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Germany

PEGIDA – an ultra-reactionary, Islamophobic and racist movement

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Since October 2014, Germany has seen demonstrations against “Islamification”. The first sizeable one to make the headlines was organised by the “Hooligans gegen Salafisten” (HoGeSa, “Hooligans against Salafists”) with 5,000 participants in the streets of Cologne, while counter-demonstrators were only a few hundred.

After this, an initiative in the name of PEGIDA (“Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes” – “Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the West”) was launched by one Lutz Bachmann, of Dresden, who became its spokesperson. At first only a few hundred came to the “Monday demonstrations” in this town in Saxony in eastern Germany, chanting among other things “Wir sind das Volk” (“We are the people”), a conscious allusion to the mass demonstrations in 1989 against the SED regime in the GDR. Then it became thousands, and by mid-December it was 15,000 (and even more according to some estimates). There were around 6,500 counter-demonstrators. The initiative spread to other towns and regions, and the movement was quickly at the centre of public political debate in Germany. Some politicians like Chancellor Angela Merkel distanced themselves from PEGIDA, seen as bad for Germany’s world image. But many others said that “people’s concerns should be taken seriously”. What concerns? Unemployment, precariousness, increasingly grotesque social inequality, the destruction of our natural bases of survival? No, the concern with being flooded by an ocean of foreigners with Muslim “preachers of hate” and Islamic terrorists.

Lutz Bachmann has published a platform (“Positionspapier der PEGIDA”) with 19 points of which points 1, 3 and 5 and partially 10 have the obvious function of an alibi: to welcome refugees, house them humanely, assign more social workers to them and the affirmation of not being against “well integrated” Muslims living in Germany. But these points are not articulated by PEGIDA speakers at demonstrations, others are. Among others: the duty of “foreigners” to integrate themselves, a more equitable allocation of refugees inside the EU, more financial resources for the police to monitor them, the consistent application of asylum laws and expulsions, zero tolerance for criminal asylum seekers and immigrants, safeguarding and protection of Western Judeo-Christian culture and so on, and opposition to “gender mainstreaming” and the imposition of a “politically correct” language.

Far right organisers

In the public discourse and comments of the participants, all is much more robust. Refugees, Muslims, immigrants are the target of hate speech. The political world of the established parties is attacked as complicit with the Islamists and “foreign” elements. Refugees, according to Lutz Bachmann, live in luxury, while German mothers can no longer buy Christmas presents for their children. And Katrin Oertel, another member of PEGIDA’s organising committee in Dresden, says that immigrants should “adapt to German norms, mores and culture” – which is line with the positions articulated by the last congress of the Bavarian CSU.

Lutz Bachmann is not too well placed to agitate against “criminal immigrants”. He has been prosecuted himself several times – among other things for burglary, drug dealing, driving without a licence and having fled German justice by going to South Africa. In the organizing personnel of PEGIDA we find several well known far rightists, including neo-Nazis. The organising committee of KÄ-GIDA, PEGIDA’s subsidiary in Cologne, includes one Melanie Dittmer, a fascist since early youth, who believes the Holocaust to be an invention of the victors of the Second World War, and wishes to save Germany from a nightmare like that of London, where she claims the most common name for newly born children is Mohammed. The leader who announced the KÄ-GIDA demonstration of January 5 officially to the police, Sebastian Nobile, has long been active in neo-Nazi structures like the banned “German

Defence League”, which has good contacts with the murderous “Blood and honour” group, and in other far right organizations.

The counter-mobilisation

It should be said that even in Dresden, the number of PEGIDA demonstrators seemed to drop and the number of counter-demonstrators increase, and in other German cities, like Berlin, Munich, Münster and others, the number of counter-demonstrators was much greater. It was January 5 in Cologne which symbolized the reversal of things.

On that evening the Kölner Dom, Cologne’s cathedral, was not illuminated. The lights were turned off for other churches, also, and for the chamber of industry and commerce, the big hotels and the Rhine bridges. The KÄ–GIDA demonstrators were only a few hundred, in the shadows of night, but the counter-demonstrators were thousands, at least 10,000 but probably more like 25,000 (the figure given by internal communications of police on the spot).

The difficulty in giving exact figures stems from the massive police intervention massive against the counter-demonstrators, dispersing them, erecting metal grills blocking the immense crowd seeking to approach the small group of KÄ–GIDA. But the mechanical pressure of the crowds was so impressive that ultimately the police advised the KÄ–GIDA demonstrators not to march across one of the Rhine bridges as planned and in the end not to march at all.

This was a catastrophic setback for KÄ–GIDA, to the point that its organizers said they would henceforth not demonstrate in Cologne. It is not by chance that after the Charlie Hebdo killings, KÄ–GIDA reversed this decision and said it would demonstrate every Wednesday in Cologne near the cathedral – while the organizers of the counter-mobilizations said they would respond with the biggest demonstrations possible.

