Reconsidering Weimar Germany

Arespectable man

The sharpest lessons of inter-war Berlin lie not in its extremes but in the mundane

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WeimarRepublic, modern Germany.

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And with itthe city. Seen through Biber-

kopf’s eyes, the heart of Berlin is Alex-

anderplatz itself. Then as now, the square

in the capital’sproletarian eastwasassoci-

ated with transience, both architectural (it

wasendlesslybeingrebuilt) and human (it

was a place of prostitutes, criminals and

ne’er-do-wells). The glamorousmetropolis

of popular imagination, with its deca-

dence and excess, is glimpsed in political

street fights and nightclub adverts, but is

not Döblin’s main concern. He was a doc-

tor, whose surgerylayjustto the east ofthe

square he knew well, and he concentrates

on the city’sflickeringmundanity:

‘Mokka-fix’ on Alexanderstrasse, nonpareil

cigars, cultured beers in mugs and glasses,

card gamesforbidden, guestsare responsible

for their own coats, I’m not taking the rap.

Signed, the Landlord. Breakfast from 6am to

1pm, 75 pfennigs, one cup ofcoffee…

Such was the lot of Biberkopf, a resentful,

anonymous working-class citizen of Wei-

mar who is trying to be “respectable”.

Thinkofhim asone ofthe blurred faces in

acrowd scene byGeorge Grosz, an expres-

sionist painter of the time (see picture); as

an extra in “Babylon Berlin”; asan alter ego

ofFräulein Schroder, the grumpylandlady

in Christopher Isherwood’s “The Berlin

Stories”, a collection that inspired the mu-

sical “Cabaret”. Döblin’s novel was pub-

lished two weeks before the Wall Street

Crash and a few years before Adolf Hitler

came to power. In the viewofRainerWer-

ner Fassbinder, whose film adaptation ap-

peared in 1980, Biberkopfwould probably

havevotedfortheNazis.

“Berlin Alexanderplatz” therefore of-

fersaninvaluableinsightintoWeimarGer-

many, through the eyes of a writer inti-

mately acquainted with its people, but

who did not know precisely what was to

come. In some ways this view is reassur-

ing,fortheGermanyhedepictslooksnoth-

inglikewealthysocietiesnow.

It is poor—far poorer than Western

countriestodayandthanmanyatthetime.

Ordinary folkin the novel scrape about to

avoiddestitution.Itsheavingcrowdswere

young.Theaverageagewas32,whereasin

modernGermanyitisover47.Aboveall,it

isviolent.Biberkopfisbeatenupandbeats

others up. He loses his arm in a car crash

and responds stoically. “It won’t make my

arm grow back,” he says of a mooted re-

venge, “and I’ve got no beef with my arm

being gone neither. It had to go, there’s no

senseinyappingaboutit.”AsDavidRunci-

man of Cambridge University has noted,

“the collapse of the Weimar Republic was

shot through with killing on the streets.”

He observes that its demography made it

moreliketoday’sEgyptthantheWest.

Look more closely, however, and the

realresonancesofthisbygonesociety,and

its true warning signs, start to appear. To

begin with, Biberkopf is overwhelmed by

change.Onthetramfromtheprisonhehas

somethinglikeapanicattack:“Thecrowds,

the crowds. My skull needs grease, it must

have dried out.” This is followed by seeth-

ing resentment at the satisfied citizens in

their restaurants and shops: “Hundreds of

shiny windows, let them flash away at

you,they’renothingtobeafraidof,it’sjust

thatthey’vebeencleaned,youcanalways

smashthemifyouwant.”

Betweenbeautyanddesperation

ThisUnbehagen,anagginguneasewiththe

unfamiliar or fast-evolving, is prominent

even in today’s rich countries. In a speech

on February 26th Angela Merkel said it

helpedexplaintheriseoftheAfD.

The battle between Biberkopf’s primal

urges and his quest to “remain decent” is

also recognisable. Döblin read and advo-

cated Freud’s theories, and his repressed

anti-hero isboth horrified and seduced by

the permissiveness of the city. The free-

domofadarkcinemapromptshimtovisit

a prostitute. Selling newspapers, he wan-

ders into a gay-rights meeting; he storms

outin disgust, notjustatwhathe has seen

but at his own enchantment with it. This

tension between take-what-you-want he-

donism and a starksense ofrespectability

is manifest, too, in the modern world’s

blend of prurience and puritanism, or in

the support of American religious conser-

vativesforalibertinepresident.

Moreover, Biberkopf’s take on current

affairswill be familiarto anysocial-media

user. “I don’tdo politics,” he smuglytellsa

girlfriend. Contact with the business does

nothelp.Whenhestumblesintoapolitical

meeting, the speakerappearsto him a gro-

tesque figure, “a fat balding man, provok-

ing, tempting, laughing, teasing”. In that

moment “there is nothing so contented as

ourFranzBiberkopf,whotellspolitics to go

get lost.” This tear-it-all-up tendency may

have been what Fassbinder was getting at

when he presumed to know how Biber-

kopfwouldhavevoted.Itlivesoninsneer-

ingonlinenihilism.

Westernsocieties—changing,hypocriti-

cal, anti-political—are not about to follow

Weimar Germany’s trajectory. But ele-

ments of “Berlin Alexanderplatz” still

echo.Consider“SevenNights”,anewnov-

el by Simon Strauss, a German journalist

who has reported on the rise ofpopulism,

in which the narrator seeks stimulation in

the seven deadly sins. The current liberal,

conformistGermanycould hardlybe more

different from its late-1920s counterpart,

yet in MrStrauss’s bookit prompts similar

sensations. At a masked ball the narrator

reckonsthat“Between beautyand desper-

ation liesjustone word: lust.”

Something of the psychology of Wei-

mar, the desire to touch the electric fence

just to see what happens, lives on in mod-

ern societiesand makesthem, in their own

ways, vulnerable to extremism and dema-

goguery. MrRunciman arguesthata latter-

dayfailure ofdemocracywill lookvery dif-

ferent to the implosion of the 1930s. One

lesson of “Berlin Alexanderplatz” is that

darknesscan take manyforms.