

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Barbara Becker-Cantarino, ed. *Berlin in Focus: Cultural Transformations in Germany*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1996. viii + 204 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-275-95507-6.

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“The entire city is sitting in the waiting room of history” (p. 24). Thus a Dutch journalist characterized the recently-reunified metropolis, echoing sentiments which had been made by a turn of the century art critic, Karl Scheffler. The latter had suggested that Berlin was in a constant state of “becoming.” Its fate over the last century has made it at times a symbol, a pawn, or an initiator of history. Becker-Cantarino’s volume adds to the growing literature which has emerged during this tumultuous decade. It centers on the cultural changes which have created a new, sometimes exasperating, occasionally thrilling, but never dull capital.

The book begins with a serviceable historical introduction, starting with Germany’s unification in 1871 and ending with unification in 1990. For those familiar with Berlin’s terrain, little will be unfamiliar in this brief and brisk narrative account. It would have been useful if the author had more closely linked the introduction to the essays which followed. Two essays discuss cinematic treatments of Berlin. One is an interesting reading of Wim Wenders’s *Wings of Desire* by Brigitte Peucker. In the other, “The Woman and the Camera—Walking in Berlin: Observations on Walter Ruttmann, Verena Stefan, and Helke Sander,” author Anke Gleber’s Berlin thread tends to be a thin one at best. The piece is actually about the literary and cinematic phenomena of the female flaneur. Though Berlin is the venue for a discussion of the gaze and its political and social powers, one does not get a sense that Berlin is unique in circumscribing women’s freedom. Most metropolises have imposed boundaries of movement. Gleber’s discussion of “Die allseitig reduzierte Persoenlichkeit,” [1977] does succeed, however, in creating a sense of the relationship between women’s movement in the city and the larger issue of the “Women’s Movement.”

A few of the essays were written in outrage, anger, or sadness over social and political injustices since 1989. Hannelore Scholz begins her piece on women and higher education with the pessimistic observation that “A massive loss of the scholarly potential of women has occurred in the new states...due to reunification and its aftermath” (p. 36). She points out that the GDR, while not gender neutral, had various programs in place to support women financially in academe. Over half of all university students were women in the GDR versus about 30 percent in the old Federal Republic. Scholz notes that the declining fortunes of women in the former GDR mirrors the larger picture; one year after unification, unemployment among East Berlin women climbed from zero to 14.7 percent (p. 45). She ends her essay on an elegiac note, despairing of the marginalized role of academic women in the new Germany.

That academics were no more immune from the long tentacles of the Stasi nor collaborated less than the general public can be seen in Hanna Labrenz-Weiss’s essay on surveillance at Humboldt University, the crown jewel of the socialist educational system. She outlines the Stasi’s organization with its undercover agents penetrating both the administration and faculty. She cites the statistic that the Gauck Commission investigated 780 professors and lecturers, and 155 of these had Stasi connections. The highest percentage of informers belonged to three departments: Business Administration, Physics, and Asian Studies. It would have been useful to learn why there were so many more informers in these rather disparate departments than in others, such as Chemistry or Foreign Languages. Historians may be relieved to note that there were only four to six collaborators in the History Department, unlike the sixty-one in Business Administration! While this article is helpful in outlining the

level of Stasi control and scholarly collaboration, it tends to confuse the reader with its tendency to lapse into bureaucratic language and lists of organizations. However, the author wishes to “de-emotionalize” what has become a wrenching period of self-examination and often self-exculpation for many academics in the former GDR.

Friederike Eigler’s essay on the newly-emerging arts scene in Prenzlauer Berg describes a commercial center run by and for women and a *Kulturbrauerei* which houses arts groups in a former beer brewery. These projects, part privately funded and part state-subsidized, seem to suggest that this funky working-class neighborhood, which Robert Darnton characterized as “cold and dismal” in his *Berlin Journal, 1989-1990* (p. 139) is becoming an interesting venue for artistic experimentation, albeit not without funding obstacles.

Another contribution touches upon multiculturalism, or the continued lack of Germans’ acknowledging the fact of it in their midst. Carol Aisha Blackshire-Belay’s essay, “Berlin: A New Kaleidoscope of Cultures” draws on oral interviews made with foreign workers in a housing project. She notes that “As an African-American woman, a member of a minority within the United States, I was able to understand and relate to the workers’ problems” (p. 80). Her observations regarding both the self-segregation of foreigners together with most Germans’ reluctance to see many of these long-term residents as anything but temporary transients are poignantly apt. It would have been helpful had the author moved beyond description to understand the cultural constraints on both sides and to see how, in a unified state, these constraints may be addressed in new ways.

The two concluding articles on fiction are rather successful in describing the obsession Berlin has had as a

literary venue. Siegfried Mews’s “The Ubiquitous Wall: Divided Berlin in Post-Wall Fiction” and Anna Kuhn’s “Berlin as Locus of Terror: *Gegenwartsbewaeltigung* in Berlin Texts since the *Wende*” discuss and analyze what Kuhn felicitously calls the “rhetoric of reciprocity and (re)conciliation” during *Ostpolitik*, which was replaced by Cold War denunciations of the GDR after the *Wende* (p. 159). Mews and Kuhn both analyze Christa Wolf’s *Was bleibt* as a controversial document of a disappearing socialist society. Wolf’s own ambiguous past as participant and dissenter within the system serve to highlight and magnify the work in the public mind. Mews and Kuhn also discuss Monika Maron’s *Stille Zeile Sechs* in which the writer, a step-daughter of a high East German official, attempts to link the totalitarianism of Nazism with that of the GDR’s repressive socialism. Kuhn sees Maron’s novel as the most persuasive example of a writer coming to terms with contemporary society. Mews, on the other hand, sees the works by Wolf and Maron as literary prisons of the past. He believes novels by Peter Schneider, such as *Paarungen*, and Jurek Becker’s *Amanda Herzlos* to be more affirmative in their literary messages. Mews suggests that the latter stories enable the authors to leave the cul-de-sac of history in the same way that the “fall of the wall offers the chance for genuine change” (p. 155).

In sum, *Berlin in Focus* offers varied and occasionally informative cultural fare. As the editor reminds readers in her preface, there is no homogeneous vision of Berlin’s past nor her present. Her cultural and architectural future is being contested daily. That is why the new capital was and is so fascinating.

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