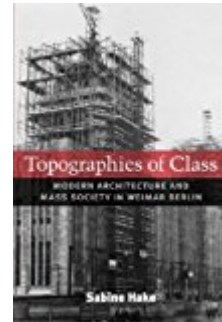




Sabine Hake. *Topographies of Class: Modern Architecture and Mass Society in Weimar Berlin (Social History, Popular Culture, and Politics in Germany)*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008. 336 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-472-07038-1; \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-472-05038-3.



Reviewed by Molly J. Loberg (California Polytechnic University)

Published on H-Urban (September, 2009)

Commissioned by Alexander Vari

Classes to Masses: Reinvisioning Weimar Architecture

“A specter was haunting Weimar Berlin, the specter of the urban masses,” Sabine Hake writes in *Topographies of Class* (p. 60). This allusion to *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) highlights Hake’s aim in this work, namely, to recover class as a primary category of analysis for Berlin architecture and architectural criticism during the tumultuous period from the close of the First World War to the seizure of power by the National Socialists in 1933.

While race, class, and gender have served as a “mantra” in the field of cultural studies, Hake suggests that few recent works on Weimar Berlin foreground class analysis (p. 61). As a result, they fail to acknowledge the deep economic and political fissures that shaped the historical context in which architects realized their urban visions and critics, novelists, and filmmakers explored these spaces. The problem of “the masses,” Hake argues, represented for Weimar intellectual and cultural figures the breakdown of traditional class society and the loss of individualistic bourgeois subjectivity as a result of the massification of political and cultural life. Rather than resist such changes, the architects and writers who populate *Topographies of Class* anticipated and even embraced

a repositioning of class through the emergence of a more homogeneous society free from class tensions and characterized by office work and mass consumption. They saw urban architecture as a key mechanism in this transformation and white-collar workers as the new protagonists of history and harbingers of a modern collective subjectivity distinct from the individualism of the educated middle classes.

As Hake admits, this work covers some “familiar terrain” (p. 2) in terms of Weimar texts, images, and spaces. Nevertheless, Hake’s class analysis provides an ambitious strategy for tying together these diverse and challenging works and for revealing important yet obscured themes. Chapters 1 and 2 set the scene for the rest of the work by mapping the physical topography and demographic trends of Weimar. After 1920, Berlin was the third-largest city in the world after London and New York, with a large working-class population increasingly rivaled by the rise of white-collar workers. Many of the architectural and technocratic visions for the city, from the traffic plans of Martin Wagner to the housing projects of Bruno Taut, centered on strategies for “or-

ganizing” these masses. Despite the progressive political and social convictions of the architects and planners, such visions often evidenced highly ambivalent responses toward cities and their inhabitants, from “quasi-religious ecstasy” (p. 89) to much more prevalent strains of cultural pessimism. Chapter 3, for example, shows us that although modern architects have been hailed as urbanists, their works evidence an “anti-city” tendency through a willing embrace of destruction as a means both of erasing the social diversity and fragmentation of the metropolis and of creating a “tabula rasa” for new “master narratives” of movement and experience. A key example of this is Ludwig Hilberseimer’s unrealized, utopian city plan from 1924, which aimed to solve the problem of social conflict in the modern metropolis by minimizing “points of contact” (p. 130). The consequence was a desolate urban landscape of isolated high-rises and nearly vacant sidewalks that the architect himself later characterized as more of a “necropolis” than a “metropolis.” Even the less apocalyptic examples of “New Building,” as Hake terms this trend, reflect a negation of working-class culture, despite the revolutionary rhetoric of its proponents. While scholarship has engaged critically with the political aspirations and cultural effects of architects’ utopian designs in the immediate aftermath of the First World War as well as their later, more functional plans for housing estates, Hake argues that the office building provides an equally emblematic example of *class conscious*, modernist architectural design—but one based on new patterns of labor, communication, and consumption associated with white-collar workers.[1]

The second half of the book shifts from architectural engagements with the problem of class and subjectivity within a modern urban context to literary and cultural representations of similar dilemmas. Chapter 4 provides a class-based reading of the works of the famous perambulators and urban essayists, Franz Hessel and Siegfried Kracauer. Rather than use Hessel and Kracauer as mere guides through the spectacles of Berlin streets, Hake interrogates their gazing and walking as an anxious strategy for reclaiming individual subjectivity against cultural massification and the proletarianization of the educated middle classes.[2] Chapter 5 explores how Berlin as a center of film and photography “became a laboratory for a new ways of seeing” (p. 174), particularly for promoting the New Building and affirming the significance of the masses as historical actors. Hake’s analysis of Alfred Doeblin’s classic urban novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929) in chapter 6 departs from the white-collar focus of previous chapters by tracing the progression from

working-class subjectivity to mass subjectivity through protagonist, Franz Biberkopf, and his experiences in the metropolis.

