Introduction: Weimar Today

The first German democracy lasted for a little over fourteen years: from November 9, 1918, when two German politicians proclaimed two German polities in two parts of Berlin on the same day; to January 30, 1933, when, in the midst of a prolonged political crisis, President Hindenburg appointed the leader of the National Socialist German Workers Party Chancellor. Although, as one historian has stated, “the fourteen years of the first German democracy are among the best-researched periods of German history,” much work remains to be done, if our understanding of the Weimar Republic is to lead us to a heightened understanding of the present. In the same account, we read: “Few periods of German history present such difficult problems of interpretation and evaluation as the Weimar years.”

The question that is still with us, then, is one of interpreting or reading the Weimar period. One could schematize the various periods of Weimar reception in Germany as follows: 1) Weimar’s own complex and contradictory reception of itself, perhaps best illustrated by classics such as Karl Jaspers’ Die geistige Situation der Zeit (The Spiritual Situation of Our Time, 1931) and Ernst Bloch’s Erbschaft dieser Zeit (Heritage of Our Times, 1935); 2) the Third Reich’s largely negative reception of Weimar as a Systemzeit (the “Era of the System”) from which it sought to distance itself; 3) postwar West and East Germany’s largely negative reception of Weimar as a period either of ideological polarization and excessive politicization (in the West) or of conservative reaction and Social Democratic betrayal (in the East) that had led to the National Socialist Dictatorship; 4) attempts in West Germany to reevaluate Weimar more positively and frequently from a Marxist or self-consciously “critical” perspective starting in the late 1960s in the wake of the student movement in Germany; 5) a growing recognition in West Germany of Weimar’s complexity and importance for understanding the loosely defined but nevertheless vital concept of “modernity” in the 1980s; and 6) a new and still largely undefined period ushered in by German reunification in 1990, in which the problematization and his-

2 See also Kolb, 129-137.
toricization of the fifth period appears to be emerging as a new receptivity to aspects of conservative Weimar cultural critique that had tended to be neglected in the preceding periods.

Most notable in this schema is that Weimar is characterized by a broken reception in Germany. The same caesurae that mark German post-Weimar history also mark the history of Weimar reception. Even if — or because — Weimar had been the immediate source of all subsequent German politics — the National Socialist “Third Reich,” the German Democratic Republic, and the Federal Republic of Germany —, each of those polities defined itself, in different ways, as negatives of Weimar, as attempts to avoid the purported failures of Weimar itself. Thus the National Socialists proclaimed the unity of the Volk, Reich, and Führer in opposition to the confusing, multifaceted, pluralistic politics of the preceding Republic; and they set out to destroy and define the impressive, if troubling cultural heritage of the Weimar Republic as “degenerate art” or “degenerate music.”

As Jochen Vogt notes in his contribution to this volume, the Federal Republic was also founded on an opposition to Weimar: the determination of the writers of the West German Basic Law not to repeat what were supposed to be the two fundamental political mistakes of Weimar: 1) an ungovernability caused by a multiplicity of viable political parties from the extreme right to the extreme left; and 2) an overly powerful presidency which had resulted in presidential dictatorship during the last three years of the Republic. Out of those two Weimar “lessons” came the Federal Republic’s so-called “five-percent hurdle” and the largely-ceremonial office of the Federal President. The “five-percent hurdle” makes it impossible for political parties in the Federal Republic to win seats in parliament without either a direct electoral victory in a particular voting district or five percent of the overall national vote. This law meant that for most of its history the Federal Republic has been fundamentally a three-party system, since only three parties (the Social Democrats, the Christian Democrats, and the Free Democrats) were consistently able to meet the five-percent requirement. The extent of Bonn’s continuing Weimar trauma was poignantly revealed in the early 1980s, when, after the environmentalist Greens won seats in parliament, pessimistic conservative commentators immediately warned of “Weimar conditions,” “ungovernability,” and “chaos.” Those fears have been repeated with the rise and possible entry into parliament of the right-wing Republican Party following German reunification in the early 1990s. For the Federal Republic, Weimar has generally fallen under the category “Dark Memories not To Be Repeated.”

The same holds true, but in a different way, for the German Democratic Republic, which, “resurrected from ruins and turned toward the future” and emphatically away from the past (Johannes R. Becher), also defined itself as a positive, democratic response to a negative German past. The fundamental trauma which the early leaders of the GDR wished to avoid was the trauma of defeat first by the largely Social Democratic leaders of the Weimar Republic itself in its early revolutionary years and then, even more traumatically, by the National Socialists in the final years of turmoil, virtual civil war, and ultimate transfer of power to the Nazis. If the writing of the West German Basic Law had cemented Bonn’s status as an anti-Weimar, then the corresponding act in the Soviet Occupation Zone was the founding of the Socialist Unity Party in 1946. The “lesson” taught by Weimar here was the need for working class unity: specifically, for unity between the Social Democratic and Communist Parties, which had fought against each other so bitterly in the 1920s and early 1930s that they had all-too-often neglected to do battle against the Nazis. The flags and party pins of the Socialist Unity Party, which soon became the ruling party of the GDR, showed two hands representing the SPD and the KPD shaking against the backdrop of a red flag. When Walter Ulbricht, the first of the GDR’s two “maximum leaders,” built a home for his Council of State, he was careful to include in it a symbolic memory of Weimar: the very balcony of the Prussian royal palace from which, on that fateful day in November of 1918 Karl Liebknecht had unsuccessfully proclaimed a socialist council republic. It was the only part of the royal palace that survived Ulbricht’s destructive wrath at the symbols and monuments of the German past; and, ironically, it may become the only part of the Council of State building to survive the current wrath against the GDR past.

