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German Past Futures in the Twentieth Century. Arnd Bauerkämper, Freie Universität Berlin; Frank Biess, University of California, San Diego; Kai Evers, University of California, Irvine; Anne Schenderlein, German Historical Institute, 23.02.2017—25.02.2017.

Reviewed by Arnd Bauerkämper

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German Past Futures in the Twentieth Century

The conference, which was generously supported by the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung (Cologne), dealt with the relationship between experiences of the past and anticipations of the future in Germany in the twentieth century. It aimed to adopt an interdisciplinary approach that sought to bring together historians and literary critics. On this basis, the first panel discussed broader conceptual and theoretical issues of writing the history of past futures. Literary scholar ALEXANDER HONOLD (Basel) gave the first presentation on âYesterdayâs Tomorrow: Modern Literature as Time Machine.â In his wide-ranging talk, Honold drew on Robert Musil, Thomas Mann and Franz Kafka to demonstrate how futures proliferated in the literary imagination before 1914. Relying on, but also transcending Reinhart Koselleckâs seminal contributions (especially his twin notions of the âspace of experiencesâ and âhorizon of expectationsâ), Honold depicted futures as highly contingent entities in the work of these novelists. They also tended to either accelerate or slow down temporal perceptions. In his suggestively entitled paper âIgnorance is Bliss. The Pluralization of Modes to Generate the Future as a Challenge to Contemporary History,â historian RÃDIGER GRAF (Potsdam) analyzed how historical syntheses of contemporary history approached the problem of an open and uncertain future. He then suggested to expand Koselleckâs concept of a âhorizon of expectationâ to allow for four different ways of generating the future: future by expectation, by design, by risk, and by conservation. ARND BAUERKÃMPER (Berlin) introduced yet another set of conceptual terms in order to analyze the interrelationship of past and future. He developed the idea of âcontingencyâ as a âstructured space of agency that human action can change.â While contingency can point to new possibilities and hope, it can also engender uncertainty and crisis. Contingency is thus also related to âcultures of security,â the second concept that BauerkÃ¤mper introduced. He then proceeded to probe the analytical benefit of these terms by pointing to the ways in which negative experiences of contingency as well as the quest for security informed the history of 20th century Germany. The panel thus began to revise, refine and/or further develop Koselleckâs foundational conceptual terms â a task that was taken up in later sections, as well.

The second panel dealt with âFutures of the Weimar Republic and Nazi Germanyâ. In his talk, KAI EVERS (Irvine) highlighted anticipations of the future between promise and threat. Analyzing works of Alfred DÃ¶blin and Franz Kafka, Evers demonstrated that the new genre of the âliterature of riskâ led to a âfuturizationâ of the future that was shaped by reconstructions of the recent past. A literature of risk seeks to acknowledge simultaneously the awareness of culturally and socio-politically preeminent present future scenarios and the unpredictability of any future present. ADELHEID VOSKUHL (Philadelphia) traced the emergence of engineers as a new technological elite. Investigating

âpoet engineersâ such as Max Maria von Weber (1822-1881), she emphasized the proximity of practical philosophy and engineers who used visions of technological progress as weapons against bourgeois culture. Concluding this section, DAVID JÃNGER (Berlin) analyzed German Jewsâ âshattered consistency of timeâ between 1929 and 1939. Understanding the year of 1931 as a Zeitenwende, German Jews turned to the past and interpreted steps towards emancipation in the nineteenth century as stages of history. As the reality of the Nazisâ advance was unprecedented in the late Weimar Republic, however, the relationship between the past, the present and the future lost its coherence. Jewish writers such as Stefan Zweig were therefore convinced that their lives had turned to pieces.

The contributions to the third section of the conference concentrated on âSocialist Futures in East Germany (1949-1990)â. In her talk about East and West German political posters from 1949 to 1961, COLLEEN ANDERSON (Cambridge, Mass.) demonstrated that the leaderships of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) in the GDR as well as the politicians of the Christian and Social Democrats in the Federal Republic of Germany, respectively, claimed to build a better future. Referring to the past as a negative foil, the posters reflected teleological views of the future. As highlighted in the discussion, the inter-relationship between the East and West German posters were surprisingly weak. In the following talk, WOLFGANG BIALAS (Berlin) elaborated upon the role of utopias and dystopias in the science fiction literature of the GDR. Gert Prokopâs crime stories, for instance, promised a glorious future in the 1980s, anticipating the advance of communism in the United States. Moreover, science fiction writers sought utopias of socialism in outer space. Influenced by the growing disillusionment and frustration in the GDR, however, âparadise on earthâ was increasingly questioned as a bright future. In the last resort, science fiction stories turned dystopian and excluded change. PHILIPP EBERT (Cambridge, UK) investigated expectations of and plans for German reunification in the FRG. Transitional justice generally aimed at criminal persecution as well as the rehabilitation of political prisoners. Yet the fall of the GDR had not been expected as a possible future by West German actors, as the debate on the Zentrale Erfassungsstelle der Justizverwaltungen demonstrated from 1984 to 1989. The discussion concentrated on the role and features of transitional justice in reunited Germany in the early 1990s in comparative per-spective. In particular, its punitive character was highlighted.

