

## REVIEW ESSAY

# “Bad” Politics and “Good” Culture: New Approaches to the History of the Weimar Republic

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*The Downfall of Money: Germany's Hyperinflation and the Destruction of the Middle Class.* By Frederick Taylor. London: Bloomsbury Press, 2014. Pp. 432. Cloth \$30.00. ISBN 978-1620402368. Paper \$20.00. ISBN 978-1620402375.

*Nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg: Lebensversuche moderner Demokratien.* By Tim B. Müller. Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2014. Pp. 174. Cloth €12.00. ISBN 978-3868542790.

*Demokratiegeschichte als Zäsurgeschichte: Diskurse der frühen Weimarer Republik.* Edited by Heidrun Kämper, Peter Haslinger, and Thomas Raithel. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014. Pp. 376. Cloth €99.95. ISBN 978-3050064055.

*Diskursgeschichte der Weimarer Republik. 2 volumes.* By Thorsten Eitz and Isabelle Engelhardt. Hildesheim: Olms Weidmann, 2015. Pp. 526; 416. Cloth €68.00. ISBN 978-3487152127.

*Rethinking the Weimar Republic: Authority and Authoritarianism, 1916–1936.* By Anthony McElligott. London: Bloomsbury Press, 2014. Pp. 384. Cloth \$120.00. ISBN 978-1849664721. Paper \$39.95. ISBN 978-0340731901.

*Europe between Democracy and Dictatorship, 1900–1945.* By Conan Fischer. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. Pp. 408. Cloth \$123.95. ISBN 978-0631215110. Paper \$52.95. ISBN 978-0631215127.

*Geschichte Deutschlands im 20. Jahrhundert.* By Ulrich Herbert. Munich: C. H. Beck, 2014. Pp. 1451. Cloth €39.95. ISBN 978-3406660511.

*Weimar Culture Revisited.* Edited by John Alexander Williams. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Pp. 264. Cloth \$110.00. ISBN 978-0230109421. Paper \$32.00. ISBN 978-1137347183.

**M**ORE than thirty years ago, Eberhard Kolb commented that the vast wealth of research on the history of the Weimar Republic made it “difficult even for a specialist to give a full account of the relevant literature.”<sup>1</sup> Since then, the flood of studies on Weimar Germany has not waned, and by now it is hard even to keep track of all the

<sup>1</sup>Eberhard Kolb, preface to *The Weimar Republic*, trans. P. S. Falla (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), ix. Originally published as *Die Weimarer Republik* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1984).

review articles meant to cut a swath through this abundance.<sup>2</sup> Yet the prevailing historical image of the era has remained surprisingly stable: most historians have accepted the master narrative of the Weimar Republic as the sharp juxtaposition of “bad” politics and “good” culture, epitomized in the often-used image of “a dance on the edge of a volcano.”<sup>3</sup> Kolb, for example, described “the sharp contrast between the gloomy political and economic conditions ... and the unique wealth of artistic and intellectual achievement” as “typical of the Weimar era.”<sup>4</sup> Detlev Peukert, arguably the most innovative scholar of Weimar history, criticized this historical image but, at the same time, declared this dichotomy “an integral feature of the era.”<sup>5</sup> The latest example can be found in the work of Eric D. Weitz, who summarizes the fate of Weimar Germany as “the striving for something new and wonderful encountering absolute evil,” juxtaposing the “sparkling brilliance” of modernist masters like Bertolt Brecht, Thomas Mann, and Bruno Taut with “the plain hatred of democracy” of Weimar’s right-wing extremists.<sup>6</sup> This contrasting of politics and culture is a narrative device that only makes sense, however, from our contemporary vantage point of Western liberal democracy and from our understanding of progressive art. This retrospective interpretation is not in itself the problem—after all, historians can never really escape their own historical contexts. It becomes problematic, however, when it is treated not as an interpretation but as historical fact. Weimar Germans certainly would not have shared this narrative wholeheartedly: many would not have subscribed to the depiction of their time as a never-ending parade of political breakdowns and economic disasters.<sup>7</sup> Even more would have rejected the view of the Berlin-based avant-garde as a sign of progressive achievement—if they had ever had the chance to see its representative works in the first place. The sharp distinction between “bad” Weimar politics and “good” Weimar culture not only fails to do justice to the way many of these Germans perceived their time but also keeps us from understanding how closely intertwined these two spheres were in the Weimar Republic. Thus, rather than giving an overview of the latest additions to Weimar historiography, this review essay looks at how recent publications have questioned—or conformed to—this dominant narrative.

<sup>2</sup>For recent overviews, see Moritz Föllmer, “Nationalismus, Konsum und politische Kultur im Europa der Zwischenkriegszeit,” *Neue Politische Literatur* 56, no. 3 (2011): 427–53; Nadine Rossol, “Chancen der Weimarer Republik,” *Neue Politische Literatur* 55, no. 3 (2010): 393–419; Björn Hofmeister, “Kultur- und Sozialgeschichte der Politik in der Weimarer Republik 1928 bis 1933,” *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 50 (2010): 445–501. The most comprehensive and useful surveys are still Peter Fritzsche, “Did Weimar Fail?,” *Journal of Modern History* 68, no. 3 (Sept. 1996): 629–56; Benjamin Ziemann, “Weimar Was Weimar: Politics, Culture, and the Emplotment of the German Republic,” *German History* 28, no. 4 (Dec. 2010): 542–71.

