

Rethinking the Weimar Republic: Authority and Authoritarianism, 1916-1936

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For a long time the historiography of Germany's Weimar Republic has been stuck in a simple dichotomy of cultural experimentation and political and economic crisis. For generations of students and scholars the first German republic was seen as an ill-fated experiment in parliamentary democracy, an inherently flawed polity unloved by its citizens, fatally undermined from the outset by the circumstances in which it had come into being and beset by almost perpetual political and economic crises. This political unrest was off-set to some extent by extraordinary cultural ferment that took place during the 15 short years of democracy between the *Kaiserreich* and the Third Reich. The republic is often seen to have displayed an unusual tolerance for avant-garde art and architecture, literature and music, which was mirrored by liberal and enlightened attitudes towards sex and sexuality. Yet as Weimar studies have taken a more 'cultural turn' in the past 30 years or so, historians have increasingly questioned the old deterministic view of the history of the first German democracy that all too often reduced it to a mere prelude to the Nazi regime. Instead more and more studies have given their attention to an increasingly wide range of different aspects of German society and culture in the 1920s, leading to an interdisciplinary reshaping of the debate on the history of the republic in which the lines that once delineated political, cultural and social history have been broken or at least blurred. These studies have revealed the complex and fragmented nature of German politics, culture and society in this period, and in doing so made 'the traditional dichotomous image of cultural boom and political chaos', once seen as so important to understanding the period, unsustainable.⁽¹⁾ But while much of this scholarship has been generated as a critical response to the thesis presented in Detlev Peukert's seminal work *Die Weimarer Republik: Krisenjahre der Klassischen Moderne* (1987) there have been few, if any, attempts to replace Peukert's assessment of Weimar's story as a struggle to manage the problems inherent in 'classical modernity' with an new overarching grand narrative to replace it. This fragmentation of Weimar historiography has led to calls to 'rethink and rewrite the actual development of this crucial period in twentieth-century European history' ⁽²⁾, and such an ambitious undertaking is precisely what is promised by the title of Anthony McElligott's wide-ranging and scholarly new examination of Germany's first democratic republic.

As Eric Weitz has pointed out, 'to grasp Weimar's history in a broader fashion requires going beyond the cultural perspective' to look at 'formal politics and economics ... and the lived experiences of a variety of

social groups' (3), and this is precisely what the present volume sets out to do. The central thesis is that the defining problem of the period was the question of authority and the search for a 'total solution' to the inherent contradictions of 'classical modernity' as outlined by Peukert (p. 4). As the author puts it, 'the question of authority underwrote the legitimacy of the Weimar Republic, whether in the spheres of economy, foreign policy, culture and law where it was frequently challenged.' (p. 181) Yet the focus is not merely on high politics, high finance or high art. The author skilfully blends a discussion of developments at a national (or international) level with a consideration of local politics and what the familiar crises and contentions of the Weimar period meant for ordinary people to present a rounded picture of the first German democratic state in which the narrative of the republic 'as a passive construct with little agency' (p. 6) is challenged. Along the way the reader is treated to a plethora of fascinating insights drawn from the primary sources, making this more than the standard general study of the republic. What we are presented with is somewhere between a textbook and a monograph that provides a general overview of the period from a novel perspective and opens up new avenues for future researchers to explore.

As well as providing a new prism through which to view the development of the Weimar state, the focus on the issue of authority informs Professor McElligott's decision to break with the more orthodox periodization of 1918–33 and instead to adopt an alternative chronology covering the 20 years between 1916 and 1936. This is very much in the vein of other contemporary scholarship on Weimar; social and cultural historians have long pointed out that many of the developments often seen as being characteristic of the republic actually began before the First World War and/or extended at least until the end of the Second World War. Other recent studies have taken a similar decision to look for different start and end points from the traditional political mile-stones of 1918 and 1933 and here it makes perfect sense. The question of who ruled in Germany and from where their authority originated became increasingly unclear as the First World War exposed the tensions within Wilhelmine society and politics, a question that was to be a running sore for successive republican governments after 1918 which was by no means decisively solved on Hitler's assumption of the chancellorship on 30 January 1933.

