Even for me, a migrant from Germany: when I saw the title, I have to admit, I misread it and assumed that immigration would be the topic of the book. German emigrants do not play a big role in the public perception compared to other European countries like Italy or Ireland. Moreover, in Germany, if one does speak of emigrants, then it refers mainly to Germans fleeing from Nazi Germany – as symbolised through Thomas Mann and Berthold Brecht – or, to a far lesser extent, the 19th-century adventurer leaving for the new World.

The nearly 800,000 Germans leaving the Federal Republic of Germany in the years between 1949 and 1961 do not belong to either of these categories. Sternberg, in his well-researched study, looks at the changing public image of emigrants in Germany and the political discourse around their emigration. He covers the year from 1949 until 2010, but his main focus are the years until 1961. After 1961, the numbers of emigrants drop significantly, since in 1961 full employment had been reached in Germany and only after Germany's reunification in 1989 the numbers rise again.

Sternberg observes that in many respects immigration and emigration are treated in Germany as the two sides of the same medal. For a longer time both emigration and immigration were ignored or even denied as a political reality and, if spoken in the public discourse, treated as a fearful threat to Germany.

Sternberg contributes with his work to a cultural history of West Germany. The changing public discourse on emigration reflects the changes within society. The debate in the 1940s and 1950s was dominated by the notion of loss of human capital. In the new century, we speak instead of the "brain drain", whereby the "most valuable members" of the German people are turned by the media into a sort of soap opera, since a documentary on emigration has all the dramatic ingredients that a program director could dream of. As Sternberg quotes the woman in charge for "Deutschland ade": "Where else you find so much interest in adventure, daring and longing for happiness? What else provides stories like this, which carry a risk of failure in itself, tell of sorrow, hope, fear and happiness? All reasons why the SWR [the television channel] is enthusiastic about emigration as a subject. It is material for a serial par excellence." (p.222)

One just wishes that historians and social scientists may realise this as well and start doing more research on it.