

Conservative Denunciation of Occupational Freedom as the Result of an Interfering State Bureaucracy (1851)

Abstract

In this passage from his influential book *Civil Society* (1851), the conservative folklorist Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl (1823–1897) describes occupational freedom as an instrument of government bureaucracy that harms independent tradesmen and lowers product quality. At the same time, he advocates a modernized guild system and renewed pride in the apprenticeship system.

Source

It is a very noteworthy phenomenon that the Vormärz^[1] police state, which allowed no freedom at all, least of all any absolute liberty, protected absolute freedom of occupation. It must certainly be a dubious kind of freedom that enjoys this sort of patronage. The police and civil service state feared an independent and robust class of tradesmen, and it was certainly aware that absolute occupational freedom is the surest rein on civic [bourgeois] trade, namely one of the reins with a sharp bit that cuts into the flesh, thereby turning the fieriest steed into the lamest nag. The dilettantish economy of the so-called “patent masters” was introduced there, whereby anyone, even the untrained, can carry on any kind of trade if he obtains a patent [trade license] for just a few guilders and keeps a journeyman; and if he has a speculative mind, he can try doing this with a half dozen different trades at the same time. That meant putting a state premium on “bungling”^[2] and swindling. The state auctioned off its buildings and public enterprises to the lowest bidders. That was yet another premium on swindling. It allowed—and allows—prisoners to engage in ordinary civic handicrafts, and through this kind of competition, which hardly costs [the state] anything in the way of workers’ wages, forces down the citizen’s income. By punishing the criminal, it simultaneously punishes the honest craftsman. One needs to have lived in countries where this kind of unrestrained occupational freedom was in effect in order to be thoroughly convinced of its perniciousness. It was in these countries that master craftsmen, at the first flickering of the ’48 movement, knew no question more urgent than salvation from this kind of murderous freedom.

There are old cities replete with trades in which the old guild system has not declined but has instead continued developing as a blessing to the crafts. But there are also dilapidated old imperial cities where one still clings to all the customs of the antiquated guild system and holds onto it in all its petrified forms. There, in general, owing to a guild spirit that’s become a mere facade, the craftsman has become just as lethargic, incompetent, ossified, and grumpy as he has become lethargic, incompetent, ossified, and grumpy in countries with absolute freedom of occupation. Both extremes demoralize the class of tradesmen.

We should once again give each individual trade a corporate constitution with an administration of its own, but we should also strictly demarcate their boundaries and protect one trade from attacks by another. Finding the borderline that divides the right to manufacture from the rights of the small-scale crafts is often difficult, but not infrequently the entire existence of small-scale crafts depends upon the correct determination of this boundary. The separation of trades among themselves is seemingly a small and trivial matter, and our political doctrinaires, whose sharp eyes manage to see the man on the moon’s beard growing, have little sight left for such trifles. And yet here, too, we are dealing with an important social question. The glazier, e.g., needs to understand something about the cabinetmaker’s work. But if he were allowed to pursue this independently, to the best of his ability, then he would quickly become a dangerous rival to the cabinetmaker in the simplest, i.e., in the most profitable work, that a

cabinetmaker does. The latter, however, cannot entrust him with this, because the glazier's work is too far removed from his own. Thus it might happen that, in a locality where there is occupational freedom, only decorative cabinetmakers would be able to earn a living alongside the glaziers. The very crafts that are most important for social welfare—because they are the most numerous—are the ones most thoroughly ruined by this kind of dilettantish system.

We should also agree that either merchants should be prohibited from trading in craftsmen's products or that craftsmen should be allowed to market the raw materials of their trade.

But these kinds of things, like establishing boundaries between the trades, are not just done in a government office. Here, the totality of all the tradesmen can best provide advice and information. Where the authorities need to decide on occupational trade matters, they should always be supported by an expert body of tradesmen who lend their expertise. In many German lands over the last several years, much has improved in this respect. The civil servant generally believes that each person should stick to his own trade^[3]; as far as his own person is concerned, however, he thinks that he can not only deal with office files, but also make shoes if need be.

If only for socially conservative reasons, municipal governments and guilds should ensure that the capital necessary to operate a business is present before granting the right to become a master craftsman and to establish municipal residency. Newfangled sentimentality and conceit sees in the class of journeymen nothing more than an oppressive relationship of dependency, and it calls this demand inhumane in its severity. But the "journeyman" means as much as the "associate" of the master; in an absurd manner, however, the journeymen now want instead to sport the much more respectable and important title of "assistant"! Once there was "journeyman's pride," now all that's left is "master craftsman's pride." To be the journeyman of an honest master all the days of one's life is not nearly so great a misfortune as being the master of a wretched business. People in public service and elsewhere are often happy so long as they do not have to be journeymen. If, by the way, a young craftsman is able to show that he has savings from wages instead of inherited wealth, then he should be credited with up to double the [standard] contribution when he applies for the right to establish a place of business, because hard work and thrift are also a handsome kind of capital in business. At the same time, this would be acting in a genuinely "bourgeois" fashion, according to the fundamental rule of our class and social rank, which says that the power to acquire wealth is a greater possession than wealth itself.

NOTES

[1] Vormärz (literally pre-March) refers to the period between the Final Act of the Vienna Congress in 1815 and the outbreak of the March Revolution in 1848—trans.

[2] Meaning not belonging to a guild—trans.

[3] Literally: "A cobbler should stick to his last" ["der Schuster solle bei seinem Leiste bleiben"]—trans.

Source: Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, *Die bürgerliche Gesellschaft*. Stuttgart and Tübingen: Verlag der J. G. Cotta'schen Buchhandlung, 1851, pp. 252–54. Available online at: <https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/en/view/bsb10770513?page=6,7>

Translation: Jeremiah Riemer

Recommended Citation: Conservative Denunciation of Occupational Freedom as the Result of an Interfering State Bureaucracy (1851), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/from-vormarz-to-prussian-dominance-1815-1866/ghdi:document-469>> [February 07, 2025].