

Widdig, Bernd: *Culture and Inflation in Weimar Germany*. Berkeley: University of California Press 2001. ISBN: 0-520-22290-3; 293 p.

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Bernd Widdig's study is one of several that have been directly or indirectly inspired by Gerald Feldman's magnum opus, *The Great Disorder: Politics, Economics, and Society in the German Inflation, 1914-1924*.<sup>1</sup> One would be hard pressed to best Feldman's study in terms of archival, primary, and secondary source research (conducted over the span of fifteen years and in over thirty archives), in terms of detail (the text alone spans 858 pages), or in terms of breadth, as Feldman addresses not only the complicated dynamics of inflation, but also the figure of Dr. Mabuse and the situation of intellectuals during the inflation. As Widdig himself acknowledges, the broader scholarship on Weimar Germany – especially in terms of the impact of inflation on the political, social, and cultural fabric of German society – is vast and „potentially overwhelming.“ (p. 12)

Widdig sets out to offer an original contribution to this crowded and contentious field of scholarship by explicitly examining the connections between cultural production and inflation, by analyzing the semiotic role of money, and by bringing an interdisciplinary approach to bear on the topic at hand. This book is meant to appeal not only to Germanists, but also to historians and economists – certainly no easy task.

For a starting point of inquiry, Widdig employs Elias Canetti's assessment of the inflation in Austria: i.e., as currency was devalued and lost its constant as a symbol, people themselves felt devalued and dislocated. Canetti's particular analysis allows readers to „think about inflation not solely as a process of monetary devaluation but also as a grand metaphor that captures the enormous cultural and psychosocial dislocations and changes in attitudes and behavior in the wake of inflation.“ (p. 22) For Widdig, the inflation has three key effects: as an „uncontrolled and unpredictable massification“; as a force

that „intensifies and condenses the experience of modernity in a frightening, often traumatic way“; and as a force that dislocates or transvaluates commonly held identities and social values.(p. 22) In the chapters that follow, he examines the central role of money in Weimar society as exemplified in caricatures, in the figure and portrayals of the industrialist Hugo Stinnes, in the importance of the number „zero“ for both Weimar cultural and political history, in the distress of the intellectuals during inflation, in the manner that inflation affected gender roles and perceptions. He concludes by offering his thoughts on the impact that inflation has had on Germany society from World War I to the present.

In the first chapter, „Money Matters,“ Widdig describes his methodology and approach to the topic. He builds a strong case as to why economics should not be divorced from „the course of modern German literature and high culture.“ In describing how his teachers approached the subject, Widdig writes, „inflation was simply not regarded as a subject that fell within the scope of Germanistik. It was thought to be a strictly economic issue and therefore properly dealt with only by economists and historians.“ (p. 6) Widdig frames his methodology in terms of striking a balance between „hunting“ (the search for master-narratives and macrohistory) and „gathering“ (the search for particular cultural artifacts and microhistory). He cites Simmel, Benjamin, Canetti, and Bourdieu as exemplars of such a dialectical approach. Yet the manner in which Widdig himself employs this dialectic is the red thread that connects many of the problematic aspects of this book.

In terms of „gathering“ cultural artifacts for this study, Widdig does not draw from any archival sources and focuses the bulk of his literary analysis on very refined products of German culture (such as the works of Heinrich Mann, Elias Canetti, and Fritz Lang). For the microhistorical sources, he culls his material from Hans Ostwald's *Sitengeschichte der Inflation*, published memoirs and journals, quotes from other books,

<sup>1</sup> Feldman, Gerald D., *The Great Disorder. Politics, Economics, and Society in the German inflation, 1914-1924*, New York 1993, see also Crockett, Dennis, *German Post-Expressionism. The Art of the Great Disorder, 1918-1924*. University Park, PA 1999.

