H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Wolfgang Hardtwig. *Ordnungen in der Krise: Zur politischen Kulturgeschichte Deutschlands 1900-1933.* Ordnungssysteme: Studien zur Ideengeschichte der Neuzeit. Munich: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2007. 566 pp. EUR 79.80, cloth, ISBN 978-3-486-58177-5.

Reviewed by Erik Tängerstad

Published on H-German (August, 2009)

Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

Over twenty years after it was first published, Detlev Peukert's study *The Weimar Republic*: *The Crisis of Classical Modernity* (1987) has become a classic in its field. By linking the supposedly antithetical notions of the classical and of modernity, Peukert aimed at pointing out the strained foundation upon which our modern society rests. "Classical modernity" shaped societies of emerging European nation-states during the years just before the First World War, and the "crisis of classical modernity" occurred when these nation-states began to reconstitute themselves after the war. The case studied by Peukert was, of course, the German one: "the years of the Weimar Republic constitute a crucial phase, set into greater relief by crisis, of the period of social and cultural innovation beginning around the turn of the century which we call the era of 'classical modernity.' It was during the Weimar years that the main features of the contemporary world took shape.... And yet, even as this happened, classical modernity was also moving rapidly towards its own point of crisis. No sooner had modern ideas been put into effect than they came under attack, were revoked or began to collapse."[1] Wolfgang Hardtwig's introduction to the anthology under review uses Peukert's study as a point of departure. He points out that the volume's contributions aim at finding the structure of the crisis, seeing it from a perspective of a "politische Kulturgeschichte" (p. 11). Hardtwig thereby makes the point that the history of culture should be seen as dealing with political matters as well, and that it should be seen as something more significant than an interest of mere antiquarians, as it is frequently viewed. At stake here is the origin of political action. The implicit notion underlining this volume is that political policy emerges from culture. Through cultural history, it will be possible to grasp the origin of politics. The anthology is the outcome of a conference held at Berlin's Humboldt University in November 2004. Its twenty-one contributions are well researched and written, and despite the sense of unease that the reader occasionally feels about the conceptual clarity of the collection, they will be a treat to read for

anyone working on German history of the first half of the twentieth century.

As editor, Hardtwig has organized the material so that contemporaries' experiences and expectations are highlighted, as opposed to our own post-Cold War notion of the "interwar years" that led to National Socialist Germany. By emphasizing the complexity of the Weimar Republic, he reminds readers that the history of the 1920s was open-ended. The Weimar Republic was never doomed to collapse into the Third Reich. In the early 1930s, various alternative possibilities of the future were imaginable. That view provokes an intriguing question: if people in Weimar Germany in the early 1930s thought that Nazism would be a lesser evil for the republic than the alternative, what did they foresee as the worst possible outcome of the collapse? What did people in the Weimar Republic see and sense that we miss today because of our--understandable--preoccupation with the horrors created by the Nazis? This anthology contributes answers to these questions.

The contributions undertake an active dialogue with the works of theorists and with each other. Reinhart Koselleck's work addressed experiences and expectations and problematized the issue of time and of prognostications. In a thought-provoking section, Rüdiger Graf, Peter Fritzsche, and Martin H. Geyer, respectively, use Koselleck's and Peukert's work as points of departure in attempts to reconstruct various views of the future held by contemporaries within Weimar Germany. Here, Hardtwig's notion of the political aspects of the history of culture becomes exemplary. In this context, Thomas Rohkrämer's essay on German conservative notions of the German realm and *Heimat* should be mentioned, as well as Kathleen Canning's article on notions of citizenship. In her article, Canning also discusses works by Fritzsche and Geyer, among others.

As is usual with this kind of conference volume, both objectives and methodological approaches vary substantially among the various contributions. It is not always easy to find a common denominator between essays as disparate as Jost Philipp Klenner's study of Aby Warburg's relationship to the imagery of Benito Mussolini, Bernd Roeck's discussion of Wilhelm Uhde's friendship with Pablo Picasso, and Alexander Schug's and Thomas Mergel's respective analyses of aesthetic and political strategies for visual advertisements and propaganda in the Weimar Republic. Also, the range of the various papers is vague. The anthology's subtitle suggests coverage of the years 1900 to 1933, but the contributions span from at least the 1880s and 90s to the 1940s and 50s. Large proportions of many of the contributions deal with conditions in the Third Reich. For example, Martina Kessel focuses on the period after 1933 in her study on wartime comics in Germany during the two world wars. Both Vanessa Conze's and Willi Oberkrome's discussions of German responses to the Versailles Treaty, to take different examples, are more concerned with what happened after than before 1933. Dirk van Laak's study of German views of Africa and Moritz Föllmer's consideration of the Berlin tabloid press follow their respective topics into the 1950s. Ute Planert's study of notions of gender also concentrates equally on the periods before and after 1933. This volume would have won in clarity if its subtitle had read "1900-45" (or even "1890-1950") rather than "1900-33." Despite these general reservations, however, it should be stressed that the book often proves an inspiring read, both in its general scope and its individual articles.

