1 Why Weimar?

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The Weimar Republic lasted a mere fifteen years – from the end of the First World War to Hitler's dictatorship in 1933. It nevertheless became *the* paradigmatic historical event shaping political thinking about fragility and robustness in the postwar West. While seemingly falling out of public debate after the end of the Cold War, Weimar is now back with a vengeance. It is routinely invoked in scholarly writings, op-eds, and political commentary to make sense of the rise of far-right populism, acute political polarization, the erosion of liberal democratic institutions, economic crises and their consequences, and ruptures in the "liberal world order."[1] The assumption motivating many of those who invoke the Weimar analogy is that the Western democracies, like those in the 1930s, are at risk – even at the brink – of possible collapse. One of the principal reasons for writing this book is to challenge this analysis. Our authors demonstrate that the supposed lessons of Weimar are highly questionable, but they have been mobilized to support a broad range of political and cultural projects.

Our book explores the origins and evolution of the "Weimar lesson" – really, Weimar lessons. We ask when and how they arose, who invoked them, under what circumstances, and for what purposes, and how they played out in particular contexts. Weimar and its lessons offer a cautionary tale, resembling a Rorschach test that is likely to tell us more about the people mobilizing it and the political culture in which they function than about the former German republic. Our volume also explores analogies based on Weimar lessons. The two are closely related. Lessons generate analogies but the process also works in reverse. To advance political projects, people have made comparisons between Weimar and their democratic orders to warn others against policies they opposed or to mobilize support for those they favor. As we will see, they invented lessons to support their analogies.[2]

We ask a set of interconnected questions about Weimar lessons and analogies. We are interested in why some so-called lessons are learned but not others. How much are they influenced by superficial versus

deeper readings of events? To what degree are lessons the products of political agendas? What aspects of the Weimar experience have generated lessons? The political lessons are the most prominent, but there are also cultural lessons. To what extent are they related? Finally, we are interested in the life history of lessons. Which Weimar lessons have endured, and why? Have they remained the same over time or have they evolved in content or taken on a different valence?

Weimar analogies, our contributors demonstrate, have proven flexible. They adapt to circumstances and are applied in political cultures quite different from the one in which they emerged. They are also prominent in the sense of being benchmarks or flashpoints of political and cultural dialogue. When mobilized, they are invariably contested, making them expressions of opposing political views and providing circumstances in which they assume meaning. Our contributors show that Weimar has come to play a cautionary tale for both the conservative right and political actors on the left. Weimar lessons are mobilized because people think they will influence the thinking of others. Their use raises deeper questions about their conceptual utility. Do they frame contemporary issues in useful ways? Or do they impose frames of reference that are inappropriate, misleading, and unhelpful? To what extent, therefore, can Weimar serve as a guide for understanding politics at the present juncture?

There is impressive scholarship on the Weimar era. We ask if it supports or contradicts the lessons people have drawn. If it does not, does it suggest more accurate and useful alternatives? Are there political and cultural lessons that can be drawn from Weimar that are germane today, or should these alleged lessons be retired gracefully? And what do Weimar lessons tell us about the relationship between history and political learning – or what passes for political learning? What incentives are there to learn particular lessons and not others?

We are not the first to acknowledge the influence of Weimar. Several recent works focus on how the Republic's demise has shaped postwar political thought.[3] However, we may be the first to evaluate these works critically by placing Weimar lessons in a comparative perspective and to use them to reflect on historical analogies and historical learning more generally.[4] Given the increased presence of Weimar analogies in contemporary Western societies, these are urgent tasks.

Historical Analogies

Historical analogies often shape how political actors understand their political present and what needs to be done to avoid repeating past

catastrophes. Attempts to escape the past may nevertheless increase its hold over the present to the degree that political actors are guided by its supposed lessons. Margaret Macmillan observes: "Even when people think they are striking out in new directions their models often come from the past."[5] Assimilation of lessons provides guidance but also blinds people to alternatives. Good policymaking requires knowledge of history and its possible lessons, but also recognition of the limitations of such lessons and the way in which different contexts might render them ineffective or counterproductive. It further demands openness to change and to new ways of identifying and thinking about problems. These are nearly impossible conditions to meet in practice, which may help explain why policymakers so often err. For leaders facing fraught and risky challenges shrouded in uncertainty, facile historical analogies offer cognitive guidance and emotional support.[6] Policymakers cannot make sense of the world in the absence of historical analogies and lessons, but policy suffers when they become prisoners of these analogies and lessons.

