

# American Weimar

BY ROBERT ALAN COOK

*We may very well stand at one of those decisive turning points of history which separate whole eras from each other. For contemporaries entangled, as we are, in the inexorable demands of daily life, the dividing lines between eras may be hardly visible when they are crossed; only after people have stumbled over them do the lines grow into walls which irretrievably shut up the past.*

Hannah Arendt (1975)

In 1972 a conclave of distinguished American historians debated whether the United States was going the way of Germany's ill-fated Weimar Republic. (The colloquium proceedings were published in *Social Research*, Summer, 1972.) They concluded that it was not, that the differences outweighed the similarities. But a few participants, such as Geoffrey Barraclough, were already worried, and today reappraisal seems overdue.

Some parallels are striking: proliferation of religious cults; popularity of astrology, the occult, and Eastern religions; bizarre food fads; back-to-the-land movements; disaffected youth; the dancing mania; sexual license; extensive pornography; public homosexuality, often suggestively violent; inflation; unemployment; a recent military defeat; a top-heavy, careerist military establishment; numerous unemployed intellectuals; mediocre political leadership; widespread political apathy; and an intellectual antipathy to democracy.

Of course some important differences also stand out. Constitutional democracy was unknown to Germany before 1919. The Germans had always lived with autocracy and by all accounts found it congenial. And the German military tradition—that special adoration of the uniform, a love of order and precision, the mystique surrounding warlord heroes of Prussian glory—has no parallel in America.

But Americans are changing in many ways. An April, 1976, Gallup poll found that 49 per cent of Americans thought the country needed “really strong leadership that would try to solve problems directly without worrying about how Congress or the Supreme Court might feel....” This after Watergate. And in June, 1979, 66 per cent of respondents to a *New York Times*/

CBS poll said they would be inclined to vote for “someone who would step on some toes and bend some rules to get things done.”

Without denying some distinctions, this essay examines three portentous, interrelated trends common to Weimar Germany and contemporary America: (1) social atomization, (2) declining power and legitimacy, and (3) deep strains of despair and irrationalism.

## THE RISE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL MAN

In 1939, Peter F. Drucker proclaimed “the end of Economic Man.” Others referred to a time of “metaphysics.” The Nazis reached beyond ordinary interest politics to seek the unity of a near-mystical German “race.” Never a political party in the usual sense, the Nazis were a *mass movement* that could succeed only when the German people had become an unstructured, atomized mass.

The atomization of German society—its reduction to a mere mass of frightened, isolated persons no longer identified by their traditional class or status interests—began with World War I, continued through the hyperinflation of 1922-23, and returned in the Great Depression. As Drucker put it, the war had revealed the individual as “an isolated, helpless, powerless atom in a world of irrational monsters.” The economic success of the mid-1920s failed to erase this perception; competitive bourgeois capitalism continued to enhance personal isolation. The Depression hastened the collapse of the class system which, in Hannah Arendt's view, had provided the only barrier to complete atomization. Lost, fearful, alienated, isolated souls flocked to the Nazi banner. Small farmers driven to the wall by low prices, powerful banks, and paralyzed distribution systems; unemployed workers, clerks, teachers, and other professionals; bankrupt small businessmen—these were the famous *déclassés* who could not abide interest-politics as usual.

But the critical consequence of all this was not merely that these people turned to quick and ready solutions to their economic problems. The unemployed, having lost self-respect, tend to reduce their social activities and find their isolation intensified. Enter psychological man. Impotence and humiliation shatter the ego. From here it is a short route to the mass movement, as the atomized individual seeks to embrace a *collective self* as a means of healing his intolerable isolation and self-estrangement.

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Robert Alan Cook is a former civil rights lawyer and college teacher who now lives in Canada and is writing a book on the United States' political future. He gratefully acknowledges the constructive criticism of Professor Jon Alexander of Carleton University.

Where intermediate entities—churches, unions, small businesses, local government units, and political parties—are strong and responsive, they temper the individual's relations with the broader society and government. One can participate more meaningfully in such groups than in national politics. But when these institutions either atrophy or become highly centralized and autonomous, the individual finds himself isolated and estranged. Moreover, élites and masses become directly exposed to each other—élites to mass action and masses to élite manipulation.

In Germany, the nation that suffered most acutely from the Depression, intermediate institutions—most of them already feeble—failed utterly. Unions, already weakened by state regulation of wages and working conditions, were rendered irrelevant by mass unemployment. Never strong in Germany, political parties disintegrated in the face of assaults from extreme Left and Right. Small businesses failed or were devoured by giant trusts and cartels. The society was ripe for mass action.

