

WHEN BERLIN BECAME BABYLON: ART AND POLITICS IN THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC

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Numerous books, exhibitions and monographic magazines have repeatedly highlighted the importance of the Weimar Republic as a turning point in art and culture, as well as emphasizing the strict contemporaneity of some of their concerns and premises. It was a vibrant, yet contradictory time marked by political, artistic, and societal revolution. However, this interesting period in history tends to be overshadowed by both what preceded it and what followed it.

Many chapters of university textbooks or bibliographic commentaries present the period as the antechamber of National Socialism, as a republic without republicans¹, whose cultural richness - although it

¹ Ottmar Bühler, in his text analysis from the Weimar Constitution, is one of the authors who believe that, the causes of the fall of the Republic lie, not so much in the Constitution, but in the lack of support it received from the German people. Also, other historians like Karl Dietrich Bracher, Heinrich August Winkler, Karl-Heinz Roth or even, at some extent, Wolfgang Mommsen argue that that the Weimar Republic lacked a solid republican backing in German society. Their analyses suggest that a lack of entrenched commitment to democratic values contributed to the instability and failure of the republic.

nearly always appears related to the process of ideological radicalization of the period - was its most appreciable asset.

As for general historiography, the most traditional approaches are as follows: there are those who define the Republic as a failed experience due to its abnormality within the country's political evolution², subject to increasingly powerful anti-democratic forces. Others³ consider it an almost necessary time and therefore, if we carefully analyze the continuity of the structures of Wilhelmine power, predictable in the course of events since the Unification. Thirdly, there are those for whom the reason for the failure of the Republic lies in a greater link between these structures of domination and the nationalist dictatorship since the Weimar institutions would have shown their inability to firmly assume a fully democratic attitude.

Among all these studies there are also those⁴ that support the widespread thesis of the Republican failure by the betrayal of social

² Among all those experts who support this theory, there are also different perspectives from which this point of view is approached: there are historians who defend the *Sonderweg* theory (for which an authoritarian government in Germany was inevitable because of the nation's unique history and development, thus being the Republic an abnormality in the logical course of events or an antechamber of National Socialism) like, to mention some, Fritz Fischer, Léon Poliakov, Alan John Percivale Taylor or William Shirer. There are other authors who define the Weimar Republic as a sort of failed experiment like Eric D. Weitz, Richard J. Evans or Detlev J. K. Peukert.

³ Hans-Ulrich Wehler, David Blackbourn or Wolfgang J. Mommsen, among others, have examined the historical continuity between the Wilhelmine era and the Weimar Republic, highlighting the impact of pre-existing power structures and social dynamics on the course of events.

⁴ Pierre Broué, Eric Hobsbawm, Ralf Hoffrogge or Sebastian Haffner, among others, provide similar perspectives on the impact of the alliance between social democracy and bourgeois forces on the revolutionary process and the subsequent instability of the Weimar Republic. Their works shed light on the political decisions and compromises that influenced the trajectory of the republic and set the stage for the rise of National Socialism.

democracy, which, apart from being a thesis supported by many historians, was the official version of the GDR, which attributed the end of the republican experience to the perverse origin of the system, to the fact that the moderate socialists had betrayed the working class. According to those who defend this thesis, the alliance of social democracy with bourgeois forces would have paralyzed the revolutionary process in November and since then, the socio-political instability that remained a constant throughout the republican era, would have led to disaster and to the access to power of the National Socialists.

Less frequently, those⁵ who have analyzed the Weimar era to study the causes of Nazism have assigned the main responsibility for political change to a powerful social minority - the German bourgeoisie.

All this historiographical reflection, although it may seem incidental, is necessary, as the historiographical perspective from which the period is analyzed determines the way in which the cultural activity is perceived and understood by each of the authors who have studied this period.

Similarly, when the Weimar era is studied only as an interlude between two totalitarian epochs - as a period doomed to failure from its inception - culture too is often analyzed solely as a reaction to the socio-political situation of the Weimar era. While it is true that the cultural activity of interwar Berlin is closely linked to, both the every day, and the socio-political life of the time, it is not born exclusively of contemporary events: it is also indebted to a whole previous tradition

⁵ Geoff Eley or Otto Dann have examined the role of the German bourgeoisie in the Weimar era and its contribution to the political change that led to the rise of Nazism. Their works focus on the socio-economic dynamics and class interests that influenced the trajectory of the Weimar Republic and set the stage for the Nazi regime.

and to a context of change that is taking place across the European continent.

