.

The historian of Eastern Europe at Humboldt University previously played a key role in ideologically justifying the return of German militarism and dictatorial tendencies. In February 2014, he argued in *Der Spiegel* for a re-evaluation of the Nazis and claimed that Hitler had not been "vicious." He trivialised the Holocaust by comparing it to the executions during the Russian Civil War: "Essentially, it was the same thing: industrial killing."[1]

This trivialisation of the past crimes of German militarism went hand in hand with a call for brutal military force. During a discussion at the German Historical Museum that same year, Baberowski spoke out in favour of military operations against terrorists and declared: "And if one is not willing to take hostages, burn villages, hang people and spread fear and terror, as the terrorists do, if one is not prepared to do such things, then one can never win such a conflict and it is better to keep out altogether."

The IYSSE protested vehemently against this falsification of history and war propaganda at the German university. Meetings attended by hundreds of participants and numerous student councils across Germany criticised Baberowski and drew public attention to the matter. Various lawsuits brought by Baberowski, claiming he should not be called a "right-wing extremist," "racist" or a "falsifier of history," were dismissed by the respective courts. Yet the vast majority of the media and representatives of all parties in the Bundestag (German parliament) rallied behind the far-right professor and defended his right-wing agenda. [2]

Nevertheless, following the storm of student resistance, Baberowski largely withdrew from day-to-day political issues and left the field to others for almost 10 years. The fact that he is now making a comeback with an open plea for the integration of the AfD and is being celebrated by countless media outlets is an expression of a fundamental shift to the right across the entire political establishment. No fewer than six major media outlets—*Der Spiegel*, *Die Welt*, the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, Austria's *Der Standard* and public broadcasters ARD and Deutschlandfunk—have published detailed and favourable interviews with Baberowski about his book. *Cicero* and the *NZZ* also published positive reviews, while only the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* published a mildly critical review and *Die Zeit* a somewhat stronger one.

While Trump terrorises immigrant workers with his ICE Gestapo, murders political opponents in broad daylight and openly calls for war crimes in his brutal war of aggression against Iran, the ruling elite in Germany is also falling into line with this course. With his pseudo-academic treatise, Baberowski is the man of the hour. From the ruling class's perspective, the horrendous military build-up and the associated fierce social attacks require authoritarian methods of rule to suppress resistance.

As is customary with Baberowski's books, *Am Volk vorbei* is rife with contradictions, inconsistencies and outright fabrications. The author is not at all concerned with developing his subject systematically but rather with driving home very concrete political points through highly abstract musings. But first things first.

Fascism as a revitalisation of democracy

Baberowski's central political thesis is as simple as it is pernicious: The so-called "populists"—by which, despite every effort to maintain academic detachment, he primarily means the far right—are not a threat to democracy but rather its corrective. "Populism," writes Baberowski, "is also a corrective, an antidote to the self-empowerment of the privileged, a wedge that breaks through the prescribed consensus, and in this way it contributes to the revitalisation of politics" (p.150).

Elsewhere, he raves about the "invigorating effect" (p.114) of populism. He styles right-wing extremists as champions of democratic rights and guarantors of the will of the people:

> Populists promise what the political elite has long since abandoned as a project: that laws which are no longer fit for purpose can be repealed, that living conditions perceived as oppressive can be changed, if only one so wishes. It is about the self-empowerment of citizens, about the transformation of a democracy of confirmation and approval into an active democracy. For most voters of populist parties do not demand that democracy be abolished. Rather, they yearn for a way of life in which their voices can be heard and their pent-up resentments can be vented. It is not before courts and commissions—which nobody has elected and which are accountable to nobody—but in the passionate clash of opinions, in parliament and in government, that the final word must be spoken. The will of the majority should count; it should no longer be kept on a leash by a political class that is not required to answer for its actions. (p.135f)

Who are these invigorating forces described here? Although Baberowski does not name the AfD outright, he leaves no doubt as to whom he has in mind. He lists them: "Silvio Berlusconi, Giorgia Meloni or Jörg Haider,

Geert Wilders or Björn Höcke, Marine Le Pen, Jean-Luc Mélenchon or the Kaczy?ski brothers—we, the representatives of the people, against the corrupt, power-hungry and out-of-touch elite" (p.116). Höcke, the fascist and leader of the AfD's far-right "Wing" who has been convicted and sentenced for using the banned SA slogan "Everything for Germany," is placed here in the same category as the left-wing populist Mélenchon. This is no accidental equation, but the methodological core of Baberowski's strategy of trivialisation: By treating the left and the right as similar "populists," he makes fascism socially acceptable.

