

Exporting Democracy

By GIULIANA CHAMEDES

Review of *THE WEIMAR CENTURY: German Émigrés and the Ideological Foundations of the Cold War*, by Udi Greenberg

Princeton University Press, 2014

This month, former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld surprised many in an interview with *The Times of London*. “The idea that we could fashion a democracy in Iraq seemed to me unrealistic,” Rumsfeld said, turning against his past support for democracy promotion in the Middle East. “I’m not one who thinks that our particular template of democracy is appropriate for other countries at every moment of their histories,” he explained. Rumsfeld’s old boss, former President George W. Bush, famously thought otherwise, and global democracy promotion is considered one of the cornerstones of his foreign policy platform. In his 2005 inaugural speech, for example, Bush had said, “It is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.”

As Udi Greenberg shows in his brilliant new book just out from Princeton University Press, it is Bush 2005– not Rumsfeld 2015– who is the standard-bearer of a longstanding tradition in American foreign policy. In *The Weimar Century: German Émigrés and the Ideological Foundations of the Cold War*, Greenberg explores many resonant questions. One of them is this: How did the export of democracy become central to U.S. foreign policy between 1945 and 1970, and who did the exporting? To tell this story (and several others, too), Greenberg traces the lives of five extraordinary individuals. Despite their many differences, all were committed to the desirability of democracy and to the U.S. as the agent for its universalization after 1945. All were German-born males; all had breathed Weimar air and achieved positions of prominence in European society prior to their exile to the United States. All had a deeply ingrained fear of communism, tucked alongside their strong abhorrence for National Socialism. And all were able to secure coveted positions in the United States as high-ranking advisors, project managers, and foreign-policy theorists following Germany’s defeat and the start of the Cold War.

These five figures are the Calvinist political thinker Carl J. Friedrich, the Socialist-party activist Ernst Fraenkel, the Catholic anti-liberal publicist Waldemar Gurian, the liberal-democratic lawyer Karl Loewenstein, and the international relations theorist Hans Morgenthau. Each one gets a chapter to himself in Greenberg’s colorful collage.

Why these five? Greenberg -- a young but already accomplished scholar at Dartmouth -- initially grew interested in these men because all contributed to Germany’s reconstruction after World War II. Some did so through their work with private American-led foundations, while others worked in cooperation with the U.S. military and the Department of State. Thus, when democracy returned to Germany after 1945, it was not an exclusively foreign import. Rather, the democratization of Germany was also carried

out by a cadre of German émigrés, born and bred in pro-democracy circles in the Weimar years. Further, their peculiar conceptions of democracy were shaped by the Weimar world in which they had matured intellectually. The rise of international communism; international law and the founding of the League of Nations; political Christianity and the Vatican's re-emergence as a force in international politics; the birth of psychoanalysis and public relations; the greater imbrication between the public and private spheres; and, of course, National Socialism's democratic seizure of power -- for Greenberg, we cannot understand these men without taking account of this rich context. Between the lines of Greenberg's narrative emerges a Weimar that's both familiar and unfamiliar: one in which there was perhaps more cross-pollination than we had initially thought (socialists reading Schmitt, international lawyers reading Freud), and more anti-communist paranoia than expected.

The book does a wonderful job of showing the multifaceted ways in which these figures participated in their own country's reconstruction after World War II. However, little ink is spent on the cast of characters – some of whom never left Germany, others of whom were US-born officials – who typically feature in histories of Germany's democratization. Is *The Weimar Century* prepared to defend the claim that these particular five figures were the decisive ones in shaping the intellectual framework (and/or practical implementation) of Germany's democratization? Or were these figures merely representative of broader trends, tendencies, and schools of thought? The distinction is not always made clear. Thus notwithstanding, the research does point towards a very important conclusion. We learn little about whether these five figures actually knew one another, but their vastly divergent conceptions show us that there was a quiet civil war raging on German soil after World War II. Greenberg's account thus suggests -- as scholars such as Marco Duranti, Aline-Florence Manent, Sagi Schaefer, and Maria Mitchell have also shown -- that Germany's path towards democracy was a belabored and deeply contentious one.

Addressing an issue that few scholars have before, Greenberg demonstrates that there were (at least) five distinct theories of democracy operative in European-American foreign policy circles after World War II. These were: the oligarchic, the collectivist, the theocratic, the liberal-democratic, and the realist. Greenberg dedicates a chapter to each.