The book is organised into nine chapters dealing with the nature of authority in the context of a different aspect of life under the republic. Each chapter has its own introduction and conclusion, making them readable as individual essays as well as parts of the wider whole, a boon for time-pressed students and scholars interested in pursuing only a single aspect of the republic. A brief introductory chapter sets out the central theme of the book and the parameters for the discussion to follow, while chapter two deals with the ways in which political authority was transformed by the experience of conflict – first through the attempt to create a military 'dictatorship' in 1916 and later through revolution from both above and below in the last months of 1918. McElligott shows how the appointment of Paul von Hindenburg as chief of the supreme army command (*Oberste Heeresleitung*, OHL) on 29 August 1916 in an effort to boost morale and restore public confidence in the military led to a 'significant transformation' in 'the relationship between state and society in Germany' (p. 15) as Hindenburg's Quartermaster-General Erich Ludendorff sought to extend military control over every aspect of life through the Auxiliary Service Law which came into effect in December 1916. This was 'a modernizing piece of legislation with an explicitly technocratic character', some of whose provisions were later adopted by the Weimar Republic under Article 165 of the Constitution, but its primary aim was 'to re-impose the authority of state after the erosion suffered over the previous two years by substituting military for political authority.' (p. 16) Nevertheless, it failed to either solve Germany's supply and production problems or to quell political dissent, and despite the military breakthrough on the eastern front in 1917 the 'Silent Dictatorship' of Hindenburg and Ludendorff faced increasing opposition from civilian authority in the form of the Reichstag and from the people themselves in the form of strikes and protests. With the obvious failure of the spring/summer offensives in 1918 and the consequent collapse of morale, the military lost any legitimacy they had. Hindenburg and Ludendorff were left with no option but to cede power to a civilian ministry, leaving the Kaiser exposed as the only target for political dissent. Nevertheless, there were few, even amongst the supposedly Marxist Social Democrats, who seriously wanted an end to the monarchy. What tipped the balance against the Hohenzollerns was the outbreak of the naval mutiny at Kiel. McElligott persuasively demonstrates how this was more a result of the erosion of trust

between officers and men (and with it the authority of the officer class) that had taken place during the war than a desire to set the pace of political reform; and that the mutiny only became a revolution because of the incompetence of officers at Kiel who alienated both their men and sympathetic locals by ordering troops to fire on protesters (p. 25)

The revolution and the announcement of the abdication of the Kaiser and Crown Prince on 9 November 1918 effectively brought an end to the German Empire, but the question of where authority now lay was not so clear-cut. Prince Max von Baden had handed over the Chancellorship and with it command of the organs of the Wilhelmine state to the Majority Socialist leader Friedrich Ebert. Yet after 9 November it was debatable how much power and authority he could exert. The new Council of People's Representatives theoretically held power until a Constituent Assembly could be elected, but they had to compete with other sources of authority such as the radical Workers' and Soldiers' Councils. McElligott rightly rejects the criticisms of the Majority Socialists by historians such as Eberhard Kolb and Reinhard Rürup who condemned the SDP leadership for being too cautious as based on unrealistic expectations (pp. 29–30). Ebert and the moderate left were left with little choice but to make a compromising alliance with the army and elements of the old Imperial state in order to impose their authority on the country in the face of opposition from the radical left.

