

Interrogations #11, Sociology 924, Session on Abraham, November 20, 2002

[1] Matt Vidal Thoughts on Abraham's *The Collapse of the Weimar Republic*

Abraham embeds a quite complex (and impressive) theoretical explanation into his detailed historical narrative. He argues that the crisis of the Weimar Republic stems from the inability of the state to autonomously organize the interests of the dominant classes, leading the conflict between the costs of integration within the political system and the demands of accumulation to be resolved at the expense of the democratic polity. That is, no stable hegemonic bloc “could be organized under a democratic form of state” (p. 275). Right below this statement, he argues that the necessary and sufficient conditions for political conflict, extraparliamentary resolution, and capitalist-fascist alliance are: (1) economic crisis; (2) a strong, recalcitrant socialist movement; (3) mass authoritarian populism; and (4) a politically weak capitalist class, fed up with liberal institutions.

While all of these are present in his narrative, the analysis of the collapse of the Weimar Republic seems to focus on two key elements (part of 1, plus 2 and 4 above, roughly): a series of economic gains made by labor, unaccompanied by structural changes in the political sphere, and defended to the extent that they undermined profitability; and unstable capitalist democracy, riven with conflicts of narrow interests and without coherent leadership, thus rupturing the links between representatives and represented. He often seems to suggest that these two conditions are necessary and sufficient for dominant classes (capitalists?) to give up democratic political institutions completely in order to save capitalism. My questions concern a set of counterfactuals regarding these two extreme conditions.

Together, the two seem sufficient to generate an extreme crisis in the political economy. But how could such a crisis be resolved in the absence of the fascist alternative? Following Przeworski, Abraham argues that under stable democracy the workers would desert their party and not cross the transition trough. Why is it, then, that the workers remained so recalcitrant under this unstable system — does it have to do with the fascist alternative or the unstable democracy itself? Would the crisis simply deepen into the unpredictable if labor had not let up (and isn't this analogous to a monetarist view of inflation)? **[I can't quite figure out your analogy to monetarism here. And I don't quite understand your point about workers unwillingness to cross the transition trough for the issues of the collapse of Weimar. Maybe I am just tired!]**

Secondly, would the problem in the political (hegemonic leadership) level have been able to be resolved if labor did indeed make concessions? He seems to suggest that excessive demands by labor is what made the crisis of hegemony insoluble. Does this mean that labor's concessions would have enabled a leader to emerge or that this would somehow allow the re-linking of representatives with their constituencies? **[This is an interesting issue to explore – what sorts of changes in strategies of collective actors who had a capacity to change strategies might have changed the dynamics. A big part of the dynamics in the early 1930s in Germany was animated by the hostility between socialists and communists and the shadow counterfactual of the USSR. This may have anchored the unwillingness of unions in Germany to agree to large scale cutbacks, feeling that this would only fuel the ranks of the Communists.]**

[2] Shamus Khan
Memo - Abraham

Abraham seems to suggest that a hegemonic push is required for political stability. He tells us, “No member of the historically dominant bloc was capable of *imposing its direction on the others*, either through parliament or other organs of the state.... German capitalism, in brief, could not surmount its own internal contradictions” (46 – my italics). This “bourgeois disunity” was further exacerbated by the inability of parties to present their policies/ideologies as anything more than the interests of *particular* groups. What Abraham is arguing, then, is that there are two hegemonic pushes, one within, and one between classes. The first can be understood as the organization of the dominant class around a “direction.” In Abraham's case this dominant class is made up of primarily industry, but also agriculture (the Junkers). The interest of the dominant class, then, is really the particular interest of one fraction under which the interests of the

other fractions are subsumed. In fact, Abraham continually uses the conception of subsumption (the basic principle of hegemony) where referring the articulation of political interests (for example, pp. 49, 78, 112, 115, etc. (I stopped looking)). The second hegemonic push is between classes, that is, subsuming the interests of the non-dominant classes under the dominant one. Abraham outlines a third task: “successfully presenting the interests of the dominant classes as the interests of all of the nation” (116). However, I don’t see this third condition as necessary, or rather, it seems spurious to the first two. From Abraham’s work it is clear that these things do not happen as a sequence; one need not first sure-up up the dominant class base before moving on to inter-group subsumption. It also may be the case that this two-pronged hegemonic push is the product of capitalism. In his five figures (28-30), only in the pre-1914 Sammlung Bloc are there two dominant interests – Estate Owners and Heavy Industry. Beyond this there are no alliances. There are strong, weak, and no relationships, but at each moment in the post-war period that Abraham looks at there is a single dominant interest under which, politically, others are subsumed.

[I don’t think that the argument is that all three of these hegemonic “pushes” are strictly necessary, but rather that in their absence the social order will be more fragile, more vulnerable to shocks. I agree with you that if the first two forms of hegemony are established – a power block in which one class/fraction subsumes the interests of others, and hegemonic rule in which the hegemonic class subsumes the interests of (some) subordinate classes – that the third form seems a bit superfluous. Still, I think the third is not entirely redundant in so far as it would further strength the kind of inter-class hegemony affirmed in the second. The second form of hegemony simply subsumes the interests of some subordinate classes under the interests of the hegemonic class, whereas the third affirms that this arrangements is in the universal interests of everyone as members of the nation. That seems a bit stronger.]

