The Exhaustion of Merkelism: A Conjunctural Analysis

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Abstract: Inspired by Hall et al.'s *Policing the Crisis* (1978), the authors provide a conjunctural analysis of present-day Germany. It is based on a periodisation of Merkelism – the dominant political mode of managing the economic, political and cultural crisis tendencies in the country from the mid-2000s onwards. This reveals that the Merkelist approach to crisis management has become exhausted. The manifestation point of this process is the 2015 'Summer of Migration'. The Merkel government decided not to prevent hundred thousands of refugees who had been walking across the Balkans for months from entering the country. Hereupon, it was identified, at the level of political discourse, with a liberal stance on the border regime. As a result, the pragmatic and depoliticising interventions typical of Merkelism lost traction; a political and cultural polarisation emerged. Importantly, this happened in the context of a socio-economic consolidation of large parts of the 'new' middle class – and a protracted decline of the working class, which was covered up by narratives of Germany as a success story. Accordingly, the conjuncture in the country is characterised by the weakening of class ties of political and cultural representation and the proliferation of nationalist interpellations. Once again, 'race is the modality in which class is lived' (Hall), which is visible in the widespread assumption that there are clearly defined, homogeneous and incompatible 'cultures' clashing with one another. In this sense, race has become a politically salient category whose discursive predominance contributes to further marginalising a language of class.

Keywords: Conjunctural analysis, Stuart Hall, Germany, migration, Merkel

INTRODUCTION

The US business magazine Forbes has been publishing 'The World's Most Powerful Women' list for fifteen years. Angela Merkel, the Chancellor of Germany, has hit the top spot no less than twelve times. It appears that her standing in liberal circles in the anglophone world is based on the alleged economic stability and social cohesion of her country, and on the presumption that she is a safe pair of hands in difficult times. In the summer of 2015, her stature increased even further. During the European 'refugee crisis', she decided not to prevent thousands of refugees who had been walking across the Balkans, from entering Germany. In this situation, she was seen as a great

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humanitarian who stood up for the values of liberal democracy in increasingly illiberal circumstances. Once Trump had been elected president, historian Timothy Garton Ash declared her 'the leader of the free world'.[1]

This image changed drastically in the aftermath of the general election in September 2017. Articles in *The New York Times* and *The Telegraph* suggested that Merkel's difficulty forming a coalition government meant that Germany had entered its deepest crisis for decades.[2] Simon Jenkins of *The Guardian* quipped that '[o]vernight, Merkel makes Theresa May seem positively secure'.[3] Suddenly, there was talk that the once unassailable chancellor was on the brink of resignation, and that her country was no longer the beacon of political stability that it had been presented as for years.

One year down the line, it appears that Merkel's detractors had a point, but that they were not spot on. Merkel has managed to form another 'grand coalition' of Christian Democrats and Social Democrats. This coalition is marred by infighting in her own political bloc and by a deep scepticism towards the whole project on the side of her coalition partner. After suffering bad results in two important regional elections, Merkel stepped down as the leader of her party in December 2018 and was replaced by Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, a close ally of the chancellor. Merkel also announced that she would not seek re-election after the next general election, scheduled for 2021. Under these circumstances, a collapse of the grand coalition is a genuine possibility. And yet, the two political blocs behind the coalition appear to be keen to avoid a general election. According to recent opinion polls, they would get a trouncing at the ballot box. The fear of electoral defeat contributes significantly to stabilising Merkel's project. And even a collapse of the government would not necessarily translate into a deep political crisis. After all, centrist political forces still control the German political scene. There is a political challenge from the far right, but so far no credible right-of-centre government project.

It appears that the difficulty of 'coming to terms' with Merkel as a key political figure in the present situation reflects a general lack of clarity concerning how the global crisis since 2007 has been processed. Our aim in this article is to shed light on this issue. We examine how the current political situation reflects contradictions pervading contemporary capitalism under the specific economic, political and cultural conditions in Germany. Furthermore, we contend that the German story has a broader relevance. After all, it refers to the politics of crisis management in the country that represents the strongest European link in the global capitalist chain and the pivotal force within the European Union. Accordingly, Germany needs to be taken into account if one wants to understand the global erosion of liberalism in the wake of the crisis.

If we speak of capitalism, it is important to stress that we talk about a social order in the broadest possible sense – and not just about an economic order. There are multiple narratives offering explanations of the workings of present-day German politics. Economic narratives refer to the performance

1. Timothy Garton Ash, 'Populists are out to divide us: They must be stopped', *The Guardian*, 11 November 2016.

2. Melissa Eddy, 'Germany may face new elections after coalition talks fail', *New York Times*, 20 November 2017; Justin Huggler, 'Germany facing "biggest crisis in 70 years" as president orders parties to return to coalition negotiations', *The Telegraph*, 20 November 2017.

3. Simon Jenkins, 'Europe needs a leader: who will step up if Merkel goes?', *The Guardian*, 23 November 2017.

of the German economy, the alleged 'jobs miracle' and the fall-out from the Eurozone crisis. Political narratives (in a narrow sense) emphasise the weakening of party political allegiances and the demise of the large, 'popular' parties [*Volksparteien*]. Cultural narratives, on the one hand, highlight the re-fashioning of national identity and 'belonging' against the backdrop of westernisation and migration and, on the other hand, identify a backlash to the supposed dominance of urban, middle-class life-styles.

The multi-faceted nature of the explanations offered suggests that a less domain-oriented and disciplinary analysis is needed. Consequently, we examine the current articulation of contradictions in their economic, political and cultural dimensions.[4] In our view, a suitable approach for this purpose is a conjunctural analysis in the tradition of Stuart Hall and the Birmingham School.[5] We complement it with insights produced by other representatives of Conjunctural Marxism such as Nicos Poulantzas and Bob Jessop.[6]

In the first part of our article, we outline key elements of such a conjunctural analysis and determine our object, the exhaustion of Merkelism. In the second section, we identify turning points in this process of exhaustion and outline a periodisation. This allows us, in the third section, to make the key analytical move in our article. We identify the economic, political and cultural drivers of exhaustion, which get articulated and undermine Merkelism as a political mode of crisis management. Against this backdrop, we discuss, in the fourth section, the opportunities, constraints and dilemmas left-wing forces are faced with in the present conjuncture in Germany, and conclude the article with a few tentative strategic reflections.

1 MERKELISM AS AN OBJECT OF CONJUNCTURAL ANALYSIS

The Components of a Conjunctural Analysis

In our view, there are three main key components to conjunctural analysis. The first one is a distinct strategy of producing evidence. A conjuncture is the 'present moment' in the history of a social order, which can last for shorter or longer periods of time, and it is examined by showing how the dominant tendencies and strategic choices of key actors in a situation are conditioned by, and transform, underlying structures, institutions, and discourses.[7] Accordingly, conjunctural analysis operates across three different ontological layers. First of all, it assumes there are deep structures, for example the capitalist mode of production and the structural configurations underpinning racism and patriarchy; second, there are institutional configurations such as the variety of political regimes presently visible around the globe at the national and supranational level, which include mechanisms of political decision-making as well as historically sedimented cultural meanings, categories, habits, and senses of identity; and third, the short-term strategies and tactics of collective actors, which are locked into struggles because they

4. There are, of course, good reasons to question the assumption that these dimensions can be distinguished clearly. Nonetheless they offer a good starting point and heuristic. For a critique, see Lawrence Grossberg, 'Does Cultural Studies have a future? Should It? (Or what's the matter with New York?)', *Cultural Studies*, 20, 1, 2001, p20.

5. See Moritz Ege, 'Cultural Studies und Empirische Kulturwissenschaft in den 1970er Jahren', *Historische Anthropologie*, 22, 2, 2014, pp149-181.

6. See Alexander Gallas, 'Conjunctural Marxism: Althusser and Poulantzas on the capitalist state', *Rethinking Marxism*, 29, 2, 2017, pp256-280.

7. Nicos Poulantzas, *Political power and social classes*, London, New Left Books 1973, p41.

encounter each other in antagonistic relations of forces characterised by social domination, for example class, race and gender relations. Reflecting those layers and modes of confrontation, conjunctures embody a contradiction-ridden ensemble of social relations.

This raises the question of how to deal with the multi-faceted nature of such ensembles when they are examined. Conjunctural analysis is based on the wager that there are themes around which contradictions coalesce that characterise a distinct conjuncture. Consequently, starting an analysis requires us to determine a theme to be analysed, which will then be examined in its contexts. This is the key to being able to unlock a conjuncture and consider its different elements and levels in the process.

Importantly, there is always a variety of themes that can be chosen, and depending on one's choice, the resulting analyses will diverge and produce different insights. The themes selected can foreground different dimensions of the social world, which means that they can be primarily economic, political or cultural. A conjunctural analysis of the US in the Trump era, for example, might start from examining an aspect of the 'culture wars' such as the arguments over statues commemorating confederate soldiers or the conflicting versions of gender relations visible in, say, the Women's March or 'pro-life' mobilisations. But likewise, it could also commence from looking an economic policy issue like the tensions in the Republican Party caused by diverging views on concerning international trade or a political question in a narrow sense like gerrymandering.

The second component is the object of analysis that is 'entered' through examining the theme. Importantly, the object is much broader than the theme: A careful analysis of recent arguments around the politics of memory concerning the Confederacy will result in an account of the articulation of race and class relations in the US in the Trump era; an analysis that focuses on the Women's March and the controversies surrounding it will shed light on struggles over resurgent sexism, threats to reproductive freedom and the inner-feminist politics of representation; a detailed examination of trade policy in the Republican Party will focus on the crisis of neoliberalism and its contestation through economic nationalism; and an account of gerrymandering will reveal authoritarian tendencies in a situation of party political polarisation. Importantly, the object cannot be assumed to capture a conjuncture in its entirety, which is due to its multi-layered, multi-faceted character. Much rather, it serves as a stand-in, yet one that cannot simply be 'inflated' to a larger size to represent the conjuncture as whole because the links and patterns that articulate its constituent elements are distinctive and not necessarily homologous.

The third component is periodisation. A periodisation is always a periodisation of something, which means in our case that a conjunctural analysis proceeds through the periodisation of the object.[8] It is about charting how the object has emerged, what kind of contradictions its emergence gives

8. Bob Jessop, *State Power*, Cambridge, Polity Press 2008, pp283-287.

rise to, how it relates to other objects and scales, and how actors respond to these contradictions through making strategic choices against the backdrop of structurally and institutionally inscribed selectivities. Importantly, the periodisation of an object should include economic, political and cultural phenomena.

Periodisations are produced by identifying strategic turning points in a conjuncture, that is, points where the conditions shift significantly against which strategic choices are made, and under which habituated practices occur. It starts from a point of emergence where the contradictions characterising the object come clearly into view; then moves on to a point of no return, where the effects of strategic choices concerning those contradictions are beginning to produce results that cannot be reversed easily; and ends with a point of manifestation where it becomes clear that these choices have produced profound changes in the existing configuration of social forces and strategies. The turning points can be events and processes of seemingly great historical significance such as the fall of the Apartheid regime, 9/11 or the Brexit referendum. But they can also be events and processes that appear to be less important but have specific momentary relevance, for example the 2011 phone hacking scandal in Britain or the resignation of the German president Christian Wulff over allegations of corruption in 2012.

The three components are clearly visible in *Policing the Crisis*, Stuart Hall et al.'s famous conjunctural analysis of early 1970s Britain.[9] In *PTC*, Stuart Hall et al. choose the 'social phenomenon' of 'mugging' as their theme (p1). Against this backdrop, they launch into a detailed examination of their object, the 'general 'crisis of hegemony' that characterised the British social formation in the early 1970s (p214). In particular, they focus on the cultural-political strategies of crisis management emerging in response to this crisis. Their periodisation begins with a specific point of emergence – the events of 1968 – then advances to a point of no return, which occurred in 1970 when the government-in-waiting of Ted Heath launched an electoral campaign based on the call for 'law and order' (p272), and, last but not least, shifts to a point of manifestation, the point when the '"mugging" panic first makes its full appearance' in 1972 (p298). Operating this way, Hall et al. are able to trace how a mode of political crisis management emerged that reconfigured race and class relations, and that was characterised as 'authoritarian populism'.[10] They argue that the conjuncture of crisis was characterised by the passage from the 'welfare state/social democratic settlement' to a 'law-and-order society' (*PTC*, p.xv, p215).[11]

From a methodological vantage point, Hall et al's key move is to 'zoom out' from the specific issue of 'mugging' to their shifting object of analysis and thereby to a general picture of the British social formation. In this article, we are making a similar move. Our theme is the response of the Merkel government and its bloc of allies to what is often called the European 'refugee crisis' (which really was a crisis of the European border regime) – and our object is the

9. Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the crisis: mugging, the state, and law and order*, Houndmills New York, 2013. (Hereafter *PTC*).

10. John Clarke, 'Of crises and conjunctures: the problem of the present', *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 34, 4, 2010, pp340-341.

11. Interestingly, Marxist social psychologist Peter Brückner comes to a similar conclusion regarding West Germany at the time. His book *Versuch, uns und anderen die Bundesrepublik zu erklären* [An essay to explain the Federal Republic to ourselves and others] from 1979 is one of the few texts in the non-economistic German Marxist tradition that side-steps questions of theory and presents a detailed analysis of the historical, cultural and political conjuncture. Fittingly, Brückner wrote the book while he was in the process of being suspended from his professorship for political reasons.

exhaustion of Merkelism. In order to trace how this process of exhaustion has evolved, we present a specific periodisation, which is detailed below.

In conclusion, there is not a single, definite analysis of any given conjuncture – and different analyses highlight different aspects and may be plausible and useful despite their obvious divergences. Both the choice of an 'entry point' and the ways of 'zooming out' reflect the observers' political priorities, including their politics of class, gender, race and sexuality. At the same time, conjunctural analyses, as Hall frequently pointed out, should take up the challenge of thinking through the conjunctural dimensions of these politics rather than taking them as a solid anchor of any kind of strategy. This, of course, is easier said than done.

THE ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF MERKELISM

Before we can discuss our periodisation, we need a clearer understanding our object. By Merkelism, we refer to the dominant political mode of managing the economic, political and cultural crisis in Germany.[12] It emerged in the mid-2000s, gained traction in response to the global slump, which hit the country in 2008, and began to erode in the aftermath of the 'Summer of Migration' in 2015. Crucially, Merkelism was premised on a technocratic, 'problem-solving' approach and an orientation towards consensus.[13] This involved distinct strategic choices at the national, European and international level. Following Hall, we argue that Merkelism – despite being, in the first instance, a political strategy – had an economic, a political and a cultural dimension.

The economic dimension of Merkelism consisted in a steadfast commitment to the export-oriented, competitive corporatist accumulation regime, which had been in place for decades. In the situation of crisis, the German government focussed on defending core segments of industry, which usually produce goods for the world market such as cars and machine tools. In 2008, it started consultations with corporations and unions, which resulted in stimulus packages and subsidies for short-time working schemes. This benefitted the core workforces in the industrial hubs, but not precarious workers. It also did little to alleviate the crisis of social reproduction in the country, which was characterised by a squeezing of remunerated care work and a deepening of the gender division of labour, especially in the area of non-remunerated work.[14] In class political terms, Merkelism facilitated the cooptation of core (often male) workforces to the predominant mode of crisis management. Needless to say, this deepened existing divides among workers and obstructed the formation of working class solidarity – both within and across national boundaries. When the financial and economic crisis mutated into a sovereign debt crisis in the Eurozone, the government responded by launching a staunch defence of the existing European currency regime. Had it chosen a counter-cyclical approach to economic crisis management at home,

12. See also Alban Werner, 'Merkel ohne 'Merkelismus oder 'Merkelismus' ohne Merkel?', *Sozialismus*, No. 9, 2018, p11.

13. In this respect, Merkelism is fundamentally different from Thatcherism. Hall and Martin Jacques famously described the latter as a form of 'authoritarian populism'. They highlighted its broad appeal in the population, but also its deeply divisive effects, which had to be contained by mobilising the repressive state apparatus. Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques, Introduction, in idem (eds), *The politics of Thatcherism*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1983. See also Alexander Gallas, *The Thatcherite offensive: a neo-Poulantzasian analysis*, Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2017.

