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THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC

The Crisis of Classical Modernity



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HILL AND WANG  
A division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux  
New York

## 14. THE EROSION OF OPTIONS

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The months between the fall of the Great Coalition in March 1930 and the confrontation between the new government and Parliament in the summer of the same year, which led to the Reichstag elections of 14 September, saw the demise of parliamentary politics in Weimar Germany.<sup>1</sup> The Brüning cabinet had been approved by the Reich President Hindenburg on the explicit understanding that it would govern without Parliament and would combat Social Democracy. With these long-term goals in view, Brüning made no attempt to win the Social Democrats' support for the budgetary programme he announced in the summer of 1930; the measures were promulgated by emergency decree. When the decree was reversed by a majority vote in the Reichstag, Brüning dissolved the Reichstag and the decree was reissued, with trivial changes, a few days later. Irrespective of whether this act was itself a breach of constitutionality in a technical legal sense, it was clearly a fundamental attack on the basic principle that animated the constitution. It abrogated the bipartite division of power between Reichstag and Reich President by effectively crippling the former; the legislature's principal means of resisting presidential power under Article 48 was neutralized. This was the political change of direction that Brüning and Hindenburg had sought, and it was to be merely the prelude to a further strengthening of presidential authority later.<sup>2</sup>

The government was also prepared to countenance the dissolution of the Reichstag two years before the expiry of its full term, despite the fact that results in *Länder* and local-government elections in the preceding months pointed to an alarming surge in support for the National Socialists. The rise of the far left and far right has subsequently

been blamed for the weakness of Parliament, but this is to put the cart before the horse. Parliament was perfectly capable of effective action and could have continued to provide a clear majority in favour of democracy until 1932. It was deliberately sidelined so that presidential rule could be imposed.

In the Reichstag elections held on 14 September the NSDAP gained over 18 per cent of the vote, the non-radical parties ceased to constitute an overall majority and the right-wing conservative DNVP suffered a catastrophic defeat, causing it to go into implacable opposition even to Brüning's presidential cabinet. Now the Reichstag had indeed become incapable of taking decisive concerted action. Even so, Brüning could still count on the SPD to display its traditional sense of national political responsibility and desist from making common cause with the extremist parties to assemble a wrecking anti-government majority. The result was a curious hybrid: an undisguisedly anti-parliamentary presidential government upheld by an acquiescent parliamentary majority. But Brüning's tactical reliance on the remnants of parliamentarism should not be misconstrued: it was certainly not his intention to seek to preserve democracy through a temporary recourse to authoritarianism.

### THE PATH TOWARDS AUTHORITARIANISM

The general direction of the political change which Brüning brought about was by no means clear to people at the time, thanks partly to Brüning's own shrewdness and skill in keeping his cards close to his chest but also to the numerous political fluctuations that occurred between 1930 and 1932. It was difficult simply to keep track of the domestic political situation, since there were all manner of conflicts among the various parties and interest groups, rapid changes in tactical alliances and confusing ideological arguments among policy-makers. We can map the path that led to authoritarianism by giving a schematic account of its main elements.

Politically speaking, the immediate issue was the freeing of government from dependence on the process of decision-making in Parliament. Policy-making became increasingly concentrated within the

Reich Chancellor's office, but it derived its legitimacy solely from the President and its crucial instrument was the emergency decree. With the elimination of any countervailing constitutional locus of power, the executive no longer had its own separate power base but became ever more dependent on the camarilla around Hindenburg.

In the longer term the presidential regimes hoped to bring about a twofold change in the constitution: *Reichsreform* would strengthen the power of the national government *vis-à-vis* the *Länder*; and Parliament would be confined to a purely supervisory function, with the state being governed along authoritarian lines on the Bismarckian model. Brüning actually nurtured the far-fetched idea of restoring the Hohenzollern monarchy, while Franz von Papen envisaged a 'new state' in the Italian mode. Although Brüning wished to maintain constitutionality and Papen was looking for a new corporatism run by the old élites, and although both rejected Hitler's extremism on grounds of sheer political self-preservation, neither of them wanted to preserve the status quo, let alone return to the Weimar system.

On the social front, the crisis enabled the government finally to start unravelling the achievements of 1918. The weakening of the trade unions, the abolition of the hitherto accepted system of collective wage bargaining, the marginalizing of the SPD and the reduction of wage and salary levels were all part of this strategy. Welfare benefits were cut back, and financial measures were taken to pare down public expenditure and the machinery of state. Once again, the crisis did not so much force the government to act as provide the occasion for the introduction of reactionary policies which it wanted to implement in any case.

The main thrust of Brüning's policies, however, lay in the field of international relations. Here too the crisis provided a convenient pretext for accelerating the revision of the Versailles settlement. First and foremost, Brüning wanted to achieve a final cessation of reparations payments, and to that end he was prepared to tolerate increasing poverty in Germany. At the same time, the new leadership at the Foreign Office was pushing for Germany to regain a free hand in international relations and, in the wake of the international economic collapse, was preparing a switch to a policy of hegemony in central

Europe designed to lead in the medium term to the establishment of economic autarky in the German *Großraum*.

