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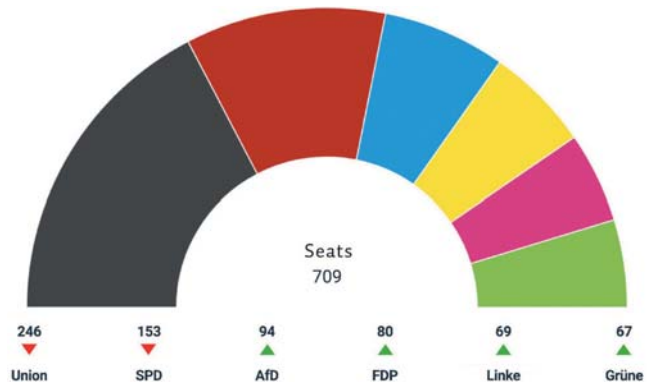
Hartmut Marhold*, December 3rd, 2017

Germany's New Instability

A look back: Political Parties in the “Bundestag” since 1949

The political system of the Federal Republic has been one of the most stable and solid among Western democracies since its foundation in 1949. No more than eight Chancellors, from Adenauer via Brandt and Kohl to Merkel, have presided over the rarely changing (and if so, only slightly modified) German governments; the range of political parties represented in the German Bundestag have not varied much over decades – there were seven in the first elected parliament (1949), but in the 50s the number was reduced to never more than four, thanks to the threshold of 5% of the votes needed to enter the Bundestag. Between the end of the 50s and the middle of the 80s, only three parties shared the whole number of parliamentary seats: Christian-democrats, Social Democrats and (smaller) Liberals.

Then (in 1983) the Greens arrived and established themselves as a permanent political force in parliamentary life, stagnating in the category of a 10% party, as with the liberals. Less than a decade later, after German reunification, the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism), the reshaped former East-German communists, entered the scene, but only thanks to directly elected candidates, i.e. candidates with a relative majority in their constituency, giving them the right to occupy seats in the Bundestag, even if their party is below the 5% threshold at a national level. But the real breakthrough for the leftists wasn't until 2005, when a fraction of the SPD split from their mother party and joined the former Communists to form what is now “The Left”. In 2013, the Liberals were punished for their liberal policy in the very middle of the crisis of (neo-)liberalism and did not jump over the 5%, which reduced the number of parties represented in Parliament again to four. It was only in September 2017 (for the first time since the early 50s) that as many as six parties managed to get over the threshold, forming the most colourful Bundestag since its early days of consolidation.



On the other hand, the German electoral system allows for a proportionally representative Parliament, since it combines the system of directly elected candidates (they “only” have to have a relative majority in their constituencies) and an additional number of seats, according to national lists, representing the proportional share of party votes at national level.

Coalition governments, the rule in (West-)German history

It was this combination of a pre-emptive and dissuasive threshold on the one hand and a proportional representation of party votes on the other, which ensured the stability of the German parliamentary system. Add to this the constitutional rule that a Chancellor cannot be deselected - except if there is an alternative candidate who has a majority on his own and is therefore ready to replace the deselected one, - and you get an institutional setting designed to rule out any instability – in 1949 the fathers of the Fundamental Law, the (West-) German constitution, consciously drew lessons from the Republic of Weimar and the rise to power of the Nazis..

Coalition government is the final ingredient of the German governmental tradition throughout the history of the Federal Republic. Only for a very short time (1960-61) did the Christian Democrats, led by Chancellor Adenauer, formally rule alone. All other governments have had to adapt to coalitions, and nearly every kind of theoretically possible combinations were sooner or later given a chance. This changed only with reunification: The Left has never

participated in any government, and (for the time being) the populist right, the newcomer of 2017, is denied any hope of joining any conceivable coalition with other parties.

2017, a turning point: Indications of a “new German instability”

2017 marks a decisive step towards a break in this long tradition of parliamentary and governmental stability. The Bundestag has finally fallen victim to a growing “spreading out” and – more importantly – splitting of the electorate and the political parties which represent them. The distinction between ‘spreading’ and ‘splitting’ means that there is indeed an extension of the political spectrum, which reaches farther to the left and farther to the right than ever before – the “Left” and the “Alternative für Deutschland” (AfD, the right wing populists) represent, if not extremist, then at least the furthest limit of what is democratically conceivable under the umbrella of the German constitution. The trend towards the ‘spreading’ of the political spectrum is clearly seen over the last two and a half decades (with the “Left”), and decisively in 2017 (with “AfD”). But the ‘splitting’ is no less important as a tendency in German parliamentary life: The four parties of the 80s – Christian Democrats, Social Democrats, Liberals and Greens may still be seen as distinct political families, but then the “Left” split from the Social Democrats, until then the uncontested monopoly of a moderate left. Then the right wing populists split away from the liberal-conservative wing of the political spectrum, seizing the opportunity arising from the atmosphere of discontent and growing mistrust during the financial and economic crisis after 2008, and afterwards constantly adapting to changing (perceptions of) threats, namely the “refugee crisis” in 2015.

