

*El salto 20-02*

## **Now Germany**

*Wolfgang Streeck*

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world

*William Butler Yeats*

Angela Merkel's *Götterdämmerung* is dragging on, and it is not a happy affair. When her heir apparent, AKK, found it impossible to do the impossible – enforce on her party, down to the smallest village, a watertight boycott on the elected representatives of ten to fifteen percent of the voters – she was finished in cold blood by her one-time patron, with a long-distance shot fired from a press conference in South Africa. Now Merkel's succession is again wide open, and her chances of holding on to the chancellorship until the end of her term one-and-a-half years from now have never been better.

As of mid-February, the situation on the German political battlefield is changing by the day, and this may continue for some time. The only constant is the German constitution and the enormous standing power it affords the chancellor. A sitting chancellor can be removed only by a so-called “constructive vote of non-confidence”, meaning that the Bundestag must elect a successor with more than half of its members. This is unthinkable, if only because the SPD, while known for deep political ineptitude, won't help the CDU contest the 2021 elections with an incumbent chancellor. Nor can there be early elections as this requires the chancellor to ask for and lose a vote of non-confidence; Merkel, like Schröder, could arrange for this, but she won't. So the question becomes: who wants to succeed AKK as party chair and chancellor-candidate and become the next sitting duck for the next potshot fired from the chancellery if he or she fails to meet Merkel's demanding expectations? Expect a year at least of anarchic power battles, some open, most covert, with lots of casualties. 2020 may see the falling apart of the last centrist governing party in Europe.

For Europe this means more indecision, for a much longer time than thought. Nobody knows how the Merkel experiment – de facto turning party into presidential government – will work out. With succession struggles raging in CDU and CSU and between them, it is doubtful what Merkel could yet promise her European partners, and for what she will still be able to wring support from a parliamentary party not knowing who will control their reselection in 2021. Issues on hand include the negotiations with Britain over its future relationship with the EU (will Germany be able to defend the interests of its export industries and prevent Brussels, in particular France, from taking too hard a line on the United Kingdom?), the budget of the EU after Brexit (to what extent will Germany have to fill the gaps caused by the British departure?), the separate budget for the Eurozone, as insisted upon by Macron, the military cooperation with France and the relationship between the EU and NATO (who will prevail in Germany, the “Gaullists” or the Atlanticists”?) etc. etc.

Why was AKK’s mission an impossible one? The CDU under Merkel had turned into a party of technocratic-neoliberal modernization: a third-way party of the center-right. Like the SPD earlier, it became increasingly unable to manage the tensions between the winners and losers of economic and cultural restructuring for international “competitiveness”. On the center-left the losers went from the SPD to the Linkspartei, at least for a while; on the center-right they moved to the AfD. In the German political system with its multiple levels of proportionate political representation, from village to Federal Republic, the AfD, with time also attracting former SPD voters, soon became an established party, winning between 10 and 15 percent of the vote nation-wide.

It has long been a strategic mantra of the CDU that there should be no political space on its right for another party; after the open border episode in 2015 this finally became unrealistic. The representation gap caused by the CDU abandoning its conservative constituency was increasingly filled by the AfD, a mixed bag of grumpy conservatives and right-wing extremists, struggling for control over their party while seeking to attract CDU, SPD and non-

voters. In response the CDU, after some to and fro, declared the AfD untouchable – a strategy in which all other parties joined. The assumption was that a party excluded as fascist from the constitutional spectrum will for all political purposes be non-existent. Simultaneously Merkel was reinforcing her effort to compensate her party’s dwindling support on the right by forging a coalition with the Greens, given that the SPD had begun to melt away due to decades of third way junior partnership with the CDU. While the prospect of CDU government forever was to assuage the CDU’s remaining traditionalists, the neutralization through nazification of the AfD and its voters would keep the new party small enough to allow for the continuation of “market-conforming democracy” (Merkel).

This did not work in Thuringia, a long-time CDU stronghold, and became increasingly unlikely to work elsewhere. In the Thuringian election of 2019 the CDU was down by 11.8 percentage points, winning only 21.7 percent, less than the AfD at 23.4 percent. The other centrist parties ended up close to extinction: the SPD at 8.2 (-4.2), the Greens at 5.2 (-0.5), and the Liberals at 5.0 (+2.5). The winner was the Linkspartei at 31.0 percent (+2.8), mostly due to a likable Minister President who would fit just as well in the SPD. The two outcast parties, from the perspective of the CDU, AfD and Linkspartei, together gained an absolute majority of 54.4 percent. This excluded the CDU from any governing majority as long as it stuck to its boycott of the AfD and, of course, Die Linke; allowing the latter to govern in order to maintain distance from the former seems to have been suggested by Berlin but was unacceptable to local party members. In the event Merkel’s insistence on isolating the AfD, not even permitting a center-right minority government tolerated by it, caused a revolt in her party on which we know two things: it will not end soon, and its effects will be lasting.

Remarkably, the unending public debate on Thüringen never went beyond party-political tactics; nobody asks who had voted for the AfD and why. Research shows that AfD voters came from all parties, including the party of non-voters (turnout, at 65 percent, was high for a regional election). Did all of them share all of the views of the many unsavory

characters among the AfD leadership? 60 percent of the voters in 2019 voted for their party of choice “out of conviction” and 34 percent out of “disappointment” with other parties; the numbers include the AfD voters of which only 39 percent said they voted out of conviction while 53 percent voted out of disappointment. Will stigmatizing them win AfD voters back for the center or the left? Among age groups, the AfD was overrepresented among the young, especially among young males; of 18 to 24 year-old men, 30 percent voted AfD, and 32 percent of those aged 25 to 34. The *Linkspartei*, almost symmetrically, was the party of the old: until age 44 its share was 24 percent or less; only above age 60 (38 percent and more) did it do disproportionately well. What were the concerns which the CDU of Angela Merkel and the *Linkspartei*, not to mention the SPD on its deathbed, were unable to address, so that a historically revisionist party of the right could thrive on them? 83 percent of AfD voters in Thuringia agreed to, and only 16 percent disagreed with, the statement, “I am very worried that our life in Germany is changing too much”. While this is high, remarkably 37 percent of CDU voters, and even 30 percent of Green voters, felt the same. Leaving it to the radical right to represent popular demands for “taking back control”, in the hope thereby to lock the losers of competitive modernization out of legitimate politics, may badly backfire.