These projected moves closely complemented the aims of the military. The Reichswehr's plans entailed an extensive programme of rearmament and a rise in numbers of army personnel: policies which could be pursued only if the Versailles Treaty were revised. But although treaty revision along these lines was entirely consistent with the thinking of the presidential cabinets, the demand was at odds – crucially so by 1932 – with Brüning's belief that the solution of the reparations question should take priority. This was one reason why Brüning lost the favour of the Reichswehr. The other reason was a clash of attitudes towards the SA and the Stahlhelm: the Reichswehr wanted to incorporate the two mass paramilitary organizations as part of the nation's military forces, while Brüning and his Minister for the Armed Forces and the Interior, Groener, were worried about the SA's capacity to cause havoc in domestic politics and therefore resolved to ban it. Nevertheless, in general the armed forces and the Chancellor were united in the desire to transform the state along authoritarian lines, partly on the grounds that this would make for discipline and order in the event of a new outbreak of war.

The decision by Hindenburg and his Chancellors Brüning and Papen to embark on the path of authoritarianism had the widespread approval of the old governing and social élites. Despite differences over tactics, there was a broad consensus in these circles that the fundamental compromises which had underlain the founding of the Republic in 1918 should be repudiated. The presidential cabinets did not adopt this policy under the pressure of the economic crisis: they used the crisis to further their political aims, and they were quite prepared to let the effects of the crisis become more acute if they thought it would help.

The policy of authoritarianism took priority not only over dealing with the economic crisis but also over responding to the rising threat of National Socialism. When the Reichstag was dissolved in 1930, the predictable growth in the National Socialist vote was regarded as an acceptable price to pay for bringing nearer the achievement of the primary goal, the bypassing of Parliament. Between 1930 and 1932, likewise, Brüning, Papen and Schleicher sought to use the NSDAP as a tool with which to realize their vision of a restructured state. The

difficulties confronting the presidential cabinets were due in no small part to the fact that Hitler flatly refused to let himself be used in this way. It would be quite wrong to conclude from the fact that the tactic of 'taming' Hitler failed that the ploy was an anti-fascist one. Its purpose was to secure hegemony within the projected 'new state': to defend the Republic against National Socialism.

#### ACTIONS AND REACTIONS, 1930-32

Brüning's dissolution of the Reichstag and calling of elections in the summer of 1930 set the pattern for the rest of his chancellorship.<sup>3</sup> The institutional balance of power created by the Weimar constitution, which had already come under serious strain, was now overturned. Parliament had effectively been eliminated, though it could still be called on to give its 'consent' to government policies. The way had been cleared for a purely cabinet-based form of government dependent on the confidence of the Reich President. Brüning at once began to weave a subtle and intricate web of political tactics. One of the main reasons, indeed, why he was the arch-exponent of a presidential form of government was that he was still able at this stage to count on the backing of a substantial number of leading politicians.

His ability to secure the active co-operation of the middle-class parties (with the exception of Hugenberg's DNVP) and the passive consent of the Social Democrats; the fact that he enjoyed, at one and the same time, the confidence of Hindenburg and his cabal and of the leaders of the Reichswehr; his skill in negotiating with the major interest groups and the representatives of the *Länder*; the courteous manner that cloaked his toughness on the international stage – all of these assets made him, at the outset, indispensable. But as time went by Brüning's secretiveness and taste for intrigue bred considerable public coolness, mistrust and disillusionment. He was reluctant to spell out the logic and ultimate aims of his policies – assuming, that is, that they were as clear to him at the time as they were when he came to write his memoirs in exile, and assuming too that he was not, in the last analysis, a mere victim of circumstances rather than, as he claimed to be, their master.<sup>4</sup>

Be that as it may, in pursuit of his policies Brüning eroded his own position. The more impotent Parliament became, the less need there was for a middleman of his sort. The more deeply his administrative and financial reforms cut into the bureaucracy, the more he forfeited the loyalty of the officials who had to implement them. As a settlement of the reparations question drew closer, there was less need for a Brüning figure on the international front, especially as the Reichswehr began to press for a show-down on the issue of rearmament. And the longer the economic crisis continued, the nearer came the inevitable moment when the man who had been responsible for the unpopular cuts in prices, wages and welfare benefits would be discharged, leaving the 'new state' that he wanted and the deflationary measures that were urgently needed to be ushered in by a politician with an untainted record.

