

Ernst Dronke, Excerpts from *Berlin* (1846)

Abstract

In the following excerpts from *Berlin* (1846), socialist writer Ernst Dronke (1822–1891) presents a kaleidoscopic view of life in the Prussian capital at the very beginning of a period of substantial urbanization. Dronke describes contemporaries' contradictory views on the advantages and drawbacks of urban opportunities and anonymity, the inhabitants' wide range of social behavior, and the misery of the working poor in the context of expanding capitalism.

Source

The locomotive whistles. From Trebbin, the last station of the Anhalt railroad, it is about five miles of the same, uninterrupted shapes, but already here the area shows us the proximity of the large, sad ocean of sand in whose middle the city lies like an oasis. Behind us, though the landscape was very flat and monotonous, there were at least views of pleasant stream banks and green patches of forest. Here in front of us, however, is a stretch of gray, boring moors with the occasional yellowing potato plant and lonely stubs of neglected moor shrubs. The train is accompanied by thick clouds of fine, sharp dust that veil the sad view from travelers as if in sympathy. No friendly dairy farms, no pleasing fields, not even wagon trails or footpaths comfort you through the hours and hours of traveling through this area, which almost everyone is abandoning to look for something better in the city. It is deserted and quiet all around you, a sad picture; and yet it is characteristic, a fitting preparation for the nearby city. These flat, barren plains with their burning dust, into whose ground the hiker nearly sinks, may at first glance remind the foreigner of the spirit of Berlin. To him it is the image of barren criticism, in whose ground the poet's or artist's hothouse flowers have never been able to flourish or develop independently, where the dust of forgetfulness has blanketed much greatness until the most recent past. Whoever comes here from other territories, from Thüringen or the Rhine, will surely experience a feeling of sadness or melancholy. The sight of this desolate, yellow, and silent moor, where even in the peak of summer the poor birds can hardly find nourishment, leaves us with a strange impression. Maybe it is the sharp dust flying in our eyes [...] but patience! We are already getting closer and closer to the city, which through its own creations should offer us a substitute for the unkindness of nature.

At some distance we observe the roofs of cottages in neighboring villages, and to the right, the peak of a monument on a low hill appears: the Kreuzberg, where Berliners enjoy their beautiful nature in summer. Another long and shrill whistle, and the train rolls through a long row of buildings, past some hut-like tobacco houses and into the train station. This is how one arrives in the city of the intelligentsia. On the ramp are thick crowds of people of all stripes, at the head of which stand several policemen. This arrangement is very practical; the red collars that attract your sight at first are the liveliest warning signs of where you are. Behind these you notice civilized, educated gentlemen of dubious appearance, and you would be wise to keep your hands in your pockets as you pass by these people. After this you will see some dear, sweet faces of girls whose chaste appearance and elegant, tasteful clothing will stun the inexperienced; perhaps one of these deeply penetrating glances will be cast upon you, and you will be enthusiastically approached:

“Heinrich, Franz, Jonathan, Nepomuk! – you are finally here, I was expecting you!”

You look surprised, since none of these names belongs to you, and the beautiful stranger blushes over her error, the result of a deceptive similarity. The next day, however, you will both be seen happily drinking champagne together at Kröll's or in another public establishment, despite Heinrich, Jonathan

and Nepomuk. These are sometimes the first experiences of arrival. If you have happily avoided these, you will travel to your lodgings, and on the way, you will observe the large, broad streets and the splendid, palatial buildings. But how should you form a complete impression of this large whole comprised of so many different elements?

You have no time to get to know a single city. Life is short, and the speed of today's journeys is still much too slow. Today Paris, tomorrow London; now Rome, then Berlin; to Petersburg and from there to Texas; migrate north and then return, yawning, from Egypt; mustn't one also use one's time in flight? A quick judgment, a brief impression, and then onwards.

The first thing is the outward appearance of a city, which usually gives us an idea of its inner life and workings. The tall gabled houses, the evening gatherings of families on the benches before their front doors, the gurgling fountain in the marketplace, and everything else that characterizes the southern German cities tell us immediately that we are dealing with the patriarchal essence of Catholicism. In Berlin, seeing the large, straight streets, the new sections of the city marching into the distance like soldiers, and the bright houses, we know in which modern spirit we find ourselves.