These contributions clearly aim at grasping highly complex matters. At times, however, the lack of an explicit, guiding research question becomes disturbing. It is unclear what is meant by the prescription of studying structures within the "crisis of classical modernity," and how such studies should be carried out methodologically. For example, the volume centers on Germany and the German people in the first half of the twentieth century, though these terms are not defined, and the authors are mostly silent on the topic of what

contemporaries meant when talking about "Deutschland," "das deutsche Volk," or simply "das Volk." Attempts to deal with the complex relationship between the modern individual and modern mass society are highlighted in many of the anthology's contributions, such as Per Leo's analysis of the "unknown Other" of the modern great city, Daniel Siemens's study of journalism, Martin Baumeister's essay on theatrical representations of war, or Sven Reichardt's piece on political violence. Even though the term "das Volk" was frequently used in Weimar Germany, apparently, these essays suggest that no consensus prevailed on what it actually meant. We must conclude, then, that a lacuna of significance for posterity persisted within interwar discourses, both nationalist and democratic. If there was no consensus about the meaning of "das Volk," how were terms like "völkisch" or "Volkssouveränität" understood?

Two of the volume's articles might offer a strategy for tackling this question, albeit indirectly. In her study on the views of the "primitive" and of the usage of the term "Primitivismus" in the modern world, Doris Kaufmann points out that these discourses concerned something that did not exist. She quotes the cultural anthropologist Adam Kuper, who claimed that primitive society has never existed. Nevertheless, over the years there has been a lot of talk of "primitive societies" and of "primitive people"; until quite recently, studies of the "primitive" were held in high regard within academic research. Kaufmann stops this line of reasoning after discussing the notion of "primitive art" at the interface of arts and sciences within the Weimar Republic. But what if "das Volk," like "primitive society," never existed, although it proved an oft-used concept?

Even though the notions of "nations" and "peoples," and--especially--the usage of the term "das Volk" seem to have constituted the epicenter upon which the order of the crisis of classical modernity is to be found, these notions are only slightly touched upon in this volume. Thomas Hippler's article on the rationale behind the Allied bombings of German cities during the Second World War, however, is a clarifying exception. Unlike the rest of the volume's articles, this one moves beyond both Weimar Republic and Germany at large. Hippler not only focuses on Anglo-American, and to some extent Italian, military theoreticians of the interwar era, he also emphasizes the World War II era, rather than Weimar Germany. Hippler finds two distinct reasons for bombing cities and civilians, based on different notions of the term "people." On the one hand, from at least 1911, bombing was established as a way for colonizing powers to subject colonized populations. On the other hand, after World War I, the idea of "total war" spread and with it the notion that entire nations should be seen as enemy combatants. Bombing an enemy city, therefore, had a double purpose. First of all, it would break the morale among the bombed, inclining them to subject themselves to the bombing power. It could also be seen as a legitimate form of warfare, since no noncombatants exist in state of "total war"--or rather, the entire population were understood to be combatants. Hippler shows that behind this reasoning looms an ambiguous use of the concept "people"; a "people" could be the entire nation, or only a part of it, such as the proletariat of industrial workers and others subsumed under the term "Pöbel" (riff-raff). Hippler shows that by mobilizing urbanites to defend their cities, it was possible to make "people" out of the "riff-raff": "die deutschen Militärs [erachten] für möglich, den 'Pöbel' durch entsprechende Maßnamen in 'Volk' zu verwandeln" (p. 421). But bomb warfare was not only used actively in nationalizing the masses, it was also used in democratizing them. Hippler underlines that when creating a distinct "Volk" or "nation" out of masses of human beings, the first step is creating notions of "Volkssouveränität," a crucial step forward in the process of democratizing a nation. Even if Hippler is prudent in discussing the nationalization and democratization of the masses, he nevertheless states that

"ein Zusammenhang besteht zwischen strategischem Luftkrieg und (um es vorsichtig zu formulieren) der Idee vom 'Volk' als originärer politischer Kategorie" (p. 418). In this sense, Hippler argues that the bombings would have united various masses of human beings into one integrated "Volk."

The flip side of Hippler's line of reasoning also can be used as a key when reading this anthology. Despite much talk about "das Volk" and "das deutsche Volk" in the Weimar Republic, these concepts seem to have been used in various and contradictory ways by different groups. No consensus existed on how to define "the German people," nor on how to define such a problematic term as "Germany." This lack of consensus concerning the groundwork of a democratically ruled state seems to have been the order of the day in the Weimar Republic: within Weimar Germany, "Ordnungen in der Krise" seem to have meant a lack both of consensus and of mutual trust.

Given the fragility of the Weimar Republic, the crucial question seems to be how it existed for fourteen years, rather than why it collapsed in 1933. It was a state constantly in the shadow of civil war. At least three times, it was on the verge of sliding into full-scale civil war: in 1918-19, in 1923, and in 1932. After reading this anthology, one is forced to ask whether various groups of people in the collapsing Weimar democracy of 1932-33 accepted Nazi rule in order to avoid what they feared the most: a German civil war.

Note

[1]. Detlev J. K. Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity*, translated by Richard Deveson (London: Penguin, 1991 [1987]), 275.

Citation: Erik Tängerstad. Review of Hardtwig, Wolfgang. *Ordnungen in der Krise: Zur politischen Kulturgeschichte Deutschlands 1900-1933.* H-German, H-Net Reviews. August, 2009.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24354