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John Bingham. *Weimar Cities.* New York: Routledge, 2007. 192 pp. $95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-95744-1.

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The Crisis of Cities in the Era of "Classical Modernity"

Historian Detlev J. K. Peukert famously situated the failed experiment of Germany's Weimar Republic within a "crisis of classical modernity." Peukert explained: "Developments that occurred after the turn of the century in science and the arts, in town planning, in technology, in medicine and in daily life were a trial run for the form of life that remains our own today: indeed, they were the first, classical statement of it."[1] In the decades between the First and Second World Wars, according to Peukert, modernity descended into a period of crisis brought on by war, economic collapse, intellectual and cultural malaise, and demographic asymmetries. In his 2007 book, *Weimar Cities*, John Bingham draws on Peukert's formulation of "classical modernity" to study the problems of urban governance in Germany in an era of crisis. Bingham understands the crisis as emerging at a juncture between tradition and progress, which, he argues, cities failed to effectively negotiate. Although he asserts that "cities were the local face of the republic," Bingham challenges the prevailing image of urban dominance in the Weimar period (p. 2). But rather than emphasize the ongoing significance of rural life and small town life, as previous scholars of Germany have done, Bingham shows the limits of urban power.

Chapter 1 situates Weimar cities at the crux of two historical problems that threatened their viability: unprecedented urban growth and unprecedented demand for city services. As Bingham states, two-thirds of Germans in 1870 lived in the countryside. By 1925, this ratio reversed and two-thirds had become urban dwellers. The rising population strained basic urban services, such as sewage, road maintenance, and policing. Expanded welfare services (e.g., for widows, orphans, and the unemployed) mandated by the new constitution of the Weimar Republic further drained the resources of municipalities as the distributors of such benefits. At the same time, the constitution granted the national government sole authority over taxation. Some cities compensated with foreign loans or with surcharges on alcohol, hotels, and even pet ownership. Bingham notes that taxes on consumption and sundries constituted 38 percent of Berlin's revenue in 1921. This political dynamic for cities, caught between limited power and fewer resources yet growing obligations, establishes an overarching narrative for the rest of the volume.

The next two chapters provide detailed administrative histories for the major municipal and communal associations of the period, their internal workings, their relationships with the state and national governments, and their collaborations as well as conflicts with each other. Chapter 2 describes the activities and interests of the *Deutsche Städtetag* (German Congress of Cities). This organization both collected data on the concerns of its members and lobbied on behalf of municipal interests. But Bingham's overall portrait of municipal power is one of relative failure rather than agency and influence. Chapter 2 presents the inability of this organization to achieve its goals and the vulnerability of cities during the Weimar Republic in contrast to their greater autonomy during the preceding imperial period. Ideology fractured the delegations to the German Congress of Cities, particularly when faced with the Weimar constitution's greater demands for greater municipal welfare provisions. Bingham explains: "The *Städtetag* was viewed by central authorities in the Depression as a useful but essentially powerless vassal" (p. 52). It provided information and statistics on local conditions but little effective lobbying. Chapter 3 focuses on the equivalent organizations for rural counties (*Deutsche Landkreistag*), rural townships (*Deutsche Landgemeindetag*), and towns (*Reichsstädtebund*). These organizations often expressed hostility toward large cities and their representative association, the Congress of Cities, as impersonal and corrupt. The smaller lobbying associations tried to distinguish their interests as traditional and more authentically German and to insist on their autonomy against the

threat of incorporation. And yet, the Congress of Cities insisted on the unity of all sub-state associations and asserted itself as leader. This chapter traces periods of cooperation and dissent among the diverse associations.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on examples of failed political mobilization. Chapter 4 describes efforts to resist the consolidation of cities in the Ruhr region in the late 1920s. Rather than a seamless process of integration, it stresses local fights over how to define a city, to balance revenues and expenditures, to distribute resources, and to manage participatory politics. Municipal entities fought to preserve a distinct identity, but in the end the process of incorporation continued despite resistance. The final chapter traces the attempt of cities to reframe the political landscape of Germany to better protect the status and interests of cities, to essentially allow them a means to circumvent the individual state governments and appeal more directly and collectively to the national government. Such a proposal, however, required a more centralized and uniform relationship between cities and the national government and threatened the principles of federalism and diversity, which many German officials cherished. The onset of the Great Depression in the early 1930s redirected political interests to more immediate problems.

After many attempts and failures at urban reform in the Weimar era, the status quo was most dramatically disrupted by the seizure of power by the National Socialists. The end of each chapter of the book touches on the so-called period of consolidation (*Gleichschaltung*). The replacement of many urban officials by party loyalists resulted in the loss of many trained bureaucrats but also the achievement of some of the "modernization" reforms, in particular, the standardization of city ordinances from towns to metropolises. Interestingly, the smaller cities threw their weight in most heavily with the new regime as the future of Germany and their presumed advantageous place within it.

One of the challenges of urban history is finding the appropriate thematic and methodological lenses to reveal the fullness of urban life without allowing the narrative to become completely overwhelmed with a city's complexity, scope, and scale. As a lens into the challenges of urban life and governance, Bingham's work focuses on communal organizations that lobbied the state and national government on behalf of the interest of cities. His thorough study of these organizations makes the book most useful to specialized audiences in German history and urban history with a particular interest in organizational history. At 167 pages including notes and index, however, the text is very brief. With the exception of the first chapter, which effectively explains the consequences of the war for urban finances, Bingham does not always connect his detailed story of the municipal associations to the larger themes of German history in the Weimar era or the broader patterns of urban development. At times, the municipal organizations appear isolated from their social, political, and cultural context. A specialized audience would be most able to make the proper assumptions and fill in the gaps. The introduction of this book lays out some tantalizing themes regarding modernity. But modernity is a notoriously slippery concept, a kind of thematic shorthand for a repertoire of changes. As the text progresses, the reader loses sense of the author's specific definition of modernity. Nevertheless, demonstrating the many failed visions of modernity is, in itself, a useful project.

Note

[1]. Detlev J. K. Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), xiv.

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