Misjudging the true alignment of political forces, Brüning believed that he had been halted 'a hundred metres away from the finishing line'. He fell victim to the dialectic between authoritarian politics and what Bracher has called the 'disintegration of power'. Virtually all the important countervailing sources of authority had been excluded from the political process, leaving the Reich President as the sole focus of legitimacy in the state. And the presidential cabal was not a reliable custodian of power. As the authoritarian tide advanced, so the crumbling of the power of the professional politicians accelerated. The more talk there was of a 'new state' governed by the old élites, the more impotent the small number of surviving wire-pullers around Hindenburg actually became.

The year 1932 brought the death-agony of presidential government; the disintegration of power was followed by a power vacuum. Until this time the economic and political crisis had been useful to Brüning in his drive to destroy the Weimar Republic, but it now backfired on the exponents of authoritarianism themselves. In 1930 the Republic's enemies had assumed power and pursued a politics of crisis designed to serve their anti-republican goals. By 1932 the crisis that they themselves had aggravated was wrecking all their calculations and manoeuvres.

The presidential election of March and April 1932 was a presage of the political confusion that was to follow. If Hindenburg were to

defeat Hitler, at least on the second ballot – when Hitler in fact won over 13 million votes, or 36.8 per cent of the electorate – then the old Field Marshal would need support from, of all parties, the Social Democrats. Clearly, in a highly mobile and politicized modern society such as Germany was in the early 1930s, a move towards authoritarianism could not be carried out without a broad basis of electoral support. The only possible sources of such support, however, were the democratic parties, notably the SPD – parties which had been driven into isolation over a period of years and were fearful that they could not retain their popular followings – or the National Socialist mass movement on the right. But the democratic parties had been banished to the sidelines by the very shift towards authoritarianism, while the National Socialists threatened, if they were once allowed to share power, to take advantage of the newly installed apparatus of authoritarian rule for their own much more ambitious ends.

For the rest of 1932 the presidential cabinets remained caught in this self-laid trap. The attempt by Brüning and Groener to stem the advance of the National Socialists by banning the SA came too late and merely had the effect of earning the opposition of Hindenburg and Schleicher, who wanted to co-opt the paramilitary organization's mishandled but useful 'patriotic loyalty'.

The new Chancellor installed on 1 June 1932, Franz von Papen, enjoyed the confidence of Hindenburg and his entourage, brought the field-grey eminence of the Reichswehr, Schleicher, into the cabinet and could properly regard himself as a quintessential representative of the old élites, employers and large landowners. But he lacked the one thing indispensable in modern politics, despite the fact that the parliamentary heads of the hydra of democracy were now supposed to have been cut off: a popular following. As a result, all talk of a 'new state' remained hollow, as did plans for a *coup d'état*. The dry run for a coup that took place in Prussia, when the SPD-led *Land* government was deposed on 20 July 1932, proved to be a Pyrrhic victory. So also did the two dissolutions of the Reichstag and the bitter elections that followed, which provoked intensified street fighting and merely raised the political temperature higher still. The Papen government certainly succeeded in ridding itself of institutional opposition, in the form of Parliament and the federal states, but the election of 6

November 1932 conveyed the inescapable message that its electoral support remained stubbornly below 10 per cent. In these elections, too, the National Socialists fell back perceptibly for the first time, gaining only 33.1 per cent of the vote as compared with 37.4 per cent in the elections held in the preceding July.

With Papen's gentlemen's club of a cabinet at a loss how to act and with the NSDAP showing signs of weakening, the kingmaker Schleicher was induced to try his own hand at leading the government. His gamble that he could achieve mass cross-party support from the trade unions and the Strasser wing of the NSDAP proved to be as misconceived as Papen's flirting with the idea of a *coup d'état*. Schleicher's failure merely underscored what had been perfectly obvious since the spring of 1932.

The policy of authoritarianism had been successful to the extent that the Republic had been destroyed, but it failed in its aim of enlisting the support of the mass anti-republican movement, which went instead to Hitler and the NSDAP. By the end of 1932, accordingly, all options but one had been eroded. The democratic option had been deliberately blocked since 1930; the Communists remained trapped in their ghetto of protest; presidential government was running aground for lack of mass support; and a coup by the Reichswehr, given the high degree of politicization in the country and the swarms of extremist militias on the streets, might have unleashed civil war with incalculable consequences.

That left the NSDAP. The Nazis' losses in the November election showed that they lacked sufficient electoral backing to assume power on their own. At the same time, the forces which had sustained the presidential regimes until now could not continue to do so without mass support. So far, though, each side had rightly viewed the other with mistrust. Hitler did not wish to be 'tamed' by the old élites and used as a tool to further their own political ends. The old élites, in turn, had not destroyed Weimar democracy in order to be ousted by Hitler's radical mass movement from the leadership role they had only just resumed. Until late in 1932 these contradictory aims barred the way to any mutual accommodation. By the end of the year, however, it seemed that both sides were in urgent need of a deal. Hitler needed power, and the old élites needed mass support. There was no love lost

between the two parties, but an engagement was finally about to be announced.

