

D.5. Weimar Culture

The Weimar Republic, however ailing in economic and political terms, was one of the most fertile grounds for the modern arts and sciences. Berlin, in particular, became a thriving center of many new art movements such as dadaism, expressionism, and new sobriety. Its status in the world of the arts resembled the place of New York after 1945. The Bauhaus school near Weimar, moreover, revolutionized architecture, and the theaters in Berlin and Frankfurt led to a revolution on stage. Thomas Mann explored the limits of modernist writing, Bertolt Brecht broke with old traditions of play writing, and Max Reinhardt and Erwin Piscator became world famous stage directors.

Great film companies made German cinema one of the most notable in the world (a position it never again achieved). Leading composers of atonal music taught and heard their works first performed in Weimar Germany. George Grosz painted satire in its most bitter ways. The Frankfurt Institute for Social Research (with Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Erich Fromm, Walter Benjamin, Karl Mannheim) developed theories inspired by a synthesis of Marxism and Freudian psychoanalysis that have proven highly influential in twentieth-century thought. In addition to that, the Weimar Republic "inherited" excellent universities and science centers from the Wilhelmine period. Göttingen was the world's most famous center for physics, and German was the international language in physics and chemistry. Albert Einstein lived and taught in Berlin.

Much of Weimar culture showed great interest in the United States, and historians have spoken of an "Americanization" of German culture during the Weimar years. But it was much less an influence through American artists as through a perceived "American" form of life that seemed exceedingly modern to Weimar's artists and thinkers. The assembly line technique (developed in the American auto industry), the skyscraper, and styles of American mass consumption and advertisement seemed the epitome of modernity to Weimar artists. They adapted some American forms but often used them critically and creatively. In addition to the importance of American patterns, one can discern a strong influence of Russian modernism on Weimar culture. The posters, graphics, and architecture of the young Soviet Union to many Weimar artists seemed to represent the manifestations of a new and more humane world.

Many of the rich developments in the arts and sciences also had their origins in prewar Germany, but the Weimar Republic let them rise to center stage and became identified with them. This was a mixed blessing, however, since a broad segment of the public in Germany (as elsewhere) saw the new trends in culture and thought as a threat to civilization and an offense to good taste. Anti-republicanism and anti-modernism often joined in the minds of conservative university faculty, church representatives, and conservative journalists. To the right, Weimar Culture confirmed the image of a hedonistic, amoral, and degenerate society (the equivalent to the hyperinflation on the economic stage). That many leading artists associated with the Communist Party (which was fashionable in intellectual circles all over Europe) or with other forms of socialism branded the new trends as doubly dangerous. (In fact, the German Communist Party welcomed much of this artist help and featured avantgarde theater and film in its propaganda.) The strong representation of Jews in the new artistic currents underscored rightist critique of a "Judaized Republic."

When the Nazis came to power most of the exponents of Weimar culture had to emigrate. Hitler declared many of its currents as "degenerate" art. The public book burning organized by Goebbels in 1933 condemned modernist thought and writing by Jews and non-Jews. The unique activity of German Jews, on which much of the advanced art and science had thrived, came to an end. Many physicists, social scientists, film directors, and writers emigrated to the United States, which thus inherited Weimar culture. Nevertheless, the Nazis' break with Weimar culture was not as strict as some historians have assumed. Even Nazi architecture and art tended to mix classical patterns with some modernist elements, producing a provincial, usually awful and bombastic style.

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