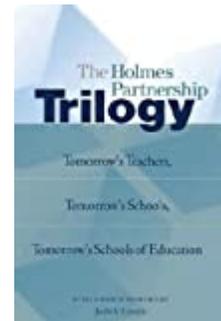


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Peter M. Daly, Hans Walter Frischkopf, Trudis E. Goldsmith-Reber, Horst Richter, eds. *Why Weimar? Questioning the Legacy of Weimar from Goethe to 1999.* New York and Oxford: Peter Lang, 2003. ix + 341 pp. \$77.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8204-6833-4.



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The Many Meanings of Weimar

When Weimar began its one-year reign as the “European Capital of Culture” in early 1999, the trumpets of boosterism sounded and the critics found several reasons to scoff. Lofty proclamations spoke of the political significance of showcasing the heritage of a town in the former eastern bloc, and many German political figures praised the event as a chance to rejuvenate aging Weimar with investment, tourism, and new cultural attractions. Over 1.3 billion Marks in private and state funds flowed to the Thuringian town, with substantial sums going towards the renovation of palaces, the National Theater, and the Goethe National Museum. Over fifty streets and town squares were the target of repair work.[1] News of these improvements to Weimar’s cultural monuments and infrastructure alternated with less promising headlines, however. The permanent exhibit at the Goethe National Museum was not ready in time for the official beginning of the festivities. The Deutsche Bahn, a major sponsor of “Weimar 1999,” fell behind in its renovation of the local train station. And, perhaps most disturbing, discussions of the planning for Weimar’s year in the spotlight reflected the lasting post-unification West-East divide. Many Weimar residents felt that the celebrations

created a zone of highbrow cultural tourism intended mostly for well-educated West Germans. In an essay in this volume, Markus Schulz cites a Bauhaus University poll that showed that 79 percent of Weimar residents believed the festival events would benefit the town, but a full 63 percent said that the events would be disadvantageous to them personally (p. 43). These numbers exhibit the sense of alienation felt by many residents of Weimar, and they give some credence to the suspicion that the local population was bypassed and ignored during the planning of Cultural Capital events.

The essays in *Why Weimar? Questioning the Legacy of Weimar from Goethe to 1999* were written during the ups and downs of Weimar’s time as the “European Capital of Culture.” They represent the papers given at a conference of the same name that was held at McGill University in September 1999. It appears the editors chose to value inclusion and variety over thorough analysis. The volume includes twenty-one pieces, most of which bear the markings of conference papers: the contributions are short (two-thirds of them are under ten pages in length), many are written in a rather conversational style, and

most authors assume that readers are familiar with the media coverage that Weimar received during 1999. The essays tend to sketch out interesting questions without having the space to provide a full treatment of examples, empirical evidence, or historical research.

In the introduction, Peter Daly indicates the variety of issues discussed at the conference, including the “festivalization” of Weimar (the celebration and marketing of the town’s history with an eye to promoting tourism and development), Weimar’s unique place at the intersection of German politics and culture, and the role of history and memory in the political culture of unified Germany. Perhaps an introduction to Weimar itself would have proved more useful, however. The volume lacks a clear review of Weimar’s cultural institutions, their contents, and their status since the renovations of the late 1990s. The reader would also benefit from a brief discussion of the local, national, and European actors involved in the Cultural Capital events. The contributors refer repeatedly to these places and actors, and readers are at a disadvantage if they have not recently visited Weimar or if they did not follow the coverage of events in Weimar during 1999.

The volume includes contributions on the historical eras and events that historians most immediately associate with Weimar—the age of Goethe, cultural modernism and the Bauhaus, the NSDAP’s early electoral success in Thuringia, and the proximity of the Buchenwald concentration camp to Weimar’s city limits. Additionally, contributors to the volume report on the Heimatkunst movement in the late-nineteenth century and aspects of Weimar’s legacy as part of the GDR and since 1989. The authors come from several disciplines, including sociology, museum and archive studies, art history, literature, and history. Many of the essays move beyond Weimar’s geographic confines to take up broader issues such as the political valences of modernist culture; memorials, remembrance, and historical thinking; and the relevance of Goethe and Schiller in the contemporary Berlin Republic. Weimar provides a very rich setting to study the role of history and culture, and this volume will be useful to readers interested in scholarship on cultural heritage, the politics of commemoration, and collective memory.

Several essays, including the first one in the volume, question the reverence that German culture exhibits towards Goethe, Schiller and the Weimar of their day. In “Why Not Weimar? ‘Normal’ German Culture and the Authoritarian State in Classical Weimar,” W. Daniel Wil-