Baberowski's glorification of the fascists pursues the transparent aim of promoting their participation in government. No one need worry about democratic rights if the far-right extremists come to power, he lectures:

> Fascism is not knocking at the door. Even if someone were to seek to establish a dictatorship—who would follow them? Societies in Europe and North America have long since immunised themselves against such temptations. ... Where populist politicians have come to power, as in the US, Italy, Greece, Poland and Brazil, they have also relinquished it after losing elections. The good news is: we are not on the brink of disaster (p.135).

Accordingly, Baberowski accuses those who warn of the fascist threat, in line with the French sociologist Christophe Guilluy, of "elevating themselves morally above their opponents and labeling criticism of the power dynamics of globalisation as fascist hate propaganda" (p.134). He also complains that the right-wing extremists mentioned are "stigmatised as 'evil', 'misanthropic' or 'irrational' and excluded from that public debate" (p.153).

Baberowski issues this clean bill of health not only to Höcke and his AfD but also to US President Donald Trump, whom he treats throughout the book exclusively as a cultural and communicative phenomenon. "Trumpism is not the work of a powerful economic lobby," explains Baberowski, "but at most the product of a negative media campaign that made the candidate and his voters the subject of contempt and which allowed him to turn the strategy of constant polarisation and the vilification of the liberal elites into a successful business model" (p.116).

Who is supposed to believe this nonsense? Trump was already backed by significant sections of the financial oligarchy during his re-election campaign, particularly by the world's richest man, Elon Musk. At his inauguration, all the major business tycoons were sitting behind him to show their support. His government is the government of the financial oligarchy.

The interests of this oligarchy are simply no longer compatible with the needs of the people. That is why the slide towards dictatorship is already well advanced, particularly in the US. From the Gestapo-style hunt for migrants, through the murder of political opponents in Minnesota, to the subjugation of universities, Trump is attacking democratic rights on a broad front.

His attacks on the social and democratic rights of American workers are mirrored in his brutal foreign policy. Trump is waging a criminal war of aggression against Iran, boasts of committing serious war crimes, and openly threatens genocide. It is not just the rhetoric that is reminiscent of the Nazis. At the helm of the United States stands a mafia boss who ruthlessly enforces the interests of the financial oligarchy.

When Baberowski claims that Trump poses no threat to democracy, he might as well exclaim: "Nobody has any intention of establishing a dictatorship." The far-right professor is quite obviously seeking to gloss over the fascist's dictatorial ambitions in the White House as a "revitalisation of democracy," in order to help the AfD gain a foothold here in Germany.

The far right's programme

Stylistically, Baberowski goes to great lengths to maintain a distance from the "populists," but time and again his own views emerge, which essentially overlap with those of the AfD.

This begins with his conception of globalisation, which he does not understand as a stage in the development of capitalism but as the work of a "cosmopolitan elite": "They declared globalisation to be a democratic interplay of free forces in order to conceal the fact that it was about nothing other than instrumentalising the governments of nation states for self-serving interests." (p.88) These elites then profited from globalisation because they "find their way easily in a world without borders, because they are mobile and possess cultural capital" (p.88).

The similarities to Kaiser Wilhelm's "stateless journeymen," Hitler's "international Jewish finance" and the neo-Nazi rhetoric of "globalists" are no coincidence. Drawing on the Third Reich's chief legal theorist, Carl Schmitt, Baberowski therefore also declares the nation-state to be the only possible vehicle for democratic structures:

> It was globalisation that first brought to light the fact that the concepts of the state, the people, the nation, the citizen and democracy had always been understood solely in their territorial dimension. "The central concept of democracy is the people, not humanity," wrote Carl Schmitt. "If democracy is to be a political form at all, there can only be a democracy of the people, not of humanity" (p.89).