<sup>3</sup>Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1969), xiv. Two recent exhibitions illustrate the persistence of this narrative: *Tanz auf dem Vulkan: Das Berlin der Zwanziger Jahre im Spiegel der Künste*, Stadtmuseum Berlin, Sept. 2015–Jan. 2016; *Berlin Metropolis: 1918–1933*, Neue Galerie, New York, Oct. 2015–Jan. 2016.

<sup>4</sup>Kolb, *Weimar Republic*, 83.

<sup>5</sup>Detlev Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity*, trans. Richard Deveson (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), xiii. Originally published as *Die Weimarer Republik: Krisenjahre der klassischen Moderne* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1987).

<sup>6</sup>Eric D. Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 361–64.

<sup>7</sup>For positive views by Weimar contemporaries of their own time, see Rüdiger Graf, *Die Zukunft der Weimarer Republik: Krisen und Zukunftsaneignungen in Deutschland 1918–1933* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2008).

## Weimar’s Master Narrative

As Dilip P. Gaonkar has argued, the distinction between cultural modernism and societal modernization as “good” or “bad” aspects of modernity is itself part of a “Western-centric” narrative about modernity.<sup>8</sup> In this sense, the historical image of the Weimar Republic is still rooted in modernization theory in general and in the idea of a German *Sonderweg* (special path) in particular: both set an ideal of Western parliamentary democracy and liberal culture as a “natural” standard and judge societies by the degree to which they conform to this ideal. Like modernization theory, Weimar’s master narrative of “good” culture and “bad” politics is a creation of the Cold War: as Sebastian Ulrich and others have shown, the history of Weimar’s failed democratic experiment was used after 1945 to strengthen the legitimacy of the postwar order in both German states, particularly in West Germany.<sup>9</sup> Naturally, Weimar democracy had to appear as a catastrophic failure that had brought on the darkest chapter of the country’s history and that was thus never to be repeated—an outcome that the newly installed political order would ensure. By contrast, the culture of the Weimar era was remembered mainly for its supposed successes, again as a way of legitimizing political developments in post–World War II Germany.<sup>10</sup> “Weimar culture” represented the aspects of German society that could be salvaged after the end of the Third Reich and used to construct a legacy for the new German states formed after 1945. Already in 1962, Helmuth Plessner, one of the representatives of this supposedly uniquely progressive, hedonistic, and creative Weimar culture, ridiculed its nostalgia-tinged image as “the legend of the Twenties.”<sup>11</sup> In this politicized juxtaposition, Weimar culture was effectively identified with a Western liberal democratic tradition, whereas “Weimar politics” became a byword for reactionary extremism. This obscured the fluid nature of both: some of the most modernist aspects of the culture of the Weimar era were far from friendly toward parliamentary democracy, and democratic politics were not as weak as they were often portrayed. It is necessary to accept the existence of “alternative modernities”—not only in non-Western societies but throughout European history as well—in order to uncover Weimar contemporaries’ complex interpretations of their own time.

After reunification in 1990, the historical image of the Weimar Republic started to change, at least with regard to its democratic institutions and republican culture, which

<sup>8</sup>Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, “On Alternative Modernities,” in *Alternative Modernities*, ed. Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 1–18.

<sup>9</sup>Sebastian Ullrich, *Der Weimar-Komplex: Das Scheitern der ersten deutschen Demokratie und die politische Kultur der frühen Bundesrepublik 1945–1959* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2009); Christoph Gusy, ed., *Weimars lange Schatten: “Weimar” als Argument nach 1945* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2003); A. Dirk Moses, “The ‘Weimar Syndrome’ in the Federal Republic of Germany: The Carl Schmitt Reception by the Forty-Fiver Generation of Intellectuals,” in *Leben, Tod und Entscheidung: Studien zur Geistesgeschichte der Weimarer Republik*, ed. Stephan Loos and Holger Zaborowski (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2003), 187–207; Jochen Vogt, “The Weimar Republic as the ‘Heritage of our Time,’” in *Dancing on the Volcano: Essays on the Culture of the Weimar Republic*, ed. Thomas W. Kniesche and Stephen Brockmann (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1994), 21–28.

<sup>10</sup>Manfred Gangl, foreword to *Intellektuellendiskurse in der Weimarer Republik: Zur politischen Kultur einer Gemengelage*, ed. Manfred Gangl and Gérard Raulet (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 1994), 10; Jost Hermand and Frank Trommler, *Die Kultur der Weimarer Republik* (Munich: Nymphenberger, 1978), 8.

<sup>11</sup>Helmuth Plessner, “Die Legende von den zwanziger Jahren,” *Merkur* 16, no. 1 (Jan. 1962): 33–46.

now appeared in a much more positive light.<sup>12</sup> Drawing on Peukert's interpretation of Weimar as a "crisis of classical modernity" with an uncertain outcome, historians now took heed of the experience of contemporaries and highlighted the era's historical contingency.<sup>13</sup> Weimar came to be portrayed as a postwar society with an open future rather than as a mere prelude to a dictatorship or as a democracy that was doomed from the start. This did not do much to change the dominance of its master narrative, however—particularly the image of its "good" culture. In recent years, three new approaches to the era's history have emerged that address, in one way or another, the Weimar stereotypes of "bad" politics and "good" culture. First, the financial crisis of 2008 has generated renewed interest in the Weimar-era economy and its role in democratic breakdown. Second, collaborations between historians and linguists have put a spotlight on the uses and limitations of studying historical language as a means of exploring political crises. And third, historians have attempted to increase the complexity of their notion of Weimar culture.