Fundamental in the foundation of both of the post-1945 German states was a sense of rupture, of discontinuity: of determination not to repeat the past. The Buchenwald Oath went, “Nie wieder Faschismus! Nie wieder Krieg!” (“Never again fascism! Never again war!”). As Peter Sloterdijk has written, postwar Germans felt the necessity to break out of the hermeneutic circle of tradition and begin in a radically new way, rejecting all inexorable lines and heritages. The ability “to begin anew and almost ex nihilo” is, for Sloterdijk, “a necessary element in the profile of an intelligentsia which, after 1945, wanted to create forms of life worthy of being passed on in a nation full of bombed-out self-destructors.” Sloterdijk speaks of a specifically German postwar necessity for autodidacticism and the urge to break with all forms of tradition, because “since the year 1945 we [Germans] have nothing but the indescribable behind us, and we are tattooed by unconditional horror.”

If the nineteenth and early twentieth century theorists of a positive German Sonderweg (“special path”) had proclaimed Germany’s healthy and productive separation from the supposedly materialist democracies of the West, then the post-1945 theorists of a negative German Sonderweg, while accepting the fundamental concept of German uniqueness and difference, proclaimed that Son

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3 In the face of continuing tensions regarding so-called “internal unification” and a possible fracturing of the political landscape into a multitude of tiny protest parties (Staat-Parteien or “instead parties”), by the spring of 1994 the conservative Christian Democrat-Christian Social Union parties were using “Wir oder Weimar” (“It’s Us or It’s Weimar”) as a slogan for the October, 1994 elections, eloquent testimony to the continuing power of the Weimar trauma. Deutschland Nachrichten, 18 Feb. 1994: 1.


derweg to have been a devastating sickness in German history, now permanently healed. The past was over, and Germans in both East and West were determined not to repeat it. As the penultimate stop on the Sonderweg, the period immediately preceding and, indeed, culminating in the National Socialist dictatorship, Weimar became a symbol of everything that good Germans in both East and West were supposed to avoid. As the late German historian Detlev J. K. Peukert, explicitly referring to Nietzsche’s critique of monumental historiography, suggested, Weimar became a "universal language for polerically defaming one’s opponents."  

And yet the rupture in German history represented by the years 1933 and 1945 was also an eruption. If 1945 had marked the loss of one-third of German territory and a division of the remaining two-thirds into four occupation zones and two future countries, then 1933 had marked an equally significant intellectual division: between those who chose to remain in Germany during the dictatorship and those who chose exile instead. Klaus Mann’s exile novel The Volcano represents Germany as an exploding volcano spitting fire and smoke into the atmosphere. If Weimar culture had been the precarious dance on that volcano — Joseph Goebbels described it as a feeling that one was “sitting on a fire-spewing volcano that is calm for a moment, but seething and rumbling in slow, barely audible waves” — then what followed and brought an end to the Weimar dance was an explosion in which German — read: Weimar — culture was flung to the furthest parts of the world: to Brazil, where, after writing a beautiful, if nostalgic memoir of The World of Yesterday, Stefan Zweig committed suicide; to Mexico, where Anna Seghers wrote her extraordinary memory of childhood, “The Excursion of the Dead Girls;” to the Soviet Union, where Johannes R. Becher and others wrote hymns to Stalin; to Palestine, where Arnold Zweig lived and wrote in misery; and to the United States, where Thomas Mann and Bertolt Brecht created some of the masterpieces of twentieth-century German prose and drama. Klaus Mann wrote: "We let the horrible thing go crazy, destroy, run amok — as if we were a natural catastrophe! As if we were living on a volcano that was spewing fire! There is nothing one can do. Everyone waits to see if it will get him." Peter Gay has called the eruption "the greatest collection of transplanted intellect, talent, and scholarship the world has ever seen." It was not just in 1945 that German culture divided; the most significant division had in fact occurred twelve years earlier, when the very best representatives of German culture — what Erika and Klaus Mann, in their anguished book with the same title, called "the other Germany" — had fled their homeland in fear and horror. The Mann siblings spoke of a "false, hateful Germany" and a better, humane, European Germany that would rise from the ashes like a phoenix after the evil Germany's defeat. The point is that after 1933 German culture was no longer just German culture: after it had been written, it was symbolic — but very literal — Nazi bookburnings at the University of Berlin in May of 1933, German culture became American, Soviet, Mexican, Swedish, French, etc.; and culture in Germany became, with some notable exceptions (Richard Strauß, Ernst Jünger, Gottfried Benn, Martin Heidegger), National Socialist propaganda or simply kitsch. For many, the true heritage of German culture now lay, perhaps permanently, elsewhere. As Dorothy Thompson suggested in a sentence that became the epigraph for the Mann siblings’ most popular exile book, “practically everybody who in world opinion had stood for what was currently called German culture prior to 1933 is now a refugee.”  

