

**Moritz Föllmer, Rüdiger Graf.** *Die "Krise" der Weimarer Republik: Zur Kritik eines Deutungsmusters.* Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2005. 367 S. EUR 39.90 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-593-37734-6.



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## **A Constructive Use of the “Magical Concept”: Discourses and Experiences of “Crisis” in the Weimar Republic**

“Crisis” is apparently an inescapable term for scholars of the Weimar Republic. The term is coterminous with the republic itself—contemplations and interpretations of contemporary crises were abundant in German newspapers, political speeches, philosophers’ reflections and art between 1918 and 1933. Historians of modern Germany continually draw on the concept in their works. The term “crisis” has been used in numerous studies as an explanation of (and a reason for) social, political and economic developments in post-World War I Germany, as well as for cultural and intellectual enterprises of the time. Moreover, the alleged crises of the republic were a key element in a common explanatory narrative of the transition from democracy to fascism: Nazism is often portrayed as a political power and ideological worldview perceived as a “solution” for the crises experienced by Weimar contemporaries. Nevertheless, scholars frequently shy away from clear definitions of the term, as well as of the actual causal relations between crisis and social change. Thus, as the editors of this volume rightly assert, in the research of the Weimar Republic “crisis” has become a “quasi magical concept,” used to fill gaps

in historians’ explanations (p. 21). Instead of reserving a revered place for it in their conclusion, Föllmer and Graf suggest they place “crisis” at the starting point of their study and to regard crisis as a particular perception of reality, a state of affairs that was subjectively diagnosed vis-à-vis the “normal,” or desired circumstances. The ways crisis was discussed in the public discourse testify, according to this approach, to the beliefs, norms and expectations of Weimar contemporaries (whose normality was challenged by various crises).

Based on a Berlin conference held in 2003, this book presents two main models of inquiry: an examination of the roles of the term “crisis” in several German intellectual, political and cultural discourses; and a critical analysis of political, economic and cultural phenomena typically considered to be manifestations of Weimar’s crises. Both endeavors emphasize the multifaceted and varied notions of “crisis” in post-World War I Germany. The contributors to this volume suggest that the somber allusions Weimar contemporaries made to crisis and their reactions to the experience of crisis should not be cate-

gorically associated with cultural pessimism. Crisis was oftentimes diagnosed together with an optimistic recognition of the opportunity for a desired change in society and the understanding of the individual.

In their comprehensive introductory survey, the editors highlight the correlation between crisis and a limited ability to predict future occurrences. "Crisis" originates in a feeling of rupture between experiences, norms and future expectations. Michael Makropoulos considers, in "Krise und Kontingenz," several dominant approaches to the understanding of "crisis" in the intellectual discourse of the Weimar Republic. Within this discourse, crisis was related to the "modern understanding of reality," which acknowledges the coexistence of multiple value systems and contrasting perceptions of "commonsense" truths (p. 53). The decision of the individual between these contradicting truths and values was perceived as "contingent" (that is, dependent on contextual reasoning and not self-evident).

Several intellectuals, such as Georg Lukács and Carl Schmitt, situated this contingency at the core of the crises that threatened individuals and society. However, heterogeneous reality was also perceived as a positive development that would enable a construction of a new ("functional" or "dynamic") system of thought (pp. 66-68). The positive aspects of an undetermined reality, which is experienced as crisis, are further explored in Rüdiger Graf's essay, "Die Krise im intellektuellen Zukunftsdiskurs," which scrutinizes the reference to "crisis" in various influential political magazines. This study demonstrates the essential connections between the ways "crisis" was perceived and described, and the aspirations for a change in social and political reality. Similar to Makropoulos's, Graf's analysis revokes the identification of crisis rhetoric with the conservative cultural pessimism. The experience of crisis was identified and characterized in the writings of socialists, liberals and National Socialists alike. The "open" nature of the crisis and an inability to predict its result was often regarded in positive terms: it enabled contemporaries to envision the present as "transition era," from which "a new man and with it a new social and political order" could emerge (p. 90). Consequently, the nature and the intensity of the contemplated crisis varied according to the nature and the extent of the desired changes in social reality: a more radical perception of the needed change was complemented by a more fundamental perception of the crisis itself.