### Democracy and Economy

Since the beginning of the global financial crisis in 2008, many experts and commentators have drawn on the history of the Weimar Republic to warn of the dire consequences of deep economic crisis for democratic states, not only in hard-hit countries such as Greece but throughout the Western world.<sup>14</sup> This has shifted the narrative focus from contingency back to failure: the historical example of Weimar is used to formulate a direct causal relationship between economic crisis and democratic breakdown, social unrest, and the rise of right-wing extremism. Many economic historians would likely subscribe to this linear understanding of the relationship between economy and democracy. From their vantage point, there never was much space for contingency when it came to the Weimar Republic—"a gamble which stood virtually no chance of success."<sup>15</sup> The economic burden of the war, compounded by unprecedented systemic crises such as hyperinflation and the Great Depression, left the struggling democratic experiment no chance of survival.

Frederick Taylor's *The Downfall of Money: Germany's Hyperinflation and the Destruction of the Middle Class* is perhaps the most visible expression of this argument's renewed popularity. Although not strictly an academic study based on primary-source analysis, it effectively dusts off older secondary literature and gives it a new shine. Taylor explicitly draws parallels

<sup>12</sup>Anthony McElligott, introduction to *Weimar Germany*, ed. Anthony McElligott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1–25.

<sup>13</sup>For an overview of this new strand of scholarship, see Jochen Hung, "Beyond Glitter and Doom: The New Paradigm of Contingency in Weimar Research," in *Beyond Glitter and Doom: The Contingency of the Weimar Republic*, ed. Jochen Hung, Godela Weiss-Sussex, and Geoff Wilkes (Munich: Iudicium, 2012), 9–15.

<sup>14</sup>One of the keenest proponents of Weimar's symbolism is Paul Krugman. See, e.g., Paul Krugman, "Weimar on the Aegean," *New York Times*, Feb. 16, 2015; Krugman, "Partying like it's 1923; or, The Weimar Temptation," *New York Times*, Dec. 27, 2010. See also the essays by Dominik Geppert, Hans Kundnani, Andreas Wirsching, Jakob Tanner, Harold James, and Peer Vries in the special forum "The European Debt Crisis in Historical Perspectives," *Journal of Modern European History* 11, no. 3 (2013): 272–328.

<sup>15</sup>Gerald D. Feldman, "Weimar from Inflation to Depression: Experiment or Gamble?," in *Die Nachwirkungen der Inflation auf die deutsche Geschichte, 1924–1933*, ed. Gerald D. Feldman (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1985), 385.

between today’s euro crisis and German hyperinflation, arguing that the historical catastrophe “still haunts the nation’s collective memory and constitutes a decisive influence on German government policy, even in the twenty-first century” (348). Yet, recent research does not support Taylor’s main argument—that the hyperinflation bankrupted Germany’s educated middle class, alienated it from the young republic, and thus created the backbone of the Nazi party.<sup>16</sup> His conclusion—that this collective trauma still influences government policy today—is psychologizing and misguided, as it essentially tries to explain the European Union’s current intergovernmental bargaining process as the product of a historical posttraumatic stress disorder.<sup>17</sup> Taylor follows the conventional narrative of Weimar as “something well-meaning and even brilliant, but fatally divided and doomed” (3). In his account, the republic barely survives its foundation: Adolf Hitler makes a foreboding—and inevitable—appearance as a bystander during the Kapp Putsch in 1920, and the first Reichstag election in that same year spells “the end of a social-democratic” Germany—though “not yet” of a democratic one (157). By 1921, the country already seems “economically and politically doomed” (168). While the republic would labor on for another decade, it is already set on the path to unavoidable failure. Taylor’s framing of the relationship between economy and democracy in Weimar Germany is clear-cut: the economic burden of the war, exacerbated by the new democratic regime’s opportunistic and incompetent financial policies, doomed the republic from the start. Put simply, the economy destroyed democracy.

The close relationship between economic performance and democratic legitimacy has long been an important part of the German self-image, with the Great Depression supposedly ushering in the Third Reich and the post-1945 “economic miracle” finally installing a lasting democratic regime. But while it is obvious that the legitimacy of a political order is closely linked to the state of the economy, particularly in modern “mass welfare-state” democracies, the conclusion that economic crises destroyed Weimar democracy is not entirely convincing. After all, the dire economic situation of the 1920s and early 1930s did not lead to a direct, violent overturning of the political order, as it had at the end of the war. Hitler’s Beer Hall Putsch of 1923, conducted on the back of inflationary turmoil, was a pathetic failure. Later, despite their best efforts, the German captains of heavy industry, military leaders, aristocratic landowners, and national-conservative reactionaries never succeeded on their own in installing a lasting authoritarian regime that could roll back the social and political innovations established after 1918. Instead, they ultimately had to rely on the now democratically legitimated force of the Nazis to put their plans into practice.

