

THE OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF DEMOCRACY: WEIMAR AND BEYOND¹

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I. The critique of the “Whig interpretation” of history and the crisis of democracy

Many interwar historians, not least in Germany, have portrayed Britain as a haven of stability, the highest stage of liberal order, and the paragon of supreme parliamentary democracy that withstood the assaults of those times.² Britain serves as the counter-image to weak and failed continental democracies, in particular the Weimar Republic. Such views have obvious consequences for interpretations of the opportunities and challenges of Weimar democracy. In fact, however, both the narrative of stability and the idea of supratemporal, unshakable political models are in doubt if political and intellectual interwar Britain is given the merit of closer attention. Historical coincidence brought about the convergence of both aspects at the height of the crisis. British historian and philosopher of history Herbert Butterfield dated the conclusion of his famous criticism of the *Whig Interpretation of History* to September 1931.³ On September 19, Britain suspended the partial gold convertibility of its currency. By late August, the Labour government had collapsed. After consultations with party leaders, King George V appointed the “National Government” of representatives of all parties, “his government in a way that was not true of any other administration.”⁴ Until 1945, great coalitions, crisis and war governments governed Great Britain, as they did from 1915 to 1922.⁵

The political crisis management went hand in hand with intellectual crisis reflection. In the fall of 1931, liberal author Leonard Woolf of the Bloomsbury milieu and conservative Eustace Percy, minister in Stanley Baldwin’s cabinet, asked the BBC’s mass audience every Thursday evening “Can Democracy Survive?”⁶ The pluralism theorist, socialist thinker and Labour politician Harold Laski also noted that democracy was in crisis. In April 1931 he spoke of “how near our feet lie to the abyss.”⁷ He diagnosed the dissolution of political conventions: “It is obvious that any view which places confidence in the power of universal suffrage and representative institutions, unaided and of themselves, to secure a permanently well-ordered

1 This essay is a revised and abbreviated English version of an article first published in German: Tim Müller, “Von der ‘Whig Interpretation’ zur Fragilität der Demokratie: Weimar als geschichtstheoretisches Problem,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 44 (2018): 430-465.

2 See Horst Möller, *Europa zwischen den Weltkriegen* (Munich, 1998), 13; 134.

3 Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* [1931] (New York, 1965), vi.

4 Martin Pugh, “Hurrah for the Blackshirts!” *Fascists and Fascism in Britain between the Wars* (London, 2006), 241; 315 f. All emphases appear in the original text.

5 See for example Pugh, “Hurrah for the Blackshirts!”; idem, *The Making of Modern British Politics 1867-1945* (Oxford, 2002); Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age. Britain between the Wars* (London, 2009); Ross McKibbin, *Parties and People. England 1914-1951* (Oxford, 2010); Philip Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin. Conservative Leadership and National Values* (Cambridge, 1999); idem., *National Crisis and National Government. British Politics, the Economy and Empire, 1926-1932* (Cambridge, 1992).

6 See for example *The Radio Times*, September 25, 1931, 754; December 11, 1931, 874; Leonard Woolf and Lord Eustace Percy, “Can Democracy Survive?,” in Mary Adams, ed., *The Modern State* (London, 1933), 15-162.

7 Harold J. Laski, *Democracy in Crisis* [1933], (Chapel Hill, 1935), 9.

8 Laski, "The Present Position of Representative Democracy," *American Political Science Review* 26 (1932): 629-641, here 629 f. and 639-641.

9 On crisis, its perception and strategies for reform, also see Helen McCarthy, "Whose Democracy? Histories of British Political Culture between the Wars," *Historical Journal* 55 (2012): 221-238; idem, "Parties, Voluntary Associations and Democratic Politics in Interwar Britain," *Historical Journal* 50 (2007): 891-912; John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses. Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (London, 1992); Michael Freedman, *Liberalism Divided. A Study in British Political Thought 1914-1939* (Oxford, 1986); Ben Jackson, *Equality and the British Left. A Study in Progressive Political Thought, 1900-64* (Manchester, 2007); Daniel Ritschel, *The Politics of Planning. The Debate on Economic Planning in Britain in the 1930s* (Oxford, 1997); Laura Beers, Geraint Thomas, eds., *Brave New World. Democratic and Imperial Nation-Building in Britain between the Wars* (London, 2012).

10 On his conservative political leanings, see Martina Steber, "Herbert Butterfield, der Nationalsozialismus und die deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft," *VfZ* 55 (2007): 269-307; Michael Bentley, *The Life and Thought of Herbert Butterfield. History, Science and God* (Cambridge, 2011); C. T. McIntire, *Herbert Butterfield. Historian as Dissenter* (New Haven, 2004).

11 Butterfield, *Whig Interpretation*, 5-7.

commonwealth is seriously under-estimating the complexity of the issue." The attractiveness of democracy was due to the coincidence of quite special conditions. Yet "the conditions of this success ... depended upon the increasing economic returns of America and the imperialistic exploitation of the colored peoples." In this crisis, Great Britain hardly differed from other democracies: "Representative democracy, at this stage, is, briefly put, asked to solve the problem by paralleling the political equality it achieved with a similar economic equality." Whether such a way out of the existential crisis would be found remained unclear: "It is as yet difficult to scan the horizon of politics and discern there hope that this will be the case."⁸ Irrespective of whether the crisis was argumentatively aggravated or defused, socialist, liberal and conservative intellectuals and politicians found that the traditional conceptual instruments were no longer sufficient to grasp the present. Their horizon of expectations did not rule out the end of democracy; there was a widespread call for a transformation of democracy.⁹

Britain was neither seen as particularly stable, nor was the idea accepted that clear-cut political judgments could be made from a position of progress that seemed convinced of its own superiority: It was at this moment that Butterfield's historical-theoretical intervention appeared. With his critique of traditions of complacency, he found himself in a cross-partisan intellectual society.¹⁰ In the historiographical tradition that he dissected, narratives of progress were predominant. Butterfield considered the tendency to divide the actors of history into "the friends and enemies of progress" according to the standards of the present day — whether the self-aggrandizement of the present occurred through appropriation or through the devaluation of history — to be the most persistent obstacle to historical research. It was so deeply rooted, he wrote "that even when piece-meal research has corrected the story in detail, we are slow in re-valuing the whole and reorganizing the broad outlines of the theme in the light of these discoveries." This epistemological weakness led to the creation of "the large story on the same pattern all the time." But before the critic could become too sure of his cause, Butterfield self-critically recalled the constraints of historical narrative: "There is a tendency for all history to veer into Whig history."¹¹

II. The postwar master narrative and Weimar democracy

Butterfield brings to light a problem that has been given little consideration in historical controversies: Weimar is not only a historical, but also a historical-theoretical or "metahistorical" problem. As obvious

as this insight is for a theoretically enlightened historian,¹² one would like to see an intensification of historical-theoretical reflection in Weimar debates whose controversial questions revolve around primarily political conflicts of interpretation.¹³

If there is a Whig interpretation of German postwar history — and that is the progress or success story against which the Weimar Republic must assert itself¹⁴ — then there are consequences for the representation of Weimar democracy. This becomes evident in the classic pattern of interpretation par excellence — the *Sonderweg* — which no Whig interpretation of the history of German democracy can do without.¹⁵ The “special path,” that “paradigm lost,”¹⁶ seems to have long since become obsolete and yet it is not. The omnipresence of *Sonderweg* elements in popular, artistic, literary, and mass media representations is beyond question. In the recently celebrated series “Babylon Berlin,” a leading German medium recognizes the “longing for death and totalitarian twilight of the Weimar Republic.”¹⁷ But current contributions can also be found in research that formulate explicit theses of a German special path.¹⁸ However, the problem does not only concern explicit narratives of a special path. Thomas Welskopp calls the special path a continuing “meta-narrative” pursuing the narrative strategy of the “construction of ‘ideal’ courses

12 As examples of the extensive literature on this topic, see Reinhart Koselleck, “Über die Theoriebedürftigkeit der Geschichtswissenschaft,” in id., *Zeitschichten. Studien zur Historik* (Frankfurt, 2000), 298–316; Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973); Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust. History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca, 1994); for more recent studies: Martin Baumeister et al., eds., *Die Kunst der Geschichte. Historiographie, Ästhetik, Erzählung* (Göttingen, 2009).

13 Among the exceptions and inspirations for this article are Benjamin Ziemann, “Weimar Was Weimar. Politics, Culture and the Emplotment of the

German Republic,” *German History* 28 (2010): 542–571; Rüdiger Graf, *Die Zukunft der Weimarer Republik. Krisen und Zukunftsaneignungen in Deutschland 1918–1933* (Munich, 2008).

