

# Retail Clerks in Changing Economic Times (c. 1890)

## Abstract

---

This excerpt is taken from a report by Karl Oldenberg, a well-known economics professor who served on the editorial board of the journal *Schmollers Jahrbuch*, which published the full report in 1892. Oldenberg is best known for his book *Germany as an Industrial State* (1897), which raised moral and economic concerns regarding the course of economic modernization. Presaging Oldenberg's later argument, this report addresses the dynamics of the retail trade and the resulting pressures on retail clerks in a period of economic transition. In addition to lacking any legal protection against exploitative shopkeepers, retail clerks faced increasing working hours (up to 18 hours per day) and competition from female clerks, who were thought by their male colleagues to be depressing wages. Oldenberg's survey also highlights large regional variations in working hours and wages.

## Source

---

In terms of Sunday observance, the German retail clerk was until now in a position similar to his fellow Austrian sufferer. Until recently, legal restrictions showed only limited effects, for instance, the complete closure in Dresden and Leipzig of retail shops not dealing in regular and luxury foods according to a law implemented in 1870. It was perfectly normal for the retail clerk to have only every other Sunday afternoon off. [...] The weekly hours also partly exceed the English figures: up to 15, 16, 17, even 18 hours per day were recorded in many cases, which included the lunch break, as in England. However, when the worker was given free board and lodging, the usual situation, the lunch break did not constitute a firm break, but rather a brief interruption necessary for eating. These most prolonged working hours, however, are almost always recorded for the large group of (colonial) groceries, household goods, and tobacco shops. [...]

Free board and lodging is still offered frequently in smaller businesses, partly to make the most of the workday, partly because the clerk and apprentice are treated virtually as family members. Even today it occasionally happens that the clerks have dinner at the owner's family table at least on Sundays, while on the weekdays, not least out of consideration for the business, dining together is out of the question. One consequence of this familial situation is the bitterly felt paternal discipline exercised by the company owner, which becomes especially noticeable with respect to the question of "going out." If he wishes to spend his free evening outside the house, the clerk has to ask for permission from the proprietor or his wife, or at least he has to ask for the front door key. Grocery clerks, in particular, sigh under these fetters, probably because, given the great length of the workday, any evening out clashes sharply with the need to sleep, and on the following day noticeably impairs the alertness demanded by the shop owner. It is presumably already an innovation that one evening a week is designated for going out by contract.

In larger businesses, the retail clerk usually finds accommodation at his own expense; there would simply not be enough space to house the majority of the clerks. Only the really huge department stores, such as the Parisian Louvre, can sometimes consider providing mass accommodation for their employees. [...] In Frankfurt a. M. one can find annual wages of 700 marks, elsewhere as low as 600 marks without free room and board; at groceries in Hamburg 180 marks with free board and lodging; in Bautzen groceries 120 marks; in a Bautzen retail store 360 marks, including free room and board. The annual value of free room and board is estimated at an average of 600 to 720 marks. In small Posen retail stores selling manufactured goods the usual pay is 720 marks without free board and lodging; in Hamburg,

---

groceries offering 600 marks with free room and board already represent the most favorable scenario according to the details provided by local Retail Clerks' Association; in Stettin this figure is the absolute maximum in the entire retail trade, while, in Bautzen, groceries at 240 to 360 marks, including free room and board, constitute the average, but up to 1,200 marks is possible. [...] Among the stratum of somewhat older "young grocers" described here, it was unavoidable that a seriously desperate situation was in the making. [...] In Munich married clerks receive 1,200 to 2,000 marks; in Breslau 1,200 to 2,400 marks; in Hanover 1,800 to 2,400 marks; in Königsberg 1,800-3,000, but in some instances also below 1,200 marks; in Stettin an average of 1,800 but also 1,200 and less; in Bautzen the pay is as low as 900, but ranges on average between 1,800 and 2,000 marks. In Frankfurt a. M. 2,400 marks for older clerks is quite a high wage. If these assessments, even in the minimum amounts, are considerably higher than those wages reported earlier, this is largely a result of the good custom of raising wages according to increasing seniority; the fact that they do not always suffice to make a living is reported often enough. [...]

When we summarize the way in which the fledgling transition to larger businesses has made its effect felt on the situation of retail clerks until now, our pessimistic bias is only confirmed to a very small extent. After all, the most common evil, namely, excessive working hours, seems more to derive from the nature of the retail trade, in general, and to depend on the specific workday of the customers, as determined by the locality, than to constitute a strategy of the smaller stores to compete with the larger operations; instead, competition with the larger, more well-to-do businesses actually seems quite conducive to prompting even the smaller proprietors to be more generous toward their clerks, so that they are able, for instance, to push through demands for better meals. To the extent that clerks in smaller retail stores are in a less favorable position, this will frequently correspond to lower performance as well. On the other hand, in the larger operations themselves workdays are shorter, Sunday observance is better, and meal provisions are of a higher quality than in the smaller ones, as far as reporting in this regard warrants such conclusions. The general big-city and big-industry development of the economy may certainly have impaired the housing situation of retail clerks in rapidly growing cities, although retail clerks' accommodations in small cities are really not much better. At the same time, though, these developments have raised their standard of living and, due to the earlier end of other workers' day, have shortened many a retail clerk's workday. Only one segment of older retail clerks, who are in a bad financial situation, constitute victims of large business, and even in their case personal incompetence is a contributing factor.

