

Dagmar Herzog on the "Sexy Racism" of the AfD

In her book *The New Fascist Body*, historian Dagmar Herzog has provided one of the most clear-eyed analyses of the German far right.

Peter Matthews · August 14, 2026

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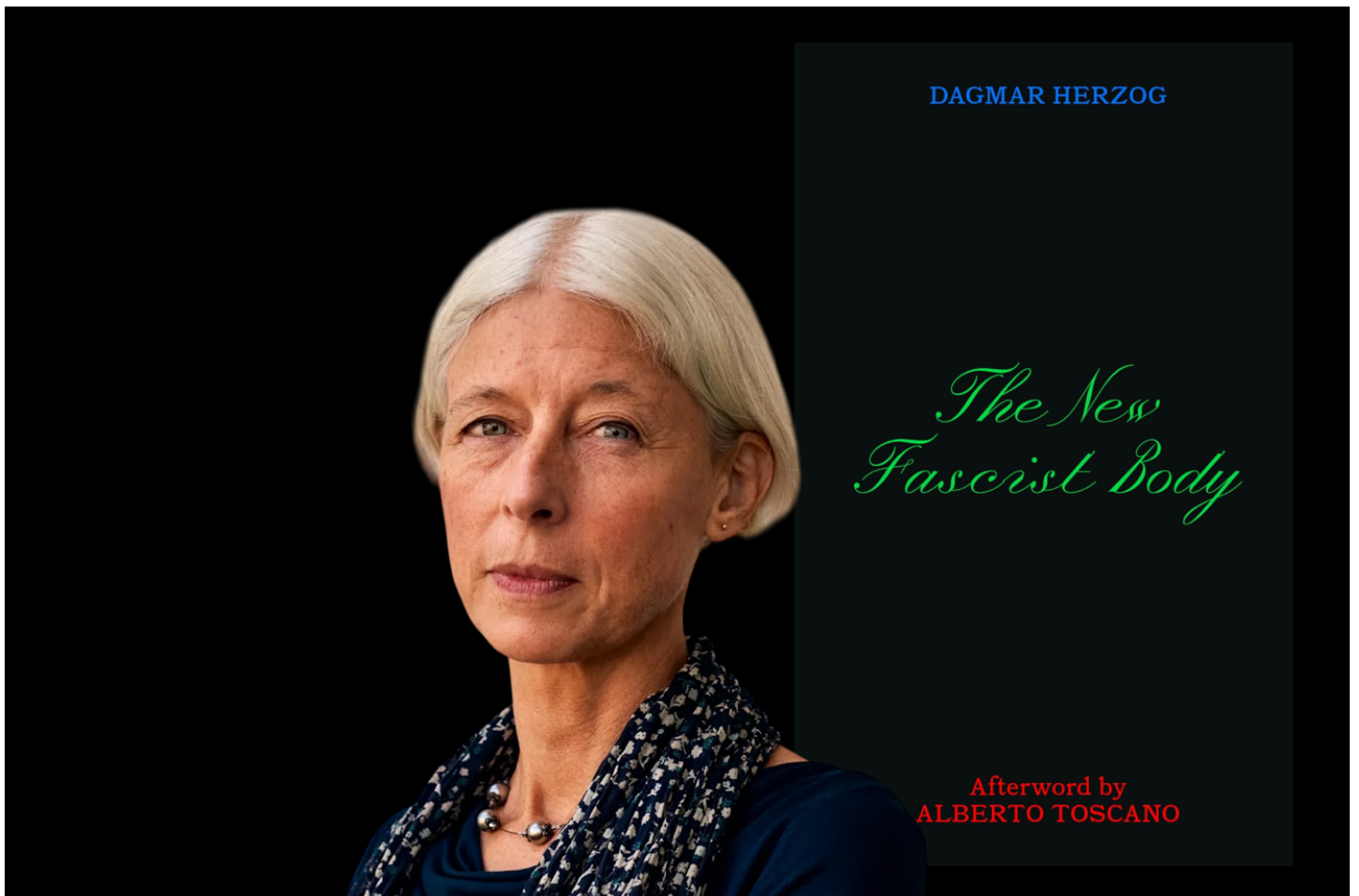


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US historian Dagmar Herzog has spent her career tracing the sexual politics of German fascism: a subject which, regrettably, is perhaps more relevant now than at any other point over that span. Last year, that research resulted in a short, powerful book, *The New Fascist Body*, whose central argument was vividly demonstrated earlier this year when research showed the AfD has been using

AI avatars and OnlyFans models to spread anti-immigration messaging.

