

Commercial Marriage Brokerage and Bohemian Life in the Big City: Excerpts from Ernst Dronke, *Berlin* (1846)

Abstract

This passage from Ernst Dronke's (1822–1891) *Berlin* (1846) introduces two phenomena regarded as typical of big cities. First, Dronke addresses the commercialization of marriage through marriage brokers and personal ads. Second, he describes the city's Bohemian intellectuals, who scorned traditional moral and religious conventions governing marriage and gender roles.

Source

However, speculation extends its reach not only to commerce proper, but even to the most intimate conditions of life. Marriage solicitations by way of the “no longer unusual” means of public advertisements in newspapers are well known. In this no longer unusual way, a man in the prime of life looks for a companion who, in addition to other personal qualities, can bring a specific sum of money into the marriage. “But I am concerned less with beauty than kindness of heart. Utmost discretion. Responses under X.” One would think that nobody would take up such crazy offers, yet they do; if you don't set your standards too high, you can expect at least five to eight responses. A friend once placed such an ad in the paper as a joke, and by the next day he had already received four responses. He had made “moderate” wealth a condition. Among those who answered was one government official, who offered him not one but three daughters to choose from. Then there was a young woman who, if memory serves me right, wrote with extraordinarily beautiful handwriting and in an elegant style that she lived a deeply unhappy life with a tyrannical stepmother and a weak father, and would seize any opportunity to escape her situation. At the end, this letter had evidently been moistened by tears, and it was painful to see a girl throwing herself in such desperation at the first stranger. Two other responses had been written in a terrible scrawl and with countless Berlinisms and misspellings. The social status of the authors was unmistakable in these letters. There are also full-fledged marriage bureaus, though they are still being run more or less quietly and cautiously. Most commission bureaus of any kind are built on fraud [...].

At the end of these reflections we shall mention a small group of people who seek to find an outward expression in public life for their contempt for contemporary moral and ethical ideas. These are the so-called “liberated” or “emancipated.” They are not content with having recognized the immorality of the moral notions of today and fighting against the conditions that have given rise to them in a way that is proper for them. Instead, they want to demonstrate in public life that they are “beyond” this. This is the characteristic trait of the Berliners that we have encountered before – shrugging something off. What they have processed and recognized in themselves, through critical examination, they regard as being done with; it no longer “exists” for them. This negation of something which, though reprehensible, still exists in society, must seem childish and ridiculous in the actual expression of life. Only the emancipated ones don't care if they clash with the power of Philistinism and the police; in fact, it is to them exalting proof of their own “finished” consciousness. And so in Berlin you can see women sitting in some public places, smoking their cigars and drinking beer, wine, or even a small glass of absinthe. In doing so they in no way intend to inveigh against a custom they have recognized as narrow-minded and philistine by using the common weapon of modern-day, peaceful consciousness, the “demonstration.” It would never occur to them to fight against something that does not exist for them. They merely want to show off their inner, superior “accomplishment.” If an emancipated or liberated person is summoned to court as a witness, he will declare to the questioner with jejune calm that he would certainly swear to the matter

and, in consideration of the legal penalties, keep in mind the legal concept of perjury; however, since he was beyond the notion of a “God,” the questioner should not hold it against him if the formula of the oath makes him laugh. Such scenes have occurred several times in Berlin, to the horror of innocent judicial trainees from the [provincial] Mark Brandenburg. The emancipated are also beyond marriage. Either they live in “free relationships,” or, if they observe the legitimate act of marriage out of consideration for questions of legitimacy, inheritance, or other circumstances that depend on the adherence to the laws of the state, “Madam” retains her family name in society. If the two spouses pay a visit, they are introduced as Mr. Schmidt and Madam Fischer. An acquaintance of mine told me some hilarious things about the wedding of such an emancipated couple he attended. The gentleman and Madam were already living together when they summoned the clergyman to perform the legitimate marriage. When the clergyman entered, the witnesses and the groom were present, only the bride, who was still busy getting ready, took her time appearing. When she finally came, one could see the clergyman’s surprise that the bride was wearing neither a myrtle wreath nor any other festive bridal ornament, but appeared merely in a simple housedress. Nevertheless, he began with the ceremony. In the meantime, the witnesses were behaving in a very conspicuous fashion. One, a well-known writer, was lying on the sofa, with his legs stretched out on a chair standing in front of him and stroking his moustache; another stood by the stove, hands in his pocket and a charred cigar in his mouth; the last two were busy at a window watching the people passing by on the street and had their backs turned to the assembly during the entire ceremony. Finally, when the exchange of rings was to take place, it turned out that none of the spouses had thought of procuring these necessary accoutrements. Each party had thought the other was taking care of it. Since none of the witnesses had a ring, and for lack of anything better, two rings were detached from the curtains and the act was performed with them. The young couple then invited the clergyman to stay with them for a “punch,” though the man of God turned down this invitation on the pretext that he had urgent duties. In all likelihood, what he had experienced there in a few short moments had awakened in him thoughts of his calling more so than all convictions of his studies; at any rate, after his departure, the assembled party laughed triumphantly about the narrow-mindedness of the philistine point of view. – Incidentally, the emancipated are among themselves very scattered and splintered into small circles. There was never a society of the “liberated”; that was only quite widely believed based on a misunderstood rumor.

Source: Ernst Dronke, *Berlin* (1846). East Berlin: Rütten & Loening, 1953, pp. 26–27, 97–100.

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