A problem to think about

In Cologne, there are two united action committees which prepare actions against PEDIGA and any other racist and xenophobic demonstration. There are anti-fascist initiatives and left organizations, as well as trade unions like the DGB and the SPD. But it is the political (apart from the far right), associative and institutional world as a whole which appears as a united front on these occasions, including the traditional bourgeois parties and the employers’ organisations.

And in Dresden, after the Charlie Hebdo attack, there was a demonstration of over 20,000 for tolerance, against violence, PEDIGA and racism, called by virtually everyone, including the regional government led by the CDU.

Of course, we can celebrate the fact that many more people were ready to mobilise against racist and Islamophobic acts than to follow the calls of PEGIDA and its ilk. But thee PEDIGA demonstrations articulate a radicalisation of a whole layer of the population, often among the middle classes, who respond enthusiastically to the denunciations of the “lying state press”, the “parties of the bloc” (a subtle illusion to the legal parties grouped around the “leading party”, the SED, in the GDR), the “corrupt bureaucrats and bigwigs” who do not respond to the aspirations of ordinary German people.

We should then discuss the possibilities of giving a more specific class and internationalist content to the anti-fascist mobilisations. It is the political forces defending the established order and the interests of big capital which daily create the reasons for reactionary radicalisations. More precisely: who, by an inhuman policy and unacceptable

words create themselves a propitious atmosphere for right populism and racist campaigns.

Apart from the vaguely humanist “politically correct” discourse, the politicians of the established pro-capitalist parties oppose PEGIDA and racist radicalizations with considerations on the importance of “well qualified” immigration for the German economy, to finance pensions and pay taxes – but PEGIDA itself talks about “good” well integrated immigrants.

While formally placing himself within the context of the great movement of national unity against PEGIDA and similar movements (he cannot contradict his own party leader who is moreover chancellor of the German government), Saxony’s interior minister Markus Ulkig (CDU) has announced to the applause of the PEGIDA demonstrators the creation of new special police units “against criminal asylum seekers” and other “notorious malefactors” (“Intensivt ter”).

An ultra right potential

This recalls the first half of the 1990s, when attacks on asylum seekers multiplied, solemnly condemned of course by a political world which nonetheless implemented the main demands of the racist crazies and transformed the right of exile incorporated in the “Grundgesetz”, effectively Germany’s constitution, into a “right” granted only grudgingly. Something similar is being prepared now: a rhetoric of fine words which accompanies a hardening of the already extremely restrictive treatment of the small number of refugees who succeed in getting to Germany despite the murderous fortress put there to keep them out.

The PEGIDA mobilizations did not fall from the sky. Before them, in Germany, there were a great number of racist actions and mobilizations directed against refugees. From January to November 2014, the figure for refugees in Germany rose to 130,000. Even if the data show that the disposition to racist radicalisation does not depend on the amount of refugees or their share of the population (in Dresden, for example, both figures are especially low), it is true that there was in 2014, a great number of actions against the lodging of refugees in wealthy neighbourhoods as well as poor ones, in the west as in the east of Germany. Often, they were mounted together by the German inhabitants of the neighbourhoods and organized far right and neo Nazi forces.

The association “Pro Asyl” counted 220 mobilizations directed against refugees from January to November 2014, and in the same period 31 acts of vandalism against them, 24 incendiary attacks against their places of habitation and 33 physical attacks against specific refugees.

Opinion polls show the rise of racist, xenophobic and Islamophobic prejudices in the German population. In 2011, 25.8% were strictly against a less restrictive treatment of asylum seekers, in 2014 it was 76%. In 2011, 30.2% felt themselves “a foreigner in their own country” because of the large number of Muslims; in 2014 it was 43%. Now, a majority of 55.9% think that Roma have criminal tendencies, while in 2011 it was still a (significant) minority of 42%.

One can estimate at 12% the hard core far right potential in Germany (and the Die Linke party and other smaller left parties and organizations have about the same potential), ready to mobilize in demonstrations, if they are not too far from their respective residences. Only a part is ready to vote for the ultra-conservative, ultra-neoliberal and right populist AfD (which according to the Forsa institute, is polling about 5% in terms of voting intentions). Some members of this party seek to collaborate with PEGIDA, and its leader Bernd Lucke (an ultra free market economics lecturer) has said on his Facebook page that PEGIDA’s demands were “legitimate”. But both he and his associate Olaf Henkel (former president of one of the two big employers’ associations), are taking their distance in relation to PEGIDA, for fear of losing their serious image among bourgeois liberal and conservative voters. Others to their right in the AfD

revolt against this distancing, and this gives a crisis of leadership in the party.

PEGIDA is an attempt to break the isolation and dispersion of the far right to achieve significant mobilisations and break from the image of right wing extremism to appear as a force rooted “in the midst of German society”. It is quite possible that this initiative will ultimately founder – but it will certainly not be the last one.