Undoubtedly, the economic crises of the interwar years changed democracy, not only in Germany but throughout Europe and the United States as well. This did not necessarily involve a degeneration toward authoritarian structures, however. As the example of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal shows, the threat of economic crisis could also result in an invigorated democratic culture.

<sup>16</sup>For a historiographical overview and a new interpretation of voter support for the Nazi Party, see Gary King et al., “Ordinary Economic Voting Behavior in the Extraordinary Election of Adolf Hitler,” *Journal of Economic History* 68, no. 4 (Dec. 2008): 951–96.

<sup>17</sup>This argument has been used in many recent comments on German policy during the euro crisis. For a general discussion, see Jochen Hung, “German Aversion to the ECB Printing Money Isn’t about the ‘National Psyche,’” *Guardian*, Dec. 22, 2011.

That is the argument of Tim B. Müller in his essay-like book *Nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg: Lebensversuche moderner Demokratien*, his most polemical publication on the topic.<sup>18</sup> Like Taylor, Müller explicitly draws parallels between contemporary Greece and Weimar: the period after World War I, he argues, witnessed the “epochal invention” of a “liberal and social democracy” (14). This fusion of political liberty and economic equality came into full bloom after 1945, but today it is threatened by extreme austerity. Where Taylor sees a troubling warning sign for our times, Müller has a more optimistic view. Instead of telling a story of democratic failure, he focuses on the “imaginativeness and staying power” (20) of Western democracies during the crises of the interwar years. Müller sees “enabling acts” and states of emergency as legitimate tools for steering a democracy into safer waters—they were, after all, what saved Weimar Germany during the years of hyperinflation, leading to a stabilization of the republic rather than to its collapse. The concept of a strong “democratic dictator” espoused by some of Weimar’s most senior civil servants and experts on constitutional law, such as Alexander Rüstow and Hermann Heller, were not signs of a rejection of democracy, Müller argues, but rather constructive criticism by staunch democrats who were inspired by similar debates in the United Kingdom and the United States.

The title of Müller’s book is typical of the more recent literature on Weimar, which avoids the “vanishing point of 1933” and interprets the first German democracy as one of many European postwar societies.<sup>19</sup> As Müller shows, most Western countries—and he counts Weimar Germany among them—had to come to terms with their transformations into mass democracies with profoundly enlarged electorates during a time of deep-seated economic problems, while at the same time laying the foundations of democratic welfare states.<sup>20</sup> Far from being doomed from the start, the new democratic order characterized the *Erwartungshorizont* (horizon of expectations) of most Germans: “The thought that there was a fundamental difference between Germany and the other democracies would have seemed odd” to them (69). For Müller, German democracy failed not because it was rejected by the German people, but because of unsuccessful crisis management by its leaders, most prominently Chancellor Heinrich Brüning. The austere Brüning had no sense for the “democratic capitalism” constructed after 1918 and had no democratic vision to offer struggling citizens. He failed not only as an economist but also—and more important—as a democratic leader.

Müller’s publications have rekindled the debate about the so-called Borchardt hypothesis, put forward by the economic historian Knut Borchardt in 1979.<sup>21</sup> Borchardt attacked the

<sup>18</sup>See also Tim B. Müller, “Demokratie, Kultur und Wirtschaft in der deutschen Republik,” in *Normalität und Fragilität: Demokratie nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg*, ed. Tim B. Müller and Adam Tooze (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2015), 259–93; Müller, “Die Geburt des Sozial-Liberalismus aus dem Geist der Verwaltung: Zur Erfindung der modernen Wirtschaftspolitik in der Weimarer Republik,” in *Liberalismus im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Anselm Doering-Manteuffel and Jörn Leonhard (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2015), 127–55; Müller, “Demokratie und Wirtschaftspolitik in der Weimarer Republik,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 62, no. 4 (2014): 569–601; Müller, “Der Erste Weltkrieg und die Geburt der sozialen Demokratie,” *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* 59, no. 10 (2014): 95–108.

<sup>19</sup>On the idea of a “vanishing point,” see Helmut Walser Smith, *The Continuities of German History: Nation, Religion, and Race across the Long Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 13–38.

<sup>20</sup>In this context, see also “Democracy between the World Wars—from Triumph to Crisis,” special issue, *Totalitarismus und Demokratie* 12, no. 1 (2015).

<sup>21</sup>Knut Borchardt, “Zwangslagen und Handlungsspielräume in der großen Wirtschaftskrise der frühen dreissiger Jahre,” in *Wachstum, Krisen, Handlungsspielräume der Wirtschaftspolitik: Studien zur Wirtschaftsgeschichte des 19.*

then-dominant assumption that a Keynesian policy of state investment would have softened the blow of the Great Depression and thus might have saved the struggling republic. Müller wants to open this discussion, dominated until now by economic historians, to political and cultural history.<sup>22</sup> His focus is less on Keynesian policies, or the question of whether they would have been successful, and more on John Maynard Keynes’s insistence on the democratic legitimacy of such policies: politicians had to foster optimism among the population, he argued, which would lead not only to more consumption and investment but also to a strengthening of the political order during the economic crisis. Brüning, Müller argues, never understood this need for the democratic legitimacy of economic policies.