When the Weimar Republic was proclaimed, Berlin had long since ceased to be the young industrial capital it had been at the turn of the century. In less than two decades, the city had become a metropolis, the capital of a great state (in full state of conflict) that had possibly grown too fast and had become a space full of contrasts and contradictions, thus being a paradigmatic example - taken to the extreme - of the difficulties that the country would face in the period that was just beginning.

Berlin was a city of deep contrasts since its founding as the capital of Germany - and even by then it already had its specific problems - but it was once the war was over that they intensified, turning the city into a space capable of absorbing simultaneously all the ambitions and energies, all the richness and misery.

As a young metropolis, Berlin still looked, in the post-war period, like a city in the process of continuous development, a heterogeneous and chaotic amalgam built rapidly based on contradictory and polymorphic elements that, perhaps in its search for an identity, it left its doors open to the outside, becoming extremely permeable to new ideas and cultural manifestations.

Since the beginning of the century, this openness to the outside world contributed to the creation of a small artistic and cultural bohemianism critical with the empire, which was developed and constituted during the first two decades of the century. However, it was not until the third decade of the twentieth century that Berlin became one of the

epicenters of the European cultural avant-garde, and it did so with certain peculiarities.

Unlike other European capitals, which were at the forefront of a period of stability or economic growth, in Berlin, the period of cultural boom coincides temporarily with the worst economic and political crises the country had ever faced.

During the decades from 1910 to 1930 - thus beginning this period of cultural boom a little before the constitution of the Weimar Republic - the cultural activities of the city play a decisive role in the genesis of the specific elements that will later permeate a great part of later culture internationally. However, it is often difficult to define or delimit the features of these cultural activities that take place in the republican Berlin, perhaps because those are, like the city that saw them be born, polymorphic, numerous, and often too, contradictory.

Weimar represents a stage of plural resolutions in all spheres, and art is no stranger to that plurality. There is not a single artistic manifestation in the Republican period that can be conceived as what has often been classified as a unitary movement. While it is true that during this period there are a number of artists who are classified as Dadaists or are included in the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) movement (and generally those who were included in the first one, were part of the second, coming almost all of them from the Expressionism) one cannot speak of a unity of styles or even, especially in the second case, of a coincidence of opinions or points of view on the political sphere among the different artists that were included in these manifestations.

Groups such as *Die Brücke*, which had maintained a certain stylistic unity at will, disintegrated with the war. Expressionism – that although

it was not a unitary movement, in some respects was more homogenous than the artistic resolutions that follow - begins to agonize at the beginning of the Republican period. What comes next - and at some point, even Expressionism itself - can only be understood in its complexity and richness if one starts from the basis that more than movements, what there was in Weimar were certain shared sensitivities and universes of significance with points in common arising from very specific conditions. It is in Berlin where, just after the end of the war, it is possible to feel more strongly than in any other city, that end-of-the-world atmosphere that had already been felt in other European capitals before the beginning of the century.

Therefore, talking about Berlin implies having to speak and start from the multiplicity and complexity, both of forms and of styles and resolutions, as well as of different sensitivities and ways - albeit with points in common - of facing the crisis or crises that cross the century and Europe.

While the military bloodbath - caused by WW1 but specially the months after the conflict - is a turning point for Germany at all levels, the cultural activity that takes place during the republican period cannot be understood as an isolated fact from the European context or the common crisis - although its forms and magnitudes vary from one period and region to the other - that had already marked the cultural development of other cities such as Vienna, Paris and Munich, and that had already begun to be felt in the same city of Berlin before the war, shortly after the turn of the century.

Thus, the crisis is neither born nor exclusive to the post-war period. However, the end of the conflict acts - and in Germany, due to its political situation resulting from the loss of the conflict, the feeling is magnified- as a breaking point, as the incision in which the end of a world materializes and is ascertained, causing a definitive break with that tradition and worldview that had begun to disintegrate in the middle of the previous century.

The experience of the war, and the turbulent years that followed, were not exclusively German either. Across Europe, and to a lesser extent in the United States, an entire generation of creators was marked by this experience for life, although on the other hand, there was a specifically German antimilitarism that developed from 1916 onwards that affected the arts of this country in a particular way.

In fact, if Berlin became a symptom and portrait of the disintegration that affected the whole continent to a greater or lesser extent in the 1920s, it is because there were differentiating factors that made this happen in this capital and not in another European city.

