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Left Out

David Hudson 08.10.2001

Weekly Review: Greens toe the line; the PDS doesn't. Also: The CCC's brilliant "blinkenlights."

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The *Tag der Einheit* (Day of Unity) came and went last week and hardly anyone noticed. Last year marked the tenth celebration of October 3, 1990, when the five "new states" that had once been the German Democratic Republic officially became part of the Federal Republic of Germany and it was, of course, a very big deal. This year, the minds of most Germans were elsewhere.

And actually, most German commentators agreed that this was a good thing. Annual assessments of how successful or not this whole "unity" thing has been over the past decade have usually merely served to accentuate the remaining political, economic, social and mindset-type differences between Wessis and Ossis. This year, all that seemed irrelevant with most Germans united in fear and anger. After all, few would disagree with [Salman Rushdie](#) when he wrote, "Suicidist assassins ram wide-bodied aircraft into the World Trade Center and Pentagon and kill thousands of people: um, I'm against that."

Where differences arise is over the question of what to do about it. As in the rest of the world, those differences are most pronounced on the left end of the political spectrum. In the US, Christopher Hitchens and Noam Chomsky are [exchanging blows](#) in the pages of *The Nation*, while in the UK, *Guardian* columnist Jonathan Freedland has [fired](#) one across the bow at *The New Statesman*. These debates center on America's responsibility for its own victimhood, the gist being: If America "had it coming," it's got no business responding in kind. If it didn't, retribution -- military or otherwise -- is justified.

Within the ranks of the German left, the entire framework of that debate is somewhat different. For one thing, there isn't so much of a focus on the past as there is a general wringing of hands over the future. Perhaps the very immediate future. Secondly, the debate isn't being carried out among star editorialists as much as it is among party grunts and dignitaries.

Both the Greens and the PDS (Party for Democratic Socialism, the post-Wall phoenix that rose from the ashes of the ruling communist party in the GDR and quite popular in the "new states") held meetings this weekend to work out their positions on all this, but most specifically, on Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's oft-repeated declaration of Germany's "unswerving solidarity" with America. Both

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meetings were far less rambunctious than they might have been had the Bush administration already fired its first shots.

As he did when the Greens, the junior partner in the governing coalition, were nearly torn apart over Germany's role in NATO's bombing of Serbia in 1999, Joschka Fischer won the day at his party's meeting. But this time, the foreign minister had an easier time of it. "We're dealing with an irresponsible nationalism or religious fundamentalism which calls into question the elementary values we all believe in," he argued, "and which instrumentally applies the politics of murder, of mass murder. And we're not going to be able to go up against these forces with kind words." The Greens wrapped up their meeting by agreeing to a military response aimed specifically at the terrorists while avoiding civilian casualties. Not a tough program to sign on to, since, nearly a month after 9.11, even the conservative US government seems to be pursuing precisely this line of action.

The PDS, meanwhile, remains the only party with seats in the German parliament to disapprove of any military action whatsoever. Instead, party leaders met in Dresden to unanimously approve an "appeal for peace" which simply calls on the US to stop "the spiral of violence" and on Germany to refuse to participate in whatever actions the US takes should it not heed their call. Predictably, most papers pronounce this appeal the death knell of what was once the clear shot the party had at winning City Hall in the country's capital in the Berlin elections to be held two weeks from now.

In Telepolis

If magazine covers are a window onto the national psyche, then it would be fair to say that Americans are openly alarmed by the prospect of imminent biological or chemical terrorist attacks. Both *Time* and *Newsweek* put gas masks on their covers last week. The threat is on German minds, too, as Harald Neuber [illustrates](#) in Telepolis, even if the sense of alarm hasn't quite reached the same fever pitch. The newsweekly *Focus*, for example, got an expert to admit that Germany has no real systematic response worked out as yet to such an attack.

Even so, there's no need for widespread "biopanic," Neuber writes. Staging a biological or chemical disaster without being caught red-handed first would be exceedingly difficult. Neuber points to the example of the Aum Shinrikyo sect who employed a team of experienced scientists whose assault on the Tokyo subway system, while killing 19, nonetheless fell far short of its intended consequences.

But Florian Rötzer [explains](#) in depth why bioterrorists wouldn't have to go the obvious, full-front route to do some severe damage. Historically, Rötzer reminds his readers, biological warfare has been aimed at agricultural infrastructures rather than directly at the population. As early as the 14th century, for example, armies would dump human or animal corpses into a community's water supply. Could the recent outbreak of foot and mouth disease that brought British agriculture to a standstill and spread like wildfire to other countries be related in some way to US and UK bombs falling on Iraq? Conspiracy theories usually confuse the issue and are to be avoided like, well, the plague, but the stakes are too high not to give rational consideration to possibilities that were not all that long ago deemed unthinkable.

Elsewhere

The Chaos Computer Club ([CCC](#)) is putting on an interactive light show on Alexanderplatz in Berlin and it is just too, too cool. It's called [blinkenlights](#) (a fun [definition](#) of the term can be found in the Jargon File) and here's how it

works: A [Plattenbau-style](#) building called the *Haus des Lehrers*, the former GDR ministry of education, is empty at the moment, so on one side of it, the CCC has installed 144 spotlights (the sort used to light up construction sites at night) behind each window on the top eight floors. If you've already done the math, you know that each floor is 18 windows wide. A computer regulates the on-off switch on each spotlight, so what you end up with is what the CCC calls "a sort of monochrome matrix with 8X18 pixels."

Now comes the cool part. Anyone can download an authoring tool called Blinkenpaint (hundreds already have) or write a simple animation program by hand (an example of a beating heart is shown on the CCC "blinkerlights" page) and send it in. The best ones blink for all the world to see. Yes, all the world, because the CCC has set up [webcams](#) (though they seem to be behind by a few days; [this one](#) is unfortunately a bit farther away from the building, but it is live).

But here's the *really* cool part. You can play Pong with this thing. You call the number given on the CCC "blinkerlights" page (at 2.42 marks a minute, it's not cheap but it does count as a donation) and move your paddle with the numbers 5 and 8 and play against the computer or a second caller.

Focus is [reporting](#) that a 19-year-old German from the state of Hessen was arrested two weeks ago in Pakistan. At the ripe old age of 13, "Denis J." evidently became interested in Islamic extremism and six years on, in March, he traveled to Kandahar, Afghanistan, where he was trained by the Taliban. Following the revelation that a few of the 9.11 hijackers had studied in Hamburg and fresh [analysis](#) from the Federal Criminal Investigation Office asserting that "acts of violence from extremist Islamic circles [are] probable" in Germany, this report in English -- ["Islamic Extremist Activities in the Federal Republic of Germany."](#) -- from the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution makes for some pretty captivating reading.

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