This volcanic explosion is important not just for understanding German culture from 1933 to 1945, but also for understanding German culture after the Nazis’ unconditional surrender in May of 1945. After an explosion of that sort, it is impossible simply to undo the volcano, to reverse time as if the volcano had never exploded. The Mann siblings’ vision of a German culture that would rise phoenix-like, from the ashes, could not be fulfilled. In Klaus Mann’s The Volcano one youthful exile had written: “I know that one day Germany will never be a people like us again. There will be a great deal for us to do.” But after 1945 Germany was not so sure that it needed "people like us." Even after 1945 German culture remained fundamentally divided, not just by the newer division into occupation zones, but by the older division into those who had stayed and those who had left. In the West, those who had left continued, for the most part, to be exiles, and even when they returned they were treated with suspicion and anger. Himself a Weimar exile, Peter Gay suggested in what remains a crucial study of Weimar Culture, that it was only abroad that the "spirit of Weimar" had found its "true home, in exile." Moreover, many of the most significant German writers — Heinrich Mann, Anna Seghers, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, Arnold Zweig — chose to return not to West Germany but to the new  


8 Klaus Mann, Der Vulkan: Roman unter Emigranten (Amsterdam: Querido, 1939).  


10 Klaus Mann, Der Vulkan, 659.  


12 Erika and Klaus Mann, The Other Germany (New York: Modern Age, 1940). xi.  


14 Klaus Mann, Der Vulkan, 718.  

15 Gay, 144-5.
founded German Democratic Republic, which, unlike the Federal Republic, understood itself as heir to the tradition of political and cultural resistance to the Nazis. For the most part, the tradition of exile and resistance continued to be cultivated either outside of Germany completely or only in the German Democratic Republic, and with an obvious pro-GDR, anti- FRG slant. Weimar culture, already divided in 1933, was now divided yet again. Because the emerging culture of the Federal Republic was largely created either by those who had, like Benn and Jünger, chosen to remain in Germany during the National Socialist dictatorship, or, even more important, by a younger generation represented by figures such as Heinrich Böll and Günter Grass, who had remained in Nazi Germany less out of conscious choice than out of youth and immaturity, it contained not only an anti-Weimar thrust but a specifically anti-exile thrust. It was as if, after divisions and subdivisions, German culture had been reduced to one-fourth of its former magnitude and importance.

Given the nature of the German "volcano," it is no wonder that several of the first significant postwar contributions to a more differentiated but also more global analysis of Weimar culture in fact came from Germans living abroad toward the end of the 1960s and in the 1970s: Peter Gay, Walter Laqueur, Jost Hermand, and Frank Trommler. Moreover, when the reexamination of Weimar came to Germany at the same time, it occurred in the wake of a cultural renewal generally subserved under a reference to the year 1968. It was natural for a student generation attacking the politics, mores, and intellectual and cultural habits of its elders to include a new understanding of Weimar in that critique. As the 1968 revolution and its aftermath transformed German society, it also transformed what had been a largely negative view of Weimar culture. By the 1970s, Weimar had become one of the most significant areas for research in German literary and cultural studies, and younger German scholars, generally practicing some kind of Ideologiekritik (critique of ideology) produced a great many valuable analyses.

Yet for all its value, much of the post-1968 scholarship on Weimar tended to create simplistic good-bad dichotomies. On the one hand there was the "good" tradition of German leftist and radical-democratic culture, a tradition that included Brecht, Fiscator, Toller, and others; and on the other there was the "bad" tradition that included, among others, Jünger, von Salomon, and Benn. Implicitly or explicitly, the "bad" tradition was the one that had led to 1933 and the Nazi dictatorship; it had to be denounced, renounced, and exposed. The "good" tradition was the one that had been destroyed or sent into exile by the Nazis, and it contained a variety of elements salvageable for the future of a fairer, more democratic, more humane Germany.

Neither of the two major historical debates that occurred in Germany in the 1980s — the debate over the publication of British historians' Geoff Eley and David Blackbourne's Mythen deutscher Geschichtsschreibung (The Peculiarities of German History) in 1980 and the 1986 "Historians' Debate" (Historikerstreit) about the uniqueness of the Holocaust — dealt directly with Weimar. On the contrary, they tended to bracket Weimar out. Eley and Blackbourne's book had sought primarily to portray the Imperial Germany of 1871-1918 in a more differentiated, subtler way than the two historians believed had been the case previously. In particular, it had challenged the concept of a separate German path toward modernity characterized by a weak bourgeoisie and, hence, a weak democracy. The Historians' Debate too had centered on the question of uniqueness: Ernst Nolte had contended that the Holocaust was just one of many atrocities that had occurred and were still occurring all over the world in the wake of modernization.16

What both of these debates, initiated by actors on opposite sides of the political spectrum, demonstrated was an increasing attempt to "historicize" history: to deal even with a still very painful history in a more abstract "structuralist" manner, and to seek in particular historical phenomena evidence of underlying global trends that tended to transcend the purely national. While such an approach did not preclude the learning of "lessons" from history, those lessons were now broader, more international, and dealt less specifically with Germany. Of course terms such as "modernization," "modern," and "modernism" were notoriously vague compared with other terms like "capitalism," "industrialization," "mass unemployment," and "dadaism." Referring to Weimar culture as a series of "experiments in modernism," and to modernism itself as a "lack of ... balance" typical of "the condition of modern man," Wolfgang Sauer suggested that "modernism is characterized by a fundamental ambiguity in the individual and social relations — including the concept itself."17 Since much of the research on Weimar in the 1980s sought in some way to analyze Weimar as a case study for more general problems of modernization, some clarification of this notoriously slippery term is in order.

