

Chris Reiter & Will Wilkes,
translated by Oliver Lingner

Totally kaputt? Wie Deutschland sich selbst zerlegt

(Broken Republik – The Inside Story of Germany's
Descent into crisis)

Munich: Piper Press. 2025, 256 pages.

Arne Semsrott

Machtübernahme - was passiert, wenn Rechtsextremisten regieren

(The Takeover – What Happens when Right-Wing Extremists
Govern)

Munich: Droemer Knaur Press. 2024, 208 pages.

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Two recent German-language books debate the current political situation in Germany. Chris Reiter and Will Wilkes' work *Totally Broken – How Germany Destroys Itself* discusses the last few decades of German politics. As the title indicates, they argue – somewhat exaggeratedly – that Germany is totally broken. This is, most obviously, not the case. Still, the book delivers a raft

of arguments to support the idea that Germany is a troubled country. In other words, when read in conjunction with another recent work, the books provide two sides of one key argument.

Many voters of Germany's far-right AfD support the party because they have been led to believe that Germany is kaput or broken. Much of this narrative dates back to Thilo Sarrazin's bestseller

Deutschland schafft sich ab (2010), translated as *Germany Abolishes Itself: How We're Putting Our Country in Jeopardy*. The book shifts the structural crisis of capitalism away from class and toward race. Once readers of Sarrazin's book – and later voters of the AfD – come to believe that foreigners are responsible for an imagined or real misery, a scapegoat has been identified.

This is nothing new. In the 1930s, Hitler's slogan was *'Die Juden sind an allem schuld.'* It worked then and, so the AfD hopes, it may still work today. Meanwhile, it is only a short step from Reiter and Wilkes' depiction of a BRD – *Totally Kaputt* to Arne Semsrott's *The Takeover – What Happens When Right-Wing Extremists Govern*. For clarity, however, this is a review of two books – not a merger of them. The review therefore outlines each book separately, as they are written by different authors and deal with somewhat distinct, albeit connected, themes.

In the second book, Arne Semsrott examines – through his work *The Takeover: What Happens When Right-Wing Extremists Govern* – whether Germany's right-wing extremists could take over the government and rule the country. While this may sound like a purely hypothetical question, there are real-world test cases, such as Viktor Orbán's Hungary, Giorgia Meloni's Italy, and Donald Trump's United States. Evidently, by right-wing extremists the author refers primarily to Germany's far-right political party, the AfD.

Reiter and Wilkes begin their book by arguing that Germany's politicians live disconnected lives from the reality experienced by many Germans. For example,

German politicians recently awarded themselves a pay rise of €635.50 (\$740) per month, while welfare recipients on Germany's *Bürgergeld* must survive an entire month on roughly the amount politicians gained in a single pay increase (p. 22). Their central argument, however, is that Germany's middle class is shrinking – a class that also shows one of the lowest rates of home ownership in the Western world (p. 36).

Furthermore, Germany still suffers, even after 35 years, from problems associated with reunification. Helmut Kohl's promise of *blühende Landschaften* (blooming landscapes) never materialized, although it helped him win elections. Instead of flourishing industrial regions, western companies took over eastern businesses, leading to rapid deindustrialization in the former GDR. To make matters worse, unemployment rose to 15% – higher than in any other country of the former Eastern bloc (p. 65). Meanwhile, two million of the former GDR's sixteen million inhabitants moved westward. Together with declining birth rates, this migration has reduced East Germany's population to just below that of Bavaria, which today has about 13.2 million residents.

Germany's infamous 'debt brake' (*Schuldenbremse*) – championed by conservatives – restricted state borrowing to 0.35% of GDP (p. 73). This limited public investment in infrastructure and education for years (p. 74). The authors describe the subsequent period as a 'lost decade' (p. 81). A telling example is Germany's railway system. In 1993, the railways of the GDR and FRG were merged, and in 1994 they were reorga-

nized into the shareholding corporation Deutsche Bahn AG under Chancellor Helmut Kohl (1982–1998). Contrary to the neoliberal assumption that ‘business can do it better than a state bureaucracy’, Germany’s railway today must borrow roughly €5 million per day (p. 87) to survive. According to the authors, the railway reform begun three decades ago has therefore failed (p. 87).

Conditions are no better in the environmental sector. Reiter and Wilkes note that although Germany has a reputation as a pioneer in environmentalism, its transition to green energy has been slow and fraught with obstacles (p. 117). The situation may not improve following the removal of Robert Habeck – a prominent environmentalist and former government minister – and the emergence of a neoliberal-conservative agenda under Chancellor Friedrich Merz. As a car-producing nation, Germany has quite literally missed the train: approximately 60 percent of all electric cars sold worldwide are manufactured in China (p. 150). Perhaps, rather than lobbying the EU to weaken environmental standards for automobiles, Germany’s carmakers should focus more on future technologies.