14 On the political necessity of a Whig interpretation see Andreas Wirsching, “Krisenzeit der „Klassischen Moderne“ oder deutscher „Sonderweg“? Überlegungen zum Projekt Faktoren der Stabilität und Instabilität in der Demokratie der Zwischenkriegszeit: Deutschland und Frankreich im Vergleich,” in Horst Möller and Udo Wengst, eds., *50 Jahre Institut für Zeitgeschichte. Eine Bilanz* (Munich, 1999), 365–381, here 381; idem., “Verfassung und Verfassungskultur im Europa

der Zwischenkriegszeit,” in Christoph Gusy, ed., *Demokratie in der Krise. Europa in der Zwischenkriegszeit* (Baden-Baden, 2008), 371–389, here 388.

15 A connection between the critique of the British Whig interpretation and the critique of the German *Sonderweg* is made by Arnd Bauerkämper, “Geschichtsschreibung als Projektion. Die Revision der „Whig Interpretation of History“ und die Kritik am Paradigma vom „deutschen Sonderweg“ seit den 1970er Jahren,” in Stefan Berger et al., eds., *Historikerdialoge. Geschichte, Mythos und Gedächtnis im deutsch-englischen kulturellen Austausch* (Göttingen, 2003), 383–438.

16 James J. Sheehan, “Paradigm Lost? The „Sonderweg“ Revisited,” in Gunilla Budde et al., eds., *Transnationale Geschichte. Themen, Tendenzen und Theorien* (Göttingen, 2006), 150–160, here 155. Despite all the differences, these interpretations showed a similarity that, according to Sheehan, justify describing them as a *Sonderweg* narrative in a broader sense.

17 Spiegel Online, October 13, 2017, <http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/tv/babylon-berlin-von-tomytkwer-serienmeisterwerk-ueber-die-weimarer-republik-a-1170044.html>.

18 For example, see Volker Berghahn, “Political Democracy and the Shaping of Capitalism pre-1914 America and Germany,” in Paul Nolte, ed., *Transatlantic Democracy in the Twentieth Century. Transfer and Transformation* (Berlin, 2016); Hartmut Spenkuch, “Vergleichsweise besonders? Politisches System und Strukturen Preußens als Kern des „deutschen Sonderwegs“,” *GG* 29 (2003): 262–293; Helmut Walser Smith, *Fluchtpunkt 1941. Kontinuitäten der deutschen Geschichte* (Stuttgart, 2010); Thomas Mergel in “Roundtable. „1933“ Eighty Years On,” *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 14 (2013): 431–448, here 437.

as a story board.” Even “far-reaching revisions of empirical assumptions” — reminiscent of Butterfield — could neither change the overall interpretation nor trigger theoretical “self-reflection.”¹⁹

This proves to be true when it comes to democracy. The idea of a Western success story of democracy, in which German history also participated after 1945,²⁰ is the core of the Whig interpretation. This systematic methodical distortion may also be due to political intentions,²¹ but at the same time, it results from narrative constraints, because in this way, in the words of Dieter Langewiesche, “the history of deficits and the staggered liberation from them over time” can be told simultaneously.²² An interpretation that thinks of normality and crisis together without elevating and celebrating the respective present and incorporates the possibility of catastrophe into normality²³ seems to be too narratively challenging.

It is part of the Whig narrative of the Western and Federal Republic’s success story to order German history before 1945 according to the pattern of lacks and lags, of deficits and delays on the way to a democracy — defined as non-deficient and not delayed.²⁴ This is a theoretically and empirically extremely problematic approach, to which David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley objected early on.²⁵ The social-theoretical argument²⁶ has been extended to include global history, combined with a call for self-reflection beyond

19 Thomas Welskopp, “Identität *ex negativo*. Der „deutsche Sonderweg“ als Metaerzählung in der bundesdeutschen Geschichtswissenschaft der siebziger und achtziger Jahre,” in Konrad H. Jarausch and Martin Sabrow, eds., *Die historische Meistererzählung. Deutungslinien der deutschen Nationalgeschichte nach 1945* (Göttingen, 2002), 109–139, here 130, 135 f., 137 f.

20 See for example Edgar Wolfrum, *Die geglättete Demokratie. Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland von ihren Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (Stuttgart, 2007).

21 See Sebastian Ullrich, *Der Weimar-Komplex. Das Scheitern der ersten deutschen Demokratie und die politische Kultur der frühen Bundesrepublik* (Göttingen, 2009), 536–613; Koselleck, “Deutschland – eine verspätete Nation?,” in id., *Zeitschichten*, 359–380, here 376; Niklas Olsen, *History in the Plural. An Introduction to the Work of Reinhart Koselleck* (New York, 2012), 248.

22 Dieter Langewiesche, “Der „deutsche Sonderweg“. Defizitgeschichte als geschichtspolitische Zukunftskonstruktion nach dem Ersten und Zweiten Weltkrieg,” in Horst Carl et al., eds., *Kriegsniederlagen. Erfahrungen und Erinnerungen* (Berlin, 2004), 57–65, here 58.

23 See Detlev J. K. Peukert, *Die Weimarer Republik. Krisenjahre der Klassischen Moderne* (Frankfurt, 1987), 11; 270 f.; id., *Max Webers Diagnose der Moderne* (Göttingen, 1989); Frank Bajohr et al., eds., *Zivilisation und Barbarei. Die widersprüchlichen Potentiale der Moderne* (Hamburg, 1991); Peter Fritzsche, “Did Weimar Fail?,” *Journal of Modern History* 68 (1996): 629–656; for more recent studies: Moritz Föllmer and Rüdiger Graf, eds., *Die Krise der Weimarer Republik. Zur Kritik eines Deutungsmusters* (Frankfurt, 2005); Tim B. Müller and Adam Tooze, eds., *Normalität und Fragilität. Demokratie nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg*

(Hamburg, 2015); Andreas Braune and Michael Dreyer, eds., *Republikanischer Alltag. Die Weimarer Demokratie und die Suche nach Normalität* (Stuttgart, 2017).

24 Ian Kershaw states that there was a path of “normal modernization,” which the Federal Republic eventually pursued: Heinrich August Winkler, ed., *Die deutsche Staatskrise 1930–1933. Handlungsspielräume und Alternativen* (Munich, 1992), 290 f. See Nils Gilman, *Mandarin of the Future. Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore, 2003); Detlef Pollack, “Modernisierungstheorie – revised. Entwurf einer Theorie moderner

Gesellschaften,” *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 45 (2016): 219–240.

25 See David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History. Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford, 1984).

26 See for example Randall Collins, “German-Bashing and the Theory of Democratic Modernization,” *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 24 (1995): 3–21; George Steinmetz, “German Exceptionalism and the Origins of National Socialism. The Career of a Concept,” in Ian Kershaw and Moshe Lewin, eds., *Stalinism and Nazism. Dictatorships in Comparison* (Cambridge, 1997), 251–284.

the boundaries of Eurocentric perspectives and concepts. Dipesh Chakrabarty formulates a convincing objection to the hegemonic Western view, which interprets the other “in terms of a lack, an absence, or an incompleteness that translates into ‘inadequacy,’” and pleads for the perception of “plenitude” and “creativity.”²⁷

Lacks and lags in the history of Weimar democracy often result from a nation-centered perspective. Here are a few examples: In contrast to the critical view of German history, which must reveal its “democratic balance,” the history of democracy of Western reference cases is still presented today as an unproblematic history of progress.²⁸ In contrast to England and France, where the right to vote came much later, the history of the women’s movement and women’s suffrage, for example, serve as evidence of German democratic deficits²⁹ regardless of the research that describes Germany as a typical case.³⁰ In a German-American comparison, “universal white manhood suffrage” is recognized as “good progress towards greater democratic participation” in the United States while racism is ignored as a dying relic of a pre-democratic era.³¹ But slavery, racism, segregation, legal inequality and violence were an inseparable component of American democratic history, the virulence of which did not diminish in the nineteenth century.³² According to Laura F. Edwards, the stop-and-go process, in which racist violence and exclusion were repeatedly extended,³³ was even constitutive for American democracy: “White men were constituted as freemen through their rights over those without rights.”³⁴

27 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2000), 32; 35. For a similar rejection of the idea of temporal lags, see Koselleck, *Deutschland — eine verspätete Nation?*, 362 f.; see Olsen, *History*, 246-249.

28 Spenkuch, *Vergleichsweise besonders?*, 280; see *ibid.* 270-273.

29 See for example Jad Adams, *Women and the Vote. A World History* (Oxford, 2014); Ingrid Sharp, “Overcoming Inner Division. Post-Suffrage Strategies in the Organised German Women’s Movement,” *Women’s History*

Review 11 (2013): 1-18; Angelika Schaser, “Zur Einführung des Frauenwahlrechts vor 90 Jahren am 12. November 1918,” *Feministische Studien* 1 (2009): 97-110.

