


BOOK REVIEW

La Germania Sospesa

Silvia Bolgherini and Gabriele D'Ottavio. Bologna: Il Mulino, 2019. 206p. 18€ (paperback)

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Stability, solidity, and reliability. These three words have often been used to describe the main features of the German political system since the early post-WWII developments of the Federal Republic of Germany. In particular, the stability of the German party system has long been considered as the cornerstone for long-lasting governments, which, since the early years of the FRG, allowed to overcome the idea of a German ‘historical exceptionality’. The German socio-political achievements and the construction of a stable democracy – realized through reliable political leaders – have contributed to the current leading political role of Germany in Europe, where its key role in European integration, its economic success, and its moderate level of social cleavages are apparently expected to last for the next decades.

The volume ‘La Germania sospesa’ (‘Suspended Germany’) by Silvia Bolgherini and Gabriele D’Ottavio – some of the most expert scholars in German studies in Italy – helps to problematize the sometimes redundant narrative of the ‘German miracle’. The book offers an in-depth analysis that well underlines the less visible tensions between a past characterized by political and economic successes and the political and social challenges that Germany will have to face in the future.

The investigation is conducted through a combined historical and political science approach that allows the reader to follow the crucial developments of the German political system since the foundation of the Federal Republic of Germany, without ever abandoning the internal perspective of the post-WWII Germany as a country under ‘special surveillance’. The country’s status and the self-perception of its exceptionality is very well described in the portrait of the *Historikerstreit* (Historians’ dispute) – the historiographical dispute among German intellectuals on the interpretation of the Nazi past and of the Shoah in the late 1980s – and in the more recent statements of the German community of historians pleading for a pluralistic political culture and opposing any populist backlash.

Indeed, the ‘populist challenge’ embodied by the rise of the party ‘Alternative for Germany’ (Alternative für Deutschland – AfD), particularly since its unprecedented parliamentary representation (2017), is one of the main elements pointing to the condition of ‘suspension’ that the authors attribute to the country.

In the six chapters of the volume, Bolgherini and D’Ottavio delineate at least three main dimensions where the passage from the Republic of Bonn to the Republic of Berlin (Berlin is not Bonn, p. 13) – deeply marked by the political leadership of Chancellor Merkel – is more evident, even if not completely accomplished: the role of Germany in the geo-political international landscape; the evolution of the party and political system; the progressive leaderization of politics and decision-making.

‘Never again; never alone; politics before strength’ (p. 20). This political motto has characterized the entire German European integration process and its foreign politics since the post-WWII period. Chapter 2 describes the changing attitudes of the German political elites towards the process of European integration since the early 1950s, and the process of Europeanization of national politics in the public opinion’s perception. Characterized by an initial ‘permissive consensus’, the European integration process was brought about by the mainstream parties during the Republic of Bonn, and found in Chancellor Kohl a ‘visionary’ interpreter. The decades after the German reunification were marked by continuity under the sign of pragmatism until the country’s leading political role in Europe became a domestic and international issue following the political decisions made by Germany during the Eurozone and the migrant crisis. In this respect, the status of Germany hanging between past and future described by Bolgherini and D’Ottavio is particularly stimulating. The authors give a very convincing description of the tensions emerging from internal and international distrust towards this new role of Germany. Germany’s reluctance to fully play a leading role in Europe seems to have been definitively overcome in the last years. However, the roots of the international distrust towards Germany’s new hegemonic position are to be found not only in the choices the country made during the Eurozone crisis but go back to the political concerns regarding the renaissance of a powerful united Germany in the center of Europe since the German reunification.

