

Institute of Germanic & Romance Studies  
School of Advanced Study, University of London

Beyond Glitter and Doom.  
The Contingency  
of the Weimar Republic

edited by

JOCHEN HUNG  
GODELA WEISS-SUSSEX  
GEOFF WILKES



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# INTRODUCTION

## BEYOND GLITTER AND DOOM. THE NEW PARADIGM OF CONTINGENCY IN WEIMAR RESEARCH

The Weimar Republic has received more attention in popular culture and academic research than almost any other phase in German history. But despite the plethora of books, films, exhibitions and articles on the period, its prevailing image remains surprisingly simplistic. Time and again, the inter-war years in Germany are likened to a 'dance on the volcano', a time when bold artistic experiments, social progress and sexual freedom flourished before the backdrop of political and economic chaos. Only a few years after the collapse of Weimar democracy, Christopher Isherwood's 1939 novel *Goodbye to Berlin*, with its flighty flappers, fey gents and Nazi thugs, set the tone, with its subsequent adaptations for musical theatre and film cementing the place this stock cast held in the popular imagination over the following decades. Today, this rather stereotypical view of the Weimar era is still very much alive – so much so that a revival of 'the decadence of the 1920s' now counts as a tourist attraction.<sup>1</sup> The title of this volume is a reference to a recent exhibition of Verist portraiture at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which invoked the image of the Weimar Republic as 'marked by immense political, economic, and social turmoil' and 'handicapped from its inception by a lack of experienced politicians', while also being 'a time of creative ferment that saw innovative accomplishments in literature, film, theater, design, architecture, and other visual arts unparalleled elsewhere in Europe' and 'perhaps the most creative period in the history of twentieth-century culture'.<sup>2</sup>

This description is exemplary for the historical image of the Weimar Republic: it is divided into the overly negative interpretation of its politico-economic situation and a disproportionately positive account of its socio-cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Helen Pidd, 'Meine Damen und Herren ... Berlin's 1920s revival', *The Guardian*, 22 May 2010, travel section, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Philippe de Montebello, 'Director's Foreword', in *Glitter and Doom. German Portraits from the 1920s* [catalogue published with the exhibition 'Glitter and Doom: German Portraits from the 1920s' organ. by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and held there from November 14, 2006, to February 19, 2007], ed. by Sabine Rewald (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. vi-vii, here p. vi; Sabine Rewald, "'I must paint you!'", in *Glitter and Doom*, ed. by Rewald, pp. 3–12, here p. 3.

achievements. This dichotomy has long been accepted as the defining characteristic of the period among historians, too: Eberhard Kolb called it 'typical of the Weimar era',<sup>3</sup> and Detlev Peukert described it as 'an integral feature of the era'.<sup>4</sup> Especially in West Germany, assessments of the Weimar era's political legacy have been one-sided and unbalanced.<sup>5</sup> In his excellent study of the 'Weimar complex', Sebastian Ullrich argues that the image of the Weimar Republic as a failed state and a doomed political experiment was used as a historical argument in order to justify the existence of West Germany: 'As a negative foil and warning sign, the first German democracy became a political symbol, used by the second one to affirm its own identity.'<sup>6</sup> Émigré intellectuals and GDR historians constructed a similarly negative image of the Weimar Republic in their respective environments.<sup>7</sup>

But the culture of the Weimar era has generally been invoked as a positive model for post-war West Germany, with an emphasis on its avant-gardist and progressive elements creating what Helmuth Plessner called 'the legend of the Twenties'.<sup>8</sup> Every generation of scholars picked and chose the aspect of 'Weimar culture' that fitted best for the demands of their time: in the apolitical and restorative 1950s, the eagerness for a reconciliation with the past led to an emphasis on Expressionism and other abstract art forms, while the politicized 1960s looked to Brecht, Piscator and Lukács for ideological precursors and role

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<sup>3</sup> Eberhard Kolb, *The Weimar Republic*, trans. by P. S. Falla (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), p. 83. The original was published in German as *Die Weimarer Republik* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> Detlev Peukert, *The Weimar Republic. The Crisis of Classical Modernity*, trans. by Richard Deveson (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), p. xiii. The original was published in German as *Die Weimarer Republik: Krisenjahre der klassischen Moderne* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> See Sebastian Ullrich, *Der Weimar-Komplex. Das Scheitern der ersten deutschen Demokratie und die politische Kultur der frühen Bundesrepublik 1945–1959* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2009); Weimars lange Schatten – 'Weimar' als Argument nach 1945, ed. by Christoph Gusy (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. by Stephan Loos and Holger Zaborowski (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2003), pp. 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. by Thomas W. Kniepsche and Stephen Brockmann (Columbia: Camden House, 1994), pp. 21–28.