### THE END OF THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC

The end of Weimar did not happen overnight and was not the product of any single set of causes. We can distinguish four separate processes which together destroyed the Republic and which led in three separate chronological phases to the events of 1933.

In the first place, the Republic was badly weakened by the chronic economic and social crisis. The scope for building on the fundamental compromises of 1918-19 gradually diminished. This *destabilization* placed a severe strain on the Republic, though it was not sufficient to destroy it, as the crisis of 1923 proved.

Secondly, in the course of the 1920s the popular legitimacy of the Republic, never secure at the best of times, underwent a steady decline. The Republic's *loss of legitimacy* reflected the collapse of the fundamental compromises of 1918; it was the expression of a widespread lack of faith in the future, in both a personal and societal sense; and it was symbolized, notably, by the electoral attrition of the moderate liberal and conservative parties, though the split in the labour movement also prevented the left from functioning as an effective political force. The loss of legitimacy was already alarmingly far advanced by 1930, when the international economic crisis set in: the Weimar constitution had become unworkable and unwanted. Nevertheless, this process too was insufficient in itself to bring about the Republic's downfall.

A third necessary condition, then, was the avowed determination of the old anti-republican élites to destroy Weimar's already battered parliamentary and democratic institutions. The *reversion to authoritarianism*, the policy pursued by the presidential cabinets of the years 1930-32, finally brought the political and social order of Weimar to an end. Moves towards a conservative and authoritarian system were, of course, a common response in Europe to the crises of the 1930s, but the German version of this response was distinctive in two ways. Nowhere else in Europe had both traditional values and new political

and social reforming ideas been so called into question as they had been in post-war Germany; and nowhere else had public life become so politicized and polarized. The one phenomenon reduced the chances of an accommodation between liberals and conservatives and threatened the very survival of the fundamental compromises of 1918. The other deprived the old élites of the mass support they needed in their search for a return to authoritarianism, while at the same time ruling out the possibility of any authoritarian solution that did not rest on such support. Finding themselves in an impasse of their own making, the old élites plumped for an alliance with Hitler.

Fourthly, even Hitler's broad-based *totalitarian movement* was not capable of toppling the Republic on its own, despite the fact that it had attained an astonishing level of political dynamism and had become the voice for the anxieties of a good one-third of Germans as the crisis deepened. By the end of 1932 the NSDAP had plainly reached the limits of its electoral potential and was showing signs of falling back once again. It was only thanks to the consortium of élite representatives which became the new government on 30 January 1933 that Hitler was given the chance of translating the destructive dynamism of the National Socialist movement into the *Machtergreifung*, the seizure of power.

Freedom died, if not by inches, then in three main chronological phases. In the years leading up to 1930 an increasing number of republicans disavowed the Republic, and the fundamental compromises of 1918 evaporated. This was the end of 'Weimar' proper. After 1930 the presidential regimes destroyed what was left of the republican constitution and created a power vacuum which their own moves towards authoritarianism proved unable to fill. Any feasible alternative to the Weimar 'system' was thereby also extinguished. In 1933, finally, the new governing élite consortium, in partnership with the National Socialist movement, released the destructive energies of the 'Third Reich'. The German crisis had become the German catastrophe; its ultimate result was to be the devastation of Europe.

## ANTI-FASCISM PARALYSED

The National Socialist mass movement had grown by recruiting followers from all social groups and regions within Germany, but it had made no substantial inroads either into Catholic society and the Centre Party or into the organized labour movement represented by the SPD and the KPD. In the Reichstag elections of 6 November 1932 the Centre (and BVP) retained 15 per cent of the vote and the KPD and SPD 37 per cent. In other words, in the last free elections held before Hitler assumed power the proportion of the electorate that remained immune to the appeal of both National Socialism and the right-wing radicalism of the German nationalists still constituted a numerical majority.<sup>5</sup>

There was, of course, no prospect that this statistical majority could be converted into a unified political force. The KPD and SPD were embroiled in bitter fratricidal conflict, the KPD being engaged in no less implacable a struggle against the Republic than were the anti-democratic forces on the far right. The Centre had become ground down by the troubles of the Brüning and Papen governments – both Chancellors, it should be remembered, were from the Catholic camp – and had gradually slipped into a more authoritarian frame of mind, so that it no longer had the energy to offer resistance.

Many workers, all the same, put up a fight against the NSDAP, and to some effect, even though they had no chance of ultimate victory.<sup>6</sup> During 1932 an assault by the SA against working-class residential districts, club premises and workers' organizations and meetings was repulsed. The political campaigns of the KPD and SPD at least had the result of immunizing their rank-and-file supporters against the blandishments of the National Socialists.

Yet the anti-fascist opposition on the left had telling weaknesses. In general, because its thinking rested on an economic Marxist tradition, the left underestimated the dynamism of the NSDAP, its ideological radicalism and its relatively high degree of political autonomy. There were some acute analysts among the socialist intelligentsia who took the new phenomenon of National Socialism seriously and whose insights remain instructive today, but they did not

find a wide hearing within their parties, where the day-to-day flurries of election campaigning understandably took precedence.

