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Left Cultural Politics in Weimar

The collapse of the German Empire in 1918, the tumultuous history of the Weimar Republic that followed, and its replacement by the National Socialist regime in 1933 are historical moments whose understanding continues to challenge historians and to hold the reading public’s attention almost a century later. Few epochs have drawn as much scrutiny as that of Weimar, and the political, social, economic and cultural histories of the era have been analyzed in great detail. What Robert Heynen has effectively done in this book is to draw on a vast array of available material, both theoretical and empirical, to analyze the cultural history of the entire period from a fresh, historical materialist perspective.

Heynen’s point of departure is the idea of “degeneration,” which many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century thinkers conceived of as the biological and social result of “the impact of modern life upon the body” (p. 1). Viewing these impacts in quasi-biological and pathological terms, thinkers such as Max Nordau developed typologies of degeneracy focusing on prostitutes, criminals, revolutionaries of various sorts—such as anarchists and Communists—lunatics, artists, and the physically handicapped. Their conception of such people as symptomatic of social pathologies requiring therapeutic intervention exerted powerful influence across the political spectrum, as the forces of the Right and Left struggled for hegemony in Germany in the thirty-year period following the outbreak of the First World War. Heynen’s primary interest, therefore, is in “the embodied politics of degeneration that drew on these figures, the relationship of degeneration to radical or revolutionary politics, and the ways in which this relationship shaped the culture of the Weimar period in Germany” (p. 2).

In the early twentieth century, discussions of therapies intended to resolve social ills drew heavily on the language of social Darwinist and eugenic thinking and were couched in terms of “social hygiene.” Heynen stresses that, while today we generally connect this mode of thinking with the political Right, at that time this idea was also very influential on the left as hygienic concerns informed policy making in virtually all spheres of public and private life, ranging from social welfare and urban planning policies to the state’s role in shaping gender, sex, race, and class relations. While the spectrum of policy choices was broad and involved various degrees of coercion, Heynen argues that what united the various approaches to degeneration “was a shared sense that individual bodies ex-
pressed characteristics of the social body as a whole,” which, especially on the right, was referred to as the Volkskörper. In the German context this term meant more than simply the “people’s body,” but also contained powerful “primordialist implications of national and racial belonging.” For Heynen this is particularly important because “the idea of the Volkskörper incorporated a powerful desire for an integrated and stable social order purged of the destabilizing and corrupting degeneracies of modern life,” via different forms of hygienic intervention. Thus, one of the core arguments of the book is that “the idea of the Volkskörper presented a powerful challenge to the left, first because radical and revolutionary movements were themselves configured as a threat to the health of the social body, and second, because left politics often lacked a critical perspective adequate to engage with and challenge theories of degeneration and the hygienic practices to which they gave rise” (p. 4).

According to Heynen, forces on the political right saw the cultural realm as a major source of degeneracy and hence “read bodies” with a heavy emphasis on aesthetic criteria and cultural traditions, but conservatives also were fearful of the growing proletariat, the rise of the labor movement, and the expansion of mass consumer society. He argues, therefore, that, like their counterparts on the left who identified capitalism as the source of social degeneration, their conception of degeneration needs to be understood as emerging not simply from a sort of generic modernity but from a specifically capitalist modernity. This leads him, then, to place the following question at the center of his study: if ideas of degeneration were rooted in the contradictions and conflicts of capitalist modernity, how did anticapitalist cultural and political movements incorporate this reality into their critical practice?

His answer, it is clear, is, not very well. While critical engagement with the body among radical left cultures did provide some glimmers of an emancipatory politics, Heynen concludes that “one of the failings of so many Marxist forms of politics and critiques in the period was the unwillingness to engage with this issue in a substantive way” (p. 30). Such a failure essentially conceded the field to the Right and thus helps explain the political dynamics of the Weimar Republic.

To analyze this failure, Heynen utilizes an historical materialist approach. While it is in the cultural realm that the dreams of the unified Volkskörper and the discourse over degeneration were most clearly articulated, the author’s basic premise is that theories of degeneration were rooted in the contradictions of capitalist modernity. After explaining Marx’s own ideas on the relationship of the body and human creativity to the alienation created by the capitalist mode of production, he illustrates how, for thinkers such as Nordau, “health” required “suppressing contradictions, [and] maintaining bodily and subjective integrity in the face of the fragmenting impacts of modern life. Social contradictions were thereby displaced onto bodies and psyches, read as expressions of racialized, gendered, or classed pathologies evident as ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ forms of embodiment” (p. 32). Purging the Volkskörper of these pathologies stood at the center of counterrevolutionary Weimar politics.

Heynen’s book is extraordinarily wide-ranging and his detailed examinations of the work of leading and lesser-known cultural figures such as George Simmel, Ernst Jünger, Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, Ernst Bloc, Otto Dix, Hannah Hoch, George Grosz, F. K. Günther, and many others are often illuminating. He organizes the work into six long chapters in which degeneration is the unifying theme. After an introductory chapter explaining the purposes of the work, its methodological approach, and its place in the broader historiography of the Weimar period, he embarks in chapter 2 on an analysis of the impact of the First World War on the politics of degeneration, with special emphasis on gender relations as men were
drafted into the military and women’s roles at home, in the workplace, and in politics were radically transformed. Particularly interesting here is the discussion of the place of gendered politics in the context of the revolution that toppled the old regime and the emerging counterrevolution that aimed to stabilize capitalism and restore the social order.