<sup>6</sup> 'Als Negativfolie und Menetekel wurde die erste deutsche Demokratie zu einem politischen Symbol, mit dessen Hilfe sich die zweite ihrer eigenen Identität versicherte.' Ullrich, *Weimar-Komplex*, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> See Eric D. Weitz, 'Weimar and its Histories', in *Culture of Politics – Politics of Culture: New Perspectives on the Weimar Republic*, ed. by Kathleen Canning (= *Central European History*, 43 (2010)), pp. 581–91.

<sup>8</sup> Helmuth Plessner, 'Die Legende von den zwanziger Jahren', in H. Plessner, *Gesammelte Schriften*, VI (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1982), pp. 261–79.

models.<sup>9</sup> As with the negative political representation of the Weimar Republic, the community of exiled intellectuals and artists played a decisive role in shaping the nostalgic post-1945 image of 'Weimar culture' and the 'Golden Twenties' used to legitimize West German society as a continuation of this liberal tradition.<sup>10</sup> The émigrés' often romanticized image of the glittering culture of the Weimar Republic also shaped the view of Weimar outside Germany: for example, Peter Gay's influential study, which set the tone for the image of 'Weimar culture' in the English-speaking world, was heavily influenced by exiled scholars and intellectuals.<sup>11</sup> The longevity of Gay's and others' rather one-sided interpretation of what constitutes 'Weimar culture' is apparent in Weitz's recent study on Weimar's 'promise and tragedy', in which he tries – in a recourse to Gay – to play Weimar modernism off against 1920s Paris and New York in the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>12</sup>

Over the last few years, the rather simplistic contrast between the cultural glitter and political doom of the Weimar Republic has been subjected to increased criticism. For the most part, the focal point for this recent scholarship has been the critical engagement with Peukert's thesis of Weimar as the 'crisis of classical modernity'.<sup>13</sup> As Peter Fritzsche has pointed out, Peukert himself challenged the 'single-minded' obsession with the failure of Weimar's parliamentary liberalism.<sup>14</sup> In the wider view of Weimar as a reaction to the various processes of modernization, the demise of parliamentary democracy appears as just one of many outcomes:

If Weimar is conceived in terms of experiments designed to manage (however deleteriously) the modern condition, then the failure of political de-

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<sup>9</sup> See Manfred Gangl, 'Vorwort', in *Intellektuellendiskurse in der Weimarer Republik. Zur politischen Kultur einer Gemengelage*, ed. by Manfred Gangl and Gérard Raulet (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 1994), pp. 9–11, here p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> See Jost Hermand and Frank Trommler, *Die Kultur der Weimarer Republik* (Munich: Nymphenburger, 1978), p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> See Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (London: Penguin, 1968). See also *Germany 1919–1932: The Weimar Culture*, ed. by Arien Mack (= *Social Research*, 39.2 (1972)); Walter Laqueur, *Weimar. A Cultural History 1918–1933* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974); *Culture and Society in the Weimar Republic*, ed. by Keith Bullivant (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977).

<sup>12</sup> See Eric D. Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 253. Weitz seems to have changed his position on Gay since then, see Weitz, 'Histories', p. 584.

<sup>13</sup> See Peukert, *Weimar*. For an overview of recent scholarship, see Benjamin Ziemann, 'Weimar was Weimar: Politics, Culture and the Emplotment of the German Republic', *German History*, 28 (2010), 542–71; Nadine Rossol, 'Chancen der Weimarer Republik', *Neue Politische Literatur*, 55.3 (2010), 393–419; Björn Hofmeister, 'Kultur- und Sozialgeschichte der Politik in der Weimarer Republik 1928 bis 1933', *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, 50 (2010), 445–501.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Fritzsche, 'Did Weimar Fail?', *Journal of Modern History*, 68.3 (1996), 629–56, here p. 630.



mocracy is not the same as the destruction of the laboratory. Indeed, the Third Reich can be regarded as one possible Weimar production.<sup>15</sup>

However, despite the new perspective of his approach, Peukert himself 'in the end could not escape the prevailing paradigm of a republic thwarted at every turn by structural flaws, immaturity, and enemies'.<sup>16</sup> Recent research on the Weimar Republic has taken Peukert's approach further and formed a new 'Paradigma der Gestaltungsoffenheit' (paradigm of contingency) which challenges the image of a doomed republic that Peukert still adhered to, and stresses the contingency of the era.<sup>17</sup> These studies can be divided into two different approaches, informed – very broadly speaking – by the two paradigmatic shifts in the humanities and social sciences that gathered momentum around the time of the publication of Peukert's study: the 'cultural turn' and the 'linguistic turn'.

