

Review Article

Did Weimar Fail?*

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What is Weimar without the Republic? Not much, it seems, since for most German historians the plot that holds the story together has been fragile democracy and its demise. "Weimar" is, as numerous subtitles inform us, the "history of the first German Democracy," the site where democracy surrendered or failed.¹ The drama of twentieth-century Germany has largely turned on the failure of the Weimar Republic. All the grand scholarly investments in the study of big-business relations, small-town clubs, East Elbian provinces, and a staggering variety of interest groups and political parties have been undertaken to explain more successfully the frailties of the Republic. This focus has been meritorious since it has guided political self-understandings in postwar Germany and indicated possible limits to the legitimacy of modern democracies generally. Even the notable political guru Kevin Phillips has invoked Weimar to warn his Republican clients not to forget "Middle America."² But preoccupation with the fate of the Republic has been so single-minded that it

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¹ Winkler; Karl Dietrich Erdmann and Hagen Schulze, eds., *Weimar: Selbstpreisgabe einer Demokratie* (Düsseldorf, 1980); Ian Kershaw, ed., *Weimar: Why Did German Democracy Fail?* (New York, 1990).

² Juan Linz, "Political Space and Fascism as a Late-comer: Conditions Conducive to the Success or Failure of Fascism as a Mass Movement in Inter-war Europe," in *Who Were the Fascists: The*

has tended to assign Germany the part of the twentieth-century delinquent whose role is to certify the basic political virtue of France, Britain, and the United States, in what might be dubbed "NATO history."³ This assignment not only misconstrues political developments in the West but also reduces politics in the Weimar era to the question of support for or opposition to parliamentary liberalism, thereby turning the 1920s into a political universe that revolves around the Reichstag on the Platz der Republik.

Did the Republic really mean that much to Germans after World War I? There is considerable evidence that it did not. In the first place, politicians and voters repeatedly averred that the crucial questions facing Germany did not turn on a formal choice between republicanism or monarchism but rather on the quality of social relations that made up the nation. A look at the political discourse of the 1920s, when contenders peddled concepts such as "economic democracy" (*Wirtschaftsdemokratie*), "national community" (*Volksgemeinschaft*), or a more conservative "corporate state" (*Ständestaat*), suggests that neither liberalism nor illiberalism provides a helpful benchmark. An intense reexamination of social groups, cultural representations, and political institutions in the last fifteen years has fundamentally challenged the extent to which historical change may be usefully judged against normative conceptions of liberalism.⁴ A great deal of the political dynamic in the 1920s is obscured by the telos of Weimar's collapse. At the grassroots level, Weimar's favorite sons and daughters—working-class socialists—now appear more attracted to nationalist sentiments and mass-cultural diversions, while history's muggers—middle-class insurgents—appear far less pathological and much more social reformist. Moreover, growing numbers of historians acknowledge the broad popularity of the Nazis, who are no longer simply understood as creatures of crisis and dislocation. At the same time, the left-liberal reformers who constructed Europe's most elaborate social-welfare state in the years after 1918 were by no means consistently guided by republican ideals. In fact, they shared common assumptions about collective responsibility and national health with their right-wing challengers, who, for all the noxiousness of their beliefs, were not nearly as backward-looking as scholars once assumed.⁵

Social Roots of European Fascism, ed. Stein Ugelvik Larsen, Bernt Hagtvet, and Jan Petter Myklebust (New York, 1980), pp. 153–89; and Kevin Phillips, *Post-conservative America: People, Politics, and Ideology in a Time of Crisis* (New York, 1982).

³ See Michael Geyer and Konrad H. Jarausch, "The Future of the German Past: Transatlantic Reflections for the 1990s," and Michael Geyer, "Historical Fictions of Autonomy and the Europeanization of National History," *Central European History* 22 (1989): 232–34, 326–33. See also David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (New York, 1984).

⁴ The liberal Republic remains central to most approaches to Weimar, although the normative standard of liberalism has been under attack for more than ten years. See Konrad Jarausch, "Illiberalism and Beyond: German History in Search of a Paradigm," *Journal of Modern History* 55 (1983): 268–84; as well as Blackbourn and Eley. The concepts of liberalism and illiberalism are most closely associated with Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley, 1961), and *The Failure of Illiberalism: Essays on the Political Culture of Modern Germany* (New York, 1972).

⁵ A similar trend can be detected in American historiography. See Michael Kazin, "The Grass-Roots Right: New Histories of U.S. Conservatism in the Twentieth Century," *American Historical Review* 97 (February 1992): 136–55.

It is not surprising that the red thread of progress is easy to lose when matters are described as being “not nearly” so clear-cut, so reactionary, so liberal. Indeed, the provocative consequence of recent Weimar histories has been to disconnect modernism from liberalism and to rethink what really is modern or antimodern. Radical nationalists, right-wing aesthetes, illiberal jurists, and even National Socialists now jostle with Social Democrats, Bauhaus architects, and Communist intellectuals as hyphenated modernists. In turn, classical terms like political reactionary and social progressive have increasingly lost their resonance; historical actions appear more indeterminate and open-ended. And once the protagonists and retardants of progress can no longer be identified with certainty, it becomes more difficult to see the Weimar Republic as a failure or to deny the Third Reich status as a legitimate, if extreme, outcome of twentieth-century civilization. Just how much the narrative of the Weimar years has strayed from the well-marked path of creation, crisis, and collapse is evident in the newly cherished vocabulary that draws attention to the proliferation of “political blueprints,” “cultural experiments,” and “social initiatives” on the Left and the Right and summarizes Weimar as the laboratory of “classical modernity.”⁶ Mostly minted by Detlev Peukert in the mid-1980s, and widely circulated since, this language calls into question the whole notion of failure. If Weimar is conceived in terms of experiments designed to manage (however deleteriously) the modern condition, then the failure of political democracy is not the same as the destruction of the laboratory. Indeed, the Third Reich can be regarded as one possible Weimar production. Perhaps the long-awaited “new paradigm” for German history has arrived in the form of the disavowal of the master narrative of the Republic in the name of the eclectic experimentalism of Weimar.

Scholarly revaluations of aesthetics and power have prepared the new framework for interpreting the Weimar years. On the one hand, the political aspirations of social groups are no longer regarded in simple terms of class.⁷ The “linguistic turn” has indicated the extent to which subjects think about the political world in ways that are not accurate reflections of social reality. These representations bear the traces of past traditions, linguistic conventions, and cultural media, and they became constituent parts of that reality.⁸ Moreover, individuals entered the public sphere in a variety of social identities. Metalworkers, to take one example discussed at length by Alf Lüdtke, were not simply trade unionists and (often) Social

⁶ Kaes, Jay, and Dimendberg, eds., p. xviii; and Detlev Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity*, trans. Richard Deveson (New York, 1989).

⁷ William Sheridan Allen, “Farewell to Class Analysis in the Rise of Nazism: Comment,” *Central European History* 17 (1984): 54–62; Peter Baldwin, “Social Interpretations of Nazism: Renewing a Tradition,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 25 (1990): 5–37.

⁸ The best effort for German history is still Thomas Childers, “The Social Language of Politics in Germany: The Sociology of Political Discourse in the Weimar Republic,” *American Historical Review* 95 (1990): 331–58. See also the broader statements by Kathleen Canning, “Feminist History after the Linguistic Turn: Historicizing Discourse and Experience,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 19 (1994): 368–405; Roger Chartier, “Texts, Printings, Readings,” in *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley, 1989), pp. 154–75; and John E. Toews, “Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience,” *American Historical Review* 92 (1987): 879–907.

Democrats, but also husbands and fathers, veterans and Germans, gymnasts and gardeners. As such, they responded to any number of compelling visions about the legitimate order of society, the proper roles for men and women, and the future of the nation. Emotional affinities to the nation, in particular, mobilized considerable political sentiment. It is now clear that substantial numbers of workers, including longtime Social Democrats, voted for the Nazis in 1930 and 1932, and those who did not still responded positively to nationalist appeals in the years that followed and accommodated themselves more or less easily to the National Socialist regime. The reach of various nationalist mobilizations was far greater than classic social interpretations of the Weimar Republic have suggested. In the hands of "new cultural" historians, postwar politics is as much the product of desire and imagination as of function and interest. Intricate webs of contingency now obscure from view the previously conspicuous *Sonderweg*, the peculiarly German path of illiberal modernization that oriented most historians in the 1960s and 1970s.⁹

The imagination of the nation is central as well to the "new political" history that has eschewed strictly party-political questions about the rise of National Socialism or the collapse of liberalism or the fate of Social Democracy and expanded the very concept of political power. Innovative studies of social welfare, education, and health during the Weimar period have focused on the ways in which individual bodies were worked on in the name of the national body, or *Volkskörper*. While the emancipatory potential of social legislation is not overlooked, the central theme of this scholarship (and many more studies are in press) is the regimentation and discipline of citizens in often dangerously imaginative ways. A Foucauldian perspective on the links between individual and national bodies not only establishes significant continuities between the Weimar era and the Third Reich but also indicates how malleable postwar social life had become. Rather than a model battleground between modern liberals and antimodern authoritarians, Weimar is the fascinating foreground against which to track the dark shadows of modernity.