Chapter three begins with a recap of the terms of the Treaty of Versailles and the outrage it elicited in Germany, underlining the four 'interrelated areas of the Treaty that were in contention from 1919 to the mid-1930s by all Germans, irrespective of where they stood on the political spectrum' (p. 37): reparations and 'war guilt', military security and equality of armaments, the international system and the League of Nations, and national sovereignty in the occupied areas and those lost through plebiscite. It is the contention of this chapter that 'The handling of each of these issues tested the authority of the government at home, since each alone and collectively related to the international authority of Germany as a sovereign state' while the fact that 'for much of the early period Germany was not master of its destiny because it was locked into a reactive policy as a consequence of the Versailles Treaty ... posed a serious challenge to legitimating republican authority at home' (p. 37). McElligott is also keen to underline the continuities in German foreign policy and argues that the focus on Stresemann and the question of 'revisionism' or 'fulfilment' has meant that much of the historiography of Weimar foreign policy has ignored 'the broader and long-term context of German foreign policy, namely its ambition to be a power at the heart of the continent (*mitteleuropäische Staatsmacht*)' (p. 38). In particular he suggests that with the USA taken out of the equation after the 1929 Wall Street Crash and Britain and France distracted by their own economic difficulties, Germany was presented with an opportunity to revive traditional ideas of a German continental strategy that chimed with a rising tide of popular nationalism. The result was the establishment of a network of bi-lateral trade deals with the Balkan states which laid the foundations for later Nazi trade/foreign policy. This is not exactly a new argument, but this chapter nevertheless contains some interesting and original insights: for example, that the notion of a 'culture of defeat' in Germany has been overstated. For most Germans, the terms of the Treaty were less important than the everyday struggles of ordinary life. We should therefore not 'overstate the psychological impact of the Treaty on the everyday lives of Germans' (p. 43). This is presented as a small point, but it is an important one as the prevailing wisdom is still that bitterness over defeat and the 'diktat of Versailles' undermined popular faith in the republic and fuelled support for Hitler.

'The authority of the republic hinged to a large degree on its ability to ensure ... material security' (p. 69) not least because from the very beginning the Weimar Republic set itself up as a 'social state' that explicitly promised the establishment of a welfare state, recognition of unions and the right to 'economic liberty'. Chapter four therefore looks into the issue of 'the authority of money', both in the sense of the interplay of politics and economics in relation to the stability and support for the republican state and the control (authority) that money had (and has) over the lives of ordinary people. In sections dealing with hyperinflation, the brief period of relative stability in the mid-1920s and the Great Depression, it is argued that the failure of the republic to ensure the material well-being of its citizens caused 'the natural authority of republican democracy' to founder 'on blighted expectations' (p. 70). Indeed, McElligott argues that in the

shifting of the burden of providing unemployment insurance from central government to local authorities from 1931 can be read 'the reneging by the Reich of the social contract of 1918' (p. 92). This completed a process of alienation amongst the German middle classes that had begun in the inflationary era and led to a general radicalisation of a destitute and desperate population. This seems like the familiar argument that it was economic crisis that ushered in the collapse of the republic, but McElligott also points out that the traditional simplistic formula of 'winners and losers' does not properly reflect the true complexity of the material and psychological effects of economic crisis: as he notes, 'much depended on the ability to negotiate salary levels, but also on geographical location and the regional cost of living index' (p. 74). Similarly, it is important to remember that in some respects the tide of angry protests against the government that often found expression in a heightened sense of nationalism from 1929 were not necessarily not 'anti-Weimar' or driven by ideology: 'they were desperate actions by desperate people in defence of what little they had left to them' (p. 97).

