

McElligott, Anthony: *Rethinking the Weimar Republic. Authority and Authoritarianism, 1916–1936*. London: Bloomsbury Publisher 2013. ISBN: 978-1-84966472-1; 384 S.

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In this book, Anthony McElligott offers another interpretation of the Weimar Republic, following on from the recent English-language surveys by Eric Weitz and Matthew Stibbe.¹ One of the striking features of this book is the different periodization it suggests. According to the author, we have to jettison „the conventional chronology“ of 1918 to 1933 in order to understand the struggles over authority „that lay at the root of Weimar as a contested polity“ (p. 4). With the inauguration of the Third Army Supreme Command under Ludendorff and von Hindenburg in 1916, a new dualism between competing forces came to the fore, that between an „Obrigkeitsstaat“ and a longing for „democracy“, as indicated by an increasingly proactive Reichstag majority and mass strikes on the ground (ibid.). This is an apt observation, but one could indeed trace this dualism even back further to 1914, when competing conceptions of sovereignty were developed in the intensive debates over the nature of the wartime national community.²

The reasons for 1936 as an endpoint are less easy to discern. McElligott argues that the Enabling Law of 24 March 1933 – that paved the way for the cessation of parliamentary rule and hence for the increasingly relentless dictatorship of the Nazi Party – has to be set in a continuity to what he describes as ‘dictatorship within the bounds of the constitution’, i.e. the use of the emergency powers that Article 48 of the constitution provided and that had already been used by the respective governments of chancellor Stresemann and Marx in 1923/24 (p. 7, see pp. 185–190). Yet as McElligott himself notes, their use of these measures differed in both purpose and result – safeguarding the republic in times of national emergency – from the practise adopted in 1933. Is it hence justified to argue that the political elites of the republic and the Nazi leadership ‘were a lot closer’ to each other in

their pursuit of power than usually assumed (p. 7)? Probably not.

Such an attempt to de-emphasize the caesura of 1933 is based on what can be termed an overly legalistic approach to political history. Chapters 5 and 8 of this book are brimming with interesting and fresh insights into the history of the judiciary in Weimar, the sentencing practices of judges in different types of cases and a detailed analysis of key protagonists of constitutional law, including the notorious figure of Carl Schmitt. Much shorter, though, and in fact insufficient, is McElligott’s portrayal of the reasons for the emergence of the Nazi mass constituency, the very basis of its quest for power. Squeezed into a short section of a chapter on ‘the authority of money’, i.e. the economic history from inflation to depression, we find a few pages on the radicalization of the Mittelstand of shopkeepers and white-collar workers vis-à-vis its volatile social and economic situation, with quotes from Theodor Geiger, a contemporary advocate of this line of argument. (pp. 89–91) As such, this shows a fundamental lack of engagement with the state of the art in Weimar electoral history, that is still marked by Jürgen Falter’s 1991 reevaluation of the available evidence through a complex, nationwide assessment of different datasets with the use of multivariate regression analysis.³ Well-worn formulas such as ‘an angst-ridden Mittelstand’ (p. 90) or a ‘generational revolt’ (pp.

¹ See Eric Weitz, *Weimar Germany. Promise and Tragedy*, Princeton 2007; Matthew Stibbe, *Germany 1914–1933. Politics, Society and Culture*, Harlow 2010.

² Apart from the overall disruptive effects of the war on society and politics, this is one of the reasons why Stibbe began his narrative in 1914.

³ See Jürgen Falter, *Hitlers Wähler*, Munich 1991. This book is listed in the bibliography, but nowhere used or discussed by the author. An excellent discussion of the limits of earlier interpretations and some potential pitfalls in Falter’s argument is Friedrich Lenger, *Mittelstand und Nationalsozialismus? Zur politischen Orientierung von Handwerkern und Angestellten in der Endphase der Weimarer Republik*, in: *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 29 (1989), pp. 173–198. Also crucial, but rarely appreciated in Anglophone historiography, is the magisterial survey by Karl Rohe, who forcefully argued that the ability of the Nazi vote to transcend social cleavages has to be situated in the regional patterns of the electoral radicalization of the nationalist camp. See his *Wahlen und Wählertraditionen in Deutschland*, Frankfurt am Main 1992.

198ff.) of the bourgeois youth cannot do justice to the broad political and electoral appeal of the Nazi party. For instance, the NSDAP was able to attract a large amount of, mostly but by far not exclusively rural, working class voters – in the March 1933 election up to every third worker voted NSDAP! – and many former SPD-voters, while the Nazi voters were in fact slightly older than the average of the population.

In the wake of Falter's pathbreaking research, many attempts to rethink the Weimar Republic have tried to understand the ability of the Nazis to penetrate – or perhaps better: inhabit – a highly diverse range of social and cultural milieux. Another important and contentious issue is the incremental political realignment in the nationalist camp since the mid-1920s and its cultural and social underpinnings, not least because this runs against the grain of the traditional view – reiterated by McElligott – that the economic crisis was the crucial prerequisite for the Nazi breakthrough.

McElligott, however, adopts a different approach. Subsequent chapters offer a detailed and thorough analysis of the revolutionary transition in 1918/19 and of the foreign policy dilemmas the republic faced. Particularly welcome is the detailed investigation of the political position and administrative practice of the Landräte or heads of the county administration offered in chapter 7. Their authority was crucial for the implementation of virtually all aspects of republican legislation on the ground, and it is a staple of Weimar scholarship to assume that the predominance of aristocratic or Junker county administrators in the Prussian East marked a crucial failure of the republic to impose its authority on the bureaucracy. Yet McElligott can show that a majority of the Landräte in Prussia supported the parties of the Weimar Coalition, and while individual cases show defiance with regard to the recognition of republican symbols and national holidays, it is time to revise the older picture of an entirely anti-republican bureaucracy. The chapter on political culture draws most heavily on recent attempts to reassess the democratic potential and republican citizenship of Weimar⁴, mainly through an analysis of the rhetoric and cultural practice around

Constitution Day, 11 August, celebrated since 1921. McElligott concludes that there is a strong streak of authoritarian attitudes in the official cultural practice of the republic, a point that is well-made with regard to censorship of the arts, also covered in this chapter (p. 155).

Only some chapters of this book offer a fundamental 'rethinking of the Weimar republic' in line with recent historiographical trends that the title suggests. Yet the more conventional accounts of revolution, foreign policy and political crisis since 1930 are complemented by substantial chapters on topics such as the judiciary and the local practices of power that are unduly neglected in most other accounts of the first German republic. In that sense, McElligott's book is a welcome addition to the available stock of interpretations of the Weimar Republic.

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⁴ As an overview, see Benjamin Ziemann, Weimar was Weimar. Politics, Culture and the Emplotment of the German Republic, in: *German History* 28 (2010), pp. 542–571.