The evolution of the party system is described in detail in Chapters 3 and 4, with particular emphasis to the innovations brought about by the 2017 elections. The last Federal elections are considered as a turning point due to the end of another German exceptionalism: the failed representation, until that election, of populist right-wing parties. With the break of the right-wing populist representation taboo in federal and state parliaments, Germany is witnessing a further step in the process of evolution of its party system and an unprecedented polarization of the political and public debate, especially since the AfD’s shift from Eurosceptical to anti-migrant and xenophobic positions. If the success of the AfD undoubtedly traces a line between the past and the present by pushing the German party system towards an unwelcomed ‘normalization’ that results in the *cordon sanitaire* adopted around the party, other elements contribute to limiting its innovation potential. On the one hand, the reluctance of the political elite to legitimize coalition formats adopted at the state level as viable configurations for the federal level produces implicit and explicit constraints to the innovation of the political debate. On the other hand, the crisis of the model of the *Volksparteien* has not yet produced a modification of the political culture of the party elites, that seems to be strictly bound to the idea of stability that marked the first phases of development of the German party system. In addition, the scarce ability of the main *Volksparteien* (the CDU/CSU and the SPD) to innovate – especially at the organization level – also helps to explain the frequent electoral dealignment registered at the state level. Together, these three elements contribute to illuminating the reasons behind the formation of three Grand Coalitions (2005–2009, 2013–2018, 2018–) under the leadership of Angela Merkel. In this scenario, the rise of the AfD is less surprising. Along with the initial Euroscepticism of the founding phase and the anti-immigration course since 2015, the persistent anti-establishment positions of the party (only partially acknowledged in the volume) – targeting the political parties and the traditional media – secured the AfD the role of a genuine political entrepreneur fighting against political elites.

In this complex scenario, the ‘anti-populist’ (p. 137) leadership style of Chancellor Merkel is analyzed in Chapter 5 with remarkable analytical attention. By highlighting the different nature of internal and international crises faced by the Chancellor during her first three mandates (2005–2009 global financial crisis; 2009–2013 Eurozone crisis; 2013–2017 migration crisis; and one could add the management of the Covid-19 crisis during the current mandate) Bolgherini and D’Ottavio portray the nature of a powerful leadership characterized by a high level of pragmatism and a low level of personalization. Despite being frequently praised, both aspects hide tensions that can be linked to German democracy as hanging between past and future, a

condition that represents the *Leitmotiv* of the volume. In particular, Merkel's orientation to pragmatic decisions often resulted in political and personalized positions that left little space to alternative visions. If Merkel's leadership is quite sober and poorly personalized in terms of spectacularization of her political communication, it is certainly not less effective when considering the outcomes of the decision taken by her Cabinet or under her direct personal influence. This is particularly evident in the management of the Eurozone and of the migrant crisis, driven by the Chancellor's vision of the future for the European Union, and of their consequences at the international and domestic level.

Merkel's resignation from CDU's party leadership (2018) marks the imminent end of a political era. The volume by Silvia Bolgherini and Gabriele D'Ottavio is an excellent analysis that allows to appreciate the achievements and the limits of the four mandates of Chancellor Merkel within the long evolution of German democracy. It does so by selecting issues— the relevance of history and historiographic debate; the process of European integration; parties and party system change; leadership style – that are crucial for understanding the development of many political systems, and essential for assessing the current evolution of the German political system.

Some relevant aspects remain in the background: the unsolved economic and social gap between eastern and western states, the role of Germany as a key factor in international relations beyond the European Union, the indicators of a significant economic slowdown of the 'locomotive of Europe'. These topics will certainly play a very important role in the evolution of German society, of its political and party system, as they already strongly contribute to the status of 'suspension' identified by the authors. Amongst these, the alternation in power after the long-lasting Grand Coalition experiences will be one of the more important ones. The struggle for the affirmation of new political leadership (which is partly already occurring) will also play a major role in this new scenario. Besides this, the current polarization signals will hardly disappear in a context where the global economy will have to face the consequences of the COVID19 pandemic.

Whilst waiting for all of this to happen, 'La Germania sospesa' provides the main theoretical and analytical considerations for future studies and is a necessary reference point for all scholars wishing to preserve the indispensable long historical view on the German old and recent developments.