Another area in which the issue of the authority of republican state was both debated in the abstract and felt in the lives of ordinary people was that of law and order. The Weimar judiciary has traditionally been seen as 'an authoritarian "third force" working against the republic' (p. 100) and ever since the publication of Emil Gumbel's *Vier Jahre politischer Mord* (4) the emphasis has been on political trials and the light sentences handed down to right-wing opponents of the republic. But as McElligott points out, political prosecutions brought under the Law for the Protection of the Republic (1923) amounted to only around 9,000 trials. When compared to the 450,000 criminal trials in Prussia alone this suggests that there has been a disproportionate focus on political cases. Indeed, the question of the authority of the Weimar judiciary is better seen within the context of wider moral panic over the (perceived) growing levels of crime and delinquency. Judges saw themselves as defenders of 'German values' whose loyalty was to the eternal Reich rather than the republican state or the German people but whose key role as bulwarks against chaos and social disorder was not only unappreciated but actively undermined by the legal and constitutional framework of the republic. This was condemned as 'a Magna Carter for the criminal' (p. 100) and judges saw the republic as being 'unable to assert the authority of law in the face of organized crime' and that 'the democratization of law after 1918' had rendered it 'impotent in the face of crime' (p. 117). Yet for all their authoritarian leanings Weimar's judges should not be seen as proto-Nazis: during the republic's middle period crime rates decreased and in terms of sentencing there was a move away 'from penal incarceration towards prison, custody (*Festungshaft*) and fines' (p. 120). But as political violence grew after 1929 new measures such as special courts and stream-lined court procedures (where in some cases pre-trial investigations and defence lawyers were done away with) were introduced and authoritarian justice reasserted itself. The development of Weimar jurisprudence can therefore be seen as both corresponding to 'the ebb and flow of Weimar politics' (p. 101) and as part of an ongoing debate on authoritarian law that began before the foundation of the republic in 1918 and continued after Hitler's appointment as chancellor in 1933.

Chapter six deals with the 'The quest for cultural authority', but those seeking another discussion of metropolitan modernism will be disappointed. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as the development and contested nature of Weimar's *avant-garde* culture have been explored in depth elsewhere. Instead, McElligott refreshingly focuses on 'the republic's own efforts to shape cultural authority, to give the republican state its own distinctive *form*' (p. 131). Building on the work of historians such as Nadine Rossol and Manuela Achilles (5), McElligott examines the ways in which the republican state sought to establish its cultural credentials and create its own cultural identity through the work of *Reichskunstwart* (Reich Guardian of Culture) art historian Edwin Redslob. Redslob defined his mission as 'raising the profile of the republic by "making it visible" ... through cultural and symbolic forms that ... connected with a deeper sensibility of the people thus awakening and demonstrating their "resolve for the state"' (p. 146). Redslob pursued this project in a variety of ways including the creation of new republican symbols and insignia, the appropriation of historical figures (Goethe, Stein, even Hindenburg who at the 1928 Constitution Day celebrations was hailed as 'first citizen' of the republic) and events (the 1848 revolutions) to show that Weimar was not an aberration but rather in the mainstream of German history. To this end he created the

annual Constitution Day celebrations as a focal point for republican identity and often included speeches that were ‘homilies on how to be good citizens’ (p. 151). Yet even here the authority of the republic did not go uncontested: the republican authorities were frustrated in their attempts to have Constitution Day adopted as a national holiday and the ongoing struggle over the national flag illustrates the divisive nature of such symbols. In the end, “‘Cultural authority’ could only find purchase among the population by reflecting the broader sentiments sweeping through society’ and could not be imposed from above (p. 156).

