

The Power of an Image

How cartoons championed and criticised the Constitution in the Weimar Republic

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Images are powerful tools for social commentary, legal critique and political expression. During the period of the Weimar Republic in Germany, the cartoon genre became an important medium to support and satirise the new Constitution. Mixing irony with imagery, cartoon artists contributed to a visual legal imagination that went beyond the formal texts of law and politics.

The popular print media flourished in Germany's Weimar Republic (1919–1933), particularly the genre of illustrated satirical journals. One of the most famous of these journals, *Simplicissimus*, founded in 1896, was situated in the political centre by the time of the Weimar years, with a readership that was 'loyal but unenthusiastic'¹ towards the new republic and thus the new Constitution. Karl Arnold was one of the leading cartoonists at *Simplicissimus*. In this short essay, I use a close reading of four of his cartoons to give a brief glimpse into the visual history of the Weimar Constitution. This is only a snapshot of my research on the subject, as there were many other artists – and many other journals from across the political spectrum – who also published satirical images and caricatures relating to the Constitution, its defenders and its enemies.

This research into legal cartoons is part of my broader research project exploring how visual art media functioned during the Weimar Republic. My aim is to interrogate the context and creation of images in different forms, their materials, and their meanings in order to understand how law and politics worked outside of formal institutional spaces at the time. To create a moment of recognition in the reader, a cartoon relies on the synthesis of its three elements – the title, the caption and the drawn image. In the same way, my method of analysing Arnold's work is to examine the complex interaction between theme, text, line and colour that emerges from his cartoons.

The threat of article 48

Promulgated in August 1919, the party pluralist Constitution of the Weimar Republic included a strong role for the President, who was to be elected separately to the Parliament (article 41). The President had broad emergency powers under article 48, which meant they could suspend constitutional rights on the basis of 'public security and order' (par. 2). Article 48 was used at various times by President Ebert and often by President Hindenburg. It was, of course, a decree based on article 48 which was then used by Hitler in 1933 and caused the end of the Weimar Republic itself.

The threatened use of article 48 as a theme in the satirical journals blossomed during various events in the life of the Republic. *Simplicissimus* ran a cartoon by Karl Arnold on

1 Ann Taylor Allen, *Satire and Society in Wilhelmine Germany: Kladderadatsch and Simplicissimus, 1890-1914* (University Press of Kentucky, 1984) 207.

article 48 on the cover of an April 1930 issue. After a financial reform bill put up by Chancellor Heinrich Brüning was rejected by the Parliament, Brüning called upon President Hindenburg to invoke article 48. Karl Arnold's cartoon *The Young Parliamentarism* (1930) shows the green shoots of a young girl-as-a-tree emerging out of the ground. The caption reads 'Barely flowering – already the destructive article 48 approaches!' The slender tree is swaying under the weight of supporting a flock of vocal birds (presumably various politicians) and is facing off against the large, grey, hooded male executioner who is labelled 'article 48'. With slits for eyes, brandishing an axe and a saw, it is clear Arnold's pictorial depiction of article 48 is meant as a warning regarding its potential to cut down the fledgling beginnings of parliamentarism. In a light touch, some of the birds are perching on the letters within the masthead *Simplicissimus*. This dissolves the boundary between the masthead and the cartoon, showing how the journal also provided a platform and refuge for different voices.



Karl Arnold, 'Der junge Parlamentarismus [The Young Parliamentarism]' *Simplicissimus*, Vol 35, Issue 5, p. 49, 28 April 1930.

The following year, Arnold revisited the same theme of parliamentarism as a tree, and article 48, with the cover image *The Last Democrat* (1931). Depicting an elderly man sitting on a pile of leaves at the side of a grave, the epitaph on the gravestone reads: 'Here Lie Democracy and Parliamentarism. Born 1848; Died from Article 48' and includes a caption from an old sentimental folk song to the effect that 'In this world the sweetest place I know, is the grassy bank my parents sleep below'.² The falling motion of the dead golden leaves, and their slow accumulation against the grey background, contribute to an impression of quiet melancholy and a prescient sense of foreboding.



Karl Arnold, 'Der letzte Demokrat [The Last Democrat]' *Simplicissimus*, Vol 36, Issue 27, p. 313, 5 October 1931.

