This is not the first exercise in assessing the track record of Germany’s first (and last) Red-Green coalition government, but it is probably one of the better ones. While other anthologies are often of questionable quality, not least due to their heavy conservative political coloring, this compilation of essays by German social scientists may be at times somewhat conservative, but rarely reactionary. Its exercise in taking stock of the first terms of the Schröder government presents detailed and carefully assembled accounts. Its unfortunate choice of a particularly clumsy title is, of course, lamentable, especially given the lack of any definition by the editor just what “normalcy” (or Normalität?) actually means in German politics.

The edited collection attempts to cover both politics (voting behavior and orientation, leadership patterns of the chancellor) and policies, covering everything from economic, social, labor market, environmental and immigration policy to foreign policy. Its particular strengths are empirically rich descriptive accounts of policy developments in certain areas—August Pradetto’s chapter on foreign and military policy; Oliver Schmidtke’s chapter on immigration policies; and Kristine Kern, Stephanie Koenen and Tine Löffelsend’s contribution on environmental policy make for a rewarding read. In contrast, the theoretical contribution made by this volume is not particularly ambitious. The authors are at their best in recounting policy developments; however, their analysis is often neither incisive nor innovative. No evaluation of governmental policy can hide its normative convictions entirely, of course, but here it seems as though the authors often either indulge Red-Green where a more critical stance would be in order and vice versa. This reserve is not a fatal flaw, but it obscures the fairly dramatic departures Red-Green has made from the politics of its predecessors in some areas, while continuing policy developments in many others. The fairly technocratic judgment of what constitutes a “successful” policy in the introductory chapter by Reutter seems to be based on successful policy implementation only, without actually evaluating policy content.

With the benefit of hindsight, it would appear that the much derided 1998 campaign slogan “vieles besser, nicht alles anders” (a lot of things better, not everything different) actually constitutes a fairly accurate assessment of Gerhard Schröder’s first term. Arguably, this was a pragmatic, results-oriented, and fairly efficient center-right government that within four years managed to implement policy solutions to often complex problems that Helmut Kohl had either been unable or unwilling to even begin to contemplate for sixteen years. Not only did Red-Green face the unenviable task of cleaning up the mess Kohl had made of unification, but the increasingly fierce international high quality product competition coupled with the restraints imposed by membership in the European Monetary Union (EMU) made for an extremely difficult domestic and international economic environment in the late 1990s, miles away from West Germany’s comfortable economic position of the 1980s. Likewise, pivotal foreign policy decisions had to be made (and quickly) in the highly fluid post-Cold War environment: Should unified Germany participate in military operations outside of NATO’s traditional mission brief? How should Germany position itself vis-à-vis the neo-imperialist, aggressively unilateral Bush regime? Could the Franco-German “engine” of European integration continue to run without sputtering, given Jacques Chirac’s petty clamoring for French votes and agricultural subsidies in
Berlin and Nice? Future historians may find some parallels between Schröder and Helmut Schmidt, both representing the right wing of their parties and presiding over economically difficult times while facing U.S. presidents with whom they found little in common.

The collection is let down somewhat by an introduction that does not venture off any beaten path in what it proffers. In fact, it contains a few surprising inaccuracies and unfortunate omissions. We are told that "most members of this government lacked any personal experience with the war or with the 'Third Reich" (p. 5). Yet Schröder’s father died in the war, Joschka Fischer is a descendant of ethnic Germans who left Hungary, and both are members of the 1968 generation that defined itself very much in opposition to the Nazi barbarism. Further on, mention is made of the "policy of Gerhard Schröder had on transatlantic relations and NATO" (p. 16), without taking into consideration the Bush government’s actions and the policy guideline, attributed to Condoleezza Rice, of instructing U.S. foreign policymakers to "ignore the Germans." Similarly, the book criticizes the German government for being unable to "embark on structural reforms and initiate long-overdue changes" (p. 16) in labor market and social policy, without once bothering to enlighten the reader as to why neo-liberalism presents a solution, rather than a problem in itself.

Robert Rohrschneider and Michael Wolf investigate voting behavior and attitudes towards social policy in unified Germany. They report that in the West, the SPD is not seen as the principal guardian of the welfare state. This is a perception that will be no doubt reinforced by the cuts to welfare spending implicit in the so-called Agenda 2010. Bernhard Wessels informs us that unified Germany disposes not of one, but effectively of three political party scenes and political cultures, with Bavaria constituting a distinct third venue. This finding is unlikely to raise any eyebrows, given that the Bavarian wing of the Christian Democrats never seemed to lose sight of the late Franz Josef Strauss’s advice not to tolerate the growth of any political party to their right. This is the Land that gave Germany a politician like Peter Gauweiler, who advocated the construction of detention camps for people living with HIV, and Edmund Stoiber, who warned of the dangers of tolerating a racially mixed (durchrasste) society. Fortunately, this sort of discourse still does raise a few eyebrows, at least outside Hitler’s adoptive hometown.