Müller’s more optimistic and nonteleological reading is an important response to the return of a certain economic determinism in the ongoing debate about the history of German democracy. Historians have not taken kindly to Müller’s arguments, however, and have accused him of willfully avoiding the need to explain why Weimar democracy did fail in the end and not develop along the lines of Roosevelt’s New Deal America.<sup>23</sup> It is indeed remarkable that the Nazis are virtually absent from Müller’s account. As Roman Köster has argued, Müller’s suggestion that the republic’s failure was entirely the fault of a small gang of scheming or incompetent conservative politicians is too simplistic.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, although Müller often urges his readers to take the historical *Erwartungshorizont* of Weimar’s citizens into account, he frequently does not follow his own call. While it might be true that most Germans accepted the idea that there was no real alternative to a democratic political order, they had very different ideas about how this new order should look. Yet, Müller focuses only on a narrow concept of democracy, one that characterizes most Western states today: a liberal democratic order coupled with an advanced welfare state. Indeed, one of his main arguments is that this Western order was founded after 1918, with Weimar Germany as one of its most advanced exponents. He refers in passing to the existence of several competing concepts, such as Hitler’s “Germanic democracy” (29), but he dismisses these as “parasitic” versions of real democracy. The Soviet Union, surely the most powerful alternative vision of popular government at the time, is not even mentioned. For Müller, a Weimar democrat was a Western democrat.

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und 20. Jahrhunderts (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982), 165–82. For an overview of the debate, see Albrecht Ritschl, “Knut Borchardts Interpretationen der Weimarer Wirtschaft: Zur Geschichte und Wirkung einer wirtschaftsgeschichtlichen Kontroverse,” in *Historische Debatten und Kontroversen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Jürgen Elvert and Susanne Krauss (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2003), 234–44.

<sup>22</sup>For a more comprehensive outline of Borchardt’s approach, see also Tim B. Müller, “Die Ordnung der Krise: Zur Revision der deutschen Geschichte im 20. Jahrhundert,” *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte* 8, no. 4 (2014): 119–26.

<sup>23</sup>See the debate on Müller, “Demokratie und Wirtschaftspolitik,” in the online forum of *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*: Claus-Dieter Krohn, “Neue Geschichtsmetaphysik: Tim B. Müllers Blick auf die Weimarer Republik,” Dec. 1, 2014, [http://www.ifz-muenchen.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Vierteljahrshefte/Forum/Krohn\\_Müller.pdf](http://www.ifz-muenchen.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Vierteljahrshefte/Forum/Krohn_Müller.pdf); Paul Köppen, “Neue Perspektiven zur Zwischenkriegszeit—eine Antwort auf Claus-Dieter Krohn,” Jan. 26, 2016, [http://www.ifz-muenchen.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Vierteljahrshefte/Forum/Köppen\\_Müller.pdf](http://www.ifz-muenchen.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Vierteljahrshefte/Forum/Köppen_Müller.pdf).

<sup>24</sup>Roman Köster, “Keine Zwangslagen? Anmerkungen zu einer neuen Debatte über die deutsche Wirtschaftspolitik in der großen Depression,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 63, no. 2 (2015): 241–57.

### The Meanings of “Democracy”

*Demokratiengeschichte als Zäsurgeschichte: Diskurse der frühen Weimarer Republik*, edited by Heidrun Kämper, Peter Haslinger, and Thomas Raithel, shows just how far removed that view is from the experience of Weimar’s citizens. This collection of articles grew out of a recently concluded collaborative research project between linguists and historians who studied the discursive changes around the term *democracy* that occurred in Germany after 1918. Their findings show that, far from being a fixed concept, it was a highly variable “*Legitimations- und Kampfbegriff*” (16), a thoroughly politicized term used by all ideological camps in their struggle to dominate the public sphere. Kämper provides an exhaustive overview of the various contemporary definitions of the term, ranging from a communist “soviet democracy” to a conservative “led democracy,” all vying to undermine the legitimacy of the competing concepts. As Jörn Retterath shows, not even the framers of the Weimar constitution could agree on a straightforward vision of the new democratic order. It is clear that they did not necessarily favor a Western-style parliamentary democracy: the first article of the constitution did not explicitly call for a parliamentary order because it effectively declared the *Volk* not only the source but also the bearer of popular sovereignty, Rettarath argues. The *Volk* could be interpreted—and was, even by most constitutional experts of the time—in essentialist, organic terms as standing above the constitution. This made it easier for enemies of the republic to support the founding document, but they also used this lack of clarity to attack the “formal democracy” of the parliamentary order (114). Anja Lobenstein-Reichmann challenges Kurt Sontheimer’s still-influential study of the “antidemocratic” thought of Weimar-era right-wing nationalists by showing that even parties such as the Deutschnationale Volkspartei (DNVP) and writers such as Houston Stewart Chamberlin and Alfred Rosenberg did not reject democracy per se. Rather, juxtaposing supposedly degenerate French and Anglo-American democratic culture with that of ancient Greece, they tried to assert their own idea of a *völkisch* democracy characterized not by traditional liberal values such as liberty or equality but by ideas such as community and collectivism. In this view, a parliamentary party system only obscured and shackled the direct and free expression of the will of the people.

