

Uneconomic Lifestyles of Workers, as Reported by Bourgeois Critics (1884 and 1889)

Abstract

Working-class poverty and lifestyle reform became favorite topics of bourgeois critics, who generally felt that workers had only to apply bourgeois virtues to improve their lot. In these passages from 1884 and 1889, one such virtue—thriftiness—is contrasted with alleged working-class hedonism and wastefulness. Although plausible in theory, such advice failed to consider workers' legitimate desire for a higher standard of living and the calamities that could arbitrarily befall a low-income family.

Source

I. “Awakening a spirit of thriftiness among the working-class population.” Instructions from the Management of the Rhenish-Westphalian Gunpowder Factories (1884)

With respect to humanitarian efforts to improve the lot of the working classes—a matter of earthshaking importance in modern times—the foremost priority is awakening a spirit of thriftiness among the working-class population. Today, a skillful and industrious worker who is employed full time receives wages that allow him during favorable periods to put something away for rainy days, provided that he keeps his needs within the bounds of his social position. In order for him to embark on this, however, he must be given an opportunity to set aside small amounts of his pay and collect them gradually in savings funds, to wit, before he begins using the money for his day-to-day expenditures. Here, one ought to assist him with stimulating advice, for he is usually awkward and inexperienced in such things. [...]

The effect of success seems obvious with respect to both economics and morality. First of all, through the practice of thrift, the worker would be saved from wastefulness and specifically from drunkenness; and later on, he would have funds in the form of savings that could be used in hard times to supplement any reduced income resulting from loss of wages. If he were spared from calamity altogether, he would have at his disposal the means to make a purchase that would elevate his living standard, even if this would involve a greater expense. In all of this, he is conscious of the fact that he owes his little fortune to his own work, and thus instinctively harbors the feeling that his work is profitable and holds value for him. In this way, he will become more devoted to his workplace and less susceptible to indoctrination by agitators. For example, he will find the catchphrase “of the disinherited people” refuted in his very own case.

II. Uneconomic Lifestyles of Workers? A Statement from Saxon Industry (1889)

It appears to us that the lifestyle of the population, especially the workers, continues to deviate from the dictates of reason in various ways. A mutual vying to acquire more magnificent clothing and to indulge in culinary delights makes itself unfavorably felt, and this contrasts oddly with complaints about inadequate shares in labor revenues. The oft-repeated spoutings about the rising cost of bread and food through tariffs, etc., are not aimed at those luxury items which, for many, give rise to expenses far greater than bread and other necessities. When one sees the overcrowded dance halls; observes how in winter and summertime one festivity follows quickly after another, one diversion chases the next; and witnesses how people pay exorbitant prices in some pubs, e.g. for beer, and then consume it in quantities for whose price their families could have been fed not one but many days, then the entire situation appears miserable indeed. Therein lies the true wretchedness.

Source: (I.) Circular to factory managers, April 19, 1884, in *Amtliche Mittheilungen aus den Jahres-Berichten der mit der Beaufsichtigung der Fabriken betrauten Beamten*, vol. 9 (1884). Berlin: 1885, pp. 687–88; 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. 112–13. (II.) *Jahres-Bericht der Handels- und Gewerbekammer zu Chemnitz 1889*. Chemnitz: 1890, p. 124; 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, p. 112.

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