The Weimar that emerges from recent historiography is strikingly open-ended. This is not to suggest that democracy as such could have survived. Gerald Feldman is probably right to argue that the Republic was, from the beginning, a "gamble which stood virtually no chance of success."¹⁰ But much more than parliamentary democracy was at stake. An astonishing variety of dreamers and adventurers prospered in the postwar years. The fact that Weimar came without operating instruc-

⁹ The classic statements of the *Sonderweg* are Ralf Dahrendorf, *Society and Democracy in Germany* (Garden City, N.Y., 1967); and Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *The German Empire, 1871–1918*, trans. Kim Traynor (Leamington Spa, 1985). Blackbourn and Eley, *Peculiarities*, provided the most comprehensive critique, and the resulting debate is recapitulated and assessed in Robert G. Moeller, "The *Kaiserreich* Recast? Continuity and Change in Modern German Historiography," *Journal of Social History* 17 (1984): 442–50; James N. Retallack, "Social History with a Vengeance? Some Reactions to H.-U. Wehler's 'Das Deutsche Kaiserreich,'" *German Studies Review* 7 (1984): 655–83; and Jürgen Kocka, "German History before Hitler: The Debate about the German *Sonderweg*," *Journal of Contemporary History* 23 (1988): 3–16. See also Helga Grebing, *Der "deutsche Sonderweg" in Europa, 1806–1945: Eine Kritik* (Stuttgart, 1986).

¹⁰ 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, 1985), p. 385.

tions (*Gebrauchsanweisungen*), as Alfred Döblin once put it, encouraged experimentation as much as it hobbled democracy. At the end of World War I, previously authoritative instructions about law, legitimacy, and community no longer seemed applicable; new blueprints and experiments filled in the empty space and gave the German future of the 1920s its uncertain and promiscuous aspect. The common note to the political and cultural history of the period is the widespread conviction that the material world could be designed: Bertolt Brecht believed that it would become possible for people to be taken apart and put back together like machines, Carl Schmitt cited Georges Sorel to redeem politics with myth, Bauhaus architects plotted out “regulating lines” that would refurbish social life, radical nationalists envisioned fantastic technologies to circumvent Versailles, geographers redrew schoolbook maps to reveal Germany’s essential capacities, and social workers energetically renovated national health. Given this industrious invention of the future, 1933 is not simply a tragic and dramatic foreclosure but an indication as well of the fullness and the contingency of historical development. As is evident from the books under review here, historians continue to watch Weimar closely, and they do so not least because it is a place where modern history appears remarkably contingent. The Weimar Republic remains compelling not because of the glimpses of social democracy and social welfare it offers but because its public life was formed so forcefully by the sense that nothing was certain and everything possible.

REPUBLIC AS HERO

Given the fact that the Weimar period witnessed revolutionary and counterrevolutionary assaults in Hamburg, Berlin, and Munich, a black-flagged farmers’ insurrection in the northern provinces, the formation of “antisystem” parties and paramilitary groups in almost every town and village, the largest Communist party in the West, and clumsy but nonetheless determined efforts at reinvigorating state authority by Chancellors Brüning, Papen, and Schleicher before Adolf Hitler and the National Socialists rapidly established one-party dictatorship, political initiative was anything but restricted. Yet rifts, obstacles, and other immovable landmarks characterize the political topography described in the major syntheses by two prominent historians, Heinrich August Winkler and Hans Mommsen. What was blocked, of course, were republican possibilities, not political initiatives. It is this misleading correspondence between the fate of the Republic and the drama of Weimar that keeps these two major histories restricted mainly to parliamentary politics in Berlin and rather uncertain about how to treat the dramatic movement of so many Germans away from the established parties.

The central theme in Winkler’s “history of the first German democracy” is a tragic but redemptive one: the cooperation between labor and industry and between Social Democrats and modern conservatives that eluded Weimar’s hardworking politicians and is now the proud achievement of those in Bonn. Recognition of the necessity for compromise is, for Winkler, the mark of democrats, and in his view Weimar had many more of them than we might at first imagine—a discovery Winkler wants to reinvest in the prospect of newly reunified Germany. Social Democrats garner praise for turning against the annexationist war, resisting the undemo-

cratic council movement, joining with bourgeois coalition partners in difficult circumstances and, despite social and economic sacrifices, keeping desertions to the Communist Left modest. Less consistent, but praiseworthy nonetheless, is the moderate Right. Winkler emphasizes the scope of the social peace that ensued during the “inflation consensus” of 1919–21 and the “rationalization consensus” of 1924–30.

Economic stabilization after 1924 provides Winkler the opportunity to step back from political narrative. But the highly informative chapter on the deep divisions in German society after Hindenburg’s election in April 1925 does not keep him from giving the Republic a real chance for survival. He is rightly impressed by the unemployment insurance that a bourgeois coalition legislated in 1927. Moreover, Winkler’s dramatization of the Great Depression as a singular disaster highlights the achievement of stability that it concluded. It was economic catastrophe, more than anything else, that gave the “antisystem” forces that had quietly furthered their aims in high places the chance they would otherwise not have gotten. In 1929 and 1930, more and more industrialists came to share the ideological predispositions of right-wing nationalists, Reichswehr officers, and Hindenburg cronies, viewing democracy (particularly once the Young Plan had been safely signed) as an economic liability. The result was the breakdown of a center-left coalition and the chancellorship of Heinrich Brüning in March 1930, a break with parliamentary democracy that Winkler follows Arthur Rosenberg in emphasizing.¹¹ Although the numbers of *Vernunftrepublikaner* (republicans of the head rather than of the heart) had dwindled by 1929 almost to a single man—Gustav Stresemann, who is accordingly well honored here—Winkler does not see the makings of broad antisystem insurgency before 1930. He notes but does not make much of the rise of splinter parties, the activity of the Stahlhelm, and the rumblings of *Landvolk* protest. As a result, there is little sense of the radical nationalism that Geoff Eley, Rudy Koshar, and others have regarded as a central dynamic in twentieth-century German politics.¹²

For Winkler it is the Great Depression that destroyed the close-to-even odds that economic stabilization had offered the first German Republic. Without this disaster, Winkler implies, democracy might have stumbled along and even won converts. Indeed, as Winkler points out in a highly original line of argument, the proof that basic lessons of democracy had been learned by ordinary Germans is the very success of the National Socialists who, after 1930, positioned themselves as representatives of the people against authoritarian schemers. In 1932, as in 1918, most Germans demanded popular representation. Unfortunately, this promising insight is not complemented by a more detailed investigation of middle-class voters, who remain indistinct. As for the Social Democrats, they were caught up in a game they

¹¹ Arthur Rosenberg, *A History of the German Republic* (New York, 1965).

¹² Geoff Eley, “Conservatives and Radical Nationalists in Germany: The Production of Fascist Potentials, 1912–1928,” in *Fascists and Conservatives in Europe*, ed. Martin Blinkhorn (London, 1990), pp. 50–70; Rudy Koshar, *Social Life, Local Politics and Nazism: Marburg, 1880–1935* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1986); and Peter Fritzsche, *Rehearsals for Fascism: Populism and Political Mobilization in Weimar Germany* (New York, 1990).

could not win: honorably supporting constitutional legalism, but doing so in a way that kept them from giving voice to popular indignation at increasingly ineffective presidential regimes. In these final chapters, then, the Nazis emerge as populists, railing against unrepresentative, distant rulers and generating a sense of collective unity. Winkler ends his elegantly written book with allusions to grassroots expectations and collective persuasions that are neglected in the body of this largely political history.

That Weimar was burdened by the archaic political traditions and intense social conflicts of the Wilhelmine period forms the foundation of Mommsen's history of Weimar as much as it does Winkler's. But Mommsen sees little of the democratic development that Winkler cherishes. Right off, the reader is informed of the "extreme autism" of the German public (p. 9). Indeed, Mommsen is more generous to politicians in the capital than to constituents in the provinces. He has little patience with the million-headed public that allows itself to be mobilized first by imperial nationalists before 1914, then by the *Vaterlandspartei*, in 1918 the largest mass organization in Germany, and finally in the 1920s by polemical antiparliamentarians and *völkisch* demagogues. In other words, democracy was threatened from the outset by broad-based chauvinist sentiments that the collective traumas of military defeat, revolution, and inflation only hardened. This is the Germany that cheered Ludendorff, applauded the Freikorps, voted for Hitler, and opposed the other, mostly working-class Germany, which stood for social justice and democracy yet grew alienated from the Republic. The confrontation of these two nations left little room for effective statecraft, and Ebert and Stresemann accordingly play much more subdued roles in Mommsen's narrative. Instead, the emphasis falls on by-now familiar middle-class anxieties, collective traumas, and humiliations of status-conscious elites, all of which were easily mobilized by extremists such as Hitler who made the resentments of the public their own.

The result is a dramatic history in which readers find epic engagements between ideological enemies who play out Wilhelmine scripts with more exaggerated Weimarian gestures. The title—"Squandered Freedom"—notwithstanding, there is little in this book about workable social coalitions, republican margins of safety, or stabilization-era consensus. Virtue is reserved for social groups, notably, the organized working class, rather than the political practitioners whom Winkler commends. Although Mommsen recognizes the break of 1929/30, it takes the form of a culmination of frustrations rather than the singular catastrophe of depression.

There is something satisfying about the active tense of this deeply felt history. Strong-armed verbs and colorful adjectives bring to life the paramilitary groups and *völkisch* speechmakers who appear only sporadically in Winkler's narrative. Cultural politics are taken seriously in the form of fantasies, traumas, and *Feindbilder*. And yet Mommsen risks caricaturing Hitler's Germany. It comes too ready-made from the Wilhelmine past. Collective inheritance overwhelms collective identity, and readers get little sense of political transformations or social exchanges over time. Most middle-class Germans appear dead-set against the Republic, completely at odds with the cultural experimentation of the metropolis, and utterly incapable of reacting except defensively or resentfully—though at least workers get to be alienated. Thus, the National Socialists stand in line, hand-in-hand, with

all sorts of reprehensible nationalist groups from the Wilhelmine period. Mommsen is quite clear: the Nazis' success was not a simple function of economic catastrophe. But with no positive ideological appeal, they made no claim on Germany's intellectual heritage. Weimar becomes the final measure of political opportunism and moral indifference.