Abraham goes on to later argue that, “Increasingly, political struggle had been replaced by the open conflict of interest groups, and by 1932 there was little pretense to the former. The links between representatives and represented had been so weakened that the bourgeois parties, when they bothered to speak at all, did so as mouthpieces for the corporate economic interests that dominated them” (217). This suggests that the failure of the Weimar republic a failure of the dominant classes to subsume interests of others under their own interests. **[But it also affirms a failure of the dominant classes to even frame their interests in class terms, as opposed to strictly particularistic terms.]** This makes me wonder: Is such a dual hegemony necessary? Is intra- and inter-class compromise really just a deceptive form of hegemony? While Abraham does talk about compromises within (between industry and agriculture, peasants and workers) and between groups (in the form of social welfare, labor legislation, and subsidies on agricultural goods), such compromises are typically seen in two ways: 1.) as the product of some kind of concession on one of the parties, or 2.) as a desperate attempt to maintain political power (and in the Weimar case, a failing one). Abraham does provide another option – disregard for interests (some particular cases of labor/capital conflict, see pp. 269) – but this seems to be the option when power asymmetries are fairly great. As such, the political stability seems to be a product of either domination or what I have called a dual “hegemonic push.” **[I am not quite following your point here. Robust class compromises are not a contrast to hegemony; they are the way in which hegemony is established and sustained. I don’t think this is “deceptive”: the compromises are real, and their stability is pratical demonstration of the hooking together of interests.]**

A second smaller point: There is an odd lack of discussion of what, exactly, the Nazis stood for - that is, why they as a party were able to marshal so much political support. Presumably not just any political party could have mobilized support (there were, after all, several of them in Germany at the time, some of which were on the margins, like the Nazis, and as such would not have suffered from past political breakdowns). The breakdown within and between groups called for a kind of organizing principle for groups. What did the Nazis provide that other parties lacked? In the four conditions that Abraham outlines (285) only the third – a mass authoritarian populism – seems to anticipate the Nazi; but it certainly the weakest condition (that is, of those that Abraham fleshes out; while Abraham does talk about capital’s push for an authoritarian regime, its populist element is notably missing). Abraham’s explanation, that, “Basically, it sees that the economically disparate collection of urban petite bourgeoisie, peasantry, and some salaried employees which had been short-changed in all the Weimar coalitions or blocs since 1924 had been reaggregated politically by the Nazi Party, and that the aggregation’s demands were such that they could provide for the reconsolidation of German capitalism at a time of economic and political crisis” (324) may be satisfactory in the abstract, but an important question, it seems, is why the Nazi Party? Somewhere in the last chapter (I can’t find the cite) Abraham does argue that the breakdown of one regime cannot

explain the rise of another. His work is not about the rise of the Nazi Party, however, I would take issue with his argument that breakdowns do not explain emergences (or, responses). While they may not tell us the entire story, they certainly lay out the conditions of emergence. In this case in particular, I think this is an important question. **[I think all that Abraham means when he says that breakdown cannot explain the rise of another regime is that it cannot explain the specific form of that new regime since there are multiple possible resolutions to a breakdown. What breakdown does is create a range of possibilities. Authoritarian populism was, perhaps, the most likely possibility, but even that need not have been specifically the Nazi version of authoritarian populism. To explain that fact would require additional causal arguments besides his class-coalition mechanism.]**

[3] Weekly Interrogation -- #11

Sun Jing

The major problem I am having with Abraham's argument is that his theorizing seems to be reductionist. Why did the Weimar Republic fail to sustain itself? Abraham tackles this question by disaggregating social classes into different factions, and subsequently demonstrating the internal clashes within the dominant economic groups: for example, the growing division between export-oriented industrialists on the one hand and heavy industrialists and large landowners on the other.

However, such internal tension within classes is only one dimension that explains the collapse of the Weimar Republic. And this dimension is overly materialistic. I am wondering if normative factors such as ideologies may also come into play in shaping the rising tensions inside the capitalist class. In any event, not all countries during the same period experienced the increased conflicts within capital class. One may hypothesize that different factions of capitalist class have a common incentive to integrate in face of organized labor. But why did this not happen in Germany? Economic interests alone cannot make German capitalist class particularistic. **[It could be the case that there were political-economic reasons why it was much tougher for the fractions of the dominant class in Germany to forge a coherent compromise among themselves than in other places. It doesn't follow that because in some countries intra-class cohesion occurred that this must have been for noneconomic reasons. Also, I am not sure that it is fair to say that his argument is reductionist in the sense of being monocausal. His argument is that the chronic instability of Weimar occurred because of this inability for intra & inter class compromises to be stably achieved and sustained, and this was substantially shaped by economic conditions. But he also talks about the legacies of past political settlements, the historical role of the Junkers in the military and public administration, the post-WWI reparations problem, etc. So there are an array of factors which impinge on these economic cleavages]**

Second, while Abraham focuses primarily on the internal dynamics that led to the downfall of the Weimar Republic, one cannot neglect the impact of external pressures: what was the impact of Germany's defeat in the war and its subsequent isolation upon various societal groups? It seems to me that to explain the collapse of Germany's interwar regime one cannot treat cursorily about the influence of the external dimension.