Constitutional aims vs. every day reality

Another common mode of critique of the Constitution was the visual demonstration of the contrast between its ambitious wording and the reality of life on the streets. Following on from his series of *Berliner Bilder* cartoons satirising Berlin life, Arnold's *The Connoisseur* (1927) offers a stark reminder of the disparity in living standards. Arnold uses a quotation from the Preamble to the Constitution as an ironic caption:

² Translation by: W. A. Coupe, *German Political Satires from the Reformation to the Second World War – Part 3: 1918-1945* (Commentary) (Kraus International Publications, 1985) 196.

‘The German people, united in its tribes [in seinen Stämmen] and inspired by the will... to further social progress’. The page is divided in two, with the title of the cartoon in the same non-serif font as the masthead. The lowercase ‘i’ amidst the capital letters emphasises the incongruity of the circumstances depicted in the cartoon underneath.

In the top half of the page, Arnold draws two thin children, plus a mother with a baby, and a man on crutches (a repeat figure from Arnold’s *Berlin* series). They are all huddling together, all straight lines, with their suffering represented by smudged black slits for their eyes. The man on crutches is grimacing, and his glasses are completely blacked out, whilst the woman is barely recognisable as a person, her features subsumed into angular creases of worry. In contrast, the bottom half is the opposite – two figures sprawling on their comfortable chairs, resting after a feast; the man in a suit, rings on his hand, with the pudgy neck of the well-to-do. The younger woman, also wearing jewellery, is lounging across the furniture and appears relaxed, with her stockings visible – possibly suggesting she is a prostitute. The scene is full of abundance and decadence. Both figures are asleep, which seems to be a pointed way for Arnold to demonstrate the way the industrial and upper classes needed to literally ‘wake up’ and open their eyes to the inequality which surrounded them. Noticeably, the black, red, and gold colours of the republic are also given a twist in this cartoon. Shown as a pink at the top, with the lines and masthead in black, and the gold turned into a lighter yellow – all washed out and dulled – this front cover becomes a striking visual metaphor for the similarly fading hopes of a fairer and more equal society under the new Constitution.

Résumé

*Sous la République de Weimar (1919-1933), la presse populaire allemande a connu un âge d’or, en particulier le genre des magazines satiriques illustrés. L’un des plus célèbres de ces magazines, *Simplicissimus*, fondé en 1896, se situait au centre de l’échiquier politique dans les années de Weimar, avec un lectorat loyal mais peu enthousiaste envers la nouvelle république et donc la nouvelle constitution. Karl Arnold était l’un des principaux caricaturistes du *Simplicissimus*. À travers quatre de ses caricatures, cet article donne un aperçu de l’histoire visuelle de la Constitution de Weimar.*

L’analyse précise de ces « images de la constitution » permet une approche analytique qui va au-delà du texte. S’y intéresser, c’est réfléchir avec esprit critique à la manière dont les images façonnent la représentation populaire du droit. Car le simple fait de tracer une ligne n’est parfois rien de moins qu’une évocation complexe du pouvoir de l’image dans tous les domaines de l’art, du droit et de la politique.

Subversive washed out colours

My final example also uses a prominent choice of colour to make an immediate impact. It is the cover page of the 12 March 1933 issue. Hitler is Chancellor and the ‘Reichstag Fire Decree’ (‘Reichstagsbrandverordnung’) had been enacted by President Hindenburg using article 48 at the end of February, which indefinitely suspended most civil liberties. In addition, during the night of 10 March, SA troops ransacked the editorial offices of *Simplicissimus*, and in the following weeks, the editors were put under extreme pressure and forced to sign assurances designed to neutralise the journal. Franz Schoenberner left Germany, and Thomas Theodor Heine went into hiding, and then also emigrated. Karl Arnold and others stayed on, and the journal continued to be printed, but *Simplicissimus* no longer took a critical stance.



Karl Arnold, ‘Der Geniesser [The Connoisseur]’
Simplicissimus, Vol 32, Issue 37, p. 497, 12 December 1927.