Political autism also provides the concluding note to Richard Bessel's recent study of demobilization, *Germany after the First World War*. This comprehensive examination of Germany's troubled transition from war to peace is a grandly impressive piece of social history that ends with curiously idealistic conclusions in the realm of political civics. Marshaling ten years of archival research, Bessel examines the widespread desire for a return to normalcy, notes the thoroughly inadequate preparations for demobilization, and explores in detail the improvised effort that eventually took place in autumn 1918. The unexpectedly abrupt demobilization in November and December 1918 had three important consequences: it got six million soldiers home without too much trouble, put the postwar transition largely in the hands of industry and organized labor, and pushed the government to subsidize industrial production and welfare expenditures on a massive scale in an attempt to ward off social disorder by means of full employment. That wartime inflation gave way to postwar inflation expressed the classic Weimar dilemma: the economic policies of demobilization were "both temporarily successful and politically necessary," but they "put off the evil day when the economic and political bill for the war would have to be paid" (p. 124). Likewise, "measures which were probably economically necessary for the long-term health of the country were politically impossible in the short term" (p. 123). Thus, the main chapters of Bessel's story, in which he surveys labor, agricultural, and housing conditions, delineate a surprisingly orderly return to economic normalcy. Large-scale disruptions were avoided, and government controls on the economy gradually lifted. Although the social peace that inflation purchased provided the Republic a margin of survival in the first years after the Revolution,¹³ it also supported the illusion that there could be a return to 1913.

If the extreme dislocation of the war embellished the fantasy of a largely patriarchal world of security, the relatively modest dislocations of demobilization enhanced its plausibility, burdening, in the long run, the Weimar Republic with expectations that could not possibly be met. For Bessel, it was precisely the ease of demobilization that kept Germans from coming to terms with the costs of the war and thus led them to adopt an agenda increasingly centered on moral issues to account for their political impotence. As a result, political practice in the Weimar era was clouded by myths that cherished the security of prewar life and castigated republican conspirators who withheld it. These recast the horrors veterans experienced in the trenches into heroics, the welcome they in fact received into shameful mistreatment, and the relative ease with which they reintegrated themselves in the postwar economy into bewildering chaos.

In the end, Bessel sounds a rather familiar theme: dreamy political myth de-

¹³ See also Winkler, p. 144; Gerald D. Feldman, *The Great Disorder: Politics, Economics, and Society in the German Inflation, 1914–1924* (New York, 1993), pp. 249–50.

stroyed responsible political discourse. Bessel repeatedly indicates the extent to which Germans did not care to take a “sober look” at accomplishments attained and difficulties ahead. Instead of engaging in “open political discussion,” “millions of Germans retreated into irresponsible political demagoguery, into the antidemocratic politics of propaganda and illusion” (pp. 282–83). Bessel’s assumption here is that politics usually is and certainly ought to be about “real social needs and economic priorities” (p. 282). While the link between sober politics and republican survival may be credible, it is not at all clear that politics is usually conducted soberly or that myths and fictions are not regular constituents of worldviews. In the end, the sharp, normative distinction between responsibility and demagoguery confuses analysis of popular motivations. A closer look suggests that “demagogic politics” may be antidemocratic, and surely sidesteps painful choices—but it is effective. Even as Bessel acknowledges the force of myth and fantasy, he avoids concluding that Weimar demonstrates precisely the degree to which political mobilization is rooted in the imagination. To dismiss this as “playing to the gallery” is to take a very limited view of politics.¹⁴

A more nuanced if less ambitious discussion of nostalgic myths and antirepublican politics is Shelley Baranowski’s *The Sanctity of Rural Life: Nobility, Protestantism, and Nazism in Weimar Prussia*. Baranowski’s elegant, almost elegiac history shows how the rise of Nazism in Pomerania was rooted in pastoral myth, a finding that challenges the repeated emphasis in the last years on the radical nature of fascism. At the center of her analysis is the “myth” of the “sanctity of rural life” that ultimately bound estate owners and agricultural laborers. The result is a fine illustration of how culture shapes politics in ways that are not rational or sober. Baranowski is mindful of rural class conflicts, but she argues that economic hardship in the 1920s reinforced social conventions of deference, which remained widespread in the nonmonetary economy of the estate village. What made villages of social harmony into seedbeds of political militance were the unsettling market relations, big-city morals, and harsh secularism of the Weimar Republic. Once the Nazis made their peace with local elites, they quickly emerged as the best guarantors of rural life.

Baranowski is surely right to remind historians of the degree to which Nazis were tied to local conventions and local hierarchies. Hitler’s brownshirts were not adventurous outsiders, as the Freikorpsmen had been, and their populism was not socialism. Nonetheless, the differences between the Nazis and the conservative German Nationalists whom they displaced so dramatically add up to more than “family quarrels” (p. 163). The problem is not to explain why estate owners supported the Nazis (with varying degrees of enthusiasm), but why they did not seem to have any other choice. Why did all the “family quarrels” of the early 1930s end so resoundingly in National Socialist victories? This family seems more extended, recombined, and troubled, and, by extension, the Nazis seem more intrusive than Baranowski allows. Unfortunately, a more comprehensive understanding of the

¹⁴ Richard Bessel, “Why Did the Weimar Republic Collapse?” in Kershaw, ed. (n. 1 above), p. 122. See also Richard Bessel, “Die Krise der Weimarer Republik als Erblast des verlorenen Krieges,” in Bajohr et al., eds., pp. 98–114.

Nazis is undermined by the difficulty Baranowski has—despite her best efforts—in giving a voice to agricultural laborers and peasant villagers, and thus to the majority of Pomerania's Nazi voters. Extensive research in local, regional, and church archives does not remove the focus of this fascinating study in rural political culture from colorful but small numbers of estate owners such as the von Krockows with whom this book opens and closes.

A useful corrective is Jonathan Osmond's investigation of peasant protest in the Rhineland and Bavaria in the early 1920s. Whereas Baranowski examines estates and estate villages, Osmond looks at independent peasants. Examining grassroots politics, Osmond very plausibly argues in favor of an increasingly radical mobilization that took place during the war and early postwar years. Peasants learned democratic forms and emerged as self-assertive political contenders. Whether monarchist, nationalist, or *völkisch*, groups like the Free Peasantry studied here made a virtue of mobilization and quickly overshadowed the more deferential Peasants' Associations and Agrarian Leagues. The increasingly dense organization and prickly self-reliance of peasants is persuasive and indicates that the persistence of prewar social hierarchy that Baranowski sees in Pomerania does not hold for small farmers in the West. Insubordinate populism thus remains a crucial part of the transformation of Weimar politics. Unfortunately, Osmond does not completely succeed in animating his peasants or their politics. This is a slight book that looks at organized groups but not at villages and is based largely on a reading of government reports. Although Osmond's analysis reaches an interesting climax when he examines the separatist actions of the Free Peasantry in 1923, the drama is quite secondary to the disorder wrought by the Landvolk—the rural people's movement in northern Germany—some years later. Given the Landvolk's expressive localism and explosive politics, it is surprising that the movement has been completely ignored by recent work on German rural life.¹⁵ A much needed investigation of the Landvolk would reveal much more clearly than has been done previously how self-reliance and political radicalism went hand-in-hand and challenged both liberal republicans and conservative nationalists.

Nonetheless, the virtue of local studies such as Baranowski's and Osmond's is that the governing frame of the fate of the Republic is much less evident. They illuminate the full complexity of Weimar era constituents. When peasants in Plötzig or Pirnasens opposed Berlin democrats, they did so on the basis of robust activism and sturdy cultural associations that can hardly be described as autistic. In other words, the elaboration of public life in which constituents sought to construct collective meanings and pursue collective interests did not lead to a stronger democracy—*pace* the classic sociological tradition of Tocqueville, Weber, and Durkheim. As long as the fate of the Republic remains the emotional center of Weimar

¹⁵ The Landvolk appears on the horizon of Baranowski's study but, astonishingly enough, is not treated in Robert Moeller, ed., *Peasants and Lords in Modern Germany: Recent Studies in Agricultural History* (Boston, 1986). Conan Fischer, *The German Communists and the Rise of Nazism* (New York, 1991), examines political affinities between the Communists and the Nazis but ignores entirely the Landvolk, which both groups celebrated and courted. The best study of the Landvolk is Michelle Le Bars, *Le mouvement paysan dans le Schleswig-Holstein, 1928–1932* (Bern, 1986).

history, the widespread political mobilization of working- and middle-class Germans and the political dynamic that culminated in the Nazi victories of 1930 and 1932 will remain misunderstood. At issue in the 1920s was not simply the recovery of social stability or economic prosperity but questions of cultural value, political entitlement, and nationalist sentiment that are not easily parsed in terms of support for or opposition to parliamentary democracy. Weimar voters were much more ideological, unpredictable, and, indeed, interesting figures than the anguished wanderers among the postwar ruins to which we continue to be introduced in even the best syntheses.

Of course, it would be foolish to diminish estimates of the disruption caused by the war. Richard Bessel effectively tabulates the costs of a war in which more than thirteen million men—fully one-fifth of the total population—served in the German army and, in most cases, actually fought at the front. At home, long working hours, poor hygiene, and un nourishing meals created horrible suffering. Moreover, wartime inflation served as a daily reminder that “the fixed relationships of the prewar world had been destroyed.”¹⁶ There was good cause for Germans to look back nostalgically on the years before the war. Nonetheless, postwar politics cannot be reduced to the recovery of social order.