On the basis of this reactionary concept, which is not founded on inalienable human rights but on Schmitt's exclusion of enemies, Baberowski develops the classic right-wing agitation against migrants. He writes:

> Today, the welfare state groans under a burden it can no longer bear, because it must also provide for people who have made no contribution to its financing. For everyone knows that it is financed through the taxes and contributions of all those who live and work within its borders. The welfare state sustains itself through its exclusivity, and anyone who wishes to abolish borders ultimately puts it at risk. For both cannot exist: open borders and social security for all (p.89).

In classic far-right fashion, Baberowski makes those who fled the NATO wars the scapegoats for the consequences of the social cutbacks of recent years. Over the last 20 years, public housing has been sold off, local authority coffers plundered and social welfare systems dismantled in order to distribute billions to the rich and finance a massive arms build-up. Now the most vulnerable members of society are to be held responsible for this!

Baberowski's juxtaposition of unbridled global capitalism with the supposedly familiar nation-state is also at the heart of every right-wing and far-right ideology.

Historically, the emergence of the nation-state and democracy are closely intertwined. They shaped the era of the bourgeois revolutions, which shattered the rule of the nobility, overcame feudal fragmentation

and, with the nation-state, created a broader framework for the development of the productive forces.

Yet by the end of the 19th century at the latest, the division of labour and world trade had burst the boundaries of the nation-state. It had become an obstacle to the modern forces of production. The First and Second World Wars were an expression of this fact. The imperialist powers attempted to resolve the contradiction between the world economy and the nation by forcibly redividing the world at the expense of their rivals. Nationalism became the weapon of the most extreme reaction. It was directed against the working class, which is closely linked to the modern forces of production and fought under the banner of socialist internationalism.

Hitler idolised the nation, which he traced back to race and blood. Yet he did not strive for national self-sufficiency. His nationalism served to rally all the forces of society to conquer first Europe and then the world; it was the ideological shell of a supranational imperialist programme that tolerated no social or political opposition and could only be implemented through the means of a fascist dictatorship.

Today's far-right extremists—from Trump's MAGA movement to Germany's AfD—stand in this tradition. They preach nationalism and wage imperialist wars. They are smashing the democratic rights of the working class, which is today more international than at any time in history. Almost every product passes through hundreds of hands and dozens of countries before it reaches the consumer. Revolutionary technologies in IT, communications, medicine and countless other fields would be unthinkable without the international division of labour.

Contrary to what Baberowski claims, drawing on Carl Schmitt, democracy is not based on "nation" and "people." Its defence is inextricably linked to the overcoming of the nation-state and the capitalist private property it defends.

An anti-democrat writes about democracy

It is not without a certain irony that Baberowski, of all people, should write a book on democracy. The professor, who sought to establish a research centre entitled "Dictatorships as Alternative Orders" and physically assaulted a student critic, has hitherto openly placed himself in the tradition of the reactionary and anti-democratic right.

In his book *Räume der Gewalt* (*Spaces of Violence*), Baberowski sketched a view of humanity that is entirely incompatible with democratic ideals. His main thesis is that violence is a fundamental characteristic of human nature, having no social or ideological causes. From this he deduced that "no order is conceivable that is not founded on hierarchies and social inequality" (Baberowski 2015, p.123).

In an interview, he summed this up even more vividly: "Wherever more than three people come together, it must be clarified who makes the decisions. One person then has power, whilst the others are granted security of order."[3] He also draws on the same assumptions in his latest book, stating, for example: "The chains cannot be cast off; at best, they can be made more supple and elastic" (p.23).

From this reactionary standpoint, Baberowski writes a highly selective history of democracy. Ultimately, his main aim is to justify the banal notion that representation and popular sovereignty are contradictions that have been weighted differently. On this basis, he then argues in the later chapters that fascists must be integrated in order to do justice to popular sovereignty.

But along the way, Baberowski repeatedly reveals his essentially authoritarian ideas. One is reminded of Dr. Strangelove, who, in his description of nuclear war, cannot bring his right arm under control.

