

Kurt Tucholsky, “Berlin and the Provinces” (1928)

Abstract

Berlin was the capital of both the German Reich and Prussia, the Reich’s largest and most populous state [*Land*]. In the mid-1920s, Berlin had a population of four million and was by far the largest city in Germany. (In fact, at the time, Hamburg was the only other German city with more than a million residents.) By the 1920s, urbanization had made substantial inroads in Germany. Still, in 1925, only 16.7 million Germans (26.78 percent of the population) lived in large cities with more than 100,000 residents, compared to the roughly 33 million Germans (around 53.3 percent of the population) who lived in rural communities and small towns with fewer than 10,000 residents. In the following text from the magazine *Weltbühne*, Kurt Tucholsky voices doubts that Berlin was the “core and heart” of the country. He notes that reactionary, anti-republican sentiment prevailed not only in many rural areas, especially East Prussia, but also in many public institutions in the Republic’s capital.

Source

Berlin and the Provinces

When journalists in Berlin speak of Germany, they are fond of using the ready expression, “out there in the countryside,” which signifies a grotesque overestimation of the capital. For the basis and foundation of Germany, the source of its standards, lie “out there in the countryside”—and the extent to which Berlin is merely an exponent of provincial values remains to be seen.

As for the republican idea (in the attenuated form in which it is produced in Germany), it must be said that it is to be found only spottily out there in the countryside. East of the Elbe things look bad in this regard; west of the Oder things are worse. One has to read the minutes of a meeting of the Republican Press Association to comprehend the extent to which republicans are merely tolerated. A public assessor in Arnsberg inclines to the *Reichsbanner* and therefore is not allowed to eat with the others at the “officials’ table” in the clubroom. He complains and gets replaced; he gets replaced, not the governor. The good will and difficult position of the Prussian interior minister should not be mistaken: the tradition of [Carl] Severing’s good days is still there. But the republicans are almost always on the defensive; their appearances in public are frequently so timid that they give the impression of excusing themselves for their existence in the world. That not only signals, as they always contend, a shortage of the right kind of people—it is a lack of force, of courage, of strength.

Entirely aside from politics, however, the question arises to what degree Berlin influences the provinces and how they would actually look with or without Berlin.

As far as a single individual can say, I would contend that, in many minor and a few major areas of superficial civilization, Berlin influences the provinces quite strongly; at least the development of the capital city and the provincial cities runs parallel in this respect. Bars, stupid revue theaters, amusement centers; the whole “get-up”—all of that is prevalent in the larger provincial cities, and they are very proud of it too. But what about the individuality of the states?

It certainly is there, but I think that the civilizing process is rapidly progressing on a deeper level as well. A mechanization, an automation of life, has set in, against which the federalist idea signifies regression and a somewhat dangerous romanticism. That which F. W. Foerster, for example, wants to reconstruct is dead—he overlooks the fact that the invigoration of small communities does not entail the invigoration

of culture but supplies a pretext for localist vanity and a cover behind which what little constitutionality exists can be sabotaged yet more effectively than is already happening, for example, in Bavaria. Better a single Prussia than twenty-six, although it has also been noted by the major French press that Prussia is today one of the freest of the provincial states and no longer the seat of reactionary tendencies.

Berlin, however, vastly overestimates itself in believing that it is the core and heart of the country. Berlin journalists would do well to travel incognito to a large estate in Silesia or East Prussia, or to a Pomeranian town—that would be an experience for them. The farcical figures, Kaiser Wilhelm memorial top hats, centenary frock coats, and traditional forester beards spewed toward Berlin on the Hindenburg Day of old was only a small sample offering: the warehouses are to be found well-stocked in the small towns and can be viewed any time, if not always without danger. Not without danger whenever a “Berliner” has made an energetic attempt to shut down the terror, dictatorship, and insolence of the ruling local bourgeoisie. One will find no court to provide support there, no administrative officials, no newspaper. One is lost and has no choice but to forsake the field.

Does it look better in the culture of the provinces? Hardly.