World War I generated a web of institutional practices and ideological ties that connected citizens to the nation in novel ways. Even as historians have overdrawn the popular resonance of patriotic community in August 1914,¹⁷ it is clear that Germans developed new emotional affinities to the nation, found a mostly deferential monarchism wanting, and experimented with new, more democratic political practices. The war provided the opportunity to reimagine national forms, and it wrecked more than refurbished the legitimacy of the prewar world. Indeed, Bessel acknowledges and Winkler emphasizes that most Germans had lost faith in the monarchy and the military by 1918. Much of the subsequent electoral volatility of middle-class voters, who distrusted social reactionaries as much as social revolutionaries, was the result of wartime experiences that enfranchised as well as conscripted citizens in a multitude of meaningful ways. At the same time, workers mobilized to protect their interests but also supported the national struggle. While the November 1918 revolution cannot be understood without reference to growing radicalism on the shop floor and at the market square, the years that followed cannot be understood without acknowledging how wartime experiences upholstered nationalist identities. Reflected in images of disciplined soldiers, skilled workers, patriotic sisters, complex machines, and self-made heroes such as the ace Oswald Boelcke, Chief of Staff Erich Ludendorff, and even the people’s favorite, the Supreme Commander, Paul von Hindenburg, Germany at war increasingly recast itself in plebian terms. Unfortunately, working-class nationalism has been virtually ignored by historians, who focus instead on the quality of social-welfare arrangements that originated during the war and were expanded in the 1920s, inquire whether the political victory of the Social Democrats in November 1918 proved

¹⁶ Bessel, *Germany after the First World War*, p. 31.

¹⁷ Wolfgang Kruse, *Krieg und nationale Integration: Eine Neuinterpretation des sozialdemokratischen Burgfriedensschlusses, 1914/15* (Essen, 1994).

too economically burdensome in the long run, and emphasize the degree to which the legitimacy of the Republic rested on social legislation.¹⁸ The result is that the story of workers in the 1920s is driven by the fortunes of the Republic. However, a series of new studies questions conventional assumptions that see workers as allied to the Republic and largely immune to nationalist sentiments. Now that it is evident that even socialist workers voted for the Nazis in considerable numbers, historians will have to reconsider “social interpretations” of the Weimar period and pay more attention to the nationalist imagination.

SOME AWKWARD EMBRACES

A discussion of nationalist sentiment is best begun with a presentation of empirical evidence. In a readable, tightly argued exposition of his detailed statistical analyses on Weimar elections, Jürgen Falter has indisputably demonstrated that in September 1930, 13 percent of all workers voted for the Nazis; by July 1932, the number had increased to 27 percent. At these same times, workers represented 27 percent and 28 percent of the respective Nazi electorates. These are very high figures cutting against the grain of long-held assumptions. Even if rural workers are factored out, the Nazis made considerable gains among industrial and urban workers and were, in fact, Germany’s largest proletarian party for most of the year 1932 (pp. 220, 224, 225, 229). One of every six Social Democratic voters in the 1930 election abandoned the party for the Nazis two years later, so that even political tradition did not immunize workers. One of every ten Nazi voters in the summer of 1932 was an ex-Social Democrat (p. 111). Clearly, the Nazi message resonated among left-wing workers, and historians have to figure out why. Falter also confirms earlier findings by Thomas Childers: white-collar employees were surprisingly disinclined to vote for the Nazis, while Protestant civil servants, retailers, artisans, and farmers were much more predisposed to do so. “The National Socialists,” Falter concludes, “recruited their electorate from so many social groups that the NSDAP is best described with Childers as a party of collective protest” (p. 289).

Falter goes on to evaluate his data against three explanatory models: the class-based analysis of Seymour Martin Lipset, who underlined the lower-middle-class nature of the Nazi electorate and presumed the immunity of industrial workers to National Socialism; the mass-society hypothesis of Reinhard Bendix, who located Nazi gains among previously unmobilized groups such as first-time voters and previous nonvoters; and Walter Dean Burnham’s argument about the role of political confession in regulating electoral behavior. Weighing the pros and cons of each, Falter finds that the evidence fits Burnham’s model most completely. Even if Burnham underestimated the susceptibility of Catholic and Social Democratic voters to the Nazis, he underscored the degree to which the Protestant bourgeois parties

¹⁸ David Abraham, *The Collapse of the Weimar Republic: Political Economy and Crisis*, 2d rev. ed. (New York, 1986); Peukert, *The Weimar Republic* (n. 6 above), pp. 129, 253–54; Knut Borchardt, “Constraints and Room for Manoeuvre in the Great Depression of the Early Thirties: Towards a Revision of the Received Historical Picture,” in his *Perspectives on Modern German Economic History and Policy*, trans. Peter Lambert (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 143–60.

were unable to hold onto theirs. For this reason, Burnham calls Germany's Protestant burghers "unchurched." But if the bourgeois bloc is expanded to include the Nazis, it suddenly displays considerable coherence, with only very few voters leaving the fold over time.¹⁹ This is confirmed by the remarkable finding that the best predictor of the results of Hitler's 1932 presidential campaign against Hindenburg was, in fact, Hindenburg's showing against Wilhelm Marx in 1925. For Falter, these two elections are among "the most fascinating and historically significant" in German history (p. 123), indicating the degree to which support for Hitler was prefigured in bourgeois coalitions well before the Depression and was confined mostly to a politically coherent if socially heterogeneous "burgher bloc." Falter is quick to point out that Social Democratic and even Catholic votes were important to Nazi totals, particularly in 1932. Nonetheless, the main outline of the Nazi electorate becomes clear if the political rather than social origins of voters are emphasized. This is reason enough to question the current assumption that the Nazis were simply "a catch-all party of protest."²⁰ Falter's correlations indicate that Nazism rested on a broad nationalist insurgency.

The sweep of Nazi gains among even Social Democratic workers challenges the value of a class-based interpretation of German fascism. Conventional social categories such as worker, shopkeeper, or employee, and the political markers of Left and Right or socialist and bourgeois they encompass, simply did not make sense of the dynamic of German politics after World War I. To understand the primacy of politics that seems manifest here, historians have little choice but to venture out onto the flimsy superstructure of collective identities, cultural practices, and nationalist sentiments.

It is useful to examine what the National Socialists offered voters that the Social Democrats did not, particularly since the Nazis emerged as Germany's largest party in 1932, exactly twenty years after the socialists had. Both parties were the main contenders for the hearts and minds of German voters in the early 1930s. The Nazis not only won over large numbers of Social Democrats but, in addition, as Falter shows, the Social Democrats had already benefited from former Nazi voters in 1928 and 1930 (one in six 1928 socialist voters had voted Nazi in December 1924 [p. 111]). Indeed, there are striking similarities between the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP): each party acknowledged the power of the other, and the Social Democrats provided the National Socialists with the basic model of political organization. Moreover, both parties left considerable numbers of voters disappointed. The Nazi party not only suffered a revolving-door membership but also, in November 1932, lost two mil-

¹⁹ Falter, pp. 114–17. See also Seymour Martin Lipset, "Fascism—Left, Right, and Center," in his *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (Garden City, N.J., 1960), pp. 127–79; Reinhard Bendix, "Social Stratification and Social Power," *American Political Science Review* 46 (1952): 357–75; and Walter Dean Burnham, "Political Immunization and Political Confessionalism: The United States and Weimar Germany," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 3 (1972): 1–30. See also the excellent essay by Bernt Hagtvet, "The Theory of Mass Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic: A Reexamination," in Larsen et al., eds. (n. 2 above), pp. 66–117.

²⁰ Thomas Childers, *The Nazi Voter: The Social Foundations of Fascism in Germany, 1919–1933* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1983), pp. 264–65.

lion voters. At the same time, Social Democrats had difficulty breaking out of their traditional working-class milieu and failed to respond to the growing number of Germans disillusioned with parliamentary politics. Although Donna Harsch does not explicitly say so, her first-class analysis of the engagement between these two political machines, *German Social Democracy and the Rise of Nazism*, indicates that both parties mobilized unfulfilled reformist expectations. (According to Falter's correlations [p. 111], the much-reported political exchange between the so-called extremes, the Nazis and the Communists, did not take place.) The Nazis were more successful than the Social Democrats because they effectively represented a national identity that was appealing precisely because it promised to break with older collective associations identified with the politics of failure. In a strange twist that Harsch might have discussed at greater length, nationalism came to denote a radicalism deemed necessary to achieve a thorough renovation of catastrophic social and economic conditions.²¹

The trouble with the Social Democrats, Harsch argues, is that they did not effectively embrace their radical democratic nature. Although the party's electorate looked forward to an ambitious political agenda that would address Germany's pressing problems, Social Democratic leaders dithered. Harsch is perfectly aware of the difficult political and economic climate in the early 1930s. And the movement itself was constituted by heterogeneous elements: party, trade union, and the Reichsbanner. Nonetheless, "Prussian reformers" and orthodox Marxists in the party leadership kept the Social Democrats from delivering a more attractive and more radical (but non-Marxist) message to the German electorate in the depths of the Depression.

Harsch is not always clear about what a "republican-parliamentary period of reform" (p. 45) or a "bold program of democratization" (p. 62) might have looked like, but she is certainly making the right inquiries. She calls on a minority of radicals such as Julius Leber, Theo Haubach, and Carlo Mierendorff to testify to the party's inability to develop a coherent social program or a critique of "real existing" parliamentarianism. While the public "craved action" (p. 62) to overcome unemployment, the SPD fought to protect unemployment benefits or else declined to doctor a sick capitalism altogether. A militant class-against-class rhetoric was feeble compensation for reformist practices, with the result that the Social Democrats neither satisfied loyal supporters nor won new adherents. The party's failure to adopt the Woytinsky-Tarnow-Baade public works plan proposed by trade union leaders in spring 1932 was indeed what Harsch rightly calls a "momentous blunder" (p. 190). The Nazis adopted it instead.

