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MORITZ FÖLLMER, *Individuality and Modernity in Berlin: Self and Society from Weimar to the Wall*, New Studies in European History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), x + 312 pp. ISBN 978 1 107 03098 5. £65.00. \$US99.00

Historians often present the twentieth-century history of Berlin as marked by a number of fundamental ruptures. Within less than fifty years, no fewer than five political systems ruled over the city. Experiences of war, persecution, and division further suggest that historical research has to divide Berlin's past into separate periods. By studying the history of individuality between the late Weimar Republic and the construction of the Berlin Wall, Moritz Föllmer's monograph *Individuality and Modernity in Berlin* questions this compartmentalization. Providing fascinating insights into the ways in which Berliners lived during these turbulent times, the book offers a more nuanced portrayal of the continuities and breaks in the city's history. Föllmer's study is therefore a valuable and inspiring contribution to German history in the twentieth century.

The book is chronologically split into three parts, each containing three chapters. In the first part, Föllmer demonstrates that claims about individuality were ubiquitous in public debates in Berlin between the late 1920s and Hitler's rise to power. Various contemporary novels and newspapers described capitalism and the economic hardships of the late Weimar years as engendering a crisis of individuality in the German capital. Föllmer compellingly shows how media depictions of dooming isolation and changed gender roles portrayed the need for a 'stable and controlled self' (p. 40) that was increasingly difficult to attain in the fast-paced environment of the city. At the same time, other contemporary accounts rendered a different, more positive relationship between the urban environment and the cultivation of individuality. Flexibility, authenticity, and consumption were portrayed as paving the way for individuality in Berlin during the late Weimar Republic. Instead of clinging to old gender roles, for instance, some tabloids argued that men could take a more flexible approach to relations between men and women and still stay 'true to themselves' (p. 51). Furthermore, following the example of outstanding *Persönlichkeiten* such as the pilot Elly Beinhorn was depicted as a pathway to becoming an individual, as was indulging in individualized consumption. According to Föllmer,

these competing claims about individuality proved difficult to integrate into liberal democracy and thus undermined progressive politics in the German capital. He shows that various political groups could use the focus on the individual in Berlin to attack the Weimar Republic as an impersonal and corrupt system.

The third chapter on Berlin during the Weimar Republic introduces the notion that Nazism did not simply pit the individual against the collective, but that it offered a particular understanding of individuality to non-Jewish Berliners. The possibilities of cultivating individuality under Nazi rule are further explored in the second part of the book. Föllmer argues that the Nazis introduced a distinction between *legitimate individuality* and *illegitimate individuality*. While he describes certain political claims as well as racial difference as having constituted illegitimate individuality, Föllmer illustrates that Nazism was oriented towards fulfilling the individual aspirations of a limited number of Berliners by fostering suburban housing, praising sport activities, or lauding individual leadership. It is a strength of this part of the book that it describes in detail how Jewish Berliners were at the same time deprived of the very means of maintaining their lives in the city. By analysing several individual life stories, Föllmer shows that the quest for individual agency under Nazi rule created a fundamental tension between selfhood and an obligation towards others for many of these city dwellers, thus raising new questions about their individuality. While the book pays much attention to the effects of Nazi persecution on the lives of a number of people, it is limited to the experience of Jewish Berliners, thus losing sight of other persecuted groups, such as homosexuals or Roma. Despite this shortcoming, Föllmer clearly illustrates that Nazism was not per se opposed to individuality in the city, but 'that "private aspirations and desires" were often couched in Nazi ideology and intimately linked to the Third Reich's success' (p. 103).

After the defeat of Nazi Germany, two separate political systems with differing positions on individuality emerged in Berlin. The third part of the book analyses this development throughout the 1950s. The immediate post-war years saw a focus on self-help in the eastern and western parts of the city that was conducive to claims of individuality. In the destroyed urban environment, a focus on individual achievement could help to overcome material hardship. At the same time, the emphasis on individuality made it easier for city-dwellers