Through the lens of the Protestant theorist Carl J. Friedrich, we are introduced to a religious, elitist conception of democracy. A kind of Zelig of the 20th century, Friedrich helped globalize the University of Heidelberg by making it the seat of one of the first modern student exchange programs, the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD). He also taught in the Institute für Sozial- und Staatswissenschaften (Institute of Social and Political Science), and following his escape to the United States, helped create the Harvard School of Overseas Administration (HSOA). This paved the way for venerable American universities to breed diplomats and military officials, rather than proudly aloof observers of state- and war-making (Harvard's previous ethos). On Greenberg's read, both before and after World War II, HSOA was in keeping with Friedrich's core commitment to elite leadership. In text after text, the German theorist called upon the "responsible" few to constrain democracy. Drawing on an increasingly mainstream position in German anti-Nazi circles, Friedrich condemned the hyper-emotional masses, and called upon well-educated elites to steer democracy's noble ship.

Did Friedrich identify at all with the famous progenitors of this position (Plato, Weber, Durkheim, Le Bon), one wonders? Did he see eye-to-eye with U.S.-born contemporaries like Edward Bernays, Walter Lippmann, and Joseph Schumpeter? What of his relations with democratic elitists in the wider German émigré community – figures like Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Hannah Arendt, William Kornhauser, or William Röpke? *The Weimar Century* does not explore these questions in detail. But it does show us that Friedrich’s conception of democracy was not just elitist: it was also shot through with Calvinist motifs. For Friedrich, democracy drew from the people’s consent for religious reasons: deploying the Calvinist concept of the covenant, Friedrich argued that democracy derived from the peaceful cooperation of Christian communities in pursuit of this-worldly and over-worldly aims. Friedrich’s conception –having much in common with elite theory and with what Andrew Preston has called a U.S.-bred Christian republicanism – was thus an idiosyncratic fusion of several existing models for democracy.

But Friedrich’s conception of democracy would have been anathema to another figure Greenberg explores: the German Socialist Ernst Fraenkel. By contrast, Fraenkel believed that democracy must be robustly committed to improving the social and economic well-being of all its constituents, so as to bring about a collectively run, and more horizontal, political order. Fraenkel sought to translate these ideas into practice in postwar Germany, though it actually took the German socialists until the 1960s to welcome his views as their own. Fraenkel had more luck as senior agent in the American mission to “modernize” South Korea. The irony of a European socialist working with a capitalist power to counter communist influence was not lost to anyone. But Fraenkel was proud of his achievements in East Asia. In 1948, he won the fight to get the new South Korean Constitution to delineate collective and social rights, rather than just individual ones, arguing that doing so would lay the foundations for a lasting democratic order. Greenberg’s findings here are quite important. They not only help corroborate the recent contention that the postwar human rights boom cannot be viewed as the reversal and delegitimation of the category of group rights, as previous historians had claimed. They also explain how some European socialists -- despite their long-seated opposition to liberal democracy – could find common ground with the United States after World War II. Finally, they provide an unlikely source for the United States’ democratization efforts in East Asia: German socialist thought. Though it would have been nice to know more about whether and how Fraenkel’s views were received by South Koreans and by U.S. forces onsite, the story of Fraenkel’s strange triumph is a fascinating and important one.

Power to the elite or the collective: the menu of options for postwar democrats did not end here. Greenberg’s third chapter explores a very important (though little-studied) group that enjoyed a surge in support after World War II. For this group, the protection and promotion of Christianity – and particularly, Roman Catholicism -- was the integral component of any functional political system. The group aimed to eliminate the possibility of any future liberal separation of Church and state by preserving Church-state cooperation (and its interwar legal guarantees) in Germany, Italy, and elsewhere. Greenberg’s attention here focuses on the Catholic publicist Waldemar Gurian, the father of postwar totalitarian theory, and a leading figure in the Rockefeller Foundation’s outreach program in Germany. But Greenberg could have easily looked at many other figures defending this view, including several European Christian Democrats, American

Catholic clerics and laymen, and leading figures within the Vatican itself (including Pope Pius XII). Readers of this chapter might wonder about the extent to which democracy was a central element in Gurian's thought at all. Was Gurian – like Pope Pius XII – willing to embrace democracy only on the condition that it defend “Christian rights” and combat communist internationalism? Greenberg suggests an answer in the affirmative, but this reader, at least, would be eager to hear more.

The book's two final figures (and the intellectual frameworks they represent) will likely be the most familiar to readers. The legal scholar Karl Loewenstein introduces us to a legalistic conception of democracy, according to which democracies function as they should only if laws are put in place to protect individual liberties, while simultaneously limiting certain rights (i.e., the freedom to undo democracy, or speak out strongly against it). This restrictive legal internationalism was a dime a dozen in the interwar years. But Greenberg sees Loewenstein as particularly significant, insofar as his theories influenced the United States' postwar dealings with Latin America, through his work with the Emergency Advisory Committee for Political Defense (CDP). Founded in 1942, the CDP's official task was to coordinate domestic measures against potential Axis enemies across the Americas. But the organization lived on well beyond World War II, turning its animus now against communism. Nowhere other than in the Loewenstein chapter does Greenberg appear more skeptical of the potentially damaging implications of democracy promotion, as he outlines the CDP's suppression of political groups, its “pre-emptive” actions against potential internal enemies, and its mass internment and deportation campaigns across Latin America.