In the areas inhabited by the petty bourgeoisie, the houses are lovely and look almost the same as the houses of the nobles, but they are standing on bad ground; it is marshy and swampy, and not infrequently, walls of buildings sink. They then either fall down or have to be torn down after a few years. This situation also reflects the life of the so-called middle class in Berlin. On the outside they glitter while they pursue pleasures in public places, full of opulence and splendor, while their homes are crumbling. You can never be sure if the families you see at concerts and around town in fine velvet and silk had to skip meals and sacrifice necessities like beds and furniture to enable their lifestyle. Out by the Hamburg Gate it is gloomy and eerie. Here are the shacks of misery and desperation. And yet a lot of people from the thriving, pleasure-seeking frenzy of the inner city are eyeing this area. Bigger and better apartments have been built there. It almost looks as though a new city is trying to rise up out of the ashes of the outcast part. Only the future knows (as the past partially hints at, if only seldom and softly) which spirit will rise from here and settle over the city.

The essence of the big city can be seen in the movement of public life. The big-city element is perhaps the only, but perhaps also the most precious, asset that justifies a stay in Berlin. The different parties illustrate Berlin according to their partisan outlook and it is often ridiculous to hear such judgments from people who have never seen the city.

"This is the modern Babel," says the pious man, making the sign of the cross, "the burning cauldron of radicalism, the sins of demoralization where all unity is dissolved and there is nothing holy to the people, not God, not the church, not the Fatherland, not even the holiest bond of family, not marriage, not a sense of duty."

"This is the hotbed of reaction," say the free spirits, "where the government pampers pietism, oppresses free science, and favors its own creatures above the love of honor. There is an army of bureaucrats here that makes every legal step impossible; here is the nest where neat regulations against the progress of time are hatched, where the police spies follow everyone, where a brazen nobility is in expansion, where the people of the streets are wounded and where the Russian knout will soon be used."

"It is the city of Prussianism," says the good-natured southern German, "where everyone carps and criticizes, where everything is precocious and one finds only cold rationality and no soul!"

"It is the city of Prussianism," adds the person of the Rhineland, "where the Protestant government is so nicely reflected in the essence of a sober spirit."

"It is the school for pietism, where the strict rules for the Sabbath are implemented, Magdalene

foundations are started, and Catholic processions and indulgences will soon be introduced.”

“It is the city of degeneration, where the government itself practices the most pernicious leniency with its people, where the faithful may be publicly mocked, where I hear blasphemous songs being sung in the bars and restaurants. ”

It is, it is, it is [...] yes, it is many things; it is the big city. Herein lies the whole secret of the thrill which life in this city has for every person and every taste. Life in a big city is always exciting, mainly because it is multifaceted and I have often heard from intellectual men that they could not live in any other city. Everyone can live how they want, because you can find everything you want; you can even have everything at the same time. No one takes care of others in the big city; people living on the same floor often do not know their own neighbors. It is very conceivable to hear a person living in the building answer the question from an unknown visitor: a man named Fischer is unknown to him although there has been a man living next to him for 10 years who might have this name. If someone wants to live as a recluse, then this is the place to do it, and if he wants to enjoy the pleasures of the big city, he has only to leave his cave. Since it is possible to continue to be incognito whenever one wants, there are some who do both. The pietist can search for worldly pleasure without running the risk of being held in disrepute by his clergy brethren; the young man from the province with glowing recommendations can visit people of the higher classes and enjoy reciprocal visits, without anyone noticing that he lives together with a young, unmarried seamstress. This disappearance of so-called considerations gives, as mentioned, a stay in Berlin its attraction and makes it preferable to the province, but it also is the main cause of the decline of domestic life. The husband does not have to fear being seen cheating on his wife; the wife knows that her spouse can't follow her if she leaves the house under some pretext. Respect and courtesies disappear, life excites with all of its pleasures; and everyone, from highest to lowest, rich and poor, spiritual and worldly, quietly steps out of their relationships. The security with which all of this transpires has something eerie, almost gruesome about it. This security unties the bonds calmly and silently without anyone noticing that they are unbound. There is a dualism to this life that naturally had to bring with it a general demoralization. This hiding of affections from family relations and other social classes makes life superficial and public. The higher circle partakes of their hidden pleasures just as the middle class does, the elderly just like the youthful. The student escorts his seamstress calmly on his arm along the street. The upper crust has its orgies at the best restaurants; the old gentleman quietly throws a party while the middle class son attends public gardens and concerts.