With the term "modernization," historians generally designate a complex package of political, social, and economic changes initially triggered by revolutionary events toward the end of the eighteenth century. The American and French Revolutions for the first time challenged and indeed replaced what had for centuries been traditional structures of political power — feudalism and its most advanced European version, absolutism — by new forms of representative government and power sharing. At the same time, the Industrial Revolution caused profound changes in the everyday-lives of vast segments of the population in Europe. Combined, these political and social developments accounted for a radical shift from a pre-modern, largely agrarian society whose members lived in close-knit rural communities or cities with fixed and age-old power structures to a society in which every kind of social or political identity was suddenly disrupted and replaced by the anonymity and facelessness of modern life. Detlev J. K. Peukert has suggested that as a description of a particular form of social organization "modernity" can roughly and schematically be defined as

the form of fully fledged industrialized society that has been with us from the turn of the century until the present day. In an economic sense, modernity is characterized by highly rationalized industrial production, complex technological infrastructures and a substantial degree of bureaucratised administrative and service activity... Socially speaking, its typical features include the division of labour, wage and salary discipline, an urbanized environment, extensive educational opportunities and a demand for skills and training... In intellectual terms, modernity marks the triumph of western rationality, whether in social planning, the expansion of the sciences or the self-replicating dynamism of technology, although this optimism is accompanied by sceptical doubts from social thinkers and cultural critics.18

Marshall Berman, suggesting that "modern life" is opposed to the security and belonging afforded by traditional values and circumstances, writes:

The maelstrom of modern life has been fed from many sources: great discoveries in the physical sciences, changing our images of the universe and our place in it; the industrialization of production, which transforms scientific knowledge into technology, creates new human environments and destroys old ones, speeds up the whole tempo of life, generates new forms of corporate power and class struggle; immense demographic upheavals, severing millions of people from their ancestral habitats, hurling them halfway across the earth into new lives; raping and often cataclysmic urban growth; systems of mass communication, dynamic in their development, enveloping and binding together the most diverse people and societies; increasingly powerful national states, bureaucratically structured and operated, constantly striving to expand their powers; mass social movements of people, and peoples, striving to gain some control over their lives; finally, bearing and driving all these people and institutions along, an ever-expanding, drastically fluctuating capitalist world market.19

Such definitions of modernity ultimately descend from Karl Marx’s famous words in the Communist Manifesto:

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind.20

As a historical and cultural process that has dominated the Western world since the middle of the 19th century and as a force that has increasingly affected the rest of the world, modernity and modernization have become the focus of critical debate since the 1950s. What is called “modernization theory” started out primarily in the United States and Great Britain as a theory of social change and amelioration that could engineer social and political progress on a large scale by using the North American political and economic system as a model for the rest of the world. Many critics have since pointed out and fiercely debated the shortcomings of this kind of thinking, but as a universal theory of history, modernization theory is still viable, at least as a heuristic model.21 As Gerald D. Feldman remarked in an essay analyzing the 1980s trend toward “historization,” modernization theory is not only useful but also unavoidable because “it permits the historian to transcend partisan recipes and distractions by defining the basic issues at a reasonable level of abstraction but one that is nevertheless capable of historical analysis.”22

Whereas it is comparatively easy to define “modernization” as an ongoing process, when it comes to delineating the seemingly more fixed terms “modernity” and “modernism,” things become more complicated. Both are often seen as outlining the result of modernization, but on two different planes. “Modernity” summarizes the outcome of modernization in terms of the economic, political, and social changes it causes, while “modernism” is a catchword for developments, movements, and revolutions in architecture, literature, painting, music, theater, film, and other art forms.23 The modernism of the arts appears as a result or outcome of the modernity of society. Both are phenomena related to the ongoing revolutionary process of modernization, and hence their notorious instability.

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21 For a critical discussion of modernization theory see Hans Ulrich Wehler, Modernisierungstheorie und Geschichte (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975).
23 In a seminal essay, Hans Robert Jauss has outlined the historical development of the concept la modernité, die Moderne, modernism since the fifth century, when the Latin term modernus was first used. Hans Robert Jauss, “Literarische Tradition und gegenwärtiges Bewusstsein in der Modernität,” Literaturgeschichte als Provokation (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), 11-66.
The dualism between modernity as a social phenomenon and modernism as an artistic movement is itself a symptom of modern life. As Jürgen Habermas has pointed out, the German sociologist Max Weber had already analyzed the basic trait of "cultural modernity as the separation of the substantive reason expressed in religion and metaphysics into three autonomous spheres. They are: science, morality and art."\(^{24}\) According to Habermas, the "project of modernity" was "formulated in the 18th century by the philosophers of Enlightenment" and consisted in their efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art, according to their inner logic. At the same time, this project intended to release the cognitive potentials of each of these domains to set them free from their esoteric forms. The Enlightenment philosophers wanted to utilize this accumulation of specialized culture for the enrichment of everyday life, that is to say, for the rational organization of everyday life.\(^{25}\)