Crisis was an attractive paradigm, concludes Graf,

"because of the possibility to surmount it" (p. 106). Per Leo and Florentine Fritzen come to similar conclusions, although their subject lies outside the realm of philosophical and ideological discourses. In both the reflections on the miserable achievements of German teams on the soccer field and in the concept of "modern life" (*neuzeitliches Leben*) discussed by consumer magazines of the Reformhaus cooperatives, the crisis of the present attested to the need for a new reality. In both cases the desired change was based on a "simpler" organization: of soccer associations in the former, of social reality as a whole in the latter (p. 167). Allusions to crisis were not related to a conservative longing for a pre-modern, simpler past. On the contrary, reformers understood crisis within a narrative of progress as something to be surmounted. It was possible only in modern context of production and consumption (so, for example, the expansion of Reformhaus trade in the 1920s was unthinkable without modern technology and new norms of consumption).

It is important to note that—unlike the political discourse described by Graf—crisis here was not a measure against utopian aspirations, but was expected to be overcome in the near future. Both soccer fans and "modern life" devotees sought a more "rational" and "efficient" organization of either their teams or society in general. Accordingly, their (commonly passive) support of the Nazi regime was more practical than ideological; they were more concerned with worldly issues, such as reforms in soccer regulations and vegetarianism, than with abstract ideals (pp. 135-136, 176).

A potentially more destructive crisis was found in the widespread debate over the crisis of confidence in the legal system (*Vertrauenskrise der Justiz*). As Daniel Siemens shows, this critical debate reached its climax in the years of economic stabilization from 1926-27, and was associated primarily with the questionable "objectivity" of judges. Utilizing a broad framework, which places the *Vertrauenskrise* within the language and concepts of German political discourse, Siemens demonstrates how historians may make analytical use of the subjective "experience of crisis." As do the volume's other contributors, Siemens finds an intimate connection between the diagnosis of crisis and an optimistic standpoint. Weimar popular culture contained numerous references to the crisis of law and order and optimistic assessments of the future. In the popular autobiographical novels of Hans Fallada, the protagonist experiences crisis when he acknowledges the unbridgeable gap between the sober rationality of the liberal justice system and the irrational, inhumane realization of this system in the state's penitentiary (p. 358).

Fallada's own experiences helped him to recognize inevitable contradictions in the liberal notion of criminal liability. Benjamin Robinson argues in his article that this perception of a "crisis of the will" compelled Fallada to develop the idea of "structural causality," which was supposed to replace the principle of individual responsibility.

Fallada's thought is rooted in the modern encounter with heterogeneous reality, in which there is no "immanently right" decision. Instead of despair, Fallada interpreted the crisis as creating the conditions that would generate a new understanding of the relationship between individuals and society. Michael Mackenzie argues that hope for the coming of a new perception of the human subject is evident in the works of Georg Grosz and Willi Baumeister. In their avant-garde illustrations, they emphasized the efficient, mechanical functions of the human body, through imagery of *Maschinenmenschen* and athletes. Instead of reading such images as manifestations of a "crisis of subjectivity," Mackenzie suggests these works express an optimistic craving for a new subjectivity, as an "ecstatic hymn for a new heroic figure, and the possibilities it bears" (p. 322). Machines and physiology would, according to these artists, replace individual psychology with functional physiology.

Like many of the contributors to this volume, Mackenzie asserts that a broad contextual analysis allows a clearer understanding of the alleged "crisis of experience." When Grosz's and Baumeister's works are examined together with contemporary cultural sentiments (the critique of the bourgeoisie and its notions of subjectivity) and the scientific discourses of the time (physiology), the assumed crisis appears to be the desired solution. In her account of demographic discourse in Weimar, Christiane Reinecke endorses this methodology of contextualizing "crisis." Her article, "Krisenkalkulation," offers an insightful look at the matrix of interests that encouraged the infiltration of "scientific data" into political discourse, and the further conceptualization of this mixture as "crisis." A critical analysis of politicians' reactions to demographic "threats" reveals that the crisis-discourse was not initiated by (new) objective scientific findings; the term crisis was consciously employed as a scientific justification for political views and policymaking. Of course, by pointing to the demographic crisis, the scientists themselves gained influence within Weimar politics.