14. Anna Köster-Eiserfunke, '"Was mich auch in der Situation gehalten hat, das ist dieses System wenn du da Einblick bekommst": Pflegealltag als Krise und die Notwendigkeit transversaler Praktiken', Tanja Carstensen, Melanie Groß and Kathrin Schrader (eds.), *care | sex | net | work. Feministische Kämpfe und Kritiken der Gegenwart*. Münster, 2016, pp 86-94.

it now worked tirelessly to roll out austerity – with the help of the Troika of the European Central Bank, the European Commission and the IMF – in countries badly hit by the crisis, in particular Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain.

The political dimension of Merkelism lay in a pragmatic and ad-hoc style of political decision-making and a de-politicising, technocratic rhetoric. This included the preparedness to perform sudden U-turns in line with what were perceived shifts in the public mood. For example, under Merkel, a minimum wage was introduced – a measure that her party, the centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU), had been opposing fiercely for a long time. Likewise, the government decided, in the wake of the Fukushima disaster in 2011, that nuclear power would be phased out, calculating that this would prevent a defeat in an important state election. This also amounted to a full reversal of the party line of the CDU, which had been promoting nuclear energy for decades. Reminiscent of TINA, Merkel had a penchant for justifying surprising decisions by stating that there was no alternative ['*alternativlos*']. Her coinage 'market-conforming democracy' was much ridiculed by parts of the centre-left commentariat, but did not dent her popularity at the time.[15] Indeed, this specific political style and rhetoric were carried by a broad party political consensus. Merkelism was not just supported by the CDU and its more right-wing Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU). From 2005 to 2009 and since 2013, Merkel has been leading so-called 'Grand Coalitions' with the centre-left Social Democratic Party (SPD). In the intermittent period, she headed a 'black-yellow' coalition (named after the party colours) with the neoliberal Free Democratic Party (FDP). Presently, two populous federal states, Baden-Württemberg and Hesse, are governed by coalitions between the CDU and Green Party, a centrist force with radical roots. And last but not least, there was a serious but botched attempt to form a coalition of CDU/CSU, FDP and Greens after the 2017 Federal Election. The party political consensus was also visible in the fact that all key decisions concerning the handling of the Eurozone crisis received broad support from the five mainstream parties. Until 2017, the only party with parliamentary representation that remained outside the Merkelist consensus was the Left Party, a democratic-socialist formation that takes an anti-neoliberal stance and was deeply opposed to the government's handling of the Eurozone crisis.

Mirroring the pragmatism prevailing in politics, the cultural dimension of Merkelism is best described in terms of a cautious moderation of shifts and changes, which also involved selective concessions to cultural conservatism. Prominently, this was the case when it came to the role of migrants and their children and grandchildren in the polity and the imagined national community. More broadly, it also concerned the democratisation of cultural recognition. An example is the 'German Islam Conference', which was established by the first Merkel government in 2006 to foster a dialogue between representatives of the Muslim communities and representatives of

15. See, for example, Stephan Hebel, *Mutter Blamage. Warum die Nation Angela Merkel und ihre Politik nicht braucht* [Mother disgrace. Why the nation doesn't need Merkel and her policies], Frankfurt, 2013. These days, 'the Merkel system' and similar expressions are primarily used on the hard right. A search using the site of a major internet bookstore suggests titles like *Geplanter Untergang: Wie Merkel und ihre Macher Deutschland zerstören* [Planned downfall: How Merkel and her men of action are destroying Germany]; *Demokratie im Sinkflug: Wie sich Angela Merkel und EU-Politiker* über *geltendes Recht stellen* [Democracy in descent: How Angela Merkel and EU politicians are putting themselves above the law]; *Die Patin: Wie Angela Merkel Deutschland umbaut* [The godmother: How Angela Merkel is remodeling Germany]; and *Macht hoch die Tür: Das System Merkel und die Spaltung Deutschlands* [Pull Up the Door: The Merkel system and Germany's division]. The formulaic character of the titles is evidence of an entrenched and personalised, often gendered and commercially calculating anti-Merkel discourse. Given all that, when speaking critically of 'Merkelism', we want to be careful

to differentiate our analysis from anti-migrant and anti-left diatribes.

16. Alexander Gallas and Jörg Nowak, 'Die Krise der Demokratien: Wahlautokratie, Klassenpolitik mit leeren Händen', Kulturalisierung, Österreichische *Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft*, 40, 2, 2011, p150.

17. There are, of course, counter-tendencies to processes of cultural liberalisation. Most prominently, these are visible in the material practices of 'securitisation', in the realm of immigration and religious diversity and in an escalating anti-Muslim discourse. The best-selling books of the former social democratic politician Thilo Sarrazin are a good example for this discourse, for example *Deutschland schafft sich ab: Wie wir unser Land aufs Spiel setzen* [Germany gets rid of itself. How we are risking our country], Munich 2010. Importantly, cultural liberalisation tendencies are partly embedded in economic liberalisation processes. Here, a distinction between economically 'valuable' and 'worthless' immigrants sometimes supersedes that between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' immigrants. Critical observers have termed this constellation of

the state.

On the one hand, this intervention amounted to the government accepting that there was a Muslim German population with specific needs and interests, which was a step away from the ethnic-nationalist [*völkisch*] notions of Germanness that had been dominant from the nineteenth century onwards. On the other hand – and in line with the anti-secularism and culturalism predominating in German Conservatism – people were represented as Muslims, not as (post)-migrants or by virtue of any other aspects of their identities. Secular Germans of Turkish and Arab descent did not have much of a voice in this conversation, and the make-up of the forum favoured culturalist interpretations of social problems.[16]

The processes of cultural democratisation aligned with the broader, 'organic' cultural liberalisation tendencies of the last decades.[17] Some of the measures taken by the government, such as legal regulations against discrimination, are embedded in EU policies; others are more adequately understood as outcomes of feminist mobilisations ('gender mainstreaming', particularly offensive to the right) or of minority struggles. The broader context was a 'multicultural drift', visible, for example, in how diverse the highly popular national football team had become.[18]

At the same time, understanding the cultural strategies of Merkelism and also more broadly the *cultural dimension* of the current conjuncture requires us to consider a wider range of issues than those that are explicitly understood as 'cultural' in public discourses. The crucial purpose of the cultural dimension (often also termed the 'ideological' or even the 'moral' level)[19] for the exercise of power in the classic CCCS tradition can be understood most basically as 'to signify and thus give events a social meaning' and to ensure that people accept a given 'definition of the situation' – consciously, affectively and practically (*PTC*, pxii).[20] This leads to broader questions of hegemony and consent. In that sense, the success of Merkelism was apparent in the support that her government's disciplining of Greece enjoyed in the German population. There was and still is a strong sense that whereas German workers 'deserved' their relative wealth or at least job stability (which they sensed they had achieved by being prepared to submit to the low-wage discipline of capital and the shift from welfare to workfare), Greeks and other Europeans had irresponsibly lived beyond their means.[21] This view was taken as an economic rationale for German predominance in the Eurozone and the imposition of swingeing public expenditure cuts on the Greek government. The then Minister of Finance, Wolfgang Schäuble, and other leading members of the Christian Democratic camp, orthodox economists and the tabloid media propagated this kind of imperialist moralism. It was articulated with discursive figures such as the responsible 'taxpayer' and the 'Swabian housewife' who knows not to spend more than she (or her husband) earns.[22] These figurations are filled with chauvinistic, anti-Southern meanings that resonate in the cultural memory. The attempts of the German government and its allies to

prop up the Euro, which were made in support of financial capital and the export economy, were culturally moralised as a sacrifice made by German taxpayers for the national interest and European unity.[23]

Importantly, however, this aspect of Merkelism was never uncontested. There were dissenting voices on the left, which were audible at the 'Blockupy' demonstrations in Frankfurt and in official pronouncements of the Left Party and the remaining circles of left-wing Social Democrats and Greens. Here, like in much of Europe and the wider world, the moralist arguments for austerity abroad were understood as an ideological legitimation for neoliberalism and German economic and political dominance.[24] Dissenting voices were probably even stronger on the German right. Conservatives and ordo-liberals criticised Merkel for taking on massive financial risks benefitting 'the South' that ultimately 'the German taxpayer' would have to carry.[25]

Nevertheless, under the leadership of the Merkel government, the suppression of the Greek debtors' revolt by the Troika succeeded. It was supported by the grand coalition, by many within the Green party and the FDP, by the most vocal representatives of capital and by much of the public sphere, including centrist and left-liberal media outlets.[26] There was a Merkelist consensus. It may have been superficial, glossing over all sorts of differences and discontents, but, for the time being, it worked. It articulated with widespread moral and ideological dispositions, to some extent also with economic rationalities of core workforces, and it was reinforced by the ideological work in old and new media. Still, rather than marking anything like stability, this was a moment of hasty decision-making, direct political confrontation within the Eurozone and the EU and fast affective swings that also heightened the sense that a crisis was closing in.

'The Exhaustion of Consent'

For our analysis, we use a category from *PTC* that has not been discussed much in the wake of the publication of the book. Chapter eight deals with the 'exhaustion of consent'. Exhaustion here invokes resource extraction: One speaks of 'exhaustion' when it becomes difficult to tap a resource and supply threatens to dry up. In *PTC*, the term refers to the fact the Wilson and Heath government increasingly found it difficult to build a broad consensus in the British population for their politics. The post-war social contract between capital and labour, built on trading affluence and a welfare state for acquiescence and restraint (*PTC*, p235), broke down thanks to deepening economic faultlines, workers embracing militancy and students revolting against dominant ideologies and lifestyles post 1968. As the economic and ideological crisis tendencies ate into the social base sustaining the contract, the Wilson and Heath governments resorted more and more to repression against those who were deemed forces undermining status quo. In other words, consent as resource for the management of social domination was

forces 'post-liberal racism'. See Vassilis Tsianos and Marianne Pieper, 'Postliberale Assemblagen. Rassismus in Zeiten der Gleichheit', in Sebastian Friedrich (ed.), *Rassismus in der Leistungsgesellschaft*. Münster, 2011, pp114-134.

18. Stuart Hall, 'The multicultural question' in Barnor Hesse (ed.), *Un/settled multiculturalisms: diasporas, entanglements, transruptions*, London, Zed Books, 2000, pp209-241.

19. See Étienne Balibar, *Europa: Krise und Ende?*, Münster, 2016.

20. This view of culture as ideology is probably spelled out best in Stuart Hall, 'The problem of ideology: Marxism without guarantees' in Betty Matthews (ed.), *Marx: 100 Years On*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1983, pp135-159.

21. This was often argued in German tabloids, as analysed in Hans Bickes et al., *Die Dynamik der Konstruktion von Differenz und Feindseligkeit am Beispiel der Finanzkrise Griechenlands. Hört beim Geld die Freundschaft auf?* München, 2012. Survey results from 2015 are somewhat uneven. According to a poll by news magazine *Stern*, 55 per cent of Germans approved of Merkel's handling of the Greek crisis

exhausted, which is why governments resorted to repression.

In the context of present-day Germany, we use 'exhaustion' to refer to the fact that the consensus behind Merkelism has eroded. After the 'Summer of Migration', it became increasingly difficult for the Merkel government to secure the consent of large swaths of the population. The handling of the 'refugee crisis' clearly identified the government with a political position in a situation of polarisation, which meant that the pragmatic and depoliticising interventions typical of Merkel's style of governing had lost traction. The far right garnered mass support for its critique of the management of the 'refugee crisis', which meant, in turn, that the social base of Merkelism started to crumble. In light of this, the government embraced a more confrontational style of decision-making, obstructed migration through a variety of means and dabbled with re-importing the authoritarian modes of crisis regulation, the implementation of which was pushed onto other European countries.

2. PERIODISING 'EXHAUSTION': THE DECLINE OF MERKELISM

The Three Stages of Merkelism

It is beyond the scope of a journal article to reconstruct the history of Merkelism in its entirety. In our view, a tentative periodisation should distinguish between its emergence, consolidation and exhaustion. In what follows, we focus on this last stage because it constitutes the present moment in German politics.

Any analysis of a conjuncture needs a 'starting point' (*PTC*, xi), 'point of departure' (p215) or 'entry point'.[27] In our view, the 'summer of migration' in 2015 marks a watershed moment in present-day German politics, and we have chosen it as the starting point of our periodisation of the exhaustion of

Table 1: a periodisation of Merkelism

Period	Name of Stage	Turning Point (Beginning of Stage)	Type	Other Events and Processes
2005-2008	Emergence	Formation of Merkel's first grand coalition	Starting point	▪ CDU: Rupture with the hardline neoliberalism of the Leipzig agenda
2008-2015	Consolidation	Financial and economic crisis	Point of no return	▪ Bailouts and stimulus packages ▪ Eurozone crisis
2015-	Exhaustion	Summer of migration	Manifestation point	▪ Partial suspension of Dublin III ▪ Rise of the AfD ▪ Political fragmentation ▪ Merkel announces retirement

in mid-July 2015. This included 75 per cent of Green Party voters, 66 per cent of CDU/CSU voters, 62 per cent of SPD voters and 52 per cent of Left Party voters. See Deutsche zufrieden mit Krisenmanagerin Merkel, *Stern*, July 14, 2015.

22. Merkel referred to the 'Swabian housewife' at numerous point after 2008. In an interview in 2015, Schäuble quoted his grandmother as regularly saying that 'largesse comes just before destitution', see Jenny Friedrich-Freska, Sicherheitsrisiko Schwaben, in *Zeit Online*, 24 July 2015. The 'Swabian housewife', however, only recently became a widely known stock figure. See Andrea Keller and Ruth Stützle, ‚Schwabenbilder. Und Schwäbinnenbilder?' in Ludwig Uhland Institut für Empirische Kulturwissenschaft der Universität Tübingen, Projektgruppe ‚Schwabenbilder' (ed.), *Schwabenbilder. Zur Konstruktion eines Regionalcharakters*, Tübingen, 1997, pp61-70.

23. On the German morality plays surrounding international dominance, see also the speculative but evocative arguments by Éric Fassin and Aurélie Windels, 'The German dream: Neoliberalism and fortress Europe', *Near Futures Online*

Merkelism. After all, it fundamentally challenged many dominant political and cultural orientations. What followed was an unstable intermittent phase, which was characterised by political polarisation. This polarisation culminated in a nationalist backlash that occurred in response to the events at Cologne Cathedral during New Year's Eve in the same year, when a large number of women were sexually assaulted out of what was described as a crowd of mostly young men with immigrant backgrounds. This constitutes our point of no return, after which the erosion of the social base of Merkelism started. Accordingly, this was the point when it became impossible to reverse the changes in the political scene and in cultural self-descriptions. Finally, there was a phase of outright decline that culminates in the point of manifestation, the 2017 federal election, after which it became obvious that profound shifts had taken place. Since then, Merkelism has basically been in agony.

In many important policy fields, Merkel's governments consolidated policies that had been introduced under her predecessor. Gerhard Schröder's red-green government liberalised financial market regulations and made deep cuts to the welfare state, stripping unemployed workers of entitlements and pushing them into the least reputable category of welfare recipients, from which many had previously been able to remain symbolically

Table 2: a periodisation of the exhaustion of Merkelism

Period	Name of Stage	Turning Point*	Type	Other Events and Processes
08/2015-12/2015	Polarisation	Summer of migration	Starting point	▪ Partial suspension of Dublin III ▪ 'Welcome culture'
12/2015-09/2017	Erosion	New Year's Eve 2015, Cologne	Point of no return	▪ Right-wing backlash against migration, rise of the AfD ▪ Deal between the EU and Turkey concerning the Turkish-Greek border and the deportation of migrants ▪ Restriction of right to asylum ('Asylum Package II')
09/2017-	Agony	2017 General Election	Manifestation point	▪ Drawn-out coalition talks, formation of Grand Coalition ▪ Permanent infighting in the Christian Democratic camp ▪ Özil-Gündoğan affair and attacks in Chemnitz ▪ Merkel announces retirement

* *The turning points mark the beginning of the respective stage.*

1 'Europe at a Crossroads', March 2016. See also Yiannis Mylonas, 'Austerity discourses in *Der Spiegel* Journal, 2009-2014, *TripleC*, 13,1, pp248-269.