The streets therefore are where you can best get to know the orientation and the lifestyles of the city dwellers. Since there is seldom a domestic life to be found and everything revolves around chasing pleasures, the expression of life is no longer found in the kitchen, but rather outside of the home in the wild and confused chaos of urban life, and again, superficiality is the best characterization of this. It is very educational for the unobtrusive observer to walk the sidewalks and study faces.

The Berlin street youth, for example, is the most obnoxious in the whole of Germany, and of them, the chimney sweeps take first place. The barbaric modern custom of building small and tight chimneys into which only children can fit has created a huge increase in poor children for this industry. Moreover, they do not get an education, and completely degenerate in this career. You see entire battalions of these small, black soldiers in the streets, usually led by a single fellow who displays his distinguished status by wearing a hat. Passersby, namely women, get out of their way, because the boisterousness of these small rascals exceeds description. Nevertheless, their obnoxiousness discreetly illustrates a kind of clever humor, and if you wanted to, you could fill books with all the witty jokes they play on anyone who crosses their path. One would also like to harass the fish lady with some jokes, but she possesses a certain coarseness that can be very rough and mean and I recommend that no one try to play a joke on her.

[...]

The disappearance of the individual in the totality is the most advantageous characteristic of the city – hence the freedom, the independence of the individual who doesn't need to pay attention to small-city, narrow-minded prejudices. A multifaceted, general social life – this is the impression that the frenetic hustle and bustle of the capital city makes upon the foreign visitor. In Berlin's open, public community life, there is no trace of a certain narrow expression of partisanship, whether pietism or irreverence, whether servile Prussianism or radical Jacobinism. These elements are in and of themselves present, but only as small atoms in a large body. Certain elements are less than desirable, but life in general in a big city is pleasant, and doubly pleasant in Berlin, more than any other German city, because here the earnest and striving spirit makes it all the more exciting. The stinking gutters and the dust of the streets in summer are without a doubt an unpleasant extra, but those who always link Berlin to these things are forgetting that life doesn't happen in the gutters and dust. The open community life is the pulse of this city. Out in the public streets everything surges and roars chaotically, the noble and the lowly, rich and poor: no one is limited by others. Only in the domestic arena do the differences of class become apparent. The high aristocracy, the cream, as they call themselves, have their residences in certain parts of Friedrichstadt. Their main part of town is Unter den Linden and on that part of the Wilhelmstrasse which is next to the Linden. You can see how small the influence of this class is in that it consists of one and a half streets, and even has to share these with others. Unter den Linden has pulled in the powerful middle class, and on the other end of the Wilhelmstrasse, where the Halle Gate is, you can already find some proletarian holes in the wall. The middle class, the shop owners and the industrialists, have expanded into Königstadt and further outwards past Luisenstadt. The proletariat consistently follows on the heels of this caste, and you can find them in the attics and cellars of the trading houses, as well as in the shacks next to the factories. Only a part of the proletariat and its bleak poverty makes itself visible within this society, outside the gates of the northwest section of the city. Misery is in its final, most terrifying form there. Everything that happens here is connected with the police and the courts, because the chains of poverty are bound to the barren moor of crime. These pariahs hear nothing of the effervescence and fire of the inner city. When they visit the inner city, their trail is marked by the blood of the forces of law and order and attacks on the property and lives of the city's inhabitants.

[...]

We now examine the conditions of working life, because trade has turned life into junk and this inalienable right of mankind has to be first dealt with. Let us see what the poor can deal with and how they can live.