The political consequences of the mobilization of historical analogies are unpredictable. It can sometimes generate lessons that help produce beneficial outcomes, as it seems to have done in the Cuban missile crisis. In *The Guns of August*, published shortly before the crisis, Barbara Tuchman argued – incorrectly, we now know – that European political leaders took the risks that led to war because they had no appreciation of its likely length and cost and because they were unaware of their countries' military plans.[7] President John F. Kennedy was very taken by Tuchman's book and is said to have kept it in mind during the crisis, and it was arguably one of the reasons he was cautious and shied away from military action.[8]

In the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, Vietnam was one of the historical analogies invoked by President George H. W. Bush and his advisers.[9] They were keen to avoid a long war and to retain public support.[10] Vietnam served, in this case, as a cautionary example. However, like many historical events, the Vietnam War spawned multiple and contradictory lessons.[11] Some historians and political scientists concluded that the US was defeated because it framed the problem incorrectly in terms of containment of the Soviet Union and China.[12] Others contend that American leaders failed to understand the local political and cultural situation in Vietnam and tried inappropriately to win a political conflict by military means.[13] Still others maintain that the US suffered from hubris, was unreasonably confident in its military capability, and was arrogantly dismissive of the Vietnamese.[14] These interpretations of the Vietnam War have continued to provide a lens for

understanding the US's campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan in the first decades of the twenty-first century.[15] Some observers have argued that the Vietnam analogy even served as a self-fulfilling prophecy, not least for the Biden administration, culminating in the rapid and chaotic exit by the US from Afghanistan in 2021.[16]

There is also a revisionist narrative that draw different lessons from Vietnam. It relies on the notion that the war was winnable and identifies internal scapegoats for the failed victory. It, too, takes several forms. Some argue that the right military strategy would have been victorious, and others that political interference kept the military from pursuing such a strategy.[17] The claim is widely voiced that the US lost the war in Vietnam because people at home did not support the troops, due in large part to the peace movement and protesters. This version of the *Dolchstoss* (stab in the back) thesis makes the case that if only the US had persevered and been less restrained in its use of force it could have won. Some revisionists also deny or downplay the civilian casualties for which the US was responsible.[18] From these perspectives, the Vietnam analogy is thus not only used to defend particular policies but also feeds into different conceptions of civic duties and patriotism.

The Vietnam case leads us to posit two ways in which historical analogies or lessons become part of political life. Analogies form part of the shared understandings of particular societies. People deploy them to make sense of their world and to identify and respond to its challenges. They also use them strategically as political tools to bolster and legitimize particular policies and identities and to delegitimize others. The creation and application of historical lessons capture the reflexive, creative, and intentional aspects of political action as well as the habitual and unreflective. An accurate and nuanced understanding of how historical lessons become influential in particular societies and at specific junctures requires that we pay attention to both these dimensions.

Sense-making has to do with the stories that politicians, academics, and people in general tell themselves about themselves and others. Historical narratives underpin foundational myths that serve as rallying points around which national and political identities are built. Significant past events are transformed into cautionary or triumphalist stories that provide meaning to political action and serve as guides for pushing society in a particular direction or for organizing its institutions in specific ways.[19] For scholars, such historical events or eras become focal points that serve as illustrative examples; they help direct the scholarly gaze in particular directions and provide the scaffolding for new theoretical understandings that are generalized and applied to contemporary circumstances. The French Revolution became such an undeniable

reference point for nineteenth-century European political thought; progressives and conservatives made it "an object of worship or of horror."[20] Vietnam serves this function in the US – and, we argue, Weimar plays the same role more generally for Western democracies. A marker of the extent to which such reference points are embedded in a particular society is that the intrinsic importance of such historical episodes is rarely questioned. People disagree about the lessons that one should draw from them, but the significance of the event as a source of lessons is firmly ensconced in shared understandings of social and political life.

