

# A War for the Soul of Germany

by Jacob Williams

*Multiculturalism and the Nation in Germany: A Study in Moral Conflict*, Paul Carls, Routledge, 2023, pp. 204, \$121 hardcover, \$26.46 ebook.

Analyzing cultural conflict through the lens of sacred ideas is not a new pursuit. From Phillip Rieff's depiction of the rise of secular progressivism as a revolt against sacred order,<sup>1</sup> through James Davison Hunter's pathbreaking analysis of America's early culture wars,<sup>2</sup> to contemporary work on the "moral foundations" of conservatism and liberalism,<sup>3</sup> taking the sacred seriously seems crucial to getting a serious grip on the dynamics of cultural struggle.

Standing against the ten-a-penny studies by so-called "critical" theorists that, dominating progressive academia, simply presuppose that right-wing views are pathological (and usually evince less real empathy for conservatives and nativists than a good anthropologist might build into his 'thick description' of a cannibalistic tribe), work that engages with sacrality forces us to take seriously the fact that both

sides in our contemporary culture wars are driven by deep and sincere convictions—and that both sometimes behave in ways that look, to the other side, oppressive and unjust.

Paul Carls's recent study of the conflict over German identity triggered by the 2015 European migrant crisis is packed with insight into the ways this battle intensified a long-standing cold civil war over the meaning of the German nation. In this competition between deeply conflicting conceptions of the German *völk*—a *Krieg zweier Deutschlands*, we might call it—mutual respect, or even toleration, seems hard to reach, for what one side views as a sacred value is often not just profane but actively sacrilegious to the other. Hence (illustrating a dynamic that is far from unique to Germany), it is not surprising to witness the spectacle of the mainstream's notional left and right parties uniting in a "grand coalition" to

maintain the “firewall” against the sacrilegious national-populist AfD after its recent surge to second place in the February 2025 Bundestag election.<sup>4</sup>

Carls explains all of this through the framework of Durkheim’s sociology of morality, central to which is the concept of the “moral fact,” a set of social norms and values that demand certain behaviors and thoughts, and are legitimated by a particular “moral authority” (8-9), thought to both impose duties and to require virtues. These moral facts exist in the social group’s “collective consciousness,” the stock of ideas shared between individuals (9). Moral facts are thus a species of *représentation collectives*, an emergent property of the consciousness of social groups, for which they in turn generate shared emotional energy (11).

Crucial to this account of social morality is the idea of the sacred: when groups create and re-create their collective consciousness of moral facts through emotionally charged rituals, they represent their morality as something that altogether “transcends individuals” (13). Any particular conception of the sacred has, as its corollary, a distinction between the “pure” sacred (the transcendent good) and the “impure” sacred (i.e., transgression against this good) (14). And the most powerful aspect of a moral fact is its associated “moral ideal”: the set of collective ends that it holds out as legitimated by this transcendent good (14).

Carls, however, also points out what Durkheim did not clearly envisage,

namely that a society—in this case, a nation—might be split between groups affirming rival and conflicting moral ideals, and thus holding conflicting conceptions of the sacred and associated understandings of duty, of virtue, of authority, and of transgression. For instance, if one group holds “the cult of the individual” to define its moral ideal, and the other ascribes transcendent value to a religious code or tribal identity, the stage is set for a war for the soul of the nation (20-21). Peaceful co-existence is difficult at best because the two groups in this scenario mutually identify each other as *members* of the moral community (liberals and conservatives recognize they share a national identity with the other side), but disagree as to what *ideals* that community is meant to uphold. When nativists affirm the sacrality of the ethno-cultural nation, which for them is the pure sacred, progressives see neither the pure sacred nor the merely profane but the *impure* sacred: not excusable error, but shocking transgression.

Carls deftly applies this framework to explain the cultural conflict that has engulfed Germany. The left, he argues, affirm a moral ideal close to Habermas’s “constitutional patriotism,” in which a purely civic nation is defined by its loyalty to sacred principles of human dignity upheld by a liberal constitution. The populist-right AfD, on the other hand, has witnessed internal struggles over their moral ideals, between adherents of an ethno-cultural nationalism that rejects biological racialism and af-

firmly the ability of minorities to assimilate into the majority *Leitkultur* (lead culture) on the one hand, and the more radical hard-right *Flügel* faction led by Björn Höcke, on the other. This radical faction embraces a conception of the nation pioneered by the *Neue Rechte* in the 1960s and '70s, which is intermediate between ethno-cultural nationalism and biological racialism, holding that a biological base underlies their sacralized ideal of ethno-cultural unity, while still rejecting Nazi-style doctrines of racial supremacy.

Clearly, with these respective commitments, the multicultural left and the populist right cannot but see each other as enemies. The very expression of each side's respective doctrines is an offense against the other's sacred values. Merely asserting (in the case of the more moderate ethno-nationalism of parts of the AfD) that minorities must assimilate into a majority culture is tantamount to a verbal assault on the sacred idea of equal human dignity as upheld in liberal constitutional patriotism. Carls thus shows how the German state's campaign against 'hate speech' is driven not by a proportionate attempt to curtail identifiable (if contestable) harms, but by a feeling of revulsion at the presence of sacrilege in the public square (61-2). This, he argues, explains the ambiguous and confused way in which figures like SPD Justice Minister Heiko Maas attempted to reconcile existing norms of free expression with new laws against online 'hate' in the wake of the anti-migration backlash in 2015-16. Progress-

sive politicians were not attempting to balance two legitimate values, but rather responding viscerally to acts of perceived transgression against their sacred ideals.