Beyond these issues, the authors identify a structural thinning of Germany’s middle class, with increasing downward mobility for many and upward concentration for a few. According to their analysis, 3,300 super-rich individuals control roughly a quarter of all financial wealth, while about one fifth of Germans face the risk of poverty (p. 195). Social mobility from the lower strata is extremely limited (p. 195). As

an illustration, a checkout worker at the Kaufland supermarket would have to work roughly one million years to earn the same income as the company’s owner, Dieter Schwarz (p. 201).

Reiter and Wilkes argue that the history of post-war Germany can be divided into two phases. In the first phase, the economic ‘cake’ grew. In the second phase – the present – the dominant dynamic has been downward pressure and redistribution toward the top (p. 217). This trend is particularly visible in East Germany, where several regions are experiencing sharp demographic and economic decline (p. 300).

Overall, Reiter and Wilkes conclude that Ludwig Erhard’s post-war promise of *Wohlstand für Alle* (‘prosperity for all’) has broken down. The authors never explicitly and comprehensively identify the ideological driver behind this breakdown – namely neoliberalism. Erhard’s post-war dream did not collapse by itself; it was the result of political decisions. Since the 1980s, many of these policies were implemented during long conservative governments, particularly under Helmut Kohl (1982–1998) and Angela Merkel (2005–2021).

Despite this minor limitation and its somewhat overblown title, Reiter and Wilkes’ *BRD – Totally Kaputt* makes a valuable contribution to understanding post-war Germany and the social, economic, and political problems the country faces today – many of which are the result of decisions made within Germany itself.

None of these problems would be solved by an AfD takeover of government, as Arne Semsrott argues persua-

sively in *The Takeover – What Happens When Right-Wing Extremists Govern*. Founded in 2013 and increasingly successful in elections, the neo-fascist AfD is no longer a fringe party. It has become a central actor in German politics. By August 2025, roughly 25% of Germans indicated they would vote for the AfD.

According to Semsrott, the party is dominated by figures seeking to transform authoritarian, nationalistic, and *völkisch* ideologies into political reality (p. 12). In this context, the term *völkisch* refers to the racialized concept of a homogeneous *Volksgemeinschaft* associated with Nazi ideology. Such a transformation would not occur automatically. It can still be prevented. Semsrott cites the German novelist Erich Kästner, who once wrote that what happened between 1933 and 1945 could already have been foreseen – and opposed – in 1928 (p. 13).

Semsrott argues that preventing such a development requires two steps. First, it is necessary to anticipate what an AfD government might look like. Second, early action can still prevent such a government from consolidating power. These are the central arguments of his book.

According to Semsrott, an authoritarian takeover would not occur overnight but through a gradual, step-by-step process (p. 17). It might begin with replacing the upper ranks of Germany's civil service. In the Ministry of the Interior, for instance, this would involve replacing roughly twenty of the ministry's 1,700 civil servants (p. 18). Once this leadership layer is replaced, the rest of the bureaucracy would likely follow, given the strong hierarchical culture and esprit de corps within Germany's *Beamtentum*.

This would allow an AfD-led government to direct administrative practices in new ways while formally remaining within the existing legal framework (p. 19). The party would likely focus on institutions such as the police, the domestic intelligence service (which currently monitors parts of the AfD itself), and administrative bodies dealing with asylum and migration. Particularly in the latter area, policies might follow the slogan of Björn Höcke – often considered the AfD's unofficial leader – who once called for 'well-tempered cruelties' (*wohltemperierte Grausamkeit*) (p. 24).

At the same time, an AfD government might attempt to dismantle institutions dealing with environmental protection, climate policy, and sustainability. NGOs could face administrative harassment – for instance through financial audits – while institutions dedicated to Holocaust remembrance might suffer severe funding cuts. Simultaneously, the government could use the legal system to intimidate journalists and discourage critical reporting (p. 32).

Following precedents set elsewhere, it is also conceivable that Germany's army, the Bundeswehr, might be deployed domestically (p. 32), thereby breaking a long-standing post-war taboo. The military and police could be supplemented by AfD-aligned 'home defense' groups or auxiliary police units (*Hilfsspolizei*) tasked with carrying out unpopular measures such as deportation raids (p. 34).

Together with networks such as right-wing student fraternities (*Burschenschaften*), these actors could form part of a broader surveillance apparatus

targeting critics and perceived enemies of the AfD.

Germany's legal system might represent one of the strongest institutional obstacles to such a transformation. Consequently, Semsrott argues, the AfD would likely seek to undermine, circumvent, and ultimately control the judiciary. Courts might then be used against political opponents, echoing the infamous practices of Roland Freisler's *Volksgerichtshof* during the Nazi era.

To prevent such developments, Semsrott emphasizes the importance of early resistance. Historical experience from the collapse of the Weimar Republic shows how dangerous it can be to react too late. Early resistance should include large-scale demonstrations against any AfD-led government coalition.