A more decisive weakness, however, was that the long-term strategy and short-term tactics of both the KPD and the SPD were strait jacketed by the effects of the period of revolution and the subsequent years of internecine hostility. In accordance with the line laid down by the Comintern in 1928, the KPD devoted most of its energies to combating 'social fascism'. This inflationary extension of the term 'fascism' had the consequence, temporarily at least, of relegating the real enemy, the NSDAP, to the background. The SPD, because of the competition from the Communists on its left flank, was unable to espouse a moderate policy for dealing with the political and economic crisis. Each party refused to contemplate joint action with its rival, and the few hesitant attempts that were made to overcome the mutual antagonism – at moments of acute crisis such as 20 July 1932 or 30 January 1933, for example – were quickly reversed.

The trade unions, likewise, were paralysed as an anti-fascist force. The employers' campaign, falling membership and high unemployment had all reduced their capacity for action, and the weapon of the general strike, which had been wielded successfully back in 1920, had become of questionable usefulness.

The formation of the Hitler cabinet on 30 January 1933 provided the labour movement with a last chance of issuing a call for collective action, however slim the prospects of success. But by now the leaders of the KPD, the SPD and the General German Trade Union Federation had become resigned to the outcome. Separately, each section of the movement had proper and legitimate reasons for holding back; once the moment for action had gone, however, the initiative had passed to other hands, where it was to remain.

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By the end of 1932 it had become clear that a deal between the governing politicians, the old social élites and Hitler's NSDAP was possible. The political establishment lacked sufficient popular backing

to be able to continue to govern on its own, and the NSDAP had reason to fear a haemorrhage of its own supporters if it did not deliver the promised spoils of victory soon.

In addition, the political clique surrounding the Reich President, while not abandoning its goal of containing Hitler, now dropped its hitherto crucial objection to a Hitler chancellorship in the hope that Hitler would be 'framed in' by reliable right-wing leaders. Papen as Vice-Chancellor, Hugenberg as Economics Minister, Blomberg as Reichswehr Minister and leader of the Stahlhelm and Seldte as Minister of Labour would, it was believed, be strong enough to neutralize the National Socialists Frick and Goering, who became Minister of the Interior and Minister without Portfolio respectively.

Hindenburg offered the 'government of national concentration' that was formed on 30 January 1933 the opportunity of calling new elections to obtain a parliamentary majority. The machinery of state would be put at the government's disposal and a generous flow of funds would be assured. In so doing, Hindenburg set in train the 'national revolution' which, in the space of a few months, was to see the complete collapse of the old politicians' scenario. Instead of being 'tamed' by being given a share of power, Hitler would demand all power for himself.

In point of fact, the consortium of élite interests that had now been formed by industry, the army and the NSDAP was little affected by this revolution. Sharing the aims of destroying the labour movement, setting up a 'leadership state' and pressing forward with rearmament, these institutions became the central components of the new power structure of the 'Third Reich' and played a central part in its future evolution. The months of the *Machtergreifung* were dominated by the use of terror to eliminate the real or alleged 'enemies' of National Socialism. Social Democrats, Communists, Jews and loyal democrats were imprisoned, tortured, murdered and sent into exile. The terror was accompanied by a wave of *Gleichschaltungen* (measures of 'coordination'), both imposed and self-imposed, and also by a surging new sense of national reawakening, now extending to an active majority as people came to believe that the removal of the last vestiges of the Republic and the creation of the promised 'Volksgemeinschaft' would bring an end to the protracted economic and social crisis.

Only seven years were to lie between the final crisis of the Weimar economy and state and the outbreak of a second world war. In the space of these seven years the National Socialist movement advanced from offering a totalitarian pledge to banish the discontents of modernity to that unique combination of destructiveness and moral indifference which led to the 'final solution'.<sup>7</sup>

It would certainly be wrong, in the light of what we now know about the machinery of murder that came to embody the true meaning of National Socialism, to argue that those who were responsible for the destruction of the Weimar Republic after 1930 and for the transfer of power to the National Socialists in 1933 were, by the same token, directly responsible for all the Nazi crimes that were to follow. Nevertheless, whatever emphasis one chooses to place on the facts, it is undeniable that after the nation's political and social leaders had cast off the republican institutions and the democratic settlement of 1918 like a worn-out garment, Germany then consciously decided, in an attempt to find a way out of the crisis it had itself deliberately exacerbated, to give a free hand to the destructive force of National Socialism.

