



Rüdiger Graf. *Die Zukunft der Weimarer Republik: Krisen und Zukunftsaneignungen in Deutschland 1918-1933.* Munich: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2008. 480 pp. ISBN 978-3-486-58583-4.



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The Many Futures of the Weimar Republic

Rüdiger Graf has set himself the enormous task of investigating the nature of the future during the Weimar Republic. By future he does not mean the republic's chances for success or the causes of its eventual collapse. Graf sets aside these problems of causality, along with their teleological orientation, in order to get at a different story: the role expectations about the future played in Weimar's political culture. The result is a fascinating summary of a broad landscape of opinion across lines of politics, class, and religion. The Weimar Republic had not only a future, it also had many diverging and overlapping futures—perhaps enough to overwhelm the political system. Graf argues (following Detlef Peukert's interpretation) that the Weimar Republic was marked by a more robust conception of the “shapeability” (*Gestaltbarkeit*) of the future than other eras.

The problem of expectations shaped political and cultural histories of the Weimar Republic. Born out of a lost war, it embodied hopes for a new, democratic future for some, hindered the restoration of German greatness for others, and presented an obstacle to a qualitatively differ-

ent future for still others. Graf employs four sets of formal distinctions to get at the complex landscape of the future in the republic. First, he distinguishes between optimistic and pessimistic notions of the future. The distinction between optimism and pessimism is not absolute: even the most pessimistic public writers, such as the Protestant pastor Paul Conrad, who wrote for the conservative *Neue Preussische Zeitung*, also proclaimed a hope for the future. Oswald Spengler's alleged pessimism, meanwhile, incorporated images of a rebirth of the nation, if only the German people would embrace the world-historical decline of the West and accept their own Prussian, socialist, militarist destiny. Indeed, optimism about a brighter future dominates the writings that Graf describes. The path to the future, however, could take a more evolutionary or a more revolutionary form, Graf's second formal distinction. Republicans tended to stress continuity with the existing system, revolutionaries on both the Left and Right emphasized a break with the past. Here, too, the distinction is relative rather than absolute; a Social Democrat like Fritz Naphtali, for exam-

ple, conceived of “economic democracy” as a kind of revolutionary reformism, bridging the gap between the two sides. Third, Graf distinguishes among different temporal and spatial dimensions of expectations. Some placed their expectations in a future far distant from the present, while others saw the future occurring within a relatively short time. They also located models for the future in the present, but spatially removed from Germany, in the United States (viewed mostly negatively) or in the Soviet Union, for example. Graf notes further how some identified moments of the future already embedded in the German present: in the *Volk*, the proletariat, the *Führer*, or the youth. Fourth and finally, Graf asks how conceptions of the future related to action. The history of the redemptive deed in Germany is long, from *Faust*, Part 1 (1808) to the Wars of Liberation; from Karl Sand to 1848; from the Franco-Prussian War to the First World War. Each phase influenced political conceptions of the future in Weimar, where the deed took on a multitude of forms, ranging from a pragmatic, conservative call for hard work and sacrifice in the present to communist calls for a revolutionary act of violence that would spark world revolution.

This formal method of distinguishing types of futures allows Graf to consider many different kinds of discussions, from the political to the unpolitical, and between Left and Right or highbrow and middlebrow. His method admits a bias towards those who communicated via the media: Graf’s source base consists almost entirely of material printed at the time, rather than, for example, unpublished letters and memoirs. Unrepresented are those who sought merely to get along in inhospitable times, or those confused by the different images of the future: people like the heroine of Irmgard Keun’s *Das kunstseidene Mädchen* (1932), whose notion of utopia is a lie and who in the end seems to have no clear future. That bias, however, reflects accurately the role of the media in focusing attention on politics and the possible. And the method succeeds brilliantly in bringing hundreds of voices into a single narrative within which someone like Hitler fits alarmingly well. Far from lying outside of the mainstream, National Socialist ideas about the future connected them formally to other groups across the political spectrum, from their “revolutionary pragmatism” to their proclamation of a reborn nation; from their assertion that the *Führer* was an immanent, already-present embodiment of the German *Volk* to their use of a radical either-or rhetoric. At times, furthermore, the National Socialists seemed to comprehend the role of the future as others did not: they realized that the future was a

marketable commodity whose value declined as its contents became more precisely defined. As Joseph Goebbels wrote, “it matters less what we believe in, than that we believe” (p. 273). Form, not content, was the key for a party’s successful positioning in the public sphere.

The methodological advantages of Graf’s approach are disadvantages as well. Graf cannot help but flatten out important distinctions among types of communication, as he searches for individual examples of how public figures conceptualized the future. Complexity and ambiguity disappear in the narrative; one wonders whether Graf’s method could get at complex works of fiction. In Alfred Döblin’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929), for example, hope and disaster come together in complex ways, and images of the future collide with the surface images of modernity.[1] Graf, however, cites brief passages from Döblin’s non-literary writings to illustrate a far less ambiguous image of the way “will and goal” can illuminate the future embedded in the present (p. 355). The great non-fiction works of the age do indeed reflect Graf’s themes: Spengler and Hans Freyer on the Right, Ernst Bloch and Georg Lukács on the Left, and of course Karl Mannheim in the middle all explored the relationship between an orientation toward the future and the social and political realities of the present. And, in fact, Graf himself gives more space to these authors’ ideas than his method suggests he should, in careful treatments that make the reader yearn for more. But in the end, they, too, have to be flattened out, to be used as examples of a formal distinction or rubric. Lukács’s complex dialectic, for example, is left behind, while his more questionable description of the Communist Party exemplifies the way the Left conceptualized an already-present, embodied future. Put another way, these figures become the objects of the historian’s lofty gaze, rather than subjects with whom the historian enters into debate. The author gains a useful perspective on the general discourse about the future, but at the cost of internal complexity and dialog. At the same time, however, Graf’s approach has the advantage of removing highbrow intellectuals from a pedestal, of showing how much their ideas ran alongside rather than counter to those of journalists, politicians, and technical experts.

The formal organization of the book may be its most important argument. Graf has provided a morphology of what Reinhart Koselleck termed “futures present” in the Weimar Republic, and in so doing, has opened up a complex discussion to empirical investigation. This experimental approach to history is of value in itself. Specific conclusions are more difficult to draw from the book.

Certainly, though, Graf makes clear that notions of the Weimar Republic as an age of pessimism are mistaken, when so much of public discussion, even among the most critical, had to do with the shaping of the future. The Weimar Republic witnessed increasingly radical conceptions of the future than did other periods in German history. Detlev Peukert's description of Weimar as the "crisis of classical modernity" is still apt, as long as "crisis" is taken to imply the appearance of openness toward the future. The notion that the future could be shaped radically took hold across the political spectrum (and not merely on the Left and Right: Graf notes the importance of dis-

cussions of planning for liberals and technical elites, for example). The notion that the world could be shaped by human will was certainly central to what would follow the republic. The concept of hope was by no means the sole property of the left in the republic—and by no means an alternative to disaster. Did too much future, in fact, help to do the Weimar Republic in?

Note

[1]. See especially Janet Ward, *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001).

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