

**In the Shadow of a Failed Democracy: The Weimar Republic and the Political Culture  
of the Federal Republic of Germany 1945-1959 (PhD-project)**

Sebastian Ullrich  
Humboldt-Universität, Berlin

„Do we live under Weimar conditions, Mister Chancellor?“ – this headline was printed by the German weekly „Welt am Sonntag“ early in 2005 on top of a long interview with Gerhard Schröder.<sup>1</sup> Statistics had then just shown a raise in unemployment rates to over 5 million persons seeking work. Comparing today’s Federal Republic of Germany with the first German democracy of 1918 may seem strange at first sight. However, looking into the recent political debates, it appears that the Weimar Republic is used quite often as a reference point for comments on actual developments in Germany. Again and again journalists, public intellectuals and politicians refer to the Weimar past to warn of its possible return, be it through economical and social problems, through parties on the extreme right, through a growing distance between people and politics or through changes in the party system. This presence of the Weimar Republic shows, that for the Federal Republic the first German democracy is – and always has been since 1945 – more than merely a bygone historical past.

In 1949, the fear that the newly founded German democracy could suffer the same fate as the Weimar Republic was not ungrounded. Today on the contrary, calling up the ghosts of Weimar is mainly used to stir up public emotions. The comparisons with Weimar reflect an exaggerated sentiment of crisis in the German public sphere more than hinting at an actual political danger. They are, as it were, remnants of the political culture of the Bonn Republic. Therefore, the role that Weimar plays in recent political debates becomes understandable only if its origins in the founding period of the second German democracy are taken into account. To this, my PhD-project wants to contribute. It aims at telling the story of how the specific relation between the Bonn Republic and its Weimar predecessor came about. It therefore concentrates on the immediate post-war period and the first decade of the Federal Republic where this element of Bonn’s political culture developed.

---

<sup>1</sup> Haben wir Weimarer Verhältnisse, Herr Bundeskanzler?, in: Welt am Sonntag, 13.2.2005.

The Weimar past hung over the beginnings of the second German democracy like a very long shadow. The famous phrase “Bonn ist nicht Weimar”, which the Swiss journalist Fritz René Allemann coined as a title for a book on the young west-German democracy was rather an appeal than a description when it was first published in 1956.<sup>2</sup> Contrary to the GDR, where official propaganda left no doubt that “lessons from Weimar” had been learned through the “antifascist-democratic” revolution after 1945, the Federal Republic was never sure of her “otherness” compared to Weimar – and this even though the urge to learn from the failure of the first German democracy had played an important role in the democratic reconstruction after National Socialism had collapsed.<sup>3</sup> As Karl Dietrich Bracher conjectured in his famous study on the Weimar Republic of 1955, the failure of Weimar democracy had caused a trauma which persisted up to the present.<sup>4</sup> Every commentator who referred to Weimar did not only make statements about the past. He also tried to influence the political framework of the new German democracy and the boundaries of political discourse. Debates on Weimar and allusions to the failed democracy in political discussions were thus highly political means in the struggles between different social and political groups. As the Weimar-discourse was connected with the self-image of the west-German democracy, it can be used to examine political mentalities, expected political developments and attitudes towards political institutions. A study on the topic can thus enhance our understanding of how cultural backgrounds and historical experiences influence political actions and events.

In my PhD-Project I understand the references to Weimar as an important element for the political culture of the Federal Republic of Germany. The broader concept of political culture seemed more appropriate than concepts as “politics of history” or “politics of memory” to describe how the historical experience of Weimar Democracy affected the development of the Bonn Republic.<sup>5</sup> It allows for an integrated study of public struggles to dominate collective memory and historical experiences, which influence mentalities, attitudes and expectations. To examine how Weimar affected the early years of the Bonn Republic, I concentrate on four major topics:

---

<sup>2</sup> Fritz René Allemann, *Bonn ist nicht Weimar*, Köln/Berlin 1956.

<sup>3</sup> See Sebastian Ullrich, *Im Schatten einer gescheiterten Demokratie. Die Weimarer Republik und der demokratische Neubeginn in den Westzonen*, in: Heinrich August Winkler (Hg.), *Griff nach der Deutungsmacht. Zur Geschichte der Geschichtspolitik in Deutschland*, Göttingen 2004, S. 185-208.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Dietrich Bracher, *Die Auflösung der Weimarer Republik. Eine Studie zum Problem des Machtverfalls in der Demokratie*, Villingen 1955.