Finally, though I am not conversant with German history, I am still wondering if it is appropriate to make clear demarcations of class factions along the lines of export-oriented versus home-market-oriented. For example, large conglomerates may sit cross both home and foreign markets. The diversification of market economy invites the question of where the process of disaggregating societal factions stops. If firms can carry out dual roles, then it may not be appropriate to put an exclusive label on them as export- or home-market-oriented enterprises. This also means that the interests of the same capitalist factions may still be mixed. Even further disaggregating? I doubt if this increasingly idiosyncratic trend will be the right direction. **[This may be a valid criticism, but it depends upon the facts of the matter. I think he is arguing that in fact in Germany at this time there was a fairly clear cleavage between export-firms and the large conglomerates, but this may not be correct.]**

[4] Matt Dimick
Sociology 924
Theories of the State
Weekly Interrogation 11

First of all, despite Abraham's arduous writing style, I did find impressive the wealth of data he presented. I also find this subject (the fall of Weimar and rise of the Nazis) interesting and thought it was worth the effort to read Abraham and learn more about it.

Abraham mentions and discusses on a number of occasions the factitious nature and relationship of Germany's political parties. Since this kind of party arrangement prevented a satisfactory resolution to the economic and political crises, it appears to be one reason that dominant classes turned to the Nazi party as a last resort. While the available explanations for the lack of a unifying party to be found in Abraham's book are plentiful, there were a few points I'd like to bring out. First, it doesn't seem that broad, cohesive party systems are absolutely necessary for bourgeois rule. On balance, broad, "ruling bloc" parties are probably preferred, but not indispensable (I'm thinking of contemporary Italy). I think the critical issue here, though, is the presence of several other circumstances that gave the benefits of broad, stable parties a greater salience (e.g., economic crisis, militant working class parties, etc.). Still, the issue deserves some thought. One purpose that political parties seem to serve is a forum for interest aggregating, bargaining, and deliberation (of course, among which actors and what weight each actor has are vital issues, but ones that I will bracket off here). Arguably, what comes out of this is a broad enough program or set of policies that satisfy the involved parties interests. When there are more parties, this integrating function would be less well served. But this is where parliaments would appear to play a vital role. Parliaments provide an identical forum of deliberation and bargaining as that of a party, but on an even broader scale. So what prevented the German parliament itself from aggregating interests sufficient to provide a stable coalition? It doesn't seem like a fully crystallized bourgeois ideology would be required (although, again, it would help). The relatively short experience of parliamentary rule that Weimar provided is probably one reason. In other words, the dominant classes may have not quite "learned" the value of parliamentary rule and were unwilling to make necessary compromises (going into this explanation might be other historical factors such as the absence of a full-fledged bourgeois revolution and the bourgeois dependence on a state-led path of development). **[This is an interesting issue, worth discussing at length I think: what are the specific functions of parties as such? Can these functions be performed through other institutions? Can a stable hegemonic compromise be organized outside of political parties? I agree with you that it seems too strong to claim that such compromises must be formed within parties, especially since we do see hegemonic systems in which there are many parties interacting in political arenas along with stable coalitions. But I suppose it is usually the case that within such configurations there is some party which assumes a leadership role, which can provide impetus and reasonableness to the compromise formation process, and perhaps for a party to be able to do this it must internally have enough heterogeneity for its own leadership to be compromise-prone (i.e. it must be encompassing enough to play this role).]**

I also wondered whether Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution, which gave the president power to enact law by decree, also had something to contribute to this factitious party struggle. If parties could not agree on legislation and became deadlocked, that power could be invoked to break the stalemate. It thus creates an incentive for parties not to compromise, since any impasse can be passed along and resolved by the president. Because there is this option, and parties know that legislation can be passed this way (and therefore government will be "doing its job") they will not want to compromise and "look weak." Arguably, in the U.S. legislature for example, which encounters deadlock regularly, parties ultimately compromise and resolve the impasse because there is no other possible resolution. Given enough time, parties are forced to fear the dissatisfaction of their supporters for not getting enough done over compromising and thereby looking like they are not prosecuting their supporters interests sufficiently. So perhaps one problem with the Weimar system was that it was not democratic enough and that this contributed to its collapse.

[5] 924memo#11 -Keedon

David Abraham argues in several places that “Fascism was not simply the outcome of this particular struggle between labor and capital or of any particular kind of equilibrium between the two,” (p. 326) but primarily the outcome of the inability to the dominant classes to constitute a general interest out of their particular, narrow interests and to secure a mass base on the basis of this general interest. But a closer look leads me to suspect that all his accounts of the rise of the Nazi state boil down to the struggle between labor and capital. For it is described that the industrialists couldn’t find a balance point between the costs imposed by social democracy and their profits endangered by the Depression and war reparations. Under this kind of situation, no political regimes but some authoritarianism seem possible from the perspective of the bourgeoisie, given the continued militancy of labor, even if the bourgeoisie is united.

