

OPINION | COMMENTARY

I Found Intolerance in Germany, and Not on the Right

The organizer of the conference in Heidelberg reproached me for briefing the main opposition party.

By Bruce Gilley

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The logo of the Alternative for Germany Party in Brunswick, Germany, Dec. 1, 2019.

PHOTO: FOCKE STRANGMANN/SHUTTERSTOCK

I traveled to Germany in December to present a paper at Heidelberg University. Later I shared other research I had done with legislators, their staff and the media at the Bundestag in Berlin. Both these activities are common for professors, particularly political scientists. This time was different, though, because I happened to engage with the “wrong” folks at the Bundestag. My host was the main opposition party, Alternative for Germany, or AfD, which made my Berlin foray unacceptable to some in Heidelberg.

“The party is using your work and your participation in my workshop as a legitimation for its own political agenda,” the organizer of the Heidelberg conference wrote in an email to me. “Needless to say, I personally find this unfortunate.”

A prominent American scholar and longtime friend who attended the Heidelberg conference was equally scolding. My views on contemporary policy issues, he wrote to

me, “are politically instrumentalized—perhaps against your intentions—by the AfD, which I consider a threat to liberal democracy in Germany.”

I was under the impression that political parties in a liberal democracy should be encouraged to engage with evidence-based research. The work I presented in Berlin was on Germany’s colonial record, a key issue in contemporary legislative debates on German foreign aid and immigration policy. Locking particular people out of scholarly discourse seems contrary to fostering a culture of independent political thought. Apparently my colleagues don’t agree.

The unstated assumption underlying criticisms of my visit is that scholars are a credit to the profession only so long as they pursue left-wing lines of inquiry and join in public debate on behalf of left-wing causes and movements. If professors step outside those boundaries, they have somehow been “instrumentalized” by nefarious dark forces and are liable to be ostracized. My American friend warned that if I continued to consort with the wrong sort of people, “all you are going to do is marginalize yourself further and further.”

I was certainly not in Berlin to stump for the AfD, which is doing very well on its own. But there is little in its party platform with which I disagree. The party pushes for debate on questions that the German left has attempted to silence, such as the problems of immigration, the causes of terrorism, and the costs of bans on fracking and nuclear power. The AfD is also one of Israel’s strongest supporters in Germany.

The party’s general push to protect freedom of speech makes it a singularly tolerant political voice in Germany. I don’t agree with the AfD’s desire for a referendum-based government, since I favor representative democracy and I support an internationalist Germany. But the AfD members I met weren’t scandalized that I dissented from some of their views. My fellow scholars, on the other hand, clearly were.

The contrast between the scorn heaped on me in Heidelberg and the AfD’s support for vigorous debate on national issues hit home on Christmas Day. My daughter opened her present, a Heidelberg University student satchel, and commented on the age of the university, founded 1386, and the unique university symbol, a cathedral. When the university was founded, students were prohibited from “immoral lifestyle and blasphemous language” as well as “nocturnal revelry,” “vineyard theft,” and “jumping the city wall,” among other vices. Over hundreds of years, many of those strictures loosened, and it became a leading center of liberal thought, scientific learning and free debate.

Today, overly strict control of debate has put Heidelberg and many universities across America under the guide of left-wing ideologues. They again censure behaviors they believe amount to an “immoral lifestyle”—in this case, giving talks to prohibited groups in Berlin, and “blasphemous language” such as unorthodox thought on the evils of colonialism. Six hundred years on, the battle for freedom both on and off campus continues.

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