and anecdotes.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the entire book, there are anecdotes that are intended to give the book the feel of microhistory, but rarely (if ever) are they footnoted or documented. For example, Widdig writes, „The portly farmer who cruised the streets in his new car unabashedly displaying his new wealth was not an uncommon scene and caused much resentment among urbanites.“ (p. 51) This might have been the case, but without any documentation, this statement remains mere supposition and not evidence in the scholarly sense of the word. As Widdig relies on secondary sources for most of his information about Weimar Germany, historical and historiographical errors pepper this book.<sup>3</sup>

Deeper problems arise when Widdig attempts to ground his readings of these cultural artifacts – the „hunting“ aspect of his methodology – into the macrohistory of Weimar Germany. Whether or not one agrees or disagrees with Widdig’s particular readings of literature, film, or caricatures, he is certainly most at home in this area and employs a good number of sources to enrich these readings. When he begins his „hunting,“ though, Widdig runs into three major problems.

First, Widdig personifies the inflation throughout the book, portraying it as an agent. He writes, „The German inflation undermined all of this. It not only damaged the social fabric of trust...It also destroyed the strong temporal bond between present and future that a functioning monetary system carries within its core.“ (p. 84) This manner of writing about the inflation is misleading, as the inflation was a complex set of intertwining micro- and macrohistorical factors. While the Weimar government did enact policies that contributed to the inflation between 1918 and 1923, these policies were not simply the evil actions of a „cynical power“ that was intent upon „shifting the cost of the war to the general public.“ (p. 50, 85) The first years of the Weimar republic were filled with immense (and often armed) social unrest, revolutions and counter-revolutions, returning veterans demanding work, and it was run by a government that was despised by many and praised by few. Thus, these policies were implemented as much in the interest of securing the social order and the very existence of the

state system as in the interest of dealing with both an immense debt accrued from the war and from the reparations payments.<sup>4</sup> Widdig

<sup>2</sup> An examination of the footnotes (pgs. 235-250) reveals no archival citations. He refers to an archival visit to Berlin in footnote 7 on page 238, but never mentions which archive nor employs any material from this unidentified archive. His history of inflation is drawn primarily from Richard Gaetgens „Geschichte der Inflationen“. Several of his key speeches and articles (Alfred Weber’s speech, *Die Not der geistigen Arbeiter* and Friedrich Kroner’s article „Überreizte Nerven,“ for example) are directly drawn from: Kaes, Anton; Jay, Martin; Dimendberg, Edward (eds): *The Weimar Sourcebook*, Berkeley 1994. Ostwald’s work was first brought to light by Fritzsche, Peter, *Vagabond in the Fugitive City*. Hans Ostwald, *Imperial Berlin, and the Grossstadt-Dokumente*, *Journal of Contemporary History* 29 (1994), p. 385-402.

<sup>3</sup> For example, on p. 140-141, Widdig describes Maximilian Harden’s praise for Hugo Stinnes. Yet he relies on a secondary source for his quotes from Harden’s „Die Zukunft“, which provides both inaccurate quotes, and labels Harden as an „influential conservative.“ In the years in question, Harden was in fact on the left side of the spectrum, lobbying for the Weimar government, arguing against the Dolchstoßlegende, arguing for the acceptance of the Versailles Treaty, and was nearly beaten to death in 1922 by a right-wing group, Organisation Consul, for these efforts. As well, in the year in question, Harden’s popularity was at its lowest ebb, and the subscription figures fell so low that the journal was no longer financially feasible. See Bundesarchiv Koblenz, Nachlass Harden 1062/102 for the correspondence between Stinnes and Harden, which reveals Harden’s repeated attempts to engage Stinnes in helping the Weimar government. In addition, Walther Rathenau was not murdered by the Freikorps, but by Organisation Consul (a secret organization headed by Hermann Ehrhardt that recruited several members from the Freikorps). See Hannover, Heinrich; Hannover-Drück, Elisabeth, *Politische Justiz, 1918-1933*, Frankfurt am Main 1966. Pg. 118. Widdig also notes on page 17 that, „By addressing the cultural side of inflation, I will enter a territory that many historians have avoided. Certainly the question of evidence and the status of fictional texts as historical sources will continue to be bones of contention between historians and proponents of cultural studies.“ In fact, numerous historians, such as Gerald Feldman, have explored the cultural side of inflation and historians, such as Gordon Craig and Fritz Stern, have always used literary sources in their work (including Peter Fritzsche, whose comments are on the back cover of the book). Thus, this is a false dichotomy between historians and proponents of cultural studies. As Harold James notes in another review, Widdig also confuses the name of the currency several times. His final chapter, „After-shocks,“ about the impact of the inflation on Hitler’s rise and rule, completely neglects modern scholarship on fascism.

