The Hunt for Decorations and Titles (January 7, 1889)

Abstract

In many of his writings, the well-known novelist and poet Theodor Fontane (1819–1898) proved a critical observer of contemporary life and the Prussian elite, though he was hardly an opponent of the state. In this letter of January 7, 1889, which was written to his friend Georg Friedländer, Fontane criticizes the necessity of acquiring official titles in the quest for social prestige. He is, nevertheless, not about to turn down the honor, if only for its practical benefits.

Source

You are congratulating me on my decoration. […] One gets decorations for the sake of others; only from this perspective do they have any value. But for that purpose they are valuable indeed. If I were a man of high social status, a recipient of tributes or even just respect for my position or my fortune, then such a distinction—which, by the way, I barely ever plan to display in public—would hardly mean anything to me. But in view of the fact that in Germany, and more specifically in Prussia, people only carry weight if they are "endorsed by the state," a decoration like that actually does have a genuine practical benefit: people look at you more respectfully and treat you better. And so blessed be Goßler, who "submitted" me.[1]

NOTES

[1] i.e., forwarded Fontane's name for the award—trans.

Source: Theodor Fontane, *Briefe an Georg Friedländer*, edited and introduced by Kurt Schreinert. Heidelberg, 1954, p. 102; reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter and Jürgen Kocka, eds., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1870–1914. Dokumente und Skizzen*, 3rd ed. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1982, p. 81.

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