On one hand, the richness of the cultural activity that was developed mainly in Berlin during the twenties, is delineated especially during the years that go from 1910 to 1913, a period in which the political and ideological decline of the Empire and of its dignitaries was already more than obvious. At that point, the German intellectuals opposed to the Kaiser have already begun to develop their cultural activity and to open up to new ways of thinking and representing. Then, the Great War started. The end of the conflict culminated in the founding of a republic that was shaken by various crises since the very first day of its

proclamation. The post-war confusion, resulted from an aborted revolution, was followed by the inflationary crisis.

Finally, after a brief period of economic and political stabilization, the great world economic recession forced the Republic to declare a state of emergency, endangering again the consolidation of a republican state in a society that was still unfamiliar with the rules of democracy.

All this indicates that Berlin art develops, not according to its social evolution, but in formal contradiction with it, and the intellectual vitality of its representatives stems precisely from that same opposition.

In this sense, it can be affirmed that, due to its specific characteristics, the Berlin art of the 1910s and 1920s is also the consequence of an unresolved social conflict that takes different forms and manifestations. For the rest, it cannot be understood in any other way, given the previous existence of the oppositions that it had to overcome.

During the republican period, the contradiction is found everywhere, in political or economic discussions, in the urban landscape and in the everyday life facts themselves.

It is in these manifestations, in their heterogeneity and in the clash of incompatible elements, where the contradiction is perceived, lived, and appreciated, becoming a means of expression that is often used by the artists of the period.

In its coexistence with the contradiction and in its assumption, the art of this period maintains a deep contact with life. However, this

coexistence of apparently incompatible elements often makes it difficult to define in an easy way the artistic panorama that developed in a period that, despite its richness, it lasted less than two decades. Not only the cultural manifestations carried out in Berlin during the Weimar Republic were very numerous, but they also escaped from any referential pattern.

Berlin's post-war cultural activity is inseparable from the historical path of the city that provoked it, and the art of the twenties is, in many ways, an art of montage, which is also in accordance with the artificial aspect of Berlin itself. Berlin is at that time - and since its founding as the capital of the newly created German state - a kind of a set city, which is witnessed by its own architectural disorder, and finds its extension in the heterogeneity experienced by its inhabitants. This is made explicit in the Berlin landscapes painted by the artists of the period, which show the fictional and decorative aspect of the metropolis. Its causes are deeply rooted in the history of the founding of Berlin as the capital of the Reich - an equally fictitious and artificial demarcation - which, instead of favoring a harmonious urban development, it tended to transform Berlin into a metropolis.

However, the same unbridled growth that turned Berlin into a metropolis is what in turn favored the flow of immigrants and what fostered the establishment of an industrial proletariat, whose existence is of great importance to understand the subsequent development of the arts in the city.

It is only in large, industrialized cities where the existence of the crowd can be perceived, and it is, as an inhabitant of the crowd, that the human being loses its attributes and becomes familiar with the

ephemeral in a geography that is no longer made on its scale and that constantly changes in order to adapt to the rhythm of capital, a rhythm that on the other hand accentuates the irrelevance of the human figure.

Berlin, which was constituted as a city of immigrants since the previous century, and which by the 1920s was already home to more than 4 million inhabitants of the most diverse populations and social classes, was also a space of cultural exchange. Likewise, in this openness, Berlin often tended to assume the cultural exchange between elements that would have possibly seem incompatible in any other city at the time. This is what happened, for instance, with the exchange that took place in Berlin between the culture from the newly formed USSR and the phenomenon of Americanization.

Once the war was over and the *Novemberrevolution* died in the hands of the same government that had initially given the population some hope for change, the newly formed Soviet Union started to act as a kind of beacon from the east, marking Berlin's cultural activity and the work of many artists.

If before the founding of the Republic, there were some artists and intellectuals that felt united for the fact that they shared a similar critical disposition against the war, many of them, after the disappointment they felt with the abortion of the revolution, decided to devote themselves to protesting caustically against the cynicism of those ghosts of the Empire that returned and remained in the very own bosom of power.

Thus, many of the artists of the period made a commitment to their present, which in many cases was linked to positioning themselves

politically and affiliating with different left-wing political parties, mainly with the KPD.