The fourth panel examined West German visions and, in particular, emotions related to the future. In his paper, PIERRE-FRÃDÃRIC WEBER (Szczecin) examined a postwar West German emotional culture of fear with a special focus on the countryâs foreign policy. He argued that Germany suffered from a complex array of fears emanating from war and occupation, which produced fear of otherâs fear of Germany as well as fear of oneself. Weber explained that FRG politicians adopted an attitude of self-limitation, which manifested itself in three ways: concessive, assertive, and retarding. Using different concrete foreign policy examples, such as the Alleinvertretungsanspruch as an assertive form of self-limitation, he argued that these self-limiting attitudes served as a sort of âpost-traumatic stress valveâ that compensated for some of the fears and allowed hopes for a better future. FRANK BIESS (San Diego) focused on the role of fear in postwar West Germany, too. In particular, he highlighted how anxiety was present in the 1960s â a time generally seen to be one of optimism and progress after the FRGâs political stabilization and at the height of the economic miracle. Analyzing what he called âdemocraticâ and âmodern fears,â he related anxious anticipations of West Germanyâs possible economic and political futures to shifting memories of a catastrophic past. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, these memories were especially the collapse of Weimar and the rise of Nazism. Biess argued that these fears and the debates about them and new processes such as on automatization were essential to West Germanyâs democratization. In the last paper of the panel, JENNIFER ALLEN (New Haven) argued that, after a profound period of anti-utopianism in the West, a new revisionist utopianism emerged in West Germany in the 1980s. Allen framed developments such as the GeschichtswerkstÃ¤tten, grassroots Green Party efforts at environmentalism, and the Stolpersteine project as micro-utopias which were characterized by imminent practice. In this way, she demonstrated the close interconnections between past, present, and future.

The panelists of the fifth section on âSocial Conflicts and Cultural Milieusâ discussed diverging attempts of the 1970s and 1980s to anticipate future developments in governance, public policy, and new conceptualizations of the self. SINDY DUONC (Berlin) took debates on an emerging âAcademic Proletariatâ in these two decades as a case study to analyze changing attitudes toward the reach and limits of scientific prognoses for planning public policies. Rather than predicting future trends on the academic job market accurately, these prognoses served, as Duonc argued, primarily the purpose of influencing and legitimiz-

ing contemporary political decisions. In his presentation on âThe Future of the Self: Dystopias and Utopias about the Self in the West-German Alternative Leftâ, JOACHIM C. HÃBERLEN (Warwick) examined autobiographical writings of the alternative left in the 1970s. As he demonstrated, these reflections on and proposals for different, more fluid understandings of masculinity and femininity contributed to changing modes of subjectivity in the West German Left. JEFF HAYTON (Wichita) took a closer look at the West German punk scene of the 1980s. He argued that the movementâs fearful anticipation of a possibly already occurring transformation of the Federal Republic of Germany into an undemocratic state shaped by efforts to control and surveil its populace was informed equally by their views of the end of the Weimar Republic and their reception of dystopian novels like Orwellâs 1984. The equation of West Germany with the failing Weimar Republic served as a justification to engage in violent, oppositional activities vis-Ã -vis the West German state. The discussion about these presentations dealt with the question of how the prognostications of academic unemployment compared to other models of forecasting general unemployment, and which theories and concepts of the self shaped debates of the alternative left. Moreover, it was discussed how particular to the punk movement the fear of an emergent surveillance state was in West Germany in the 1980s.

The contributors to the sixth section concentrated on âUtopias and the Past in 20th Century Germany.â In her presentation on âRemainders of Apocalyptic Experience: GÈnther Anders and the Fragments of the 20th Century,â ANNA POLLMANN (Berlin) outlined how the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and its implications for future warfare led philosopher GÈnther Anders to a reconceptualization of apocalyptical thinking. Andersâ concept of a âprofane apocalypseâ marks the culmination of his intense reflection on the concept of history and its boundaries which Anders began in the 1930s and continued until the early 1990s. Two contemporaries of the philosopher, Fritz Sternberg and Ossip Flechtheimâthey spent the 1940s in American exile, as wellâstood at the center of TERENCE RENAUDâs (New Haven) presentation on âCrisis Theory and Futurology in the 1940s.â Analyzing the early phase of âfuturologyâ (a term introduced by Flechtheim), Renaud proposed that the apparent contradiction in these scholarsâ work between the urgency of decision demanded by their anticipations of political and economic crises and their interest in future scenarios that the crisis itself generated disappears when one interprets prognosis not primarily as a prediction of future trends and events but as a guide for political action. In her talk on âShaping the Future. A Short History of Future Studies since 1945â, ELKE SEEFRIED (Munich/Augsburg) extended the history of future studies all the way to the present. Paying particular attention to the first three decades after the Second World War, Seefried differentiated between three approaches within future studies. A normative one was influential especially in France (de Jouvenel). A critical and emancipatory approach prevailed primarily in Scandinavia and Western Germany (Jungk and Galtung). In the 1960s, a third empirical and positivistic approach began to dominate especially in the US and West Germany (Kahn and Steinbuch). While Seefried observed a general decline of the premise that the future could be planned and controlled since the 1970s, she detected a partial return to technologist ideas of âsteeringâ in future studies for the 1990s and 2000s in the wake of digitalization and the new media. Among many other topics, the discussion addressed in particular the questions of how the experience of the recent past, especially the shared experience of living in exile, shaped the new critical approaches to future studies from Anders to Jungk.