24. See, for example, this TV interview with Keynesian economist Heiner Flassbeck: 'Wir haben kein Griechenland-Problem, wir haben ein Deutschland-Problem!', *Arte*, 17 June 2015. For a systematic critique of the politics of austerity by left-of-centre politicians, see Cansel Kiziltepe, Lisa Paus and Axel Troost, 'Die ungelöste Eurokrise: Zwischenfazit und Ausblick anlässlich der Europawahl', *Denkanstöße des Instituts solidarische Moderne*, no. 16, Berlin.

25. This argument was crucial for the establishment of the *Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)* in 2013. Euro-sceptic conservative economists were a prominent fraction among its founding members. On the notion that Germany was a financial victim of the Eurozone, see the works of the country's most popular economist at the time, Hans-Werner Sinn: *Die Target-Falle. Gefahren für unser Geld und unsere Kinder* [The Target trap. Dangers for our money and our children]. Munich 2012; and *The Euro trap: on bursting bubbles, budgets, and beliefs*, Oxford 2014.

exempt. Importantly, there were also progressive policies that Merkel did not challenge, first and foremost the liberalisation of the citizenship law that made it easier for the children of migrants born in Germany to become German citizens.[28] In the run-up to the 2005 federal election, Merkel presented herself as a neoliberal hardliner; after failing to win a clear majority on this platform and deciding to form her first government with Schröder's SPD, she embraced the pragmatist and opportunistic political style that we describe as Merkelism.

The Point of Emergence: The Summer of Migration

In our view, the point at which Merkelism started to become exhausted was the summer of 2015. This is widely known as the time of the refugee crisis [*Flüchtlingskrise*] – or *The Long of Summer of Migration*.[29] At the time, the dire situation of Syrian civilians and refugees dominated the news, as did drownings of thousands of migrants in the Mediterranean. In August and September 2015, the Merkel government temporarily suspended the 'Dublin III' regulations and decided not to refuse entry into Germany to tens of thousands of people who had come over the 'Balkan route', many of whom were from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. For some time, it was relatively easy for refugees to enter the country. In subsequent months, the government worked to close migration routes again. German asylum law was tightened in late 2015 and early 2016, and in March 2016, the EU and Turkey struck an agreement that aimed to prevent refugees from crossing the Turkish-Greek border. Cause-and-effect analyses are obviously difficult and contentious. But it seems clear that during the autumn and winter months of 2015 and 2016, comparably safe migration routes and symbolic acts like Merkel's photos with refugees and her assurance that 'We can do this' [*Wir schaffen das*], in concert with mass mobilisations in support of refugees in German cities, encouraged new movements of migration.

A lot of ink has been spilled over the moral, political and practical erosion of the European border regime, and the question as to the motivations behind the German government's seemingly uncharacteristic and erratic actions in 2015. In our view, there is not much use in adding to the speculation over motivations. Instead, we focus on the conditions under which the government operated in the summer of 2015. What is clear is that it was faced with a real dilemma. Of course, it had the option of closing and securing the border, if need be with violent means. But this would have risked a humanitarian disaster, with thousands of vulnerable people being attacked and stranded in the middle of nowhere with no safe place to go to. Furthermore, this would have posed a grave threat to the Schengen regime of open borders in continental Europe. There was a genuine possibility that European countries would have followed suit and re-erected national borders, which would have had huge repercussions for business and the populations of inner-European

26. For example, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Die Zeit* and *Der Spiegel*.

27. Bob Jessop, 'What follows Fordism? On the periodisation of capitalism and its regulation', in Robert Albritton et al. (eds), *Phases of capitalist development: booms, crises and globalizations*, New York, Houndmills, 2001, p226.

28. See Perry Anderson, 'A New Germany?', *New Left Review*, 57, 5/6, 2009.

29. Sabine Hess et al., 'Der lange Sommer der Migration: Krise, Rekonstitution und ungewisse Zukunft des europäischen Grenzregimes', in idem (eds), *Der lange Sommer der Migration: Grenzregime III*, Berlin, 2016, pp6-24.

border regions.[30] Furthermore, pushing people back to Greece and interning all new arrivals there would have been logistically and legally very difficult. It also would have been politically dangerous in the Greek and the wider European context, given the dire situation and massive discontent after the near-exit of the country from the EU in summer 2015. The other option was to temporarily suspend the Dublin III regime and, to a degree, accept that it was impossible to control migration at this point. Of course, this threatened to cause popular discontent, divide the centre right and embolden the far right, but this was the option taken by Merkel.

In political and legal terms, a key question was what the partial and temporary suspension of the 'Dublin III' rules meant, which occurred in late August and early September 2015. Under the 'Dublin' regulations, it is legal for the German repressive state apparatus to deport almost all refugees and migrants to the Southern and Eastern European countries through which they pass on their journeys to Central Europe, at least theoretically. Practically, however, deportations do not take place in many cases, for example because of the humanitarian situation in Greek border camps. In the summer of 2015, tens of thousands of refugees and migrants were stranded in South Eastern Europe. In response, the Merkel government called for accepting those people and distributing them across the EU after they had entered Germany. In so doing, it risked its friendly relationships with governments of neighbouring countries that preferred rejection or internment of refugees at the borders. Importantly, the Merkel government had been a primary 'beneficiary' and upholder of the Dublin III system, which kept refugees and migrants out of the country or in legal limbo. Now, it suddenly transformed itself into a self-declared moral authority and a force of reform that welcomed refugees and opposed the construction of inner-European border fences.[31] Hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrants were able to enter the country in 2015, substantially shifting the balance of forces underpinning the border regime.

Soon after, the government hardened its stance on asylum seekers once again and imposed new rules for processing asylum claims. Via the EU, it sought 'deals' with repressive governments. The agreement with Turkey is particularly important in this context. In March 2016, the Turkish government agreed to block entry into Southern Europe, which led to a massive decrease in the number of border-crossers.[32] Around the same time, anti-immigrant forces in Germany launched a violent backlash which was fuelled by resentment against the government and the mainstream media.[33] This strengthened the far right and deepened pre-existing tensions and polarisations. Within the EU and its adjacent states, German attempts at political leadership in the migration question met strong resistance, merging with concerns over a repetition (though in a completely different register) of the German-led, brutal rejection of Greek political self-determination and economic survival during the Eurozone crisis.

Rather than providing the nth narrative of the events, we would like to

30. See Fabian Georgi, 'Widersprüche im langen Sommer der Migration: Ansätze einer materialistischen Grenzregimeanalyse', *Prokla*, 183, 2, 2016, p192.

31. Étienne Balibar, *Europa: Krise und Ende?*, Münster, 2016, p134. See also Giannis Varoufakis, ‚Die moralische Nation', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 13 September, 2015.

32. See Cavidan Soykan, 'Turkey as Europe's gatekeeper. Recent developments in the field of migration and asylum and the EU-Turkey Deal of 2016' in Sabine Hess et al. (eds.), *Der lange Sommer der Migration: Grenzregime III*, Berlin, 2016, pp52-60.

33. There were over 3700 attacks on refugee and refugee housing (including racist graffiti) in 2016 alone, which includes 595 physical attacks on individuals and 116 cases of arson. See the database *Chronik flüchtlingsfeindlicher Vorfälle*, https://www.mut-gegen-rechte-gewalt.de/

stress five points that reveal how 'Merkelism' both manifested and exhausted itself in the process of the government managing the Summer of Migration.

First, it is important to note Germany has long been in a deadlock over migration policy. The country does not have a flexible, 'merit'-based system of immigration that neoliberal forces have been propagating for years as an adequate response to skills shortages, demographic changes, and the global competition for highly qualified workers, usually citing the Canadian model.[34] Even people with sought-after skills face high hurdles if they try to enter Germany. For migrants with different skill-sets, claiming asylum is the only route into the country, which is why the right of asylum – enshrined in the constitution, but severely restricted from 1993 onwards – plays such a crucial role in debates over migration. The Christian Democrats have for a long time been blocking attempts to pass a wider-ranging immigration law, and there is the suspicion among those who want to restrict labour market access that asylum-based immigration is being used by corporations to undercut wages.[35]

Supporters of migration are heterogeneous and have a variety of demands. During and after the summer of 2015, two contradictory pro-migration discourses were prominent: the economically motivated call for a selective 'welcome culture' meant to attract 'valuable' immigrants; and the more universalistic demand for freedom of movement, which was coupled with a critique of the deadly European border regime and calls for a transformative, progressive and anti-racist 'welcome culture'.[36] In practical acts of support and welcoming, these rationales often fused or faded into the background, while humanitarian attitudes prevailed. Refugee support became a 'normalised' practice. People no longer identified it with strictly defined political and social groups; according to estimates, one in ten Germans over fourteen years of age participated in refugee support activities.[37]

In this situation, Merkel defended her handling of the 'refugee crisis' by articulating a moral discourse centered on human dignity with one that was utilitarian and economistic. In her speech at the party conference of the CDU in December 2015, for example, she stated that there was a 'humanitarian imperative' to help the refugees stranded in Hungary and Austria, but she also stressed that 'a country benefits from successful migration'.[38] Still, given the strong tradition of ethnic-nationalist conceptions of Germanness and 'German culture', defending this position was always going to be an uphill struggle. Whatever her exact motivations were, Merkel apparently made a leap of faith, hoping that the combination of ethical and economic rationales, and the organic and emergent social forces that carried them, would overcome the inevitable backlash from the right.

Second, the political management of the 'summer of migration' exemplified the Merkelist approach to politics insofar as it was marked by ambiguities and shifts. The government suspended Dublin III and changed refugee registration under the banner of a 'state of emergency' and in an ad-hoc fashion. Faced with a tense situation and an obvious ethical-political

34. In the 1990s and 2000s, liberals and many on the centre-left called for this kind of reform. Today, restrictive versions of it are promoted by radical-right parties like *Alternative für Deutschland*. See Guilermo Meardi et al., 'A Canadian immigration model for Europe? Labour market uncertainty and migration policy in Canada, Germany and Spain' in Jon Erik Dølvik, Line Eldring (eds.), *Labour mobility in the enlarged single European market*, Comparative Social Research, Vol. 32, Bingley, 2016, pp99-124.

35. The leader of the parliamentary faction of the Left Party, Sarah Wagenknecht, argues along those lines, *Die Welt*, 'Wagenknecht für Begrenzung der Zuwanderung', 11 May 2018.

36. The term 'Welcome Culture' had initially emerged in the context of a deficit analysis of the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees. In this discourse, the lack of such a culture was a deterrent to highly skilled migrants. In 2015, it became used more widely and in a different sense. Fabian Georgi, 'Widersprüche im langen Sommer der Migration: Ansätze einer materialistischen Grenzregimeanalyse', *Prokla*, 183, 2, 2016, pp183-203.

37. Serhat Karakayali, Olaf J.

dilemma, Merkel suddenly threw overboard conservative principles and practices that she had staunchly defended only weeks earlier. When discontent increased with Merkel's liberal stance on the border regime, she backtracked by introducing new regulations aimed at reducing the number of migrants. However, thousands of people had already arrived in the country. No matter what Merkel said or did, she was identified with a liberal stance on refugees and migration. In other words, she was chained to one side of the debate, which rendered Merkelist government techniques ineffective. Merkel and her supporters were suddenly unable to rein in centrifugal tendencies and to avoid polarisations.

A good illustration of this process are the new laws concerning asylum seekers that were passed by the coalition in late 2015 and early 2016 ('asylum package I & II'). They addressed the situation in a deeply contradictory way that seems typical for the Merkelist approach. However, they satisfied neither side of the debate. Key measures were:

(a) the adjustment of administrative procedures (such as health insurance) and the re-shuffling the responsibilities of institutions at the federal, state and local level;

(b) the introduction of compulsory language and 'integration' courses for accepted asylum seekers, which were meant to facilitate access to the labour market (which, however, remained shielded through existing regulation);

(c) the restrictive handling of housing and food provision and the swift deportation of people whose applications had been declined; and

(d) the expansion of list of 'safe states', whose citizens are not allowed to claim asylum in Germany, in an opportunistic fashion - Albania, the Kosovo and Montenegro were included in the list, which was an obvious attempt to target Roma from those countries.

The last provision in particular was heavily criticised in left-wing and centre-left circles; at the same time, strong forces on the right did not think that the government had gone far enough.

Third, the 'summer of migration' revealed deep internal conflicts within the CDU, between the CDU and the CSU, and between the government and different state apparatuses. With hundreds of thousands of people entering the country apparently without being formally registered, 'state failure' became the battle cry of conservatives to the right of the chancellor. Many within the repressive state apparatus, including the police unions, fumed over the apparent loss of control, but, for some time, dutifully swallowed their anger, at least in public.[39] Remarkably, Merkel was able to contain the discontent within her own party and maintain party discipline, despite the strong anger directed at her from right-wing grassroots activists and conservative has-beens.[40] Under the surface of a successful containment operation, however, counter-movements were taking shape. In the realm of

Kleist, *Strukturen und Motive der ehrenamtlichen Flüchtlingsarbeit (EFA) in Deutschland, 2. Forschungsbericht. Ergebnisse einer explorativen Umfrage vom November/ Dezember 2015*. Berlin 2016, p3-7, see also Ove Sutter, 'Willkommen! Emotionale Politiken des zivilgesellschaftlichen Engagements für Flüchtende', *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde*, 113, 1, 2017, pp3-23.

38. Angela Merkel, 'Bericht der Vorsitzenden der CDU Deutschlands', 14 December 2015: https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=5a4e1abe-5e28-05c0-6c7e-06f53dedada3&groupId=252038 [accessed 13 December 2018]. All quotations from German-language texts have been translated by the authors of this article.

39. See Stefan Aust, Helmar Bücher, Die Sondierung der Grenze, *Welt am Sonntag*, 21 January 2018, p6.

40. Among the conservative has-beens, there are politicians such as Wolfgang Bosbach or media figure Peter Hahne. Right-wing conservatives that remained publicly loyal at the time include Hans-Georg Maaßen, head of domestic intelligence who in 2018, after his dismissal, explained that he had been a consistent internal

party politics, the CSU, which only operates in Bavaria, threatened to expand nation-wide.[41] This would have fractured the Christian Democratic bloc and the joint parliamentary party at the federal level. Furthermore, the right-wing populist 'Alternative for Germany' party (AfD), which had lost steam due to infighting in the months preceding the summer of 2015, re-emerged as a political force. Partly, support was drawn from people who used to vote for the Christian Democrats.[42] Merkel's political base did not erode completely - the party centre held - but people began to ask whether she had turned into a lame duck.

Fourth, surprisingly large parts of the news media initially supported Merkel. This ranged from centrist-liberal outlets like *Der Spiegel* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* to right-leaning tabloids such as *Bild*, but also concerned news programmes on TV. Significantly, most of the German media temporarily gave the Merkel government's decision not to close the border a positive spin. In what seemed like a moment where engaged citizens had to take a side, many journalists actively propagated 'welcome culture', prioritised humanitarian concerns, painted civil society support for refugees in a positive light and stressed the economic and cultural benefits of immigration. For a time, it appeared as if the rules of the sayable had shifted. Supporters of 'common-sense' conservatism denounced this as a new 'opinion dictatorship' guarded by liberal journalists, triggering a 'spiral of silence' that pushed the large parts of the population in favour of a more traditional, 'homogeneous' society out of the realm of respectability.[43] One must be careful not to overstate this point and fall into the same narrative, but it seems that in these weeks, government rhetoric and mass media attitudes did merge in a different, more 'progressive' way than usual. The main media discourse pushed the opposition to anti-immigration, anti-Muslim attitudes, terror scares and other staples of sensationalist coverage, and populist politics to the sidelines for a while (in our view, a justifiable move from a normative sense). In so doing, those who were suspected of holding anti-immigration views were increasingly subject to 'educative' and paternalistic treatments at the hands of the media and leading politicians. This included a paper like *Bild*, which has a strong track-record of xenophobic, anti-immigrant discourse and was now calling on its readers to support newly arrived refugees - an unprecedented and short-lived development. What followed was a massive backlash from commentators and politicians who suggested that it had been a mistake to throw one's weight behind Merkel.[44]

Fifth, during the summer of migration, relations of forces in the cultural and political realm shifted significantly (including the subjectivities in which they are embodied) and were recomposed. Clearly, despite the temporary alignment of political and media messages, this was not a stable hegemony of a 'refugees welcome' bloc at all, but a precarious temporary offensive of migrants and heterogeneous, self-identified progressive forces who temporarily found themselves in an unwitting alliance with Merkel and supporters of a neoliberal

critic of Merkel's policies. Police union leader Rainer Wendt, on the other hand, positioned himself as the representative of angry rank-and-file police officers.