30 See for example Gisela Bock, “Das politische Denken des Suffragismus. Deutschland um 1900 im internationalen Vergleich,” in *idem, Geschlechtergeschichten der Neuzeit. Ideen, Politik, Praxis* (Göttingen, 2014), 168-203.

31 Berghahn, *Political Democracy*, 20 f.

32 See for example Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom.*

The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia (New York, 2003); Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic. An Account of the United States Government’s Relations to Slavery*, ed. Ward M. McAfee (Oxford, 2001).

33 See for example Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself. The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York, 2013), 29-57; 96-129; 227-275; Jason Scott Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism. The Political Economy of Public Works, 1933-1936* (Cambridge, 2006); Ta-Nehisi Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power. An American Tragedy* (New York, 2017), 184; 186-191; 207 f.

34 Laura F. Edwards, “The Contradictions of Democracy in American Institutions and Practices,” in Joanna Innes, Mark Philp, eds., *Re-imagining Democracy in the Age of Revolutions. France, America, Britain, Ireland 1750-1850*, (Oxford, 2013), 40-54, here 54; see for example Lacy E. Ford, *Deliver Us from Evil. The Slavery Question in the Old South* (New York, 2009); Barbara Young Welke, *Law and the Borders of Belonging in the Long Nineteenth-Century United States* (Cambridge, 2010); Glenn C. Altschuler, Stuart M. Blumin, *Rude Republic. Americans and Their Politics in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 2000); on suffrage: Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote. The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York, 2009); Hedwig Richter, *Moderne Wahlen. Eine Geschichte der Demokratie in Preußen und den USA im 19. Jahrhundert* (Hamburg, 2017), 71-93; 418-444; on the Civil War and democratic ideas on both sides: James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades. Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (Oxford, 1997); *idem, Battle Cry of Freedom. The Civil War Era* (Oxford, 2003).

- 35 Martin Pugh, "Hurrah for the Blackshirts!," 315; 241.
- 36 See Williamson, Baldwin, 143; 145; 203-242.
- 37 See Andreas Wirsching, Jürgen Eder, eds., *Vernunftrepublikanismus in der Weimarer Republik. Politik, Literatur, Wissenschaft* (Stuttgart, 2008).
- 38 Gerald D. Feldman, "Der 30. Januar 1933 und die politische Kultur von Weimar," in Winkler, *Staatskrise*, 263-276, here 266; Christoph Gusy, "Verfassungsumbruch bei Kriegsende," in idem, *Demokratie in der Krise*, 15-51, here 37; Wirsching, *Krisenzeit*, 367; 377; 380 f.; see idem, *Verfassung und Verfassungskultur: the democratic beginning in 1918/19* "was ailing" from its "birth defects" (371), the late formation of a nation state was one of the reasons why the democracy failed (372 f.; 375; 388), just like the unbalanced statist tradition that differed from the "western European zone" (380-383).
- 39 See Margaret Lavinia Anderson, *Lehrjahre der Demokratie. Wahlen und politische Kultur im Deutschen Kaiserreich* (Stuttgart, 2009), 48 f.; 51; also see Altschuler and Blumin, *Rude Republic*; Edwards, *Contradictions of Democracy*; Joris Gijzenbergh et al., eds., *Creative Crises of Democracy* (Brussels, 2012); Jussi Kurunmäki et al., eds., *Democracy in Modern Europe. A Conceptual History* (New York, 2018); Jussi Kurunmäki and Johan Strang, eds., *Rhetorics of Nordic Democracy* (Helsinki, 2010); Müller, Toose, *Normalität und Fragilität*; Daniel T. Rodgers, *Contested Truths. Keywords of American Politics since Independence* (Cambridge, 1998).
- 40 See Müller, "Deutschlands 'Anderssein', der 'Westen' und die Demokratie. Hugo Preuß' Weltkriegsschrift 'Das deutsche Volk und die Politik'," in Detlef Lehnert, ed., *Das deutsche Volk und die Politik: Hugo Preuß und der Streit um „Sonderwege“* (Berlin, 2017), 41-82.

Nor did democracy remain unchallenged in Britain after the First World War. "Whatever the reason for the failure of fascism to grow into a major movement in interwar Britain, the explanation does not primarily lie in British political culture," explains Martin Pugh. "Timing and contingencies" play the main role here, including the safety valve of the monarchy.³⁵ The example of three-term Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin shows just how difficult the path to democracy was even for moderate politicians. Baldwin saw himself as an educator for democracy, but measured democratic maturity against conservative electoral successes and declared in 1937 that the masses were not qualified for the franchise.³⁶ Similar statements by a Weimar politician would probably be seen as evidence of authoritarian tendencies that hardly qualified him as a *Vernunftrepublikaner*.³⁷

When grand masters of Weimar historiography attest the lack of "an unshakable democratic tradition and devotion," "differences in tradition," or the "absence" of a democratic inheritance, as a "deficit in Germany's political culture," due to which Weimar has deviated from the "normal path," their thinking in the categories of lacks and lags becomes obvious.³⁸ For before 1918 there were hardly any democratic political cultures to be found even outside Germany, yet democratic elements in political culture could be found in Germany just as elsewhere.³⁹ Moreover, sources that were often used to support the idea of major differences between German and "western" political traditions have recently been undergoing thorough re-readings.⁴⁰

Without the framework of lacks and lags, however, it is possible to develop intriguing questions in the history of democracy that are dedicated to transnational normality and at the same time to the fragility of the new phenomenon of democracy. These include the problem of the integration of old elites and conservative forces, which did not occur without violent tensions anywhere.⁴¹ Fascist and anti-democratic tendencies were widespread on the British right⁴² while antiparliamentarism and sympathies for fascism existed among

41 See Mergel, "Das Scheitern des deutschen Tory-Konservatismus. Die Umformung der DNVP zu einer rechtsradikalen Partei 1928-1932," *HZ* 276 (2003): 323-368.

42 See Martin Pugh, "Hurrah for the Blackshirts!"; Richard Griffiths, *Fellow Travel-*

lers of the Right. British Enthusiasts for Nazi Germany 1933-1939 (London, 1980); idem, *Patriotism Perverted. Captain Ramsay, the Right Club and British Anti-Semitism, 1939-1940* (London, 1998); Dan Stone, *Breeding Superman. Nietzsche, Race and Eugenics in Edwardian and In-*

terwar Britain (Liverpool, 2002); idem., *Responses to Nazism in Britain 1933-1939. Before War and Holocaust* (Basingstoke, 2003); Bernhard Dietz, *Neo-Tories. Britische Konservative im Aufstand gegen Demokratie und politische Moderne, 1929-1939* (Munich, 2012).

conservatives in Sweden or Finland; it was not until the 1930s that democratic tendencies gained the upper hand there.⁴³

The formation of a democratic conservatism was anything but self-evident. The theory of democracy emphasizes the centrality of this question for the interwar period, the dependence on conservative forces and the forms in which they were organized and able to articulate their interests. This exposed the young democracies to considerable contingency. A strong organization of antidemocratic old elites seems to have contributed to their long-term integration into democracy and reduced the likelihood of an alliance with militant-revolutionary antidemocratic movements.⁴⁴ If, however, “tradition differences” in the sense of a lack of long-term democratic traditions are ultimately offered as an explanation for the destruction of democracy, this crucial historical problem is ignored. Such readings also ignore the fact that in reaction to developments in Germany after 1933 a new reflection on democracy and dictatorship began in Western nations. Democratic self-understandings and traditions — later projected back into a *longue durée* of democracy⁴⁵ — were developed in the confrontations of those years; political options previously represented among the elites, such as anti-Semitism and racism, were now gradually more or less outlawed.⁴⁶

Time and again, up to the most recent publications, democracy is equated with an ahistorical, anachronistic norm of parliamentary democracy by which Weimar’s failures and omissions are measured.⁴⁷ Transformations of parliamentary government, for example by strengthening the executive branch or corporatist institutions, as they were often conceived and established in democracies, are thus classified as antiparliamentary.⁴⁸ The dichotomy of authoritarian and

» *Deutschland und Frankreich 1918-1933/39. Berlin und Paris im Vergleich* (Munich, 1999), 3; 7; Gusy, *Verfassungsumbruch*, 10 f; 15 f; 22; Jochen Hung, “The „Ullstein Spirit“. The Ullstein Publishing House, the End of the Weimar Republic and the Making of Cold War German Identity, 1925-77,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 53 (2018): 158-184, here 160 f.; Steffen Kailitz, ed., *Nach dem „Großen Krieg“. Vom Triumph zum Desaster der Demokratie 1918/19 bis 1939* (Göttingen, 2017). On anachronism: Marcus Llanque, *Demokratisches Denken im Krieg. Die deutsche Debatte im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Berlin, 2000), 112 f.