As Herzog shows through a historical analysis of sex in Nazi propaganda, the fascist stance is not typically a conservative, forbidding, or repressive one. Rather, fascism licenses its followers to be aggressively sexual, just as it permits them to break societal rules in other ways. This disinhibited mixture of lust and hostility is something Herzog terms "sexy racism." When she spoke to *HEIST*, this was the starting point for our conversation.

Can you outline the idea of "sexy racism," the term you give for a distinct strategy of sexual politics employed by the far right? What is it, and when did you first start to notice it?

"Sexy racism", whether deployed by the Nazis in their antisemitic pornography in *Der Stürmer* or – in a truly striking variety of ways, ranging from cute to cruel – by the AfD, refers to the strategic use of titillating, erotic imagery and narrative to advance a racist message. In short: using sex to sell racism. With regard to the Nazis, I've been thinking about it for the last quarter-century, when I was working on what became the book *Sex after Fascism*. Sexual demonisation of Jews, especially shrill denunciations of Jewish men as rapists, pimps, corrupters of youth, was an indispensable right-wing tactic already in the Weimar years. But it's the Nazis who refined the genre of putting a lovely naked woman on full display while mobilising outrage at the threat to her purportedly being posed by malicious, ugly, cartoonishly big-nosed Jewish men (or snakes with Jewish names).

It's funny that you're asking me when I first started to notice the phenomenon in the AfD. The answer is: right away, 2017, when the party was just entering the Bundestag. But your question prompts me to remember that at that point I had a different set of political-conceptual puzzles than I do now, nine years later. Because back then, far-right parties across Europe were styling themselves as favourable both to gay rights and to hetero women's sexual independence, and positioning the main menace of Islam as residing in its oppressive hostility to sex-liberality. It's hard to imagine now just how much didactic intensity was back then being put into excoriating Muslims for adhering to traditional-conservative gender roles. And lots of liberals joined in on the Muslim-bashing, just delighted that there seemed to be a rising cross-party consensus on sexual freedom.

Poster for the 2019 election campaign of the AfD in Saxony: "Pepper spray doesn't always help. Good politics does. Therefore now AfD." Compared to an image from the Nazi newspaper Der Stürmer from late Weimar, January 1929.

Wow, were they ill-prepared for the arrival of the AfD, even in its sassy 2017 iteration. But they certainly could never have guessed that the AfD would become a party that markets itself as the antiabortion and "family values" crowd, campaigns "against rainbow shit and gender madness", and has Maximilian Krah worrying about young men's low testosterone and Björn

Höcke fretting about gayification (*verschwulen*) and urging a return to "natural masculinity." The new hype around restoring conservative gender roles has come stunningly fast.

Still, when the pro-AfD "Remigration Hit" video went viral in 2024, there's no question that it represented yet a further iteration of "sexy racism". Instead of fear-mongering about the supposed dangers posed to white womanhood by brown and black men, here scores of abjected and depressed brown and black men are being herded onto airplanes by sexily gyrating flight attendants and studly "Aryan" pilots and flown off into the blue yonder. This is dominance display, braggadocio, Schadenfreude.

One of the key ideas is that it gives licence: it isn't forbidding, it's permissive. It tells people to enjoy themselves. Why does this idea of permissiveness matter so much to sexy racism?

One of the main misunderstandings too many people have had about fascistic or other right-wing politics is that it is inevitably repressive. So the wrong question gets asked about why people willingly subordinate themselves to authority.

But fascism is not repressive to its followers. On the contrary, it treats them as special. It gives them a feeling of superiority and entitlement; and it sends the message: "you may!" It's disinhibiting. You're allowed to break the rules that conventional people live by. And you're encouraged to look down on anyone who has been marked as either weak or different.

Your argument puts the AfD in historical parallel with the Nazis: you show how liberating people from conservative sexual politics, while positing a corrupted sexual element as the enemy, was itself a Nazi technique. Can you describe how today's stance repeats that move?