All of this is insightful and convincing. Another signal benefit of Carls's Durkheimian approach is that it throws the structural symmetry between far-left and far-right violence into sharp relief. While not excusing or evading the acts of violence committed or encouraged by a small minority of AfD supporters (145-55), Carls contextualizes this with the often-violent campaigns against the AfD spearheaded by "Antifa" protest groups, and sometimes tacitly supported by mainstream figures. The *Autonomen* (German Antifa) are revealed as exemplifying the purest and most extreme version of the leftist egalitarian conception of the sacred, adopting such a demanding conception of human dignity as to impugn any defense of national belonging (however qualified or merely civic), or of traditional norms of any kind, as inherently impure and transgressive (75-8). In the case of both *Autonomen* and far-right violence, Carls deploys Durkheim's account of interaction rituals that generate escalating emotional fervor, in which the actively violent members of a crowd feed on the collective consciousness shared by more reticent supporters in their midst (91-7; 146-9).

If revealing symmetries is one of the great strengths of *Multiculturalism and the Nation*, nevertheless this drive for non-judgement is sometimes taken to

unhelpful excess. Carls argues, following Durkheim, that because moral facts derive their motivating power from a *sui generis* form of emotional energy, they are incapable of being proven true or false: there is, apparently, “no epistemic reference in reality for moral truths against which one can verify their truth” (17). The moral claims about duty, loyalty, and virtue made by both sides are therefore ultimately mere preferences, or brute social facts about collective psychology.

This is a repugnant conclusion, both for all the reasons that moral relativism is intrinsically repugnant (what would we say about Nazi moral facts?), and also because it implies that moral conflicts, like the one between multiculturalism and ethno-cultural nationalism, are not just hard to resolve through reasoned argument, but intrinsically incapable of being grappled with through rational discourse of any kind. In this bleak portrait of our moral landscape, there is nothing either good or bad, but (collective) thinking makes it so. Ignorant armies are doomed to clash interminably in the cold night of moral relativism.

This particular confusion seems to arise from an over-attachment to *theory*. Durkheim, as a sociologist, not a moral philosopher or metaphysician, is not qualified to tell us the truth about values and the (in)capacity of the human mind to grasp them, only to tell us how people in society *think* about values. It would have been entirely respectable for Carls to say that, in a work of sociol-

ogy, he must abstain from passing judgment as to whether either side’s moral ideals are *true*. It is slightly perplexing that he does not do this, but makes an implausible meta-ethical assertion instead. Perhaps the very phrase “moral facts” is unhelpful, for the book does not really speak to facts about morality, but rather to social facts about what certain people happen to think about morality.

This minor piece of philosophical confusion does not reduce the book’s sociological achievement, in revealing the real cultural dynamics of this ongoing war for the soul of Germany. Germany is a good exemplar of the wider conflicts over migration and identity afflicting the rest of the Western world, since (for obvious historical reasons), both multiculturalist and ethno-nationalist ideas tend to be articulated with particular sharpness, and the cultural stakes are perceived by both sides to be incredibly high. Germans may be canaries in a large coal mine in which other Westerners are flailing in the dark.

One remaining blind spot that future scholars may wish to address, however, concerns the complex role of Christianity in Germany’s moral culture. Carls makes occasional references to statements by church leaders, many of them on the progressive side of the struggle (e.g. 68, 137, 148). On the other hand, as an example of ethno-cultural belonging perceived to be under threat, he discusses the multicultural refiguring of Germany’s *Weihnachtsmärkte* and other Christmas traditions (135-39). Re-

cent scholarship by the religious scholar and German MEP Tobias Cremer has shown that the AfD is disproportionately supported by avowed non-believers, while practicing German Christians are highly resistant to populist arguments.<sup>5</sup> If, as Cremer argues, attachment to the *horizontal* sacrality of the nation frequently stands in tension with the *vertical* sacrality of the Divine, we will need to speak far more carefully than Carls sometimes does about the populist-right's attachment to moral traditionalism. For instance, Carls presents the left's disdain for "traditional gender norms" as connected to its moral ideal of human dignity (74), but it should not go unnoticed that AfD leaders have sometimes deployed the language of feminism and LGBT activism in articulating their grievances against Muslim immigrants. Moral ideals, it seems, can be slippery things.

Equally, it will surely be of interest to future scholars to investigate the link between the evacuation of substantively Christian values from the center-right's Christian Democratic Party and this party's drift, since the 1980s, from ethno-cultural nationalism to a tacit civic multiculturalism with more in common with the left than with the AfD—a drift that Carls observes but does not explain (45; 105-6).

Amidst an academic climate of stale theory and lazy stereotyping about the populist-right, Carls's work is a breath of fresh air: theoretically innovative and empirically precise. Its achievements will inspire more much-needed work,

while its limitations are a standing invitation for more scholarship that continues to take the sacred seriously.

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1. Phillip Rieff, *Sacred Order/social Order v. 1; My Life among the Deathworks Illustrations of the Aesthetics of Authority*, Edited by Kenneth S. Piver, *Sacred Order/Social* (2006).
2. James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle To Define America* (Basic, 1991).
3. Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (Vintage 2012).
4. Pierro Cingari, "Germany's 'Grand Coalition' Takes Shape: What It Means for the Economy." *Euronews*, February 24, 2025.
5. Tobias Cremer, *The Godless Crusade: Religion, Populism and Right-Wing Identity Politics in the West* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).