

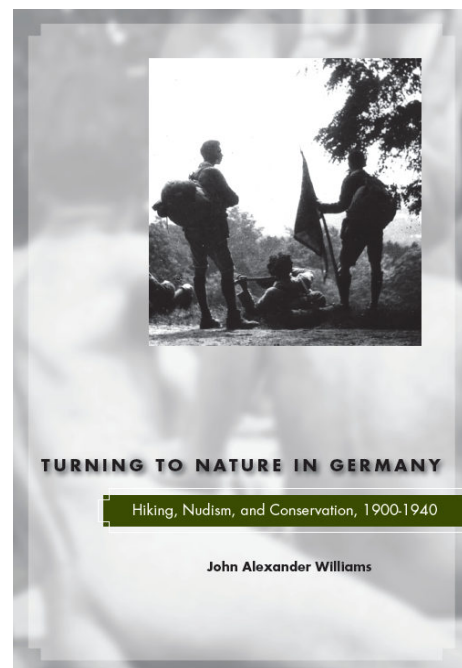
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Naturfreunde in Weimar Culture

John Alexander Williams. *Turning to Nature in Germany: Hiking, Nudism, and Conservation, 1900-1940*. 354pp. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007

John Alexander Williams (ed). *Weimar Culture Revisited* (Studies in European Culture and History). 264pp. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

The two books introduced here shed new light on cultural developments in Germany during the early years of the 20th century. They do not attempt to create a new theory on the history of the Weimar Republic but, following Detlev Peukert's concept of Weimar culture as a microcosm of deeply modern uncertainty, present cultural, political, and psychological case studies, i.e. examples for how general developments become concrete in real, empirical life. What lies at the heart of both books is how a German "identity" is created, negotiated, and contested. From a *Naturfreunde* perspective both volumes are relevant because they define contexts in and against which club history can be understood.



Williams' monograph *Turning to Nature* concentrates on differing attitudes in Germany towards nature during the first four decades of the 20th century. Historically he distinguishes three major phases: The Wilhelmine (or Kaiser) Reich up to World War I; the inter-war period up to roughly 1930; and the transition to and first half of the fascist era. He sketches out two main traditions of what "nature" means, one conservative and one social democratic. The conservative tradition is based on order, social homogeneity, social darwinism, and nationalism; working-class and left-wing interpretations rather emphasize equality, democracy, social justice, and internationalism. Williams makes pervasively clear that readings of left-wing concepts of nature as forerunners of Nazi ideology are unfounded.

The range of conservative approaches Williams analyzes is wide, including the (fragmented and moderately oppositional) *Wandervogel* and *bündische Jugend* movements, institutionalized Youth Cultivation (*Jugendpflege*), and, by the end of the Weimar period, organized tendencies to oppose unrestrained "wild hiking" (*wildes Wandern*) in favor of hiking in paramilitary forms, which would result in the drills and marches of the Hitlerjugend. In spite of all the differences among conservative attitudes, in a historical perspective they occasionally are quite flexible. An exemplary case for a transition from moderate conservatism to the extreme right can be found in the writings of Konrad Guenter, whose arguments of why to hike in nature move from early escapism towards a later (fascist) "blood and soil" concept (*Blut und Boden*). Williams also traces the semantics of the term *Heimat*, which during the 1920s included a variety of local interpretations and thus could also stand for diversity, yet by 1933 was reduced to the simple equation of *Heimat* = Nature = Nation, i.e. a unified space where difference is absent, erased in favor of a "national community" (*Volksgemeinschaft*). In spite of all the nature lore, the conservationist rhetoric was a mere facade for technological and military "modernization."

In Williams' book conservative ideologues, organizations, and concepts are given more space than those of the Left, but as the volume opens with a discussion of "Socialists and Nature," permanent and productive references to and comparisons with the culture(s) on the Left are discussed throughout. The ideological gap between conservative and progressive interpretations of the human body can already be found in the origins of German nudism. Here Williams analyzes how an appreciation of the naked body was present in conservative discourses, but a majority of organized nudists during the Weimar years was Leftist. Instead of the early, elitist ideals of the right-wing minority it pursued a "holistic goal of simultaneously healing the mind, the body, and the soul" (23).¹