For Habermas, the split into the realms of science, law, and art represents the basic problem of modern life: on the one hand, the extraordinary progress western society has experienced was possible only because of the specialization of spheres under the overarching principle of rationality; but on the other hand, all the different processes of alienation and estrangement that are so characteristic of modern societies are outcomes of this primal sin or scene.\(^{26}\) Modernity's greatest strength is also its greatest weakness. But not only that: When art was split off from the rest of social life as an autonomous realm in the middle of the 19th century, a form of cultural criticism emerged that is still at work today: Via a projection mechanism this form of criticism relegates all the evils of modern life to the sphere of arts and morality: Whenever a problem arises, e.g. the breakdown of the family or the diminished influence of traditional values, this problem can be perceived as an outcome of a crisis in morality or art, or, as is often the case, as a combination of both. Instead of viewing the crisis as influenced by fundamental changes in the realm of social, economic, and political life, critics project the crisis onto the sphere of cultural production, where they can discuss it at length and with questionable results. Culture, then, becomes a realm for relatively harmless debate, critique, and alienation, while other aspects of modern life remain untouched.\(^{27}\) In a sense, modernism becomes the scapegoat for modernization itself. Habermas observes three groups who make use of this projection mechanism in renouncing artistic modernism: The first is the "young conservatives" who "justify an irreconcilable anti-modernism" and who include poststructuralists such as Bataille, Foucault, and Derrida. The second group Habermas identifies as the "old conservatives." The members of this group denounce cultural modernism wholesale and "recommend a withdrawal to a position anteri(0)or to modernity." They want to turn back the clock. And the "neoconservatives," try to establish "the decisive confinement of science, morality and art to autonomous spheres separated from the life-world and administered by experts."\(^{28}\) Such a confinement, however, would mean the end of the "project of modernity altogether," at least as Habermas defines it. In order to save the project of modernity, Habermas refers to his Theory of Communicative Competence, which he developed precisely as an antidote to the dualism between separate spheres of modern life. Only bridging the gap that separates the spheres of science, morality, and art from the everyday life of modern man and woman can keep alive the project of modernity.

From a different point of view and with a radically different outcome, Peter Sloterdijk has taken up Weber's analysis of the separation of spheres in modern societies.\(^{29}\) Sloterdijk accuses thinkers like Weber and Habermas of forgetting a critical potential that lies hidden within the modern tradition itself. He asks whether "the cults of science and aesthetics" are not "the prototypical 'complementary idiots' of modernity,"\(^{30}\) and he invokes Friedrich Nietzsche's texts and life as an embodiment of the "unrelinquished dream of modernity." Nietzsche, "albeit at a high price," succeeded "in being an artist as scholar-scientist and a scholar-scientist as artist."\(^{31}\) Nietzsche is Sloterdijk's prime witness to the process of modernity, because in him, Sloterdijk sees at work a thinker who, like Weber and Habermas, penetrates the alienation of modern man, but, unlike them, does not accept the separation into different spheres of life as an unavoidable concomitant of modernity. If one can characterize the "project of modernity" as an attempt to reconnect the spheres of art, science, and the law with both everyday life and each other, then the Nietzschean project, according to Sloterdijk, starts from a different primal scene: it re-discovers the potential and unused energies of modernity itself, those manifestations of the eternal conflict between the "Appollonian" and the "Dionysian," as Nietzsche, in The Birth of Tragedy, called the drives toward culture that convey mankind beyond a fragmented existence.\(^{32}\)

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\(^{25}\) ibid, 9.

\(^{26}\) For another, less sophisticated, account of the dualism between modernity and modernism, see Berman, 88 and 131f.


\(^{28}\) Habermas, 13f.


\(^{30}\) Idem, Thinker, 12; Denker, 30.

\(^{31}\) Idem, Thinker, 12; Denker, 31.

\(^{32}\) For a more thorough discussion of Sloterdijk's reading of Nietzsche, see Jochen Schulte-Sasse's "Foreword: Nietzsche's Theoretical Resistance" to Thinker on Stage, ix-xxvi.
Whereas Jürgen Habermas has not devoted a major part of his work to a reading of Weimar as a historical period, Peter Sloterdijk has contributed to the discussion on Weimar in his monumental *Critique of Cynical Reason*, one of the two most important recent contributions to an understanding of Weimar and the problem of modernity. In it, Sloterdijk provides an analysis of the “Weimar Symptom” as containing “models of consciousness” for “German modernity.”

Peter Sloterdijk suggested that Weimar’s fourteen years of crisis were the founding period of a certain kind of self-reflexive cynicism that has remained characteristic of the modern epoch ever since. Sloterdijk wrote:

In the articulation of its crowning achievements, Weimar culture remains... the alertest epoch in history, a highly self-reflexive, thoughtful, imaginative, and expressive era filled with the widest variety of self-observations and self-analyses.\(^{33}\)

One of the reasons for the failure to deal adequately with Weimar culture in Germany after the Second World War was that Weimar itself was more “advanced” mentally — i.e., more self-reflexive, more aware of its own cynicism — than subsequent historical periods. “In Weimar culture... cynicism is able to find a language even more articulated than today,” wrote Sloterdijk, with the result, he concluded, that “the more I continue to read, the less certain I am that we are in any kind of a position to say something meaningful about the culture and consciousness of those years from 1918 to 1933.”\(^{34}\) Weimar had been such a pinnacle of modern self-reflexive, cynical culture, Sloterdijk suggested, that it was not until the late 1970s and early 1980s, with their characteristic disillusionment and cynicism, that post-Second World War German consciousness had once again caught up with Weimar consciousness and thus put itself in a position to be able adequately to understand and interpret Weimar culture. As Sloterdijk put it, “across the space of half a century, the [two] eras understand each other on the basis of a nearness of experience that has been recreated.”\(^{35}\)

In stressing the congruity between his own time and the period he was studying, Sloterdijk was also foregrounding his own status as an anything but disinterested observer. He was claiming not only for his period but for himself a privileged position in understanding Weimar. Since Weimar had been a pinnacle of self-reflexivity and cynicism, it could be understood only by a critical practice that was itself self-reflexive and cynically aware.