Baberowski discusses the relationship between representation and popular sovereignty without any reference to concrete social conditions, class struggles or uprisings. For Baberowski, democracy is always something granted to the people, not something that has been fought for. The great social upheavals that made democratisation possible in the first place are systematically ignored or marginalised.

The French Revolution is virtually absent from his book, even though it was the first major democratic mass revolution of the modern era, which overthrew absolutism and established the principle of popular sovereignty. The American Revolution is mentioned but only in terms of its conservative elements: Baberowski emphasises the Federalist compromise, the restriction of the will of the majority through constitutional law, and the institutional safeguards against direct democracy. Not a word, however, about the Declaration of Independence of 1776, which stated that "all men are created equal" and have the right to overthrow a tyrannical government—a revolutionary impulse that had a global impact.

When he describes the development of democracy in Germany, he cannot avoid mentioning socialism as a driving force. But he assigns it a completely subordinate role. Instead, Baberowski emphasises the First World War as a factor in democratisation: not because workers and soldiers fought and revolted, not because of the Russian Revolution and the November Revolution, which cost the German nobility the throne—but because the war mobilised everyone and thus created a collective experience. In fact, it was the masses who wrested democratic rights through strikes and uprisings, not the war as such.

It is therefore not surprising that Baberowski repeatedly calls upon Carl Schmitt as a key witness. Schmitt's theory of the political shares the same reactionary underlying trait with Baberowski's anthropology of violence: Both conceive of the friend-enemy dichotomy not as a product of concrete social conditions, historical contradictions or class conflicts, but as a timeless essential characteristic of the political itself. Baberowski writes:

> The political is part of the human constitution, an existential reality. We are political in the world; we distinguish some from others, assert ourselves or submit. A completely pacified world without opposition would be a world without politics. The political, says Schmitt, is not the struggle itself, but an attitude that at all times reckons with its possibility. The core of the political is therefore the distinction between friend and enemy, a contradiction of moral truths that cannot be resolved (p.150).

In doing so, Baberowski aligns himself with Schmitt's reactionary theory of the state. Schmitt describes the friend-enemy concept as a general constitutional principle of the political: Every conflict—whether moral, religious or economic—becomes political "when it is strong enough to effectively group people into friends and enemies."[4]

Yet this theory is imbued with a profoundly anti-democratic attitude: For Schmitt, the political is defined by the ever-latent possibility of armed struggle, indeed the physical killing of the enemy. Parliamentary debate and compromise—For Schmitt, these are liberal, depoliticised trappings that reduce the "struggle" to mere "discussion." In an emergency, the state must sovereignly determine the enemy—and this includes the internal enemy, which Schmitt himself links to the logic of civil war. This concept is not a democratic category of analysis but the theoretical foundation for legitimising the state of emergency and dictatorship. After 1933, Schmitt used these theories to justify the Nazi dictatorship.

Baberowski is very much aware of the consequences of Schmitt's theories. As early as January 2017, he delivered the so-called Carl Schmitt Lecture at Humboldt University under the title "The Russian Revolution

and the Origins of Sovereign Dictatorship." In it, he argued, using Schmittian terminology, that the Tsar or the provisional government should have established a "provisional dictatorship" in order to suppress the social revolution.

This dictatorial and reactionary line of reasoning runs like a thread through Baberowski's work. All the polite language Baberowski now uses to justify engaging in democratic discourse with fascists thus turns out to be the well-known strategy of the far right: They insist on freedom of speech when they are criticised but attack the most fundamental democratic rights when they are in power. It is precisely for this purpose that they are deployed by the ruling class.

Trivialising the Nazis

The central political lesson in this context is, of course, the Nazi dictatorship. In the last free elections in November 1932, Hitler received only 33.1 percent of the vote—significantly less than the two workers' parties, the Social Democrats and the Communist Party, combined. Yet he was brought to power through a conspiracy involving the military, business leaders and the media, with the aim of crushing the workers' organisations and preparing for a new war. In March, all the "democratic" bourgeois parties then voted in favour of the Enabling Act.