Greenberg closes his excursus with the best-known figure of all: political theorist Hans J. Morgenthau. In many senses, Morgenthau has little in common with Greenberg's other historical actors. But the king of postwar international relations theory figures as a kind of accidental hero: the unlikely redeemer of the German émigré community and its commitment to forms of democracy ultimately cast as deeply flawed -- “short-sighted,” rigid,” and “tragically paranoid,” in Greenberg's words. As is well known, Morgenthau asserted the primacy of the political, and saw the pursuit of national interest as the determining factor in international relations. But this “realist democracy,” Greenberg is careful to note, was not devoid of moral commitments: for Morgenthau, ethical and moral considerations constrained and determined the pursuit of national interest. This, for Greenberg, explains why the expat gone native developed his growing discontent over the United States' involvement in Vietnam, and his surprising agreement with the '68 generation, in their call for a more principled, and horizontal, democratic practice. In this final chapter, Greenberg's narrative leaves the calcified democratic theory of the Weimar-into-early-Cold-War era, and points towards the emergence of new theories and expectations regarding U.S. foreign policy. Greenberg also avoids freezing the intellectual titan in “the Weimar moment” – for just as Weimar was formative for Morgenthau, Greenberg demonstrates that so too were new experiences (migration, World War II, and the Vietnam War). It's a refreshing conclusion.

Greenberg's book points in many directions, and summarizes huge bodies of literature. It sheds light on the story of Germany's democratization; on the practices and ideologies of US postwar foreign policy; and on the sources of the strength of the Western Cold War alliance system.

Overall, *The Weimar Century* suffers only two minor flaws. At times, the book appears to presume an overly tidy and linear connection between thought and action. But as Greenberg himself admits, it is dicey to claim that what we do is the direct actuation of what we think –that is, that actions necessarily emerge from theoretical and ideological commitments. And the temptation to see action as “ideology with teeth” becomes even more implausible when we turn our attention to foreign policy-making and state-building – paradigm examples of messy, complex, and collective, processes that eschew single-authorship models.

The other minor flaw of *The Weimar Century* is this: the book, perhaps predictably, overstates the influence of its five protagonists, and implies that all were equally important. The one man, one chapter, approach is conducive to this reading, but Greenberg also appears at least partially wedded to a mode of historical explanation that privileges individual agency and the quest for real-world, easy-to-spot, influence and power (in place, for instance, of a framework that emphasizes collective action, structural forces, and the intrinsic significance of ideas). Greenberg is far too sophisticated a historian to make the case that understanding these five figures will enable us to (fully) understand who rebuilt Germany, undergirded democracy promotion, and “provided the intellectual framework [for the] new alignment with the Western bloc.” Sure, these were important players. But did they act alone? Hardly. And can we chart their actual influence on postwar Germany or U.S. foreign policy in a convincing, quantifiable, manner? Probably not – and if we listen to the recommendations of certain prominent intellectual historians, the question of “cultural influence” is probably not the most answerable (or productive) question anyway.

Happily, and to its vast credit, *The Weimar Century* does not ultimately hinge on the intractable question of individual influence. Its contributions are considerably more far-reaching. In brief, *The Weimar Century* represents a fantastic and far-reaching provocation, as most great books do. It challenges us to rethink American foreign policy in the early postwar years as multi-directional and well-nigh incoherent; the outcome and unlikely synthesis of a variety of antitheses. On Greenberg’s read, American foreign policy emerged from the union of native and foreign-born expertise. But even the phrase “foreign-born expertise” underrepresents the muddle of postwar planning teams: after World War II, democracy promotion was the product of a range of vastly divergent conceptions of the good society. Thus, *The Weimar Century* makes the powerful case that democracy is a vast ocean – and that one person’s democracy might look like another’s dictatorship. This finding has broad implications not only for the study of democratic theory, but also as we continue to debate the validity of the end of history paradigm, and listen to the U.S. administration continuing to make cautious overtures to the project of democracy promotion abroad. Is it really so easy to sing the praises of democracy as an unquestioned, and unquestionable, good? Following Udi Greenberg’s lead, we might reserve the right to ask a few follow-up questions rather than rush into a quick yes or no answer. For as *The Weimar Century* demonstrates so well, democracy in the abstract is a severely under-determined concept, while democracy promotion in-the-flesh has been a many-headed hydra. And some of the monster’s heads – we might add – have done and said rather distasteful things in our not-so-distant past.

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