Unable to assess the radical disillusionment of voters, the Social Democrats misread the rise of the Nazis, whom they dismissed as reactionaries and capitalists and whose supporters they regarded condescendingly as deluded and irrational. Only a few observers acknowledged the popular resonance of the NSDAP's reformism. Yet when Social Democrats in Hesse and Hamburg experimented in 1932 with a more confident style of agitation, replaced proletarian with national motifs, and appealed to the *Volk* in the name of freedom rather than of the Republic, the results

²¹ See also Fischer.

were encouraging. These partial successes in the face of broader Social Democratic failures indicate just where the Nazis outmaneuvered their foes. What the National Socialists offered the public was the simple, constantly reiterated promise that present circumstances would be radically altered for the benefit of the entire nation. This proved effective against both the traditional Right and the traditional Left. The Social Democrats, by contrast, were tied to a discursive, rational language that resonated deeply among working-class supporters but withheld an immediate and indignant response to the crisis. For all the differences, however, the impression remains that many voters judged the National Socialists in terms of longer-term disappointments with, rather than outright opposition to, Social Democracy, and regarded the two parties not as polar opposites but as more and less able reformers.

By focusing on the confrontation between Social Democracy and National Socialism, Harsch highlights the conceptual differences between the two movements, reexamines the broad appeal of radical reform, and thereby makes a provocative and timely contribution to the study of German politics. But where Harsch suggests that the Republic was not a terribly important issue for voters and faults the SPD for compromising its otherwise appealing democratic radicalism by its attempt to steady parliamentary institutions, Wolfram Pyta commends the party for its consistent and energetic efforts on behalf of the Republic. It is not clear why Pyta undertakes this exhaustive study, since the SPD's basically good intentions have not been in doubt. But along the way, the author makes some important points. Like Harsch, he is struck by the clumsiness of SPD thinkers who generally could not comprehend the charisma of Hitler or the racism of the Nazi message. The Social Democrats saw what they wanted to see: the anticapitalist sentiment of Nazi voters who would eventually come around to the real thing. As a result, Pyta argues, the rise of the Nazis confirmed rather than challenged the SPD's proletarian socialism. Given this scenario, there was no need for the party to formulate a more populist *Gemeinschaftsgedanke*, to repair the economy with public works plans, or to contest at the grass roots the Nazis' ferocious opposition to the conservative Catholic chancellor, Heinrich Brüning.

Pyta describes the SPD's official policy of tolerating Brüning in 1930–32 as a strategy of postponement, during which time the masses would continue their anticapitalist journey, moving from the Nazi to the Marxist camp. In the meantime, Social Democratic civil servants tried valiantly to dispel the notion that National Socialism was inevitable. Unfortunately, efforts at republican enlightenment were sporadic and always compromised by uncooperative bourgeois functionaries. This is important territory for Pyta to cover, for he is interested in whether Social Democrats passed the test in defending the Republic. It becomes clear that they did, but it is not so clear why this is such a crucial standard for evaluation. Did Social Democratic supporters expect such vigilance? Probably not, since the constitutional legalism the SPD defended so vigorously during the Brüning chancellorship left the party without a strategy to confront directly the Nazis or to press for radical improvements in the lives of ordinary voters. To be sure, Pyta carefully outlines the ways in which the SPD's legalism was counterproductive, but he fails to factor these into a concluding analysis. Astonishing as well is his assumption that the Social Democrats could have made a more energetic pitch to the middle classes,

who Pyta sketches in as rather opportunistic, ignoring their basic disposition against the left-wing party. By taking the survival of the Republic as the main issue and reviewing the policy options of the Social Democrats in that light, Pyta shows little feel for Weimar voters themselves. It is unlikely that the Social Democrats could have jumped out of their political skins to adopt the brash style of the Nazis, reanimate radical workers, win over shopkeepers, and, at the same time, continue to defend the constitutional order.

Radical and national motifs figure prominently in Gerhard Paul's intriguing and powerfully argued analysis of the National Socialists' public face. In *Aufstand der Bilder: Die NS-Propaganda vor 1933* (infelicitously translated as *Insurrection of Images*), Paul does not simply analyze Nazi propaganda, which was aimed at creating an emotionally powerful world of illusions designed to (re)conquer workers for nationalist ends; he demonstrates the vital role of imagery in politics as well. His well-written study is a pathbreaking reconsideration of the very terms of Weimar politics, which favored those contenders who worked in the subjunctive mood of the imagination. Paul has little patience with contemporary critics like Bertolt Brecht who dismissed Nazi propaganda as pure illusion. "A whitewash satisfied important needs," Paul counters; images referred to "mythic and utopian symbols" and mobilized emotions against "the arid language of democracy and rational discourse" (p. 13). Although Paul occasionally describes this mobilization of pictures as "counterrevolutionary," he is more intent on uncovering the full register of politics. As Carl Schorske argued long ago, mass politics had increasingly become an aesthetic form, a modernist genre.²²

A few characteristic figures constituted the main elements of visual propaganda. Large-format curbside posters depicting able-bodied workers, frontline soldiers, overfed bureaucrats, and subhuman Bolsheviks, as well as the visual and acoustic spectacle of uniformed ranks of National Socialist marchers, created an "illusionary world of existential threats and eminent apocalypse, of a radical transformation and a brown future" (p. 213). More than anything else, such visuals conveyed a sense of the movement's militance and determination. Although Harsch points to the pathetic, groaning proletarians in Social Democratic posters before Carlo Mierendorff and Sergei Chakotin developed a more confident style, Paul sees little difference between the muscular giants in standard left-wing and right-wing propaganda.²³ With their unshakable convictions and vigilant poses, these oversized fantasy figures entered the public sphere to protect and destroy, not to debate and discuss. In them, the Nazis found an appealing revolutionary subject, confirming the streetwise abilities of Hitler's campaigners and signaling the social-reformist intentions of his regime. In the end, what the Nazis did was to steal from the Left, taking the "red of their flags and posters" as well as their "slogans, catchwords, and allegories" (p. 257)—inserting them into new contexts, to be sure, but also projecting a diffuse socialist future beyond Weimar which many workers evidently found appealing.

²² Carl E. Schorske, "Politics in a New Key: An Austrian Triptych," in *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York, 1980).

²³ Harsch, pp. 177–78.

Paul is keenly aware of the limits of aesthetic mobilization. Particularly before 1933, the carefully choreographed compositions he describes were marred by counterdemonstrations, street battles, and unruly or drunken party members. And by autumn 1932, even Nazi sympathizers had become dulled to the party's visual effects. Moreover, there were as many constituents who did not need Goebbels's flim-flam to persuade them to vote for the Nazis as there were organized workers and rural Catholics who dismissed the hoopla altogether. And yet Paul has accomplished a great deal. He outlines Nazi assessments of the crucial role that propaganda played in mobilizing homefront publics in World War I and class allegiances in 1918 and, furthermore, considers these assumptions quite plausible: he demonstrates how twentieth-century images spoke effectively to utopian yearnings for a more prosperous future and a greater sense of national belonging. At the same time, Paul notes the entirely subordinate role of political discourse and published tracts. In urban areas, electoral battles were fought primarily by posters and speeches. Goebbels referred again and again to the "*Plakatkrieg*" which the Left had won in the early 1920s but from which the Nazis would eventually emerge victorious. By contrast, the written word, which one leading Nazi named the "step-child of the movement" (p. 180), was associated with interest-group entitlements and parliamentary politics. Gerhard Paul presents an extremely rich argument indicating that the "social language of politics" might not have been as important as the emotional vocabulary of collective desire.²⁴

Paul does not attempt a reception analysis of Nazi visuals, but the gritty proletarian politics that Alf Lüdtkke explores confirm how effectively symbolic gestures and national tableaux enrolled workers in National Socialism. In a series of important essays that have appeared over the last ten years, Lüdtkke undertakes nothing less than a reconceptualization of the political universe of the German working class. He wants not only to expand the emotional register of politics in ways entirely compatible with the work of Donna Harsch and Gerhard Paul but also to enlarge the terrain of politics so that the *Grosse Politik* of national affairs may be understood also in terms of the *Kleinpolitik* of shop-floor relations, tenancy fights, subsistence struggles, and, Lüdtkke might want to add, gender roles. People do not enter grand politics as autonomous individuals making rational choices, nor are they simply manipulated objects; rather, they participate in a variety of contests in which their engagement with authority might take the form of withdrawal, stealthy subversion, direct engagement, or even loud agreement. He introduces the term "*Eigensinn*," a kind of freedom staked out in these cautious and occasionally prickly relations to power, to understand the readiness of workers to support the war effort in 1914, their broad acceptance of National Socialism some twenty years later, and also their revolts, boycotts, and all-around stubbornness in the years 1918–20.

The public sphere is not necessarily a place Lüdtkke's workers enter willingly. The desire to be among one's own kind, with workmates, family, and friends, often superseded allegiances to formal organizations and frequently reflected difficulties in dealing with state officials and welfare bureaucrats or in finding a stable liveli-

²⁴ Childers, "The Social Language of Politics" (n. 8 above).

hood or even in procuring bread. The fact is that the "attention and energy of male and female workers and housewives was still very much absorbed by the daily strain of survival" (p. 296). As Lüdtkke works it back into the stream of day-to-day life, politics remains central to workers, but the "party line," the regime, and other civic virtues are often peripheral. At the same time, reserve toward the powerful could easily give way to trust. Lüdtkke wonders what effect the Nazi slogan "Bread and Work" had on those adults who in winter 1932 once again tasted the bitter rations of 1916 and 1923 and surely hoped for a social order that would finally banish such misery (pp. 232–33). To consider workers' acceptance of the Nazi regime in light of the trauma of the wartime "*Steckrübenwinter*" (pp. 263, 296) is the bold move of Lüdtkke's *Alltagsgeschichte* in which the clear lines between interest, ideology, and politics give way to unstable, tenuous, and mediated actions that are much more faithful to the complexity of people's lives.²⁵