In 2017, finally the “split and spread” tendencies led to a Bundestag with six parties, four of them in the category of 10% (Greens, Left, Liberals, and AfD), one around 20% (Social Democrats) and one around 30% (Christian Democrats).

It became extremely difficult, under these conditions, to form a new coalition, all the more so since the SPD did not want to engage in a renewal of the “Grand Coalition” which they held responsible for their decline. With the AfD being still the outcast of the German Parliament, attempts to find a common ground among the remaining four failed, namely due to the refusal of the Liberals to take the final step and agree on the nearly achieved compromise. Whatever

may happen now – the SPD may reluctantly enter a renewed Grand Coalition, a minority government may come into office, new elections may be held –, the trust in the readiness of the Federal Republic to form a stable government, whatever the outcome of the elections may be, has faded away. There is a certain feeling of a new instability in Germany.

The underlying social reality: ‘splits and spreads’ in society

This is not only a parliamentary, not only a political phenomenon. On the contrary, the German electoral system, owing to the very fact that it is proportional, reflects the ‘splits and spreads’ in society itself. Diversification is a mark of societies beyond the older binary opposition between workers (“proletariat”, in the Marxist terms of that era) and employers (“capitalists” ...), an opposition, which characterised politics for over a century between the Industrial Revolution and the last third of the 20th century. This opposition simplified political rivalries and their mirror, the parliamentary majorities and oppositions. But this era has definitely been overtaken by an evolution towards a much more diverse, multi-faceted economy and society, based no longer on industry and all this means in terms of work and life, social interests and their political reflection, but on services, on an enormous spread of divergent forms of relations between employees and employers, to the extent that even this distinction has become an anachronistic simplification. It is much more difficult now to aggregate interests of social groups, to translate them into political party affiliations and to get clear-cut majorities. It does not come as a surprise, under these circumstances, that a proportionally representative electoral system generates ever more parties in Parliament, ever more divergent interests which are ever more difficult to squeeze under one unique umbrella of a political programme.

A major driver of this evolution is technology. The High Tech or Chip Revolution, often designated as the Third (or Second) Industrial Revolution, has set forces of individual freedom free, which have not only changed the work place, but the minds of men and women. “Technology”, to quote one of the ingenious first generation founders of the computer generation, Lee Felsenstein, is “the triumph of the individual over the collective dis-spirit.” – “It’s not just an academic point. It’s a very fundamental point [... which enables] to defy a culture which states ‘Thou shalt not touch this’, and to defy that

with one's own creative power"¹. There's no doubt that this "hacker ethic" has become widespread and is a mental mark of social and political life today. The Chip Revolution is not only a technological one, just as the Industrial Revolution was not only a revolutionary change of tools and devices, but it marks a profound change in the way we act, behave, and how we conceive ourselves as members of a society - as individuals, with the desire to extend our freedom to act according to individual interests instead of those decreed by social groups.

Another driver is the equally revolutionary change in the relationship between individuals, society, and politics, referred to as neo-liberalism. After decades of a marginal existence, purely theoretical, without any chance of being put into practice, neo-liberalism only came to the fore when the crisis of the 70s put an end to the "Golden Age of Capitalism"², which had so profoundly shaped the post-war generation. Only when the model of the "Golden Age" no longer worked - did neo-liberalism emerge as an alternative. When August Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman got their Nobel Prizes, in 1974 and 1976, and when Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan put their theories into political practice, they triggered a new era, marked by a tremendous shift towards individual freedom - by means of deregulation, privatisation and liberalisation. Margaret Thatcher led the way when she said: "There's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families"³ and Ronald Reagan drew the consequences at the political level in his first inaugural address, when he coined the sentence: "Government is not the solution. Government is the problem"⁴.

In reality, the story is much more complex, but this brief look at two main drivers of history, technology on the one hand and economic theory translated into politics on the other, joining together to overcome a deep crisis in the Western world, explains to a great extent what has recently been coined as a "Society of Singularities"⁵, a society where the binding forces of groups of all kinds are fading away to the advantage of individual ways of life, of ad-hoc affiliation instead of life-long membership. This is a widespread phenomenon which affects trade unions and churches, sports clubs and political parties alike. 'Spreads and splits' are a common feature affecting all these formerly binding social groups. Centrifugal tendencies and growing inequality are the mark of the German as well as of many other Western societies. The German Trade Unions (DGB, Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, the national federation of trade unions

of individual branches) could still proudly boast, at the end of the 80s, of 10.000.000 members. Since then they have lost 40% of their members and both the Catholic and the Protestant Churches in Germany have lost approximately 20% of theirs. The German Christian Democrats' membership has decreased, since the highly politicised 80s, from nearly 800.000 to around 450.000, the Social Democrats' from a million to approximately the same level.⁶

"There's no such thing as society", Thatcher's credo, is still largely exaggerated, but the tendency is unequivocal - Germany has made long inroads towards a much more divergent, fragmented, split society, a society of individuals alienated from each other by growing inequality - a "society of singularities", where the readiness to bind oneself for an undetermined life span into a social group has been weakened. That is a "triumph of the individual over the collective dis-spirit", as Felsenstein correctly predicted thirty years ago. Obviously, sooner or later, such an evolution must translate into political instability - and that's what has happened in Germany over the last months, since the elections in September, and especially after the failure to form a coalition government among a wider range of political parties than ever before, despite the country's long experience with reaching compromise beyond party limits. The spreading and the splitting of the parties involved, the individual stance of some of the leaders, their reluctance to commit themselves to a coalition, their unwillingness to give up their individual freedom of action - all these factors are symptomatic of the larger societal evolution.

