Beyond Glitter and Doom.
The Contingency
of the Weimar Republic

edited by

JOCHEN HUNG
GODELA WEISS-SUSSEX
GEOFF WILKES
CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION
Jochen Hung: Beyond Glitter and Doom. The New Paradigm of Contingency in Weimar Research 9

RETHINKING THE CULTURAL HISTORIOGRAPHY
OF THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC
Moritz Föllmer: Which Crisis? Which Modernity? New Perspectives on Weimar Germany 19
David Midgley: Beyond the Clichés. On the Specificity of Weimar Culture 31
Gustav Frank: Beyond the Republic? Post-Expressionist Complexity in the Arts 45

THE FAILURE OF WEIMAR DEMOCRACY REVISITED
Michael Dreyer: Weimar as a ‘Militant Democracy’ 69
Anthony McElligott: Rethinking the Weimar Paradigm. Carl Schmitt and Politics without Authority 87

CASE STUDIES IN WEIMAR CULTURE AND POLITICS
Jochen Hung: ‘Der deutschen Jugend!’ The Newspaper *Tempo* and the Generational Discourse of the Weimar Republic 105
Florian Krobb: Catholicism, Conservative Revolution and the Fairy Tale. The Case of Wilhelm Matthießen 119
Jill Suzanne Smith: Prostitutes in Weimar Berlin. Moving beyond the Victim-Whore Dichotomy 135
Geoff Wilkes: Beneath the Glitter. Berlin, the New Woman and Mass-Market Fiction in Vicki Baum’s *Menschen im Hotel* 148
Matthias Uecker: ‘Das Leben […] So ist es und nicht anders.’ Constructions of Normality in *Menschen am Sonntag* 162
Contents

James A. van Dyke: Felixmüller’s Failure – Painting and Poverty 176

Nils Grosch: Kurt Weill, Mahagonny and the Commercialization of Berlin Musical Theatre in the Weimar Republic 192

Authors 209
INTRODUCTION
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. 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’.

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 disproportionally positive account of its socio-cultural
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’, and Detlev Peukert described it as ‘an integral feature of the era’. Especially in West Germany, assessments of the Weimar era’s political legacy have been one-sided and unbalanced. 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.’ Émigré intellectuals and GDR historians constructed a similarly negative image of the Weimar Republic in their respective environments.

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’. 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

---

models. 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. 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. 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.

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’. As Peter Fritzsche has pointed out, Peukert himself challenged the ‘single-minded’ obsession with the failure of Weimar’s parliamentary liberalism. 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-

---

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

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’.16 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.17 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.18 The picture of the Weimar Republic that emerges from these studies shows much stronger political institutions and a healthier democratic culture than previously thought.19 At the same time, the strict periodicization of Weimar – as a phase of transition which began in 1918

---

17 Hofmeister, ‘Kultur- und Sozialgeschichte’, p. 446.
19 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 Staatsrechtslehrer 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).
Beyond Glitter and Doom. The New Paradigm of Contingency in Weimar Research

and ended in 1933 – has been called into question, 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. […] Rather, 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.

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. 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.

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

---


22 See Hermand and Trommler, Kultur, p. 35.

the ‘crisis’ narrative in the Weimar Republic arguably is the path-breaking publication in this area. 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. Many other discourses of the Weimar Republic have been described and analyzed in similar fashion, like the infamous ‘Dolchstoßlegende’ or the Hindenburg myth.

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’.

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. 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.

27 Ziemann, ‘Weimar was Weimar’, p. 571.
28 See Ziemann, ‘Weimar was Weimar’, p. 565.
This volume originated in a conference held at the University of London’s Institute of Germanic & Romance Studies (IGRS) in September 2010 and co-organized by the IGRS and the University of Glasgow. We would like to thank Katherine Tubb for her conceptual contribution to the conference, Jane Lewin for her help in the organization of the event, and all conference speakers and participants for their contributions to the discussion of the papers presented. Thanks are also due to Ritchie Robertson for his thorough reading of and helpful comments on an early draft of this book.

Last but not least, we are grateful to the German History Society and the Royal Historical Society for generously supporting the 2010 conference, and to the University of Queensland for its financial support of this publication.

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.