Harsh economics are not everything, however. Drawing on the work of Barrington Moore, Lüdtkke insists that workers operate in public with a robust sense of honor.²⁶ This can express itself in rebellious actions in the name of social justice, as in the November Revolution, but also in an entirely personal sense of achievement grounded in supporting a family, spending a little extra on weekends, and advancing from one skill grade to another. Although Lüdtkke's arguments would have been enhanced had he disentangled male honor from working-class honor, he persuasively shows how easily *Grosse Politik* could draw legitimacy from *Eigensinn*. Iconic representations of muscle and sweat honored the labor of the worker and recognized *his* mastery of material and machine. In both World War I and World War II, such a "*Bilder-Sprache*" (p. 334) composed powerful images of "German Quality Work" from countless discerning and proficient hands on the shop floor. These images at once esteemed labor and enrolled laborers into the "whole"—into the nation and the *Volk*. And "*Nationale Arbeit*" was not idle propaganda; already circulated by Social Democrats in the 1910s, patriotic images of labor allowed workers to reconcile vocational with collective identities and to connect quality on the workbench to prosperity around the corner, and they facilitated working-class acceptance of the National Socialists.²⁷

For all the book's rich insight, its usefulness is somewhat limited by its tentative nature. Although the subtitle promises "*Ergebnisse*"—research results—the volume is a collection of essays, most of which are argumentative rather than empirical, intriguing rather than persuasive. Yet the great promise of Lüdtkke's forcefully argued agenda is to take seriously previously "scare-quoted" concepts such as "*Ehre*," "*Gemeinschaft*," "*Volk*," and "*Nation*." Conceptions of what it meant to labor on the shop floor, to support a family in hard times, and to be a German, fears of winter rationing and hopes for a better life—all were politically complicit

²⁵ See also Geoff Eley, "Labor History, Social History, *Alltagsgeschichte*: Experience, Culture, and the Politics of the Everyday—A New Direction in German Social History?" *Journal of Modern History* 61 (1989): 297–343.

²⁶ Barrington Moore, *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt* (New York, 1978).

²⁷ See Lüdtkke, pp. 307–9, 328–29, 334–35.

dramatizations that could be mobilized in the public sphere. The thought-provoking conclusion that Lüdtke reaches is that National Socialism was extensively “coproduced” (p. 332) by the cultural practices of everyday life.

What recent studies of Weimar workers and National Socialists reveal are degrees of affinity that have not been taken seriously until now. To be sure, the working-class appeal of the Nazis should not be overstated; after all, a majority of Social Democratic voters remained loyal to the party. Nonetheless, the historians under review here have provided compelling evidence that workers responded positively to nationalist appeals. German workers repeatedly identified their own fate with that of the nation and in some cases used nationalism to reenchant radicalism. At issue is not the dutiful patriotism of “yellow” unions or small-town apprentices, but an imaginative rendering of the commonwealth that contained a compelling if unsystematic critique of German society and politics. In other words, there is no correspondence between social reform and republican politics. Weimar is not simply the story of the Republic, and the demise of the moderate and republican parties should not be regarded as symptomatic of electoral panic and dislocation. In the minds of millions of voters, the Nazis figured as a movement that promised to introduce radical reforms benefiting all non-Jewish Germans. As a result, National Socialism was not a political choice that necessarily revoked the progressive social and economic aspirations that workers had long cherished. Moreover, the Nazis’ success demonstrates the extent to which modern politics is not simply a matter of interest but also one of imagination. The study of the Weimar years continues to develop the post-Marxist proposition that interests need myths to speak for themselves. What historians are left with is not one single Weimar story, but multiple versions in which the constitutive role of the nation and the community encouraged political mobilization along various fronts.

If preoccupation with the fate of the Republic fails to catch the broad mobilization of interest and sentiment in the postwar years, it also neglects the exuberant confidence in design that “middling modernists” in the state administration shared with high-minded intellectuals in the avant-garde. In light of the ambitious attempts to renovate the social body, to improve national health, and to modernize the German economy, Weimar is less a cumulative failure than a series of bold experiments that do not come to an end with the year 1933. The ceaseless improvement of national capacities was all the more essential, since twentieth-century circumstances of total war, imperial rivalry, and commercial competition appeared to underscore how endangered Germany had become. A shelf of recent books has attempted to take the measure of this imagination of design. Here too the stress is on the open-ended nature of mobilization, on the supererogatory, ideologically complicit assumptions that worked and reworked the *Volkskörper*.

DESIGNING THE NATION

Already in use during the Weimar years, the ominously authoritarian term *Volkskörper* has been recirculated by present-day historians to draw attention to the ways in which the ambitious practices of newly professionalized groups such as engi-

neers and doctors meshed with the growing responsibilities of the state to renovate the nation for collective ends. It is particularly useful because it keeps in focus two fundamental twentieth-century developments: an open-ended one in the form of innovation made possible by the application of science and technology, and a delimiting one in the form of increasing absorption with the fate of the nation. The crucial question in German history is to account for the enclosure of the modernist spirit of experimentation by the national collective at the expense of the individual and the particular. Two central texts by Detlev Peukert have become indispensable to this inquiry: *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity*, and the collection of essays entitled *Max Webers Diagnose der Moderne*.²⁸ It is worth reviewing Peukert's contribution before assessing the most recent literature on the design of the nation.

Peukert's untimely death in 1990 left us with an exceptionally rich but basically incomplete analysis of modernity. His most coherent statements can be found in his synthetic history of the Weimar Republic, and yet these were superseded by darker suspicions expressed in his untranslated essays on Weber. Peukert refers to the Weimar years as "a crisis of the classical modern." The emancipatory potential, democratic practice, social reformism, and economic and technological rationalization that Peukert identifies with modernization came all at once, in compressed and intense form, in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Moreover, these were accompanied, after 1929, by a severe economic downturn. This fateful coincidence Peukert compares to a "worst-case" scenario of the failure of a complex system (he makes an explicit reference to Chernobyl). Economic stagnation and cultural and political crisis led to an increasingly authoritarian, exclusive, and discriminatory state fully realized in National Socialism. In this line of argument, twentieth-century Germany is different not because it is burdened by a specific national past—the *Sonderweg* interpretation—but because it is simply an extreme case.

What was innovative about Peukert's approach was his attention to the serious problems of and misgivings about modernization. In his view, the supposedly progressive social-welfare complex, for example, rested on normative hierarchies of human worth that would be fully articulated by more repressive regimes. At the same time, Peukert acknowledged ways in which an allegedly antimodern "politics of cultural despair" constituted insightful responses to the incompleteness of modern rationalism.²⁹ Because the pressures of modernist experimentation were intensely contradictory, its variations were politically diverse and included the comforts of nostalgia as well as the temptations of totalitarianism. Moreover, Peukert's work deliberately placed Germany in a Western context and distinguished the most ominous catastrophes of the modern era from modernity itself.

But Peukert permits others readings. In his brilliant essays on Max Weber, for example, he repeatedly invokes the "Janus face" of modernity and draws attention to the disenchantment and disorientation that have invariably accompanied indus-

²⁸ Detlev Peukert, *Max Webers Diagnose der Moderne* (Göttingen, 1989), and *The Weimar Republic* (n. 6 above).

²⁹ Peukert, *The Weimar Republic*, p. 188.

trial development.³⁰ Here Peukert does something he generally avoids in his history of the Weimar Republic: he plays with the equation of modernity and crisis, a plotline in which Germany becomes the archetypical expression of the very essence of modernity rather than a more isolated example of its most serious troubles. In this case, upheaval is the prevailing experience of the modern. And it is not only individuals who feel themselves freed from convention or marginalized by industrial development; professional elites, political institutions, and the state itself respond to the modern condition. These actors acknowledge the precarious nature of social structure but also recognize the far-reaching ability to reform and renovate.³¹ Renovation and experimentation are distinctive modernist practices, but because they presume both the extreme malleability and the impermanence of the material world and are also often undertaken in conditions of apprehension, they can serve dangerously adventurous ends. This darker vision of modernism is compelling but not wholly persuasive. It is questionable, for example, whether the “spirit of science” introduces quite so automatically a “discourse of segregation” without the application of racist politics.³² Doesn’t politics choose its own science at least as much as science prefigures political regimes? And while the dangerous embrace of crisis and renovation makes intuitive sense, it cannot, by itself, explain the dynamic of modernist movements, which do not simply emerge out of a “dialectic of Enlightenment” but are deeply implicated in the particular experiences of total war and economic exhaustion.

Shifting between a close examination of the crisis of Weimar and broader meditations on catastrophe, Peukert’s work raises questions about the very nature of modernity: to what extent are reformist practices invariably collusions in disciplinary regimes, and to what extent do they turn ominous only in the extreme conditions that war, military defeat, and economic devastation produce? Peukert also suggests an alternate approach to the history of the Weimar Republic, which he views as a well-developed regime that articulated various strategies to organize social life. This functionalist reading of the modern state puts the accent on administrative innovation rather than political collapse. Unfortunately, the volume of essays prepared as a memorial to Peukert, *Zivilisation und Barbarei: Die widersprüchliche Potentiale der Moderne*, is disappointing. There is little sustained engagement with Peukert’s work and insufficient reflection by the authors on what modernity might be. Therefore, the alleged contradictions of the modern are often confused with unpleasant events. One exception is Geoff Eley’s opening chapter,

³⁰ See, in particular, “Die ‘letzten Menschen’: Beobachtungen zur Kulturkritik im Geschichtsbild Max Webers,” originally published in *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 12 (1986): 425–42, and “Der Janusgesicht der Moderne,” both now in *Max Webers Diagnose*.

³¹ See Modris Eksteins, *The Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston, 1989); Peter Fritzsche, “Landscape of Danger, Landscape of Design: Crisis and Modernism in Weimar Germany,” in *Dancing on the Volcano: Essays on the Culture of the Weimar Republic*, ed. Thomas W. Kniesche and Stephen Brockmann (Columbia, S.C., 1994), pp. 29–46; and Paul Rabinow, *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989).

