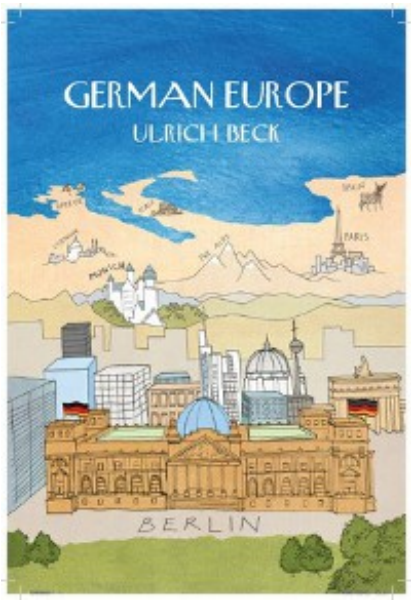
Book Review: German Europe by Ulrich Beck

by Blog Admin May 3, 2013

Germany's power relative to other European states has grown as a result of the Eurozone crisis. ***Ulrich Beck's*** *latest book asks whether the country's dominant position within the European Union means that we're now living in a* ***German Europe****. Professor of Sociology* ***William Outhwaite*** *finds Beck's book to be rich in ideas, but questions whether the responsibility for austerity policies should be specifically ascribed to Germany.*

German Europe. Ulrich Beck. Polity. March 2013.

Find this book



amazon

The most controversial thing in this short but important book is the title and the argument elaborated in chapter 2: 'Europe's New Power Coordinates: The Path to a German Europe'. The rest of the book is short enough not to require summary, yet sufficiently rich in ideas to make such a summary difficult.

There can be little doubt that Beck has the right conceptual tools to analyse the current EU crisis: risk society, globalisation (these two combined in world risk society), cosmopolitanism, sub-politics and so on. He neatly wields these concepts in his diagnosis and prescription for Europe. His critique of austerity policies is a familiar one and his plea for a social (and social democratic) contract for a peoples' Europe as opposed to a bureaucratic one is also fairly uncontroversial.

What is less convincing, I think, in Beck's argument is the ascription of the austerity policy specifically to Germany and more specifically to a Machiavellian strategy of the Chancellor, whom he calls Merkiavelli.

"The Chancellor saw the crisis as her *occasione*, 'the propitious moment'. A combination of *fortuna* and Merkiavellian *virtù* enabled her to seize the historic opportunity and to profit from it both domestically and in foreign relations." (p.54)

The history of the last three disastrous years in Europe has not yet been written, but I wonder if we should not think more in terms of a reluctant dragon (to borrow the title of Kenneth Grahame's story and John Rutter's operetta), presiding over an equally 'reluctant hegemon' (William Paterson's term) and a problematic coalition, divided, like Europe itself, as Beck notes, 'between supporters of nation-state orthodoxy, who wish to keep politics within the existing rules, and the Europe builders, who advocate rule changes' (p. 34).

The way the EU has developed has made the demands for further democratisation greater at the same time that pressures have been moving us in an inter-governmental direction: towards what Jürgen Habermas has called 'post-democratic executive federalism'. At its most extreme, this means heads of government and heads of state getting together to negotiate deals at the last minute. The back-and-forth scramble over Cyprus in the spring is a striking example.

Where Beck thinks of Machiavelli, however, I am more inclined to think of Montesquieu, with his keen eye for the interplay of structural conditions and historical accidents. Among the structural elements is the disproportionate influence of big states in European Union politics, in particular the Franco-German 'motor' recently analysed by Ulrich Krotz and Joachim Schild. This culminated (for the time being) in the somewhat improbable personal union of Merkel and Sarkozy which, as Beck notes (pp. 40-41), dominated policy discussions to the annoyance of, in particular, the smaller member states. 'And then there was one', to borrow Agatha Christie's title. In their different ways, Berlusconi and Cameron had ruled their countries out of any significant contribution: as Beck notes (p. 42), 'Britain is drifting into European irrelevance…'

In this vacuum, Merkel's mantle was of course tailored by the structures and economic ideology underlying the Eurozone, reflecting those of the Federal Republic a decade and two Chancellors earlier. Austerity policies, whose intellectual credibility was finally to be undermined by a 'dodgy spreadsheet', as Blair's was by the 'dodgy dossier', are not specific to Germany, but they do have a particular resonance there. And Germany, having wrecked what was left of the East German economy in its solidaristic embrace, offered the rest of Europe austerity *without* solidarity.

Other member states of the Eurozone and the wider EU, it seems to me, were substantially happy to tag along, letting Germany and Merkel take the flak. (The Polish foreign minister at least had the decency towards the end of 2011 to acknowledge the case for German leadership.)

Beck notes the 'gulf' (p. 43) which has opened up 'between those countries that are already (or not yet) on a drip provided by the rescue funds and those countries that are financing the bailout.' But the 'not yet' is crucial: this is a quantum-theoretic gulf where states can move instantaneously from one side to the other.

It may be that Beck has slightly over-personalised the current crisis of crisis management, but I think he poses (p. 38) the right question: 'Will the prospect of the demise of the European Union end up promoting a European consciousness, a consciousness that takes issue with both the abstract Brussels-dominated Europe and with nation-state orthodoxy?'

William Outhwaite is Professor of Sociology at Newcastle University. His recent books include Social Theory and Postcommunism (Blackwell, 2005); European Society (Polity, 2008); and Habermas: a critical introduction (2nd edition, Polity, 2009). Read more reviews by William.