

The Arts of Democratization: Styling Political Sensibilities in Postwar West Germany

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Over the past decade, historians have increasingly approached West German democratization as an ongoing process of searching for the meaning of “democracy” itself. Rather than simply measuring democratization against preconceived benchmarks, this new trend has drawn our attention to the differing ways in which West Germans defined democracy and how they believed it could be realized as a “way of life.” Jennifer Kapczynski and Caroline Kita’s recent edited volume advances our understanding of this search for the meaning of democracy with a particular focus on the arts (broadly conceived) and representations of democracy in “word, image and sound” (3).

In the introduction, Kapczynski and Kita argue for greater attention to how differing groups of West Germans conceived of “democratic subjectivity” (4). To shed light on this question, they argue, we cannot focus solely on formal political institutions and policy debates, and should consider how democratic subjectivities were defined, performed, and styled in a range of media. The subsequent contributions, in turn, explore ideas about democracy in a range of fields, including theatre, radio, film, literature, photography, pedagogy, and forums of public discussion. An examination of these fields, Kapczynski and Kita argue, reveal the diverse and often contradictory ideas about democratic ways of being which could be found in the Federal Republic.

The first contribution, by Kathleen Canning, fittingly opens the volume by situating the search for democracy after 1945 within the context of the memory of the Weimar Republic. The turbulent moments of Weimar’s founding and collapse, she argues, served to efface the broader memory of Weimar democracy after 1945. But Weimar democracy, Canning argues, was more robust and capable of self-defence than is often believed. Rather than simply embedding the respective histories of the Weimar and Federal Republics within a contrasting narrative of failure vs. success, Canning instead argues for viewing the search for democracy in Weimar as a beginning point, which actors after 1945 continued to build upon.

The following contributions, by Sean Forner and Caroline Kita, shed light on questions about public discourse and democracy in the early Federal Republic. Forner focusses on forums of public discussion between intellectuals and ordinary West Germans—looking particularly at the “European Discussions” of the *Ruhrfestspiele* and the famous “Wednesday Discussions” held in the Cologne train station throughout the 1950s. Forner argues that intellectuals were not as broadly sceptical of mass democracy as is often assumed. Ordinary denizens, meanwhile, displayed a deep hunger for forums of open discussion in the wake of National Socialism. Kita’s chapter, meanwhile, turns our attention to West German engagement with the radio and to questions about how it could be transformed from a propaganda tool to a democratic medium. Kita hones in on exploration of this question in a 1947 radio play by Axel Eggebrecht—a journalist who was deeply involved in reshaping radio broadcasting in the British Zone. Eggebrecht’s work emphasized the importance of fostering dialogue and pluralist discourses in radio, while encouraging critical engagement over passive listening.

Emphasis on democracy as being about active engagement can similarly be found in Jennifer Kapczynski’s chapter on the efforts of pedagogues to use amateur theatre

performances to foster pupils' attachment to democracy. While these often included re-enactments of German resistance to National Socialism, the pedagogues also argued that amateur theatre performances could promote democratic sentiments by teaching empathy, encouraging active participation, and forging a sense of community.

The chapters by Anthony Kauders and Paul Lützel turn our attention to thinking about West German democratization in the work of two postwar intellectuals. Kauders's chapter focusses on Max Horkheimer and begins by dividing thinking about West German democratization into two schools of thought: a "thin" school, in which constitutional arrangements and new democratic structures were believed to "do the trick," and a "thick" school, which saw democratization as requiring a deeper transformation of the German psyche. While Kauders heralds Horkheimer as a "master thinker" (101) of the latter school and dismisses much recent work as belonging to the "thin" school, one wonders whether these two bifurcated categories are not a bit too simplistic to capture the complex thinking about democratization in Germany past and present. Lützel's chapter hones in on the Austrian-Jewish author, Hermann Broch, who had been a strong advocate of democracy in the interwar years and fled to the United States after the *Anschluss*. As Lützel demonstrates, Broch argued that democracy could be advanced in West Germany by fostering transatlantic cooperation, harnessing alternative German traditions, and remembering the history of German resistance to National Socialism. Broch also sought to promote the creation of an international university as a site of democratic education.

The next three chapters offer insights into diverse topics, ranging from bibliomigrancy and food consumption to gender. Tobias Boes's engaging chapter on the movement of books emphasizes the role of the Allies in re-circulating works forbidden or marginalised by the Nazis. His chapter provides examples of how engagement with alternative German literary traditions could be shaped by the Allies, who physically reproduced those works viewed as useful in constructing a democratic Germany. Alice Weinreb's chapter turns our attention to the question of food and consumption in democracy. West Germans, she argues, identified hunger with the threat of totalitarianism and believed that being well-fed was a *sine qua non* of democracy. Darcy Buerkle's chapter turns our attention to gender and argues that the American occupiers helped to export fear of the feminist Left to early postwar Germany. She shows how the Eisenhower administration intimidated feminist activists in the US Office of Women's Affairs, therein disrupting the construction of international feminist networks in West Germany.

The last three chapters focus on film and photography. Maja Figge's chapter examines two films from the 1950s and how they reflected broader attempts in West Germany to democratize Whiteness by creating a foundational myth of West Germany as free of racism. This approach, which itself relied on anti-Black tropes and a Black-White binary, Figge argues, has underpinned the persistent failure to come to grips with anti-Black attitudes in Germany into the present. Jan Uelzmann's chapter examines PR films produced by the *Deutsche Wochenschau* for the Federal Press Office, which sought to paint a picture of the new Federal Republic. Uelzmann's chapter uses these tremendously valuable sources to show how the state sought to depict democracy as being about Christian morality, economic success, embrace of transatlantic alliance structures, and the paternalistic leadership of Konrad Adenauer. Such films also sought to elevate the image of the new capital of Bonn as a symbol of democratic identity, combatting negative attitudes towards the city as a representation of the loss of German unity. In the volume's final chapter, Franz Mehring turns our attention to depictions of the Marshall Plan in photography exhibitions. Mehring pushes beyond debates about the real economic impact of the Marshall Plan and emphasizes the cultural power of the narratives which it helped to forge. These narratives emphasized not only the economic stability allegedly brought by the Marshall Plan but also how democracy and a new sense of identity could be achieved by rejecting nationalism and forging new European and transatlantic partnerships.

The close identification of democratization with connections to the Western powers shines through in many of the contributions to this volume. While historians have rightly problematized narratives of West German democratization as a simple process of “westernization” (opting instead to interrogate how the idea of the West itself has evolved and been invoked in different ways), it is clear that many in early West Germany saw democratization and turning to the “West” as interconnected.

While many edited volumes have been unfairly criticized for the issues which they did not take up, this work offers less consideration of how and why certain actors came to identify with the search for democracy itself. Identification with the creation of a new “democracy” (whatever that is believed to entail) would seem to be a crucial point of departure. What was the role of confrontation with defeat and earlier experiences of mass violence in this process? Did the level of identification with the search for democracy differ from that of the Weimar Republic, when—so Peter Fritzsche reminds us—the main question for many was not whether democracy would succeed but rather what would come after it? The number of questions which can be taken up in a single volume, however, is inevitably limited. On the whole, the present volume makes a valuable, unique, and highly engaging contribution to questions about how West Germans varyingly understood what “democracy” was and how it should be shaped, “styled,” and performed.

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