It has often been concluded from this that the collapse of the Republic and the assumption of power by the National Socialists are the supreme and culminating demonstration of the existence of a 'deutscher Sonderweg', a 'special German path of development': that is, of a process of modernization peculiarly burdened by traditionalism, illiberality and a yearning for powerful authority. On closer consideration, however, it is clear that even the anti-republican governments' abandonment of parliamentary democracy was not so much a reversion to outmoded tradition as an attempt to combine technocratic efficiency with authoritarian methods of social control in order to resolve the tensions that had been created by modernization and heightened by the chronic crises of the 1920s. The growth of mass political movements and the politicization of rival interest groups had advanced much too far for any purely reactionary solution to these problems to have been feasible. If the Brüning and Papen regimes had been successful, there might perhaps be some justification for enlisting their traditionalism as evidence in favour of the hypothesis of a 'Sonderweg'. But their very failure shows that the dynamic thrust of the process of modernization could no longer be held in check. Hitler, for



his part, succeeded in creating a broad-based totalitarian movement by mobilizing the masses whom the crisis of modernity had alarmed into political visibility. The tensions of a mass society which had come so dramatically to a head at the end of the 1920s could, in fact, be resolved only in one of two ways: either by democracy or by totalitarianism. The historical responsibility which must be borne by the old élites that governed Germany between 1930 and 1932 is, therefore, likewise twofold: first, that they repudiated democracy; and then, when the authoritarian road proved to be a dead end, that they threw in their lot with Hitler.

## VI. REVIEW: THE CRISIS OF CLASSICAL MODERNITY

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The concept of progress is founded on the notion of catastrophe. The fact that 'things move on' is the catastrophe.

Walter Benjamin

1. It is unfair to assess the history of the Weimar Republic solely in the light of its ending: that is, in light of the fact that it issued into the 'German catastrophe'. None the less, any attempt to explain the history of Weimar must of necessity include an analysis not of the National Socialist dictatorship itself, but of the conditions that made such a dictatorship possible. Weimar has its own history, which must be judged on its own terms, but it is also proper to judge Weimar against the history that followed its downfall.

2. The years between 1918 and 1933 fall within two independently definable historical periods, each extraordinarily dramatic in its own terms. They form, on the one hand, the nucleus of the period of world war and world crisis that stretched from 1914 to 1945. The feverish succession of events that marked this period, the vast convulsions and the violent changes in political culture and society, were not incidental to it but of its essence. They generated a deep-seated sense of unease and disorientation, an awareness that the conditions underlying everyday life and experience were in flux, and a questioning of many inherited assumptions, such as those concerning the relationships between the sexes and the generations. The hallmark of the period was uncertainty.

3. At the same time, the years of the Weimar Republic constitute a crucial phase, set into greater relief by crisis, of the period of social and cultural innovation beginning around the turn of the century which we call the era of 'classical modernity'. It was during the Weimar years that the main features of the contemporary world took shape

and that modern ideas and movements in social policy, technology, the sciences, the humanities, art, music, architecture and literature achieved their breakthrough. In less than a decade and a half virtually every social and intellectual initiative we think of as modern was formulated or put into practice. And yet, even as this happened, classical modernity was also moving rapidly towards its own point of crisis. No sooner had modern ideas been put into effect than they came under attack, were revoked or began to collapse.

4. Germany's experiment in modernity was conducted under the least propitious circumstances. For over thirty years the world economic and political system was in a state of structural crisis, the lowest points of which were the Great Depression of 1929–33 and, later, the Second World War of 1939–45. The exceptionally severe check to Germany's economic growth that followed the First World War reduced the scope for compromises and trade-offs which would have made the Weimar Republic's innovations in politics and welfare provision acceptable to a wide range of groups within the country. With little or no growth in wealth to distribute, or with real reductions in living standards having to be carried out, disputes over wages and benefits became increasingly embittered and social fragmentation and polarization became more pronounced. Society crystallized into opposing camps, each of which was incapable of working with the others and none of which was capable of sustaining effective political action on its own. The regression from reform to political stalemate and, finally, to the undoing of such gains as had been achieved was particularly evident in the field of social and economic policy, though that was not the only example. In 1919 the welfare state was, for the first time, enshrined in the constitution, and in the following years reformist legislation was introduced dealing with important matters ranging from education to unemployment insurance. And yet as soon as these reforms began to be implemented in full, problems and external obstacles started to accumulate, and there were calls for the 'limits of the welfare state' to be recognized. The world economic crisis, when it came, served as little more than a pretext for work to start on dismantling the system of welfare provision. There was a similar evolution in economic and industrial policy. In the immediate post-war

period there were several important innovations: the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft* agreement, moves towards co-determination in industry and the creation of a state-guaranteed system of collective wage bargaining. But by the time that the inflation had been contained, or even before, the scope for further reform had narrowed here too, and the premise on which the compromise settlement of 1918 had rested was beginning to crumble. Bitter disputes over wages induced the employers to go on to the offensive against the 'trade union state' and the welfare state; working-class wages and living standards were cut. Under the remorseless pressure of the economic crisis, the basic social compromise on which the Republic had been grounded had become the principal threat to the Republic's continued existence.