The volume has to be praised for questioning the historical narrative of democratic breakdown, suggesting that, for many Germans, the sidelining of parliament after 1930 might have promised more rather than less democracy. The above-mentioned contributions show that *democracy* was a very fluid concept and that it is thus not helpful to describe Weimar politics mainly as a struggle between “democrats” and “antidemocrats.” All political camps tried to claim social democracy for themselves by promoting popular political participation and social welfare. The Western parliamentary model was only one version of democracy among many, and, during the systemic crises of parliamentarism during the interwar years, it was not necessarily the most appealing to many Germans. While the extremist versions might retroactively seem to be mere “parasitic” ideas that fed off the promise of Western liberal and social democracy, one should not assume that contemporary Germans felt the same way.

Despite its strong arguments, the book nevertheless suffers from a lack of methodological cohesion. The contributing historians and linguists did not find a common approach to their topic and generally do not seem to have much to say to one another. Many historians will not find the contributions by linguists very useful: the jargon-laden and sometimes downright hermetic language often obscures rather banal findings, which mainly seem to reach the

conclusion that transformative social events are reflected in changes in language. An example is Melanie Seidenglanz’s study of the declarations of abdication by various German princes, which does not offer much insight beyond the self-evident statements that these documents are “indicators of a radical change,” that they are “multilayered” texts, and that they were “highly socially relevant” (183–84). The communication difficulties between the two disciplines are also reflected in Marcus Müller’s meditations on the relationship between *Sprachgeschichte* (linguistic history), *Diskursgeschichte* (discursive history), and *Realgeschichte* (actual history). Müller constructs the straw man of a “deadlocked debate about constructivism and realism” (227), portraying historians as hardheaded proponents of the latter and linguists as dedicated followers of the former, a forced distinction that has not really existed since the linguistic turn.

There are similar problems with the handbook-like *Diskursgeschichte der Weimarer Republik*, a collaborative effort by the linguist Thomas Eitz and the historian Isabelle Engelhardt. The two volumes cover important debates of the Weimar era, from the role of women in society and the transformation of the economic system to abortion and homosexuality. The publication’s methodological approach is rooted in the tradition of *linguistische Diskursgeschichte*, which has until now mainly focused on the political language of West Germany.<sup>25</sup> The authors make a convincing case for further study of the discursive history of the Weimar Republic: the political, social, and cultural upheavals of the time caused a fundamental shake-up in the meaning of everyday language, but the language of the Weimar Republic has been studied heretofore only as a precursor to the jargon of the Third Reich. This, they argue, ignores the complex political and ideological struggles of the time, which were often fought out in “semantic battles” (18). Despite this innovative starting point, the study is of only limited use to historians, as it largely remains on what Achim Landwehr has called the “naïve” level of historical discourse analysis: the mere collecting of different interpretations of a certain concept.<sup>26</sup> In many cases, the authors simply reproduce contemporary utterances about several controversial topics, and the chapters mostly consist of a nearly unbroken sequence of lengthy quotations. The conclusions that the reader can draw from this parade of quotes are often limited, such as the insight that the radical Left was in favor of a Soviet system and socialization of important industries, whereas conservatives were not. There is no real explanation for why the authors chose the topics they study and no discussion of the significance of the different sources they use. For example, it does not seem to make a difference to the authors whether a concept appears in a commentary in a small publication such as *Die Weltbühne*, in an article in a mass-market newspaper like the *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, in a text in a regional publication like the *Miesbacher Anzeiger*, or in a speech in parliament.

The interesting parts of the study are the rare instances where the authors show how Weimar Germans addressed the “linguistic confusion” (250) of their own time and criticized political adversaries’ attempts to co-opt central terms and concepts.<sup>27</sup> Highlighting the fact

<sup>25</sup>See Thorsten Eitz and Georg Stötzel, eds., *Wörterbuch der “Vergangenheitsbewältigung”: Die NS-Vergangenheit im öffentlichen Sprachgebrauch*, 2 vols. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2007–9); Georg Stötzel, *Kontroverse Begriffe: Geschichte des öffentlichen Sprachgebrauchs in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1995).

<sup>26</sup>Achim Landwehr, “Diskurs und Diskursgeschichte,” *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte*, Feb. 11, 2010, [http://docupedia.de/zg/Diskurs\\_und\\_Diskursgeschichte?oldid=106237](http://docupedia.de/zg/Diskurs_und_Diskursgeschichte?oldid=106237).

<sup>27</sup>Indeed, contemporaries could not even agree on a name for their own state. See Sebastian Ulrich, “Mehr als Schall und Rauch: Der Streit um den Namen der ersten deutschen Demokratie 1918–1949,”

that there was almost no consensus in Weimar on even the most fundamental categories of political, cultural, and social life is the most important accomplishment of this study—and an aspect that historians of the Weimar era would do well to keep in mind.

### Democracy and Authority

One way to avoid superimposing our understanding of democracy on the political culture of the Weimar Republic is to examine it as only one manifestation of the broader, more abstract concept of *authority*. By doing just that in *Rethinking the Weimar Republic: Authority and Authoritarianism, 1916–1936*, Anthony McElligott is able to show the continuities and fluidity of German politics between the Kaiserreich, the Weimar Republic, and the Third Reich. He puts the republic in the broader context of a “reformulation” (7) of the question of state authority that emerged with the “quasi-dictatorship” (16) of Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff and culminated in Hitler’s “unbound” (209) authority in the second half of the 1930s. In this picture, Weimar is not a mere democratic interlude between authoritarian regimes, but a pivotal part of a long struggle for political legitimacy in which liberal and conservative positions frequently converged. McElligott applies this innovative view, with varying success, to the fields of foreign policy, social and economic policy, cultural policy, to the judiciary, and to the Landräte (rural administrators). The approach works best in the last chapter, where the author directly addresses the contemporary debate during the Weimar era about three “interrelated yet competing visions of political authority” (181): democratic authority, authoritarian democracy, and dictatorship. To describe the fluid nature of Weimar politics he mostly draws on the same experts Müller uses, such as the economist Alexander Rüstow, who coined the phrase “dictatorship within the bounds of the constitution” (185). For McElligott, the real culprit is not Brüning but Franz von Papen, the first chancellor to use the constitutional possibilities for authoritarian measures not to shore up democracy but to do away with it.