Chapter 3 analyzes the ideas of many revolutionary and counterrevolutionary thinkers to show how the war and the revolution of 1918 affected aesthetics, politics, and the question of totality. Among the many examples he provides, Heynen juxtaposes the views of counterrevolutionary writer Ernst Jünger, whose novels, such as Copse 125, put forward a bodily aesthetic using a “stylus of steel” to illustrate the soldier-male as the agent of the new technological (industrial) order, with those of the revolutionary expressionist playwright Ernst Toller, who played a leading role in the Munich Soviet of 1919 and whose play, Transformation, grappled with issues of individual and social emancipation via a variety of bodily metaphors. Such examples lead Heynen to the conclusion that, while the works of expressionist and Dadaist writers on the cultural left represented emancipatory alternatives to the dominant idea of the Volkskörper, they were generally neither rooted in concrete class analysis nor were they taken up by the Left as a whole. As a result, the political Left, that is, the Social Democratic and Communist Parties, lacked the “sustained and subtle challenge to the dream of unity expressed by the metallic bodies of the radical right male warrior” (p. 137).

Heynen then shifts his analysis of aesthetics into the realm of art and focuses on how the war influenced artists’ conceptions of the body. Chapter 4 examines the works of leading members of the avant-garde, such as Dix, Grosz, Kollwitz, and Heinrich Hoerle, and explores how their representations of prostitutes and disabled veterans generally depicted them either as degenerative threats or symbolic victims rather than emancipatory figures in the postrevolutionary world. In addition, he explores artists’ renderings of madness and of the primitive, which they believed embodied an “immediate, preconscious creative energy” that could be mobilized in the service of artistic and political radicalism (p. 256). While Heynen asserts that these tropes can be viewed as efforts “to reverse the logic of degeneration,” he also argues convincingly that the focus on primitivism reveals the centrality of racial thinking in all aspects of the politics of embodiment across the political spectrum and shows how discourse in the sphere of the arts intersected with those of science and politics and thereby with such themes as population politics, eugenics, and social hygiene (p. 257).

While chapter 4 examines the relatively elite world of art with its locus on painting, chapter 5 moves into the realm of mass culture with a focus on visual cultures of photography and cinema. The rapid development of these fields convinced many avant-garde artists, such as László Moholy-Nagy, that new forms of vision involving the production of new bodies and new subjectivities were now possible, but many other cultural critics feared the new media would have deleterious effects on “vulnerable,” “primitive” audiences consisting of male workers, women, and children. The sphere of mass media thus became a zone in which political forces vied to impose their visions of social hygiene on the public. It became a contested sphere for the implementation of hygienic pedagogies on a large scale and hence a means of remaking and regenerating the Volkskörper.

During the Weimar years the Social Democratic and Communist Parties both developed a wide array of cultural organizations designed to provide their working-class followers with alternatives to bourgeois cultural institutions from which they tended to be excluded and to build the foundation for the new cultural world that should replace the capitalist one Heynen focuses his last chapter on workers’ cultural organizations close
to the KPD, which he asserts combined “aspects of avant-garde practice with a broader commitment to a collective aesthetic” (p. 497). While the workers’ cultural organizations never effectively challenged the KPD’s rigid and masculinist politics with its focus on street fighting, they did generate different forms of resistance in the cultural sphere that represented a clear challenge to the Right and the potential for broader coalition building. In bringing the book to a close, the author uses an excellent case study of how the issue of abortion galvanized the party’s cultural organizations in a mass movement against the restrictive paragraph 218 of the criminal code. The movement revealed how the radical Left could directly challenge the Right on the terrain of the Volkskörper, but it also revealed how the Left was weakened by its attitude toward women, whom it continued to view largely as passive victims with motherhood at the center of their life activity; the leadership’s views of the limits of workers’ creativity from below; and the deepening of the cleavage of the labor movement, exacerbated by the KPD’s slavish adherence to the Communist International’s declaration that Social Democracy was a greater danger than National Socialism.

Heynen has read broadly and deeply on the intellectual, cultural, and political histories of Weimar and his focus on the theme of degeneration and the body reminds us of the importance of culture for our understanding of the complex factors that undercut the republic and brought Nazism to power. This is the book’s greatest strength and anyone interested in how social Darwinist and eugenic ideas came to permeate the ideological and political landscape of central Europe during the interwar years will learn a great deal from it.

It is not a work that will be accessible to a broad readership, however. Though generally well written and well organized, it assumes substantial knowledge about Weimar politics and society and is, therefore, most suitable for advanced students and scholars. It is also too long at times, and the highly detailed and sometimes very wide-ranging discussions of one individual after another occasionally make the reader wonder how it all hangs together. Aside from these stylistic quibbles, however, I have one major substantive issue with the book and this revolves around the following question: Assuming Heynen is correct that the Left did not recognize the need to mount a sustained challenge to the right-wing vision of a Volkskörper purged of degenerate elements, why was this the case? While Heynen is right that the Left also shared elements of the Right’s attitude toward social hygiene, he also knows that it tended to eschew the Right’s most brutal solutions, derived from its social Darwinist outlook, and to favor changes in the broader environment to alter social outcomes. If that is the case, then why were the intellectual and political leaders of the bourgeois democratic, Social Democratic, and Communist movements unable to then integrate their own visions of the body into their own movement politics as seamlessly as the National Socialists were able to do? Was it because the Social Democrats and Communists’ outlook toward different elements of the body politic made the winning over of women, workers, and other groups unlikely? Was it because their leaders felt the ideas of the Right were simply too irrational, too barbaric, to be taken seriously? Or was it due to other factors? In my view, such a discussion would make clearer how the cultural politics so well analyzed here were connected to the larger political struggle that resulted in the Left’s defeat.
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