



La Germania sospesa

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To cite this article: Michelangelo Vercesi (2019): La Germania sospesa, Contemporary Italian Politics, DOI: [10.1080/23248823.2019.1675931](https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2019.1675931)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2019.1675931>



Published online: 08 Oct 2019.



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BOOK REVIEW

La Germania sospesa, by Silvia Bolgherini and Gabriele D'Ottavio, Bologna, il Mulino, 2019, 206 pp., €18.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-88-15-28381-8

Germany has in many respects traditionally been a crucial case study for social scientists. In this regard, the up-to-date volume by Bolgherini and D'Ottavio is an important, well-informed, work of reference for those wanting to get a better grasp of recent political events in this country.

Both Bolgherini (a political scientist at the University of Naples Federico II) and D'Ottavio (an historian at the University of Trento) have considerable experience of studying Germany. One thinks, for instance, of Bolgherini's book (edited with Florian Grotz) about Germany in the aftermath of the 2009 *Bundestag* election (*La Germania di Angela Merkel*). D'Ottavio's volume (edited with Thomas Saalfeld) about Germany's 2013 general election (*La Germania della Cancelliera*) is another case in point. Like these two books, *La Germania sospesa* is part of a broader series on 'Elections, Governments, Democracy' in Europe, which is published by the Italian research centre, the Istituto Cattaneo.

The main premise of the volume is that both the view of contemporary Germany as a success story, and the view that Germany is a system in crisis, are too simplistic. Rather, the authors suggest that the country is suspended between its traditional political stability, on the one hand, and structural changes on the other. In their view, a mixture of internal long-term political trends, and recent external shocks, has forced Germany to reconsider its identity. While international drives have created space for a new European leadership, internal political conditions have seemed to work against it. The Merkel era (since 2005) is analysed in the light of longer-term historical processes affecting the *Bundesrepublik*. The aim is to 'contribute to historical and political reflection, [...] avoiding falling into the trap of retrospective determinism' (p. 11). The Merkel era, in particular, is seen as an autonomous phase of German political history, one that is probably paving the way for another reorganization of the political system.

Aside from the introduction and conclusions, the book is made up of five chapters, four of which are single-authored and one of which is co-authored. Chapter 1 explains the sense in which the view of post-WWII Germany as a 'success story' should be refined (not discarded), and how the debate about the nature of the country as part of Europe should be renewed through a deeper consideration of its past.

The second chapter assesses whether political elites and citizens have changed their views about European integration over time. If a new cleavage *tout court* does not seem to have emerged, there is evidence that recent economic crises and migration flows have helped to increase the salience of the European issue and relevant party polarization.

Chapters 3 and 4 are focussed on party competition in general and rely on several 'hard' data. The former looks at relevant transformations since 1949, linking the decline of the two *Volksparteien* (the CDU/CSU and the SPD) to the success of AfD located on the right of the political spectrum. The analysis offers a four-period categorization of German political history. After the period of the 'two-and-a-half' party system, the post-materialist 'revolution' in the 1980s brought the Greens in and moved the system in the direction of bi-polarity. A further watershed was the reunification, with the subsequent entry of the PDS (later *Die Linke*) into the political system. Finally, since 2013, we have had the phase of

democratic stress and globalization. Its main features are: a fluid six-party system; moderate pluralism; increasing ideological polarization.

Chapter 4 analyses the campaign leading up to the 2017 general election, and its results, as well as the political debate and the formation of the *Große Koalition* in the election's aftermath. Dynamics at the federal level are investigated, together with political trends at the level of the *Länder*. Moreover, a picture of the socio-demographic profiles, the preferences, and the geographical distribution of AfD voters is provided.

Finally, Chapter 5 (co-authored) is about Angela Merkel. After introducing the main institutional features that make the German chancellor a relatively strong head of government, the chapter interprets Merkel's pragmatic and anti-populist leadership as consistent both with the post-war German preference for limited political personalization and with Merkel's specific biography. The first three of the *Kanzlerin's* terms of office are depicted as marked by mid-term crises (respectively: the global financial crisis; the European debt crisis, and the refugee crisis). It is also argued that the third term (from 2013 to 2017) – with the management of the relationship with Russia during the Ukrainian crisis; the third Greek bail-in package, and the temporary opening of Germany's frontiers to Syrian refugees – is the term that has contributed most to shaping Merkel's public profile. Interestingly enough, Merkel's image as an efficient, proactive, leader was enhanced outside Germany just at the time when harsher criticisms began to be voiced internally. The international press praised Merkel as a morally upstanding leader with a strong commitment to liberal democratic values, while at the same time, Merkel was losing support in Germany. The book suggests that Merkel's rule will probably be seen in the future as representing a form of balance between Weber's ethics of responsibility and the ethics of conviction.

In short, *La Germania sospesa* is a comprehensive investigation of contemporary Germany and its political system, enriched by a long-term perspective and the use of fresh data. The book is clear and provides several suggestions for further debate. A desirable contribution to political science would be made by the application of its approach to further systematic comparative studies of changing European democracies.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2019.1675931>