The fluidity of political categories was also evident in cultural policy. McElligott explicitly sets out to challenge the “old Weimar paradigm of failed politics offset by cultural experimentalism” (2) by interpreting the republic not just as a political project but as a cultural one as well. He shows how the Weimar state tried to build political legitimacy by asserting cultural authority through censorship and “constitutional pedagogy” in the form of regular festivities, such as the yearly *Verfassungsfeiern*, which, from the start, “contained both democratic and authoritarian impulses” (155). From 1930, the latter aspects developed into a “cultural authoritarianism” (5) characterized increasingly by nationalistic overtones.

The argument seems much harder to make in the other categories, however. It gets lost in the chapter on social and economic policy in a conventional retelling of the construction and eventual dismantling of Weimar’s welfare state, and it hardly seems to work at all in the section on the Landräte, a group that was evidently hostile to the new democratic order but also opposed to Nazi upstarts who challenged their traditional authority. The individual chapters thus seem disconnected and the book reads more like a collection of essays than an integrated work with an overarching argument. These structural reservations aside, McElligott’s persuasive analysis of the multifaceted nature of Weimar’s political culture is

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in *Die “Krise” der Weimarer Republik: Zur Kritik eines Deutungsmusters*, ed. Moritz Föllmer and Rüdiger Graf (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2005), 187–207.

an important step toward a more open, contingent, and complex historical image of the Weimar Republic. In particular, his reinterpretation of the most important ideological struggles of the time through the lens of authority highlights the often surprising closeness of the opposed camps in their interpretation of Weimar's political system.

### Democracy and Culture

As Benjamin Ziemann pointed out in 2010, the persistence of the conventional emplotment of the Weimar Republic is most evident in general histories.<sup>28</sup> This has not changed much since then: the narrative of cultural experimentalism against the backdrop of democratic breakdown still dominates recent historical surveys. In Conan Fischer's *Europe between Democracy and Dictatorship, 1900–1945*, the whole of European interwar culture is described *en bloc* as international modernism represented by the Bauhaus, the "New Woman," and *Vanity Fair*, whereas European politics and the European economy are riddled by crises and disaster. Fischer mentions the co-opting of these modernist styles and modern technology by the Nazis and other radical groups like Oswald Mosley's Blackshirts in Britain and the Croix de Feu in France, but, as the title suggests, he leaves little room for the fluidity of interwar politics. Generally, these groups appear as antidemocratic outsiders swept into mainstream politics by the destitution wreaked by the Great Depression, rather than on the back of a different vision of popular political participation.

In his magisterial overview *Geschichte Deutschlands im 20. Jahrhundert*, Ulrich Herbert avoids an overtly teleological master narrative, which in itself is an impressive feat for a large-scale survey that starts in 1870 and ends with the years of Gerhard Schröder's and Joschka Fischer's Red-Green coalition government.<sup>29</sup> He describes Weimar as a time of deep economic and political crises and social upheaval but also highlights the republic's achievements, such as the politics of reconciliation with its French archenemy, which "impressively refutes any forms of determinism" (215). If such developments were possible in the field of foreign policy, Herbert argues, Weimar's domestic politics must be seen as a similar space of possibility and contingency, without an inevitable trend toward a Nazi dictatorship. He thus describes the path toward 1933 as a journey with unexpected twists and turns, without any foreboding of a dark future ahead.

Unfortunately, Herbert does not apply this sophisticated approach to Weimar culture. Culture exists in his study only as the "culture of the city" (244), meaning Berlin, and only in an "Americanized," meaning modernist, form. He argues that this classless "culture of modernity," represented by American movie stars, mass sports, and avant-garde art, had become firmly established in Germany by the end of the 1920s and supplied critics on the Left and the Right with ammunition for further attacks on the democratic republic. Using this narrative, he paints the contradictory image of a thoroughly modernized culture that had reached every corner of the country and thus the lives of most Germans, but that, at the same time, had only a very small group of advocates. This is largely because he relies for his analysis mostly on comments by contemporary cultural critics, who had an interest in decrying a supposed deluge of Westernized culture. Scholars like Karl-Christian Führer and Corey Ross have shown, however, that the cultural life of most Germans was

<sup>28</sup>Ziemann, "Weimar Was Weimar," 543.