41. Robin Alexander, *Die Getriebenen – Merkel und die Flüchtlingspolitik: Report aus dem Innern der Macht*, München, 2017.

42. See Volker Weiß, *Die Autoritäre Revolte: Die neue Rechte und der Untergang des Abendlandes*, Stuttgart, 2017 for an account of long-term continuities on the German radical right.

43. See Michael Haller, Die 'Flüchtlingskrise' in den Medien. Tagesaktueller Journalismus zwischen Meinung und Information', *OBS Arbeitshefte*, 93, 2017, p144.

44. Famously, in early September 2015, *Bild* started a campaign 'Wir helfen - #refugeeswelcome' (*We are helping – #refugeeswelcome*) in support of refugees, using a slogan of the anti-border, anti-racist left. The backlash is documented in Haller, *Die 'Flüchtlingskrise' in den Medien*. Since 2004, questionable headlines, imagery and statements of *Bild* have been chronicled by *Bildblog*, https://bildblog.de. *Bild* was also a leading voice of anti-Greek

hegemonic project that prioritised open borders between EU countries for economic reasons. From the viewpoint of the nationalist-conservative right, this new fusion of forces amounted to a political and cultural rupture that required a harsh reaction. The globalists, the minorities and the do-gooders [*Gutmenschen*], represented at the parliamentary and the symbolic level by the Green Party and its supporters as well as the socialist internationalists and their useful idiots, were taking over - and did so under the leadership of Merkel, a Christian-Democrat.[45]

Overall, the summer of migration was a turning point in the political and cultural wars of position within Germany. New forces formed; old political and cultural loyalties began to fade into the background. This was visible in a political polarisation that united a centre-right chancellor with liberal and left-wing forces and created deep rifts within Christian Democracy.

The Point of No Return: New Year's Eve in Cologne

The events during the New Year's Eve celebrations in 2015 in the city centre of Cologne made headlines around the globe. A large group of young men, apparently migrants, committed sexual assaults on a mass scale. By any measure, these were horrific, sexist attacks, and while sexual assault takes place on a daily basis, these events were indeed unusual in their public and mass character, as accounts of the women attacked made painfully clear. The police initially did not inform the public about the events, and large media outlets also remained silent for about three to four days. Critics saw this as an attempt by 'politicised' state institutions and 'mainstream' media to cover up what had happened. They also claimed that the media were covering up that many of the perpetrators were the people whom 'Merkel had invited' – newly arrived refugees from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan.[46]

In our view, 'Cologne' (as a discursive event) marks the point of no return in the exhaustion of Merkelism, that is, the point at which it became clear that it was impossible to conserve the Merkelist strategy as it had existed for roughly a decade. The clearest symptoms of irreversible exhaustion were not just that there was open hostility towards the government's handling of the 'Summer of Migration' from commentators who had not necessarily been opposed to the government in the past; it was also the rise of the AfD, which used the assaults in order to mobilise for an anti-migration platform. In a nutshell, a political polarisation occurred that fed a party political realignment, which in turn made it increasingly more difficult to cling to a consensus-based and technocratic style of government. Beyond party politics, this polarisation could be sensed clearly in everyday life - in a wave of anger and resentment and affective contagion, where conversations about 'the refugee problem' increasingly turned hostile. Refugees, Germans of colour and migrants and their descendants reported a new intensity of racist comments and actions, as many ethnic Germans seemed intent on symbolically 'taking back' control

sentiment, for example with its article headlines like 'Just sell your islands, you broke Greeks!', 27 October 2010; or 'Greeks richer than us! Confirmed: Average wealth twice as high as in Germany – but the government is planning new billions worth of help', 5 February 2014.

45. See, for example, this opinion piece from October 2015 by Vera Lengsfeld, a former Green and CDU MP: Vera Lengsfeld, Merkels Plan: Grün bis linksradikal [Merkel's plan: Between a green position and left radicalism], *Die Achse des Guten* Blog, 17 October 2015.

46. Most likely, refugees who had recently arrived in Germany were a minority among the attackers. See the numbers below and Christian Werthschulte, 'Die Silvesternacht und ihre Folgen', *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte (APUZ)* pp1-3, 2017.

of 'their' territory.[47]

By now, the events in Cologne are common knowledge. According to a parliamentary report, a group of approximately 1,000 men gathered in front of Cologne Main Station on New Years' Eve, and a great number of them sexually assaulted, and stole from, mostly female passers-by. 1,020 alleged offenses were counted, out of which 302 were sexual offenses, 175 a combination of sexual offenses and theft and 474 just theft. There were 299 suspects overall – 83 from Morocco, 81 from Algeria, 33 from Iraq, 25 from Syria, 21 from Germany and everyone else from other countries. 98 of the suspects were not allowed to be in the country from a legal standpoint; 96 were asylum seekers; 46 were legally entitled to be present in the country but not asylum seekers and a small number had already been refused asylum.[48] The wording in the report ['stammten… aus'/'hail... from'] leaves it unclear how many of the suspects were born in Germany, and how many of those who had migrated to the country entered it during the 'Summer of Migration' (p365). Consequently, it did not contain conclusive evidence as to whether or not the suspects had arrived in Germany only recently.

Nevertheless, a culturalist discourse emerged quickly in response to the events that made the connection to Merkel's management of the refugee crisis and used it to 'make sense' of recent developments more broadly. It was fuelled by journalists and politicians who now argued that there was something fundamentally wrong about how the state apparatuses were handling migration, how their own language had been too positive in previous months, and how the cultural background of the recently arrived migrants and refugees was incompatible with 'German', 'European' or 'Western' culture.[49] The subtext was that the liberal stance of the government on migration was directly to blame for the assaults.

A narrative emerged and spread quickly that made a link between 'North African culture' and religion, violence, crime and sexual harassment. It turned the sexual assaults in Cologne into a symbol for dangers 'imported' through migration. On 10 January 2016, for example, the liberal-conservative Sunday Paper *Welt am Sonntag* published an article under the heading 'the phenomenon of "*taharrush gamea*" has arrived in Germany'.[50] In the article, the Federal Criminal Police Office was quoted as saying that a new form of crime had arrived in the country that was known from some Arab countries and took place in public: '*taharrush gamea* (collective sexual assault)'. The article contained nothing on the social context in the Arab countries in which this phenomenon supposedly occurs, nor on who the people are who engage in this type of assault. The only connection made was made to the figure of the '*Antänzer*', a term referring to a dancer who is moving towards someone else possibly making sexual advances. In police parlance, the term has become associated with pickpockets who use spontaneous dancing and hugging in order to confuse their victims and then rob them, if needed with the help of threatened or real violence. According to the article, the

47. According to the Ministry of the Interior, there were 186 attacks on shelters of asylum seekers in 2014; 1047 in 2015; 988 in 2016 and 313 in 2017. This suggests that the 'Summer of Migration' and the events in Cologne coincided with a wave of violent attacks against refugees. See Helena Ott, Vier pro Tag, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 6. November 2018.

48. *Schlussbericht des Parlamentarischen Untersuchung sausschusses IV*, Landtag Nordrhein-Westfalen, Drucksache 16/14550, 23 March 2017, pp364-365.

49. 'The impression arises that many journalists now over-eagerly wanted to make up for what they previously had neglected', writes Michael Haller about German journalism in January 2016. Michael Haller, ‚Die 'Flüchtlingskrise' in den Medien: Tagesaktueller Journalismus zwischen Meinung und Information', *OBS Arbeitshefte*, 93, 2017, p139.

50. Martin Lutz, 'Das Phänomen "tarrahush gamea" ist in Deutschland angekommen, *Die Welt*, 10 January 2016.

office also reported that the criminals using this technique were mostly North Africans. As Cologne Central Station is often portrayed as a hotspot for pickpocketing, the connection made was clear: North Africans, possibly working as pickpockets at the Station, used New Year's Eve to gather in front of the station and to engage in a form of assault that was indigenous to their culture, but not known in Germany. The discursive links established through the talk of '*taharrush gamea*' resembled, in their loadedness with notions of crime, violence and race, those connected to 'mugging' in 1970s Britain that were depicted in *PTC*.

Significantly, however, the Iranian-American writer Alex Shams points out that the term was misspelt and should read '*taharrush gama'ei*'.[51] He adds that *'taharrush gamea'* is by no means a common practice in Egypt nor anywhere else in the Arab World', which is why it is deeply misleading to use an Arab term instead of speaking of 'harassment'. Similarly, a group of social scientists around Angie Adbelmonem argue that '*taharrush*' was a term used by Egyptian activists from the mid-2000s to *scandalise* street harassment and to push for criminalisation.[52] Following them, the interventions of the activists linked global and local understandings of sexualised violence, and did not mean to say that '*taharrush*' was culturally specific to Egypt or the Arab world. Furthermore, they point out that linking the instances of collective harassment in Cologne with those in Egypt ignores the specificity of the political circumstances under which attacks occurred in the Egyptian context: collective violence against women was often part and parcel of the practices of political repression. What we see here is a process of disambiguation: Activities that occur in highly specific contexts and are conditioned by a multiplicity of factors are explained with reference to a single, simple cause: a homogeneous, foreign culture.

The '*taharrush gamea*' episode is linked to broader ensemble of discursive interventions in the media that occurred in response to the Cologne events and shifted profoundly the political and public discourses on migration and 'German culture'. There were now numerous voices, not just from the far right, who were openly dismissive of Merkel's migration management and of North African, Arab or 'Muslim' culture, which she was accused of ushering into the country.[53] The prevalent pattern was to ascribe to migrant men 'backward' attitudes towards women. These were either racialised, which mostly happened at the level of imagery, or culturalised, that is, presented as the product of their cultural backdrop, which was presented as a homogeneous entity.[54] Two infamous images illustrate the point about racialisation: On 9 January, conservative news magazine *Focus* published a cover showing a naked, eroticised blonde young woman with black hand marks all over it. Superimposed on the cover was a suggestive headline criticising what was seen as the dominant attitude towards migrants, which was presented as being too liberal: 'Women make accusations: After the sex attacks of migrants: Are we still tolerant or already blind?' Similarly,

51. Alex Shams, 'Neither taharrush gamea nor sexism are Arab "Cultural Practices"', *Huffington Post*, 21 January 2016.

52. Angie Abdelmonem et al., 'The "taharrush" connection: xenophobia, Islamophobia, and sexual violence in Germany and beyond', *Jadaliyya*, 1 March 2016.

53. A more in-depth discussion would of course also have to take up discourses on 'imported' Islamist terrorism. However, while the attacks in Paris in November 2015 (and over a year later in Berlin) were also important discursive events, these debates did not reach the intensity of those over 'Cologne'.

54. See Stefanie C. Boulila and Christiane Carri, 'On Cologne: gender, migration and unacknowledged racism in Germany', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 25, 3, 2017, pp286-93. (Hereafter *On Cologne*).

Süddeutsche Zeitung, Germany's most widely read broadsheet, published a stylised illustration on its front cover that showed the lower half of a white women's body with a black arm – emerging from the black background – superimposed on it, with the hand being placed on the crotch of the women.[55] The covers insinuated that all the perpetrators were somehow black and all the women who were attacked were white or even ethnic Germans (in reality, Cologne is one of Germany's most ethnically diverse cities). In the imagery used, a traditional racialising and racist othering occurred, which juxtaposed the bodies of white women with the hands of black perpetrators and invoked the old racist trope of the non-white rapist (*On Cologne*, p288).[56]

At the level of commentary, it was not so much biological, but cultural racism that came to the fore. The perpetrators were

Illustration 1a and 1b: Covers of Focus and Süddeutsche Zeitung (9/1/2016)

portrayed as representing a homogeneous cultural bloc (Islam/the Muslim world) producing traditional patriarchal values that were fundamentally incompatible with, and possibly inferior, to the allegedly gender-egalitarian culture of the West.[57] Interventions of this type were not just made by people known for staunchly conservative or right-wing views. Alice Schwarzer,[58] a famous author and spokeswoman of second-wave feminism in Germany (a status that is heavily contested by other feminist voices),[59] provided a similarly culturalist explanation. Significantly, she linked the attacks to the question of political migration management: 'With the starry-eyed importation of male violence, sexism and antisemitism, we do not only threaten our own security and values; we do not do justice to these brutalised young men, who have not been born as perpetrators. They are shaped by the experience of a traditionally violent patriarchy in the family and by the civil wars in the streets, which has turned them into perpetrators as well as victims'. In this statement, Schwarzer highlighted the 'imported' character of the problems, constructing an entirely foreign, traditional patriarchal culture (which remained ill-defined in terms of its extension and scope) and insinuating that the Merkel government was to blame for Cologne because the responsibility with 'this culture' entering Germany lay with it. Schwarzer can be seen as a proponent of 'femonationalism', an ideology based on the articulation of a nationalist take on culture with feminist themes such as anti-discrimination and gender equality.[60]

This discourse turned into a danger for Merkelism not just because it channelled discontent and directed it at the government, but also because it fuelled the campaigns of the AfD, which achieved unprecedented results in the elections at federal state level in particular in the months after the Cologne assaults. In the eastern states of Saxony-Anhalt and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, it even managed to become the second strongest parliamentary party.[61] Notably, the electoral campaigns of the AfD both in 2016 and 2017 directly commented on the events in Cologne. In the state of Baden-Württemberg, it used the slogan 'For our country – for our values'. In so doing, it suggested that the political mainstream was out of touch, anti-patriotic and ignorant of traditional German values, and combined this, in a stereotypical act of femonationalism, with the statement: 'The dignity of women is inviolable' – an allusion to the German Basic Law, whose first article is 'Human dignity is inviolable'. For the election in North Rhine Westphalia in 2017, the state where Cologne is located, the AfD used a picture of a blonde girl in front of Cologne Cathedral, a symbol for the city that is adjacent to the central station, with the slogan: 'On turning 18, Lili is even happier that her parents have voted AfD'. Reiterating the theme of an out-of-touch elite, this was accompanied by the slogan: 'Reality is our agenda'. Similar slogans and imagery were used in the Berlin city state elections in 2016.[62]

In this context, it is useful to note that the authors of *PTC* famously described the reaction to 'mugging' as a 'moral panic' in Stanley Cohen's

55. Illustration 1.

56. See Beverly Weber, 'The German refugee crisis after Cologne: the race of refugee rights', *English Language Notes*, 54, 2, 2016, p81.

57. See, for example, Harald Martenstein, 'Es geht um den Islam, nicht um Flüchtlinge', *Der Tagesspiegel*, 10 January 2016.

58. Alice Schwarzer, Die Folgen der falschen Toleranz, *Alice Schwarzer Website*, 5 January, 2016.

59. Authors of *Missy Magazine* have been particularly strong critics of Schwarzer. See Mithu Sanyal,'Hatespeech im Feminismus-Mantel: Alice Schwarzers Buch über die Kölner Silversternacht ist eine rassistische Hassschrift. Aber warum eigentlich?', [Hate speech under the guise of feminism: Alice Schwarzer's book about new year's eve in Cologne is a racist hate text. But why?] *Missy Magazine Blog*, 18 June 2016.

60. Sara Farris, 'Die politische Ökonomie des Femonationalismus', *Feministische Studien*, 29, 2, 2011, pp321-334.

61. See table 3.

62. See illustration 2.

Table 3: Result for Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Federal State Elections in the Run-Up to the 2017 General Election

Source: www.wahlrecht.de

Date	Federal State	Percentage	Rank
13 March 2016	Baden-Württemberg	15.1	3
13 March 2016	Rhineland-Palatinate	12.6	3
13 March 2016	Saxony-Anhalt	24.2	2
4 September 2016	Mecklenburg-Vorpommern	20.8	2
18 September 2016	Berlin	14.1	5
26 March 2017	Saarland	6.1	4
7 May 2017	Schleswig-Holstein	5.8	5
14 May 2017	North Rhine-Westphalia	7.4	4

Illustration 2 (a,b,c): AFD campaign posters and pictures for the federal state elections in Baden-Württemberg (March 2016), Berlin (September 2016) and North Rhine Westphalia (May 2017).