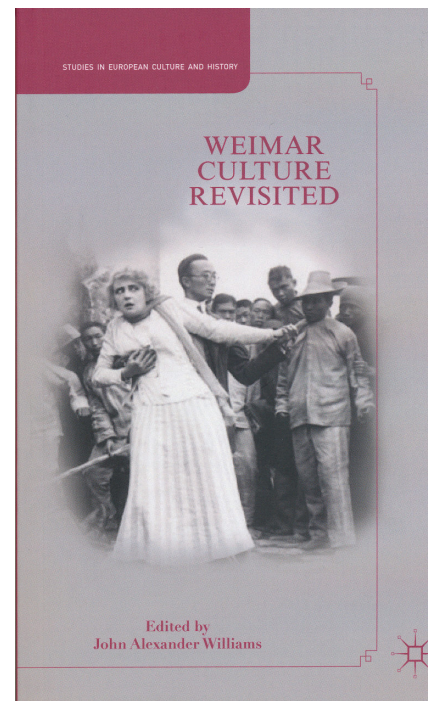
The social democratic approach is mainly exemplified by the *Naturfreunde* (67-104), in particular through their concept of social hiking: "*Soziales Wandern* was a kind of hiking that would take groups of workers through their regional homeland, exposing them not only to the environment of the countryside or the industrial town, but also to the social conditions of rural and urban workers. Social hiking was intended to raise participants' consciousness of how working people lived in Germany and how capitalism was preventing their reaching their goal of an active mind in a strong, beautiful body." (70) Social hiking was not an escapist dream of the past, but was to get workers together under the heading of class solidarity and social justice. Common experiences in nature were to create a rational view of what a socialist society might be able to achieve. Only occasionally the *Naturfreunde's*

¹ This argument is detailed in John Alexander Williams' "Der Körper fordert seine Rechte: Nudismus in der Arbeiterbewegung 1919-1935," in the present volume of *NaturFreundeGeschichte/NatureFriendsHistory* 2.1 (2014).

freedom-loving practices were shared by more conservative ones, such as when the early *Wandervogel* movement saw "hiking as an excellent way to promote subcultural solidarity among young workers." (122) But by the end of the Weimar Republic ideological differences between the Left and the Right had hardened and such crossover attitudes were excluded from conservative discourses.

Williams does not overlook that many a Weimar *Naturfreund* did not see him- or herself as a Social Democrat. Even during the leadership's two major attempts, around 1924-25 and 1930-32, of cleansing the club from Communists and anarchists, many continued to spend their time together. On the dissolution of the Weimar *Naturfreunde* in 1933, when Social Democratic leaders tried to save the organization and its clubhouses through self-synchronization with the Nazis ("Selbstgleichschaltung"), Williams feels that simply accusing Steinberger, Burger et al. of selling out to the Nazis is to rigidly judge from hindsight. This does not exculpate the leaders, though: "It seems clear that the *Naturfreunde* leadership did not fulfil a sinister bourgeois protofascist tradition. Instead they betrayed a progressive socialist one." (97)

Weimar Culture Revisited can be seen as a follow-up project to the monograph. Here ten scholars (five from the USA, four from Britain, one from Israel) discuss a wide range of topics which focus "on four thematic areas: visual and mass culture, transnational film and literature, political culture, and the body and nature." (xv) According to Williams' "Foreword" (ix-xxvi) the essays aim at widening the research canon into unexplored cultural walks of Weimar life ("Alltagsgeschichte"). In their research perspective, contributors read the Weimar Republic not with an eye on how it preconditioned the coming of fascism but rather see it in its own right, as a fully-fledged pluralistic society. Unlike the term "chapter" for each contribution suggests, each text can be read by itself. Yet when read together the essays provide intensive glimpses into the ramifications of Weimar culture(s).



Williams' own chapter "Friends of Nature: The Culture of Working-Class Hiking" (199-225) is an updated and more compact version of his discussion in *Turning to Nature*. Again he indicates sympathy with the "moderate" socialism predominant in the German *Naturfreunde* organization (199). Williams' text, the last one in the volume, grabs an editor's opportunity to subtly integrate relevant observations from his co-authors. Even readers who know his monograph will find inspiring detail in

this essay. For readers of English it serves well as a compact introduction to the Nature Friends in inter-war Germany.

In sum, both volumes expand our knowledge and understanding of the Weimar Republic. They are based on a thorough knowledge of German as well as international sources. Both come with comprehensive bibliographies and indexes to help practical usefulness.² One might wish that scholars like Williams would keep up their interest in the German *Naturfreunde*, thus extending the studying of working-class hiking and eco-socialism in English-language scholarship.

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² A few critical remarks on either volume might be in place. To be sure, none of these observations reduces their benefits and value.

- a) *Turning to Nature* - The founding year of the *Naturfreunde* is erroneously given as 1898 (17; elsewhere it is, correctly, 1895); the first Swiss local was not founded in 1900 (72), but in 1905; *Naturfreunde* leader Xaver Steinberger's first name is Americanized throughout to Xavier; due to Williams' concentrating on social democratic discourses, he occasionally makes a point too strongly: "The TVNF never [?] made a serious effort to delve deeper into the proletarian milieu by appealing to poorer workers" (76), thus neglecting the more radical segments within the German organization; coining the new acronym TVNF (for "Touristen-Verein [die] NaturFreunde") seems unnecessary: for the Germans it is TVDN / TVdN, and in Austria TVN.
- b) *Weimar Culture Revisited* - The motto (or rather greeting phrase) of the conservative *Alpenverein* is not "Berg auf" (200) but more problematically "Berg heil"; the translation of the term "Anschlussmitglied" as "auxiliary member" seems problematic, as it refers to a family member paying reduced membership fees; again the unconventional acronym "TVNF" is used, even though Xaver Steinberger's first name now is spelt correctly.