At the moment American mass unemployment appears remote—if only due to a prospective draft and an assured weapons build-up. But our intermediate institutions are decaying rapidly in a time of radical social change. Unions now represent about a fifth of the labor force (down from one-third in the late 1940s). Surviving unions have become highly centralized and bureaucratized, alienating rank and file. Established churches have lost much of their influence. With every recession, more small firms go bankrupt, with corporate giants absorbing their assets. The major political parties have long been disintegrating under the combined impact of television (which personalizes campaigns), primaries (which require personal organizations), intraparty divisions, and now federal campaign subsidies. Popular initiatives are curtailing state taxing and spending authority, weakening state and local governments. As intermediate groups decline, politics shifts to more direct confrontations between man and élite—a new hyperdemocracy riding an unprecedented wave of mass referenda, initiatives, and recall petitions. Pressures are building for nationwide initiative processes.

The growth and proliferation of authoritarian religious cults are signs of atomization. These are true mass movements. They appeal to the lost, alienated, and frightened of all classes, providing answers for the confused, discipline for the wayward, purpose for the self-estranged, solidarity for the isolated. Ideologies apart, their techniques of conversion and control justify alarm, and their adhesion to the *Führerprinzip* carries all the savor of late Weimar.

Americans, however, are turning to themselves more than to cults. At this moment many choose not to believe in anything; neither God nor state competes with the urge to instant gratification. The ego is under attack from all sides, as state and society destroy self-help, invade the family, and usurp many of the latter's critical functions. With few exceptions, we can find no reference points within ourselves. What Christopher Lasch has so brilliantly diagnosed in his *Culture of Narcissism* is a highly alienated complex of selfishness,

isolation, and unstable self-esteem. Lasch believes that, given the chance, the American narcissist would "willingly exchange his self-consciousness for oblivion and his freedom to create new roles for some form of external dictation, the more arbitrary the better."

### CRISIS TO SPASM TO AGONY

Who are the atomized? Predominantly, they are the white members of the working, middle, and upper middle classes. In the working and lower middle classes the atomized white American is alone, fearful of his fellow man, addicted to TV violence and sitcoms, adrift among rapidly changing values and sex roles, suspicious of his union's leadership (if he has a union), and knows he is superfluous to an industrial system that can easily replace him with a black, a woman, or a machine—each degrading to him—or simply shut down his job-providing plant. A whirlwind of social and political change confuses and angers him and leaves him nostalgic for the "good old days" of the late 1940s, when blacks and women knew their places, machines posed no threat to jobs, and America could whip any country in the world. Just as this Middle American was "making it," the world turned on him.

In the middle and upper middle classes the atomized American is too jaded and hedonistic to be angry—at least for the moment—though he can be counted on to get out and vote for lower taxes and let the poor be damned. He has already found his own solution to urban decay in the flight to suburbia, where he denies any responsibility for helping the city on which his suburb depends. Nor is he ready to share his little Eden with blacks; indeed, he is far more likely to be armed against them. Of course if he is young and single, he has returned to the city with the new swinging "gentry" and renovated a house or apartment, he smokes enough pot to be chic and swings at the disco clubs. Wherever he lives, he measures his well-being by his victories in the power struggles of office and cocktail party and by his calculated seductions. He has either undergone the rigors of the "self-awareness" movement or has read its bibles. He has learned that, whatever his feelings, they are as valid as anyone else's and he has no need of anyone but himself. (He needs sexual partners, of course, but they must not be allowed to encroach on his "space.") As Lasch notes, "getting ahead of others" and "surviving" are his watchwords. Politically, he is cynical and therefore apathetic. In his quiet moments he fears loneliness, old age, and random violence.

Throughout all but the uppermost classes, across the social and political spectrum, Americans are isolated from each other and even intensify their isolation. Meanwhile, inflation gnaws at the status of the middle class. As the nation staggers from crisis to spasm to agony with no relief in sight, people find themselves driven into corners and forced back on neurotic, sometimes hysterical defenses. We may even be worse off than the Germans of the 1920s; we are far more spoiled and just as irrevocably atomized. Some evil day, the pain of our loneliness, our isolation, and our multitudinous anxieties will cry out for the relief that comes from the submergence of our individual differences in some momentous, mass-uniting cause.

## THE DECLINE OF POWER AND LEGITIMACY

Throughout its brief existence the Weimar Republic fought an almost daily battle to establish its legitimacy in the eyes of the German people. The Right attacked it as the bastard child of the "November traitors," who had "betrayed" the German Army in 1918 and sought a humiliating peace. The extreme Left saw it as the last defense of bourgeois capitalism, fit only for hanging. In the middle stood the apathetic, apolitical German, a new stereotype.