Above left: 'For our country – for our values. The dignity of women is inviolable. Vote AfD! Alternative for Germany'.

Above right: 'I vote for AfD this time so that there will not be assaults against women during the next Carnival of Cultures. That thing about an arm's length of distance just isn't working out'.

Right: 'On turning 18, Lili is even happier that her parents have voted AfD. Reality is our agenda. Alternative for Germany'.

sense, a concept that is also useful in the context of the Cologne events. Chas Critcher's definition in the afterword to *PTC* seems to fit with the discursive patterns that have emerged in response to the assaults in Cologne:

> Moral panics are perceived crises in the moral order, reinforcing the tendency of elites to embrace a single definition of the problem and the media to reproduce it (*PTC*, p393).

In this sense, the reaction to the assaults can be seen as a classic instance: a moral panic around migration from North Africa and the Arab world is created, and this is done by mobilising pre-existing patterns of prejudice or racist 'knowledge', in which predatory, sexualised violence is equated with 'North African', 'Arab' or 'Muslim culture'. As Gabriele Dietze writes:

> the only way to explain the moral panic about the so-called 'sex mob' in Cologne is to consider the fact that in it, a figuration was found against which a diffuse discontent could be mobilised … The event 'Cologne' would not have had this discursive effectiveness and it would not have gained its status as an exemplary 'truth' if it had not been filtered through a pre-existing knowledge order in which the critique of Islam is a matter of sexual politics.[63]

63. Gabriele Dietze, Das 'Ereignis Köln', *Femina Politica*, 25, 1, 2016, p96.

To make these critical points is not to sugar-coat the assaults or to claim that their meaning is entirely contained in these discourses: Obviously, sexual assault in contemporary Germany, like street crime and violence in 1970s Britain, is by no means a mere invention. To the contrary, discourses scandalising sexual violence resonate with the experiences and fears of many women. This can include attacks by 'non-white men', many more of whom were present in public squares of German cities in fall and winter of 2015. But on a collective, discursive level, it is impossible to disentangle such fears from the racist imagery in which they have historically arisen and continue to thrive. While the argument (made by some anti-racist feminists) that the Cologne events were really no different from what goes on at Munich's Oktoberfest every year seems a bit facile – this *kind* of mass attack has not happened there, and such differences matter – it is no surprise indeed that the political right discovered its interest in women's sexual self-determination only once it was coded as the need to protect 'our women'.

Culturalist discourses and the rise of the AfD also formed the backdrop of a discursive intervention by Thomas de Maizière, a leading member of Merkel's CDU and Minister of the Interior until the formation of the new government in 2018. In a column for right-wing tabloid *Bild am Sonntag* published in April 2017, he reiterated the need for a 'guiding culture' for Germany, reviving a conservative-communitarian trope that had served as counter-theme to multiculturalism and cultural liberalism in the 1990s and 2000s. Moving

beyond the Habermasian, liberal notion of a 'constitutional patriotism', he said that there were certain *cultural* principles establishing 'what essentially [im Innersten] holds us together' and serving as a 'guideline'.[64] De Maizière listed the following collection of 'principles', a strange mixture of the concrete and the abstract: shaking hands and showing your face; education; effort; historical heritage; culture; Christianity; consensus-orientation, respect and tolerance; enlightened patriotism; an orientation towards the West; and collective memory. He also made clear that he expects migrants to embrace these 'values'. Obviously, de Mazière's intervention is not a direct comment on the Cologne events. But the emphasis on shaking hands and showing your face, in particular, can be seen as reiterating the need to re-assert what he sees as important elements of 'German culture' in light of a purported Islamic challenge. At this particular point, the article appears like an attempt by a CDU politician slightly to Merkel's right (but loyal nonetheless) to once again claim ownership for a culturalist interpretation of social reality with its clear-cut sense of who is 'us' and 'them', and who should be in charge.

64. Thomas de Maizière, 'Wir sind nicht Burka', *Bild*, 29 April 2017.

There also were occasional statements by government spokespeople that the Cologne aggressors did not represent refugees and migrants more generally. But the Merkelist camp – far from actually embracing progressive multiculturalism, cosmopolitianism or transnationalism – failed to develop a positive counter-strategy. It did not go beyond vague ideas of welcome and integration and invoking images of a more diverse Germany with its own challenges and opportunities. Besides, it relied on the old tropes of authoritarian communitarianism and thus legitimised a discourse that was by now primarily associated with the far right and its supposed 'realism' about Islam.

Nonetheless, the emergence of a culturalist response to the Cologne events posed a serious problem for the Merkelist strategy: It established an anti-Merkelist counter-discourse that spilled over, with the rise of the AfD, into the political scene. In this sense, the far right was able to exploit a moral panic for its purposes and translate it into a political challenge to the status quo.

The Point of Manifestation: the 2017 General Election

The federal election in September 2017 was a turning point, which brought three important political changes. The first change consisted in the AfD entering the Federal Parliament. It was the first party to the right of Christian Democracy to do so since the 1950s.[65] Second, the political duopoly of Christian Democrats and Social Democrats, which has been dominating the political scene of the Federal Republic of Germany since its foundation in 1949, obtained its lowest share of the vote ever. Third, it took a record six months for a new government to form, which was a direct consequence of the political fragmentation visible in the first two changes.

65. Under German electoral law, parties winning less than five per cent of the national vote usually do not gain parliamentary representation. This regulation has meant that for decades, far right parties operated outside parliamentary politics at the federal level.

From the outset, the Merkelist project had been carried by the party duopoly. In 2017, the AfD based its campaign on an agenda that was directed

against Merkel. Consequently, the election result can be seen a grave defeat for Merkelism. Politicians and political commentators started to discuss whether it was time for Merkel to step aside or at least allow a discussion about succession plans. Journalist Dirk Kurbjuweit, writing for *Der Spiegel*, remarked that '[i]t could still be a while before Angela Merkel cedes power, but it's clear that we've entered the late phase of Merkelism'.[66] Likewise, Paul Hockenos, working for CNN, asserted that the new government was going to be 'Merkel without Merkelism'.[67] The election was the point of manifestation where the exhaustion of Merkelism came into plain view.

The first aspect, the entry of the AfD into the Federal Parliament, merits closer examination in terms of who voted for the party. After all, it is only possible to identify the limits and contradictions of Merkelism if one understands which social groupings were not or no longer prepared to throw their full weight behind it. The AfD gained 12.6 per cent of the vote (see figure 1) and found significant support across the country, but there is an unevenness in support if one considers three social cleavages in particular, namely the east/west, the gender, and the class divide. In East Germany, the former German Democratic Republic, the AfD's share of the vote was 21.9 per cent. It became the second biggest party after the CDU. The contrast to the West is marked, where party obtained a more modest 10.7 per cent and came fourth. Its stronghold was the Eastern state of Saxony, where it became the strongest party in the state with a share of 27 per cent of the vote. Saxony is also a region where large-scale far-right mobilisation have been taking place in recent years. Since 2014, a movement called 'Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the Occident' (PEGIDA) has been staging regular demonstrations in the state capital of Dresden, for which up to 20,000 people have turned up. Notably, there is also a clear gender divide in terms of the support for the AfD. According to exit polls, 9 per cent of women, but 16 per cent of men voted for the AfD. This divide was particularly pronounced in East Germany, where 26 per cent of men voted for the AfD, and only 17 per cent of women. Finally, the exit polls also indicate that class matters. 18 per cent of blue-collar workers [*Arbeiter]* voted for the AfD, as opposed to 11 per cent of white-collar workers [*Angestellte]*, 9 per cent of civil servants [*Beamte*] and 12 per cent of self-employed people [*Selbstständige*]. Likewise, people with a low or mid-level of education were more likely to support the party than people with high-school diplomas or university degrees. This does not turn the AfD into a working-class party – after all, the numbers show that there was significant support from people with other social backgrounds. But the figures show that there was a strong constituency inside the working class. It should be noted in this context that the two parties with strong organisational and ideological ties to organised labour, the SPD and the Left Party, gained only 23 and 10 per cent respectively among blue-collar workers - results only marginally higher than their overall share of the vote.[68] The election results of the AfD shows that a ticket voicing fundamental discontent with the government was successful,

66. Dirk Kubjuweit, 'Surveying the Ruins of Merkelism', *Spiegel Online*, 15 December 2017. See also Wolfgang Streeck, 'Merkel: ein Rückblick', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 17 November 2017.

67. Paul Hockenos, 'Germany's Future: Merkel without Merkelism', 11 January 2018; see also Alban Werner, 'Merkel ohne "Merkelism" oder "Merkelismus" ohne Merkel?', *Sozialismus*, 9-2018, pp8-13.

68. Paul Blickle et al., 'The AfD profits from non-voters and Merkel defectors', *Die Zeit*, 24 September 2017; ZDF, Wahl 2017: Bundestagswahl, *ZDF Wahltool*, 24 September 2017.

and that there are social groups where it resonated strongly. This is a significant difference to previous elections where the mainstream parties broadly supportive of Merkelism dominated the political scene, with the Left Party representing the only parliamentary grouping outside the Merkelist consensus.

The second important aspect of the election result was that it amounted to a disaster for the party duopoly, which consists of the Christian Democrats (the alliance of the CDU and CSU) and of the SPD. The Christian Democrats gained only 33 per cent of the vote, their second worst result in history. The share of the vote for the SPD, 20.5 per cent, was its lowest after World War II in a general election. The combined result for the two blocs, 53.5 per cent, was another record low – down from 67.2 per cent in 2013 and almost 40 percentage points less than in 1976, the record year in post-war West Germany (see figure 3). Considering that two of three Merkel governments up until the election were carried by an alliance of the two blocs – a so-called grand coalition – the result can be seen as defeat for Merkelism at the ballot box. Just like in other European countries like France or Spain, there are tectonic shifts in the German party political system. If recent opinion polls are anything to go by, the six parliamentary parties are no longer far apart in terms of their share of the vote, and it is a real possibility that the SPD will come third or even fourth in the next general election. This would amount to an end to the era of the party duopoly, which began in 1949.

The third significant political change was the duration of the coalition talks after the election. Since the German electoral system is based on a modified

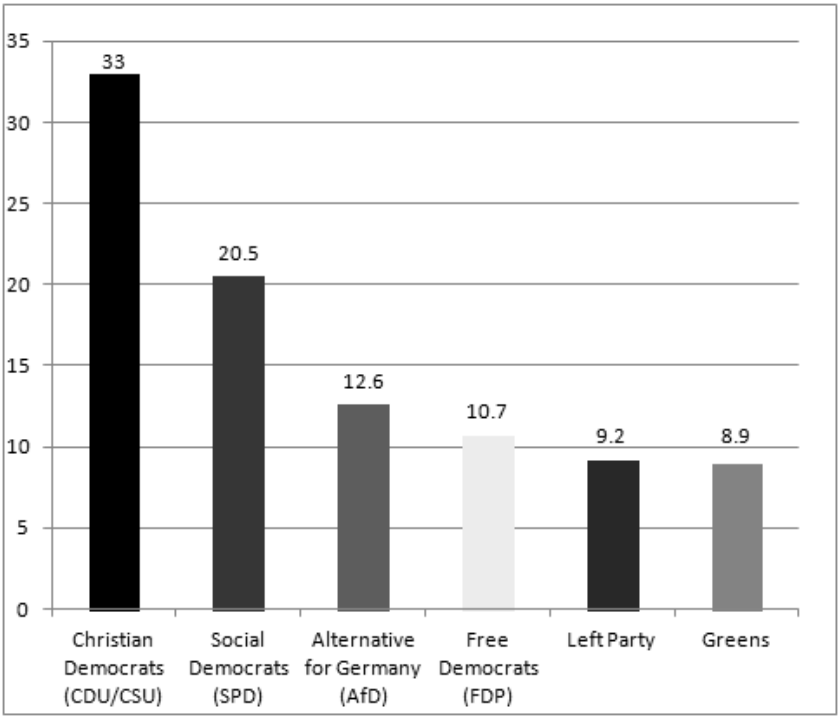


Figure 1: Result of the 2017 federal elections in Germany (in per cent). Own illustration. Data source: Bundeswahlleiter.

form of proportional representation, there are usually coalition governments. Thanks to the need for negotiations between parties, the formation of a new government often takes weeks. This time, however, the time span from the election to the formation of the government was about six months, which was also unprecedented in the history of the Federal Republic. The existence of six parliamentary parties and the bad result for the duopoly meant that there was just one option for a two-party coalition, which was a reprise of the 'grand coalition'. Otherwise, only three-party coalitions were possible. Things were complicated by the fact that straight after the elections, the Social Democrats refused to enter coalition talks, arguing that their role, after a stinging defeat, was to lead the parliamentary opposition. Since the Christian Democrats had ruled out cooperating with the AfD and the Left Party, and there is no tradition of minority governments in Germany, this left only one viable model for a coalition: An alliance of the Christian Democrats, the FDP and the Green Party. Negotiations between the parties did indeed get underway, but finding agreement was difficult from the start because three sides with diverging political agendas were involved. After several weeks of talks, the FDP decided to withdraw, which meant that the 'Jamaica' option had died. Following a lot of soul-searching and internal conflict, the SPD decided to perform a U-turn and enter coalition talks, which in the end resulted in the formation of a new 'grand coalition'. Notably, there was wide-spread dissatisfaction among leading representatives of the Christian Democrats about the results of the negotiations and a feeling that Merkel had made too many concessions.[69]

The events after the formation of the new government confirm that another turning point in the exhaustion of Merkelism had been reached. There was a long summer of discontent, which reflected strong divisions in the population over questions of migration and national identity. The new government proved unable to find agreement over these issues, which shows that consensus had eroded, and that Merkelism had entered the stage of agony. Right-wing forces inside the governing bloc gained small symbolic victories such as re-naming the German Ministry of the Interior, *Bundesministerium des Innern*, to *Bundesministerium des Innern, für Bau und Heimat* [official translation: Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building and Community]. This was an intentional iteration of the contentious, evocative and ambiguous term *Heimat* [territorial and emotional home/homeland] that often serves as code for traditionalist views on national belonging.[70] Strikingly, the main fault line within the governing bloc lay between the CDU and SPD on one side and the CSU on the other. Whereas Merkel's inner circle and leading social democrats attempted to defend the existing project, the Bavarian party tried to move the government to the right and to force it to unite behind a hard line stance on migration. This would have amounted to a rupture with what is generally presented as the centrist and moderate orientation of Merkelism.

In May 2018, photos surfaced in the news media of İlkay Gündoğan and

69. See Paul Carrel and Thorsten Severin, 'Merkel, SPD under renewed fire over German coalition deal', Reuters, 12 February 2018.

70. *Allison Williams, Daniel Delhaes, Martin Greive*, 'Germany's new homeland ministry raises questions – and eyebrows', *Handelsblatt Global*, 13 February 2018; Peter Blickle, *Heimat: A critical theory of the German idea of homeland*, Martlesham, Studies in German Literature, Linguistics and Culture, 2014.