The crisis of the Dessau Bauhaus recently demonstrated how things stand there. First they drove that black-red-gold Jewish architecture out of Weimar; then a slander crusade lasting years got underway in Dessau as well; and now they have run the leader, Mr. [Walter] Gropius, quite completely into the ground. The facts are these:

The moment an artistic institution becomes dependent on municipal or state officials in the provinces it is lost: it falls helplessly into the reactionary mire of narrow-minded philistines; liberal men are fired, thrown out, overcome with disgust, and because one only occasionally finds a free-thinking local aristocrat, who has so often been the creator of rural culture, the provincial philistine rules absolutely. There are, of course, exceptions in the larger provincial cities.

The exceptions, however, are usually powerless. Opposition camps do exist in literally every provincial city, but they have a very difficult time and we in Berlin fail to support them adequately. Shocking letters prove this, as well as brochures and articles in little newspapers no one reads—consider, for example, the informative pamphlet “Würzburg—A Provincial City?” (from the press of the Würzburg Working Group, 1927). How they struggle, how they attempt to adopt the good from without while preserving their own. And how hopeless it all is, how fragmented, how permeated by romanticism, empty talk, and surreptitious Catholicism (which is more dangerous than the open variety). These small, impotent groups are bled to death by the municipal and provincial powers.

The provincial bourgeois press is not responsible for this, as the credulous zealots would like to believe; it is only a symptom and expression of the ruling caste, which uses all available means—boycotts, firings of editors, withdrawals of advertising—to make the newspapers what they are: a nearly invulnerable bulwark of reaction. A truly grave responsibility falls on the provincial Social Democratic press. Aside from a few exceptions (for example, in Zwickau), they are all busy emulating *Vorwärts* [the paper of the Social Democratic Party]. No problem is thought through to the end; nothing appears there without qualification. All too rarely do these papers break out of the narrow party tracks, with the result, just as in Berlin, that the local equivalent of the *Morgenpost* gets the masses and social democracy is left behind. Bellowing “keep bourgeois papers out of the house!” is of no use; as long as the workers’ papers do not appeal to the youth and the women, without whom success is inconceivable, then the others will simply remain ahead.

Now, however, all the panels, nearly without exception, are artistically reactionary: those made up of city representatives, party secretaries, or members of regional committees or citizens’ boards. Whether it is a question of art or culture, these pompous conferees will always decide against the intellect. They can do

so because they have power. The zigzagging of these “intendants,” as the city theater directors are fond of calling themselves today, the compromises forced upon liberal experimenters, amply testify to this. So does Berlin signify freedom? That would be a severely mistaken impression.

Berlin is merely a big city. And in a big city the individual disappears; groups are able to work with less interference, because here those involved number in the tens of thousands, while in Cologne they encompass only eighty or a hundred people; everything is simply multiplied by a hundred. Nor does it amount to more than that. For as considerable as negative freedom is in Berlin (“Here you can do what you want and ignore the rest”), the positive is just as limited. One need only go to where power is truly exercised—to the building authorities, to court, to schools—and there, with the exception of numerous enclaves of freedom, one confronts the provincial swamp, prejudices of a nearly diluvial sort, unlikely sorts who have been co-opted into the governing bodies and flourish there. You all went to school with a sour, rather humorless, not so well-washed fellow, usually to be found among the top ten—and you could swear that he sits there today and runs the show. His is the illegible signature on official decrees; he commits all the nearly incomprehensible chicanery in the administration; he and none other. In Berlin as well.

The provincial reproach that the tumult of Berlin is not Germany is justified to the extent that the prestige of large democratic newspapers, of artists, and of liberal associations in fact bears no relation to their actual power. On the other hand, the power of reaction—always there and working more skilfully and, above all, less respectfully—functions almost silently. It is supported by the pious wishes of the stock market and the merchant class, who lend their applause to those innocuous performances at the Berlin premieres.

But in the provinces, in a hundred different places, our people continue the struggle: for light and air and freedom. I do not believe that a new “National Association for ...” can help them. If there were, however, an intellectual *Reichsbanner*, then they would be helped. As long as there is no such thing, it seems to me a duty and the commandment of good sense for everyone who holds a position of power in Berlin to radiate energy into the provinces instead of patting them on the back. To the outcry of the provinces against their own capital, there is only one answer: Speak out with the power of Berlin, which is light, to the provinces, where it is dark.

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