Detlev J. K. Peukert’s study of Weimar as a fundamental keystone for German modernity has been met with broad attention by scholars of Weimar. In

\[^{33}\text{Peter Sloterdijk, } \textit{Kritik der zynischen Vernunft (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983), 708;}\] (available in English as *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 389. We have used our own translations. References are to the German edition followed by the page numbers for Eldred’s translation.

\[^{34}\text{Sloterdijk, 702, 704; Eldred, 386, 387.}\]

\[^{35}\text{Sloterdijk, 709; Eldred, 389-90.}\]

Peukert’s view, the Weimar Republic was “a period of crisis of classical modernity” (“eine Krisenzeit der klassischen Moderne”):

In the years between the First World War and the world economic crisis, classical modernity triumphed on a broad front, developed its own internal contradictions, and plunged into its deepest crisis. In a brief period and at a breathtaking pace, “Weimar” played out for us the fascinating and fatal possibilities of our modern world.\(^{36}\)

According to Peukert, Weimar demonstrates quite clearly “the aporias of modernization and the tendency toward catastrophe embedded in modern normality,” and it is in Weimar, with its traces of “classical modernity,” that present-day Germans can discover “the emergence of our own life-world.” Here Peukert and Sloterdijk are in agreement: “the schemata that gaze out at us from the blind mirror of history are, in the final analysis... our own selves.”\(^{37}\) If postwar German reception of Weimar in the East and West had sought in Weimar its ideological and historical Other, German scholarship on Weimar in the 1980s sought in Weimar visions of itself.

The problem of modernity and modernism is crucial for the already mentioned debate about a German Sonderweg or special historical path. In a standard work on Germany and the Germans, Gordon A. Craig diagnosed in Germans

an inconsistent attitude toward modernity which, through most of the modern period, has expressed itself in the eager adoption of technical and economic innovation and a simultaneous reparation of its social and moral effects, this latter feeling often assuming romantic, racist, and regressive forms.\(^{38}\)

Much of the debate around German history in the 1980s centered around the problem of the Sonderweg. Were Germany’s problems in facing modernization peculiar to itself, or were they typical of many modernizing societies, if not of the contradictions and problems inherent in modernization itself? In most respects, this debate centered not so much around facts themselves as around their interpretation. One of the major implications of the postwar Sonderweg theory was that the history of Imperial Germany, of Weimar, and of the “Third Reich” had important lessons for present-day German democracy: generally lessons about what to avoid. With the historicization of the 1980s, what had in the past been peculiarly German lessons were extended to broader concepts and problems applicable beyond what Martin Walser, in a controversial 1988 speech,

\[^{36}\text{Peukert, 11-12. Our translation.}\]

\[^{37}\text{Peukert, 272. Jeffrey Herf has discussed a similar paradox in } \textit{Reactionary Modernism} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).}\]

\[^{38}\text{Gordon A. Craig, } \textit{The Germans} (New York: Meridian, 1991), 11.}\]
called “this embarrassingly narrow and completely German space.” German history no longer had a “lesson” to teach only to Germans themselves; rather, that lesson involved all modern societies. Since it revolved less around facts than around attitudes toward facts, neither the Sonderweg debate nor even the Historikerstreit ever was or ever could be definitively resolved. Clearly both viewpoints were right: German history was specific and peculiarly problematic. No amount of interpretation or reinterpretation could get around the stark facts of the National Socialist dictatorship and, finally, the Second World War, mass death, and genocide. And yet German history also contained warnings and lessons that were more broadly applicable. As Gerald D. Feldman argued,

Historians should not go too far in rejecting the German Sonderweg, for Weimar’s crisis ... was a direct outgrowth of Germany’s political history, but the general relevance of the German experience is probably more significant than its exceptionalism.

Weimar, in other words, was both a general crisis of modernity and a specifically German malaise. Or more precisely: Weimar presented the specifically German manifestation of a more general crisis of modernity. And as Peter Fritzsche suggests in this volume, to speak of a crisis of modernity is in a sense a tautology: Modernity is precisely an ongoing crisis. Walter Benjamin sums up the modern paradox perfectly in a famous aphorism: “Daß es ‘so weiter’ geht, ist die Katastrophe” (“‘That things go on as usual’ — that is the catastrophe”).