48 See Gusy, *Verfassungsumbruch*, 45; 49; Thomas Raithel, “Die Haltung von Eliten, Verbänden und Parteien. Überlegungen zur Stabilität und Instabilität parlamentarischer Demokratien zwischen den Weltkriegen,” in Gusy, *Demokratie in der Krise*, 105-121, here 116-120. — On the “compatibility” of democracy and corporatism, however, see: Werner Abelschauser, “Freiheitlicher Korporatismus im Kaiserreich und in der Weimarer Republik,” in id., ed., *Die Weimarer Republik als Wohlfahrtsstaat* (Stuttgart, 1987), 147-170; Andrea Rehling, “Demokratie und Korporatismus – eine Beziehungsgeschichte,” in Müller, Toose, *Normalität und Fragilität*, 133-153; Stefan Couperus, “Fixing Democracy? Political Representation and the Crisis of Democracy in Interwar Europe and the Netherlands,” in Gijzenbergh, *Creative Crises*, 269-290. On the subject of corporatism, in his own field of economic history, Feldman rejects the idea of a German divergence: Feldman, *30. Januar 1933*, 265.

43 See Jussi Kurunmäki, “‘Nordic Democracy’ in 1935. On the Finnish and Swedish Rhetoric of Democracy,” in Kurunmäki and Strang, *Rhetorics*, 37-82, here 38 f.; 46-49; Francis Sejersted, *The Age of Social Democracy. Norway and Sweden in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 2011), 73-78.

44 See Daniel Ziblatt, *Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy* (Cambridge, 2017).

45 See Marcus Llanque, “Die Diktatur im Horizont der Demokratieidee. Zur verfassungspolitischen Debatte der Zwischenkriegszeit,” in Gusy, *Demokratie in der Krise*, 52-85, here 57; Paul Nolte, “Jenseits des Westens? Überlegungen zu einer Zeitgeschichte der Demokratie,” *VfZ* 61 (2013): 275-301; Pugh, “Hurrah for the Blackshirts!”, 316-319; Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, 29-57; Kurunmäki, “Nordic Democracy.”

46 See Mark Mazower, *Der dunkle Kontinent. Europa im 20. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 2000), 155 f.

47 See Feldman, *30. Januar 1933*, 264; 271; Gerhard Schulz, “Bemerkungen zur Wegscheide zwischen parlamentarischer und autoritärer Entwicklung in der Geschichte der Weimarer Republik,” in Winkler, *Staatskrise*, 39-47; Wirsching, *Vom Weltkrieg zum Bürgerkrieg? Politischer Extremismus in »*

democratic-parliamentary rule that is widespread in research⁴⁹ does not do justice to historical “confusion,”⁵⁰ such as the authoritarian tendencies of “militant” democracies, as demanded not only by Weimar democrats,⁵¹ nor does this dichotomy reflect complex findings on the relationship between authority and democracy.⁵² There was hardly any clear alternative between democracy and an authoritarian state; rather, the transitions were fluid⁵³ and authoritarian instruments were sometimes able to enhance democratic legitimacy. Moreover, the Weimar debate about the authoritarian safeguarding of democracy was by no means specific to Germany, but was “continued in Great Britain after 1933.”⁵⁴

It is not only here that contemporary perspectives are sidelined — or distorted in favor of the overrepresented voices on the right — instead of using their heuristic potential to open up a fragile order with confusing constellations.⁵⁵ Deviating perspectives in the sources are often devalued as naïve. The interpretation of the Brüning government as a transitional regime to an authoritarian state without parties, for example, stands in contrast to contemporary perception in leading media,⁵⁶ and dating the end of Weimar democracy to 1930,

49 See Schulz, *Bemerkungen*; Dirk Berg-Schlosser, Jeremy Mitchell, eds., *Authoritarianism and Democracy in Europe 1919-39. Comparative Analyses* (London, 2002); id. eds., *Conditions of Democracy in Europe, 1919-39. Systematic Case Studies* (London, 2000); but also Ziblatt, *Conservative Parties*, 6.

50 Marc Bloch, *Apologie der Geschichtswissenschaft oder Der Beruf des Historikers*, ed. Peter Schöttler (Stuttgart, 2002), 168.

51 See Arnold Brecht, “Die Auflösung der Weimarer Republik und die Politische Wissenschaft,” *Zeitschrift für Politik*, N.F. 2 (1955): 291-308; id., “Democracy - Challenge to Theory,” *Social Research* 13 (1946): 195-224, here 216-222; 224; Udi Greenberg, *The Weimar Century. German Émigrés and the Ideological Foundations of the Cold War* (Princeton, 2014), 169-210; Michael Dreyer, “Weimar als „wehrhafte Demokratie - ein unterschätztes Vorbild,“ in Michael Schultheiß, Sebastian Lasch, eds., *Die Weimarer Verfassung. Wert und Wirkung für die Demokratie* (Erfurt, 2009), 161-189; Stefan Vogt, *Nationaler Sozialismus und Soziale Demokratie. Die sozialdemokratische Junge Rechte 1918-1945* (Bonn, 2006).

52 See Yves Cohen, *Le siècle des chefs. Une histoire transnationale du commandement et de l'autorité, 1890-194*, (Paris, 2013); Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, 29-57; 96-129; Moritz Föllmer, “Führung und Demokratie in Europa,” in Müller, Tooze, *Normalität und Fragilität*, 177-197; Elisabeth Dieterman, “Demokratische Perspektiven in den Niederlanden der 1930er Jahre,” in *ibid.*, 421-435; Henk te Velde, *Stijlen van leiderschap. Persoon en politiek van Thorbecke tot Den Uyl* (Amsterdam, 2002); Archie Brown, *The Myth of the Strong Leader. Political Leadership in Modern Politics* (New York, 2014); Anthony McElligott, *Rethinking the Weimar Republic. Authority and Authoritarianism 1916-1936* (London, 2013).

53 Karl Dietrich Bracher analyzed the “authoritarian transformation” not as a dichotomy, but as a continuum open in both directions: Karl Dietrich Bracher, *Die Auflösung der Weimarer Republik. Eine Studie zum Problem des Machtverfalls in der Demokratie* (Düsseldorf, 1984), 302 f.

54 Llanque, *Diktatur*, 75; see Stone, *Responses to Nazism*; Giovanni Capoccia, *Defending Democracy. Reactions to Extremism in Interwar Europe* (Baltimore, 2005).

55 On this topic also see Eberhard Kolb, “Die Weimarer Republik und das Problem der Kontinuität vom Kaiserreich zum „Dritten Reich,“ in id., *Umbrüche deutscher Geschichte. 1866/71 - 1918/19 - 1929/33*.

Ausgewählte Aufsätze, ed. Dieter Langewiesche and Klaus Schönhoven (Munich, 1993), 359-372.

56 See “Gestaltwandel deutscher Demokratie. Eine Rückschau,” *Frankfurter Zeitung*, January 1st, 1931, Nr. 1; Rudolf Kircher, “Der Reichskanzler,” *Frankfurter Zeitung*, July 26, 1931, Nr. 549. Harry Graf Kessler (*Das Tagebuch, Bd. 9: 1926-1937*, ed. Sabine Gruber and Ulrich Ott (Stuttgart, 2010), 427) wrote on May 30, 1932: “Brüning stepped down today, or rather, he was dismissed by Hindenburg. [...] Today means the tentative end of the parliamentary republic.” Also see Bracher, *Auflösung der Weimarer Republik*, 465.

as is customary among well-known experts,⁵⁷ is far removed from the experiences and expectations of those dramatic years.⁵⁸ This dissonance could be productively discussed in the history of democracy: What determines our judgment as to when a democracy ends?

New questions are needed to grasp more clearly the ambivalences of Weimar's democratic history, the double face of crisis and resilience, fragility and normality. This begins with talking about democracy. Some evidence of an assumed authoritarian longing can plausibly be read as proof of the self-evidence of the parliamentary system.⁵⁹ The consensus on the inevitability of democracy was so considerable that its supporters believed themselves confident of the insurmountability of democracy. German chancellor Gustav Bauer spoke in 1919 of the "invincibility" of his internationalist vision of democracy,⁶⁰ while even opponents, who were operating as mass participatory movements in democracy, sometimes rather uncomfortably embracing the concept of democracy for themselves, had to acquire democratic legitimacy.⁶¹

Even groundbreaking new research sometimes does little to counter traditional patterns of interpretation. Many studies still exaggerate

57 See Larry Eugene Jones, *Hitler versus Hindenburg. The 1932 Presidential Elections and the End of the Weimar Republic* (Cambridge, 2015), 5; 8; Andreas Wirsching, *Die Weimarer Republik. Politik und Gesellschaft* (Munich, 2008), 33; Ian Kershaw, Peter Krüger, Gerald Feldman and Klaus Schönhoven, in Winkler, *Staatskrise*, 51; S. 53 f.; Hans Mommsen, *Die verspielte Freiheit. Der Weg der Republik von Weimar in den Untergang 1918-1933* (Berlin, 1989), 289-293; 302.