The concluding discussion highlighted some of the key insights of the confernence, while also pointing out areas for future research. Several participants underlined the importance of relating memories of the past to anticipations of the future as one of the original contributions of the conference. The possibilities and limitations of employing Reinhart Koselleckâs terms âspace of experiencesâ and âhorizon of expectationsâ also constituted another emphasis of the debate. The conversation of historians and literary critics proved fruitful yet also revealed disciplinary differences: while historians tend to orient their investigations toward already existing master narratives, literary critics appear to have abandoned such narratives altogether. Several participants suggested to shift the focus of investigations from the content of imagined futures to an analysis of different modes of generating the future, also with attention to the shifting medialization of the future. Other participants missed a more extensive discussion of the concept of âgenerationâ or pointed out the absence of less privileged voices â especially women, minorities and immigrants â in analyses of the future. Overall, participants praised the open, collegial, and productive discussions on a subject that appears to enjoy increasing attention among scholars in the humanities and social sciences.

Conference Overview:

Welcome and Introduction

Simone LÃ¤ssig (German Historical Institute) / Anne Schenderlein (German Historical Institute) / Arnd BauerkÃ¤mper (Freie UniversitÃ¤t Berlin) / Frank Biess (University of California, San Diego) / Kai Evers (University of California, Irvine)

Panel 1: Theory and Methodology
Chair: Kai Evers (UC, Irvine)

Alexander Honold (UniversitÃ¤t Basel): Yesterday's tomorrows. Modern Literature as a Time Machine

RÃ¼diger Graf (ZZF Potsdam/UniversitÃ¤t Bochum): Ignorance Is Bliss. The Pluralization of Modes to Generate the Future as a Challenge to Contemporary History

Arnd BauerkÃ¤mper (FU Berlin): Contingency and Cultures of Security: Concepts for Investigations of Twentieth-Century German History

Panel 2: Futures of the Weimar Republic and Nazi Germany
Chair: Anne Schenderlein (GHI)

Kai Evers (UC, Irvine): Strategies of anticipating multiple futures in modernist literature: Next war scenarios in the works of DÃ¶blin and Kafka

Adelheid Voskuhl (University of Pennsylvania): Philosophy of technology and visions of the future (and the past) in engineersâ class struggle in the Second Industrial Revolution (1900 to 1930)

David JÃ¼nger (Zentrum JÃ¼dische Studien Berlin-Brandenburg/FU Berlin): The shattered consistency of time. Future prospects of German Jews and their emigration from Germany between 1929 and 1939

Panel 3: Socialist Futures in East Germany (1949-1990)
Chair: Richard Wetzell (GHI)

Colleen Anderson (Harvard University): The Future in East and West German Political Posters, 1949-1954

Wolfgang Bialas (IES Berlin): Science fiction struggling with East German past futures

Philipp Ebert (University of Cambridge): Imagining transitional justice in a future reunited Germany. Conceptions of how to deal with socialist injustice in West Germany, 1961-1989

Panel 4: West German Futures
Chair: Elisabeth Engel (GHI)

Pierre-FrÃ©dÃ©ric Weber (University of Szczecin): âSelf-limitationâ. The FRG's past escape from frightful futures (1949-1990)

Frank Biess (UC, San Diego): The Past as a Source of Anxiety: The 1960s as Crisis Decade

Jennifer Allen (Yale University): Reclaiming Utopia in Late-Twentieth-Century Germany

Panel 5: Social Conflicts and Cultural Milieus
Chair: Frank Biess (UC, San Diego)

Sindy Duong (FU Berlin): âTimeless Bugaboo of the Chicken-Heartedâ or âFuel for Future Social Conflictâ? Envisioning, Measuring, and Debating the âAcademic Proletariatâ in West Germany in the 1970s and 1980s

Joachim C. HÃ¤berlen (University of Warwick): The Future of the Self: Dystopias and Utopias about the Self in the Alternative Left around 1980

Jeff Hayton (Wichita State University): Paranoid Futures, Reoccurring Pasts: 1984 and 1933 in the West German Punk Imaginary

Panel 6: Utopias and the Past in 20th Century Germany
Chair: Arnd BauerkÃ¤mper (FU Berlin)

Anna Pollmann (Berlin): Remainders of apocalyptic experience. GÃ¼nther Anders and the fragments of the 20th century

Terence Renaud (Yale University): Crisis Theory and Futurology in the 1940s

Elke Seefried (IfZ Munich / UniversitÃ¤t Augsburg): Shaping the Future. A Short History of Futures Studies since 1945

Concluding Discussion

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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