to dissociate themselves from Nazism, which was mainly portrayed as based on a collective ideology. As the Cold War unfolded, the German Democratic Republic had to walk a fine line between catering to the individualist aspirations of a much needed skilled middle class consisting of doctors, engineers, and other professionals, and collectivist rhetorics. Föllmer demonstrates that the preferential treatment of this middle class led to the resentment of many working-class Berliners, whose individual expectations often remained unfulfilled. It is a central argument of this part of the book that the conflicts surrounding individuality ultimately led to more dictatorial politics in the eastern part of the city. In West Berlin, tension between an individuality based on material goods and a value-based individuality appeared during the 1950s. Föllmer shows that political actors such as the mayor of West Berlin, Ernst Reuter, called for the cultivation of immaterial values as a way of becoming an individual. This clashed with the more mundane priorities of some West Berliners for individualized consumption. Drawing on these debates, the third part of the book demonstrates that the continued coexistence of controversial claims about individuality, rather than the linear development of 'individualization', marked the history of West Berlin well into the 1960s.

Individuality and Modernity in Berlin renders classical accounts of the history of Germany during the twentieth century more complex. By demonstrating that the debate about becoming an individual in Berlin spanned the period from the late Weimar Republic to the divided city in 1961, Föllmer provides evidence against a history of 'liberalization' that portrays the post-war era in West Germany as the continued rise of individuality. His study is therefore in line with other works questioning some of the narratives that have long been seen as part and parcel of the 'success story' of the Bundesrepublik.¹ Furthermore, the book provides compelling insights into the urban history of Berlin. Föllmer analyses an impressive number and variety of sources, ranging from articles in the tabloid press to personal suicide notes. Drawing on these documents, his book provides a needed monograph on relations between the history of the city and its inhabitants. *Individuality and Modernity in Berlin* takes up many issues that have been addressed in other contexts as a history of the self or

¹ Dagmar Herzog, *Sex after Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Princeton, 2005).

a history of subjectivity. While the book thus offers an empirical study that can fruitfully be connected to a number of questions raised by current research, its analytical focus on individuality remains less convincing.

Föllmer grounds his analysis in well-established theories of individuality from philosophy and sociology. At first sight, taking issue with the concept of individuality might thus seem merely like a question of intellectual inclinations—a more or less opaque quarrel between, for example, structuralists and post-structuralists. The theoretical outline of *Individuality and Modernity in Berlin* carries, however, considerable weight for its empirical findings. Throughout the book it remains unclear whether there is a single, clearly circumscribed ‘modern individuality’, or whether this study is about a variety of ‘multiple individualities’, as both terms are used in the analysis. The problem with ‘multiple individualities’, on the one hand, is that much like the concept of ‘multiple modernities’, it risks becoming an empty signifier with little analytical value, bringing together diverse histories from medieval Japan, the Russian Revolution, or post-war Germany. Approaching individuality as a single characteristic of ‘modernity’, on the other hand, leads to highly universalistic claims that are fraught with the pitfalls of the concept of modernity itself. Föllmer states, for instance, that Berlin was a key site of the ‘history of modern individuality’. But how is the German capital’s past more instructive for such a history than the study of other places, such as Buenos Aires, Delhi, Tokyo, Moscow, or Münster? The answer that Föllmer’s book provides, that Berlin occupies a special place because of its prominence in existing theories about individuality, simply reproduces the regional bias of these theories without historicizing or questioning them.² Drawing on the concept of a single ‘modern individuality’, furthermore, carries the risk of reiterating modernity’s claims about ‘universal man’—the dangers of which have so importantly been pointed out by critics of theories of modernity.³

Despite this critique, *Individuality and Modernity in Berlin* is a pioneering study and makes stimulating reading not only for historians

² Christine Hentschel, ‘Postcolonializing Berlin and the Fabrication of the Urban’, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* (forthcoming).

³ Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, 2005), 148.

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of twentieth-century Germany, but also for scholars interested in the history of subjectivity and the self. Most importantly, Föllmer's study offers a useful perspective on the breaks and continuities in German history. As the author himself points out, the book can also advance the conversation about claims of individuality during the twentieth century. In doing so, it provides historians with insights into the opportunities and challenges of writing about concepts such as individuality or subjectivity.

JOSEPH BEN PRESTEL is a Predoctoral Fellow at the Centre for the History of Emotions at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin. He is working on a dissertation project entitled 'Urban Emotions? Debates on the City and Emotions in Berlin and Cairo (1860–1910)' and is the author of 'Die Reform der Stadtmänner: Urbaner Wandel und Körperpolitik in Kairo am Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts', *Body Politics: Zeitschrift für Körpergeschichte*, 1 (2013).