

# Photography and the Politics of Hope in the Weimar Republic

## Albert Renger-Patzsch, Willy Römer, and the Contest for the Future

### Introduction: What is Hope?

- Hope is a utopian mode of thinking. It posits a different future we might move towards. Thus hope is an inherently critical category.
- Unlike “scientific” utopianism, hope does not follow a deterministic, closed logic. Instead, hope presupposes vulnerability, risk, and non-closure. Someone might hope for a future, but this future may never arrive.
- Ernst Bloch: “Hope . . . does not renounce, it is in love with success rather than failure. Hope, superior to fear, is neither passive like the latter, nor locked into nothingness. The emotion of hope goes out of itself, makes people broad instead of confining them. . . . human action . . . is expectation, hope, intention towards possibility that has still not become.”
- David Newheiser: “Hope constitutes a disciplined resilience that enables desire to endure without denying its vulnerability.”



Willy Römer, *Hachtkinge und Inflationstasche: Holzsammler Familie*, Berlin, 1920. Museum für Fotografie Archives, Berlin.

### The Crisis of Modernity and the Role of Art in Weimar

- Post-Wilhelmine Germany inherited a hyper-accelerated modernization process. Traditions were quickly displaced. Liberal democracy, for the first time in German history, arrived in 1919, meaning the German social world was no longer beholden to the aristocracy, the Kaiser, or the church.
- At the same time, the post-World War I social world was also plagued by crisis: hyperinflation, food shortages, extremist politics, and rampant violence.
- The future was left open, crisis abounded, and art was a primary vehicle for inventing Germany’s future.
- The artistic climate of Weimar reflected the political climate: figures as politically varied as Leni Riefenstahl, Werner Peiner, Bertolt Brecht, Hannah Höch, and George Grosz played key roles in creating the new German identity.

### Hope in the Past: Reviving Tradition in Albert Renger-Patzsch

- Much of the “Western” tradition of art is founded upon representational principles. “Superior” pieces of art imitated “reality” more precisely.
- For photographers trained in traditional arts like Albert Renger Patzsch (1897-1966), it was hoped that photography could complete the mimetic tradition.
- But does this photograph below and others like it represent “reality?” Or are they blurry distortions, compromised dystopias?



Albert Renger-Patzsch, *An der Ruhmündung bei Duisburg*, 1929/1930. Museum für Fotografie Archives, Berlin.



Biography

- Renger-Patzsch’s works pretend to be “apolitical;” they are uncritical, and nostalgic, evoking “the good old days.”
- Renger-Patzsch thinks his photographs reflect reality. But in the 1920s in Germany, the places he captures are filled with suffering. Renger-Patzsch brackets this suffering by absenting human subjects and destruction almost entirely. His photographs thus uncritically distort the realities of his social world.
- By imposing highly-traditional formal restraints on his photography and dogmatically accepting a skewed vision of the past, Renger-Patzsch also closes off the possibility of a more-just future. Hope only produces new social orders by critiquing already-existing ones.
- His photography merely evokes an imaginary, Edenic past which he hopes to reinstate. This restorative logic would prove destructive in the 1930s and 1940s when it was adopted by Nazi mythologies.
- Walter Benjamin: “*The World Is Beautiful* - this is the title of the well-known picture anthology by Renger-Patzsch . . . has succeeded in transforming even abject poverty - by apprehending it in a fashionably perfected manner - into an object of enjoyment.”
- Bertolt Brecht: “a simple ‘reproduction of reality’ is now less than ever capable of saying anything about reality.”

### Hope in the Future: The Politicization of Art and the Role of Critique in Willy Römer

- Photographers like Willy Römer (1887-1979) saw hope in photography because it transformed the relationship between art, politics, and critique.
- Because of the mass-reproducibility of photographs, anyone could create and distribute art quickly. In “left” political circles, photography served a critical role in resisting both German Fascism and oppressive traditions due to the mass-distributability of art.
- Photography does not capture political reality: it allows everyday people to open up new political realities.
- Walter Benjamin: “The concepts which are introduced into the theory of art [by photography] differ from the more familiar terms in that they are completely useless for the purposes of Fascism. They are, on the other hand, useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art.”
- Germany’s suffering is no longer read or heard about. People confront suffering in photographs. By bringing distressing images directly to the viewer, it is hoped that photography might encourage political and social transformation.



Willy Römer, *Malier am Lützowufer*, 1920. Museum für Fotografie Archives, Berlin.

### Conclusion: Hope in the 21st-Century

- Modern political movements have adopted the language of hope. But some have closed conceptions of hope where the world they wish for *must* be created. Hope for them is not an artistic leap of faith for an open future, but a moral battle to restore a mythical past.
- Questions: Are both visions of hope the same? Is hope still hope if I insist on it becoming reality and close off other possibilities? Or is hope then, such as the hope for “a Golden Age,” only a tool of domination or a predecessor to dystopia? Are the hopes of the Republican Party, for example, the same as Willy Römer’s, or are they fundamentally different?

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