<sup>29</sup>See also Konrad H. Jarausch, review of *Geschichte Deutschlands im 20. Jahrhundert*, by Ulrich Herbert, *Central European History* 48, no. 2 (2015): 249–51.

still very much focused on the home and shaped by social milieus and regional differences.<sup>30</sup> Hence the supposed modernism of the era's culture must be seen not as a historical fact but as a "semantic weapon," to paraphrase Eitz and Engelhardt, deployed by warring political camps to support or attack the status quo—just as "democracy" was. In short, as McElligott has shown, the culture of the Weimar Republic was a complex mixture of old and new, with democratic as well as authoritarian tendencies—just as the era's politics was. The juxtaposition of progressive cultural trends and a deteriorating political sphere works only with a one-sided view of both.

It is surprising not only how resilient the myth of Weimar culture has proved but also how infrequently it is seriously questioned, even by eminent historians such as Herbert. The collection of essays *Weimar Culture Revisited*, edited by John Alexander Williams, is one of the few books that have recently dealt with the phenomenon, and the contributions reveal how much gets lost when the culture of the Weimar Republic is reduced to a modernist canon. Tom Neuhaus shows, for example, that an appropriation of Eastern spirituality and mysticism was as much a part of Weimar modernity as were the cool lines of the Bauhaus. Ofer Ashkenazi argues that popular Weimar-era adventure films, a genre that is conventionally seen as "a symptomatic manifestation of national traditions, longings, and fears" (73)—in other words, as part of "bad" Weimar politics—were, in effect, vehicles for a "liberal, transnational worldview" (93). But with the exception of Ross, who challenges the image of a homogenous, vibrant mass culture "regarded as a central element of Weimar's cultural modernity" (24), most authors are content with merely widening the concept of Weimar culture. They implicitly assume that there was something particular about German culture between 1918 and 1933 that warrants seeing it as a more or less stable phenomenon that started and ended with these dates. While the manifold cultural currents from the Kaiserreich that extended into the Weimar era have been acknowledged by many scholars, most famously by Peter Gay in his classic *Weimar Culture*, the view of a fundamental break between Weimar culture and the culture of the Third Reich still persists.<sup>31</sup> This unintentionally echoes, however, the Nazi myth of a corrupted "system" finally overcome by a totally new kind of state with its own brand of culture.

### What to Do about the Nazis?

Detlev Peukert explained our continued fascination with the Weimar era with the fact that we often believe we can catch glimpses of our own world in it.<sup>32</sup> The search for our own reflection in the looking glass of Weimar society is understandable, considering the image we made of it for ourselves: we are attracted by the seemingly unparalleled explosion of fascinating creativity but also by the *mysterium tremendum* of political breakdown and the rise of a barbarous regime. The similarities we perceive can blind us, however, to the fact that the Weimar Republic was very much "a foreign country." Weimar Germans not only did things differently but also had very different ideas about what these things meant—and

<sup>30</sup>Karl-Christian Führer, "High Brow and Low Brow Culture," in *Weimar Germany*, ed. Anthony McElligott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 260–81; Corey Ross, *Media and the Making of Modern Germany: Mass Communications, Society, and Politics from the Empire to the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 163–90.

<sup>31</sup>Gay, *Weimar Culture*.

<sup>32</sup>Peukert, *Weimar Republic*, 282.

“democracy” was one such thing. Studying the language of the Weimar Republic thus seems to be one of the most important tasks in the further historical investigation of the Weimar era if we are to avoid seeing its politics and culture through the filter of our own contemporary understanding of these categories. This caution should also be applied to the renewed focus on Weimar’s economic history, not least to prevent us from assuming an automatic chain of cause and effect between economic crisis and democratic breakdown.

The rise of the Nazis remains the pivotal event in Weimar history, and treating it as a side-show, as some recent works have tended to do, is a dead end. While it is important to respect the historical contingency of the era, we should be careful not to give up the possibility of explaining what came after it. A solution to the narrative conundrum of “what to do about the Nazis” when writing the history of Weimar Germany could be to dismantle further the master narrative of a strict separation between its politics and culture. Until now, the Nazis have been located squarely in the realm of Weimar’s “bad” politics. In fact, it could be argued that the whole notion of a uniquely innovative and progressive Weimar culture is dependent on the idea that it was wilfully destroyed by its opposing sphere—by “anticultural” (*kulturfeindliche*) forces personified by Hitler. To question this narrative is not to make light of the fates of the many cultural producers who were killed, silenced, or driven into exile by his regime. But perhaps it is time to see the Nazis also as an aspect of the era’s culture, which would mean not just widening the concept of Weimar culture but also historicizing the concept itself. This should include a new, critical look at “Nazi culture”: only by investigating the continuities between Weimar culture and its supposed successor will we be able to define what was really unique about the culture of the earlier period.<sup>33</sup> Both the notion of a root-and-branch extermination of Weimar culture and that of a “parasitic” appropriation of it by the Nazis ignore the fact that they themselves were, after all, a Weimar creation, deeply rooted in a political culture characterized by the new experience of mass political participation. As Walter Benjamin pointed out, the Nazis gave many people a “chance to express themselves” and thus a very real sense of public representation that was reflected in the large number of nonvoters they brought into the political process.<sup>34</sup> Most important, they were not solely a movement *against* Weimar democracy but also a movement *for* a “better” democracy, a “better” modernity—at least in the eyes of many contemporaries.

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<sup>33</sup>For a new study that represents an important step in this direction, see Moritz Föllmer, *“Ein Leben wie im Traum”*: *Kultur im Dritten Reich* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2016).

<sup>34</sup>Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (New York: Prism Key Press, 2010), 47.