58 Among contemporaries, Arthur Rosenberg was not the only one to date the end of the republic to 1930 and characterize Brüning as a dictator (Rosenberg, *Geschichte der Weimarer Republik* [1935] (Hamburg, 1991), 79 f; 205; 207; 210.)

Being a Communist at the time, he did not represent the democratic mainstream. These assessments were also made by right-leaning middle-class sympathizers of fascism; see for example Ludwig Bernhard, "Nationalsozialismus," in Oscar Müller, ed., *Krisis. Ein politisches Manifest* (Weimar, 1932), 209-216, here 214 f. For a non-communist left-wing republican like Otto Kirchheimer, the "process of republicanism" continued in 1930 despite all criticism of the class-based state: Otto Kirchheimer, "Weimar - und was dann? Analyse einer Verfassung [1930]," in id., *Politik und Verfassung* (Frankfurt, 1964), 9-56, here 14 f.; only Papen's "Prussian action" constituted a breach of the constitu-

tion; see Riccardo Bavaj, "Otto Kirchheimers Parlamentarismuskritik in der Weimarer Republik. Ein Fall von „Linkschmittianismus“?," *VfZ* 55 (2007): 33-51.

59 Most recently, see McElligott, *Rethinking the Weimar Republic*, 179-221.

60 Tim B. Müller, *Nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg. Lebensversuche moderner Demokratien* (Hamburg, 2014), 74-113. On democratic confidence despite the awareness of fragility even in the "late" republic, see Ferdinand Aloys Hermens, *Demokratie und Kapitalismus. Ein Versuch zur Soziologie der Staatsformen* (Munich, 1931); "Dieser Wahlkampf," *Frankfurter Zeitung*, February, 28, 1933, Nr. 159.

61 See Koselleck et al., "Art. Volk, Nation, Nationalismus, Masse," in Otto Brunner et al., eds., *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (Stuttgart, 2004), Bd. 7, 141-431, here 382; 390-402; 407-415; Jan-Werner Müller, *Contesting Democracy. Political Ideas in Twentieth-Century Europe* (New Haven, 2011); McElligott, *Rethinking the Weimar Republic*; Llanque, *Diktatur*, 70 f.; Michael Wildt, "Volksgemeinschaft und Führererwartung in der Weimarer Republik," in Ute Daniel et al., eds., *Politische Kultur und Medienwirklichkeiten in den 1920er Jahren* (Munich, 2010), 181-204; Ralph Jessen, Hedwig Richter, eds., *Voting for Hitler and Stalin. Elections under 20th Century Dictatorships* (Frankfurt, 2011); Peter Fritzsche, *Rehearsals for Fascism. Populism and Political Mobilization in Weimar Germany* (New York, 1990); id., *Germans into Nazis* (Cambridge, MA, 1999).

the violence of political conflict in the Weimar Republic, interpret it as a sign of doom, and ignore international parallels.⁶² Political community concepts are interpreted one-sidedly as authoritarian, antipluralistic and anti-liberal, as if there were no differentiated research into the concept of the *Volksgemeinschaft*.⁶³

The problem is of a theoretical nature. Arnold Brecht, a top Weimar civil servant and political theorist, already regarded democracy as a “challenge to theory”⁶⁴ against the background of his experience in Weimar. Of course, contemporary theory of democracy cannot be reduced to a common denominator.⁶⁵ But not only institutions and procedures, but also contingencies, economic, geopolitical and geographical conditions play a role in explaining the functioning of democracies. There is talk today of inherent instability, democratic deconsolidation, populist and authoritarian varieties emerging from democracy. Familiarization effects allow democracies without convinced democrats to become the rule.⁶⁶ In the German historiographical debate about Weimar such problem awareness can be found almost exclusively in the work of Eberhard Kolb, who warns against “a normative concept of ‘Weimar’” as a parliamentary democracy or emphasizes the mutability of democracy, the constitutional “state of suspense.”⁶⁷

62 Most recently, see Mark Jones, *Am Anfang war Gewalt. Die deutsche Revolution 1918/19 und der Beginn der Weimarer Republik* (Berlin, 2017), 254, 291, 343. On the debate: Benjamin Ziemann, “Germany after the First World War – A Violent Society? Results and Implications of Recent Research on Weimar Germany,” *Journal of Modern European History* 1 (2003): 80-95; id., *Front und Heimat. Ländliche Kriegserfahrungen im südlichen Bayern 1914-1923* (Essen, 1997); Dirk Schumann, *Politische Gewalt in der Weimarer Republik. Kampf um die Straße und Furcht vor dem Bürgerkrieg* (Essen, 2001); Sabine Kienitz, *Beschädigte Helden. Kriegsinvalidität und Körperbilder 1914-1923* (Paderborn, 2008); Sven Reichardt, *Faschistische Kampfbünde. Gewalt und Gemeinschaft im italienischen Squadristismus und in der deutschen SA* (Cologne, 2009); Peter Keller, „Die Wehrmacht der deutschen Republik ist die Reichswehr“. *Die deutsche Armee 1918-1921* (Paderborn, 2014).

63 See Feldman, 30. Januar 1933, 269 f.; Fritzsche, *Rehearsals for Fascism*; Thomas Mergel, “Dictatorship and Democracy 1918-1939,” in Helmut Walser Smith, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Modern German History* (Oxford, 2011), 423-452, here 428; 430 f; 433; 447; for new approaches: Wolfgang Hardtwig, “Volksgemeinschaft im Übergang. Von der Demokratie zum rassistischen Führerstaat,” in Detlef Lehnert, ed., *Gemeinschaftsdenken in Europa. Das Gesellschaftskonzept „Volksheim“ im Vergleich 1900-1938* (Cologne, 2013), 227-253.

64 See Brecht, *Democracy – Challenge to Theory*, 212-217; also his earlier monograph, *Prelude to Silence. The End of the German Republic* (New York, 1944).

65 For a historical overview, see Paul Nolte, *Was ist Demokratie? Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Munich, 2012); Hedwig Richter, Hubertus Buchstein, eds., *Idee und Praxis der Wahlen. Eine Geschichte der modernen Demokratie* (Wiesbaden, 2017).

66 See Robert A. Dahl, *On Democracy* (New Haven, 2000); Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, eds., *Democracy in Decline?* (Baltimore, 2015); Francis Fukuyama, *Political Order and Political Decay. From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy* (New York, 2014); Joshua Kurlantzick,

Democracy in Retreat. The Revolt of the Middle Class and the Worldwide Decline of Representative Government (New Haven, 2014); Steven Levitsky, Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York, 2018); Pippa Norris, *Democratic Deficit. Critical Citizens Revisited* (Cambridge, 2011); on the academic debate: Nicola Fuchs-Schündeln, Matthias Schündeln, “On the endogeneity of political preferences. Evidence from individual experience with democracy,” *Science* 347 (2015): 1145-1148; Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, “The Democratic Disconnect. The Danger of Deconsolidation,” *Journal of Democracy* 27/3. 2016: 5-17; Cas Mudde, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, eds., *Populism in Europe and the Americas. Threat or Corrective for*

Democracy? (Cambridge 2013); Carlos de la Torre, ed., *The Promise and Perils of Populism. Global Perspectives* (Lexington, 2014); Dirk Jörke and Veith Selk, *Theorien des Populismus zur Einführung* (Hamburg, 2017).

67 Kolb in Winkler, *Staatskrise*, 49. Ibid., 286 he points out the “longevity of a political system” as a “factor for creating legitimacy”: “Für die Weimarer Republik kam es in der existenzbedrohenden Krise von 1932/33 auf ihr bloßes Überleben als Verfassungsstaat mit dem Offenhalten der Möglichkeit zu späterer Reparlamentarisierung an.“ On France, see Philip Nord, *The Republican Moment. Struggles for Democracy in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, 1998).

From the perspective of democratic theory, an “unfinished democracy”⁶⁸ is a tautology: from John Dewey to Pierre Rosanvallon, the experimental, the constant further development characterizes democracy.⁶⁹ Democracy research, in the words of Adam Przeworski, is “a never-ending quest.” Weimar experts have to face the problem that in an international perspective “[d]emocracy turned out to be compatible with inequality, irrationality, injustice, particularistic enforcement of laws, lies and obfuscation, a technocratic policy style, and even a fair dose of arbitrary violence.” The history of democracy is too contradictory to be trivialized to confirm political norms: “The challenge is not just political but intellectual. It poses an entire research agenda.”⁷⁰

III. “Frequently inconsistent endeavors in flux” – history and theory

Yet this intellectual challenge not only involves the theory of democracy, but also the theory of history. Siegfried Kracauer, recently rediscovered as a historical thinker, was another Weimar contemporary. His work, *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, which the émigré scholar who died in 1966 could not complete, continued his decades-long preoccupation with the proprium of the historical. It testifies to his detailed reading of Ranke, Butterfield, Marc Bloch, and numerous contemporary historians and mentions his interlocutor Koselleck by name.⁷¹ It also raises illuminating questions for Weimar research.