Mesut Özil, well-known footballers and Germany internationals of Turkish descent, showing them handing shirts of their clubs to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the Turkish president. In response to this event, Germany supporters started jeering and booing both players at matches of the national team. It quickly transpired that the hostility towards the players was not just a result of them aligning themselves with an authoritarian political leader. Indeed, there was a racist subtext to the complaints about the meeting with Erdoğan, with politicians, football officials and commentators speaking in a highly aggressive and derogatory manner about the players and questioning their loyalty to their country. Werner Steer, the head of the publicly funded German theatre in Munich, made several disparaging comments on twitter and told the two players to 'bunk off' and 'piss off' to 'Anatolia'. An even more extreme comment came from Bernd Holzhauer, the social democratic deputy mayor of Bebra, a small town in Hessen. Holzhauer published a post with his private Facebook account in which he called the two players 'goat fuckers'. The enmity towards Gündoğan and Özil resurfaced after the dismal performance of the German team at the 2018 World Cup in Russia. Özil in particular was blamed for the poor showing of the team - despite the fact that most of the Germany players had delivered sub-standard performances. Jens Meier, an AfD MP known for his racist views, stated on Twitter that '[w]ithout Özil, we would have won'. Even the business manager of the Germany team, Oliver Bierhoff, publicly stated that Özil should not have been included in the squad, indicating that he had not been in shape.[71]

71. Uzi Dann, 'Ozil's decision to quit German soccer team is a victory for racists worldwide', *Haaretz*, 25 July 2018; *Deutsche Welle*, 'The Özil affair: A chronology in quotations', 23 July, 2018; Peter Nowak, 'Rechte hetzen nach WM-Aus gegen Özil', *Neues Deutschland*, 28 June 2016; Franz Kotteder and Frank Müller, 'Chef des Deutschen Theaters beschimpft Özil und Gündogan', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 23 November 2018.

The whole affair is relevant for our topic because it is indicative of how

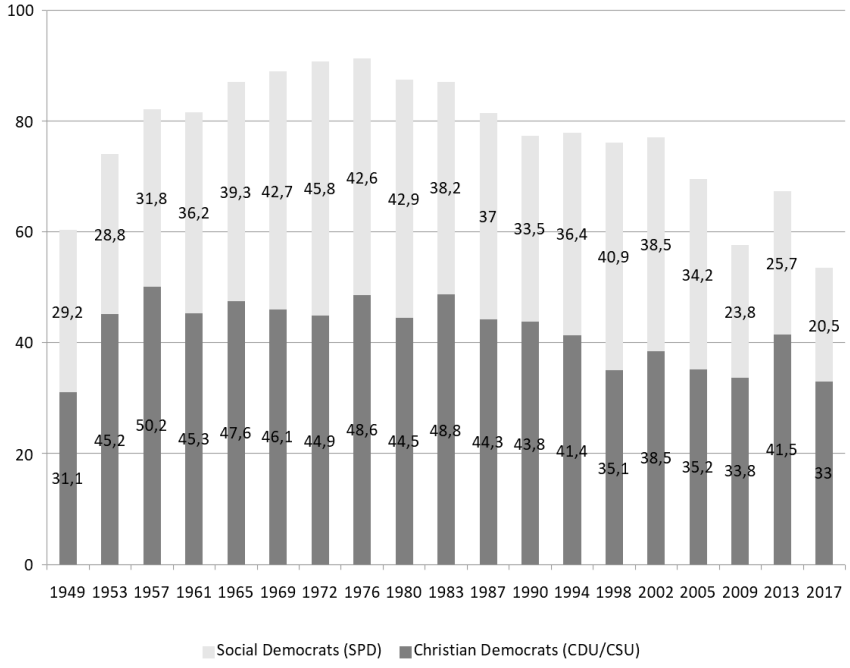


Figure 2: Share of the two main party political formations in general elections, Federal Republic of Germany. Own illustration. Data source: www.wahlrecht.de, Bundeswahlleiter.

Merkel and her circle struggled to preserve the broad consensus that had carried the Merkelist project. From the mid-2000s, the German FA had started to present the team as a symbol of multiculturalism and a motor for social integration. Merkel had aligned herself with the team and its image by attending key matches at big tournaments and regularly meeting the players. Once the recriminations against Gündoğan and Özil had started, she got together with both players for a private conversation. Subsequently, she attempted to alleviate tensions by suggesting that they had misjudged how people would respond to the photo with Erdoğan. But her attempt to play down the issue backfired, as is visible in the reaction to the performance at the World Cup. An MP of the AfD, Norbert Kleinwächter, created a direct link between Merkel's agenda and the Germany squad by alleging that 'the team represents the dysfunctional Germany of Angela Merkel'. In July 2018, Özil announced his retirement from the national team, citing 'racism and disrespect' as reasons for his decision.[72]

Around the same time, a deep rift in the Christian Democratic camp emerged. Horst Seehofer, leader of the CSU and Minister of the Interior, demanded that asylum seekers who had been registered already in a different EU member state should be refused entry into Germany – a demand that again posed a threat to the open border regime inside the Schengen Area. Whereas Merkel and her circle promoted the idea of finding an EU-wide agreement on the distribution of asylum seekers across Europe, Seehofer insisted that Germany should act unilaterally. Temporarily, Seehofer threatened to simply go ahead with implementing his plan, and commentators suspected that Christian Democracy as a single, united parliamentary party could break apart as a result. In the end, the government chose to paper over the cracks with what was presented as a face-saving compromise. It agreed that there would be a 'transit procedure' for asylum seekers registered in other EU countries who crossed the Austrian-German border. The aim was to return them to their host countries within 48 hours; in order to ensure this, the government announced that it would seek bilateral agreements with other EU countries regulating their repatriation.[73]

In August 2018, the political tensions around the migration issue heightened once more when a German with Cuban roots was killed in a knife attack in Chemnitz, a city in Saxony. The three suspects were asylum seekers who seemed to be of Syrian and Iraqi origin. The killing triggered a wave of protests organised by far-right groups against migration as well as antifascist counter-mobilisations. It deepened the chasm running through the Christian Democratic camp and the Cabinet thanks to widely diverging perceptions of what had happened, and what an adequate political reaction to the events was. This concerned, in particular, a march of 800 people organised by a group of far-right hooligans in order to protest migration, which took place on 26 August. The object of contention was whether some of the demonstrators had chased and attacked migrants. The prime minister of Saxony, Michael

72. *Deutsche Welle*,'The Özil affair: A chronology in quotations'; Peter Nowak, ‚Rechte hetzen nach WM-Aus gegen Özil', *Neues Deutschland*, 28 June 2016.

73. Landis MacKellar, 'European asylum crisis: the politics of gridlock and magical thinking', *Global Policy Opinion*, 11 July 2018; *Deutsche Welle*, 'German government agrees on migration compromise', 5 July 2018.

Kretschmer, a member of the CDU, denied this had happened. In contrast, Angela Merkel remarked that '[w]e have video footage showing that there was targeted harassment, that there was rioting, that there was hate on the streets'. Merkel's view was rebuked, in turn, by the head of domestic intelligence, Hans-Georg Maaßen, a CDU member. Maaßen echoed far-right conspiracy theories by alleging that a video showing demonstrators attacking a man had been fabricated, and that there was the possibility that people had deliberately spread 'misinformation' with the aim of distracting 'the public from the murder in Chemnitz'.[74] Importantly, journalists investigating the issue found that there is plenty of evidence suggesting that the video is genuine. For example, they were able to identify a victim, an Afghan migrant, who confirmed that he was the person being attacked in the video.[75]

Maaßen's comments were met with calls for his resignation by the Social Democrats and all the opposition parties apart from the AfD. At this point, Seehofer, who was Maaßen's direct superior, chose to intervene in the debate. He defended Maaßen. Commentators suggested that the coalition might break apart because of Seehofer's insistence that Maaßen had done nothing wrong. In fact, it led to another farcical compromise. The government decided that Maaßen would be relieved of his duties, but at the same time promoted (at a higher remuneration) to state secretary in Seehofer's ministry. This act of horse-trading caused outrage among politicians, commentators and members of the general public. New negotiations ensued, after which it was decided that Maaßen should become a special advisor of the ministry at the same level of remuneration. In November 2018, the media reported that Maaßen had held a farewell speech, in which he insisted that what he what had said was right and that 'radical left elements inside the SPD' were to blame for him being relieved of his duties.[76] As a result of this speech, Seehofer decided that Maaßen would have to retire.

Commentators argued that Seehofer's confrontational stance was at least in part motivated by an attempt to contain the rise of the AfD through outflanking it – all the more since a state election in Bavaria was coming up in the autumn.[77] The constant squabbles inside the government benefited neither Seehofer nor Merkel. The CSU sustained a heavy blow and lost its absolute majority in the Bavarian election in October 2018; and the CDU lost heavily in the state election in Hesse in the same month. The brittleness of the Merkelist consensus was visible in the fact that the SPD also did very badly in both elections, with the winners being the AfD and the Green Party. In this situation, the death knell for Merkelism was sounded. Merkel announced that she would step down as party leader in December 2018 and not seek re-election as chancellor after end the end of her current term. At the same time, Seehofer resigned as leader of the CSU, but not as minister.

All in all, the fallout from the 2017 general election shows that Merkelism had reached the stage of agony. There was no longer a broad consensus across mainstream parties, and not even a consensus inside the Christian

74. Kate Connolly and Jess Smee, 'German spy chief contradicts Merkel over Chemnitz clashes', *The Guardian*, 7 September 2018; *Deutsche Welle*, 'Chemnitz violence: 'No evidence' far-right chased foreigners, says intelligence chief ', 7 September 2018.

75. Till Eckert, 'Nach viralem Video: Das ist die Geschichte des Menschen, der in Chemnitz von einem Neonazi gejagt wurde', Ze.tt, 30 August 2018.

76. *Deutsche Welle*, 'Interior Minister Seehofer forces ex-spy chief Maassen into retirement', 5 November 2018. See also Jefferson Chase, German government under fire over Maassen spy chief scandal, *Deutsche Welle*, 19 September 2018.

77. Alban Werner, 'Merkel ohne 'Merkelism' oder 'Merkelismus' ohne Merkel?', *Sozialismus*, 9,2018, pp12.

Democratic camp. Accordingly, it became considerably more difficult, for Merkel, to cling on to her position as chancellor. As a consequence, she chose to announce a step-by-step retreat from the political frontline. The weakness of the chancellor and of the parties behind the Grand Coalitions are clear signs that Merkelism had been exhausted.

3. ASSESSING THE ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF 'EXHAUSTION'

The rifts in the Merkelist consensus reflect fundamental disagreements in the political scene and the population over the question of migration. At first sight, this is a political and cultural question. At the political level, issues such as border management, the distribution of refugees over the country, the allocation of resources, the access of refugees to education and their participation in the labour market are all objects of polarised debates. Importantly, the discussions also concern notions of 'belonging', cultural dominance and national identity – 'culture' in the sense in which the term is understood popularly. This is visible in the discussions over whether there is a need for a German 'guiding culture', to which migrants have to adhere. 'Defending German culture' once again became the battle cry of the right, but in new constellations of forces.

What was not so much at the forefront of political debates – perhaps surprisingly – was the economy, with the exception of the question of the labour market integration of migrants and refugees. In general, the dominant economic discourse is that Germany has weathered the Great Crisis comparably well – and that this is thanks to a strong industrial base, moderate unions prepared to accept wage restraint, a successful liberalisation of the labour market in the early 2000s and forceful corporatist institutions that facilitate tripartite agreements in times of crisis.[78] This discourse is fed by the fact that growth picked up fairly quickly again after the slump. It is bolstered by the oft-heard reference to a 'jobs miracle'[79], which reflects the fact that a record number of people is in work – the labour force has increased from 39.3m people in 2005 to 44.2 in 2017,[80] and the unemployment rate has dropped from 11.1 per cent in December 2005 to 5.3 per cent in December 2017.[81]

A closer look at economic data, however, shows that the picture is far from rosy. An important qualification to the 'jobs miracle' is that the absolute volume of hours worked by the labour force is roughly the same as at the turn of the millennium.[82] If the drop in the unemployment rate is factored in, this means that significantly more people work fewer hours than before. Since the development of wages per hour is rather weak,[83] it can be assumed that lower individual work hours translate into lower individual earnings. In other words, more people are in work, but this is, to a much larger degree than before, part-time work that does not pay very well. In 2015, 15.3m people worked part-time; twenty years earlier, the number had been 8.3m.

78. See, for example, Danhong Zhang, 'The secrets of Germany's economic success', *Deutsche Welle*, 19 October 2013.

79. *IAB Forum*, 'From 'the sick man of Europe' to the 'German job miracle', no date.

80. DeStatis, Arbeitsmarkt, *Statistisches Bundesamt*, 2018: https://www.destatis.de/DE/ZahlenFakten/Indikatoren/Konjunktur indikatoren/Arbeitsmarkt/arb210.html [accessed 28 February 2018].

81. DeStatis, 'Zahl der Erwerbstätigen im Jahr 2017' um 1,5 Prozent gestiegen, *Statistisches Bundesamt*, 2 January 2018: https://www.destatis.de/DE/PresseService/ Presse/Pressemitteilungen/2018/01/PD18_001_13321.html [accessed 27 February 2018].

82. See figure 1.

83. See figure 2.

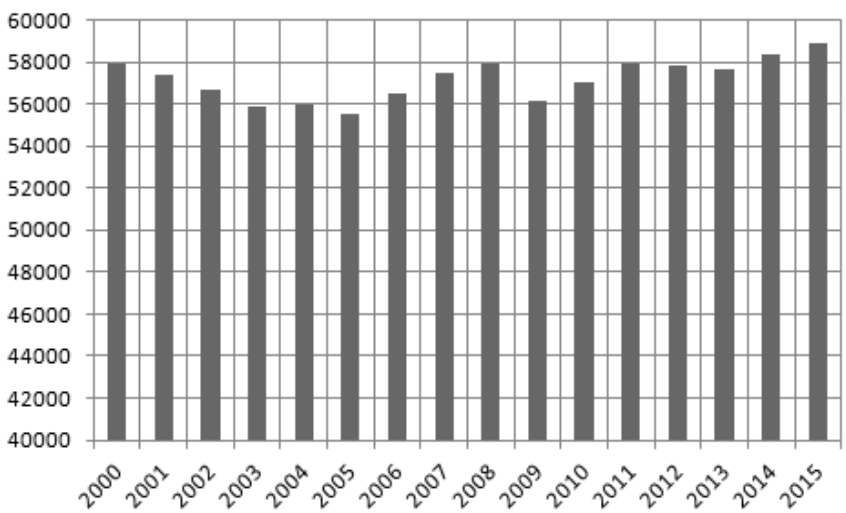
The number of people working full-time dropped over the same time span from 25.9m to 24m.[84]

Furthermore, if we look more closely at wage development, it becomes clear that the 'trickle down' effects of the expansion of the labour force are strictly limited. Wages have not kept up with GDP growth since German reunification. Furthermore, it is revealed, if income deciles are compared, that those with the highest incomes have benefited considerably from GDP growth since the turn of the century. In contrast, those with mid-level wages have mostly seen wage stagnation, and those with the lowest incomes have lost out significantly.[85] Correspondingly, there is a sustained increase in economic inequality in the country,[86] with the poorer segments of the German population struggling to make ends meet.

The reality behind the narrative of the success of the German economy is that GDP growth does not translate into increasing living standards for the majority of people, and that the German working class is struggling economically. This is a result, to a good part, of the neoliberal attack on the working class, which shifted the relations of forces between labour and capital significantly in favour of the latter. This development is connected, in particular, to the government of Gerhard Schröder, who led a coalition between the SPD and the Green Party between 1998 and 2005. It instigated welfare state retrenchment on a grand scale and, through changes in labour legislation, facilitated the expansion of a low wage sector.

In other words, the German working class has been experiencing a protracted weakening of its socio-economic position, which has been covered up through the narratives of Germany as a success story. The Merkel

Figure 3: hours worked by the labour force (in millions)



Own illustration, data source: Statistische Ämter der Länder und des Bundes

84. SPON, 15 Millionen Beschäftigte arbeiten in Teilzeit, *Spiegel Online*, 28 April 2017.

85. See figure 2.

86. See Eckhard Hein and Daniel Detzer, 'Financialisation, redistribution and "export-led mercantilism": the case of Germany', in Alexander Gallas et al. (eds), *Combating inequality: the global North and South*, London, Routledge, 2016, pp132-149.

87. The debt break introduces a strict cap on borrowing both for federal and state governments. It obliges them to follow the principle of a balanced budget and creates tight limits concerning the expansion of public debt. Critics argue that it obstructs expansionary strategies in fiscal policy and has a pro-cyclical effect during economic downturns, which can contribute to worsening economic crises. Eckhard Hein and Achim Truger, 'Fiscal policy and rebalancing in the Euro area: a critique of the German debt brake from a post-Keynesian perspective', *Levy Economics Institute Working Paper*, no. 776; Andrew Watt, Germany's debt brake is not a model for europe, Social Europe Blog, 14 September 2016.