The story is about the rise of Nazism as a likely outcome of the crisis of the Weimar Republic caused primarily by the crisis of accumulation. Would it be possible, however, to reverse the causal links? In other words, isn’t it possible to have Nazism as an independent variable explaining at least in part the collapse of the Republic? I don’t know what I really have in mind, but I think that in explaining the rise of Nazism, to ask “how and why the Republic ended up Nazism” may give a quite different answer than one from “how and why Nazism was successful in bringing itself to the supreme. **[This is part of the standard argument that Abraham rejects. That is, the standard argument sees the rise of the Nazis as playing a significant role in destroying Weimar. This is similar to standard views of revolutions in which it is the strategies and coherence of revolutionary movements which explain the overthrow of *ancien regimes*. Abraham’s argument here is thus like Skocpol’s argument concerning revolutions: she argues that it is the collapse of states which allows for revolutionary movements to succeed, rather than revolutionary success which explains the collapse of states. For her, international war is crucial in this process, since war sometimes contributes to the weakening of states. In Abraham’s case he believes that the Nazis could never have overthrown Weimar if it hadn’t been for these longer term processes that made the state so fragile.]**

[6] César A. Rodríguez
Soc. 924
Memo # 11 –Abraham.

In the concluding chapter of the book, Abraham argues that the key reason for the Nazis’ ascent to power was their ability to “reaggregate politically” the interests of various classes and strata –among them capitalists in the heavy industry sector, the urban petit bourgeoisie, the peasantry, estate owners and some salaried employees.

This claim is consonant with Abraham’s overall argument –i.e., that the Weimar republic fell because of the inability of the dominant classes to constitute a hegemonic bloc. However, the precise reasons why the Nazis were able to bring about such reaggregation of interests are not entirely clear, given the deep conflicts within and among classes that Abraham thoroughly documents. Abraham seems to give two different answers to this question. On one hand, he argues that disparate classes perceived the Nazis as embodying an economic program that would cater to their material interests: protectionism and antisocialism appealed to estate owners, peasants and heavy industry; “national corporatism” appealed to some fractions of the working class. Thus, this would suggest that the Nazis’ ascent was class-based, i.e., fundamentally premised upon the resolution of inter- and intra-class conflicts. On the other hand, at many points in Abraham’s account the key reason for the appeal of the Nazi Party is the diffusion of class divisions into a nationalist discourse. From this point of view, the Nazis’ ability to reaggregate various classes stemmed from the fact that, at least in their discourse, class took a back seat to nationalism. Indeed, Abraham contrast the SPD with the Nazi Party by claiming that while the former “was clearly defined on a class basis”, for the latter “the very lack of an economic or class basis. . . created the impression that its demands would be less costly to the accumulation process” (p. 324).

These two arguments are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, it may be the case that the Nazis’ success was due to their ability to implement economic policies that catered to the material interests of the traditional hegemonic bloc (the *Sammlung*) while managing to extract sacrifices from other classes based

on a nationalist political project and a nationalist discourse. Abraham's view on this issue, however, is not entirely clear. What exactly was the role of nationalism in the construction of the class bloc that supported the Nazis' ascent to power? Was the appeal of nationalist discourse a causal mechanism independent of class that contributed to that outcome? Did nationalist discourse and policies lead to the subordinate incorporation of classes or strata –e.g., some strata within the working class- that, on purely economic grounds, would not have supported the Nazis? **[Perhaps one way of thinking about this is that, with respect to different specific strata and classes, the Nazis had different kinds of appeals. The authoritarian populism and nationalism seems to have been especially important for some sections of the middle class, but its specific project of economic reconstruction combined with repression of labor may have been the pivot for the dominant classes.]**

[7] Robyn Autry

Power of capital

Abraham argues that capitalists blamed the Republic for the economic downturn and that competition between them led to their support of the NSDAP an alternative and solution? But how important was this support to Hitler and the NSDAP? Could this rise have occurred without or with less support from capital?

It seems that capitalists' primary concern was to end the economic crisis and prevent social instability. These circumstances led to their support of the NSDAP as an alternative to the Republic. But this does not necessarily mean that they supported the ideology and intentions of Nazism. Their concern with profit generation and protection and their preoccupation with the threat of communism may have blinded them to the larger National Socialist project. **[Abraham's argument is not that they supported Nazism, just that they supported the Nazi party as a solution to a problem. It may be less that they were blind to the virulence of its ideology and more that they just didn't care – they saw it as a side-show.]**

Homogeneity of Business

Abraham's characterization of capital and its role in the demise of the Republic and the rise of Hitler are not especially nuanced. Would his overall argument change at all he considered conflicts of interest between different industries? Industries situated differently in the national or even international economies would have different interests and therefore different political goals. Was there considerable internal conflict among the capitalists that undermined the group's ability to have a more powerful voice or impact on the nation's political trajectory? **[But this is precisely his point – it is about a very deep conflict between domestic and export-oriented business, and between both of these and large agrarian capitalist interests. I don't think he is guilty of treating capital as homogeneous.]**