At one point, Kracauer discusses his own experience as a well-known author and feature editor for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in the Weimar Republic, who, when suddenly confronted with the critical research of a young American historian, recognized the “incommensurable relationship” of his Weimar experience with the image of Weimar that had become dominant in contemporary historical research since the 1960s:

Everything he had dug up so far was true to the fact, while nothing had happened the way he related it [...] all that was a matter of fluctuating opinions, agonizing doubts, and spontaneous decisions during the 'twenties would freeze into a more or less rigid pattern of trends, cross-currents, majority and minority attitudes [...] many experiences I had then undergone were obviously doomed to slip through the net of the concepts and labels he used to establish his pattern [...] He did not represent the events as I knew

68 Horst Möller, *Die Weimarer Republik. Eine unvollendete Demokratie* (Munich, 2006).

69 See Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, 1991); Pierre Rosanvallon, *La Démocratie inachevée. Histoire de la souveraineté du peuple en France* (Paris, 2000); id., *Democracy Past and Future*, ed. Samuel Moyn (New York, 2006).

70 Adam Przeworski, “Democracy. A Never-Ending Quest,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 19 (2016): 1-12, here 4; 7.

71 Siegfried Kracauer, *History. Last Things before the Last* [1969], (Princeton, 1995); see Stephanie Baumann, *Im Vorraum der Geschichte. Siegfried Kracauers „History – The Last Things before the Last“* (Konstanz, 2014); Sabine Biebl, “Arbeit an der Biographie. Siegfried Kracauers historisches Rohmaterial,” *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte* 11/4 (2017): 115-121; Till van Rahden, “Lumpen sammeln. Mit Siegfried Kracauer im Dickicht des 19. Jahrhunderts,” *HZ* 307 (2018): 319-340; Jörg Später, *Siegfried Kracauer. Eine Biographie* (Berlin, 2016).

them — events in flux and amenable to change — but conceived of them as elements of a period which was now definitely a *fait accompli*.

Kracauer reflected on the price at which a history written from the perspective of those affected by it came.⁷² Nevertheless, his concern about the teleological compulsion to which a history in broad strokes is subject prevailed.⁷³ For Kracauer, historical reality was characterized by fluidity, a chaotic multiplicity of simultaneous processes, constant change, and contingency; what happened simultaneously and was related to each other was most likely to occur “independently of one another”;

the historian’s “historical and social environment” is not a fairly self-contained whole but a fragile compound of frequently inconsistent endeavors in flux [...] Even supposing that contemporary influences were better definable than they actually are, their binding power would still be limited by the mind’s freedom to initiate new situations, new systems of relationships.⁷⁴

Such historical-theoretical reflections are not suitable for historical-political lessons of a Whig interpretation, but such a more complex understanding of historical change could enrich histories of Weimar democracy. The contradictoriness of the diversity of development, the individuality and stubbornness of people and their stories, the constant transformation of even the enduring and the long-term phenomenon must be taken into consideration. Koselleck speaks of the “absurdity of linear questions of origin.”⁷⁵ A processualist sociology such as Andrew Abbott’s,⁷⁶ in particular his understanding of historical change, which analyzes the concept of stability as an illusion (and thus points out the theoretical weakness of the way of speaking of the illusion of stability in Weimar), can offer suggestions here. This interpretation of the fragility of social order makes it possible to theoretically sharpen the question central to the history of Weimar democracy about the transformation of the “normal” crisis into the catastrophe of 1932/33: “the social process reaches a true crisis when all of its loose reproduction mechanisms accidentally happen to fail at once. Then large change can happen and can happen quite suddenly, even given relatively small actions.”⁷⁷

72 See Kracauer, *History*, 86 f.

73 *Ibid.*, 119.

74 *Ibid.*, 66 f.

75 Koselleck, *Theoriebedürftigkeit*, 308.

76 See Andrew Abbott, “Sequences of Social Events. Concepts and Methods for the Analysis of Order in Social Processes,” *Historical Methods* 16 (1983): 129-147; *id.*, *Time Matters. On Theory and Method* (Chicago, 2002), 37-63; 129-160; *id.*, *Processual Sociology* (Chicago, 2016).

77 See Abbott, 37th Annual Marc Bloch Lecture, Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris, June 18, 2015, <http://home.uchicago.edu/aabbott/booksandpapers.html>.

When Kracauer insisted on “the mind’s freedom to initiate new situations,”⁷⁸ the possibility of the new in the midst of the existing references comes into view. In Reinhart Koselleck’s words, “the before and after of an event retains its own temporal quality, which can never be fully reduced to its longer-term conditions,”⁷⁹ an insight from which he concluded that the “causal genetic explanatory model” was generally called into question — explicitly with regard to what made National Socialism possible.⁸⁰ With regard to the “times of history,” Koselleck noted that history “is always about simultaneities of the non-simultaneous.”⁸¹

For Hannah Arendt, another witness, observer and thinker of this epoch, the “moral structure of Western society” had been destroyed and the “end of the bourgeois age” had occurred.⁸² What had happened could be “no longer understood within the framework of its categories” for historical and political science. This was not only about understanding totalitarian terror itself; totalitarianism had become the “stumbling block on the road toward the proper understanding of contemporary politics and society.” Mass murder, wars of aggression, imperial expansion of power, nationalism, racism, anti-Semitism were not new phenomena, but in the historical constellation since 1933 these elements, via “intermediary stages which are relatively normal and quite comprehensible,” crystallized into something unprecedented that shook all knowledge and forced the sciences to reconsider their hitherto unquestioned fundamental preconceptions.⁸³ In her book on totalitarianism, Arendt wrote “the totalitarian phenomenon can no more be explained from its elements and origins than other historical events of great significance, perhaps even less so.” National Socialism thus breaks “the continuity context of our history and the concepts and categories of our political thought.”⁸⁴

What conclusions can we draw from this for a history of democracy in Weimar? How can we avoid rationalizing National Socialism as a “relatively normal and quite comprehensible” problem explained by familiar means: “(not explained but) explained away

82 Hannah Arendt, “The Aftermath of Nazi Rule. Report from Germany [1950],” in id., *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954. Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York, 1994), 248-269, here 248; id., *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft. Antisemitismus, Imperialismus, totale Herrschaft* [1951], (Munich, 1996), 940. While the Western perspective lends itself to a critique of the categories of Western scholarship, Arendt does not ignore global phenomena of violence; see Ira Katznelson, *Desolation and Enlightenment. Political Knowledge after Total War, Totalitarianism, and the Holocaust* (New York, 2003), 69 f. On this and the following, see Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, “Koselleck, Arendt, and the Anthropology of Historical Experience,” *History and Theory* 49 (2010): 212-236, here 224-232.

83 Arendt, “Social Science Techniques and the Study of the Concentration Camps [1950],” in id., *Essays in Understanding*, 232-247, here 232-234; see id., “A Reply to Eric Voegelin” [1953], in *ibid.*, 401-408, here 403.

84 Arendt, *Elemente und Ursprünge*, 946 f.; see id., “Mankind and Terror,” in id., *Essays in Understanding*, 297-306, here 302; Hoffmann, *Koselleck*, 225 f.; Katznelson, *Desolation and Enlightenment*, 55.

78 Kracauer, *History*, 67.

79 Koselleck, “Darstellung, Ereignis und Struktur,” in id., *Vergangene Zukunft*, 144-157, here 151.

80 Koselleck, “Terror und Traum. Methodologische Anmerkungen zu Zeiterfahrungen im Dritten Reich,” in id., *Vergangene Zukunft*, 278-299, here 294-299; see idem, *Theoriebedürftigkeit*, 310.

