After the disastrous result obtained by the Christian and Democratic Union (CDU) on the occasion of the latest German General elections, a kind of “Merkel-fatigue” became evident across the country. Well known experts, analysts and academics – most of which men one must concede – denounced the “unfriendly” ruling-style of the Chancellor (“Ist es Wahnsinn, aber hat es auch Methode”; Streeck 2016). Some claimed that “Merkel tired citizens” (Merkel 2016), or, to say it with Jürgen Habermas, she left “Germany to swim like a brick” (Die Zeit 2016).

In this context, at first sight, the book Becoming Madame Chancellor by Joyce Marie Mushaben stands out from the crowd. Mushaben, an American political scientist, argues that Angela Merkel, likewise the “German reunification” in the 90s, embodies a sort of miracle (77). More specifically, the Chancellor herself spurred a “cultural revolution” in Germany. Unlike anyone else before, Merkel raised the status of women in the country. Part of the explanation Mushaben provides, relies in Merkel’s “socialist past” as she grew up in the Democratic Republic (DDR).

Well written and filled with qualitative data, the book is yet a bit over-stretched along its 342 pages. However, the data through which Mushaben backs her arguments is excellent. The volume contains countless extracts from interviews conducted by Mushaben with high-level politicians across the country over the past 30 years. Among the latter, an interview with Angela Merkel back in the 90s – a time when no one could imagine the future of the Chancellor – stands out. More than that, the author merges wisely secondary literature and journalistic material form national and international media outlets.

In the first part of the book, the private-professional and political biography of Merkel is analysed against the backdrop of her experience in the DDR. Subsequently, in the second and third part, Mushaben focuses here attention on four case studies, trying to evaluate the achievements of Merkel’s legacy in relation to the Euro-crisis, the refugee crisis, the relationship between Western and Eastern Germany, and, last but not least, the politics of energy.

It is in this last part, that readers get fastly rid off that sort of “pro-Merkel” flavour that emerges from the first section and which is in stark contrast to today’s negative commentaries. More specifically, the analysis of Merkel’s behaviour midst the Euro-crisis conveys the clear (and, for many German citizens, unpleasant) feeling that
Germany does not practice at home what it preaches abroad. Likewise, as Mushaben discusses the current inequalities between Eastern and Western Germany, as well as the long-term economic, psychological and social consequences of the reunification process, the book can be seen as a j’accuse against the Western establishment, judged guilty of systematically neglecting the state of the German “Mezzogiorno”. Drawing insights from her past, wide and far reaching research on Eastern German social developments, the author shows how especially women suffered in terms of a lack of social rights, if compared to the standards of the West. Arguably, no West-German author would feel comfortable in drawing up this socio-economic picture in such a neat fashion.

Against this background, it is then again truly surprising how Mushaben understands Merkel’s political style to be an outcome of her “socialisation” in the DDR. But the reasons is as simple as sensible: the Chancellor was an outlier, if compared to 90% of women born and grown up in the formerly Democratic Republic. First of all, Merkel didn’t become a mother. Secondarily, she grew up as the daughter of a Priest in a State that was notoriously – and effectively – trying to shut any religious power-influence. By the way, Merkel was actually born in Western Germany. Moreover, political factors didn’t interfere with Merkel’s ability to study and accomplish strong academic results. All that taken into consideration, it is impossible not to raise an eyebrow as one tries to explain Merkel’s political style through her “socialisation” in the DDR. Yet, one must concede that Mushaben solidly shows how Merkel’s DDR-derived “inertia”, ability “to adapt” and “strike compromises”, drove her success in a Catholic, men-lead Western CDU party. At the same time, the conceptual framework, which is outlined at the beginning of the book, is too vague to define specific causal-relationships between “DDR-socialisation”, on the one hand, and “political ability”, on the other one. The author does not bring enough counterfactual elements to the fore.

The fact that Mushaben did not set up other alternative conceptual frameworks depends as well on the book’s desired audience. Becoming Madame Chancellor is not meant to be a text for scholars only, but a reference for informed readers as well. The thoroughly-documented and relatively neutral perspective of the author is refreshing. Most of all, if compared to the one forging the commentaries of German experts, years after Merkel first appeared. That’s why, if anyone feels like having more about Madame Chancellor, this 342 long book is a more than advisable read.

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