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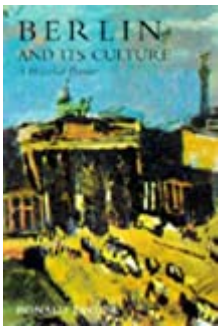


**Ronald Taylor.** *Berlin and its Culture: A Historical Portrait.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998. xiii + 416 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-07200-6.

**Reviewed by** Erik C. Maiershofer (University of California, San Diego)

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## A Portrait of Berlin

Berlin is a city with a complex history. It is not as old as many German cities (particularly those in the south), it never enjoyed the status of a republic or Reichsstadt under the Holy Roman Empire, it was divided by a wall for almost half a century, and its own identity as a town has often been overshadowed by its association with Prussia and the nation of Germany. This last aspect provides a challenge for any work on Berlin–how does one separate what is unique to Berlin from what is generally referred to as German? If one talks to Berliners and non-Berliners alike, there is a general agreement that Berliners *are* different from other Germans. Thus, an author is faced with a paradox: how to describe a city that is so German, and yet so different from most of Germany. It is a task that Robert Taylor, author of *The Culture of Berlin: A Historical Portrait*, is to be commended for taking on, especially given the broad spectrum of time and subject matter that he attempts to include. The book seeks to provide a history of the culture of Berlin from it beginnings as a city (more precisely, as one of a pair of twin cities along with Coelln) to the fall of the Berlin wall. Given the organization of the book (an issue to which I will return below), one would expect to see some notion carried out to explain the uniqueness of Berlin and what a particularly "Berliner culture" might look like. What we are provided with is a mixed lot, with some parts of the portrait painted in vivid outline, and other parts needing some more brushstrokes.

Ronald Taylor is an emeritus professor of German at the University of Sussex, and much of his previous work has focused on German composers (Richard Wagner, Robert Schumann, Franz Liszt, and Kurt Weill). Indeed, in this book, his strengths come through, as the coverage of music and opera are well written. In each of these areas, he shows the influence of the state, other composers, and the general *Zeitgeist* of the time on composition of music. Taylor is most at home discussing composers and music that we might classify as belonging to the "high arts," and this is no mistake, as from the introduction, Taylor unapologetically states that this is the "culture" which he will analyze. Taylor assigns the word culture a specific, limited definition, and his use of the term is key to understanding how he approaches his material. He writes: "Nobody's interests would have been served, it seemed to me, by a narrative so detailed that it

would have amounted to a catalogue of names and works of writers, painters and musicians, some known, many barely so, who contributed at one time or another to the Berlin cultural scene. Rather, from behind a conventional conception of what constitutes culture–literature, philosophy, painting and sculpture, the theater, music, the decorative arts–I have located a series of historical periods and set out to identify the characteristic nature of the city's culture within those periods, setting the political and social scene on each occasion" (p. xi).

Taylor recognizes that having been drawn in by the prominence of the word "culture" in the title of the book, the reader may be expecting to read about life as it is lived by Berliners, given the increasing importance of cultural studies to our understanding of history. Taylor's definition of culture is one that most urban historians will take issue with, and it does beg the question: "Why should so much that we now recognize as coming under the scope of cultural history be left out?" For Taylor, culture consists of the high arts produced by an elite group of artists in society. Such culture is produced within a historical context, but Taylor makes clear from the start that the influence of such a context on the production of high culture has its limits: "Each art obeys the laws of its own inner nature and responds to the outside world on its own terms" (p. xi). Taylor's history then proceeds on the basis of the assumption that high culture (art) has its own logic within each discipline–whether it be music, sculpture, or painting–and that the historical context within which that art is produced does not influence the art per se, but rather, provides topical material for the artist to express the logic of the art via a certain medium (clay, oil and canvass, text on paper).

The book is divided into standard historical eras, mixing political and intellectual divisions–the formation of Prussia, the Enlightenment, Romanticism, Realism and Revolution, the Kaiserreich, Weimar, Nazism, and divided Berlin. The Medieval period and the Reformation merit a mere thirty pages in two chapters, with each subsequent chapter increasing in length to encompass the increasing importance of each successive era, ending with the post-war period which occupies twice the length of any other chapter in the book. Reformation and Baroque art are presented outside of a broader social and cultural context, and the average Berliner appears only as part of the masses until the Weimar period.

Following the logic stated above, Taylor claims that his is primarily a cultural history; however, many urban cultural historians (or many cultural historians in general) would not recognize this book as such, but rather as more of an intellectual history. Even so, there is an uneven application of this logic by Taylor in the course of the book, alternating between social issues as subject matter for art, as in Expressionism, and art as self-consciously seeking to envision an alternative future, as in the case of the theater of Brecht. None of this is free from Taylor's aesthetic judgment, from his disdain for Biedermeier painter Franz Kruger–"He makes no effort to penetrate the inner life of his subjects, to interpret the joys, the frustrations, the aspirations of the men–and women–of the Biedermeier world" (p. 131)–to the work of painter Magnus Zeller, part of the "inner emigration" of artists who opposed the Nazi regime through art–"The canvas called *Hitler's State* exposes, in a mass of bizarre detail, the existential absurdity and inhumanity of conditions in Nazi Germany…The spirit of opposition could hardly be more defiantly demonstrated" (p. 282).