Wages for laborers in Berlin

1. Women's Jobs

Job description	daily wages in silver pieces	months without work per year
washerwoman	10-12	4 months
ironer	8-10	4 months
hairdresser	6-10	4 months
seamstress	8-10	—
florist	7½	4 months
embroiderer ^[1]	3-8	4 months
gold and silver embroiderer	10	—
silver polisher	7½-10	8 months
metal polisher	6-7	2 months
crocheting	5	—

fabric sorter	5-7½	4 months
thread stringer	3-5	4 months
reeler[2]	3-6	3 months
box girl	5	—
light packer	4	2 months
silk reeler	3-4	3 months
spooler[3]	3-4	3 months
layout at the printer	3	2 months
fashion worker[4]	3-7½	—
tailor[5]	5-7½	4 months
blanket seamstress	4	4 months
glove seamstress[6]	3-4	4 months
shoe binder	2½-3	3 months
cap maker	5-6½	3 months
straw hat maker	4-8	6 months
factory girl[7]	3-6	—
cigar maker[8]	2-4	(?)
tavern girl[9]	2½-4	—
servant girl[10]		—
daily farm worker[11]	4-6	4 months

2. Men's Jobs

Job description	daily wages in silver pieces	months without work per year
jeweler [12]	15-20	4 months
arms maker	10-15	3 months
butcher[13]	0-2	2 months
carpenter	10-12½	5 months
coppersmith	15-20	4 months
shoemaker	10-15	3 months
roofer	10-15	6 months
Mason	10	5 months
wagon maker[14]	2-4	2 months
leather worker[15]	4-5	2 months
cutler	10-15	—
designer	30-40	3 months
engraver	30	—
printer[16]	15	2 months
cabinetmaker	10	3 months
pattern maker	15-25	2 months
plumber	10	3 months

type founder	15	3 months
brass founder	15	3 months
iron founder	10-20	2 months
blacksmith ^[17]	0-4	—
glove maker	7½-10	—
watchmaker ^[18]	10-15	2 months
book printer	10	3 months
material printer	15-20	2 months
farrier ^[19]	0-4	2 months
stone mason	12½	4 months
painter	10-15	4 months
tin founder	7½-10	2 months
porcelain worker ^[20]		2 months
lacemaker	10	—
bookbinder	7½	3 months
saddler	15	3 months
locksmith	7½-15	3 months
cooper ^[21]	10-15	2 months
woodworker	10-15	3 months
men's tailor	12½-15	6 months
women's tailor	7½-12½	5 months
silk colorer	15	(?)
basketmaker ^[22]	5-7½	2 months
varnish worker	7½-10	—

Some of the workers do not earn more than 2-5 silver pieces a day; it is obvious that this is not enough to live on in Berlin. But even if it were enough to live on, it would not have the slightest impact on the conditions of the proletariat. They work every day without rest to earn their existence. But what kind of world is this that takes away the right to live, a right given by nature, and says you have to earn this right through the hardest of work? Those who are in a position to earn something consider themselves lucky and are happy about it. With the masses growing as they are, work has become a game of chance. The wages which we present here are for the luckiest, most fortunate ones. It is assumed that they are the ones who have been given the opportunity to earn their existence; it is assumed they are young, strong, and have no family cares; it is assumed that they find work and through the mercy and nobility of their bosses, they are given life. The next level of these happy, independent people, who have to work from morning until night just to exist, is made up of those without any kind of stable work or who are handicapped because of an illness in the family. The first of these are the so-called small masters. These people are not like the journeymen, who are given a fixed income. Nor can they move on when a job doesn't work out. The masters are bound to their workshops and have to be there week in and week out to receive their money. Thus the small masters work through the week without any security, but just with the hope that at the end of the week they may be able to sell their work. They are forced to buy their right to live through work. Furthermore, they are forced to deliver their work by the end of the week, because most of them have to pay back creditors and suppliers. If this is not possible, then they have no work and no existence the following week. They try to sell their work to traders Saturday evening, if they haven't