81 Koselleck, “Historik und Hermeneutik,” in id., *Zeitschichten*, 97-118, here 101.

[...] through [...] reducing it to a previously known chain of causes and influences”?⁸⁵ How do Weimar interpretations succeed in “visualizing the distance that separates the twenties from the forties”⁸⁶ of the twentieth century? How can the history of this democracy be opened up and told in such a way that neither its elements protruding into National Socialism nor the qualitative novelty of the series of unprecedented transgression of limits that began in 1933, the escalation of violence, the transformation of values, the routinization of genocide are ignored?⁸⁷ And how does one do justice to the transnational, European dimension of the processes and phenomena without dismissing national differences, but also without short-circuiting them to exclusive explanans?⁸⁸

Studies of extremist milieus or nationalist traditions that have a transnational perspective and reflect the constitutive fragility of democracy need to include the possibility of the radically new — such as what Nikolaus Wachsmann calls the “primacy of political terror” within the first year of Nazi rule with its up to 200,000 political prisoners, accompanied by the exodus of political and intellectual elites of democracy.⁸⁹ The question of continuity is misleading when it focuses solely on pre-democratic or anti-democratic forces. Emancipative and destructive potentials, pluralistic and homogenizing tendencies of democracy collided and converged and formed constellations that were no less relevant to the question of continuity in 1933.⁹⁰

Hegemonic narratives and predominant periodizations can also be broken up by “subaltern” perspectives. This can be seen, for example, in a fleeting glance at how the majority society and state authorities deal with minorities such as the German Sinti or religious minorities as an indicator of their willingness to pluralism and the recognition of human rights.⁹¹ Here we find the tendency to place events of discrimination and marginalization of these groups in the Weimar Republic in a continuity context with the practice of persecution and annihilation under National Socialism.⁹² This contrasts with the self-interpretations of those affected, for whom a life began after 1933 that had little to do with their experience of a self-determined everyday life as German citizens before 1933, despite the traditions of Antiziganism — a time with an imperfect but not ineffective guarantee of fundamental rights and with officials and governments loyal to the

85 Arendt, Reply to Eric Voegelin, 407.

86 Arendt, *Elemente und Ursprünge*, 577.

87 See Nikolaus Wachsmann, *KL. A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (London, 2015), 82, 87, 135, 371, 427, 497, 626.

88 See William Selinger, “The Politics of Arendtian Historiography. European Federation and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*,” *Modern Intellectual History* 13 (2016): 417-446; Boldt, *Deutschland*, 360, 369 f.

89 Wachsmann, *KL*, 27, 31, 78; see Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in History and Memory* (London, 2015), 87-117.

90 Inspiring despite a lack of comparisons in this area: Fritzsche, *Rehearsals for Fascism*; id., *Germans into Nazis*; McElligott, *Rethinking the Weimar Republic*.

91 See Evans, *Third Reich*, 59-84; Müller, Review of: Gerhard Besier, Katarzyna Stokłosa, eds., *Jehovas Zeugen in Europa. Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 2 vols. (Berlin 2013-2015). <https://www.hsozkult.de/publicationreview/id/rezbuecher-25255>.

92 See Karola Fings, *Sinti und Roma. Geschichte einer Minderheit* (Munich, 2016), 59-62; Robert P. Ericksen u. Susannah Heschel, “Introduction,” in id., *Betrayal. German Churches and the Holocaust* (Minneapolis, 1999), 1-21, here 12.

constitution.⁹³ Whether the victims were meant to be silenced by assumptions of continuity still requires discussion. The image of Weimar democracy changes fundamentally with such decisions about narrative voices and perspectives, in both directions.⁹⁴

What might a merging of the previously outlined insights into democracy and history look like? Pierre Rosanvallon encapsulates his approach to the history of democracy with his often-quoted saying that democracy does not simply “*have* a history. It is necessary to consider the more radical notion that democracy *is* a history.”⁹⁵ This approach aims to understand the history of democracy as a continued “history in the making.” It reconstructs how the “world view” of individuals and groups “has limited and structured their field of action.” In this perspective, “conceptions and ‘ideas’ [...] are material for structuring social experience” that “guide action, limit the field of the possible through the imaginable, and define the framework for controversies and conflicts.”⁹⁶

The more recent historiography of democracy, as far as its approach to the abundance of material is concerned, is currently primarily intellectual history, although its objects and sources come from a wide variety of fields. To give one example: Sociologist Austin Harrington has undertaken a reconstruction of democratic and pluralistic thinking in Germany, which in its deviation from alleged standards of “western” democracy has opened up theoretical democratic potentials. Harrington traces the thinking of German thinkers like Troeltsch as a mode of self-criticism and provincialization of hegemonic “western” discourses. Harrington reads thinkers like Troeltsch as “sensitive to the values of pluralism in cultural and historical life” and “broadly cosmopolitan,” “reminding Western European thought of its own culturally specific context of particularity.” This “peripheral” culturally pluralistic thinking thus managed to “decenter itself” out of the European intellectual traditions, as a thinking conscious of its limits, reflecting the provinciality of the “West.” At the same time, this way of thinking adhered to universal values with a “western” connotation: “Germany, in engaging constructively with Western European traditions of liberal-democratic political thought, [...] could remain open to the West and to Western universalistic concepts without copying or emulating specifically Western cultural models of institutional organization.”⁹⁷

Can the current research trends for which this example stands be reduced to a common denominator in terms of sociology of knowledge?

93 See Reinhard Florian, *Ich wollte nach Hause, nach Ostpreußen! Das Überleben eines deutschen Sinto*, ed. Jana Mechelhoff-Herezi and Uwe Neumärker (Berlin, 2012); Hildegard Lagrenne et al., *„Da wollten wir frei sein!“ Eine Sinti-Familie erzählt*, ed. Michail Krausnick (Neckargemünd, 2015); Detlef Garbe, *Zwischen Widerstand und Martyrium. Die Zeugen Jehovas im „Dritten Reich“* (Munich, 1997), 83-85; Falk Bersch, *Aberkannt! Die Verfolgung von Jehovas Zeugen im Nationalsozialismus und in der SBZ/DDR* (Berlin, 2017), 25 f.

94 See for example Jonathan Frankel, ed., *The Fate of the European Jews, 1939-1945. Continuity or Contingency?* (Oxford, 1997); Saul Friedländer, *Den Holocaust beschreiben. Auf dem Weg zu einer integrierten Geschichte* (Göttingen, 2007); idem, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation. Nazism and the „Final Solution“* (Cambridge, MA, 1992).

95 Pierre Rosanvallon, “Für eine Begriffs- und Problemgeschichte des Politischen,” *Mittelweg* 36 20/6 (2011): 43-66, here 49; also see id., *Democracy. id., Le Peuple introuvable. Histoire de la représentation démocratique en France* (Paris, 1998); id., *La Démocratie inachevée; id., Demokratische Legitimität. Unparteilichkeit - Reflexivität - Nähe* (Hamburg, 2010).

96 Rosanvallon, *Begriffs- und Problemgeschichte*, here 49 f.; 55 f.; id., “Toward a Philosophical History of the Political,” in id., *Democracy*, 59-76, here 66.

97 Harrington, *German Cosmopolitan Social Thought*, 5-7.

In view of pioneers such as Ursula Büttner and Eberhard Kolb, newer approaches cannot be considered a generational project, even if a significant number of younger researchers are included.⁹⁸ A more intrepid and perhaps irreverent approach to traditional patterns of interpretation seems to be more common in Anglophone research,⁹⁹ but the history of democracy in particular is not always the strength of Weimar research outside Germany.¹⁰⁰ Two similarities are more noticeable: on the one hand, the orientation towards political theory, namely the theory of democracy, and less towards the social science and social theory varieties that had been en vogue for years, which looks like a common process of paradigm change in the history of knowledge; on the other hand, intellectual dissatisfaction with traditional categories whose heuristic suitability has lost its evidence in the face of confrontation with a new political confusion.¹⁰¹ Changes in political experience and scientific methods seem to work together here in our time.¹⁰²

IV. Normativity matters

But how does research on Weimar that is sensitized to the historical fluidity and fragility of democracy deal with the inevitable normative questions? All too often, such approaches are misunderstood as relativistic. The opposite is true. But it is a normativity without complacency and without a narrative of unchallenged progress. Rather, at the center of such approaches are the core normative issues of our civilization.

The catastrophes of the twentieth century led Hannah Arendt or Reinhart Koselleck to reject any historical-philosophical rationalization of a coherent historical course, any idea of telos or reason in history.¹⁰³ Auschwitz does not permit “logificatio ex post.”¹⁰⁴ History is absurd, without hope of consolation.¹⁰⁵ But this understanding does not lead to the abandonment of every normative attitude. With historicist instruments, as it were, a historical thinker like Koselleck solves a problem of historicism. He points out a supratemporal norm both by reconstructing it from the normative self-understandings of past times and by asserting it against the absurdity of history as a

98 See Braune, Dreyer, *Republikanischer Alltag*; Müller and Tooze, *Normalität und Fragilität*.

99 See Ian P. Beacock, *Emotions and Political Violence in Weimar Germany. Reflections on the Political Subject* [2018]; id., *Best of All Possible Worlds? Weimar Historiography and the Paradox of Recovery*, West Coast Germanists' Workshop, University of California, Davis, March 17.-18, 2018; Eric D. Weitz, “Weimar Germany and its Histories,” *Central European History* 43 (2010): 581-591; Ziblatt, *Conservative Parties*.