If the lessons of German history are applicable only to Germany itself, then one studies it for only one reason: to learn about Germany. If, however, German history is applicable to modernization in general, then one studies it in order to learn about all modern countries. In a sense, the history of the Sonderweg theory also reflects the history of Germany’s increasing “normalization” and integration into Western Europe. The more profound and seemingly permanent that “normalization,” the less the need for a theory that explains Germany’s “peculiarity” and “difference,” and the more the need for a theory that integrates German history into a more general history of Western modernization. For some critics German reunification in 1990, by moving Germany and its capital substantially to the East and incorporating a history of contact with Eastern and Central Europe, represented a threat to the Federal Republic’s postwar western integration and hence its “normalization.” Yet in a profound sense reunification simply represented the culmination of an ongoing process of “normalization.” If German political division had, paradoxically, been a guarantor of continued German peculiarity, if it had kept open what Martin Walser referred to as “the wound called Germany,” then German union meant that

40 Feldman, 26.

Germany was once more, at least geographically and politically, a country like any other. As Chancellor Helmut Kohl, a politician with a fine sense of popular desires and neuroses, declared on the eve of economic and monetary union in the summer of 1990, his biggest wish for Germany was:

That things will normalize. That’s the most important thing for us, that we become a wholly normal country, not ‘singularized’ in any question ... that we simply don’t stick out. That’s the important thing.

After the Nazi dictatorship and forty years of division, Germany was to become a normal country.

If, after over half a century of “abnormality,” there was any model of normality for the again unified Germany, that model was the Weimar Republic. As the historian Heinrich August Winkler wrote, the Federal Republic “is once again what only the Republic of Weimar used to be — or at least was supposed to be according to the will of the creators of its constitution: a democratic German nation-state.” The Federal Republic before 1989 had been a state but not a nation; after 1990, it was both. In its search for patterns of normal nationhood, the reunified Germany was once again looking to the Weimar Republic for lessons. In the traditional tripartite division of Weimar history, the period of “normality” was the time from the end of the inflation and the institution of the Dawes Plan in 1923/1924 to the onset of the worldwide depression in 1929; roughly six years of “relative stabilization.” Culturally, those years were characterized by the predominance of Neue Sachlichkeit, generally rendered in English as either “New Objectivity” or “New Sobriety.” With what, in the wake of the Cold War, was widely proclaimed as the “end of ideology” or the “end of history,” the slogans of the new era of the 1990s closely resembled the slogans of the mid-1920s. Both were postwar eras that proclaimed the end of ideology and a new sobriety and objectivity. For this reason, most of the contributions in this volume deal, in one way or another, with the period of “normalcy” in Weimar’s middle years.

The cultural consequences of German reunification are still very much being worked out. They have not yet played themselves out. But what is already clear is that the post-reunification era will involve a new cultural understanding of Weimar. With Berlin now definitively the German capital and a growing cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism, Germany already embodies not only the continuing division between East and West but also the growing interconnectedness and interdependence among Europe’s various regions. Formerly the most powerful symbol of European division, Berlin has now become a powerful symbol of European unity — for good and for bad. With Germany’s major intellectual organs proclaiming the end of the culture of the divided Germany in both East and West, it is also clear that Weimar culture is once more taking on
a powerful role in reevaluation and reanalysis. In particular, aspects of cultural pessimism and conservatism formerly denounced and excluded have once more become part of the public discussion in Germany. The publication of Botho Strauß's provocative, culturally conservative essay "Anschwellender Bocksgefang," with its tragic, almost Spenglerian view of Western industrialized culture, as well as the popularity in Germany of Samuel Huntington's equally Spenglerian theories of cultural warfare underline the change in the intellectual atmosphere.

In the first part of this book, we seek to explore broader aspects of Weimar historiography and its significance for the present day. Jochen Vogt examines the rejection of Weimar as a political model after the Second World War and during the founding years of the Federal Republic, as well as the West German student movement's belated rediscovery of Weimar as a lost connection to Western modernism and modernity in the wake of 1968. Peter Fritzsche sees Weimar as part of a complex dialectic: the enhanced destructive potential of war and technology, while dangerous and threatening, also showed how social and economic planning can fundamentally change society. Planners' recognition of "the delinquency of history" also opens history up to experimentation, design, and control. A time of constant crisis, the Weimar period combined the potentials of apocalypse and renewal, of utter destruction and the birth of a new order. In his contribution to the volume, Klaus-Michael Bogdal sounds a significantly different note by challenging broad structuralist categories such as "modernity" and "modernization," preferring instead the more limited but also more human perspective of oral and regional history that began to grow in importance throughout the 1980s. From this vantage point, Weimar becomes less a period of crisis than a time of greater personal freedom and well-being among German workers. Finally, Jost Hermand closes the first section of the book by addressing the complex problem of Neue Sachlichkeit, suggesting that this important term, generally restricted to a specific and relatively limited artistic movement in the middle of the 1920s, in fact perfectly captures the world view of the Weimar Republic, with its emphasis on sober pragmatism and administration rather than utopian idealism or artistic longing. Hermand pinpoints the paradox that a movement whose initial impulse was in fact the rejection of high art ultimately became associated primarily with high art and not with its rejection. In analyzing the term Neue Sachlichkeit, Hermand discovers contradictions and paradoxes that remain with modern industrialized societies to this day. The tension between Hermand's generally negative judgment of Weimar culture and Peter Fritzsche's more positive insistence on the possibilities for change and renewal opened up by crisis partly reflects the tension already mentioned between the newer structuralist or historicist analyses of the 1980s and earlier post-1968 critiques of ideology. Significantly enough, the concept "modernity" is crucial for Fritzsche, whereas Hermand works with concepts such as "capitalism."

