

VOICES FROM A WEIMAR DREAM

Austin Harrington. *German Cosmopolitan Social Thought and the Idea of the West. Voices from Weimar.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2016. pp. x + 439.

Voices from Weimar is the slightly misleading subtitle that Austin Harrington gives to his *German Cosmopolitan Social Thought and the Idea of the West*. While Harrington uses the voices of various people to speak about what was happening in Weimar, he tends to use them as if they were referring to a pleasant dream about it and not to the nightmare that Weimar mostly was. This is not to say that Harrington is wrong—many of the thinkers he discusses did try to make Germany more liberal and democratic during those years of the Weimar crises, but ultimately they failed. Harrington's intention to provide an ideal alternative was also bound to fail—because that often happens when dreams are confronted by reality. However, Harrington should be applauded for mounting a vigorous defense on behalf of the Weimar intellectuals and he should be praised for telling a complex and critical story.

Harrington's account is sweeping—he examines the fourteen years of the Weimar Republic and he discusses many of the most important Weimar thinkers. These include Georg Simmel, Max Weber, Alfred Weber, Ernst Troeltsch, Karl Jaspers, Karl Mannheim, Ferdinand Tönnies, and Carl Schmitt. Harrington regards most of these individuals as good, if not almost heroic, but there are some who he considers marginal and then there are a few who he actually regards as bad. Because of space and relevance, this review is restricted to four thinkers: Troeltsch, Tönnies, Max Weber, and especially Carl Schmitt.

Ernst Troeltsch was one of the most important theologians of the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. However, Troeltsch was not above all a philosopher but a theologian, so Harrington is correct to complain that like Tönnies and Alfred Weber, his “political writings and accomplishments have not been as well appreciated as they should be.” (107). Harrington is also correct in his description of Troeltsch's Protestant theology and

how it influenced his political thinking. However, Harrington does not convey how much Troeltsch believed that Oswald Spengler's books were damaging Germany nor does he do justice to Troeltsch's scholarship in *Historismus und seine Probleme*.¹ Furthermore, Harrington is wrong to state that this book appeared in two volumes in 1922 since Troeltsch died before writing the second volume. Finally, Harrington claims that the title that Troeltsch's wife assigned to the posthumously published collection is misleading; however, Harrington's own claim is incorrect. Martha Troeltsch properly chose *Historismus und seine Ueberwindung* because Troeltsch did think that historicism *itself* needed to be overcome and that it reflected the connection between these five pieces and the *Historismus* volume. (246, 248). Its accuracy is further reflected by one of the titles in the new series of *Troeltsch-Studien: Geschichte durch Geschichte überwinden*.²

Harrington is right to emphasize Ferdinand Tönnies' early concern for the working man and for warning against the later threat of National Socialism (111-114). However, he is wrong to suggest that Tönnies was mildly critical about Nietzsche. Tönnies does not simply offer a critical assessment of Nietzsche but condemns him in both *Der Nietzsche-Kultus* and in "Nietzsche-Narren." Furthermore, Harrington minimizes Tönnies's conservatism and his inclination to patriarchy. It is clear from a reading of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* that Tönnies did recognize the changes occurring in modern society but he still preferred the values of traditional, rural family life.³

As a long-time editor of *Max Weber Studies*, Harrington has demonstrated a great understanding and a fine appreciation for Weber's writings; however, here he adheres strictly to Wolfgang Mommsen's critique of Weber's nationalism that he formulated in *Max Weber und die Deutsche Politik. 1890-1920*. (164, 166-178, 235-236). He also relies heavily on Joachim Radkau's psycho-biography (*Max Weber: Die Leidenschaft des Denkens*) to portray Weber as unstable. Harrington would have been better served if he had consulted the more objective accounts of Weber's life and work as found in the books and articles from Wilhelm Hennis, Kari Palonen, and Jürgen Kaube.