In chapter seven McElligott turns his attention to the provincial administration and the role of the Prussian *Landrat*, providing an absorbing discussion of an area which has been somewhat underexplored in the English-language historiography on Weimar. The slightly dry subject matter (it is probably no accident that the number of great novels and dramas set in the world of local government can be counted on the fingers of one hand) is nonetheless vitally important to understanding how the republic operated and how citizens interacted with the republican state. For many ordinary people practical authority was exercised not so much in the Reichstag or the presidency as by provincial ‘field administrators’, the ‘county managers’ (*Landräte*), who ‘ensured the provision of welfare and relief among the needy and unemployed; the operation of public utilities; the upkeep of roads and communications; the integrity of local savings banks and credit institutions; and ensured favourable conditions for local enterprise to flourish’ (p. 158). McElligott asks the very pertinent question of how, if these figures were as reactionary as they have usually been painted, did they come to terms with the republic that they served and how did this impact on local politics and society? He demonstrates that although the office of *Landrat* had historically been the preserve of the aristocracy (54 per cent of *Landräte* were noblemen in 1916), and that the paternalism this engendered lasted into the republic, the new authorities did introduce legislation in 1919 to create a mechanism for ‘unreliable’ officials to be removed and replaced by those more amenable to the republic. A concerted effort was made in the 1920s to ensure that the provincial civil service was loyal to the republic and by the mid-1920s aristocrats made up only a third of *Landräte* (down from over half in 1918), and there were only 14 still in post by 1931. Surveys show that most were members of the parties of the Weimar coalition – in 1929 only 17 out of 408 belonged to the DNVP (p. 163). This is surely evidence of a more assertive republican state than is usually presented and should lead us to question sweeping assertions that the civil service was made up of *Vernunftrepublikaner* at best and at worst outright ‘reactionaries’ – rather it seems that most were middle-class men ‘who stood closer to the republic than has been hitherto assumed’ (p. 164). Nevertheless, there was still a high number of those whose commitment to the republic was at best a case of what Conan Fischer has called ‘functional loyalty’ (6), as the case-study of Herbert von Bismarck (great-nephew to the Iron Chancellor), *Landrat* for the county of Regenwalde in Pomerania from October 1918 until his dismissal in 1931, shows (pp. 169–79).

The political authority of the republic, albeit at a national rather than a local level is also the subject of chapter eight. Opening with a discussion of ‘three interrelated yet competing visions of political authority under the republic: ... democratic authority, authoritarian democracy and dictatorship’ (p. 181). Commencing with an overview of the development of the differing notions of political authority elucidated in the works of Hugo Preuß, Max Weber and Carl Schmitt, McElligott shows that the different visions of the state and where it should draw its legitimacy from that emerged during the First World War fed directly into the debates in the National Assembly and constitutional committee in 1919. In the latter the divide was between those who favoured a strong plebiscitary executive and those who believed in the popular sovereignty of parliament. The result was, as numerous historians have noted in the past, a compromise in which ‘the various positions on singular authority and parliamentary pluralism converged in the Constitution of 1919’ (p. 185). This has frequently been seen as one of the key fault-lines within Weimar politics, a fateful accommodation between authoritarian and democratic strands of German political thought that paved the way for Hitler’s dictatorship, but as McElligott points out, no-one found this arrangement contradictory at the time. Emergency powers were used extensively by various chancellors during the crises of 1922–4, including the suspension of elected state governments in Saxony and Thuringia and the passage of at least one Enabling Act. These powers were used within the framework of the Constitution ‘as a buttress to weak cabinets, thus fulfilling the original intention’ (p. 188) and were not seen as being particularly

dangerous to democracy. McElligott skilfully and persuasively argues that even as the political balance tipped in favour of a presidential dictatorship in the early 1930s, there was no serious desire to break completely with the political framework of the republic. Dictatorship was proposed, yes, but dictatorship ‘within the parameters of the Constitution’. Papen went much further than Brüning in his use of Article 48, but for all his talk of a ‘national government’ and ‘true democracy’ Papen, like his successor Schleicher, was unable to rally popular support behind him – he was not the charismatic ‘sovereign dictator’ envisaged by Schmitt and Weber. In the end both men fell from power because they couldn’t rally a parliamentary majority behind them and end the necessity of ruling by decree. Hitler’s appointment was seen as a way to return to normal democratic politics – with the authoritarian flavour favoured by Hindenburg and many Germans – because he could command a majority in the Reichstag.

