

The Unhealthy Nourishment of Urban Workers as Depicted by a Bourgeois Social Reformer (1890)

Abstract

Malnutrition was recognized as the underlying cause of many problems among urban workers, including high infant mortality and poor work performance. In this commentary from 1890, a bourgeois social reformer describes bad eating habits as “dangerous to the public.” Adopting the condescending and condemnatory tone often found in such assessments, he criticizes workers for the “inefficient” and “irrational” choices they make about the foods they eat. He recommends better education to enable workers to seek sound and affordable nourishment.

Source

Urban workers live completely inefficiently in every respect. They buy inferior food with their hard-earned money and nourish their bodies absolutely inadequately; the worst part, however, is that they haven't the slightest idea of their misguided way of life, because they are not informed about it. What's more, those responsible for providing such information are themselves largely uninformed.

Here, the authorities, associations, etc., would find a broad front for their battle against a kind of ignorance that is dangerous to the public. I say “dangerous to the public,” because I am convinced that this wrong way of living will lead the urban working-class population to gradually regress both physically and mentally.

The body's development will be essentially retarded, or even regress, if the nutrients it requires on a daily basis to realize its vital powers are not replenished. This insight applies especially to the growing organism, and to a considerable extent the high infant mortality rate among the working class certainly results from the children's inadequate nourishment.

On the other hand, one should not be particularly surprised about the mood in these circles when one considers that these people actually don't get their fill of food. Courage sits in the stomach, and an empty stomach means little zest and enthusiasm for work. That is also why, after work, neither husband nor wife undertakes even the most rudimentary repairs to their furnishings and clothing, so as to render their lives a bit sightlier—at least on the face of it.

It is important that the workers be shown how to nourish themselves better and sufficiently—and still save money in the process—and that the purchase of nutritious yet affordable food (fish from the sea!) be made easier for them. They would benefit much more from such measures than from the allocation of presents, which, on top of that, end up in the wrong hands all too often. Moreover, asking for and receiving assistance necessarily damages the self-esteem of the individuals involved.

Source: Otto Rademann, *Wie nährt sich der Arbeiter?* Frankfurt am Main, n.d. [1890], pp. 6–7; reprinted in Klaus Saul, Jens Flemming, Dirk Stegmann, and Peter-Christian Witt, eds., *Arbeiterfamilien im Kaiserreich. Materialien zur Sozialgeschichte in Deutschland 1871–1914*. Düsseldorf: Droste, 1982, pp. 100–1.

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