5. The years before the outbreak of the First World War had already been marked by the challenges of modernization, by a questioning of previously undisputed assumptions about society and culture, and by a popular mood oscillating between enthusiasm and anxiety, hopes of national reawakening and fears of national extinction. After the war these phenomena took centre stage, stripped of the familiar reassuring veils of national mythology which had still disguised them during the Wilhelmine era. The world of the new could no longer be ignored, and it was not an entirely attractive sight. The Janus-faced nature of the process of modernization became a fact of everyday life; it dominated cultural discourse. In a breathless whirl of change the Weimar Republic tried out every cultural fashion that modernity had to offer, scarcely having time to don one idea or style before discarding it for the next.

6. The 'golden twenties' were seen, at the time, as the culmination of a process of rationalization and efficiency, not only in technology and the economy, but in the social structure and in people's daily lives. A substitute religion of social and technological utilitarianism and a euphoric faith in progress inspired a cult of 'Americanism', but optimism was dispelled by the brute realities of the economic crisis. The dream of modernity set off searching and harsh counter-reactions, which sprang in part from a desire to go back to traditional values and assumptions, but were partly inspired, too, by prefigurations of a

critique of modernity we can now call 'post-modern'. This twofold reaction explains the unusual ideological hybrid that was the 'conservative revolution'.

7. The Weimar Republic was born out of national defeat. Whatever form the peace treaty might have taken, the millenarian hopes which the First World War had aroused were bound to have been disappointed. That, rather than the severe yet ultimately tolerable terms of the peace settlement, was the root cause of the revanchist Versailles myth. Given this starting-point, the achievements of the policy of rapprochement that was pursued between 1923 and 1929 can scarcely be exaggerated. They created the basis for a modern internationalist foreign policy committed to political co-operation and economic integration. But it was precisely the modern aspects of the policy that became the inevitable casualty when the world economy collapsed and policies of autarky and national self-interest took root among the ruins. The persistence of the mystique of nationalist integration and the desire to reassert Germany's position as a great power also helped inspire the revanchist shift in foreign policy that began in 1929–30 as the international and political crisis set in.

8. The Weimar experiment in democracy may have been an 'unfinished revolution', but the significance of the experiment should not be minimized. Every revolution is an unfinished revolution. On a sober assessment the constitutionalist movement, which carried forward the parliamentary traditions of Social Democracy, liberalism and political Catholicism, can be said to have achieved all of its important goals, at least in a preliminary sense. Its aspirations were enshrined in the fundamental compromise settlement reached in 1918–19. The Weimar constitution established an open, pluralistic framework and looked ahead to a wide-ranging programme of domestic and social reform, the details of which were to be fleshed out later. The compromise agreement between trade unions and employers on social and industrial policy survived the period of demobilization, though the ending of the inflation took away the economic room for manoeuvre and accommodation that was needed if it was to be sustained. Altogether, what undermined the Weimar experiment was the continuous shrink-

ing of freedom of manoeuvre in the social and economic spheres that occurred not only during the domestic and external post-war crises but during the years of relative stability in the mid-1920s. A less 'unfinished' revolution would have had to battle against the same difficulties. The crisis-ridden nature of the whole period prevented the new political system and welfare structure from becoming consolidated and gaining real legitimacy in the eyes of the German people. It is all very well to take the political parties to task for being insufficiently prepared to compromise in the interests of democracy, but the material and economic basis for compromise was not available in the first place. The proliferation of ideological and interest-group splinter parties merely reflected the profound divisions within society itself. The fundamental compromises of 1918–19 were undermined rather than reinforced, and the parties to the settlement eventually retreated from the disintegrating structure of the Republic, leaving the old élites to bring the condemned ruin tumbling to the ground.

9. The Weimar Republic was destroyed by four distinct processes, each of which might well have been withstood on its own.

– From a starting-point of structural socio-economic crisis, the continuous shrinking of the economic room for manoeuvre that was needed to strengthen the settlement of 1918–19 led to a fundamental *destabilizing* of the Republic's political and social system.

– The steady retreat from the original settlement also played a part in bringing about the new Republic's *loss of legitimacy*. Even before the onset of the world slump, the political system of the Republic had reached a point of crisis, evidenced particularly by the sustained decline in support for the old liberal and conservative parties. As the centre-right parties declined, they were driven into increasingly bitter competition with the Social Democrats, who in turn were prevented from acting as an effective force by the presence of the Communists on their left.

– The *reversion to authoritarianism* which the old élites hoped to effect at the start of the 1930s was an attempt to undo the compromise settlement of 1918 and to restore the power relations of the Bismarckian

Reich. But while the presidential cabinets were strong enough to destroy the Weimar constitutional order, they were too weak to cope with the mass movements and mounting politicization that had meanwhile transformed German society. They failed to halt the defection of centre-right voters to the National Socialists, and without mass support their own position was doomed to become untenable.