The book is rounded off with a ‘brief’ (13-page) postscript that fulfils the author’s aim of taking the chronology all the way up to 1936 by examining the development of Hitler’s ‘unbounded authority after 1933’ (p. 210). Here all the usual elements of Nazi *Gleichschaltung* are briefly covered, but McElligott stresses that National Socialist attempts at national ‘co-ordination’ were part of a broader struggle over authority and legitimacy that had been going on since at least the First World War. Thus, many of those non-Nazis who voted for the Enabling Act did so ‘based on a false premise that the Reichstag would have a (albeit diminished) role to play in government (similar to its role under the Enabling Acts of the early 1920s)’ and that ‘their vote for the Enabling Act represented less an approval for a Hitler dictatorship than an affirmation of government by constitutional dictatorship as framed by more than ten years of Weimar state theory discourse’ (p. 216). Similarly, the plebiscite on Germany’s withdrawal from the League of Nations in the autumn of 1933 and the vote on the amalgamation of the offices of Chancellor and President in August 1934 legitimised Hitler’s authority and saw him assume the mantle of the charismatic ‘sovereign dictator’ who draws his authority from popular acclamation but rules in an authoritarian manner as theorised by Schmitt.

This is an excellent and insightful book that challenges the reader to look anew at a familiar subject. McElligott demonstrates a masterful command of a huge range of material (there are over 100 pages of endnotes) and manages to combine an overview of the ebb and flow of the historiography on a variety of different aspects of life under the Weimar Republic with genuinely new insights drawn from the primary sources. But does the book deliver on the promise of its title? Certainly it avoids ‘the inertia of the textbook genre’ (7) and is bolder than many general studies (my own included) in jettisoning the standard chronology based around political milestones such as 1918 and 1933. But then this is not really a textbook – it is too densely detailed and learned to be easily accessible to students or general readers coming to the study of Weimar for the first time. Instead it will be most useful to those who have some prior knowledge of the period but want to broaden and deepen their understanding of key aspects of the republic. While perhaps not presenting us with a complete ‘rethinking’ of the Weimar Republic it does present us with a fresh model for conceptualising the development of the republican state and the society that it governed. Using authority as the prism through which to view different aspects of Weimar yields some interesting insights and helps to challenge the received wisdom, particularly on the ‘agency’ of the republican state. It also opens up new avenues for research for those keen to pursue this line of thinking. In particular, two key areas left largely undealt with in this volume – changing gender roles and family dynamics and the still largely neglected or overlooked topic of religion – would provide opportunities to explore the meaning of authority under the republic in a wider sense while still linking into the discussion of the legitimacy and agency of the Weimar state. The book is thus perhaps best viewed not so much as the final word on the issue of the authority and authoritarianism of the Weimar state and society as a jumping-off point and a spur to further inquiry. In any case, it certainly gives the student of the Weimar Republic much food for thought.

Notes

1. Jochen Hung, ‘Beyond glitter and doom: the new paradigm of contingency in Weimar research’, in *Beyond Glitter and Doom: The Contingency of the Weimar Republic*, ed. Jochen Hung, Godola Weiss-Sussex and Geoff Wilkes (Munich, 2012), p. 14. [Back to \(1\)](#)

2. Benjamin Zieman, 'Weimar was Weimar: politics, culture and the emplotment of the German Republic', *German History*, 28, 4 (2010), 571.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Eric D. Weitz, 'Weimar Germany and its histories', *Central European History*, 43, 4 (2010), 590.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Emil Julius Gumbel, *Vier Jahre politischer Mord* (Berlin, 1922).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. See Manuel Achilles, 'With a passion for reason: celebrating the constitution in Weimar Germany', *Central European History*, 43, 4 (2010), 666–89; Nadine Rossol, 'Visualising the Republic: state representation and public ritual in Weimar Germany', in *Weimar Culture Revisited*, ed. John Williams (Basingstoke, 2013).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Conan Fischer, "'A very German revolution'? The post–1918 settlement re-evaluated', *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute*, 28, 2 (2006), 20–3.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Benjamin Zieman, 'Weimar was Weimar', 543.[Back to \(7\)](#)

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