<sup>4</sup> In another review of this book, Harold James writes

does not incorporate any of the debates as to how much Handlungsspielraum the German government had in this regard, which would have given greater nuance to his analysis.<sup>5</sup>

Second, Widdig does not place his theory of the connection between inflation and culture into a broader historical or temporal context. While he does forward his theory of the connection between culture and inflation in Weimar Germany, he never examines this connection in other countries or during other time periods in German history. What was the connection between economic upheavals in Austria, France, Britain, and America and their particular cultures after the war, and how did the German response differ? Such questions would have forced Widdig to consider what (if anything) was specifically „German“ about their cultural response to the inflation. Without the use of a comparative approach, one also gets the impression that once again, Germany was following a Sonderweg, wholly different and aberrant from her neighbors.<sup>6</sup> Temporally, the inflation that took place between 1914-1923 was also the result of long-term, structural factors that were present in German government and society from the time that Bismarck enacted his social welfare legislation in the 1880s, and that linger on to this day.

Third, Widdig analyzes his „gathered“ material in a manner that would have one believe that Weimar culture and cultural production were solely the products of a rupture

Blackbourn, David; Eley, Geoff, *Mythen deutscher Geschichtsschreibung*. Frankfurt am Main 1980; see also Kocka, Jürgen, „German History before Hitler. The Debate about the German Sonderweg“, *Journal of Contemporary History* 23,1 (Jan. 1988), p. 3-16.

in the *Journal of Economic History*, „Conceptually, too, Wittig's [sic] approach raises many problems: inflation is a product of decisions about monetary policy – not analyzed in this book – that may well be a response to, as well as a product of, social trauma (such as, for instance, military defeat). Would it not be simpler to conclude that the First World War dislocated German society? However, this book ignores the bulk of recent writing on the German inflation or its mechanisms, has no grasp of monetary theory, and even confuses the name of the currency that was being inflated. Instead of analysis, it provides a substantial barrage of pretentious language. The book fails entirely to grapple with its subject, the German inflation, or to show how and why it had pernicious consequences.“ *The Journal of Economic History* 62,1 (March 2002), pg. 239. James notes in another article that, „The First World War brought an increased intervention of the state in the economy and a belief that the market could and should not be left to regulate itself. The interwar depression reinforced the lesson of the war. In the 1920s a network of expectations could not be fulfilled in the circumstances of the depression and within the framework of the democratic state... the inflation was a product of a set of political calculations on how Germany might be saved from social revolution, and how, as part of this process of social stabilization, the costs of war should best be distributed.“ James, Harold, *The Problem of Continuity in German History. The Interwar Years*, *The Historical Journal* 27,2 (June 1984), pp. 513-524. The quote is from pgs. 514-515. In his review of Widdig's book, Hans-Joachim Voth writes, „Yet I couldn't help feeling that Widdig trusts popular interpretations too readily when it comes to hyperinflation's long-run impact on economic behavior. The German love affair with the saving account, and their (until recently) disinterest in shares are interpreted as the direct outcome of the traumatic years of million-mark eggs and wheelbarrows full of cash. Every reading of the economic literature implies that the exact opposite would have been the only economically sensible response – those who saved in assets guaranteed in nominal terms lost almost everything, while those who purchased productive assets (Sachwerte) did relatively well. Germany's distaste for equity is a paradox, given the experience of two great inflations in the last century, and not its logical result.“ Voth, Hans-Joachim, *Review of Bernd Widdig Culture and Inflation in Weimar Germany*, *Economic History Services*, Dec 3, 2002, URL : <http://www.eh.net/bookreviews/library/0560.shtml>.