<sup>5</sup> Due to the limited space I cannot discuss the methodological implications of the concept „political culture“ in more depth. In my thesis I am using Karl Rohe’s approach to the concept. See Karl Rohe, *Politische Kultur und ihre Analyse. Probleme und Perspektiven der politischen Kulturforschung*, in: *Historische Zeitschrift* 250 (1990), S. 321-346.

1) Patterns of interpretation of the Weimar Republic and its failure in different political camps. How many different basic points of view can be identified? What do they tell us about the general understanding of parliamentary democracy among those groups? Was the general image of Weimar positive or negative?

2) The question of how the relation between Bonn and Weimar was seen at different points of time. Did Bonn count as a fundamental step forward compared to the Weimar times or was it regarded as a kind of second edition of the failed republic?

3) Politics of history with Weimar and the role of the first Republic in the struggle for political legitimacy. Was Weimar used to “invent” a democratic tradition for the Federal Republic? If not, what prevented Weimar from being used for this purpose?

4) Weimar as a political argument. What different “lessons from Weimar” were present in the political discourse of the immediate post-war period? Did the German Basic Law incorporate these “lessons” completely or were there political expectations left unfulfilled? How was the “Weimar-argument” used in the political debates after 1949?

These different topics are integrated through the central question of the project: I want to ask what function Weimar fulfilled for the political development in the early years of the Federal Republic. „Bonn did not become Weimar because there had been Weimar“, claims a common explanation for the success story of the second German democracy. Did the reminiscence of Weimar really have a stabilizing effect in the founding period of the Federal Republic? This is the question my PhD-thesis wants to answer. In this setting it is neither possible to present all the results of my work nor to tell in detail the complex story of how the Federal Republic’s specific relation to its Weimar predecessor originated. Therefore, I can only highlight three points:

1) In the immediate post-war period, Weimar was seen very negatively in the German population as contemporary opinion polls reveal.<sup>6</sup> Even the apocalyptic breakdown of the “Third Reich” did not succeed in altering this image. On the one hand, this was a consequence of the defamatory campaign the Nazis had started immediately after 1933. On the other hand,

---

<sup>6</sup> See Jahrbuch der öffentlichen Meinung 1947-1955, hg. Von Elisabeth Noelle und Erich Peter Neumann, Allensbach 1956, S. 126.

there was a consensus even among the opponents of the “Third Reich” that Weimar had failed. Some politicians and publicists, mainly former adherents of the “Weimar Coalition“, tried to alter the negative image of the Republic and attacked the Nazi-propaganda against the first German democracy. But these attempts did not succeed. This was partly due to the fact that in large parts of the population Weimar served as a kind of scapegoat used to explain and excuse former support for the NSDAP. “I became a National-Socialist to protest against the complete and scandalous failure of the Weimar Republic”, claimed a former member of the Nazi-party in a letter to the head of the Social-Democrats, Kurt Schumacher, in 1948.<sup>7</sup>

2) Due to the negative image of the Weimar Republic among the German population, any attempt to ground the new democratic state in the tradition of its predecessor encountered great obstacles. To highlight the fact that Germany possessed democratic traditions, commentators were more likely to refer to the 1848 revolution whose 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary was celebrated in 1948. Instead of being a resource for establishing democratic traditions which could serve to legitimize the new German democracy, the preoccupation with the Weimar past was dominated by the questions of guilt and responsibility for the rise of Hitler. It became a major topic in the fight for historical legitimacy between the different political camps in post-war Germany. Attempts to popularize the idea of democracy in Germany by drawing a brighter picture of the Weimar Republic were therefore doomed to fail. The democratic reconstruction in the western and the eastern parts of Germany alike was, thus, from the beginning on undertaken with the intention to create a political system different to Weimar democracy. In order to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the west-German population after 1949, the Bonn Republic therefore had to prove that she distinguished itself clearly from the Weimar Republic.