Apathy, a sign of waning legitimacy, was a serious problem in Weimar. In our society today, a growing near-majority ignores elections. In the 1976 presidential election a bare 53 per cent majority voted; in the 1978 congressional and state elections 37 per cent turned out. Polls consistently show declining confidence in all governmental institutions

Several scholars hold that interwar fascism was the twentieth-century reaction to lost national self-esteem, that it was more an ideology of power than of economics. German sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf has shown that much of the fractured German middle class wanted "the powerful state to offer a third way between...the evils of capitalism on the one hand and socialism on the other" (emphasis added). The key to the Nazi revolution, according to this view, is that the Nazis, far more consistently and dramatically than any other party, promised power for Germany. The unexampled violence of the Brownshirts aimed to create one impression: that only the Nazis could be counted on to mete out the revenge many felt was due.

Now no sensible person would equate America's defeat in Vietnam with Germany's in World War I. In 1918, Germany was an utterly exhausted nation. Its army was on the verge of total collapse, reeling before Allied advances. In early 1973 the U.S. Army was fully intact, the economy in good condition. In World War I, Germany lost two million men; the United States lost 55,000 in Vietnam.

And yet a parallel may be developing, not merely in military defeat and its aftermath, but in fantasies born of lost power and self-respect. Of course more than Vietnam accounts for the famous decline of American power. At least three sources of that power—moral authority, wealth, and technology—are in trouble today.

Moral authority: Against our history of Indian wars and black slavery, contemporary racism and economic injustice stand as blatant contradictions to America's claim to moral authority. Opposed to our preachments on "human rights" are other voices asserting that millions of American blacks and Hispanics go hungry, alternately swelter and shiver in rat-infested slums, and rot in prisons, while we deal amiably with every fascist regime in Latin America.

Wealth: We depend on many Third World countries for critical resources; of thirty-six minerals essential to modern industry, the U.S. is self-sufficient in seven. The growing interrelated problems of energy, resource depletion, and pollution clearly guarantee indefinite inflation and a declining standard of living. Nor is there any easy solution to the problem of flagging productivity. "Cost-push" inflation is here to stay.

Technology: Europe, Japan, and even the Soviet

Union are pressing the American lead. Meanwhile, bureaucracy and environmental concerns hamper technical innovation; research and development funds are shrinking as a percentage of GNP.

As many political thinkers have insisted, effective power operates via co-optation, persuasion, and compromise. Violence and political power are opposites; the great danger is that men and nations tend to resort to violence when their legitimacy and power decline. The desperate confusion of power and violence is what took place in Germany, and the possibility of its occurring here must soon confront us.

Much of the world no longer listens to the United States; OPEC goes its own way, as do others. How long will Americans tolerate such an attitude among those whom America has so aided in the past—Europe with liberation and the Marshall Plan, and the Third World with three decades of foreign aid?

## DESPAIR AND THE FLIGHT FROM REASON

Weimar, like America today, was widely noted for its avant-garde culture, its dancing, and its sexual license. But beneath it all ran dark currents of despair, a love affair with death, and what historian Peter Gay calls a "hunger for wholeness." The rediscovered poetry of Hölderlin and Kleist glorified death and made suicide a romance. For many, too, the philosophy of Martin Heidegger—a Nazi sympathizer—evoked the beautiful mysteries of death, destruction, and irrationalism. In *Weimar Culture*, Peter Gay quotes one observer to the effect that "the young German soldiers...who died somewhere in Russia or Africa with the writings of Hölderlin and Heidegger in their knapsacks can never be counted."

Perhaps youth are always lost and confused, but in Weimar these qualities seemed especially poignant. All over Germany, groups of young men and women—the *Wandervögel*—wandered, sang folk songs, advocated vague varieties of socialism, and searched for community around campfires. Some sought to return to the land, some dabbled in astrology, the occult, and Eastern religion. All were searching for alternatives to the suffocations of bourgeois society and for a "wholeness" of spirit—to the neglect of mind.

The *Wandervögel's* incessant searching, Gay notes, effected a "fixation on the experience of youth itself" among their elders. Germany developed a cult of youth, turning "adolescence itself into an ideology." Amid all the confusion, communal idealism, and mystical longings, teen-age suicide ran at an alarming rate. And when the time came, young Germans embraced Nazi nihilism, the "wave of the future." Between 1930 and 1933, of the thousands of new Party members, 43 per cent were between eighteen and thirty years old; 27 per cent were between thirty and forty.

The parallels here are compelling. Suicide now ranks as the second leading cause of death among American teenagers (after homicide)—due in large part, according to many psychiatrists, to widespread hopelessness. Teen-age alcoholism and drug abuse approach epidemic proportions—surely a sign of despair. The restless searchings of our own unorganized *Wandervögel* have run from the "drop-outs" of the 1960s—who wandered

from Haight-Ashbury to Woodstock to Altamont—to the recent “punk rock” scene with its Nazi-inspired paraphernalia. And the hippies’ quest for “spirituality” has all along reflected their notorious anti-intellectualism. The cult of youth, though it has aged slightly, is integral to our narcissism.