In the second part of this book, we move from the abstractions of historiography to the concrete analysis of specific Weimar discourses. In particular, we seek to reexamine the concept and discourse of "Americanism" as a crucial element in Weimar's modernization process and its representation. Mary Nolan's account of the highly controversial role of Americanism and Fordism in economics shows with what great complexity the American model of the 1920s was received in Weimar Germany. Nolan identifies the idea and ideal of mass consumption as the point where the different receptions of Americanism by industrialists and Social Democrats were most prominently at odds. Whereas Social Democrats adhered to the consumerism of Henry Ford, German industrialists were more interested in Ford's methods of production. Moving from the realm of economics to the realm of cultural iconography, Beeke Sell Tower analyzes the problem of "Americanism" as a point of symbolic intersection between the "ultra-modern" and "the ultra-primitive." As Sell Tower sees it, German reception of America in the 1920s was fundamentally schizophrenic. On the one hand, Germans viewed America as the apotheosis of modernity; on the other hand, however, they saw in America, and in particular in African American culture, aspects of the "primal" and "primitive." Sell Tower suggests that this bifurcation in the reception of America continues in Germany to this day, raising the interesting possibility that for Germans in Weimar and today America becomes a symbol of the very dialectical nature of modernity itself. Working along similar lines in his analysis of the Weimar reception of African American jazz, Cornelius Parack identifies the paradox that for Weimar Germans jazz, still largely ostracized and marginal in the United States, became the epitome of "Americanism" itself. Put differently, it was precisely America's most ostracized and marginalized culture, the African American culture, that became for Weimar Germans America's cultural ambassador. German critics on both the left and right, who usually had access only to second- or third-rate jazz bands and orchestras, generally failed to recognize in jazz a great and highly complex musical tradition or to understand its provenance in an American underclass. Just as the concept "America" became a lightning rod for both German discontent with and aspirations for modernization, so African American jazz became a complex and paradoxical icon of the German jazz age.

In the third part of this book, we seek to explore the problem of Weimar urban culture from the perspective of metropolitan myth-making. For Weimar Germans Berlin became the epitome of modernity, and so it is with the myth of Berlin that we begin. Erhard Schütz analyzes the myth of Berlin as the quintessential metropolis of the 1920s. After pointing out that this myth was largely a creation of Berlin newspapers, Schütz demonstrates how the image of the modern metropolis changed almost overnight when economic crisis hit and the ideals of the fast-moving, ever-changing modern metropolis became frightening for masses of unemployed people who had lost their social and political orientation. Schütz's analysis of the Berlin myth, which begins with the reinvention of that myth at the time of German unification, raises the interesting possibility that the reuniﬁed Berlin might once again become a powerful urban myth, now no longer of European division, but of European unity. In analyzing Walter Rutmann's 1927 ﬁlm Berlin, Symphony of the Big City, Sabine Hake suggests that Berlin, with its innovative montage and cross-section techniques, fetishizes urban specularity in a new way typical of the homogeneous, apolitical white-collar culture of Neue Sachlichkeit. And in his examination of the architecture of Metropolis, Dietrich Neumann reads Fritz Lang's ﬁlm against the background of
contemporary German debates about skyscraper culture. The “Tower of Babel” in *Metropolis* represents a conservative German alternative to the American skyscrapers, which had impressed Fritz Lang and other German visitors to New York. Neumann’s contribution unfolds the complex background of nationalist ideology that found its representation and critique in the architecture of *Metropolis*.

Finally, in the last section of this book we seek to explore the crisis in gender and sex relations and representations in Weimar culture. Stephen Brockmann explores the discourse of Weimar sexual cynicism, relating sexual cynicism both to economic modernization and to the culture of *Neue Sachlichkeit*. Laurence Rickels points out how psychoanalysis since the First World War was instrumentalized first in the war effort and then by the Nazis. From treating war neurosis to “healing” homosexuality, psychoanalysis was part and parcel of an ideology of total war that contaminated not only Nazi Germany. And as a kind of postscript Atina Grossmann follows the lives of exiled women sex reformers who had to leave Germany after the Nazis came to power. Arriving in the United States, these women found themselves confronted with a series of prejudices that made a continuation of their professional careers all but impossible. It is, perhaps, appropriate that our story of Weimar culture should end not in Germany but in exile. But it is also significant that Grossmann, far from agreeing with Peter Gay that it was in exile that Weimar culture found its “true home,” stresses a history of thwarted careers and arrested development. The true home of Weimar culture was Germany, and that culture could never be the same anywhere else. Ultimately, the story of Weimar culture is a story of irrevocable loss and unfulfilled promise. The ghosts of that loss and that promise continue to haunt us on both sides of the Atlantic.

In moving from general considerations of Weimar historiography through the discourses on economic and cultural Americanism and urban myth-making to the construction and representation of gender and sexuality, we hope to suggest how broad, multilayered, and complex the changes associated with Weimar modernity were. From the most abstract and impersonal levels of economic rationalization to the seemingly most personal and private levels of sexuality and gender, Weimar became associated in the German mind with extraordinary cultural changes that represented both a tremendous opportunity and a fearsome threat. In these essays we have aimed for informed critical analysis based on the current state of research on Weimar culture and its continuing importance for Germany and the world. We hope in the process not only to understand Weimar better but also, through Weimar, to understand ourselves.

At the end of the book, we have provided a list of sources on the history and culture of Weimar Germany for those interested in further reading. The list is not intended to be comprehensive, but rather to refer readers to some of the standard works on our topic. Many of the sources listed include extensive bibliographic material.