88. See also Didier Eribon's insightful comments on how the neoliberal turn of social democratic

governments, with their commitment to defending the status quo, have done nothing to reverse the fortunes of German workers. Much rather, they have consolidated the advances of capital made during the Schröder era through administering the status quo, for example by enshrining a debt break in the German constitution.[87]

As long as there was an open and global economic crisis, the Merkelist call for unity and restraint did not produce discontent on a massive scale. Merkel and her allies managed to produce consent through invoking the need to pull together. But the more the crisis receded into the background and the narrative of the success of the German economy came to the fore, the less was there a language available for people to air their economic grievances.[88]

This is visible in the Eurobarometer polls of the European Commission, which contains items measuring people's perceptions of their own situation and of the situation in their countries. According to Eurobarometer, 49 per cent of the Germans polled in January 2009 saw the economy as one of two key problems the country was facing; by March 2018, this number had dropped to 2 per cent.[89] And yet, in a special poll conducted 2017, a huge share of the people polled in Germany agreed with statements at odds with this number: 92 per cent of respondents consented to the proposition that '[n]owadays in Germany people's differences in income are too great'. For the claim that '[t]he government in Germany should take measure to reduce differences in income levels'[90], the number was 84 per cent.

In a nutshell, there seems to be a silent, smouldering discontent with the socio-economic situation, which does not have a clear language or a target. It is often voiced in a language compatible with neoliberalism that highlights the importance of hard work, merit and fairness.[91] This suggests that it is difficult for the government to produce consent, and that the projection of security and stability characteristic of Merkelist discursive interventions is not as effective as in times of open crisis. The brittleness of the Merkelist consensus among certain groups of workers is not just visible in the social composition of AfD voters, which we have discussed in the preceding chapter, but in the fact that there is evidence of a significant number of active trade unionists in East Germany supporting the far right.[92] In other words, the social base of Merkelism in the working class appears to be narrowing: Even the core workforces, which had part been co-opted to the Merkelist project from the start with the help of corporatist agreements around domestic crisis management, have been feeling economic pressure for a long time while being told that all is well in Germany. Herein lies the economic dimension of the exhaustion of Merkelism.

While we believe that the economic dimension is crucial, it is *not* our argument that it was smouldering economic discontent that *ultimately caused* the anti-refugee swing of opinion or the rise of the AfD, and that the latter were 'really' about socio-economic decline, rather than, for example, racism. Instead, we argue that the discontent forms the breeding ground in which

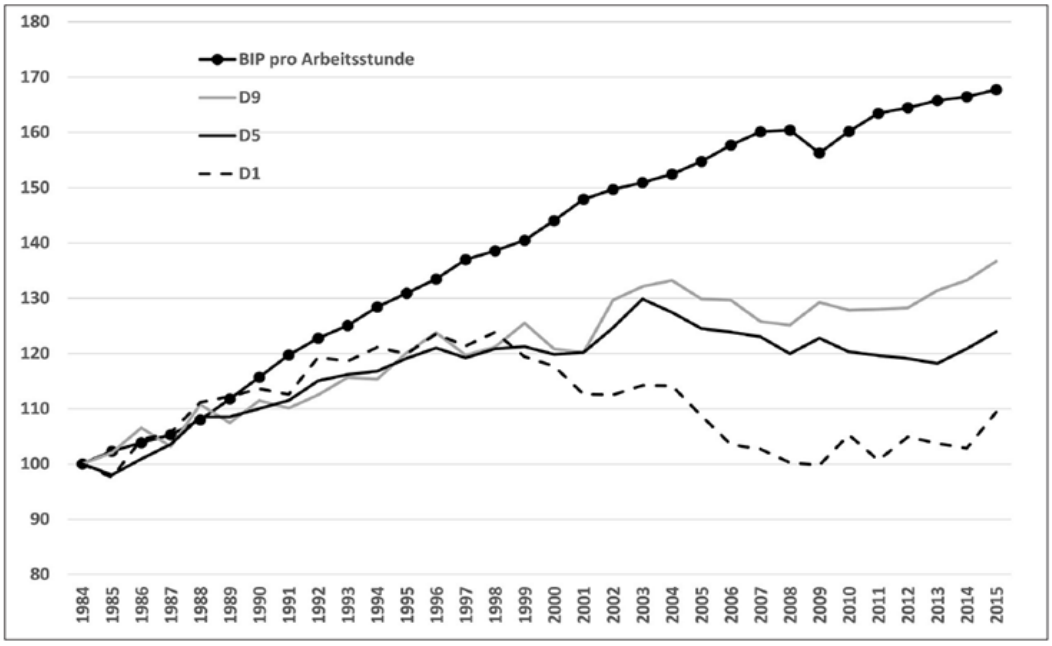
and socialist parties has stripped workers of their ability to make sense of their situation with the help of a language of class. Didier Eribon, *Returning to Reims*, Los Angeles, MIT Press, 2013, p130.

89. Eurobarometer Interactive, http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Chart/getChart/chartType/lineChart//themeKy/42/groupKy/208/savFile/54 [accessed 27 November 2018].

90. Special Eurobarometer 471, Germany Factsheet, p4, ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/ResultDoc/download/DocumentKy/82713 [accessed 27 November 2018].

91. Public sector trade union ver.di has recently published an opinion poll on attitudes of apprentices towards the world of work. According to this poll, 99 per cent of respondents stated that it is 'very important' or 'important' that 'things in the world of work and in the firm are fair and just', and 25 per cent declared that they do not agree 'at all' or 'rather less' with the claim that 'things in their firm' are 'fair and just'. Ver.di, 'Fairness, Gleichbehandlung, Gerechtigkeit - was Azubis von der Arbeitswelt erwarten', May 2018.

Figure 4: Development of real hourly wages according to deciles in West Germany (all wage-dependent employees), compared to GDP per work hour [BIP pro Arbeitsstunde]



Source: Gerhard Bosch and Thorsten Kalina (eds), Wachsende Ungleichheit in der Prosperität: Einkommensentwicklung 1984 bis 2015 in Deutschland, IAQ-Forschung, vol. 8, no.3, 2017, p8.

racist attitudes (old or new) spread easily if they articulate discontent with the status quo. We will return to this question below.

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that allegiances with the party duopoly of centre-right and centre-left has weakened considerably, as it can be observed in many other European countries, for example Austria, Greece and Spain. Both the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats are identified with the Merkelist project, and a clear indicator of its exhaustion is a process of party political fragmentation, which makes it hard to form stable coalition governments. This does not just affect the federal level. It is also visible at the level of federal states, where more and more governments have emerged that are based on 'unconventional' alliances cutting across political camps without following the traditional 'grand coalition' model of an alliance between CDU and SPD: the 2016 coalition of CDU, SPD and the Greens in Saxony-Anhalt; the 2016 coalition led by the Green Party with the CDU as the junior partner in Baden-Württemberg; the 2017 coalition between SPD, FDP and Greens in Rhineland-Palatinate; and the 2017 coalition between CDU, the Green Party and the FDP in Schleswig-Holstein.

Admittedly, the fragmentation had been going on for a while, reflecting both the protracted economic crisis and the re-alignments of different socio-political milieus and identities. But it has been gathering speed after 2015.

92. Klaus Dörre, 'A Right-Wing Workers' Movement? Impressions from Germany', *Global Labour Journal*, 9, 3, pp339-347.

Merkelism is exhausted politically because it appears very hard for Merkel and her closest political allies to gather the troops behind a political project. Put differently, the political management of the 2015 summer of migration has created the foundation for a political polarisation that has undermined Merkelism as a de-politicising mode of crisis management based on 'muddling through'. The clearest symptoms of the exhaustion of Merkelism can be found in the political scene, namely, the rise of the AfD, the difficulties surrounding the formation of a new government after the 2017 federal election and the permanent infighting in the Christian Democratic camp ever since.

Importantly, however, there are other, connected indicators, which are predominantly cultural and form the third prong of the exhaustion of Merkelism. They primarily concern the polarisation of civil society around the themes of migration, citizenship and nationhood and the questions of how large the circle of 'we' should be drawn - whether there should be a German 'guiding culture', and whether what is seen as 'Arab' or 'Islamic' culture is compatible with 'German' values. Here, Merkel's hesitant democratisation and modernisation strategies have not satisfied the political right, which has contributed to its radicalisation. The resulting polarisation is visible in the emergence of a pro-refugee and pro-migration camp, embodied in the popular support networks for newly arrived refugees, and an anti-refugee camp. The latter does not just include political formations hostile to migration such as PEGIDA and the AfD, but also a vocal grouping of intellectuals with different political allegiances who attempt to draw a clear line between Islam and German culture. This grouping includes representatives of the far right such as Götz Kubitschek, a publisher, and Akif Pirinçci, a novelist; conservatives such as the journalists Harald Martenstein and Roland Tychi; Thilo Sarrazin, a well-known former politician and SPD member; as well as feminist Alice Schwarzer.

Observers and scholars have attempted to identify both the socio-economic bases of the new political 'camps' that were re-shaped and solidified in the wake of the 'summer of migration' and the concomitant polarisation, usually drawing upon the popular SINUS milieu studies. For example, Peter Unfried, a journalist and supporter of a green-tinged neoliberal project, has taken up sociologist Andreas Reckwitz's impressionistic account of a society split into three parts (plus a small elite) in order to explain the new divides. According to Reckwitz, who sums up a host of other studies and comes to a diagnosis that resonates with social commentary in many countries in recent times, there is a 'new', university-educated, cosmopolitan and urban middle class,[93] which, Unfried argues, generally supports taking in refugees, across party preferences.[94] We could add that despite a widespread anti-neoliberal attitude, these people are, in their professional lives, often also among the upper- and mid-level administrators of neoliberalism and, despite precarisation, among its material beneficiaries.[95] Following Unfried, this 'camp' is facing an anti-immigrant counterpart composed mostly of two different social groupings:

93. Andreas Reckwitz, *Gesellschaft der Singularitäten. Zum Strukturwandel der Moderne*, Berlin, 2017.

94. Peter Unfried, 'Was bleibt vom Jahr 2017? Ein Land auf der Suche', *die tageszeitung*, 31 December 2017.

95. Cornelia Koppetsch, *Die Wiederkehr der Konformität. Streifzüge durch die gefährdete Mitte, Frankfurt am Main*, New York, 2013.

a lower working-class precariat, now voting for the far left, far right or, more likely, not at all, *and* a milieu of non-academic, skilled blue-collar and white-collar workers, which crosses party preferences and includes many union members.[96] The latter group has seen its cultural capital devalued in the course of cultural liberalisation, resents the other groups, struggles with economic transformations and now constitutes the recruiting ground for the new right.

But where in this picture are the culturally and ethnically diverse urban constituencies of 'democratic cosmopolitanism', who are not at all the same as the new middle class?[97] And what about the hundreds of thousands of refugee supporters and migrants in small towns and rural areas, for example low-income, progressive nurses and social workers? Or those members of the new middle classes who primarily identify, at the political level, with hardline neoliberalism, and who have begun to subscribe to 'new-right' periodicals? And the many supporters of the radical right in the traditional fractions of the bourgeoisie? While diagnoses like the ones by Unfried and Reckwitz – similar to those focused on generalised 'anxieties'[98] – have some plausibility, they unwillingly end up primarily illustrating the lack of solid quantitative and qualitative empirical research on social cleavages and attitudes as well as the lack of new social imaginaries. Nonetheless, as much social commentary in the last years has reiterated, such inter-milieu resentments exist, and they are articulated with lifestyle preferences as well as class cleavages and other structurally inscribed and institutionalised hierarchies. They explain a good part of why the 'cosmopolitan' left has limited appeal to people in the lower-middle and working class.[99]

Importantly, Merkelism's cultural exhaustion also manifests itself in the increasing distrust of parts of the population in centrist and mainstream media, the growth of right-wing publications, online and offline, and the strong demand for alarmist (fake) news about rape and violence perpetrated by immigrants. [100] While this polarisation can by no means be reduced to a West/East divide, it does have a strong regional component. In parts of the former GDR, the opposition to immigration and to 'Merkelism' connects with a predominant local common sense that is strongly critical of the values, way of life and political priorities of 'Western' elites and the 'new' middle class. Here, the supposed 'natural rights' of ethnic Germans to be treated as first-class citizens and a deeply felt sense of being misrecognised and in a second-class position, remains a strong motif.[101] For those who articulate their dissatisfaction in a nationalist discursive register, the political left more broadly, with its pro-immigrant stance, has to some extent merged with Merkelism and the cultural and political establishment. This has led a strand in the Left Party, most prominently represented by its parliamentary leader, Sarah Wagenknecht, to embrace right-wing common-sense positions. Wagenknecht promotes the return to a strong national state and calls for tighter immigration controls.

96. On a far-right current within the German labour movement, see K. Dörre, 'A right-wing workers' movement: Impressions from Germany', *Global Labour Journal*, 9, 3, pp339-347.

97. Jeremy Gilbert, 'The Crisis of Cosmopolitanism', *Stuart Hall Foundation Website*, undated.

98. Heinz Bude, *Gesellschaft der Angst*, Hamburg, 2014.

99. This can also be observed in youth (sub-)cultures. See Moritz Ege, *Ein Proll mit Klasse. Mode, Popkultur und soziale Ungleichheiten unter jungen Männern in Berlin*, Frankfurt am Main, New York, 2013.

100. Michael Haller, Die 'Flüchtlingskrise' in den Medien. Tagesaktueller Journalismus zwischen Meinung und Information. Eine Studie der Otto-Brenner-Stiftung, *OBS Arbeitshefte*, 93, 2017.

101. In the federal state of Saxony, for example, two out of three respondents in a recent poll agreed with the statement that 'East Germans are second-class citizens even today'. Among voters of the AfD, the number was 78 per cent. The survey was initiated by a local newspaper. See *Dresdner Neueste Nachrichten*, 22 January 2018.

Importantly, the political and cultural shifts are taking place against the backdrop of the protracted socio-economic decline of the German working class and a solidified position of large parts of the 'new' middle class. In this situation, class ties of representation are weakening; instead, nationalist interpellations move to the fore. Many subscribe to zero-sum-game-theories in which any resources spent on refugees and migrants will be taken from 'ordinary Germans'. Once again, more or less explicitly, 'race is the modality in which class is lived', (*PTC*, p394) which is visible in the widespread assumption that there are clearly defined, homogenous and incompatible 'cultures' clashing with one another. In this sense, race becomes a politically salient category whose discursive predominance contributes to marginalising a language of class. All of this also contributes to a situation marked by party political polarisation and fragmentation.

4. STRATEGIC DILEMMAS OF THE LEFT

The current conjuncture of capitalism, under its specific conditions in Germany, is characterised by a protracted socio-economic crisis for people on low incomes that is lived through a situation of political and cultural polarisation. The exhaustion of Merkelism is revealed by the fact that a pragmatic course with a de-politicising rhetoric is blocked in a situation marked by a deep polarisation not just of the political scene, but of German society as a whole. This may pave the way for a less consensus-oriented mode of governing the crisis where authoritarian techniques are re-imported into Germany from the European crisis countries. The police repression against demonstrators at G20 summit in Hamburg in 2017 may have been foreshadowing what is to come.[102] The obvious strategic question for the left in a broad, inclusive sense is why it has not benefitted from the exhaustion of Merkelism so far. In this section, we will both discuss party politics and the situation in the radical, social movement left.

102. *Deutsche Welle*, 'Hamburg G20 riots: German police look to Spain, Italy to find perpetrators', 2 February 2018.

In the realm of political parties, the answer is pretty clear, at least for the SPD: The party is so much part of the Merkelist consensus that it is difficult to present itself as a credible alternative to the status quo. The case of the Green Party is more complicated: It has benefitted significantly from the weakness of the SPD and the Christian Democrats in recent state elections, but there are questions as to whether it still can be seen as a centre-left force at all. Obviously, its root lie in the social movements of the 1970s and 80, many of its leading representatives of the past had their political roots in the radical left, and it has progressive demands especially in equal opportunity and environmental policy. But it has increasingly moved towards cooperating with the CDU to form governments at the state level that shut out the SPD and the Left Party. In fact, a strong current inside the Green Party has fully embraced centre-right positions. Leading Green politicians such as the prime minister of Baden Württemberg, Winfried Kretschmann, and the former party

leader Cem Özdemir are more aptly described as moderate conservatives than as social liberals.[103]

In contrast, the Left Party and the extra-parliamentary, social movement left have been fairly consistent in terms of operating outside the Merkelist consensus. But they are still struggling to benefit from the process of exhaustion - presumably because they are not seen as a force offering a credible alternative to the status quo, and because of anti-migration attitudes are strong among many of those who are discontent with how things stand politically and economically.