Apart from that, one cannot deny the fact that in the purely social realm the curse of the fledgling large business operation begins to have an effect even among the ranks of salesmen, however modest the beginnings of the big operations in this line of business may be. Even Georg Hiller, the moderate head of the Association of German Retail Clerks, cannot suppress his complaint that "a great many proprietors treat their clerks with little consideration. They, who once were clerks in training themselves, regard their clerks as subordinate, even though they will rise to the same station sooner or later. They do not pull them closer, but rather push them away; their company, their social approach is not tolerated; the cordial tone that ruled between owner and clerk in the past is hardly ever used any more; the tender consideration vis-à-vis the loyal assistant, involving the opening of friendly relations to the family, is no longer cultivated; unfortunately, every imaginable barrier is erected instead, and the clerk is no longer regarded by the proprietor as his own flesh and blood, as his employee, but merely his laborer. As a matter of course, therefore, the relationships among the ranks of businessmen must loosen, and a certain degree of ill will must take hold."

Therefore, modern developments by and large may hardly have pushed the dependent segments of the retail businessmen into a worse position than earlier on, but instead rather improved their lot in absolute terms; nevertheless, in comparison to other social strata, the situation of retail clerks may possibly have deteriorated, in fact, not only vis-à-vis a number of their employers, but also in comparison to other working classes; and in this respect, not only in financial terms, but also in terms of social standing. This

---

does not just involve the increasing influx of the unpropertied elements into the trade class, who have no prospects for future independence and accordingly might well lag behind regarding skills and education as well, as the class of retail clerks shares this fate with other employees; but it is instead primarily due to the elementary education spreading to all parts of the population. In the past, the retail clerk used to be a little aristocrat by virtue of his literacy and knowledge of forms; today he has lost part of that prestige. At the same time, the general spread of literacy must have increased considerably the rush to the business class, substantially stiffened competition for positions, and brought the material situation of retail clerks more into line with the workers. Connected to this is the fact that the retail clerk faces new competition from a number of other sources, which forces the position of his class down. [...]

As early as 1848, Berlin commercial clerks voiced loud protest over the increasing employment of female retail clerks. According to the business census, in 1875 there were 40,132 female retail clerks in the German Reich as opposed to 197,909 male ones. [...] As a consequence a rather irritable tone prevails between the sexes. [...] “A female accountant keeping the general ledger will and always must cause annoyance! The same holds true for a female clerk who keeps any books or carries out office work!” “It is not women’s vocation to take away men’s daily bread at the office,” was also the opinion of one Austrian participant in the congress. More understandable is Hiller’s objection to women as traveling commercial clerks; but he also does not like the female shop assistants and office workers; in fact he believes that they stand in their own way because, due to the competition they represent to their male colleagues, they block their own road to marriage. By contrast, the Social Democrat Auerbach congratulates them wholeheartedly on their commercial occupation, not without a bit of malice.

The competitive threat of the female commercial clerk lies of course not in her performance but in her modest wage demands. In order to avoid becoming a servant, a girl who depends on an occupational income will make do with the most unprofitable commercial position. Many of them remain at their parents’ home and do not have any other expenses than for clothing. Others depend on support from their admirers. All of them have attained regular pay after a short period of apprenticeship. [...]

Alongside the proliferation of shop girls, the commercial apprenticeship system is another, hardly less significant, matter of grievance. This entails two complaints: inadequate apprenticeship, and “breeding” of apprentices on a massive scale for motives of material gain; both things are connected and result in stiffer competition for the retail clerk. [...]

The problems are manifold: the opening of the occupation to elements who, according to talent, education, and property, are content with life-long dependency; the spread of general elementary schooling; the division of commercial labor; the beginnings of competition from machines; female shop clerks and office workers; the “bred” apprentices; the unskilled assistant clerks; and the unskilled grocery clerks—all of these factors diminish the regular retail clerk’s opportunities for income, they overfill the job market, they deteriorate the working conditions that he has to put up with; and to top it all, the poorly educated retail clerk undercuts the better one.

Source: Karl Oldenberg, “Die heutige Lage der Commis nach neuerer Literatur,” in *Schmollers Jahrbuch für Gesetzgebung, Verwaltung und Volkswirtschaft im Deutschen Reich*, vol. 16 (1892), pp. 768–90; reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter and Jürgen Kocka, eds., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1870–1914. Dokumente und Skizzen*, 3rd ed. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1982, pp. 311–14.

---

Translation: Erwin Fink

Recommended Citation: Retail Clerks in Changing Economic Times (c. 1890), published in: German History in Documents and Images,  
<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-536>> [May 19, 2024].