Before these events, however, Arnold's cover cartoon challenges the ascendancy of the NSDAP. Titled *On the Constitution of the German Reich*, the caption ironically quotes article 1: 'The German Reich is a republic. The state power is derived from the people' as well as article 3 'The colours of the Reich are black – red – gold.' However, on this front page, the only colours are a washed-out red/pink, white and black. Arnold deliberately does not include the Weimar Republic colours and flag in the image, suggesting that they have simply been erased, which also shows the continuity and complicity between supporters of the Imperial regime and the NSDAP. Here, Arnold creates a new version of the merchant flag,³ depicting a red flag with the Nazi *Hakenkreuz* in the centre and the Imperial flag in the corner. This dominance is emphasised through the two cherubs who are holding up the flag, with one doing the Heil Hitler salute, the other (with the sword and Imperial helmet) acquiescing.



Karl Arnold, 'Zur Verfassung des Deutschen Reiches [On the Constitution of the German Reich]' *Simplicissimus*, Vol 37, Issue 50, p. 589, 12 March 1933.

The third figure is a young 'Deutscher Michel' – often used to depict the German people, recognisable by his nightcap – kneeling and praying with a lock on his mouth, his voice taken away, with the newspaper under his arm similarly silenced. In a form of visual wordplay, the ballot box ('die

Wahlurne' – or literally translated: the voting urn) is shown here as a funeral urn. It is revealed by the cherubs to be padlocked and closed off, signalling the death of the democratic republic. The cherubs pulling away the flag represents a form of lifting of the veil, referencing the traditional religious connotations of drapery showing the passage from the earthly realm to the next. Here, the lifting of the veil shows Arnold's despair at the country's transition to Nazi rule.

Zusammenfassung

In der Weimarer Republik (1919–1933) erlebte die populäre Presse in Deutschland eine Blütezeit, insbesondere das Genre der illustrierten Satirezeitschriften. Eine der bekanntesten dieser Zeitschriften, der 1896 gegründete «Simplicissimus», war in den Weimarer Jahren in der politischen Mitte angesiedelt, mit einer Leserschaft, die der neuen Republik und damit der neuen Verfassung «loyal, aber wenig enthusiastisch» gegenüberstand. Karl Arnold war einer der führenden Karikaturisten des «Simplicissimus». Anhand von vier seiner Karikaturen gibt dieser Beitrag einen Einblick in die visuelle Geschichte der Weimarer Verfassung.

Die genaue Analyse von «Verfassungsbildern» ermöglicht einen analytischen Zugang, der über den Text hinausgeht. Sich mit ihnen zu beschäftigen bedeutet, kritisch darüber nachzudenken, wie Bilder unsere populäre Rechtsvorstellung prägen. Denn das einfache Zeichnen einer Linie ist mitunter nicht weniger als eine komplexe Beschwörung der Macht des Bildes in allen Bereichen der Kunst, des Rechts und der Politik.

3 The second sentence of Article 3 of the Weimar Constitution stated that the merchant flag shall retain the imperial colours of black, white and red, and include the new national flag (black, red, gold) in the top corner.

The politics of representation

Seen through these four cartoons, Karl Arnold demonstrates an approach to the Constitution in *Simplicissimus* which was characterised by mild support and social satire – an approach perhaps representative of the majority of the middle class who were its readers. His warnings regarding article 48 and his concern about the inequality on the streets escalate to the powerful cover image in March 1933, lamenting the silencing of the people, the press and the Parliament. As a result, in this final cartoon, we clearly see some of the competing uses of the image in the Weimar Republic. The use of colour and the literal as well as allegorical representation of the flags directs us to think about the importance of images, symbols and visual artefacts for all sides of politics – and their crucial role as a tool for support, critique and propaganda within and outside the political and legal establishments.

The Weimar Republic was the first time Germany was a republic with a representative democracy. In today's democracies (and beyond), the dynamic nature of images and their potential cannot be understated. Representative politics today continues to be characterised by a similar politics of representation to the Weimar Republic – images have become political and legal forces unto themselves. Focusing on cartoons dealing with the Weimar Constitution is a history lesson that has tangible implications for how we view our present-day constitutions. It means thinking deeply and critically about the work of images in fostering and shaping our popular legal imagination; it compels analysis that goes beyond a text-based approach and centres on different forms of cultural expression. The simple drawing of a line is a complex invocation of the power of an image – historically and today – across all realms of art, law and politics.

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DOI

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8289054>

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