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The Opinion Pages | CONTRIBUTING OP-ED WRITER

Is This the West's Weimar Moment?

Jochen Bittner MAY 31, 2016

Hamburg, Germany — WE Germans can never escape the trauma of our recent history. That has rarely been clearer than today, as we look around our Continent and across the Atlantic. There are almost too many differences to mention between what happened in the 1930s over here and what is going on today. And it goes without saying that Donald J. Trump and Austria's Norbert Hofer are not Adolf Hitler. Still, Germany's slide into a popular embrace of authoritarianism in the 1930s offers a frame for understanding how liberal democracies can suddenly turn toward anti-liberalism.

Setting aside debate about whether the rise of Nazism was built into the German DNA, there were four trends that led the country to reject its post-World War I constitutional, parliamentary democracy, known as the Weimar Republic: economic depression, loss of trust in institutions, social humiliation and political blunder. To a certain degree, these trends can be found across the West today.

First, the history. The Black Friday stock-market collapse of 1929 set off a global depression. As bad as things were in America, they were even worse in Germany, where industrial production shrank by half in the following three years. Stocks lost two-thirds of their value. Inflation and unemployment skyrocketed. The Weimar government, already held in low esteem by many Germans, seemed to have no clue about what to do.

All this happened as traditional ways of life and values were being shaken by the modernization of the 1920s. Women suddenly went to work, to vote, to party and to sleep with whomever they wanted. This produced a widening cultural gap between the tradition-oriented working and middle classes and the cosmopolitan avant-garde — in politics, business and the arts — that reached a peak just when economic disaster struck. The elites were blamed for the resulting chaos, and the masses were ripe for a strongman to return order to society.

Some people today imagine that Hitler sneaked up on Germany, that too few people understood the threat. In fact, many mainstream politicians recognized the danger but they failed to stop him. Some didn't want to: The conservative parties and the nobility believed the little hothead could serve as their useful idiot, that as chancellor he would be contained by a squad of reasonable ministers. Franz von Papen, a nobleman who was Hitler's first vice chancellor, said of the new leader, "We've hired him."

At the same time, even the imminent threat of a fascist dictatorship couldn't persuade the left-wing parties to join forces. Instead of being conciliatory for the sake of the national interest, Ernst Thälmann, the head of the German Communist Party, branded the center-left Social Democrats the "moderate wing of fascism." No wonder Hitler had an easy time uniting broad sections of the German public.

Are we at another Weimar moment now?

The 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent global recession were nowhere nearly as painful as the Great Depression. But the effects are similar. The heady growth of the 2000s led Europeans and Americans to believe they were on firm economic ground; the shattering of banks, real estate markets and governments in the wake of the crash left tens of millions of people at sea, angry at the institutions that had failed them, above all the politicians who claimed to be in charge.

Why, voters ask, did the government allow so many bankers to behave like criminals in the first place? Why did it then bail out banks while letting car factories go under? Why is it welcoming millions of immigrants? Are

there separate rules for the elites, defined by a hypermodern liberal worldview that ridicules the working class — and their traditional values — as yokels?

In America and Europe, the rise of anti-establishment movements is a symptom of a cultural shock against globalized postmodernity, similar to the 1930s' rejection of modernity. The common accusation by the "masses" is that liberal democracy has somehow gone too far, that it has become an ideology for an elite at the expense of everyone else. Marine Le Pen, chief of the French National Front, calls these normal folk "les invisibles et les oubliés," the invisible and the forgotten.

Of course this isn't 1933. Democratic institutions are much more stable today. But the power of nostalgia doesn't depend on the times you live in. This is why, for all the differences, we are indeed witnessing another 1930s moment across the West.

It's easy to say that people need to accept the new realities and work toward feasible reforms — however true that is. And yet most mainstream parties haven't done even this, at least not in a compelling way. Instead, they fight among themselves, and see the rise of demagogues as a solution to their problems, not a threat to their nations. Mr. Trump is no Hitler, but that's not the point. Today, as in the 1930s, we are seeing the failure of the liberal mainstream to respond to serious challenges, even those that threaten its very existence.

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