How does this happen? The premodern notion that history can be uncritically mined for exemplars and serve as a reservoir for lessons in line with the idea *Historia Magistra Vitae* (history as life's teacher) should by now have loosened its grip on our political consciousness.[21] However, frequent turns to history for lessons by policymakers and analysts indicate a continuing tendency to think in this way.[22] Drawing lessons from history may be a powerful, if not inescapable, cognitive predilection. Current events and problems are almost always framed in terms of collective understandings of past significant episodes and events.

High-profile policy decisions frequently make use of historical analogies to impart significance and weight to problems at hand and to their responses. Scholars of international relations have documented how the so-called lesson of Munich has been used to justify and highlight foreign policy decisions at various junctures in the postwar era.[23] Neville Chamberlain's appeasement and assurances to the British people that war with Hitler's Germany had been averted "in our time" obviously turned out to be erroneous. But, as often happens with lessons and analogies, "Munich" was divorced from its historical context and its power enhanced by transforming it into a freestanding principle of foreign policy.[24] It has encouraged and justified confrontational and militaristic foreign policies in widely varying circumstances. This includes the disastrous French campaigns in Vietnam and then in Algeria in the 1950s, British prime minister Anthony Eden's response to Nasser's seizure of the Suez Canal, US intervention in Vietnam, and Margaret Thatcher's response to Argentina's 1982 occupation of the Falkland Islands.[25] Munich was also used to justify deterrence and Cold War military buildups against the Soviet Union. Deterrence was repeatedly reconfirmed tautologically and was falsely given credit for the end of the Cold War.[26]

We should not assume a priori that historical lessons and analogies to buttress contemporary political decisions are problematic. If based on sensitive historical interpretations, treated with caution, and reformulated in response to new evidence, historical analogies can help crystallize

core problems facing particular societies. They can also serve as effective communicative tools that provide perspective on contemporary challenges.[27] Scholarly evaluation and periodic reformulation of lessons have the potential to improve the choice of historical analogies mobilized in political discourses and the way in which they are used. Toward this end, we think it useful to focus equally on the collective understandings about history and its lessons that emerge in a society and how such analogies are used to formulate policies, justify them, and rally support.

The cognitive and instrumental perspectives on historical analogies and lessons capture different features of social and political reality. They overlap in the sense that lessons that have been taken to heart are easier to mobilize for instrumental purposes and will be more successful if they are shared and make sense to the target audience. Some scholars have attempted to determine if historical analogies shape the outlooks of politicians or are mobilized by them to justify and gain support for or against particular policy decisions.[28] This is a useful question to ask, but we should also focus on the ways in which these two uses of historical analogies are analytically and substantively related, and how they reinforce one another in practice.

Historical analogies and lessons are bundled together. Analogies are made between some past event and a present situation and the lessons learned from that event applied to the present one.[29] People can question the analogy between the past and present situations, the validity of that lesson, or its applicability to a particular situation. Our contributors make it apparent that Weimar has been mobilized in a range of different settings and for a variety of different ends. The most extensively used historical analogies are usually ones that have become deeply embedded in a political culture. Munich and Weimar qualify in this regard. The lessons of both are open to challenge, but, given how entrenched they are, it is usually more politically effective to challenge their application. Because they are so frequently invoked, they generate many cases in which their applicability or the lessons themselves can be evaluated. We are interested in knowing the extent to which scholars, the media, and policymakers think retrospectively about the application of these lessons.

The Paradigmatic Lesson

For political scientists and the media, the Weimar Republic and its downfall have become something of a just-so story. They have been a recurring reference point to make sense of threats to democracy and the possibility of political, economic, and societal breakdown.[30] Weimar has

been mobilized to understand the limits and fragility of political orders; it supplies a concrete instance of a possible outcome which, if we are not careful, might come to pass in other polities. The interpretation of Weimar, as the exemplar of societal and political breakdown, is intimately bound up with what followed it. The moniker "the Weimar Republic" became widely spread only posthumously, after it had been eclipsed by the Nazi regime.[31] As political analogies go, however, Weimar may be unparalleled in its richness and scope of application. In recent years, Weimar has most frequently been used to understand the growing support for far-right movements and parties in Europe and more recently in the US. It assumes and encourages a homology between today's politics and the social, economic, and political dynamics that produced fascism in the 1930s. Donald Trump and those who voted for him have been described as fascists.[32] Trump's claim that the 2020 presidential election was stolen from him has been compared to the "stab in the back" myth, and his supporters' occupation of the capitol to Hitler's 1924 failed Beer Hall Putsch.[33] Weimar has also been weaponized by the far right. Their propagandists blame the Republic's collapse on homosexuality and other forms of perceived degeneracy and warn that the same outcome is likely in America.[34]