<sup>5</sup> The debate over Handlungsspielraum (room for maneuver) was set off by Knut Borchardt and refers, in its original sense, to the constraints upon Chancellor Brüning. For literature on this broader topic, see Fischer, Wolfram, *Weltwirtschaftliche Rahmensbedingungen für die ökonomische und politische Entwicklung Europas 1919-1939*. Wiesbaden 1980; Feldman, Gerald

after the Great War.<sup>7</sup> The research of scholars such as Jay Winter has shown, through a broadly comparative approach, that the period after the war was far less of a rupture and far more of a return to traditional, pre-war forms of commemoration and cultural production (in contrast to the earlier analysis of Paul Fussell).<sup>8</sup> This „backward gaze“ of many Europeans after the war was a search for familiar forms and familiar associations in a time when little was certain, and death and poverty left nary a family untouched. This analysis also explains why Weimar culture is far more traditional than the author portrays.<sup>9</sup> For example, one of the best-selling authors during the Weimar years was none other than Karl May. His novels of adventure, escape, and of new lands were stories that many Germans (including such wildly opposite figures such as George Grosz and Adolf Hitler) grew up on and kept reading before, during, and after the war.<sup>10</sup> Amidst the upheaval and grinding poverty of Weimar Germany, one can understand why more and more readers were seeking some form of escape from their everyday lives – an escape, moreover, that was familiar and traditional.

In terms of style, this reviewer can find little positive to note. This book contains numerous errors of usage, citation convention, and other

May. (Time for someone to write a study of Karl May and his phenomenal influence on German intellectuals).“ *The Journal of Modern History* 44,2 (June 1972), p. 299. For statistics and analysis of May’s popularity and influence, see also Frigge, Reinhold, *Das erwartbare Abenteuer. Massenrezeption und literarisches Interesse am Beispiel der Reiseerzählungen von Karl May*, Bonn 1984; Munzel, Friedhelm, *Karl Mays Erfolgsroman „Das Waldröschen.“* Hildesheim 1979.

D.; Holtfrerich, Carl-Ludwig; Ritter, Gerhard A; Witt, Peter-Christian (eds.), *The German Inflation Reconsidered*, Berlin 1982; Borchardt, Knut, *Wachstum, Krisen, Handlungsspielräume der Wirtschaftspolitik. Studien zur Wirtschaftsgeschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, Göttingen 1982.

<sup>6</sup> For further information on the Sonderweg notion, see

<sup>7</sup> On page 16, Widdig writes, „[Anton] Kaes lays the important groundwork for my study by persuasively arguing that ‘the inflationary period after World War I marks a radical cultural rupture. By rejecting the nineteenth-century notion of culture of the educated bourgeoisie, a new economically based modern mass- and media culture constituted itself.’“