100 See Gordon, McCormick, *Weimar Thought*; Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 363-365.

101 From a historical perspective, see Ariane Leendertz and Wencke Meteling, eds., *Die neue Wirklichkeit. Semantische Neuvermessungen und Politik seit den 1970er-Jahren* (Frankfurt, 2016); Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, MA, 2011); Nolte, *Jenseits des Westens?*; for examples of symptomatic texts: Heinrich Geißelberger, ed., *Die große Regression. Eine internationale Debatte über die geistige Situation der Zeit* (Berlin, 2017); Robert D. Kaplan, *The Return of Marco Polo's World. War, Strategy, and American Interests in the Twenty-First Century* (New York, 2018); Ivan Krastev, *Europadämmerung. Ein Essay* (Berlin, 2017); Levitsky, Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*; Edward Luce, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism* (London, 2017); Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy. Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It* (Cambridge, MA, 2018).

102 See Koselleck, “Erfahrungswandel und Methodenwechsel. Eine historisch-anthropologische Skizze,” in id., *Zeitschichten*, 27-77.

103 See Hoffmann, *Koselleck*, 224-226, 233 f.

104 Koselleck, “Geschichte, Recht und Gerechtigkeit,” in id., *Zeitschichten*, 336-358, here 349.

105 See Jan Eike Dunkhase, *Absurde Geschichte. Reinhart Kosellecks historischer Existentialismus* (Marbach, 2015).

fundamental precondition of human existence in general. This point is neither about genealogies of human rights ideas nor about definitions of a minimal democracy, but about a civilizational minimum as a genuinely historical-theoretical, in view of historical experience necessarily transhistorical, anthropologically fundamental condition of possible histories:¹⁰⁶ Even those who are not able to recognize in history a “rational compulsion to progressively transform the development of human power into legally secure and even more into just states,” because “our own experience blocks itself against the temptation of this hopeful and utopian interpretation of history,” nevertheless cannot completely escape this civilizing idea “because our chances of survival depend on a minimum of legal order, however much it must be won and reproduced anew from day to day.”¹⁰⁷

Histories of Weimar democracy that follow this train of thought combine historicization with the awareness of the fragility of civilization and the need to defend it, an awareness that Arendt, Brecht, Kracauer or Koselleck, all contemporaries of that epoch of catastrophes, had developed.¹⁰⁸ The assertion of a civilizing, legally protected minimum that upholds human dignity — including the dignity of minorities —, the defense of the “idea of humanity” and the freedom that constitutes humanity, became the non-negotiable line of defense against the breach of civilization and totalitarianism.¹⁰⁹ At a time when the protection of minorities seems more fragile and democracy, which has functioned for so long after 1945 as a delicately balanced system of checks and balances based on the conceptions of human dignity and fundamental rights, is once again being reinterpreted by growing forces as the tyranny of the majority, this is a decidedly normative position.

In the Weimar Republic, human rights and human dignity were regarded as the basis of legitimacy. In a political manifesto for the Brüning government in 1932, for example, those supporting the Republic formulated views that can be placed in a history of Christian human rights ideas.¹¹⁰ Georg Jellinek’s human rights history of 1904

106 While Koselleck’s position can be contextualized in its historic moment, his argument, which operates on a different level, cannot be accused of constructing a misleading genealogy of human rights since the 1970s that centers on Auschwitz or of

depriving democracy of its “political dimension” and “socio-historical dimension” for the sake of a “human rights based democracy” and shrink it to a “minimal democracy”; Marcel Gauchet, “Democracy. From One Crisis to Another,” *Social*

Imaginaires 1 (2015): 163-187, here 182; Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia. Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA, 2010), 6.

107 Koselleck, “Geschichte, Recht und Gerechtigkeit,” 347.

108 See Katznelson, *Desolation and Enlightenment*; Anson Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe. German Intellectuals between Apocalypse and Enlightenment* (Berkeley, 2000); Dan Diner, ed., *Zivilisationsbruch. Denken nach Auschwitz* (Frankfurt, 1988); Moïshe Postone, Eric Santner, eds., *Catastrophe and Meaning. The Holocaust and the Twentieth Century* (Chicago, 2003).

109 Hannah Arendt, “Approaches to the .. German Problem,” 115; id., “Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility,” 131 f.; id., Reply to Eric Voegelin, 403; 408; see Katznelson, *Desolation and Enlightenment*, 47-106.

110 See Oscar Müller, ed., *Krisis. Ein politisches Manifest* (Weimar, 1932); Samuel Moyn, *Christian Human Rights* (Philadelphia, 2015); Hans Joas, *Die Sakralität der Person. Eine neue Genealogie der Menschenrechte* (Berlin, 2015).

was widely discussed, commentaries on the Weimar constitution included sections devoted to fundamental rights, the judiciary began to orient itself — albeit not always in the sense of the constitution’s authors — to the development of fundamental rights.¹¹¹ Erwin Planck, an actor of the “Prussian action” [*Preußenschlag*] of 1932, recognized that the careless handling of “the constitutional rights of others” resulted in the abandonment of the “most sacred human rights” and soon joined the resistance against National Socialism. In reaction to the events of 1932/33, Arnold Brecht in exile developed a political theory that focused on the protection of human rights, “sacrosanct minimum standards,” “humanitarian standards” which were not to be subject to majority decision-making, in order to find a way out of the dilemmas which democracies experienced in times of existential crises.¹¹²

Before that, Ernst Troeltsch, the Protestant theologian, cultural philosopher and liberal politician, had already elevated the “idea of human rights” to the center of his “cultural synthesis” of democracies after the First World War and made human rights the basis of a “European ethos.” “People” were “much more similar to each other than the theories would have it.” The “contrasts” of Anglo-Saxon-Roman and German political traditions that were exaggerated during the war were “ultimately less exclusive [...] than they seem. Both systems presuppose the idea of the autonomy of man and personality, the critical attitude against reality and tradition that the Enlightenment created.” In a universal expansion of this perspective, he described “democracy as the most difficult constitution, morally the most demanding, but also the one demanded by God, nature and humanity.”¹¹³ The recognition of historical and cultural difference on the one hand and at the same time the search for a foundation of universal values on the other hand were the problems with which Troeltsch’s “historism” book,¹¹⁴ written during the First World War and self-critical of the limits of the Eurocentric world view, also wrestled. This civilizational minimum of human dignity and human rights, familiar at that time as well as a fundamental condition of possible histories in general, is a resilient normative basis for a

111 See Roman Schnur, ed., *Zur Geschichte der Erklärung der Menschenrechte* (Darmstadt, 1964); Hans Carl Nipperdey, ed., *Die Grundrechte und Grundpflichten der Reichsverfassung. Kommentar zum zweiten Teil der Reichsverfassung*, 3 vols. (Berlin 1929-30); Gerhard Anschütz, *Die Verfassung des Deutschen Reiches vom 11. August 1919. Ein Kommentar für Wissenschaft und Praxis*, 14. Auflage (Berlin 1932); Gertrude Lübke-Wolff, “Der Schutz verfassungsrechtlich verbürgter Individualrechte. Die Rolle des Reichsgerichts,” in Hermann Wellenreuther, Claudia Schnurmann, ed., *Die amerikanische Verfassung und deutsch-amerikanisches Verfassungsdenken. Ein Rückblick über 200 Jahre* (New York, 1991), 411-434; Kathrin Groh, *Demokratische Staatsrechtslehrer in der Weimarer Republik. Von der konstitutionellen Staatslehre zur Theorie des modernen demokratischen Verfassungsstaats* (Tübingen, 2010).

112 Brecht, *Auflösung der Weimarer Republik*, 303 f; 307; id., *Democracy*, 216-222; 224; see id., “The Search for Absolutes in Political and Legal Philosophy,” *Social Research* 7 (1940): 201-228; as a principle organizing the historical narrative in: id., *Prelude to Silence*; also see Hannah Bethke, *Das politische Denken Arnold Brechts. Eine transatlantische Ideengeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 2013), 236-264; 289-291; 338-342.

113 Ernst Troeltsch, (1918-1923), ed. Gangolf Hübinger (Berlin, 2002), 477-512, here 510, 508, 505 f., 500.
114 See Troeltsch, *Kritische Schriften zur Politik und Kulturphilosophie* (1918-1923), ed. Gangolf Hübinger (Berlin, 2002), 477-512, here 510, 508, 505 f., 500.

Der Historismus und seine Probleme. Erstes Buch: Das logische Problem der Geschichtsphilosophie [1922], ed. Friedrich Wilhelm Graf (Berlin, 2008), 1025-1028, 1031, 1048.

history of democracy that does not sidestep the fragility of its subject nor that of its insights.

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