The Republic's Structural Problems

The structural problems of the Republic, from the federal/state system to the presidential powers, seemed to undermine its survival more than anything else. If these problems were at the root of Germany's political and economic problems at the time, it seems that capital would have had an interest in reforming the system during the 1920s. I understand that there were objections to the state and its activities, it just seems that prior to the late 1920s and 1930s that capital would have been actively working to reform the political system. **[This is a good question. I suppose part of the problem was that, given the depth of the conflicts among fractions of capital and the strength of the working class, that there might have been a fear that a project of constitutional reconstruction would open a pandora's box in which any given fraction of capital was not confident that they could guarantee their dominance.]**

[8] Memo # 11 Landy Sanchez

I found Abraham's argument a compelling account of how conflicts within dominant classes and with subordinate classes block the construction of a hegemonic bloc, and open the door to authoritarian solutions. The general argument seems to have two sides a) conflicting material interests where the

intensity and extension of conflicts among the three dominant fractions (rural elites, export-oriented and domestic-oriented industry), added to economic restrictions to secure mass support from the subordinate classes (peasantry and working class) making hegemony unattainable; b) the political institutions of the Weimar Republic were unable to either forge coalitions or contain popular pressures. My comments are about the connections between these two sides.

1. In the first chapter, Abraham claims that, even though political relations can develop independently of economic relations, state autonomy arises just after the establishment of leadership within the bloc of dominant classes. His argument seems to be that the existence of a hegemonic bloc allows selective and coherent state actions to guarantee capital accumulation. In this sense, hegemony acts as a selectiveness principle that allows those policies which reproduce the hegemonic bloc. On the contrary, when hegemony is not attained, state intervention becomes incoherent and inefficient. Is this an accurate picture of his argument? **[The relationship between coherence of state policy and hegemony is not entirely clear in Abraham's analysis. One the one hand it seems that coherence is one of the conditions for hegemony: to be hegemonic is to pursue a set of policies that give the society a certain coherent direction. So, in a way, it is not that hegemony explains coherence; coherence is an indicator of hegemony. But there is also a sense in which hegemony is identified with a kind of pragmatic set of compromises which would not, inherently, imply that the resulting policies were coherent – the compromises could be inconsistent patchworks. I suppose then the claim would be that real incoherence (in the sense of internally contradictory elements within such policies) would be unstable and would unravel the compromises. Coherence, then, would be a conditions for the sustainability of hegemony but not a criterion for hegemony. Finally, one other possibility is that coherence requires a state capable of acting on system-needs not just immediate manipulations of specific capitalist interests. In general where an intra-class compromise is not in place – where there is no “bloc in power” – then state policy processes will tend to be colonized and manipulated by specific capitalist interests. In this interpretation, hegemony explains the willingness of capitalists to adopt a hands off stance to immediate policy making, because they have confidence that they state will broadly serve their interests under the leadership of the hegemonic fraction, and thus the state is able to act more autonomously.]** At the same time, it seems that hegemony is extremely difficult to obtain under democratic (parliamentary) conditions, mainly because of popular influence on state agenda. Could hegemony, and therefore state autonomy, be accomplished under democratic procedures? He seems to suggest that under economic expansion that could be possible, but at the same time it seems that democratic procedures would tend to intensify dominant/subordinate class conflicts, and to threaten the power basis of dominant fractions (for example, estate owners and peasantry relationship). **[I am not sure that democracy as such renders hegemony more difficult. Popular pressure, in fact, can be one of the factors which encourages capitalists to stop fighting with each other and give the state more autonomy to organize the economy. The fact that a purely repressive solution to conflict from workers is ruled out under democratic conditions means that capitalists are forced to seek conflict-containing compromises and this encourages a search for hegemonic solutions.]**

2. My second comment refers to the role of SPD and working class on the collapse of Weimar Republic. Abraham's says that the temporal alliance between export-oriented industry and SPD was broken because of the economic crisis and the negative reaction of SPD to reduce wages and social benefits. To him, SPD negative reaction is explained by the fragile structure of the labor organizations, which became highly dependent on state arbitration and political negotiations; thus, SPD lacked the means to secure working support of long-term goals. This fragile structure also reduced SPD capacity to oppose the Nazi empowerment. I am not sure what is his whole argument; first, it is not clear to me that a different organizational structure would have had an impact on the SPD strategy. A structure with strong presence at the firm level usually encourage a more militant positions, thus it would make more difficult to obtain rank-and-file consent of welfare cuts; moreover, wouldn't a strong floor company presence push industry's fears? Second, Abraham's data show that between 1928 and 1933 SPD votes decreased significantly, but not in the same proportion as the other bourgeois parties (except Z+BVP), to what extent the party was confronted with the trade-off that Przeworski analyzed? Would a change of its economic position attract middle-class votes in a larger proportion than the losses among working class? Did not its middle class support depend basically on SPD accomplishments on welfare benefits? **[A stronger labor movement would not necessarily be more militant in the face of this sort of crisis, since its strength might enable**

it to discipline members and create a longer time-horizon, since workers would be more confident in their ability to take advantage of future growth. Perhaps the relevant comparison here is Sweden.]