Early accounts of the re-emergence of the radical right in Europe built explicitly on interpretations of the rise of the Nazis in Weimar.[35] A common starting point of these analogies is a comparison of modernization and its effects in Weimar with contemporary globalization and the groups these processes marginalize and anger. Longstanding and well-institutionalized sociopolitical cleavages and coalitions became obsolete, creating a situation in which the center did not or seems not to hold. Much of the burgeoning literature on antidemocratic movements and political parties consists of variations on this theme.[36] The association of socioeconomic hardship and status decline on the one hand, and the rise of the radical right on the other, has also been contested; scholars have advanced other, mostly non-Weimar, explanations.[37] Similarly, the many efforts to analyze Trump's rise to power in the light of the Weimar analogy have been criticized for their lack of historical accuracy and progressive potential. It is accordingly a propitious moment to explore the Weimar analogy and its lessons as they are being widely used and widely criticized in the US, Europe, and elsewhere.

By far the most important Weimar analogies are associated with the fragility of democracies and what can be done to defend them and make them more robust. Scholars and pundits have drawn different lessons from Weimar. Some have emphasized the need for a substantive democracy that successfully addresses the material and other needs of

citizens.[38] Social democrats have long regarded the comprehensive welfare state as the *sine qua non* and guarantor of a well-functioning democracy, inoculating societies from extremist politics. Social equality enables broad popular participation in politics in a positive way and fosters support for democratic institutions.[39] Conservatives have drawn the opposite lesson. Convinced that a mobilized population constitutes a threat to political order, they argue for a minimalist democracy primarily focused on safeguarding procedures for the non-violent change.[40] Beginning with Karl Loewenstein, constitutional scholars have focused on those aspects of the Weimar Constitution that made it inherently vulnerable to abuse. Loewenstein described Hitler's appointment to *Reichskanzler* (imperial chancellor) and the subsequent destruction of democracy as in no little part facilitated by "the generous and lenient Weimar republic," speaking then about how the constitution allowed for the dismantling of democracy through legal means.[41]

Recent discussions on democratic self-defense also take their cues from the fall of Weimar democracy. They rework the ideas of Loewenstein in a contemporary context.[42] Critics have questioned to what extent the notion of a democracy that abolishes itself is an accurate one; they have instead argued that it is an idea that ultimately helps legitimize a diminished and constrained form of democracy based on distrust of the electorate and their ability to withstand the emotional allure of charismatic leaders.[43] Others have highlighted fundamental differences between today's far-right populists and the extremist supporters of totalitarian ideologies in the interwar years.[44]

The Weimar analogy has not been limited to understanding political phenomena with a direct lineage to European fascism. It is often invoked in settings where this parallel is less obvious or absent. A prominent example is the student protests and social and political upheavals of the late 1960s and early 1970s in the US. They were seen by some as analogous to the turmoil of the Weimar era.[45] Others – with some justice, in our view – dismissed this comparison as superficial and indicative of a fear of democracy.[46]

From the point of view of the student movements, "fascism" was a pejorative used freely against a wide range of ideological opponents. For others, it came with more specific connotations, based in more palpable experiences of authoritarianism and war. This was especially evident in the German and Italian nationalist movements, both of which sought to reckon with the legacy of actual fascism in their countries.[47] The Weimar analogy is so flexible because there are multiple readings of its collapse, each with a different villain. For many German refugees, what put an end to Weimar was the mobilization of the masses by extremists on the right

and the left. For socialists, then and now, it was the alliance of industry and the fascist right. For postwar constitutionalists, it was the special powers provision of the Weimar Constitution.[48] Others have singled out the failure of intellectuals to commit to the Republic; political division on the left; Weimar's troubled version of semi-presidentialism; bad leadership by Hindenburg and his chancellors; and the supine response of the socialists and Prussian police to Hitler's efforts to consolidate power.[49] Each of these interpretations of Weimar offers different lessons and serves to underpin conflicting social and political diagnoses of present-day problems. They include the dangers of polarization, the erosion of established institutions, the recklessness of the emotional masses, and authoritarian or psychopathological leaders. Weimar is mobilized to challenge the status quo but also to defend it.