Coinciding with this fact, the arrival of immigrants from the USSR to Berlin facilitated the exchange of ideas between the two countries. Shortly after, when Germany reached the peak of its inflationary madness, and became dependent on the capital injections of the Dawes plan for its survival, the phenomenon of Americanization touched the work of many artists fully. These two facts favored the existence of an intense cultural exchange between east and west, between two poles that were assimilated and used in a determined way by a city that was open to absorbing all kinds of ideas.

Just in the same way that the most disparate ideas could have a place in the very same cultural context, the Berlin art of the republican period is also possibly unique in its way of using the different “isms”. The discoveries made before the war by the pioneers of the European avant-garde, were neither rejected nor belittled by Germany. They were neither exploited as a fashion, as was sometimes the case in other places in Europe during this period but assimilated and applied in the context of a society in full gestation.

Thus, between these movements and the city of Berlin, there was an encounter that “provoked an agitated chemical reaction that changed the nature of both entities”⁶. From that it can be stated that art and the artists' sensibilities were transformed by the course of events taking place in the city, while at the same time the city's personality was marked by its cultural activity.

⁶ Casals, Josep (1987). Las últimas noches de Berlín-Babilonia. *Diagonal* (41) 30-33.

Hence, in the same way that the war had confirmed the apocalyptic premonitions of Expressionism, the *Novemberrevolution* and the fall of the monarchy seemed to materialize those hopes of regeneration that the artists of this movement had.

However, when at Christmas of 1919, the city of Berlin entered in a state of civil war to culminate with the *Spartakuswoche* bloodbath, movements such as expressionism become paradoxical and the sensitivity of art changes again following the course of events.

At that time, the pressure exerted by reality on artists was immense, and could hardly be ignored. The search for the original, the notion of the demiurge artist, creator of the world or with pretensions that other movements saw as promethean, lost credibility in the face of the bleak situation left by the war. In a state shattered by the consequences of a warlike conflict without equivalent in the past and by a revolution drowned in blood, there was no longer room for utopia or for sentimentality, mysticism, moralism, the regenerating soul of the world or subjective interiority. And even so, it was during the Weimar Republic that expressionism experienced its greatest successes and acquired its greatest popularity, possibly because in the face of this reality, the expressionist character became, to a certain extent, a state of mind shared by a greater number of people. The devaluation of money also helped.

Soon, the faith that expressionism had placed in being able to change the course of events through subjective interiority gave way to Dadaist nihilism, characterized by that explosive mixture of humor and cruelty,

of frivolity and political radicalism that in a certain way were also the poles that marked life in Berlin after the war.

Dadaism appeared for the first time in Zurich in 1916, in the middle of the World War, influenced by expressionism and a certain type of futurism. Like expressionism, it was an open movement that had no previous programs and did not obey any pre-established school or teaching. It was also an internationalist, anti-war and anti-bourgeois movement that sought to revolutionize art and literature with a deliberately provocative intention, manifesting a special fascination for revolt, the subversive, the unusual and the irrational, characteristics that in some way already had also been present in expressionism, although they took on different dimensions with dadaism, and later, in Berlin, they seemed to find a climate that was totally in tune with this mood.

Dadaism moved to the German capital only a year after it emerged in Zurich from the hands of the same artists who had already been present at Cabaret Voltaire. However, far from the prosperous and neutral city of the Alps, where the consequences of the war were not felt, in Berlin, these artists felt "dancing on a volcano"⁷ that seemed capable of erupting at any time. The effects of the shock were felt in the work of the artists, who, far from avoiding reality, embraced it and made it the core of their creation: "I felt the ground tremble under my feet and that tremor was reflected in my paintings and in my watercolors [...]. I drew soldiers without noses; war cripples with crab-like limbs of steel"⁸.

⁷ Béhar, Henri (1996). *Dadá, historia de una subversión*. Barcelona: Edicions 62, 43

⁸ Grosz, George (2011). *Un SÍ menor y un NO mayor*. Memorias del pintor de entreguerras. Madrid: Capitán Swing, 156

The components of this movement aspired to the comprehensive destruction of the fundamental values of Western civilization through its grotesque character, absurdity and laughter. Laughter, that new weapon of the artist who was supposed to destroy these values, was no longer, however, just a laughter but the one that arose from the cynicism caused by the brutal experience of war. This, was constituted on a gallows humor where the ego "refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure."⁹

Parallel to the Dada Club, cabarets of all kinds– also political ones – arised. Various writings of the time described cabarets as spaces of dream and oblivion, where a certain atmosphere of sadness and irony was generated and where the taste for the different ephemeral pleasures of existence, were reflected in the image of the gambler, the prostitute, the transvestite and other mythical figures of the Berlin night scene. Reaching their peak during the worst years of economic crisis and general collapse, the cabarets were linked to the time that made them grow, consequently reflecting the entire political and social crisis that remained in Germany during the years that followed the end of the conflict.