Seen from this angle, the range of the political parties represented now in the Bundestag may look a bit different from the traditional left-right scheme. If one agrees on the hypotheses laying the ground for the "society of singularities" approach, there is a strange affinity between what Rechwitz calls a "differential liberalism" on the one hand and a "cultural essentialism" on the other. Both tendencies owe their origins to the same challenge: "differential liberalism" stems from a neo-liberal and individualistic approach, a new understanding of individual freedom, a denial of individual responsibility for social concerns, a readiness to accept and even promote diversity, openness, globalisation, migration ... whereas "cultural essentialism", at the very opposite end of the spectrum, is no less inspired by the search for separated identities, for a diversity of cultural roots - but instead of openness it closes its borders down, isolates one cultural identity from another, insists on a multitude of

individual, particularistic cultures⁷. One may see both tendencies represented in the two political parties which constitute the biggest problems for the German Bundestag: The Liberals, representing (more than any other party, at least) the first of the two tendencies outlined, i.e. the “differential liberalism”, and the Alternative für Deutschland, AfD, representing the other one, “cultural essentialism”, i.e. the German version of the populist right-wing movements. And it is precisely these two parties which are the most problematic ones – the AfD because it is still very difficult in Germany to admit that there is a parliamentary group close to ideas which lay at the roots of Nazism. But it is the Liberal Party which made the coalition “in the making” fail – and that may not be purely coincidental, since it reflects the predominance of individualism over commitment, of separated interests over the Common Good, which is a mark of “differential liberalism”. In this respect, the spreading of the German political spectrum extends to both extremes of Reckwitz’s scheme.

Germany is not alone with this problem. The German electoral system offers a truer picture, translates more accurately into the political sphere a problem of society which is common to Western societies everywhere. In other political systems the problem is hidden away from political consciousness by either an electoral system prearranged to produce stable majorities (as in the United Kingdom or the United States), or by revolutionary breakdowns and momentary restructuring of political affiliations (as in Italy in the 90s, and maybe in France today). But these political systems do not solve the problem – if the assumption is still true that a democratic government should mirror the reality of social interests, promoting those of the majority and protecting those of the minority. In this respect, Germany is on the one hand a unique case, on the other hand a worth-while case study: Whatever the outcome of the German governmental crisis, the problem is set for a generation.

Solutions?

It is not an easy task to imagine solutions to the problem, seen in its historical and societal depth – the

formation of a coalition, if it is successfully done, is certainly not enough. Policies aimed at reducing inequality, one of the most mischievous offsprings of neo-liberalism, would be an important step towards a more coherent society, helping to reduce ‘spreads and splits’. But the problem goes beyond the reach of political voluntarism, since its fundamentals also lie with the technological evolution and its impact on individual and social life, and that is something politics can hardly steer and regulate, all the more so since this technological revolution has devaluated national borders, disabled nation states (and even continental polities, like the European Union), has launched a wave of globalisation, which largely escapes the grip of political action. The problem must be seen the other way round: Not (only) as a political task, with society as the object being acted upon, but as a societal task to adapt democracy to the challenges of a ‘split and spread’ society. The “independent variable”, as political scientists could put it, is society, not democracy. The German difficulties in forming a government under the constraints of a multifaceted Parliament reveal a real problem of democracy.

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References:

- 1 Lee Felsenstein quoted from Steven Levy’s milestone book „Hackers. Heroes of the Computer Revolution“, 1984, p. 429f. Levy, in his book, elaborates what has become known as the „Hacker Ethic“, and Felsensteins quote is „the essence, of course, of the Hacker Ethic“ (ibidem, p. 430).
- 2 Title of another milestone book, by Stephen A. Marglin and Juliet B. Schor (eds.): The Golden Age of Capitalism. Reinterpreting the Post-War Experience, 1990. The equally famous French counterpart is Jean Fourastié: Les Trente Glorieuses, ou La Révolution Invisible de 1946-1975. Paris 1979.
- 3 Thatcher in an interview in Women’s Own in 1987, here quoted from The Guardian: Margarat Thatcher: a life in quotes; <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/apr/08/margaret-thatcher-quotes>
- 4 Reagan quoted from <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=43130>; his speech in full length <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LToM9bAnsyM>
- 5 Andreas Reckwitz: Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten. Berlin 2017.
- 6 See Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, <http://www.bpb.de/politik/grundfragen/parteien-in-deutschland/zahlen-und-fakten/138672/mitgliederentwicklung>.
- 7 See Reckwitz, op.cit., Chapter VI: Differenzieller Liberalismus und Kulturessenzialismus: Der Wandel des Politischen, p. 371-442.