Moritz Föllmer's study considers a phenomenon frequently associated with the destructive power of the

crisis experience—the new woman. The reactions to the appearance of the "new woman" in Weimar public discourse have often been identified with increasing (bourgeois, male) anxieties in a modern urban surrounding. Former perceptions of subjectivity were challenged, allegedly, with the arrival of the new woman. However, as Föllmer convincingly demonstrates, an examination of the writings of the "new women" themselves (in personal letters) and of the trade press dedicated to modern urban female, accentuates a different tendency that existed alongside the resentments towards the "new woman." These sources display an effort to encourage individualism among the young women, an individualism based on economic independency, activism and pragmatism. The letters cited point to the endeavors of women to formulate for themselves concepts of freedom and individuality through the notion of self-fulfillment (p. 294). The traditional narrative of the crisis of subjectivity underscores an inevitable link between the bourgeois anxieties manifested in the image of the "new woman" and the abolition of the individual, and its fascist replacement with the national collective. Föllmer's findings suggest that the appearance of the "new woman" was also related to authentic efforts to reformulate a sense of subjectivity within the modern urban surroundings. Even conspicuously threatening "modern" phenomena, such as the new culture of consumption, were depicted as a tool for authentic self-expression and identification (p. 308).

The "new woman" was one of the numerous phenomena associated with "crisis" in the Weimar Republic. However, even in the arenas most intimately linked to Weimar's "crises," such as the German economy and parliamentary functions, a close examination reveals intricate interrelations between actual crisis and subjective experiences. Gideon Reuveni's survey of the German trade press's marketing policies in the 1920s reveals flexibility and resourcefulness which enabled the business to overcome economic challenges. The subjective "feeling of crisis" (*Krisengefühl*), argues Reuveni, should not be regarded as a predictable result of an "objective" crisis. In other words, the widespread "experience of crisis" in the Weimar Republic does not testify for an omnipresent objective crisis, which allegedly predetermined the Republic's demise. In a compelling analysis of the (mal)functioning of the Weimar parliament, Thomas Raithel offers a similar assessment. The multiple warnings against the "crisis" of the parliament authority do not point to a genuine crisis, but rather to "contemporaries' impression of crisis" (p. 264); this impression was caused by an "anachronistic" understanding of

the parliament's role in modern governing system. This anachronistic perception ignored the oppositional function of the parliament and encouraged desertion of parliamentary politics in extreme (economic) circumstances (such as the hyper-inflation period). It was this perception, and not the reluctance of the strong political powers to compromise, that enabled the decrease in parliament's influence between the years 1930-33 and encouraged the growth of oppositional movements outside of the parliament.

As Sebastian Ullrich shows, the label "Weimar Republic" was formulated and used by politicians and scholars who sought to differentiate themselves—and their political reality—from the incompetence and the crisis-bound weaknesses of the first German democracy. *Die "Krise" der Weimarer Republik* challenges the view that sees Nazism as emerging from a series of crises that were traditionally linked with the term Weimar Republic. The contributors to this volume seek to provide a framework for analytical use of "crisis" in researching post-World War I Germany. Instead of searching for an objective

crisis in Weimar reality, whose extent, influence and actual existence seem debatable, they define the concept as a unique, subjective perception of reality. They relate the "experience of crisis" to the inability to deduce from past experience the immanently "right" decision, and the fated results of the present circumstances. Thus, in many cases, contemporaries' references to crisis articulated optimistic perceptions of modern reality and its possibilities.

Crisis is a fruitful model when placed within a broader contextual discourse; when examining crisis historians should consider the interests of the people who employed the concept, the norms against which the crisis was measured and the favored solutions they advocated. Analyses following these lines—in this volume, and in other recent studies of the Weimar Republic—confirm the constructive role of the crisis-discourse for the scholars of post-World War I Germany. *Die "Krise" der Weimarer Republik* provides scholars and students of German history with an alternative point of view on the perceptions of reality during one of the most eventful and creative times in history.

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