One line of enquiry has emphasized the era's fundamental 'openness' by applying approaches of cultural history to analyze the attitudes, ideas and narrative constructs that formed people's perceptions and the symbolic forms of politics in the Weimar era.<sup>18</sup> The picture of the Weimar Republic that emerges from these studies shows much stronger political institutions and a healthier democratic culture than previously thought.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, the strict periodization of Weimar – as a phase of transition which began in 1918

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<sup>15</sup> Fritzsche, 'Weimar', p. 631.

<sup>16</sup> Anthony McElligott, 'Introduction', in *Weimar Germany*, ed. by A. McElligott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 1–25, here p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Hofmeister, 'Kultur- und Sozialgeschichte', p. 446.

<sup>18</sup> See *Weimar Publics/Weimar Subjects. Rethinking the Political Culture of Germany in the 1920s*, ed. by Kathleen Canning, Kerstin Barndt and Kristin McGuire (New York: Berghahn, 2010); *Culture of Politics – Politics of Culture*, ed. by Canning; *Politische Kulturgeschichte der Zwischenkriegszeit 1918–1933*, ed. by Wolfgang Hardtwig (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005). See also the publications of the research group 'Politische Kultur der Weimarer Republik. Identitäts- und Konsensprobleme in einer fragmentierten Gesellschaft': *Pluralismus als Verfassungs- und Gesellschaftsmodell. Zur politischen Kultur in der Weimarer Republik*, ed. by Detlef Lehnert and Klaus Megerle (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1993); *Politische Teilkulturen zwischen Integration und Polarisierung. Zur politischen Kultur in der Weimarer Republik*, ed. by Detlef Lehnert and Klaus Megerle (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1990); *Politische Identität und nationale Gedenktage. Zur politischen Kultur in der Weimarer Republik*, ed. by Detlef Lehnert and Klaus Megerle (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1989); Detlef Lehnert and Klaus Megerle, 'Identitäts- und Konsensprobleme in einer fragmentierten Gesellschaft. Zur politischen Kultur in der Weimarer Republik', in *Politische Kultur in Deutschland. Bilanz und Perspektiven der Forschung*, ed. by Dirk Berg-Schlosser and Jakob Schissler (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1987), pp. 80–95.

<sup>19</sup> For this, see also Nadine Rossol, *Performing the Nation in Interwar Germany. Sport, Spectacle and Political Symbolism 1926–36* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Kathrin Groh, *Demokratische Staatsrechtslehre in der Weimarer Republik. Von der konstitutionellen Staatslehre zur Theorie des modernen demokratischen Verfassungsstaats* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010); Thomas Mergel, *Parlamentarische Kultur in der Weimarer Republik: politische Kommunikation, symbolische Politik und Öffentlichkeit im Reichstag* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 2002).

and ended in 1933 – has been called into question,<sup>20</sup> encouraging more complex understandings of the Republic as a discrete historical period which nevertheless displayed significant continuities with the periods which preceded and followed it:

Increasingly, in these more recent historical evaluations Weimar no longer appears only as a defensive reaction to the lost World War that ultimately led to an aggressive escape into National Socialism. [...] [R]ather, the increased emphasis on the historical openness of the Weimar Republic creates room for the challenge of identifying the dynamic discreteness of the period and at the same time putting it in the context of Wilhelmine Germany and National Socialism.<sup>21</sup>

With this new current of cultural-historical research, the historiography of the culture of the Weimar Republic is also changing. The traditional image of 'Weimar culture' as synonymous with the Berlin-based avant-garde fostered by Gay and others has long been challenged by a more differentiated view: Jost Hermand and Frank Trommler have pointed out that the culture of the Weimar era was just as chaotic and fragmented as its political and socio-economic spheres, and how problematic it is therefore to describe 'Weimar culture' as a homogeneous complex.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, more recent studies have directed their attention to the polyphonic nature of the era's cultural production, have shifted their focus from high art to everyday popular culture, and have also acknowledged the cultural complexity of Germany's federal tradition.<sup>23</sup>

The shift towards a paradigm of 'openness' is also present in recent studies engaging with the discursive elements and semantics of Weimar history. Already in 1990, Thomas Childers outlined a 'linguistically oriented' approach to Weimar history, but Moritz Föllmer's and Rüdiger Graf's critical analysis of