Taylor provides us with a catalogue of artists, musicians, sculptors, architects and writers, devoting a page or two to well-known figures, such as Schadow, Schinkel, Strauss, Guenter Grass, Berthold Brecht and Christa Wolfe, to name a few. While conceding that his inclusion or exclusion of certain figures may be questioned by some (indeed, one who sets out on such an ambitious task has every right to make his or her own list), Taylor is not always clear *why* these people are important to understanding the culture of *Berlin.* One might compare, for example, Taylor's treatments of Kaethe Kollwitz and Guenter Grass. Taylor does a wonderful job placing Kollwitz and her contemporary painters and sculptors in the context of a Germany and a Europe recovering from the First World War and trying to come to terms with the terrifying power of mechanization–both in terms of its destruction of human life and human spirit; and yet, the reader is left without explanation of how this fits into a specific *Berliner* culture (pp. 220-22).

In marked contrast is his discussion of the work of Guenter Grass, which is particularly well executed. Taylor places Grass's work in the context of the problems facing both Berlin and Germany as people tried to make sense of their immediate past, writing that the period in which Grass produced most of his work represents "fifty of the most agitated and agonizing years in the life of Berlin" (p. xii). Taylor is at his best here, moving beyond the motifs in Grass's works and portraying Grass as a moderate caught in the middle of the ideological battles of divided Berlin. He cites Grass's *oertlich betaeubt* (*Local Anesthetic*) as part of Grass's "non-revolutionary socialist message" that was attacked by those on the left,

and *Hundjahre* (*Dog Years*) as part of Grass's attempt to keep the wound of Germany's past open (lest Germans become complacent about this past)–a stance attacked by the right (pp. 318-19). Taylor situates Grass *in* the politics of Berlin, and shows how his work reflects the politics of Berlin as well as a wider German context.

The underlying assumption of Taylor's final chapter on Berlin during the Cold War, however, appears to be an interpretation of art and high culture as fields in continuous development, a development bifurcated by the Wall, but now moving back together. In his postscript, Taylor writes, "Although psychological barriers take longer to break down than physical barriers, the direction of history is unmistakable and centuries of a common culture will assert themselves" (p. 392). Such an approach inevitably raises more questions than it provides answers– What is the direction of this history? What is its underlying logic? The assumptions of this approach to Berlin's history remain unquestioned. If this approach is examined critically, one inevitably begins to ask questions about why history has not been progressive for all in all time periods. It is telling that in this light, Taylor treats Nazi culture as an aberration, and the artists under consideration in that chapter tend to be those of the inner migration (as shown above), who are portrayed as keeping Berlin's (and Germany's) culture alive during this time; yet it seems difficult to imagine Nazi culture as something alien to Germany, for it *did* draw on German cultural traditions, though we may debate how faithfully or to what value.

One might dismiss this criticism as a difference of opinion; but even if we are to accept this approach to the history of culture, there is still the issue mentioned above, that Taylor is not consistent in explaining what is unique about Berlin's culture. Often, Berlin's culture is conflated with that of Prussia or that of Germany. To be sure, there is significant overlap, and Taylor states: "To survey the literature, the painting, the architecture, the music and the other arts of Berlin is to look at a part of a larger whole, a part of the culture of a nation" (p. 251). What seems lost in the analysis is that Berlin often *did not* stand for the whole of Germany; indeed most Germans refused to identify with Berlin. To this day, many Germans see Berliners as different (particularly Bavarians), and Berliners themselves see themselves as different from most Germans. Taylor states his task in his introduction, stating, "[The book's] focus is the activity of, and in, a city but that activity, like the city, is only part of a larger whole. I have tried to capture the cultural spirit of Berlin in successive ages but the discussion has inevitably encroached from time to time on other, broader fields" (p. xi). In evaluating the book, we must consider this statement. As stated in the introduction, a difficulty in writing about Berlin is that it is part of a larger whole, and shares, in some ways, the history of Germany by the fact that it served (and will again serve) as the capital of Germany. At times, however, Taylor falls into the trap of portraying Berlin as a placeholder to represent the high culture of Germany (and sometimes Europe). Indeed, it is a particular lens through which we see this high culture, but this is not always made explicit.

Overall, this book defies any critique that can be applied to the book as a whole. Even given the problems that many (including this reviewer) will have with his approach to culture, there is a good amount of this book that is fascinating. It is a good background resource to anyone working on the history of Berlin, for it provides a good overview of the artistic elite who called Berlin home. It also includes a wealth of images that are beautifully reproduced, including forty stunning color images of paintings. Taylor has taken on a monumental task, and the result is a book that provides a series of portraits of a city which is once again preparing to become the capital of Germany and an important artistic and political nexus of Europe.





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