

Artisanal Masters Oppose the Rise of Factory Work in Krefeld (1870s)

Abstract

In contrast to countries like Great Britain, which experienced industrialization early on, Germany first saw a massive shift from small artisanal workshops to large factories in the second half of the nineteenth century. As this description of master weavers in Krefeld shows, opposition to factory labor was strong and vocal. Although fueled in part by material grievances, such opposition hinged on the artisans' feeling that factory work violated the honor of their trade, their independence, and centuries-old tradition.

Source

Not insignificant are the obstacles to factory operation rooted in the spiritual-moral [*geistig-sittlichen*] life of the master weavers. They, who gained their legal recognition as free craftsmen only thirty years ago, do not wish to improve this position merely with a view to higher wages (which the mechanized weaving mills have to pay anyway in order to attract any skilled workers), but with a view to becoming a greater master craftsman, a rising entrepreneur has more and more looms and “property” at his disposal. Hence, their deep contempt for all factory workers and their hatred of factories as strongholds that cajole the artisan’s honor, freedom, and independence. A master would rather die on the board of his handloom than journey into that place of drudgery. And at noon, when he sees the factory worker sitting beside some ditch eating his meal—the meal that his wife has brought to him after more than half an hour’s journey and that he has wandered for half an hour as well, often in rain, snow, and wind, to receive—it gives him strength for years to come to work in his own shop for meager pay rather than become like that worker. These tender men know how difficult it was to rise from factory workers to craftsmen, and with indescribable sadness they speak of the young people who sacrifice their freedom and independence for a few groschen more in pay. Especially for these older weavers, who are already in poor health and no longer capable of continuous work, weaving at home in their own space is the best thing for them. Thus, technical progress faces adversaries in the very assistants upon whom it was meant to rely, and it meets with more opposition from the people than from the circumstances. But such sentiments, however honorable they may be, will not stop the triumph of steam. They may perhaps lead to the sad result that the smokestack will be erected in Switzerland or in England rather than Krefeld: a different stock of people there have different sentiments. Steam and iron are unforgiving when face-to-face with artisanal honor, independence, and freedom.

Source: Alphons Thun, “Die Industrie am Niederrhein und ihre Arbeiter. Teil 1: Die linksrheinische Textilindustrie,” in *Staats- und Sozialwissenschaftliche Forschungen*, vol. 2. (1879), no. 2, pp. 131–32; reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter and Jürgen Kocka, eds., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1870–1914. Dokumente und Skizzen*, 3rd ed. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1982, pp. 295–96.

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