3) In July 1945, the protestant bishop Otto Dibelius was very sceptical about the prospects of democracy in Germany, because firstly, as he said in a conversation with an American officer, it was an ideology foreign to the German people and secondly because the bad experiences of the Weimar Republic had discredited it even further.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the „Weimar experiences“, or at least, what people thought of as being „Weimar experiences“ after twelve years of Nazi-propaganda, had lead to a general distrust of western parliamentary democracy. In the early

---

<sup>7</sup> Günther Rüffer to Kurt Schumacher, Oktober 1948, in: Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn-Bad Godesberg, Bestand Kurt Schumacher, Box No. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Marshall M. Knappen, Report on a conference with Dr. Dibelius, in: Die Evangelische Kirche nach dem Zusammenbruch. Berichte ausländischer Beobachter aus dem Jahre 1945, bearbeitet von Clemens Vollnhals, Göttingen 1988, p. 60.

years of the Federal Republic, therefore, “Bonn” had to step out of the Weimar shadow in order to create trust in the stability of the new political system among the population. In 1949, it was still a long way to go until the phrase “Bonn ist nicht Weimar” came to be generally accepted. When the second German democracy came into being, it encountered a widely shared conviction that it had not broken consequently enough with the Weimar past. This was partly because the „lessons from Weimar“ that had been incorporated in the process of democratic reconstruction after 1945 were – from different political standpoints – regarded to be insufficient. Thus, the comparisons with Weimar aggravated the crisis of the newly founded state, a crisis that, apart from social and economic problems, was due to the lack of trust among its citizens. It needed the successes of the era Adenauer for “Bonn” to leave behind the shadow of the first republic. It was only now that the second German democracy was perceived as a form of parliamentary democracy fundamentally different to its Weimar predecessor. In the beginnings of the Federal Republic, the comparisons with Weimar had a destabilizing effect. They increased reservations about the political system and lead to exaggerated, sometimes even hysterical fears for the stability of the new democracy. The Weimar past was often even used to explain ones distance towards “Bonn”. Only after the remarkable economical and political successes in the first few years of the Federal Republic did this change. Comparisons with Weimar now increased the legitimacy of the second German democracy. Now they gained their function as “rituals of self-assurance” and “tests for normality” which they kept up to the present.<sup>9</sup> Bonn had not become Weimar so far and references to the Weimar past were now made to prevent this from happening in the future.

---

<sup>9</sup> See Dietmar Schirmer, Ist Bonn Weimar ist Berlin? Die Weimarer Republik als symbolisches Dispositiv der deutschen Nachkriegsdemokratien, in: Friedrich Balke, Benno Wagner (Hg.), Vom Nutzen und Nachteil historischer Vergleiche. Der Fall Bonn – Weimar, Frankfurt/M./New York 1997, pp. 125-146, esp. p. 134.

Although the Federal Republic of Germany was certainly the more important partner, with a stronger influence during the period as a whole, the GDR nevertheless served as a role model in several areas. The article sheds light on Sweden's view of divided Germany during the Cold War by examining how both German states were portrayed linguistically in Swedish public discourse between 1949 and 1989. The analysis shows that the German-German context involved regular wars of words, where the use of a name could prompt both domestic and foreign policy conflicts. The names of East or West Germany

The Social Democrats supported the Weimar Republic that they had helped to create. The Centre Party (ZP): a moderate party which sat in the centre of the political spectrum. As with the Social Democrats, the Centre Party supported the Weimar Republic. The party was supported by conservatives and had arisen from the Catholic Church. Like the Communists they hated the Weimar Republic, despised those who had signed the Treaty of Versailles and wanted to avenge Germany's defeat in the First World War. Originally called the German Workers' Party the name was changed when Adolf Hitler took over. They were initially supported by workers, but their support grew across the middle classes too.

Home » Modern World History » Weimar Germany » Weimar Republic and the Great Depression. Weimar Republic and the Great Depression. The Weimar Republic was devastated by the Wall Street Crash of October 1929 and the Great Depression that followed. The Crash had a devastating impact on the American economy but because America had propped up the Weimar Republic with huge loans in 1924 (the Dawes Plan) and in 1929 (the Young Plan), what happened to the American economy had to impact the Weimar Republic's economy. Despite Hitler being the leader of the largest political party in the Reichstag, Hindenburg had nothing but contempt for "the little corporal". In keeping with the constitution, Hindenburg selected his own chancellor "Franz von Papen. Everything about the Weimar Republic was contested. The kinds of artists, thinkers, architects whom I focus on in the book -- much or all of their work was intensely challenged from the right. What led finally to the demise of democracy in the Weimar Republic? After all, in the 1928 general election, the Nazis won just 2.6 percent of the vote; five years later Hitler was in power. It's true, in 1928, the Nazi party was a marginal, unimportant political group which had very little resonance beyond some very distinctive places that were already in depression before the Great Depression -- agricultural areas in particular. But in many ways, the republic was seriously undermined and the political system paralyzed prior to the Nazi seizure of power.