[9] #11 - Teresa Melgar

Abraham: *The Collapse of the Weimar Republic*

My comments for this particular book are more clarificatory in nature. In addition, I'd like to raise a few issues which I am not sure if the book touched on, but which I am curious to know a little about.

1. *On the fascist turn*. I believe that the main argument of the book is that in the course of the intense political crisis and inter-class conflict that took place prior to the collapse of the Weimar republic, no single class was able to rise to forge a hegemonic bloc that could mediate and aggregate these competing interests. This was the vacuum that the Nazis filled in. What I find intriguing about this analysis is this: how come the situation did not generate instead into: a) a civil war or b) prolonged stalemate in which these conflicts continue with no resolution, but where there is pronounced political decay, i.e. a situation where institutions substantively decline in, or lose political legitimacy altogether. I ask these questions because in some countries where these kinds of conflicts took place, these were the resulting outcomes. But in the case of Germany, the resolution of the conflict was still channeled to the parliamentary arena, in the form of support for the Nazi party. If the Nazi party had not been around then to fill in the vacuum, would it have been conceivable for any of these two alternative scenarios to take place, given the specific political make-up of German society, the balance of forces at that time between classes, their political inclinations, etc, and the other relevant variables that Abraham looked into? **[It is always possible that a very prolonged period of crisis and stagnation can occur without resolution. We see this in some Latin American countries, I think, where it is not so much a question of stalemate between powerful contending forces, but stagnation in the absence of any powerful force having a coherent strategy. This is, I think, what is meant by a "power vacuum". The question then would be: what would explain the absence of any collective actor with a credible project? In the current context – eg Argentina – this seems to be because of global factors more than local ones.]**

2. The impression that I get from Abraham's analysis is that the socialist movement in Germany somehow contributed to the ripening of conditions propitious to a power vacuum (which the Nazis filled in) because it "showed no signs of backing away from costly and successful economic demands." (P. 285). The persistent demands of the left for "economic democracy" at a time of deepening political crisis and inter-class conflicts, in other words, partly laid the ground for a capitalist backlash, as capitalists looked for ways to defeat this growing movement. Setting aside, for the moment, Abraham's analysis, what conclusions or analysis has the SDP reached as to the impact of the political positions, strategies, etc. party militants took during these fateful years? Would they have agreed with Abraham's analysis? What specific lessons or analysis did they derive from this particular historical episode? **[The situation was heavily complicated by the competition between socialists and communists – there was always the threat of revolutionary militancy and this constrained some of the choices of the SPD as well. It remains a deep question whether or not there were real strategic choices that could have been made.]**

[10] Amy Lang

Comments on Abraham, *The Collapse of the Weimar Republic*

I find it odd that Abraham uses a Poulantzian theoretical model where the state is seen to be a "factor of cohesion" among fragments of capital. As far as I understood the data he presents, the German state was never able to exercise independent (bureaucratic) leadership on issues of policy during the Weimar Republic. That is, the state was never able to rise above the particular interests of the class-coalition in parliament, even during the stable years of the Weimar Republic. Nor was it able to present its policies in an effectively hegemonic way, such that the class fraction interests served appeared to be the interests of Germany as a whole. In the period of stability (1925-1930) the state was dominated by an export-labour

coalition that excluded heavy industry, estate owners and family peasants. (Abraham argues that even though heavy industry was nominally represented in the bloc, they received short shrift in terms of policies in their interests (p. 30) and that bureaucratic agencies reflected the splits among class fractions (p.45)). But in this case, Abraham argues that it was the dominance of export capital and the relative prosperity of the period which made social wage concessions to labour bearable (288), not that these policies somehow met capitalist class interests [other than stability] as a whole. **[But stability is a pivotal component of those interests. The theory of hegemony does not imply that there are no costs to the capitalist class for assuming a hegemonic role – the concessions to workers are meant to be real concessions, with real costs, but the trade-off is to secure the long-term trajectory of capitalist interests]** Thus, although Abraham argues that the various elites looked to the state to find a compromise among the interests of capital fractions (36), it doesn't necessarily follow that the Weimar state was ever in a position to meet their expectations. To attribute the collapse of the Weimar republic in part to a failure of the state to be a factor of cohesion necessitates a demonstration by Abraham that this capacity to promote cohesion actually existed. If he fails to do this, what is the model of state-class relations that is actually supported by Abraham's data? **[I guess I would interpret the argument a little differently from you: The function of the state may be to provide the "factor of cohesion" for the society (by organizing the bourgeoisie, and disorganizing -- atomizing -- the working class), but (a) the extent to which the state successfully fulfills this function is variable, and (b) the destabilizing consequences of failing to fulfill this function will also be variable. During the apparently stable period of the Weimar republic the state partially succeeded in providing this cohesion, but it did so in a way that was quite vulnerable to unraveling under less favorable conditions. This consequences of the failure intensified during the early 1930s and the state lost all capacity to reforge any new sort of stability-enhancing compromise.]**

[11] From: Pablo

To: Everyone in Sociology 924.

I would like to understand better an aspect of Abraham's argument that I didn't fully understand.