It's important to grasp how Nazism used incitement and disavowal in tandem – and how there was always a triangular dynamic (Nazis–Jews–Christians) at play to pull off that combination. The Nazis are constantly promoting heterosexual activity, also pre- and extramarital – definitely not just for reproduction, very much also for pleasure – all the while denying that that is what they are doing. They pull this off by repeatedly demonising and derogating whatever smacks of "dirty" Jewish sex while also ridiculing all that was associated with the inherited Christian value system as laughably uptight. And yet additionally, and simultaneously, they keep repurposing the Christian moral vocabulary of "guilt" and "sin" to adapt it to issues of race and Volk.

An commercial sticker from Lukreta, the AfD-adjacent women's organisation, which was on offer at the launch of the youth organisation 'Generation Deutschland' in November 2025.

Maybe it helps to visualise: you can see the strategy at work in a double photo spread in the SS newspaper *Das schwarze Korps* from 1938, where on one page nudes from the Weimar era are labelled "Shameless Business" while, on another page, there are multiple photos of a naked woman luxuriating in sun, sand, and sea – implicitly in the Third Reich – and these pictures are tagged as "Beautiful and Pure". *Das schwarze Korps* chastises those who would "campaign against the supposed immorality of National Socialism," and declares priggish critics of the regime's sexual incitements to be "vermin". *Mein Kampf* is quoted as announcing: "Public life must be freed from the suffocating perfume of our modern eroticism [read: Jews], just as from every unmanly prudish dishonesty [read: Christians]." But regardless of how they are labelled, or what quote of the Führer accompanied them, the joke is of course that the interested viewer got to enjoy looking at both of the pages.

In our postmodern, ever-disorienting present, the far right engages in even more of a contradictory mix and match. The AfD has posters calling for preserving "Christian values" and it has young women in skimpy bikinis flaunting their attractive behinds. It showcases a photo of mother, father and children hopping happily along the beach with the tagline "Traditional? We like it!" (*Traditionell? Uns gefällt's*). And it has a poster jokingly recommending teen sex (*Kinder! machen! Spass!*). And the racist message is unmistakable in the image of the sensually pregnant white belly with the slogan: "New Germans? We make them ourselves."

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The LGBTQ politics fits here too. Some months ago, *HEIST* ran a piece by Ben Miller looking at how the far right plays a similar double game: adopting an LGBTQ stance as a shield from criticism, while remaining aggressively anti-trans and homophobic elsewhere. Does this

mirror the argument you're making?

Ben Miller is wonderful. Yes, the AfD appeals directly to homophobes, rants against all things rainbow, and is hideously anti-trans. And the party strives to woo gay voters, whether by marshalling the old libel that it's Muslims who are the dangerously hateful ones or by putting Alice Weidel's face on a pro-Pride poster announcing "We are committed to a free society in Germany where everyone can live as they choose."

I would add the point that the continual contradictoriness is a quite deliberately deployed AfD technique. It's multifunctional: it expands potential audiences, keeps opponents guessing, entertains with shrewd humour, and provides ready deniability in case of rebuke. More yet: it creates confusion generally, and destabilises what counts as truth. The far right benefits greatly from that destabilisation.

Healthiness is central to this. The enemy in sexy racism is often the apparently violent or violating foreigner, migrant, but you show this libidinal thrill has a counterpart in hostility to disability. Can you explain how these two fit together, and why a titillating sexiness should need a hostility to the disabled alongside it?

Nazi racism came in two mutually complementary forms. In the Third Reich, the racial hatred directed against Jews, the supposed outsiders/intruders, was paralleled by racial fear about the extent of imperfection within the would-be master race. It's not well understood, but important to know, that already by late Weimar earnest and anxious discussions were underway and warnings and worries were circulating to the effect that not just 10 or 20, but maybe even 30% of the citizens in Germany, were so profoundly subpar that they should be prevented from having children. One in three of one's fellow human beings!

Nazi eugenics, like Nazi antisemitism, was basically fake news. Nonetheless, 400,000 people were mutilated based on the lie that these imperfections were hereditary; over 200,000 people within the German Reich were murdered on grounds of disability. If we treat this as some minor subplot, or at most as the preparatory phase for experimenting with killing methods that then got transferred to the Operation Reinhardt death camps in Nazi-occupied Poland, we miss the opportunity to grasp that the would-be dominant group is never naturally dominant. The yearning for the Germans to become a Volk that is strong, healthy, beautiful, and smart was just a fantasy – implemented through brutality.