filled orders or already sold it all during the week. These traders of some means do not work but rather put their money into trading. They know these small masters and their hard circumstances very well. They know that these unlucky masters have to sell their work at any price, so that the journeymen and the materials can be paid; so they offer a dirt-cheap price for the masters' work even as they complain about their hard times and show their well-filled storerooms. The master is always forced to sell his goods at the offered price and when he has paid the journeymen and for the materials he has barely anything left to feed his family. The following week starts off with the same sad song, assuming he doesn't have an accident. His work must be perfect if he doesn't want to lose everything; a single illness, baptism, or death of a child can put him in a position of hopeless misery without any bread whatsoever. In Berlin there are 4000 self-employed tailors of all kinds, two-thirds of which do not receive enough orders. There are, however, 206 clothing traders who get their inventory from the poor masters at dirt-cheap prices. The competition expands in some months through so-called worker companies; the government also competes if the stores for the military are already full. The worker companies are then disbanded and these people, who can work cheaper than any others, offer themselves to the traders and masters at dumping prices. For the finishing on a pair of pants they only ask 4-5 silver pieces, and so the journeymen and masters can forget about working during these times. The number of self-employed shoemakers is 3000, and their relationship to the traders is very similar to that of the tailors, if not exactly the same. There are 837 silk workers who work for 113 traders or so-called manufacturers, which exploit the uncertainties of this industry through their trade capital. The number of carpenters, who are also at the mercy of traders, is 2000: In addition to these, there are also 123 furniture traders and between 3000-4000 journeymen. There are 20,000 weavers and these people cannot live from their income, even in the best of cases. Other businesses, like chimney sweeping, have their pre-determined number^[23] which is controlled by the police and magistrates and cannot be increased.

As badly off as these people are, there are some people in even worse conditions, and they have to accept whatever work comes their way. These are usually families where the man is sick or deceased and there are grandparents or several dependent children to feed. The children are sent to the factories as soon as they are the least bit strong enough. They work here from 5 a.m. to 9 p.m. and earn only 15-22½ silver pieces a week, which is about three silver pieces a day. They suffer not only physically, for example through coughing, deformed posture and crooked legs, but also morally and psychologically. They are totally ruined in the bleach factories where they inhale poisonous fumes the whole day. Even grown men can hardly survive a few years in these factories. And yet mothers still send their children here even though they know this means a sure death for their little ones. Maybe they do it for this very reason. The children are a burden to them, and misery robs them of every sense of being human. Additionally, they probably think that since civilized society has created these factories, it must not be a crime to send children there. From time to time, parents get rid of their children through blatant crime; they have no food for the young ones and perhaps only a few bare bones for to nibble on themselves, so what should they do with their children? To these number all so-called infanticides, when young mothers kill their newborns because they don't know how they will feed them. Berlin newspapers frequently report on small, unidentified corpses being found in sewers.

NOTES

[1] Different kinds. The working girls in fine embroidery have to compete with the women and daughters of the middle class who earn their pocket money in this fashion and of course, deliver very cheap products.

[2] Wool spinners perhaps 5-8.

[3] Children get at the most 10-12 silver pieces per week, which is an average of 1-5 silver pieces a day.

[4] Director, 10-15.

[5] The tailors who work for families also receive board and a somewhat smaller wage. Those who

work for shops are the worst paid; for a high-quality expensive shirt which takes at least a day to make, they receive 4-5 silver pieces and have to pay the materials themselves. When the master craftsmen have time off, most work for the shops and so-called manufacturers.

[6] The yearly average is 2-3 silver pieces.

[7] Children 15-22½ silver pieces per week.

[8] Mostly paid by the thousand, although they have to pay for wasted tobacco. Deveining is done by children, who get 7½-10 silver pieces per week.

[9] With board.

[10] 8-12 thalers a year plus board. Some receive a "house key," which essentially means that they have to prostitute themselves to make ends meet. Most are sent into the armies of prostitution anyway, and the fare in Berlin is so meager that they usually resort to theft and fraud.

[11] Receive less in wintertime.

[12] We want to note here what exactly an independent worker has to pay for his most basic needs: For lodging he pays 2-2½ thalers, for lunch 3 thalers, for dinner 2½-3 thalers, 1 thaler for breakfast; on average he pays 9 thalers a day, not including drinks, clothing, shoes and so on.

[13] Room, board, and allowance.

[14] Room and board.

[15] Room and board.

[16] Five out of 15 workers have no work.

[17] Room and board.

[18] Have to bring their own tools.

[19] Room and board.

[20] Handymen 5-7½, lathe operator 15-20, painter 12½-15.

[21] With room and board 3-4 silver pieces.

[22] Without board.

[23] Fifteen

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