In our view, the inability of the left to exploit the demise of the Merkelist project reflects a dilemma that emerged with the political polarisation in the country in recent years, and that is relevant for both the centre-left and the radical left: If the welcoming of migrants and refugees and the refusal to re-erect borders within the Schengen Area is identified with Merkel, should the left prop up the Merkelist project in order to block the advance of the far right and prevent a nationalist project? If not, what would be an alternative strategy?

The leadership of the SPD and Green Party seem to have come to the conclusion that it is their job to support the chancellor. This is visible in the fact that both were prepared to enter a new government under the leadership of Merkel after the 2017 federal election. The Greens' moderate, but symbolically potent pro-migration stance and their refusal to dismiss Merkel's handling of the 'refugee crisis' attracts many people. As Merkel and her party have shifted back to more restrictive migration policies, the centrist current inside the Green Party offer a kinder, more compassionate Merkelism than the CDU, which is not tainted by attempts to pander to the far right. In addition, the Greens are seen as a credible force for a progressive climate policy.

Against this backdrop, it appears unlikely that the Green Party will be prepared to build a left-wing alternative to Merkelism – all the more since it represents much more than other parties the university-educated upper-middle class and higher-ranking civil servants. Put differently, the social base of the Greens is less affected than other groups of voters by the economic pressures on people on low incomes and does not appear to be hungry for change on the socio-economic front. Consequently, discussions about forming a 'red-red-green' coalition with the SPD and the Left Party have run out of steam. There is no parliamentary majority for such an alliance at this point, and all three parties are sceptical about the prospects of such a project.[104]

The SPD seems to be deeply divided, which reflects its broader social base. Its more left-wing youth wing led an unsuccessful but broad protest against the formation of a new 'grand' coalition. In the light of the demise of social democracy in countries like France, Greece and the Netherlands and the disastrous election results in recent years, there is a credible fear that the party will perish. But opinions on how to respond to the crisis of the party diverge

103. Lisa Caspari, 'Der konservative Beat der Grünen', *Die Zeit*, 17 November 2012; Winfried Kretschmann, *Worauf wir uns verlassen wollen: Für eine neue Idee des Konservativen* [What we want to rely on: For a new idea of conservatism], Frankfurt 2018; Katrin Bennhold, Greens thrive in Germany as the 'Alternative' to Far-Right Populism, New York Times, 27 November 2018.

104. Dietmar Neuerer, 'Grüne bremsen Linksbündnis-Träume der SPD', *Handelsblatt*, 3 May 2018.

considerably. Its left wing and its youth wing argue that stepping outside the Merkelist consensus (without compromising a pro-migration stance) is the only option that could revitalise its fortunes. In contrast, the party establishment is worried that the political destabilisation caused by giving up on the 'grand coalition' would amount to sounding the death knell for the party. Listening to remarks by the former foreign minister and former party leader Sigmar Gabriel, it seems that significant parts of party leadership have come to the conclusion that the electoral base they have lost, especially in the working and lower-middle class, will not be won back with oppositional gestures and left-wing economic 'populism'. In this interpretation, polemics against 'hipster' and 'lifestyle politics' and a national-communitarian rhetoric of 'doing something for our own people for a change' are seen as an adequate response to the decline of the party; in this view, the problem with 'third-way' social democracy is its cultural progressivism rather than its neoliberal economic and welfare policies.[105]

The far left, both at the parliamentary and the extra-parliamentary level, is one step ahead of the moderate left in terms of not being prepared, on the whole, to defend the Merkelist project. But this comes with new challenges: How is it possible to garner mass support for a left-wing anti-Merkelist platform, in particular since the idea of a 'red-red-green' government has limited traction? Does the opposition to Merkelism play into the hands of the far right by dividing the forces that, on the whole, have a favourable view of migration? And most importantly, what would be a left-wing political platform that represents a credible alternative to the status quo?

There is a second, related dilemma that not just the German left is faced with: How should one deal with the issue of scale and with the political (and economic and cultural) arena of the nation-state? In our view, the recurrent debates about identity politics as opposed to class politics result from a specific aspect of the current conjuncture, the almost necessarily aporetic stance of left politics on the national state. At the heart of far right discourses is the claim to represent the 'people', usually understood as neatly defined group based on ethnic, racial and culturalist criteria, vis-à-vis a 'globalist' elite, which allegedly destroys national cultures, polities and economies by allowing in migrants.[106] Behind this discourse is a deeply seated racism, nationalism and – where global financial elites are concerned – antisemitism, but also the fact that the transnational neoliberal project has indeed destroyed institutions and cultures of solidarity that were mostly located at the national level. So how should the left respond to this discourse? Does it makes sense to transform it along left-communitarian lines in order to win back working-class people who vote for the right? This what the social-democratic commentator Ernst Hillebrand argues. He suggests taking the side of the 'proletarianised 'somewheres'' against the privileged 'anywheres'. In his view, this can be done by promoting an agenda that increases the formers' 'life chances' and 'chances of participation' and combines this with restrictions on migration.[107] Or does

105. Sigmar Gabriel, 'Sehnsucht nach Heimat', *Der Spiegel*, 51/2017.

106. Steve Bannon, for example, remarked in 2014 that '[t]here is a growing global anti-establishment revolt against the permanent political class at home, and the global elites that influence them, which impacts everyone from Lubbock, Tex., to London, England'. Leslie Kaufman, Breitbart news network plans global expansion, *New York Times*, 16 February 2014.

107. Ernst Hillebrand, '*Raus aus dem linksliberalen La La Land, Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft*', 22 October 2018.

an adequate response consists in strengthening trans-national solidarity and building an alliance between left-liberal, cosmopolitan milieus in the middle class and left-leaning workers – a 'middle-bottom alliance', as one of the organic intellectuals of the Left Party, Michael Brie, put it years ago?[108]

Notably, there is a deep rift inside the Left Party over this issue at the moment. The leader of the left faction in the federal parliament, Sarah Wagenknecht, is advocating a cap on migration and a strengthening of the national state vis-à-vis the forces of economic globalisation. In September 2019, she launched a cross-party, extra-parliamentary organisation called 'Aufstehen' [Stand up] that is supposed to promote this agenda. Wagenknecht's supporters - among them sociologist Wolfgang Streeck, former Green politicians Ludger Volmer and Antje Vollmer, and dramatic advisor Bernd Stegemann – see her left-nationalist position as an adequate response to the rise of the far right and an opportunity to mobilise working class people disillusioned with party politics for a left-wing platform. In some public statements by prominent Aufstehen supporters, an acerbic and resentful rhetoric toward open-border ideals, 'elite' cultural liberalism, privileged urban lifestyles and 'moralism' prevails.[109] In contrast, the party leaders, Katja Kipping and Bernd Riexinger, are known for taking a pro-migration stance that is based on principled solidarity with refugees and promoting the idea of safe escape routes, which is also the official line of the party.[110] Correspondingly, Wagenknecht's detractors argue that she is dividing the party by establishing a non-party organisation and going against the official party line, which is pro-migration; that she is disregarding global inequalities, the plight of refugees, and the fact that thousands of people are dying every year thanks to the European border regime; that she is ignoring the fact that a huge chunk of the German population has been actively involved in solidarity work for refugees, which could arguably be mobilised for an anti-racist, left-wing platform; that she is invoking a romantic idea of a benevolent national state, which does not square with the reality of post-war welfare states in Western Europe and their exclusionary effects especially on women and migrants; and that she provides the agenda of the AfD with legitimacy, ignores the importance of racism in the mobilisation of the right and has made remarks with racist overtones herself.[111] The come-back usually is that the Left Party under Kipping and Riexinger's leadership is on the way to become a new version of the Green Party.[112]

In any case, Wagenknecht's project has not gathered a lot of strength so far. This is probably for the best. Aufstehen's national-communitarian elements, the negative and reductionist attitude towards emancipatory demands that are not primarily class-based - at least in some prominent statements - and the tendencies of Fordist nostalgia have made it pretty clear that this is not a project that the radical and social movement left can easily identify with. At the same time, Aufstehen does not seem to have succeeded in 'winning back' many AfD voters and non-voters. Alienating the one group without

108. Michael Brie, A different government is possible! Beyond the centre-left governments in Europe, Rosa Luxemburg Foundation Brussels, 28 June 2010.

109. See the writings of Streeck, such as 'Merkel – ein Rückblick', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 17 November 2017, where a strong state with well-protected borders is called for, and of fellow Aufstehen supporter Stegemann, *Die Moralfalle. Für eine Befreiung linker Politik*. Berlin, 2018 [The moral trap. For a liberation of left politics] In the German context, pro-migration positions are also accused of resulting from a pathologically negative relationship to collective cultural identity and national statehood.

110. 'Modern class politics' or 'connecting class politics' are important terms here as well. See Bernd Riexinger, *For the many, not the few: Moderne Klassenpolitik*, Hamburg, 2018.

111. Volker Schmitz, 'The Wagenknecht Question', *Jacobin*, 15 February 2017; Leandros Fischer, 'Why Wagenknecht will fail', *Jacobin*, 3 March 2017; *Deutsche Welle*, 'Left Party Die Linke congress calls for "open borders" and legal escape

winning over the other, while weakening the Left party, may really be one of the bigger strategic blunders imaginable. Contrary to what – perhaps naively – one may have hoped, a truly inclusive left-wing populism has once again proven to be an unlikely goal in Germany. Given Germany's economic dominance in the Eurozone, and the potentially contradictory short- and medium-term interests between the German core workforce and workers from other European countries and the wider world, this is particularly worrisome.

routes for refugees, 9 June 2018; Darko Janjevic, Germany: New 'Aufstehen' movement of Sahra Wagenknecht is shaking up leftists, *Deutsche Welle* , 11 August 2018; *Deutsche Welle*, 'Cross-party leftist alliance launched in Germany', 4 September 2018.

5. CONCLUSION

Even beyond the 'Aufstehen' controversy, the rift on the left is obvious today: For many, a left-wing stance consists in working to drive back relations of social domination and to up-end the legacies of colonial racism and North-South-exploitation. It follows that in the present moment, the job of the left is to defend or gain the right for people to migrate – to be at least as mobile as capital – and to have equal rights in their new countries of residence. From this point of view, a 'sublation' of the nation-state in actually existing and emerging post-national social and cultural formations (and in and through economic globalisation) and a diffusion of sovereignty is welcome. This has been the position of many on the social movement, academic and arts-scene left, including those influenced by autonomous politics and post-operaist theory. As we showed in our article, during the 'summer of migration' the balance of power briefly shifted in this direction and different historical movements - movements of migration, cultural liberalisation and political transnationalisation – seemed to align.

112. Jens Berger, 'Linkes Europawahl programm: Kritiklos in die nächste Wahlschlappe', *Nachdenkseiten* Blog, 27 November 2018.

However, this did not last long. Furthermore, supporters of Aufstehen and other critics are correct in pointing out that this strategic pro-globalisation position is now particularly unpopular in fractions of the working and lower-middle classes – and not necessarily only 'ethnic' Germans – that are fearing or experiencing decline. There is the wide-spread idea that, in the current situation and in view of the anti-democratic, neoliberal nature of European institutions, one's own life chances are better protected by a strong nation-state – partly because protecting social rights seems at best a secondary priority of those who advocate 'openness', but also because the German nation-state promises to be particularly strong, based on its economic might.

We are unable to resolve this dilemma. Highlighting the contradictions in our analysis may, however, be at least a step in the right direction. It needs to be asked whether a return national-social welfare state of post-war Western Europe, as it is being discussed on the left in numerous countries, is possible and desirable. It would have the consequence of disentangling the European economic bloc. But what kind of accumulation strategy would it be based on? Would it leave any space for the recognition of struggles for transnational solidarity and redistribution? And how could a re-nationalisation of the economy and politics *not* be tied to restrictive policies of migration and

'national culture' - especially in the current conjuncture with its increasing strength of the nationalist right and the ignorance of significant parts of the left especially toward questions of racism? There is no lack of strategic reflections that aim at establishing a broad popular alliance at the national level demanding 'a different economic and social policy' and combine this with declarations in favour of internationalism and anti-racism.[113] But as long as they do not address how they want to tackle the fact that conceptions of nationhood and the institutions of the national state rest on the exclusion of those who are not citizens, they protect mechanisms that undercut the inclusive solidarity they call for.

Notably, suggestions for transnational, anti-capitalist social arrangements from the radical left are equally vague. These seldom take into account existing social formations, institutional configurations and relations of forces and offer little more than invoking an ill-defined 'common good [*das Gemeinsame*]'[114] from a transnational perspective and calling for a revival of transnational mobilisations in the tradition of the alter-globalisation movement of the late 1990s and early 2000s (p46). There is a little in the way of a vision how a transnational post-capitalist society could like. Today, post the Greek *όχι* and the Brexit referendum, the fate of the nation-state is a lot less clear than it was a few years ago, and there are good reasons why people cling on to it as the main political arena. Considering the mobilising power of 'moral economies' in E.P. Thompson's sense, which work against market mechanisms, it seems inevitable that defensive strategies at the national level must be part of the left's repertoire.[115] In light of this, it would also be self-defeating for the left if it were to completely abandon what is left of the 'traditional' (but multi-'ethnic') working class in its labour struggles due the latter's tendency towards seeing the nation-state in a positive light.

All in all, the left in Germany and beyond, in the current conjuncture, is facing considerable challenges. It is obvious that taken in isolation, neither a return to the post-war welfare state nor the decision to embrace transnationalism and globalisation will allow it to advance. In our view, it is obvious that there is no way around a multi-scalar approach that does not prioritise, from the outset, either the national or the transnational scale but seeks to find forms of interventions where they get articulated[116] – be it in the form of transnational strikes like the trans-Iberian general strike in November 2011, the closer cooperation of left parties at the European level or the dissemination of square occupations as a mode of protest across the globe. Likewise, it remains to be discussed how the *cultural* gaps and conflicts between different subaltern class fractions can be bridged in a counterhegemonic project if we also take into account the economic and political dynamics they have become articulated with. The unspoken strategy of radical antifascist groups – donning sportswear as a lower-class-youth camouflage – carries only so far. Surely, there need to be political-cultural spaces where people with different social backgrounds encounter each other and forge connections. A

113. Thomas E. Goes and Violetta Bock, *Ein unanständiges Angebot? Mit linkem Populismus gegen Eliten und Rechte*, Cologne, 2017, p115.

114. Sandro Mezzadra and Mario Neumann, *Jenseits von Klasse und Identität*, Hamburg, 2017, p58.

115. E.P. Thompson, 'The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century', *Past & Present*, no. 50, 1971, pp76-136.

116. See Alexander Gallas, 'Vom "Nachlaufspiel" zum multiskalaren Internationalismus: Bedingungen internationaler Solidarität unter ArbeiterInnen im globalen Kapitalismus', in Ulrich Brand, Helen Schwenken and Joscha Wullweber (eds) *Globalisierung analysieren, kritisieren und verändern: Das Projekt kritische Wissenschaft*, Hamburg, 2016, pp145-162.

sign of hope was a recent mobilisation in Berlin. In October 2018, 240,000 people marched against the far right, against divisions along class, gender and race lines and for an inclusive form of solidarity that does not play off an expansive social policy for the resident population against the support for recently arrived migrants. The motto was 'Unteilbar' [indivisable].[117]

It is beyond the scope of this article to find definite answers to the questions we have raised in this conclusion. But understanding the conjuncture out of which they emerge will help thinking about those answers. We hope that in this sense, our article is also a contribution to the political-strategic debates on the left – in Germany and beyond.

117. Ben Knight, 'Berlin protests against far-right politics draw thousands', *Deutsche Welle*, 13 October 2018.

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