Harrington addresses several points regarding Carl Schmitt's writings from the Weimar period.⁴ The first point revolves around Schmitt's critique of parliamentary democracy in *Die geistesgeschichtliche Lage des heutigen Parlamentarismus*. He claims that Schmitt believed that

¹ pp. 134-135; 244-245, 247, 249-250. Troeltsch published two lengthy review essays on Spengler's *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, one in 1919 on the first volume and the other appeared posthumously in 1923 on the second volume. Both review essays are found in Band 13 of the Ernst Troeltsch *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter. 2010. For a full account of *Historismus und seine Probleme* see the "Einleitung" to Band 16.1 of the *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. 2008. For a shorter account see Adair-Toteff's in *The Anthem Companion to Ernst Troeltsch*. London: Anthem Press. 2018.

² For the background for the choice of title see the "Einleitung" to Band 17 of the *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. 2006. Also the publication was 1924 and not 1925.

³ See the essays by Kenneth C. Bessant, William Stafford, and Niall Bond in *The Anthem Companion to Ferdinand Tönnies*. London: Anthem Press. 2016.

⁴ Harrington makes generalizations such as the problems which are "widely discussed", points which are "widely noted", an assertion that is "well known", "as commentary has underlined", "As criticism has underscored", and as "critics note". 321-323, 325. Yet, he relies mostly on William Scheuerman's *Carl Schmitt: The End of the Law* and Reinhard Mehring's *Carl Schmitt zur Einführung*. Hamburg: Junius 2001 and *Carl Schmitt. Aufstieg und Fall*. München: C.H. Beck. 2009. A close reading of both of Mehring's books shows that Mehring has a more nuanced and a more positive opinion of Schmitt than Harrington suggests.

parliaments had become “instruments for self-advancement of antagonistic social blocks” and that legislatures were nothing more than “a parading ground for the power-interests” (322). Yet, this work is not nearly as negative as Harrington maintains and it is less superficial than he suggests. One may not agree with Schmitt’s assessment of Parliament, but one should acknowledge that his analysis of it was fairly accurate.⁵

The second is Schmitt’s depiction of Roman Catholicism in *Römischer Katholizismus und politische Form*. Harrington accuses Schmitt of making “sleights of hand” and he criticizes him for oversimplifying and for superficiality. Specifically, Harrington insists that Schmitt’s account of Catholicism implies that it can overcome all opposition and by “joining faith with juridical rationalism” can guide “psychic life without destroying its irrational mystique.” (324). Harrington might be justified to suggest that Schmitt misread Weber’s juxtaposition of Protestants and Catholics as an indictment of the latter, yet Schmitt noted that Weber acknowledged that Roman Catholic rationalism helped defeat many irrational tendencies.⁶ Furthermore, anyone familiar with the anti-Catholic polemics that pre-date and post-date Bismarck’s “Kulturkampf” should acknowledge that Schmitt is more or less justified in mounting a defense of Roman Catholicism against the typical misunderstandings and misconstructions.

The third is Schmitt’s observation about the “general loss of authentic political consciousness” as set out in *Der Begriff des Politischen*. Harrington accuses Schmitt of promulgating “a kind of super-Machiavellian metaphysic of experience”, he faults him for employing the “Freund-Feind” distinction, and he condemns him for “stretching” an observation of homogeneous communities “into a thesis of sinister behavioural necessity, as if ‘often’ or ‘typically’ meant ‘always’ and ‘inevitably’.” (325). Harrington exaggerates the positions that Schmitt actually takes and he overlooks the importance of Schmitt’s countering of the positivist legal doctrines of the time such as those of Georg Jellinek and of Hans Kelsen. As Schmitt maintained, the state *is* political, and to deny that, is to deny reality. In terms of politics, Schmitt moved away from Max Weber, but in terms of scholarship, he followed him by avoiding scientific exaggerations.