As her final case study (chapter 7), Hake explores Ruttman’s *Berlin Symphony of a Big City* (1927) as a representation of a city devoid of the political and economic struggles and that climaxes in a harmonious and dazzling montage of white-collar culture in the form of advertising, spectator sports, and film. In this final chapter, Hake hints at the relative ease with which modernist techniques of architecture and film (as well as the subject of these works, the white-collar worker) transitioned into the National Socialist era despite an earlier progressive orientation. Ruttman continued to make films in Germany after 1933 with a slightly more critical tone regarding the metropolis and its dangers.

With this book, Hake raises a fundamental set of problems relevant for urbanists of diverse disciplinary backgrounds: who were these modern masses who so preoccupied architects and writers (and not just in Germany) and what social, political, psychological, linguistic, or economic structures produced them? Were they a real historical phenomenon or a “mass psychological chimera,” that is, a mere discursive product of bourgeois anxiety (p. 61)? These questions become all the more challenging given that textual sources remain the essential basis of any analysis of the urban past. Can we locate a historic reality outside the text? Hake attempts to avoid the historical materialism of “orthodox Marxism” as well as the reduction of urban experience to a “purely textual category” by using Edward Soja’s “sociospatial dialectic” approach, that is, to study and integrate both the “imaginary” and “physical” qualities of urban space.[3]

Hake provides some historical context for her reading of Weimar architecture. But as this is primarily a work of cultural and literary studies, the discursive and imaginary components of these spaces remain privileged, as do the writings of celebrated architects and architectural critics. As a synthetic work, it usefully draws together many of the most relevant and compelling sources of the Weimar Republic. But for the specialist of this specific place or period it raises the broader question: was Berlin truly so “massified”?

While “the problem of the masses” remained an intense preoccupation of the architects, writers, and filmmakers who frequented the spaces of mass consumption, such as film palaces and department stores and who identified with white-collar workers as agents and consumers of the new economy, for most Berliners the

neighborhood, with its intensely local and personal conflicts, remained the primary space and experience of urban life.[4] Further research into other urban texts such as political reports, neighborhood papers, and citizens' letters to the municipal government may provide alternative discourses on urban spaces and the problems of class. Hake's own beautiful selection of photographs and images reminds us of the diversity within Weimar crowds and the manageability of the often lightly trafficked urban streets. These images suggest the degree to which architects and critics may have misunderstood the actual nature of Berlin crowds and the political threat they posed and, thus, help explain why their solutions to the problem of the masses proved so inadequate in matching the challenges of the day.

Notes

[1]. Iain Boyd White, ed., *The Crystal Chain Letters: Architectural Fantasies by Bruno Taut and His Circle* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985); Matthias Schirren, ed., *Bruno Taut: Alpine Architecture* (Munich: Prestel, 2004); Joan Weinstein, *The End of Expressionism* (Chicago:

University of Chicago Press, 1990); Adelheid von Saldern, "The Workers' Movement and Cultural Patterns on Urban Housing Estates and Rural Settlements in Germany and Austria during the 1920s," *Social History* 15, no. 3 (October 1990): 333-354; and Barbara Miller Lane, *Architecture and Politics in Germany, 1918-1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).

[2]. Eric Weitz's highly readable survey of Weimar Berlin provides a recent example of the use of Franz Hessel as a guide to the spectacle of Berlin Streets. Eric Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

[3]. Edward Soja, "The Socio-Spatial Dialectic," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 70, no. 2 (1980).

[4]. Pamela Swett's *Neighbors and Enemies*, as one example, shows the localized and intimate political conflicts that intensified in neighborhoods at the end of the Weimar. Pamela Swett, *Neighbors and Enemies: The Culture of Radicalism in Berlin, 1929-1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

Citation: Molly J. Loberg. Review of Hake, Sabine, *Topographies of Class: Modern Architecture and Mass Society in Weimar Berlin (Social History, Popular Culture, and Politics in Germany)*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. September, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23505>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.