<sup>8</sup> Winter, Jay, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning. The Great War in European Cultural History*, New York 1995. See also Susan Kingsley Kent’s review of Winter in *The Journal of British Studies* 37,1 (Jan. 1998), p. 105-110. She writes, „Jay Winter and Joanna Bourke have produced studies that challenge the status of the Great War as a moment of acute cultural or social discontinuity. Winter focuses on bereavement... arguing that ‘traditional’ languages of mourning – themes drawn from classical, religious, and romantic images – enabled Europeans to recover from the experience of their losses.“ p. 105.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Schulze, Hagen, *Weimar. Deutschland 1917-1933*, Berlin 1982. Schulze writes on pg. 124, „Dennoch, die ‚Kultur von Weimar‘ ist ein Mythos, geboren nach der Flucht und Ausbürgerung der vielen Intellektuellen, die den Zwanzigern Form und Farbe gegeben haben [...] Was aus dieser Perspektive als leuchtende, exotische Blume der Republik erscheint, die 1933 von SA-Stiefeln zertrampelt wird, das blüht in Wahrheit schon viel länger; seine Wurzeln liegen im wilhelminischen Deutschland.“ Schulze also quotes an excerpt from Harry Graf Kessler’s *Tagebücher*, „Daß in der deutschen Kunst eine Wandlung von Bürgerlichen (dem Impressionismus) zum Volkstümlichen (dem Expressionismus) bereits der Revolution vorausgegangen sei.“ (Entry from January 4th, 1919, p. 91).

<sup>10</sup> Hitler kept May’s books by his bedside wherever he went and even commanded his top generals to read May. As Speer recounts in his *Spandau Diaries*, „Hitler was wont to say that he had always been deeply impressed by the tactical finesse and circumspection that Karl May conferred upon his character Winnetou [...] And he would add that during his reading hours at night, when faced by seemingly hopeless situations, he would still reach for those stories, that they gave him courage like works of philosophy for others or the Bible for elderly people.“ See Ryback, Timothy, „Hitler’s Forgotten Library.“ *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 2003.

abuses of the English language.<sup>11</sup> In addition, Widdig employs the often opaque language of literary criticism without explaining or clarifying key terms.<sup>12</sup> If this book is indeed meant to appeal to those outside of his own discipline, Widdig should attempt to engage not only the scholarly works of economics and history, but also the methodologies, styles, and debates that are part and parcel of the disciplines. Nevertheless, he has taken on a daunting task in writing this book, and one hopes that others will follow his approach of employing a wider, interdisciplinary lens.

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Grosz was heavily influenced by May, as one may read in his biography by Beth Irwin Lewis, *Grosz, George, Art and Politics in the Weimar Republic*. Madison 1971. See also István Deák's review of the book, in which he notes that „The first phase, that of the ‘theoretical misanthrope’ (1912-1919), saw an almost destitute Grosz acting the English aristocrat, the expressionist, and the dadaist, and with the wild enthusiasm for everything American, an enthusiasm shared by many of his contemporaries nurtured on the childhood-novels of Karl

<sup>11</sup> The reviewer should note that he is, in the parlance of the discipline, a prescriptivist. Widdig alternates between in-text citation and footnotes throughout the entire book, which is quite confusing for the reader. See p. 140-141 for an example. Widdig also alternates, often in the same paragraph, between British and MLA usage of punctuation (see pg. 27 for one example), uses the word „enormity“ to refer to quantity, employs numerous usages of the pronomial „this,“ employs pronouns without direct antecedents (see the bottom of pg. 15 for one example), falls victim to several comma-splices, abuses the expletive construction, and employs coordinating conjunctions to begin sentences, which gives the book its rushed feel. For those who would like a full listing, please contact the reviewer.

<sup>12</sup> A good description of the problems of Widdig's language for those outside the discipline of literary criticism can be found in Voth's review of the book, „The book is not entirely free from the jargon of cultural history and some of the oddities that make so many of the writings in a similar vein hard to read. Learning that ‘the grand narratives of modernity employ the dichotomy of gender as a powerful rhetorical strategy to mark basic structures of difference such as ... authenticity and alienation, ... desire and rationality’ made this reviewer feel like the hero in Musil's *Young Törless*, who, when reading Immanuel Kant, has the sensation of his head being slowly squeezed in a gigantic mechanical apparatus.“ Voth, Hans-Joachim, „Review of Bernd Widdig *Culture and Inflation in Weimar Germany*“ *Economic History Services*, Dec 3, 2002, URL : <http://www.eh.net/bookreviews/library/0560.shtml>.