Such protests should be organized quickly, be large in scale, and continue over extended periods (p. 47). Their purpose would be to demonstrate that right-wing extremists do not represent the majority of German society. Participants should mobilize friends, relatives, and broader social networks. Even the Catholic Church has taken a clear position, arguing that Christians cannot support the *völkisch*-nationalistic AfD (p. 48).

In fact, more than three million people already protested against the AfD's 'remigration' plans - effectively ethnic cleansing of migrants - during nationwide demonstrations in early 2024, which included over 1,200 rallies.

Nevertheless, resistance may be complicated by the fact that Germany has neglected its democratic infrastructure for decades (p. 51). Once in government,

the AfD might intensify this neglect by closing institutions and withdrawing funding from democratic initiatives.

Moreover, in the early phase of an AfD government, supportive civil servants might exploit access to state data to identify and undermine political opponents. At the same time, transparency rules could be weakened - authoritarian systems tend to operate in darkness.

Yet even an AfD government would not immediately possess unlimited power. To consolidate control, it would require the cooperation of Germany's vast administrative apparatus (p. 69). Even the Nazi Party did not initially hold an absolute parliamentary majority.

Historically, however, many German civil servants willingly provided the administrative tools for Hitler's dictatorship (p. 73). According to Semsrott, similar risks remain today. A senior official in the Interior Ministry reportedly admitted that the number of officials willing to resist would likely be 'very small' if the AfD achieved parliamentary dominance (p. 75).

Support for the AfD may also exist within Germany's judiciary. Cases such as the AfD-affiliated judge Jens Maier - who publicly expressed admiration for the Norwegian Neo-Nazi terrorist Anders Breivik - demonstrate the potential presence of right-wing sympathies within the legal system (p. 117).

Business, however, may prove less supportive. Unlike the situation in the early 1930s, German industry today is largely opposed to the AfD. The party's anti-EU and anti-euro positions conflict with the interests of export-oriented corporations. As a result, powerful busi-

ness organizations such as the Federation of German Industries (BDI) view the AfD as an economic risk (p. 136).

To prevent an AfD takeover, Semsrott proposes several measures: banning the party, withdrawing state funding, prohibiting civil servants from AfD membership, revoking gun licenses from party members, and excluding AfD politicians from publicly funded television talk shows (p. 173). These measures, he argues, could limit the spread of the party's ideology.

Examples illustrate why such action matters. Prior to the 2020 terrorist attack in Hanau, which killed nine people, the AfD's regional branch in Hesse had run an online campaign linking crime by foreigners (*Ausländerkriminalität*) to shisha bars (p. 196). Yet crime statistics show little overall difference between Germans and non-Germans, suggesting that the narrative of 'foreign crime' is largely a product of right-wing populist propaganda.

Similarly, in the East German town of Sonneberg - where an AfD candidate became *Landrat* in 2023 - neo-Nazis subsequently attacked refugee centers and migrants (p. 199). Semsrott warns that such developments could intensify under an AfD government.

The book closes with a stark warning. An AfD victory would represent a catastrophe above all for those groups identified by the party as enemies (p. 217). While the AfD might not immediately abolish democracy, its ideology could gradually permeate society. Over time, democratic institutions might be weakened and eventually dismantled.

Overall, Semsrott has written an exceptionally well-argued book about a possible future in which Germany is governed by the neo-fascist AfD. Importantly, his work is not merely a dystopian scenario. Alongside describing the dangers of an AfD takeover, Semsrott also outlines how democratic societies can prevent such a development. Central to this effort are awareness of the risks and early political intervention.

Both books ultimately serve different but complementary purposes. The AfD exploits many of the social and economic grievances identified by Reiter and Wilkes in *BRD - Totally Kaputt*. Yet the party exaggerates these problems in order to portray Germany as a country in chaos.

Notably, two of the AfD's central alarmist narratives have already failed to materialize. First, the predicted refugee chaos following Angela Merkel's decision to admit Syrian refugees in 2015 never occurred. Despite initial challenges, Germany managed the integration process relatively successfully, and many refugees now contribute to the labour market.

Second, the AfD's claim that the COVID-19 pandemic would lead to a 'Corona dictatorship' also proved unfounded. The Merkel government did not use the pandemic to establish authoritarian rule, despite the fears promoted by far-right activists.

In sum, the AfD constantly seeks new threats or enemies in order to mobilize electoral support. Reading both books together therefore provides valuable insights into Germany's recent politi-

cal economy (Reiter and Wilkes) as well as into the mechanisms through which the AfD exploits these conditions to gain power (Semsrott). Most importantly, Semsrott demonstrates how neo-fascism can be resisted. One book outlines the crisis tendencies of contemporary

capitalism in Germany, while the other explains how the far right attempts to capitalize on that crisis – and how democratic forces can prevent Germany from sliding toward another illiberal regime similar to Hungary.

Thomas Klikauer