³² Detlev J. K. Peukert, “The Genesis of the ‘Final Solution’ from the Spirit of Science,” in *Reevaluating the Third Reich*, ed. Thomas Childers and Jane Caplan (New York, 1993), pp. 234–52, here p. 249.

which locates the development of the disciplinary practices that fashion the *Volkskörper* in the late nineteenth-century rise of administrative sciences such as psychology and psychiatry and in “the priority of the social” in popular nationalism (p. 29). Not a deficit of modernity but the very modern “scientific and technocratic ambitions” of social policy prepared the ground for National Socialism (p. 54). Richard Bessel, in contrast, seems rather uninspired by Peukert and sanguinely identifies benign modernism on one side of World War I and deleterious disorder on the other. Yet it is disorder that legitimized all the more completely the introduction of disciplinary renovation, although scholars debate whether repressive normative regimes are the function of long-term rationalization, as the excellent essay by Adelheid von Saldern implies, or of economic emergency, as the more narrowly focused chapter on the economic emergency by Uwe Lohalm indicates.³³

Recent work on Weimar social policy has tended to take a middle road, unwilling to reduce social policy to social discipline without taking the political motivations of practitioners into account but mindful as well of the normative standards that invariably accompany the organization of social life. Historians do agree that the focus of almost all social reform was on the nation-state. From the national efficiency campaigns of the 1890s to the elaboration of social welfare and maternity policies in the 1920s to the alarming civil defense exercises of the 1940s, citizens were assessed, categorized, mobilized, treated, and improved insofar as they were potentially productive members of the nation. Given the intense international competition for imperial spoils and commercial advantage, and the increasingly technical challenges of daily life, the period 1870–1945 stands out; at no time before or since have administrative practices targeted Europeans in terms of their respective nationalities so relentlessly, with so much foreboding, and with such abandon.

The *Volkskörper* is at the center of Cornelia Osborne’s engaging and welcome analysis, *The Politics of the Body in Weimar Germany*. Osborne is well aware of the fact that women’s bodies have played key roles in efforts to protect the body politic from social diseases since the nineteenth century. In the last years before World War I, especially, discussions about the condition of the nation were medicalized as doctors identified demographic crises and eugenic debilities and, in turn, recommended appropriate therapies. But it was the war itself that led to the dramatic shift from an undifferentiated neo-Malthusian stimulation of the birthrate in Wilhelmine Germany to obsessive eugenic concern with the quality of the population in the Weimar Republic. Ever more total mobilization revealed the stakes not merely in creating more but in fashioning better Germans. Unfortunately, Osborne does not examine biomedical discourse during the war, which would have revealed the rapid expansion of interventionist techniques to construct the national body.

³³ Geoff Eley, “Die deutsche Geschichte und die Widersprüche der Moderne: Das Beispiel des Kaiserreiches,” pp. 17–65; Richard Bessel, “Die Krise der Weimarer Republik als Erblast des verlorenen Krieges,” pp. 98–114; Adelheid von Saldern, “‘Statt Kathedralen die Wohnmaschine’: Paradoxien der Rationalisierung im Kontext der Moderne,” pp. 168–92; and Uwe Lohalm, “Die Wohlfahrtskrise, 1930–1933: Vom ökonomischen Notprogramm zur rassenhygienischen Neubestimmung,” pp. 193–225, all in Bajohr et al., eds.

The inattention to the war and the exclusive focus on the postwar years casts Osborne's therapists in a decidedly defensive light as they deal with postwar shortages, veterans, and refugees. Yet it was the war that best demonstrated the ways in which a functional *Volkskörper* could be created, made urgent the state's duty to do so, and generated a consensus from Left to Right that individual bodies were subordinate to the national collective. Total war did not simply pose organizational challenges but generated imaginative possibilities to reinvent the nation as well.³⁴

In a clear and persuasive exposition, Osborne examines the ways in which Weimar women were the targets of intervention in four different areas: maternity, sexuality, contraception, and abortion. She finds considerable agreement among socialists, liberals, and right-wing moralists that the state had a responsibility to preserve national health by fortifying an ideology of motherhood, regulating sexuality, and otherwise encouraging eugenic behavior. Even as the lives of women improved with the extension of social-welfare services, maternity benefits, and the ready availability of contraception (a single Berlin manufacturer sold twenty-four million condoms in 1928, mostly for the home market), these measures contained a prescriptive aspect. They cast women in a "domestic rather than a public role" for the sake of the collective good (p. 210). Only a few women doctors argued that women had the right to control their bodies as individuals. However, Osborne is careful not to demonize the politics of the body and usefully compares Weimar debates to the much less informed discussion in England. She recognizes the commitment of the republican government to improve the lives of mothers and commends the churches for their open attitudes in sexual matters. But in the end, Osborne emphasizes the creation of a biological imagination in which the individual body was made to conform more and more completely to the demands of the *Volkskörper*. It is on the basis of this qualitative reconstruction of the national body that a fundamental continuity between Weimar and Nazi Germany can be identified. While Nazi practice was infinitely more coercive, segregation of "defectives" and sterilization of the "unfit" received official sanction well before 1933. This well-conceived and unpretentious book is the first to map out the politics of the body for this period and stands as a major contribution to German history.

The welfare state has as much to do with the conduct of warfare and the rationalization of the workforce as it does with material gains to benefit disadvantaged citizens. Today, its history is no longer written simply in terms of the political balance between left-wing reformers and the opposing right-wing employers. As Osborne demonstrates, welfare was a crucial administrative site for fitting people into various public and private roles regarded as crucial for the healthy development of the nation. The politics of the body did not follow conventional differences between Left and Right, for even when political enemies disagreed about morality or capitalism they shared basic assumptions about the collective ends of public policy. No less important than the protection of healthy married mothers was the

³⁴ See the pathbreaking arguments in Michael Geyer, "The Stigma of Violence, Nationalism, and War in Twentieth-Century Germany," *German Studies Review* (Winter 1992), pp. 86–91; and also Paul Weindling, *Health, Race and German Politics between National Unification and Nazism, 1870–1945* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 9, 281–97.

creation of a disciplined labor force. In her fine analysis of adolescent youth, Elizabeth Harvey explores the border separating the core of “regular (usually male) workers,” who enjoyed full-time employment and benefits, and the periphery of “those workers, often young and/or female, who were employed casually” (p. 6). Both Social Democrats and their bourgeois opponents deployed techniques of supervision and even coercion to impose healthy and productive forms of behavior. These normative practices were not always objectionable and included individualized counseling, vocational schooling, and job training as well as the usual admonishments against hedonism and consumption, but they all rested on the assumption that what they considered to be disorderly lives should be ordered. With the coming of the Great Depression, welfare authorities hit “the limits of social discipline,” drastically delimited the pedagogical sphere, and reclassified more and more intractable youths as uneducable. Incarceration rates soared; efforts at reform and rehabilitation dwindled.³⁵ However, economic stringency did not create hierarchies of human worth; it simply gave them increasingly dangerous implications as the state turned from discipline to triage.

Both Osborne and Harvey follow Peukert to emphasize the role of the Depression in giving momentum to eugenic propositions about who was worth investing in and who was not. Budget cuts reduced or eliminated welfare programs after 1930; and three years later the Nazi seizure of power resulted in the purge of thousands of socialist and Jewish welfare officials. Political revolution thus enforced the tendency of financial constraints: the raucous debates that had shaped Weimar social policy came to a quick end. The sad result was legislation based exclusively on the principles of negative eugenics. The period 1930–33 is thus a crucial watershed. Nonetheless, the longer-term continuities between Weimar and Nazi Germany cannot be ignored. Beginning in World War I, the social body was widely recognized as a national concern that justified administrative intervention as the state attempted to standardize the role of women, discipline young adults, and consider the segregation of allegedly “worthless” human material. (Euthanasia in the late 1930s was often justified by pointing to the high death rates in German asylums and old-age homes that were the result of food shortages and professional neglect during World War I.) Whether to ameliorate the lives of the underprivileged, to meet the challenges of an increasingly rationalized capitalist marketplace, or to prepare for war, *Menschenökonomie* regulated the way state authorities approached citizens, who were regarded in increasingly productivist and functional terms. In these analyses, social policy had the effect of creating a national subject of production.

The most basic continuity between Weimar and Nazi policy lies in the assumption that human material could and should be remolded. It is the idea of mobilization rather than the particular aims of mobilization that constitutes the common ground between the two regimes. Weimar reformers and Nazi eugenicists shared a genuine optimism about the possibility of renovating society, although this optimism was tempered by the acknowledgment of the pervasive instability of human

³⁵ See also Detlev J. K. Peukert, *Grenzen der Sozialdisziplinierung: Aufstieg und Krise der deutschen Jugendfürsorge, 1878 bis 1932* (Cologne, 1986).

relations. Therefore, both were obsessed with “shiftless, unskilled boy laborers and sexualized girls” as well as asocial adults³⁶—the frail margins of a social body that required vigilant social policing. Indeed, the more serious the emergency, the more legitimate social reform was considered to be. Characteristic Weimar images of the crippled veteran, the unemployment line, the destitute middle-class creditor, the tumbledown metropolitan facade all provided stark testimony to the impermanence of the material world but also to the tractability of its reconstruction. History had never appeared so dangerous or so open-ended as when it was viewed from the midst of the ruins of the postwar years.

Just how much Weimar was appreciated by contemporaries as an ongoing experiment in social renovation becomes evident in the restless self-criticism implicit in their appraisals of the United States, which is the subject of Mary Nolan’s illuminating new study, *Visions of Modernity: American Business and the Modernization of Germany*. Before World War I, America was not particularly relevant to Germans, who had few major doubts about their own itinerary of national development. Once the Wilhelmine future was challenged by the upheaval of war and the humiliation of defeat, however, the very newness of America offered Germans ways out of the binds of failed history. America indicated the magnitude of the possibility of renovation and the open-endedness of future development. For this reason the “imaginative vision of Germany’s future was shaped . . . by the perception of America’s present” (p. 5) in ways that were not as pertinent to the victorious powers, Great Britain and France. America fascinated Germany not simply because it offered potential versions of modernity but also because America’s exuberant liberation from tradition corresponded most closely to Germany’s calamities in the 1920s. After the war it appeared that Germany had little choice but to reimagine itself in the future tense.