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<sup>20</sup> See Wolfgang Hardtwig, 'Einleitung', in *Ordnungen in der Krise. Zur politischen Kulturgeschichte Deutschlands 1900–1933*, ed. by W. Hardtwig (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2007), pp. 11–18. See also Anthony McElligott, *Rethinking the Weimar Republic: Authority and Authoritarianism 1916–1936* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> 'Weimar erscheint verstärkt in solchen neueren historischen Einschätzungen nicht mehr nur als defensive Reaktion auf den verlorenen Ersten Weltkrieg, die schließlich in eine aggressive Flucht in den Nationalsozialismus mündete. [...] [V]ielmehr erlaubt die verstärkte Betonung der historischen Offenheit der Weimarer Republik die Herausforderung, die dynamische Eigenständigkeit der Epoche herauszustellen und gleichzeitig in den Zusammenhang von Kaiserreich und Nationalsozialismus einzuordnen.' Hofmeister, 'Kultur- und Sozialgeschichte', pp. 445–46.

<sup>22</sup> See Hermand and Trommler, *Kultur*, p. 35.

<sup>23</sup> See *Weimar Culture Revisited*, ed. by John A. Williams (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Karl Christian Führer, 'High brow and low brow culture', in *Weimar Germany*, ed. by Anthony McElligott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 260–81; Peter Hoeres, *Die Kultur von Weimar. Durchbruch der Moderne* (Berlin: be.bra, 2008).

the 'crisis' narrative in the Weimar Republic arguably is the path-breaking publication in this area.<sup>24</sup> Graf's subsequent study on the contemporary discourse about the future of the Weimar Republic further showed how a pessimistic image of the era's development influenced the predominant historical representation, while the positive voices were largely ignored.<sup>25</sup> Many other discourses of the Weimar Republic have been described and analyzed in similar fashion, like the infamous 'Dolchstoßlegende' or the Hindenburg myth.<sup>26</sup>

In the light of these new historical approaches to the Weimar Republic, the traditional dichotomous image of cultural bloom and political chaos that Peukert and Kolb saw as 'integral' to the era is no longer sustainable. Despite the obvious explanatory clout of the popular image of Weimar as an artful dance on a political volcano, scholars interested in a more complex interpretation should look beyond such stereotypical imagery. The various studies mentioned above have shown that Weimar culture, politics and society were so fragmentary, pluralistic and multifaceted – especially in the experience of contemporaries – that they should not be played off against each other in such a simplifying way and that, in fact, 'it is time to rethink and rewrite the actual development of this crucial period in twentieth-century European history'.<sup>27</sup>

The essays gathered in this volume contribute to this undertaking. Their authors approach their subject from very different angles and with very different conclusions, and thus represent the pluralistic nature that characterizes this new conception of the Weimar era. However, the view of Weimar as a fragmented and multi-polar society does not necessarily mean to give up the attempt to formulate an overarching analysis of the Weimar Republic.<sup>28</sup> In fact, Weimar's pluralism can act as just such a 'grand narrative': rather than in the struggle between pro-democratic and anti-democratic forces, or avant-gardists and reactionaries, the common theme and overarching topic of the contributions to this volume can be found in the period's very openness and the question posed by contemporaries of how to deal with it.

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<sup>24</sup> See Thomas Childers, 'The Social Language of Politics in Germany: The Sociology of Political Discourse in the Weimar Republic', *American Historical Review*, 95.2 (1990), 331–58; *Die 'Krise' der Weimarer Republik. Zur Kritik eines Deutungsmusters*, ed. by Moritz Föllmer and Rüdiger Graf (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2005). See also *Krisis! Krisenszenarien, Diagnosen, Diskursstrategien*, ed. by Henning Grunwald and Manfred Pfister (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> See Rüdiger Graf, *Die Zukunft der Weimarer Republik: Krisen und Zukunftsaneignungen in Deutschland 1918–1933* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2008).

<sup>26</sup> See Boris Barth, *Dolchstoßlegenden und politische Desintegration. Das Trauma der deutschen Niederlage im Ersten Weltkrieg 1914–1933* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 2003); Anna von der Goltz, *Hindenburg: Power, Myth, and the Rise of the Nazis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> Ziemann, 'Weimar was Weimar', p. 571.

<sup>28</sup> See Ziemann, 'Weimar was Weimar', p. 565.

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To ensure the volume's accessibility to a wide readership, contributors have provided English translations of quotations from the original German texts. Where no translator is explicitly referenced, these translations are the contributors' own.