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The illustrations in this fine book supplement a rich and clearly written text. Indeed, eight full-page colour plates reprint election posters, art and a photograph of the Einstein tower. The images illustrate well the novelty of colours and forms associated with the politics and culture of Weimar. Weitz lauds both while acknowledging the difficulties of the era. As a synthesis this work brings together much significant research on this troubled era though in a selected fashion.

Nine chapters, preceded by a short introduction and followed by a terse conclusion, present chronological overviews interspersed with thematic accounts. »A Troubled Beginning«, (Chapter 1) on 1918–1919, acknowledges the difficulties faced by the new republic after a lost war and an imposed peace. »Walking the City« (Chapter 2) provides an overview of what might have been experienced by a visitor to Berlin during the 1920s. Many well-chosen quotations, poetry and songs, stud the text. Weitz claims that »the capital city was the symbol and pacesetter. For the rest of Germany it was too far in front. […] It mirrored Weimar Germany in one, absolutely essential fashion: no single group, no individual, could claim Berlin as its own« (p. 79). No comparative information is provided. Would the Worpswede commune of Heinrich Vogeler not have objected to claims about Berlin being the avant garde, did the Saxon Communists and Social Democrats, whose reformist coalition was deposed from Berlin in 1923, not offer more positive solutions to political stalemates than the Berliners, and would the Bavarians under Gustav Kahr not have thought themselves better than the Berlin conservatives?

Readers should know that the narration is from the following perspective: »Weimar was Berlin, Berlin Weimar«(p. 41, repeated p. 79). That hints at an older approach of a Prussian-centered German past and does not include much of the history that has been written »from the margins«. Bavaria, Bremen, Saxony, Hamburg and other states and regions receive almost no mention. That the communist uprisings in March 1921 were in Hamburg and those of October 1923 in Saxony, and not in Berlin, is not clear (p. 91). The crises of federal-provincial relations as well as the civilian-military conflicts of 1923 do not figure in this narrative; the Hitler Putsch is mentioned but left unexplained. »Political Worlds« (Chapter 3) reaffirms that the republic suffered a »democratic deficit« from beginning to end. The traditional chronological divisions 1918–1923, 1924–1929 and 1929–1933 are employed. During all Weitz illustrates the lack of hegemony by any political group. The main parties and their constituencies are competently reviewed and their election propaganda illustrated. The remnants of authoritarianism in the courts, in the right wing parties prepared to accept assassination of their opponents and especially in the military are well presented.
Similarly, in »A Turbulent Economy and an Anxious Society« (Chapter 4) Weimar’s economy is shown to be a »bundle of conflicts and contradictions« (p. 131). Here too the traditional chronological order is followed with appropriate use of explanations from economic historians who have made reparations and hyperinflation understandable. Weitz concludes about the multitude of economic crises and great depression: »It was the German Right, in which heavy industry and major financial interests exercised preponderant influence, and which promoted policies of inflation, stabilization, and deflation that worsened the real-life circumstances of so many Germans« (p. 168).

In »Building a New Germany«, »Sound and Image«, »Culture and Mass Society«, and »Bodies and Sex« (Chapters 5–8), Weitz hits his stride and offers much novelty and insight. Here he makes Weimar come alive through architecture, art (especially dada), mass culture, radio and various nudist, health and sexual reform movements. The buildings and the intentions of Bruno Taut, Erich Mendelsohn and Walter Gropius are presented in historical context. Letters, drawings and social statements of these designers and architects are drawn upon to demonstrate their desire to create a new urban scene in terms of housing, consumption and aesthetic sense. Weitz asserts, perhaps with nostalgia and critical reflection on present American trends: »The great buildings of Weimar were not corporate office towers, the self-displays of business wealth and power; they were housing developments, department stores, and education and research institutions. Sun-drenched apartments, enticing places to shop, and stimulating spaces to learn —that, too was the promise of Weimar« (p. 206). Cinema, radio and photography are next related to the new technology in each sphere which found its immediate application in 1920s Germany. Though too much underscoring a contrast between the provincial of elsewhere and the cosmopolitanism of Berlin, Weitz illuminates the new ways of seeing and reproducing. He employs August Sander’s and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy’s work but integrates it with what readers would find in illustrated magazines. In discussing film and cinema Weitz moves systematically through the great classics of the era. By contrast he notes state direction and educational intent in analyzing radio. He does pose the question of the impact of these new mass means of communication – of the reproduced image and transported sounds. He thinks »Germans in the Weimar era were living through the greatest transformation of media culture since Johannes Gutenberg« (p. 247). Weitz overlooks that all those technologies could easily reach the provinces and soon did. Automobiles and motorcycles could have been added to the list. But, he rightly underscores the special vitality and intensity of the German engagement with the new forms.

In the chapter on culture and mass society he seeks to demonstrate »the restless questioning of what it means to live in modern times, the search for new forms of expression suitable to the cacophony of modern life, and the belief in the possibilities of the future« (p. 253). A representative and now fairly standard list of »greats« including an author, dramatist, musician, film producer, and philosopher (Thomas Mann, Bertolt Brecht, Kurt Weill, Siegfried Kracauer, Martin Heidegger) is buttressed by a surprising artist choice (Hannah Hoch). Hoch is represented by three of the eight colour plates and all three black and white illustrations of this chapter. Weitz applauds the output of these individuals and laments their
destruction by the next regime. How the »masses« received what had supposedly been created for them is less clear. With the section on »bodies and sexuality« Weitz – in perhaps the strongest part – outlines what the sex reformers advocated with charming examples. And he provides great evidence on their opponents’ fears and anxieties. With dance, nudity and cabarets as well as the image of the »New Woman« he underscores the class elements of novelties, including the working class search for respite in nature from proletarian drudgery. The fear of the female and of alleged outsiders such as Jews and Bolsheviks is tied in nicely as he wonders whether »we have really travelled all that far from the 1920s« (p. 330).

Much learning and a careful structuring of information in this work helps the reader rethink Weimar culture and its context. Weitz demonstrates both its promise and tragedy.