There are three related but different explananda in Abraham's book. First, the crisis of the Weimar republic. Here he has provided a brilliant explanation, in which the incapacity of the different dominant classes to form a unified and stable hegemonic block plays a central role.

Second, he explains "how and why the leading fractions of the dominant social classes came to see the NSDAP as the most reliable or best available basis of support for continuing their own social dominance and for liquidating Weimar democracy" (323-4).

Observe that the previous one is an explanation of dominant classes' preferences for Hitler, not of why Hitler seized power. This is a third explanandum, that requires a separated explanans. Even if those classes preferred a dictatorial regime headed by Hitler, and even if they acted according to their preferences – for instance, by giving money to Hitler – this does not necessarily mean that they were important, or even necessary, in producing that outcome.

Abraham is aware of the difference between these two explananda. Indeed, he refines the last one even more when he maintains the following:

"By early 1932 at the latest, the leading figures in the now decisive fraction of industry concluded that Nazi participation in or control of the government would provide the best way out of the political crisis while providing auspicious possibilities for a profitable economic recovery. Such a decision was, of course, primarily opportunist and *contributed little – besides funding – to Nazi electoral and popular successes*. Conversely, however, electoral successes alone could not guarantee that the Nazis would come to power, and *the support of numerous industrialists, bankers, estate owners, and army officers proved crucial to such an outcome*" (p320, italics added).

What is not clear to me is what exactly the role of the industrialists, bankers and estate owners was. In the few pages between this paragraph and the end of the book, Abraham says that the treasurer of the heavy industry's political fund was in favor of offering the NSDAP generous financial support (p321); that "general industrial support for the Nazis grew throughout the summer and reached a crescendo in the late autumn, for instance with the Langnamverein convention of November 1932; and that "the bourgeoisie ... decided "consciously" in favor of the Nazis" (p323).

Nothing of this provides the evidence required to back the claim that the support of industrialist, bankers, etc. was *crucial* for the Nazis seizure of power. ("Crucial" should be interpreted here, I think, as implying that the Nazis would have not come to power without the support of these groups.) Is it implicit here that the dominant classes could have impeded this outcome if they had wanted, and so that their preference for Hitler was a necessary condition for the latter's success? Is that true? I mean, given how divided and how lacking of mass support they were, and how weak "their" parties had become, could have they impeded the access of Hitler – who had 44 % of votes in 1933 – to power? Is the story of how capitalists' and landowners' support was crucial to this outcome so well-known, that it doesn't need to be repeated? **[I do not know the empirical answer to the question here, but I think at least part of the counterfactual is that if the capitalist class had seen Hitler as a threat to their interests then they would have been able to obstruct his rise to power because they would have been able to mobilize opposition. The counterfactual, I think, is that if Hitler did not have a project compatible with the basic economic interests of capital, then in fact he would not have gotten 44% of the vote in 1932. To be sure, if he had been able to get this % of the vote against the interests of capital, then the divided and weak status of the bourgeoisie in 1933 would probably have prevented them from blocking the rise to power of Hitler. But this would not be a credible counterfactual, I think: one of the reasons Hitler did get this level of support was because of the class character of the project. Now, suppose that somehow after the election and before the seizure of power Capitalists had suddenly realized that Hitler's program was bad for them. Could they have even at that late date have activated a political process that would have blocked Hitler's accession to power? When we read Ermakoff's book perhaps this will become clearer – he argues that there was indeed the possibility of blocking Hitler even at a fairly late date, and this in turn suggests that if capital had thrown its weight against Hitler then even at the end, blocking was possible.]**

[12] Matt Nichter

While I am broadly sympathetic to Abraham's structural approach to the decline of the Weimar Republic, I think he downplays the extent to which the subjective political orientations of SPD and KPD leadership enabled Hitler to seize the initiative. Moreover, what little Abraham says about the KPD's politics during the twilight of Weimar strikes me as mistaken.

Abraham writes that "the striking passivity of the non-Communist organizations of the working class toward the end of the Republic resulted from their earlier inability to develop a strategy for achieving labor's social and political demands through reliance on mass activism." This is either poorly worded or positively misleading, since the SPD's core leadership was hardly "unable" to develop a mass action strategy; quite simply they opposed it, as they had consistently since the 1918-23 period (during which they relied upon the Freikorps to violently suppress mass strike action). It's also odd to argue that "once pluralist-democracy, class-compromise broke down, SPD and ADGB leaders were virtually helpless: during the massive crises of July 1932 (Papen coup, Nazi victories and violence), all they could do was appeal to the workers to vote SPD." Now if Abraham simply means that SPD leaders were incapacitated *by their ideology*, I would agree. But he seems to suggest something more: namely that the SPD could not realistically hope to mobilize its members for mass action as a result of accumulated passivity within the ranks themselves - a product of the leadership's reliance on a top-down approach in the years leading up to the crisis.