Although Harrington does not specifically list it, he has a fourth point regarding Schmitt’s view of the Weimar constitution. Harrington incorrectly suggests that Schmitt thought of himself as a “detached bystander” (328) because Schmitt was proud that he was regarded by legal scholars as a knowledgeable, if passionate, authority in the debate about the state and politics. Harrington fails to mention the other contributors to this debate, which included Rudolf Smend, Richard Thoma, Gerhard Anschütz, and Heinrich Treipel. Hans Kelsen, who is regarded as one of the greatest legal scholars of the twentieth century, is mentioned only once (326). Harrington misconstrues the issue of “Hüter der Verfassung” as evidenced by his translation “custodian of the Constitution” instead of “guardian of the Constitution” and he ignores the “Preußenschlag” of 1932 which is perplexing because it meant the end of the Weimar era.⁷ In general, it appears that Harrington ignores or downplays the belief that

⁵ Mehring 2001: 74-75. Even someone as opposed to Schmitt’s political conclusion about parliament as Richard Thoma believed that Schmitt’s essay was sound legal scholarship. Richard Thoma, “Zur Ideologie des Parlamentarismus und der Diktatur.” *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*. Band 25, 1925. 212-217.

⁶ Carl Schmitt, *Römischer Katholizismus und politische Form*. Klett-Cotta, 2016. 23-26.

⁷ The Index is problematic. Some people have only one or two entries yet are mentioned numerous times in the book: Joachim Radkau is listed once but is found on eight pages; Volker Meja is listed once but is found

many Germans shared, that longing for the “dawn” of the new order and a way out from the chronic crises of the Weimar Republic.⁸

Harrington’s dislike of Schmitt is evident in his claims that Schmitt offered “extravagant” contentions, made “far-fetched” accusations, and provided “legerdemains” (322-325). It is even more evident in Harrington’s contrast between Schmitt and Mannheim, whereas the former is depicted as bashing liberal democracy whereas the latter defends it. Yet, this is an oversimplification, if not a distortion, of both thinkers’ positions. Harrington claims (without providing evidence) that Mannheim “referred generally positive” to *Die geistesgeschichtliche Lage*, that Schmitt mentioned *Ideologie und Utopie* in *Begriff des Politischen*, and that they corresponded for a while (326). However, Mannheim did not think much of Schmitt’s work, Schmitt did not like Mannheim’s writing, and Schmitt referred to Mannheim as a “dreadful, poor Eastern Jew” (“scheußlicher, elender Ostjude”) (Mehring 2009: 257).

There are a number of assertions which may seem minor and are not objectionable to someone with a cosmopolitan view point; however, they are likely strike many Germans as being rather odd, if not wrong. These include the misrendering of Luther’s famous “Hier ich steh, ich kann nicht anders” as “here I stand, I can move no further” (26) and the misrepresentation of Weber’s “Das Wahre ist die Wahrheit” as “Only truth is the true” (296-297). “Kampf” is translated as “contest” (295), “Gemütlichkeit” as “comfortableness” or “homeliness” (88), a “Kulturvolk” as “civilized peoples” (146).

There is a larger problem; namely, Harrington views these thinkers through a lens of morality. Whoever thought in terms of a “European cosmopolitan task of reconciliation” (167; see also 176, 228, 265, and 314) is regarded as good; whoever did not is considered bad. That is why Troeltsch and Tönnies are “good” while Weber and Schmitt are “bad”. Harrington’s book is not so much a history of what was, but of what should have been; and a more accurate title would be: *German Cosmopolitan Social Thought and the Ideal of the West*. Max Weber would certainly object to this book because of the substitution of values for facts, but it is also likely that Schmitt, Tönnies, and Troeltsch would object to Harrington’s rather wishful account. Yet, Harrington is able to convey the best of Weimar, which Peter Gay had maintained was a combination of “austere empiricism and scholarly imagination”.⁹ Having devoted considerable effort to understanding the complexities of the Weimar era, I readily acknowledge that Harrington does a more than credible job in explaining many of them. Thus, for those wishing to learn about the Weimar intellectuals and their struggles to create an ideal culture, I encourage them to read Harrington’s *German Cosmopolitan Social Thought and the Idea of the West*.

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on twelve pages; David Kettler is listed twice but is found on fourteen pages; and Colin Loader lacks an entry but is mentioned five times.

⁸ Michael Stolleis, *Recht im Unrecht. Studien zur Rechtsgeschichte des Nationalsozialismus*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp. 1994. 136-137.

⁹ Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture. The Outsider as Insider*. London: Penguin Books. 1974. p. 35.