The Weimar analogy has also been employed to assess the viability of new political orders, their instability or stability. In this sense, Weimar came to represent something of a shadow figure to the triumphalist liberal narratives of the end of the Cold War. For some, post-Soviet Russia provides a striking analogy with the tumultuous and instable Weimar Republic.[50] In a similar way, it has been applied to post-occupation Iraq as part of the counternarrative to American triumphalism and the claim by US occupiers that liberal democracy was expanding its reach and on the march throughout the world.[51] Weimar also has a foothold in the economics literature, where it is associated with hyperinflation in the scholarly and popular imagination.[52] Images of wheelbarrows of cash used to purchase a loaf of bread, or of *Reichsmarks* set aflame to light the wood stove, became emblematic of the dangers of irresponsible financial policies and their potential for precipitating more general social and political collapse. In many countries, and above all in Germany, the experience of hyperinflation and its putative lessons were exploited in the postwar era to remove financial policy from the sphere of democratic decision-making and to sacrifice all other economic goals to that of avoiding inflation. This lesson has finally lost some of its luster among economists, prompting a Nobel prize laureate to proclaim that the first person to bring up Weimar hyperinflation in a debate is considered to have lost.[53]

Weimar is also invoked to identify the tensions and limits of modern society more generally. Some thinkers, writing during and after the war, framed the collapse of Weimar as part of a larger struggle between modernity and rationality versus premodern, myth, and emotion. Liberal thinkers such as Hans Kelsen and Karl Popper elaborated these themes, as did Ernst Cassirer.[54] Influenced by Nietzsche, Cassirer argued that, despite all the efforts to supplant myth with reason, modern

societies are built on the volcanic soil of mythical thinking and risk eruptions in times of uncertainty and crisis.[55] In this connection it is useful to define what we mean by myth. We follow Cyril Buffet and Beatrice Heuser in attributing two qualities to historical myths. "Myth" is a "shorthand" for an historical interpretation that is invoked frequently to justify certain kinds of policies. It is also in many instances an untrue, or largely untrue, representation of the past.[56] Weimar "myths" are mobilized at two levels. They are used to sell policies – mostly conservative ones – that are intended to preserve democracy, but which, as we have seen, in practice make societies less democratic. They are also used to evaluate modernity and its consequences, and again, for the most part, to attack them as dehumanizing, demoralizing, and corrupting. Not surprisingly, the two myths intersect as the conservative versions are mutually supporting. This is most evident with the so-called Claremonster conservatives (see Chapter 3), who explicitly draw on Leo Strauss's condemnation of modernity to justify their support for Donald Trump and authoritarian rule.

Weimar is contested every time it is deployed, no matter by whom and for what purpose. This is particularly apparent in the famous *Historikerstreit* in Germany in which opposing interpretations of Weimar emerged. These readings offered sharply contrasting takes on the Weimar Republic and the rise of the Nazis. The *Historikerstreit* generated a more general debate on the nature of the lessons that might be learned from the Weimar and Nazi eras and how both should be understood in relation to German history.[57]

Weimar and its downfall provide lessons about the West more generally and about modernity. While specific lessons drawn from the Weimar era are always contested, its continuing allure as an illustration of collapse and societal breakdown seems undiminished. Whenever it is invoked, it is a response to perceived crisis, and its embeddedness also helps us to determine when we confront a crisis. For some, it alerts us to being at the edge of chaos, and, for critics, imagining a crisis when none may exist. Either way, it has significant policy consequences.[58]

Structure of the Book

Douglas Webber's chapter (Chapter 2) explores why the reputedly strongest labor movement party in Europe, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), failed to stave off the collapse of the Weimar Republic. Webber distinguishes between structural and contingent variables, and between those that were internal and external to the labor movement, that explain this inaction. The preponderantly