son challenges the commonly drawn dichotomy between Weimar’s “horrible political past” represented at Buchenwald and “the glorious cultural past” contained in the works of Goethe and Schiller (p. 4). This juxtaposition allows admirers of German classicism to enjoy canonical works without contemplating the political settings of this cultural production. Wilson reminds his readers “that arguably the most important cultural flowering in German history occurred under the protection of an absolute monarchy” (p. 6). Wilson then provides a provocative look at some of Goethe’s political activity as a Privy Councilor and head of the War Commission of Saxe-Weimar. Wilson explains that Goethe was directly involved in an arrangement that sold off Weimar prisoners to Hanover recruiters. Many of these inmates ended up serving the British and dying in the American War of Independence. This kind of impressment was condemned throughout Germany in Goethe’s day. Wilson argues that Goethe’s political activity receives little attention because of a desire to safeguard the poet’s cultural status. David Pugh also makes a case for a revised reading of the German classical authors in “Is It Time to Decentre Classicism?” He argues that, by treating these canonical figures as clear spokesmen for positive political values, “a pedagogical tradition revolving around the idea of classicism ... runs the risk of obscuring the unique and problematic aspects of the individual work” (p. 195). Common interpretations of Schiller’s “On the Aesthetic Education of Man,” for example, celebrate “the ideal of the harmonious and organic personality” without paying adequate attention to the limitations that the royal court and autocratic society exercised over dramatists in the eighteenth century (p. 193). According to Pugh, an open discussion of these issues would make the works of Schiller and Goethe more relevant and interesting than a sterile repetition of the virtues of canonical works. In a brief social history of Weimar around 1800, Michael Batts further complicates the image of Weimar as a cultural paradise by depicting the “non-classical” side of Weimar (the world of those outside of the court that Goethe served) as a quite miserable place with very little economic development. These critical views provide a healthy balance for a year of celebrations. They challenge readers to reconsider the prescriptive ways that Goethe and Schiller are used in the classroom.

Weimar and modernism are almost synonymous because of the history of Bauhaus architecture and the cultural flourishing during the Weimar Republic. Several of the contributions in this volume pose new questions about this well-worn pairing. Theodore Fiedler’s inter-

esting contribution on “Weimar between Modernism and Heimatkunst” shows how the local scene in Weimar contained many of the same cultural conflicts that were evident in Germany and Europe around 1900. Fiedler shows how Harry Graf Kessler’s efforts to raise the status of the Weimar School of Art and the Permanent Exhibition as institutions devoted to modernist art in Weimar were challenged by proponents of the native and nationalist Heimatkunst movement. Ernst Wachler and Adolf Bartels advocated for poetry and theater that were “rooted in the character, uniqueness and history of our country and tribe” (Wachler quoted, p. 140). Modernism and Heimatkunst offered different forms of national regeneration, and with the shift to the right in Weimar politics in the early decades of the twentieth century, the Heimatkunst movement triumphed over the proponents of modernist art in the public sphere and in court circles. In an essay that nicely complements Fiedler’s piece, Rosamunde Neugebauer comments that Weimar “was [artistically speaking] somewhat behind the times” in the 1920s (p. 167). While Weimar was home to many imaginative artists, the town never served as a “symbolic topography” for modernist art. Representations depicted Weimar as an idyllic and rural setting in a nineteenth-century Impressionist style, not in the avant-garde styles that depicted life in Berlin during the same decade. Neugebauer refers to Weimar’s status as a modernist mecca as a myth.

Two essays address Weimar as a site of cultural significance within the German Democratic Republic. In “Weimar/GDR?—A Realm of Memory and Its Institutions,” Marcus Gaertner asserts that Weimar’s presence at the geographical heart of Germany and “the ensemble of historical sites around Weimar and the Wartburg made the memory landscape of Thuringia indispensable for the SED Deutschlandpolitik, which at that time [in the 1950s] was aimed at promoting unification” (p. 86). When the East German regime abandoned the idea of future unity in the 1960s, many of Weimar’s cultural sites fell into physical disrepair, while some loyalists to the regime

conceived of ways to make Weimar an integral part of the “socialist nation” (p. 87). In “Marbach vs. Weimar: Cultural Politics in the Cold War and Beyond,” Arnd Bohm provides some fascinating historical context for the literature archives of West and East Germany. With the creation of a decentralized West German archive system, the idea appeared that the Swabian literary archive in Marbach “should be upgraded in 1956 to become a German Literary Archive” (p. 286). The reputation and status of the West German archive surpassed Weimar—the place of much of Goethe and Schiller’s literary production—as the Federal Republic embarked on an impressive acquisitions campaign and as the West German archive offered much easier access for Western scholars. The unification of Germany has raised many questions about cultural institutions and their doubles, as federal and Berlin officials must deal with the existence of two State Libraries, multiple Berlin opera houses, and art museums at the Kulturforum and the Museum Island. It appears that a similar discussion could take place about the location of Germany’s literary heritage. It remains to be seen whether Weimar will add a more prominent scholarly and archival presence to its status as a traditional home of German literature.

Unfortunately, this short review cannot relate the content of all twenty-one essays. It should suggest the wide variety of topics addressed in this volume and the authors’ constant attention to the relationship between cultural legacies, cultural institutions, and political change. Taken together, the essays point out many compelling reasons to adopt a more careful position towards Weimar than the celebrations or “festivalization” that the boosters of 1999 promoted.

Note

[1]. Volker Mülller, “Freudenfest mit leiser Häßame,” *Berliner Zeitung* 20 (February 1999): p. 11; archived at: <http://www.berlinonline.de/berliner-zeitung/archiv/.bin/dump.fcgi/1999/0220/feuilleton/0011/>.

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