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Art and the Weimar Republic

Germany, post-World War I, was in shambles: the war had been lost and great debts were owed to victor nations; the structure of the previous political party was dismantled in favor of a republic; and fervent nationalism was replaced by humiliation and disgust with one's country. The chaotic social, economic, and political conditions of the Weimar Republic (1919-1933) were depicted by artists of this period through cabaret performances, paintings, and literature. Themes of hopelessness, struggle, disgust, and bleak realism infiltrated works of art to represent Germany's new situation in the world.

The political conditions of the Weimar Republic were extremely volatile and fractious owing to a polar shift in the beliefs of the populace: at the beginning of the Republic, Germany was largely left-leaning (Democratic and Communist), whereas by the end it was decidedly far-right (National Socialist). This is depicted in the Reichstag election results between 1920-1933 in which the Communist party of Germany (KSP) and the Social Democratic party of Germany (SPD) had "221" seats combined at their apexes, while the Nazi Party had an apex soon after that of the KSP and SPD parties' with "288" seats (Political). The actions and poetry of Richard Huelsenbeck as well as those of other Berlin Dada artists embody these politically turbulent conditions. His poetry written during this time, particularly, "The Evening Comes the Lambs Flock Home," depicts a bleak view of the politics of Weimar Republic Germany: "Big stone balls celebrate their midday meal...the fleas will emigrate" (Poems). This poem very clearly

associates the “big stone balls” with the avaricious National Socialist politicians, who were very politically rigid. The fleas represent the marginal Germans who were ridiculed by the National Socialists. This poem perfectly encapsulates the less than optimal political conditions of the Weimar Republic. Poems such as these by Huelsenbeck, were read at Dada gatherings in Berlin; at these meetings Huelsenbeck also declared that “Dada is German Bolshevism” (En Avant Dada), which coincided with the beliefs of many fellow artists and intellectuals. Unfortunately, by the end of the Weimar Republic, this decree was in opposition to the prevailing political party beliefs, and his works and hundreds of others’ were considered “degenerate” and thus verboten.

The economic conditions of the Weimar Republic were disastrous due largely to the failure of the German empire and the consequences of the Treaty of Versailles; the art of George Grosz elucidates this economic calamity. Hyper-inflation, rampant unemployment, loss of a capable work force, and the excessively punitive war reparations created an environment of chaos and instability for most Germans. The two most severely critical economic conditions were: hyper-inflation, in which from 1919-1923 the mark inflated from “4.2 marks to the dollar to 4.2 trillion marks to the dollar” (Inflated), and the punitive war reparations thrust upon Weimar Germany, which Weimar Germany owed “\$33 billion” (Allied Powers). By eschewing the more popular “expressionist” mode of painting and drawing, Grosz depicts figures as realistic, grotesque, and representative of the ugliest side of human nature. The art historian, Robert Hughes, characterized Grosz’s world as “[being] owned by four breeds of pig: the capitalist, the officer, the priest and the prostitute” (Metropolis). This is observable in George Grosz’s work *Suicide*, in which one can view each of the four pigs (see below for explicit location of pigs (Suicide)). Everyone and everything can be bought for a price, as nothing sacred remains after World War I. The venal nature of Grosz’s artworks clearly show the decimated

situation of the Weimar Republic economy.

Conventional German social conditions were trounced in the Weimar Republic after the horrors of World War I, which largely begat a generation of traumatized war veterans, suffering both physically and/or psychologically, and was well-described by writer Erich Maria Remarque. After their stinging loss of World War I, the nationalistic pride that once held sway in the country gave way to an unfamiliar feeling of humiliation and shame throughout German society. The likely source of these feelings would be articles 119, 159, 181, 198, 231, and 428 of the Treaty of Versailles. These articles convey that Germany is to keep a feeble military force, endure forced occupation by allied troops, and limit infrastructural developments (Allied Powers). In Remarque's novel, "All Quiet on the Western Front," using metaphor, intense first-person descriptions and the omnipresent spectre of death, Remarque conveys the despair of war veterans returning home to a Germany they no longer recognize. His description of the protagonist's (Paul Baumer's) desire for the sweet release of death is representative of the failure of Weimar Republic society to help returning war veterans. Extended narratives between Paul and his friends as well as Paul's inner thoughts show his realization that war is otiose and nothing he and his comrades do will give it meaning. Paul never returns home; the report on the day he died simply notes, "All quiet on the western front," a metaphor for the futility of the war in which he and his friends fought and died (Remarque).

The chaos of the political, economic, and social conditions of the Weimar Republic were reflected clearly in the artworks of the time. One has only to look at any of George Grosz's works from the period to feel his profound disgust with the new Germany; the same is true of reading Remarque and Huelsenbeck. The cynicism, poverty, and hopelessness experienced by so many Germans led to the creation of a Nazi Germany, bringing an end to the Weimar Republic.

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Appendix

Analysis of George Grosz' painting *Suicide*



Location of each of the four pigs:

Prostitute: top right, seen topless standing in window

Capitalist: [corpse 1] center bottom, lying in a pool of his own blood, [corpse 2] hung himself on the light pole (mid left), [alive] seen in the window with the prostitute (top right).

Priest: no priest is explicitly shown, but Grosz alludes to the priest by depicting a church prominently in the top center of the painting

Officer: no officer is explicitly shown, but Grosz alludes to the officer by depicting a revolver (a common weapon used by officers of this period) in the middle right of the painting.