Arendt spoke of a certain “bored indifference to death” among the atomized European masses. Is not this strange psychology on the rise again? We did not need Jonestown or Gary Gilmore to remind us that death is honored today. Despair is ubiquitous, as it was in Weimar. It is manifest in the haunted eyes of the urban underclass and the unemployed; in the “doomsday” chatter of the educated; in the drunken, jaded teenagers; indeed, in the very life-styles of the middle-class narcissists. Polls show a declining faith in the future, a radical erosion of traditional American optimism.

Does not despair generate a flight from reason in some? For the principal causes of misery and hopelessness are the works of man, the products of reckless reason. In Weimar reason had wrought—so far as one could see—hyperinflation, an anemic democracy, and, finally, mass unemployment. Why not, then, follow the Nazis and “think with your blood”?

Like many of the tormented souls of Weimar, large numbers of people today are turning with alacrity to the solaces of astrology, the occult, Eastern religion, faith healers, cults, and fundamentalist religion. Hippie journals advertise quack medicines and “aura meters” (joining radio preachers peddling “curative prayer cloths”). In January, 1978, the New England hippie organ, *Center/Peace*, featured “immortalism”—a staggering doctrine that holds that since all illnesses and accidents are caused by the victim’s “negative thoughts,” then strong “positive thinking” will enable one to live forever. The “counterculture” joins Norman Vincent Peale.

The new irrationalism also finds expression in youthful defiance of all authority; students’ threats and violent assaults against teachers; and pop psychology’s preference for *feeling* over *thought*. Anthropologist Marvin Harris complains in the *New York Times* that many of his colleagues consider science a “Western disease” and hold that “empirical research is nothing but a dirty bourgeois trick.” He also reports that in 1978 the American Anthropological Association refused to condemn the notion that astronaut gods created earthly culture. Among those for whom this passes for science today, who will not think with his blood when the time comes?

## THE ROAD TO NIHILISM

The elemental constituents of American Weimar converge synergistically. Direct mass-élite confrontations reflect both atomization and the decline of institutional legitimacy. Both atomization and the loss of national power feed despair. Despair yields irrationalism, which in turn erodes the consensual, rational basis of democratic legitimacy. Finally, despair enhances the isolation of atomization. The circle is complete and truly vicious. And there is plainly no hope that the independent causes will soon lose their force.

Intermediate institutions appear likely to continue to decline. Industry relocation and automation guarantee the enduring weakness of unions. Communications technology and political pressures will likely continue to undermine the parties and facilitate consummation of the movement toward mass-initiative politics. As material scarcity continues to intensify—and thereby to amplify the Hobbesian “war of all against all”—we need look for no early abatement of selfish narcissism. Our warped individualism is all we have now; Americans have never learned to live in community. Meanwhile, we are dramatically and steadily weakening the family, gradually eliminating its role of primary social mediator.

Social fragmentation is clearly the order of the day. As Kevin Phillips has written in *Harper’s*, America is becoming “Balkanized.” Everywhere one looks there is conflict: between classes, races, ethnic groups, the sexes, sexual preferences, generations, regions, states, and the various levels and institutions of government. We are all the more thoroughly atomized by virtue of these several groupings; while interests conflict, memberships overlap. Has any society so riven found unity without war? Will we find anything other than a successful war to restore American self-esteem and resolve the “crisis of legitimacy,” to recapture the euphoria and exuberance of power? Many American youth are ready to kill, many others ready to die; most need discipline and direction. And adventure in exotic lands can do wonders for youthful wanderlust. American internal violence fairly cries out for organization and a legitimate channel of expression. Modern war admits of little personal glory, but its weaponry grants the lowliest infantryman a power scarcely dreamt of by earlier heroes.

A few years ago Robert Heilbroner voiced the fear that when people see clearly the enormous sacrifices required to serve the ecological interest of posterity, they may condemn the unborn to oblivion “by choosing the present over the future.” Indeed, it could be worse than that, for many might say that a chaotic, polluted earth is fit only for burning. Such, after all, was part of the message of “punk rock.” Many Germans inarticulately felt such nihilism in the late 1920s and early 1930s. By then, both Hitler and Spengler had already suggested that decadent Europe deserved a *Götterdämmerung*.

However that may be, the atomized American people appear almost desperate for order, discipline, and unity, i.e., regimentation and repression. A badly wounded national pride, differing from Weimar’s merely in present intensity, demands “revitalization,” and only war can bring relief. Americans dance tonight in the disco-halls—in an orgiastic spree unknown anywhere since Weimar—but one suspects from the frenzy and the guarded, masked alienation that they will soon be ready to march instead. **WV**