Sabine Kropp presents an analytical sketch purporting to portray Schröder’s leadership style. The chapter highlights the institutional constraints implied by a federal system and a coalition government, but despite a token employment of irksome game theoretical jargon and the self-evident finding of interrelated policy actors and arenas no serious theoretical insights are formulated here.

Werner Reutter describes the formation and the short existence of the pseudo-neocorporatist Alliance for Jobs. The author is clearly discontent about the alliance’s failure to produce concrete output, unlike developments elsewhere in Western Europe. The chapter would have benefited from engaging the existing literature more strongly. The claim that Germany never possessed truly full-fledged neo-corporatism is a finding that largely dovetails with the neo-corporatist literature of the 1980s that never considered West Germany a "strongly" neo-corporatist case. It would have been worthwhile to consider why the unions refused any deals and concessions in the context of the alliance, given that their benefits were not readily apparent and, unlike in southern Europe, they were powerful enough to refuse pressure from employers to lend acquiescence to welfare cuts, wage freezes, and the abolition of employee rights.

Kurt Hübner presents a scathing critique of Red-Green economic policy, portrayed as a failure to break "the strong sclerotic structures of the German political economy" (p. 107). This is fortunately not a call for the services of Doc Thatcher, as one might assume. Rather, this chapter criticizes the often haphazard economic policies of Red-Green, which lacked a sound theoretical basis as opposed to rhetorical spin, and a recognition of the drastically constrained margins for maneuver in the context of the EMU and the Eurozone. Thus, fiscal policy reform was not only poorly timed; it also failed to consider that fiscal policy remains one of the last macroeconomic instruments that national governments can manipulate in the Eurozone. Even more embarrassingly for a purportedly Social Democratic government, most of the tax cuts benefited business and large income earners, leading to drastic reductions in tax revenues, especially at the local and regional level. In addressing the persistent income and wealth gap between the West and the East, Red-Green failed to distinguish itself from the less than stellar record of Kohl and in fact continued the policy of large transfer payments to the East, without sufficiently encouraging private sector investment.

Martin Seeleib-Kaiser reports a dual transformation of German social policy, meaning a trend towards leaner
and especially meaner welfare state policy coupled with presumably more lavish funding for family policies. The author makes a relatively strong case for the former, but is less convincing in postulating the advent of the latter. Clearly, successive attempts at tinkering with the structure of the German welfare state have meant shifting more responsibility for the risks of ill health, old age, unemployment, and accident from the state to the individual, as the description of the pension reform illustrates. What is less compelling, however, is the claim that modest increases in funding of child care facilities, aiming at covering a mere 20 percent of all children less than three years old even by the government’s own optimistic estimates, constitute a transformation. After all, Schröder once referred to family policies as “nonsense” (Gedöns)—an indicative quote that may appear surprising in light of Germany’s demographic development.

Gert-Joachim Glaessner’s chapter describes recent policy developments in policing and surveillance. Unfortunately, this contribution does not maintain a healthy critical distance towards governmental discourse and policy output—generously increased police powers are portrayed as “responses.” This characterization is all the more remarkable as it is precisely in this policy field where Red-Green has shifted far further to the right than Kohl ever did. Otto Schily’s legislative attacks on the individual’s civil rights have permanently undermined and jeopardized civil rights in Germany. Police surveillance activity has been extended, especially, but not exclusively, with respect to migrants. The author chronicles the extension of the notorious article 129 A of the German Penal Code, an often very loosely interpreted clause geared at criminalizing “supporters” and “sympathizers” of terrorists. Itself an outgrowth of Schmidt’s heavy-handed campaign against the 1970s Red Army Fraction (RAF), one might have expected an interior minister who served as an attorney to some RAF members in the late 1970s to have this article reviewed critically, rather than extending it to non-German residents. Glaessner comments cheerfully: “The new legislation closed the gap [sic] that previously existed in the prosecution of international terrorist organizations and is considered an important contribution towards fighting terrorism” (p. 155). In the conclusion, even he is pressed to admit that the interior ministry’s first legislative draft “tended to undermine basic civil liberties” (p. 159) and that “one can hardly avoid the impression that the antiterrorism bill has created a convenient pretense for pushing forward restrictive regulations on asylum and migration” (p. 158), but he still presents the overall legislative package as level-headed.