But such mobilization was possible. For one thing, the SPD's Reichsbanner militia was numerically superior to the SA. Especially after the formation of the 'Iron Front' - a coordinating body linking local Reichsbanner units to SPD-controlled sporting associations and union branches – in late 1931 in response to rank and file demands, even leading Nazis were fearful. In NSDAP-dominated Marburg, for

example, the SA was routed by worker mobilizations on several occasions. Krebs, the Gauleiter of the Hamburg Nazis, later admitted that “Despite all their willingness to fight and be sacrificed, [the SA’s] combat power would have been utterly insignificant [in a major confrontation with the Left before the Nazis held state power]...you could fight meeting-hall battles with them [but] I do not doubt that it still would have been possible, even in 1931 and 1932 , to eliminate the Nazis as a party organization.’ Yet the SPD leadership bent over backwards to prevent a clash. After von Papen’s coup in Prussia, the headline of *Vorwärts* was “Martial Law in Berlin – Our Answer – 31 July” (the date of the Reichstag elections)!

Abraham claims that the KPD’s demands were “qualitatively [in]distinguishable” from the SPD’s; while this is an exaggeration even with regard to the KPD economic program, it completely ignores the fundamental difference in approach regarding direct confrontation with the SA, which the KPD supported throughout the 20s and early 30s. Tragically, the numerically weaker KPD (whose paramilitary organization membership numbered around 100,000) failed to orchestrate united mass action against the Nazis with SPD forces in the early 30s. This failure was the result, on the one hand, of the KPD’s commitment to the Comintern’s ‘Third Period’ position after 1929 (which branded the SPD ‘Social Fascists’) - and of the SPD’s demonization of the KPD as “National Communists” allegedly part of a “bosses’ alliance” with the Nazis, on the other.

That a strategy of mass mobilization to smash the Nazi party organization could be successful was demonstrated elsewhere, perhaps most clearly in France, where united action on the Left not only frightened and demoralized fascist activists, but severely weakened the appeal of the fascist movement among the middle class as well. In short, I think division on the Left— more ideological than ‘structural’ in nature - was as important as divisions among the ruling class and division between ruling class and workers in permitting Hitler’s rise, especially once Weimar began to disintegrate. **[It is a very interesting speculation that the rise to power of the Nazi’s could have been blocked if the SPD had been willing to mobilize its forces alongside the KPD for militant battle with the Nazis. But of course, if the working class had demonstrated that kind of strength in the German context, then one could easily imagine the military stepping in a repressing the working class as a whole. Germany democracy was, after all, unquestionably weaker than French institutions in the early 1930s (although, of course, the French Republic turned out to be not all that robust in 1940). This, however, might just have lead to a military dictatorship rather than a Nazi dictatorship, since it does not seem that the military was really enthusiastic about the fanaticism of the Nazis.]**

[13] James Benson. Addressing the Problems of the Parliamentary State

Abraham outlines a set of factors that led to the disintegration of the Weimar Republic, and the eventual “decision” of the bourgeois factions to work with fascism. Some of these factors were economic (as compared to political), pertaining to the divergent interests of the domestic-market heavy industrial sector, the export industrial sector, and the agricultural sector. Some of these factors were exogenous to both the German economy and state, especially the flow of investment capital from New York, and the onset of the Great Depression. Concerning the state itself, Abraham takes aim at the fractious nature of decision-making within a parliamentary system. To summarize:

“The parliamentary system proved weak and indecisive: the fragmentation of interests it encouraged prevented the emergence of a coherent capitalist response to the crisis, while democratic representation assured that the interests of organized labor would continue to be pressed with some success.” (48).

From the standpoint of our inquiry in this course, **we should be concerned with the benefits and pitfalls of a state organized around parliamentary decision-making.** (bold -type provided for skimmers). I believe it is important to consider Abraham’s critique of parliamentary organization. However, drawing on our discussion with Vivek Chibber last week, I would like to suggest that the problems of the Weimar Republic were not the structural problems of a fractious parliamentary decision-making system, but the structural problems of a state that was not effectively organized around a national plan for economic development. Abraham sounds like a U.S. liberal Democrat when he criticizes the German parliamentary system. So, I pose the counterfactual: Would Germany have been more likely to formulate an effective

economic development policy (between 1924 and 1929) if the decision-making body of the state had been organized along the lines of a U.S.-style winner-take-all system? Such a system would have been likely to encourage less political parties, and would have reduced or eliminated the role of a social democratic party. I don't see any evidence from Abraham to suggest that the domestic-market heavy industries, or agriculture, would have been more likely to embrace economic modernization in such a system. The problem of devising a national economic development plan would still have been present. I think that Abraham is correct when he says that none of the industrial factions saw the limits of the economy to absorb popular programs (43). However, it would also be accurate to say that none of the industrial factions saw the limits of their own, particularistic, economic strategies. The lesson for the Left in this story may be that we have to attend not only to the social interests of our constituencies, but also to the role of the state in organizing economic development. **[I agree with you that the technical details of the parliamentary electoral rules do not seem to be the real culprit in the failure of the state to formulate a coherent capitalist project. Intra-class compromise and the formation of power blocs can certainly take place under a variety of different rules. Still, it could be the case that in the kind of class fragmentation that characterized Germany, institutional forms could matter more than in many other contexts. One empirical question, then, is whether there were other arenas besides party-structures within which elite compromises and consensus could have been forged?]**