– The *National Socialist movement* benefited in two ways from the failure of the old élites and the traditional liberal and conservative institutions that had supported them. First, the protracted crisis of the years 1930–33 gave the Nazi movement a prime opportunity to present itself as a dynamic, modern totalitarian mass party. Secondly, at the beginning of 1933 the Nazis were handed over the keys of power by the old élites who had been all too successful in destroying the Republic but too feeble to restore the pre-war order. All other political alternatives having been exhausted, a final, extreme alternative presented itself, and was accepted.

10. Each of the various ingredients of the crisis in Germany was also to be found in other modern industrial societies at the time. The German crisis was, in that sense, a representative one. But the process of modernization took a more brutal, uncompromising form in Germany in the twenties than it did in other countries. The glamour of modernization exerted a special fascination on the Germans, but its dark side, too, had a profound effect on lives that were also shadowed by war, military defeat, a loss of confidence in old values, the bewilderingments of hyperinflation and the blight of world recession. The way in which the separate ingredients of crisis converged to form a single comprehensive crisis of political legitimacy and social values was unique to Germany in the period. It seemed to Germans that there was no sure path leading out of this all-embracing crisis. The familiar processes of social and political action offered no solution, nor did the individual's pursuit of his private destiny. Comparative statistics of suicides provide dramatic evidence of this helpless state of mind. In 1932 there were 85 suicides per million inhabitants in Great Britain, 133 in the United States and 155 in France. In Germany there were 260.

11. There is no need to invoke the hypothesis of a 'deutscher Sonderweg' in order to explain why Hitler's accession to power was possible. On the contrary, the *Machtergreifung* of 1933 occurred not because the traditional élites remained excessively influential, but because they had become critically weaker as the masses had become increasingly politicized. What was 'special' about Germany between 1918 and 1932 was, on the one hand, the sudden and uncompromising manner in which modernization arrived and, on the other, the simultaneous presence of several different elements of crisis. It was a unique conjuncture, and yet one which at the same time demonstrates how easily the processes of modernization which we are accustomed to regarding as part of our normal experience can tip over into catastrophe. To use a metaphor of our own times, the normal operating state of a nuclear power station is certainly not the same as the 'worst case' of a melt-down, but the 'worst case' arises as the result of a simple succession of critical events that represents one possible outcome of the normal operating state. In a similar way, the crisis in Germany at the start of the 1930s made the 'German catastrophe' possible because it set off an escalation of the contradictory pressures that were inherent in classical modernity.

#### POSTSCRIPT

Borrowing the three famous categories of historical writing proposed by Nietzsche in his essay 'The Use and Disadvantage of History for Life', we can offer some final thoughts on the significance of the history of the Weimar Republic.

From the *monumentalist* point of view, Weimar may serve as an archetypal instance of the history of democracy: a compendium of democracy's virtues as well as its vices. The history of Weimar can encourage us to refine and elaborate our own traditions of democracy, and can deepen our understanding of the range of democratic precedents to be found in the past. At the same time, we must also be alert to the danger of excessive ritual invocation of the past in the day-to-day struggles of politics in the present. 'Weimar' may easily degenerate into a catch-all term of political abuse.

From the *critical* point of view, the history of Weimar demonstrates that the methods of democratic compromise are fragile, that the process of modernization is rife with contradictions, that normality can contain the seeds of catastrophe and that hopes and ideals count for little in the face of straitened material circumstances. And yet a preoccupation with crisis and catastrophe may also blind us to the fact that people survived and that life went on. The dangers of an exclusively critical view are cynicism and fatalism: against them, we should stress the value conferred by any new opportunities – large and small, taken and untaken – for personal growth and social change.

From the *antiquarian* point of view, the 1920s, in assuming the features of classical modernity, also reveal to us the emergence of the world we inhabit today. They show us a society on the threshold between what has since become our familiar present and what has turned into a strange and shadowy past – a society which shared our own hopes and anxieties, but one whose fantasies and phobias also present us with a bewildering caricature of what is now our normal everyday life. And yet, even in this respect, the shadowy figures that look out at us from the tarnished mirror of history are – in the final analysis – ourselves.

## CHRONOLOGY

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- 1914**
- 4 August Reichstag parties approve war credits; Wilhelm II announces 'Burgfrieden' (party 'truce')
- 1916**
- 29 August Hindenburg and Ludendorff form new Supreme Army Command
- 1917**
- 19 July Peace Resolution passed by Reichstag (SPD, Centre and left liberals)
- 1918**
- 3 March Peace Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Soviet Russia
- 29 September Supreme Command accepts defeat and calls for an armistice and parliamentary government
- 4 October  
(–9 November) Prince Max von Baden Reich Chancellor (government includes SPD, Centre and liberals)
- 28 October October reforms: constitutional monarchy established
- 3–9 November Sailors' revolt in Kiel; soldiers' and workers' councils (or soviets; *Räte*) spread