Oliver Schmidtke presents a rich empirical account of immigration policy, focusing on the fate of the initially ambitious new Immigration Act, prepared during the first term in office. He argues that immigration policy has slowly percolated to the forefront of the political agenda over the course of the past twenty years and that the heated political controversy inside and outside of parliament over the most recent bill is a case in point. The Christian Democrats correctly perceived this issue as one to exploit so as to escape the electoral doldrums that Kohl’s egregious corruption scandal had left them in. The author is largely spot on in portraying just how internally torn and ambivalent the political right is on this subject, with the more moderate wings accepting the need for immigration, not least in light of business demands for labor migrants, while the hard right continues to clamor for restriction. Likewise, the author portrays skillfully the successive watering-down of the bill, as successive concessions to the Christian Democrats and an unfortunate voting procedure in the Bundesrat led to an ultimately unsatisfactory final outcome that marks more continuity than innovation.

Kern, Koenen and Löffelsend discuss environmental policy initiatives, presumably also quite dear to the heart of a Red-Green government. The analytical categories proposed here, distinguishing between “laggards” and pioneers,” do not seem to provide additional mileage, but the empirical account of the somewhat disappointing compromise over abandoning nuclear energy, the introduction of the so-called eco tax, and national action plans for reducing emission levels and pursuing sustainable development is well executed and thorough.

Pradetto summarizes developments in foreign and especially military policy. Empirically rich and well documented, this chapter argues that Red-Green sleepwalked into the Yugoslavian conflict and found it very difficult to insist on U.N. involvement vis-à-vis a U.S. government that was already less than committed to securing any U.N. mandate during Clinton’s second term, with this stance growing even more pronounced under his successor. The author seems to argue that the Social Democrats lacked grand visions akin to Brandt’s Ostpolitik, while Fischer similarly subscribed to an uninspired events-driven policy stance whose only conviction consisted of a commitment to existing multilateral organizations. While it is probably accurate to say that by the late 1990s most substantial Green principles had already been long forgotten and what remained was little more than...
pragmatic “shooting from the hip,” a more detailed analysis of Fischer’s mutation into the foreign minister that sent German military aircraft back to the night skies over Belgrade would have been helpful. One shortcoming of this chapter is that it seems to downplay the significance of a much more assertive and at times aggressive foreign policy stance.

Finally, Barbara Lippert’s chapter takes stock of German EU policy under Red-Green, portraying the results at Berlin and Nice as less than satisfactory, but ultimately the best possible compromise solutions. It was not only the French who were strongly opposed to making concessions in the regional aid and agricultural subsidies they received. Resistance to real reform ran strong throughout southern Europe as well as in Ireland and the UK, leading to the Berlin summit compromise, which did not grant the ten newcomers to the EU the same level of financial assistance awarded to the Mediterranean newcomers of the 1980s. Likewise, the 2000 Nice Treaty, ostensibly geared at reforming the EU’s creaking institutions in the run-up to eastern enlargement, may have introduced a dual majority requirement in the EU’s Council of Ministers both in terms of proportion of countries and population size represented. Yet this was far from the major institutional reform some had hoped for. Fischer had signaled his support both of an enlarged EU and a sort of German-style federalized Europe in his famous speech at Humboldt University in Berlin in 2000. What the author does not seem to grasp is that the enthusiasm for such federal design may be very limited outside of Germany. “Germany must overcome its internal economic and social weaknesses to make other EU partners join their course [sic] of European integration” (p. 251), the author asserts. It is not clear how much enthusiasm there is in Paris, London, or Madrid for “being made to join their course” by the German government, either. If this goal is related to the author’s next demand, lack of enthusiasm may take on more overtly hostile forms, and, frankly, rightly so: “Both the government and the political class must work together to upgrade the economic and material resources available for Germany’s leadership capacities ... [to combine] ‘prudent self restraint’ with assertiveness and normal practices of Realpolitik” (pp. 251-252). This is jaw-dropping stuff. Europe has already seen its fair share of German material resources being used to bolster the country’s leadership capacities during the twentieth century. If this vision of the EU is indeed espoused in German government circles, then the rejection of the EU Constitution by the populace in France and the Netherlands might have come just in time.

This monograph presents a collection of largely ambitious essays aimed at assessing the record of the Red-Green government’s first term in office. Though often thorough and rich, the contributions lack theoretical ambition and commonly are not bold enough in their analysis. This is certainly a good exercise in policy description and a large step up from previous efforts in this vein, but could have easily endeavored to provide even more.

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