The task of reinventing the nation was undertaken with enthusiasm. By the mid-1920s, trade unionists, liberal economists, engineers, and business leaders all had a great deal to say about the German future they saw prefigured in America. Of course, there was no consensus about the America that shaped these German visions, and Nolan expertly distinguishes the views of labor leaders, who saw an efficient economy geared toward mass consumption, from the antiunion outlook of business, which stressed the free hand of factory owners and the diligence of factory hands, from the visions of engineers, who admired the scale and efficiency of production. German ideology consistently reshuffled the American experience to emphasize, in turn, consumption, discipline, and technology. And yet the itineraries of German visitors to the United States were very much the same. The America they saw was urban, industrial, and midwestern. Indigenous burdens of history and poverty that were plain to see in the South would have obscured the triumph over history that the massive humanwork of Chicago and Detroit—and, most of all, Henry Ford’s factories—seemed to reveal. Technology rather than nature, monumental movement rather than pristine inactivity, attracted the German eye. Right or Left, the emphasis was on the techniques of mobility.

Nolan concludes that the German obsession with Fordism and the great promise

³⁶ Harvey, p. 297.

of rationalization ended with the Great Depression. Thereafter, “Americanism did not provide an appealing model of modernity,” she writes, “and utopian aspirations could no longer be expressed in the language of rationalization” (p. 232). Politics, Nolan adds, rather than economics or technology, seemed to provide solutions to Germany’s pressing problems. That the National Socialists rejected merely technocratic and managerial approaches and emphasized the priority of explicitly ideological and racial strategies is beyond dispute. And yet the primacy of politics rested on the assumption that society could be mobilized and transformed. For the Nazis as much as for Weimar reformers, the global crises since the outbreak of the war had invalidated past history and revealed a vast arena for improvisation. Weimar’s political sciences—geopolitics, the myth of the friend and the foe—its social sciences—welfare legislation, maternity programs, eugenics—and its intellectual cultures—radical nationalism, Bauhaus, *Neue Sachlichkeit*—rewrote the material world in increasingly plastic terms. The fiscal frustrations of the late 1920s only heightened the urgency of improvisation, as had the emergency of war and defeat in the 1910s. This *Baulehre*—or what Peukert has termed “*Machbarkeitswahn*,” a heady sense of the possible—was characteristic of Weimar reformers on the Right and on the Left.³⁷ For city planners, welfare experts, business-minded rationalists, and extreme nationalists, engineering of one sort or another served as the basis for the mobilization and transformation of the *Volkskörper*. The common note in the explorations undertaken by Osborne, Harvey, and Nolan is the centrality of design in the political imagination of the Weimar Republic.

Improvisation is also the keynote of the beautifully compiled sourcebook edited by Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg. Thirty chapters arrange 327 documents on Weimar themes as diverse as sexuality, consumption, radio, Jewish life, right-wing nationalism, inflation, and prisons. And while certain omissions might be noted, such as the absence of thematic complexes that treat questions of representation, or of tradition, shock, or novelty, the editors have rightly placed the emphasis on experimentation. As a “laboratory for modernity” (p. xvii), the Weimar experience appears as a “frantic kaleidoscopic shuffling of the fragments of a nascent modernity and the remnants of a persistent past” (p. xviii). The generally punchy style of the manifestos, vignettes, and declarations reflects the impress of formidable forces that have acted thoroughly (defeats are utter, strikes general, struggles great), with great power (industry is concentrated, culture monotone, the masses overwhelming), and with tremendous speed and surprise (people are left alone and panicked, things are torn and tattered). In the face of so much novelty, witnesses feel variously disoriented and abandoned, endangered and delighted. Only a few commentators such as Kurt Tucholsky debunk these postwar pretensions to the end of history and cynically expose the immobility of so much German culture. There is also little writing that seeks to safeguard or restore or commemorate, and these documents come mostly from the political center. The texts assembled here are not lachrymose or nostalgic. For the most part, a sense of exuberant possibility enchants the landscape they describe. Artists, technicians, politicians,

³⁷ Peukert, *Max Webers Diagnose*, pp. 69, 110–11. See also Fritzsche, “Landscape of Danger, Landscape of Design,” pp. 29–46.

scientists, and athletes, among many, many others in this collection, cast themselves as searchers, adventurers, muckrakers, and pioneers. Of course, the juxtapositions and collages that the discontinuity of postwar experience created are precisely the things that make Weimar so aesthetically interesting, and postmodern intellectual fashions of the present day have shaped the selection of texts, as the editors freely admit. In this regard, the texts are a little too canonical: Weimar perennials like Walter Benjamin and Kurt Tucholsky appear five times each; Ernst Jünger and Carl von Ossietzky three times. Also unfortunate for a "sourcebook" is the reliance on so many essays rather than on blueprints, court cases, directives, and manuals. The sources are mostly opinions that imagine but do not enforce power, and fully 12 percent of the texts come from two left-wing journals, *Weltbühne* and *Das Tagebuch*. Nonetheless, this volume is a splendid archaeology of modernism. It reveals a great deal about how history was viewed during the Weimar years and how those promiscuous viewings armed the political imagination in dangerous ways.

Examining Weimar remains an intellectual preoccupation at the end of the twentieth century because Weimar provides such a compelling version of history. As is evident from the most recent historical studies, modern Germany is a place where the imaginative foundations of politics appear particularly manifest. One dramatic illustration of the assumption that social life could be designed is the array of administrative practices presupposed by the notion of the *Volkskörper*. The fascination with experimentation pervaded intellectual and cultural life as well, as *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook* makes clear. That the historical process was widely regarded as inherently unstable in twentieth-century Germany is not surprising. By the end of the nineteenth century, Germany seemed the quintessential product of manufacture: railroads, factories, retail goods, and sprawling cities had literally created a second nature more extensive and more complete than elsewhere in Europe. War, revolution, and economic collapse appeared to confirm the impermanence of the material world. Of course, Britain and France endured substantial social and economic upheavals as well. But Weimar's political and intellectual culture was distinctive for the exclusiveness of its identification with the circumstances of contingency. And it is this identification that makes the 1920s so recognizably modern.

On the one hand, postwar Germans had the sense of living among ruins, a nostalgic state of mind that nourished reactionary politics of the sort that Bessel explores, though one that also exhibited an aesthetic fascination with fragments, margins, and the temporariness of life which, in the hands of Walter Benjamin, for example, punctured the claims of master narratives and commonsense realism.³⁸ On the other hand, Germans from all political camps recognized the possibility that collapsing structures might be steadied, at least for a time. Emergency conditions offered opportunities for amelioration. As mobilization during World War I suggested, healthier citizens could be fashioned, more productive workers trained, and unworthy delinquents sorted out. Later in the 1920s, Carl Schmitt elaborated new

³⁸ David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986).

collective myths to forge national consensus, a thoroughly modernist gesture since he acknowledged the exhaustion of traditional belief structures even as he tried to banish the moral relativism that had replaced them with the purely arbitrary distinction between friend and foe.³⁹ Schmitt's constructive myth building was a conscious disavowal of nostalgia's essential passivity. From this perspective, it appeared that contingency could be managed to the national advantage; the very marauding movements of history promised to reanimate its multiple possibilities. What still needs to be explained, however, is why the management of contingency so often took the form of fierce nationalist revivals. Few intellectuals echoed Helmuth Plessner, the Weimar sociologist who embraced the "anonymity, itinerancy, [and] dispersion" of modern life because it opened up a new "horizon of possibility."⁴⁰ Striking a remarkably postmodern pose, Plessner celebrated the multiple self-stylizations of the self. But his contemporaries proved unwilling to embark on this stimulating voyage. Again and again, in the face of the collapse of history, critics as diverse as Schmitt, Ernst Bloch, and Georg Lukács attempted to retrieve community in totalist collectivities such as class, nation, and *Volks*. These dramatizations, in turn, generated "narratives of empowerment" that enrolled individuals in compelling ways.⁴¹ Weimar was the postwar workshop in which these more or less fierce versions of the future were constructed. That democracy failed or that Plessner remained alone in his search did not diminish the operations of this place. The coming of the Third Reich in 1933 was not so much verification of Weimar's singular failure as the validation of its dangerous potential.

³⁹ Wolfgang Essbach, "Radikalismus und Modernizet bei Jünger und Bloch, Lukács und Schmitt," pp. 145–59; and Manfred Gangl, "Mythos der Gewalt und Gewalt des Mythos: Georges Sorels Einfluss auf rechte und linke Intellektuelle der Weimarer Republik," pp. 171–95, both in the excellent collection edited by Manfred Gangl and Gerard Raulet, *Intellektuellendiskurse in der Weimarer Republik: Zur politischen Kultur einer Gemengelage* (Frankfurt, 1994). See also Norbert Bolz, *Auszug aus der entzauberten Welt: Philosophischer Extremismus zwischen den Weltkriegen* (Munich, 1989).

⁴⁰ See Helmuth Plessner, *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft: Eine Kritik des sozialen Radikalismus* (Bonn, 1924); Helmuth Lethen, *Verhaltenslehren der Kälte: Lebensversuche zwischen den Kriegen* (Frankfurt, 1994), pp. 8–9; and Michael Makropoulos, "Haltlose Souveränität: Benjamin, Schmitt und die Klassische Moderne in Deutschland," in Gangl and Raulet, eds., pp. 197–211, who also discusses the management of contingency.

⁴¹ Geyer, "The Stigma of Violence," p. 76.