There is no question that the AfD's anti-disability obsession is the other side of the coin of its anti-migrant racism.

There have been recent examples in the media of AfD influencers spreading sexualised, often AI-enhanced messaging alongside anti-migration rhetoric. Some of these influencers are entirely invented characters, pure AI creations. You point out that even under the Nazis, real "Aryan" types were hard to find, and some in the regime complained about the lack of the ideal. How do you think AI changes the fascist body, or the fascist ideal?

Yes, this point can never be emphasised enough: the would-be dominant group is never naturally dominant. It requires extraordinary propagandistic efforts and ruthlessness to try to make it so. I mean, vulnerability and interdependence are a huge part of human life, and we would do well to accept that – and people need far more opportunities for getting practice in empathy and solidarity.

At the same time, none of us can escape the ways those images address "the unconscious of our bodies" – as Alberto Toscano put it so helpfully in his afterword to my book. They mess with our heads and hearts and inevitably affect our relationships to ourselves and to each other.

But also, AI – in addition to ravaging the environment, it's a nightmare what the data centres are doing to landscapes and communities (though one hopeful note is that resistance to the destruction may actually, in the US, bring Democrats and Republicans together) – is exacerbating exponentially the confusion about what's real and what's fake and thus stoking general distrust and confusion.

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Do you think there are competing ideas of the body within the far right: say, between a more domestic "trad-wife" role and a more explicitly licentious image? Are these examples of competing dynamics within the right, or is the ambiguity deliberate?

They're not really competing types. Both the OnlyFans ladies offering racist messaging blended with their Zoom-porn-chats and the tradwife types (and in practice one could be both, the online porn could after all be a tradwife's side hustle) are doing their bit to stroke and prop up hetero male egos.

But you can take a look at the merch they were offering at the launch of Generation Deutschland. There was something for every taste: a punky, tattooed girl giving the finger to "antifa", a lissome blonde warning prospective gang-bangers (*Gruppenvergewaltiger*) that "Allah will judge you", and an ever-so-slightly Nazified, sweet-faced dirndl-wearer offering a foamy stein of beer. That's my point: something for everyone.

You're coming to Berlin this autumn, right as the city goes to the voting booth. The AfD is polling very high, just a few points off first place. How can an understanding of the far right's sexual politics help us fight their rise?

Almost no one seriously wants to live in a society without abortion rights, or without the freedom to constellate one's family and to live and love however one chooses. Those enamoured of the AfD just want to be given licence to be mean and sneering rather than respectful towards other people's choices.

The folks who are drawn to the AfD either believe the lies that the party's programmes will benefit them economically – even though economists have repeatedly explained either that the proposed interventions are unworkable or will even harm the very constituencies that the party attracts – or they have become persuaded by the constant xenophobic drumbeat (which alas other parties participate in) that migrants and refugees are the main cause of all social ills.

The AfD is simultaneously normalising and radicalising itself, and profiting greatly from the generalised social media-driven confusion about reality. Alice Weidel giggling girlishly with the emotionally unwell, deeply racist, then-billionaire (now trillionaire) Elon Musk and declaring emphatically that Hitler was "a kind of communist, socialist guy" is a perfect example of the unravelling of any shared sense that facts matter. What the AfD wants is power, and they will say whatever they think will get them there.

They claim they want more direct democracy, but really they want to break democracy, especially minority rights, protections for the vulnerable, equality before the law. One of the ways you can recognise a fascism when you see one is the delight its leaders take in trampling on the weak, and offering an ego-boost and promise of greatness to the ordinary, average citizen.

But pay attention above all to the antisability politics and the particularly intense ranting

But pay attention above all to the ambivalence between the particularly intense ranting against inclusion in Germany's schools. There you see both the angstiness that Germany is somehow not the super-smart nation it wants to be and the arrogance that if we just re-segregate and re-invisibilise the weak and disruptive ones, we will once again be a nation of great "achievement" (*Leistung*). What this is really about is an aggressive re-hierarchisation of human value, a frontal attack on the ideals of equality and solidarity, a strenuous effort to make a new Social Darwinism socially acceptable. It's all so pathetic, as bullying always is, even as it's also terribly dangerous.

The New Fascist Body is available from Wirklichkeit Books.

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