As Peter Longerich has demonstrated, based on a systematic analysis of a large number of intelligence and police reports, that opposition to the Nazi regime was widespread throughout its entire reign. It simply could not find open political expression. [5] That is why the Nazis ruled with unprecedented terror. Immediately after seizing power, they created a network of at least 70 concentration camps, in which tens of thousands of communists, social democrats and trade unionists were imprisoned and stripped of their rights. The terror continued to escalate, culminating in the mass murder of World War II and the industrial extermination of German and European Jews.

Not a single sentence about this can be found in Baberowski's book on the history of democracy in Germany! On the contrary, he describes the brutal Nazi dictatorship as a kind of national awakening. For instance, when he paraphrases the recollection of a girl from the Nazi era: "By freeing itself from its representatives, popular sovereignty found expression in the 'Führer' in the first place. This is undoubtedly how many Germans understood it when they resolved to surrender to the seducer." He then sums it up himself: "The idea of an all-encompassing community of destiny is evidently capable of captivating the masses as long as dictatorships deliver on their promises and give people what they most desire in their everyday lives" (p.74).

While the terror of the Nazi state is completely glossed over and the state is transformed into an idyllic national community, Baberowski portrays those who fought against the Nazis as the true enemies of democracy. He repeatedly emphasises that communists and Nazis alike despised democracy. In the relevant chapter, however, he devotes over five pages to communists and socialists, and only three pages to the Nazis in the entire book.

What he has to say about the communist opponents of war, dictatorship, and fascism is utterly baseless. He quotes from the speech by the communist Clara Zetkin at the opening of the Reichstag in 1932 and accuses her of "contempt for democracy" (p.72). Yet Zetkin did not despise democracy. In her speech, she castigated Papen's presidential cabinet, which ruled dictatorially through emergency decrees, and called on the Reichstag to overthrow Papen. "The overthrow of the government by the Reichstag can only be the signal for the mobilisation and the rise to power of the broadest masses outside of parliament," Zetkin continued: "In this struggle, the first and foremost task is to crush fascism."

Zetkin's warnings would prove true five months later, when the very same figures who had helped the presidential cabinets seize dictatorial power made Hitler himself Reich Chancellor. For Baberowski, however, the call for an anti-fascist struggle constitutes "contempt for democracy."

In addition to whitewashing Nazi terror and denigrating anti-fascists, Baberowski's extremely brief digression on the Third Reich essentially serves to downplay the threat posed by today's fascists. Because Nazis (and communists!) openly declared that they wanted to establish a dictatorship, but today's "populists" do not, it cannot be assumed that they want to abolish democracy (p.133f). The idiocy of this claim has already been demonstrated above with regard to Trump, who, incidentally, has also openly declared that he does not want to relinquish power.

In reality, the parallels to the 1930s are obvious. Trump's open declaration of war crimes, his threat to wipe out Iran and starve millions of people, are, in their ruthlessness, comparable only to the Nazis. His comprehensive attacks on the democratic and social rights of workers serve to prepare for a full-scale war against China that threatens the very survival of human civilisation.

In Germany, too, the government is rearming on a scale not seen since Hitler, and democratic rights are under attack. Anyone who opposes the horrific genocide in Gaza or the brutal war against Iran must expect massive repression. Under these conditions, even the ruling elites in Germany are taking a liking to dictatorship. That is why Baberowski's treatise is being celebrated and the AfD courted.

Yet there are also significant differences from the 1930s. The far-right groups are not mass organisations with strong militant wings. War and militarism are rejected by the overwhelming majority, and workers around the world are only just beginning to free themselves from the straitjacket of the trade unions and mount genuine resistance against the spree of cuts and mass layoffs.

This opposition must be linked to the struggle against war and the fascist threat and directed against the root of the problem: capitalism. Rejecting the rampant ideological justification of fascism and war is an important part of this struggle.

Footnotes

(1) https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/questions-of-culpability-in-wwi-still-divide-german-historians-a-953173.html

(2) Detailed in: Vandreier, *Why Are They Back?* , Mehring Books

(3) Baberowski and Kröber in discussion, „Krieg wird es immer geben" ("there will always be wars"), in: Cicero (2016), Nr. 1, S. 112-119

(4) Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, Munich, 1932, P25

(5) Longerich, *Unwillige Volksgenossen. Wie die Deutschen zum NS-Regime standen. Eine Stimmungsgeschichte*, Munich, 2025