It is possibly at this point, where we can say that Berlin has already become Babylon, a motif – that of Babylon – to which a large part of the German-language writers of the period will resort, and that has taken

⁹ Freud, Sigmund (1961). *Humor. Collected Works*. (Vol. 21) London: Hogarth, 162.

on connotations of corrupt wealth and power, which is why it sees so much use in reference to the capitals as well as other important cities of powerful nations. Based on this, it should come as no surprise to learn that Berlin was known as Babylon during the Weimar period. At that time, Brecht defined Berlin as "a capitalist city and a Babel of sin"¹⁰. Döblin defines it as the Great Prostitute throughout the entire novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. And, though *Berlin Alexanderplatz* talks about the last prolific years of Berlin before the Nazi rise to power, the Berlin Street of the first years of the 20s, is also a scene of misery and marginalization that is well exemplified in figures like the prostitute, a figure that, in turn, like the city itself, becomes an ambivalent character, having at the same time connotations of life and destruction. The interrelation between both entities is evident in works such as Kirchner's, in which the prostitutes, absorbed by the surrounding space of the big city, become anonymous and mechanical, thus showing more similarities with the mannequin or the automaton than to the human being.

When the madness of the inflationary crisis came to an end and the unemployment curve stabilized, the relative sociopolitical stability obtained also marked a new turning point for culture. Dadaism gave way to the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, a heterogeneous movement that for some artists meant "an ethical norm put at the service of reconciling the social conflicts that arose after the war"¹¹ and for others, a return to the anecdotal generated by the climate of disillusion caused by the successive failures of the revolution and by the inflationary period.

¹⁰ Knopf, Jan (2016). *Brecht-Handbuch* (Vol. 1). Berlin: J.B. Metzler, 185

¹¹ Schneede, Uwe M. (1987) Verismo y Nueva Objetividad. *Debats* (22) 102

In both cases, fidelity to the fact and the return to the concrete were the fundamental trait of this aesthetic orientation, but in its critical line – which rejected all complacency towards what was given – the distancing from the subject accentuated the presence of objects to such an extent that reality became sinister (*unheimlich*). In this situation, the subject, immersed in the void and unreal due to its literalness, ceased to be a living being to become a grotesque doll, an automaton.

And this figure, that of the automaton, which populated the art of this entire period from cinema to literature, continues to be, perhaps, one of the most representative signs of the art and the period, thus becoming a vivid representation of the crisis, which is why is not surprising that, along with the prostitute, it was one of the most represented elements in interwar art.

In the end, as a generality, the automaton represented a multiple and complex entity, often also contradictory, which could both represent the birth of the new man and the failure of the revolutionary subject – or, taking Benjamin's terminology, it could move between the absence of drive, thus being the opposite of the state of revolution, and excited corporeality.

The automaton can represent the feeling of strangeness through its lack of its own features. It represents a generality insofar as, because it does not have a singularity, it is capable of representing all individuals, but at the same time, due to this very fact, it does not represent anyone and can easily evoke “not being familiar to oneself”, to the fact of experiencing the *Unheimlichkeit* in one's own person, not feeling recognized, since the body, devoid of a face, can never invite to the full

identification of the subject with the object. For this reason, this figure often moves on the border between the object and the subject, and its ambiguous position reveals a crisis.

The automaton, as a dismembered figure, sometimes alluded directly to the horrors of the First World War, and in any case, it is always a highly politicized figure present in art during the 15 years that the republic lasted.

Finally, the end of the decade seemed to bring with it a new change in the atmosphere of the German capital that terminated with this culturally prosperous era. The brief and precarious stability of the previous years ended up being definitively broken with the Great Depression. Unemployment raised as fast as political radicalization. Not much later, Nazism declared most of the republican cultural manifestations *Entartete Kunst*.

In the end, the apocalyptic premonitions that those artists had started to capture in their works 15 years earlier when WW1 was over, borne out. In a way, Berlin, like Babylon, fell. And artists and intellectuals were forced to abandon it or fall with it.

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