

Consumerism: Berlin Department Stores (1908)

Abstract

Leo Colze's writing on department stores in Berlin captures the transformation of Germany at the turn of the century. Stylized as "uncrowned emperors" of Berlin, Colze sees stores such as Wertheim, Tietz, Jandorf, and Kaufhaus des Westens as the culmination of industrial development and transnational trade. Department stores and the rise of consumerism fundamentally altered the city landscape and the mode of interaction in urban areas. Colze enumerates the advantages and disadvantages of these stores, both for the individual and the city as whole.

Source

There are four rulers of Berlin, uncrowned emperors, whose strict regimes are everywhere acknowledged and whose governing decrees and proclamations give rise to much laudatory discussion. These uncrowned lords are the department stores, [they] are Wertheim, Tietz, Jandorf, and – for a year now – Kaufhaus des Westens. The transformation of Berlin into a major metropolis, a world class city, is closely tied to the arrival of these shopping palaces. Any impartial, politically neutral observer will have to admit that it was the department stores that got the commercial world rolling here. When one shopping palace after another lines the thoroughfares of the imperial capital today, when light-infused display windows not only tempt [us] with the most amazing manufactured goods from around the civilized world, but also appeal to our aesthetic senses, when even today's little man is in a position to come into the possession of luxury items at trinket prices – then it is the sole doing of the modern department store.

The Berlin department store is a creation that has become exemplary not only by German standards, but also by those of the commercial establishments of the entire old and new worlds. We are not here talking about the department store "wannabes" that discredit the department store name with their poor quality merchandise, their modest venues, bad service, and bargain-basement, penny-pinching sales pitches, but rather about the modern department store which, as exemplified by Kaufhaus des Westens, embodies all the lessons of America and Germany combined.

Thus, I will often refer to Kaufhaus des Westens, the most modern of the department stores, as an exemplar, for it is the most advanced organism that the contemporary commercial world possesses at this time.

When I spoke earlier of the Berlin department store, I meant the department store purely as an independent entity – irrespective of its relationship to the actual shopping population of Berlin. These two separate entities will, however, be considered [in tandem] at several points in my presentation. With respect to the latter [Berlin consumers], it behooves us to draw strict distinctions between the *three ruling districts* of our uncrowned leaders.

There is the firm of A. Jandorf & Co. with its stores at the hubs of working-class commerce – the department store of the little man.

For satisfying the demands of the middle class, there are the stores of the firms Hermann Tietz and A. Wertheim – with the exception of the latter's establishment on Leipzigerstrasse, an exclusive luxury store. These stores, situated alongside the modern Kaufhaus des Westens in the new west side of Berlin, are intended for the city's moneyed circles.

Any stroll down the street, any cursory inspection, will suffice to convince us of the accuracy of these observations.

I once saw somewhere a caricature of the modern department store as a ventilator into whose wide-open orifice the large and the small, the old and the young, little men and little women all disappeared – whose suction power, in short, drew everyone in. The image is persuasive, even with respect to the finer side. I do not want to weigh the pros and cons. I am writing neither a national economic analysis nor a politico-economic polemic. However, I do not want it to go unsaid that, in my opinion, the big department stores of Berlin have played a large role in the transformation of the metropolis along the Spree.

At every spot where department store palaces have emerged, an exceedingly lively commerce has developed as a matter of course. Wisely cognizant of [the inherent potential of] the growing commercial traffic, specialty shops of all kinds have arisen, thereby disproving the old wives' tale that department stores have a destructive impact on such shops. With their modern facades, they incorporate, in both form and substance, the best elements of the department stores.

To take a prime example from recent times: Tauenzien- and Kleiststrasse in the west side of Berlin, a boulevard of flirtatious teen-age girls, a stomping ground for Spreewald ladies and nannies pushing baby carriages was – only four weeks earlier – a fashionable residential street in the elegant west side.

A housing complex was bought up. Grand residential complexes that had barely been completed [suddenly] fell victim to the pickaxe, and in no time Kaufhaus des Westens began to rise up and spread over the capacious terrain. The metamorphosis of the entire area, which currently proceeds in leaps and bounds, dates from this exact time period. An early summer afternoon: It has become dark. Coming from the Zoologischer Garten train terminal, and just before the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtnis Church, we cross August-Viktoria-Platz along the center divide of the wide Tauenzienstrasse. A display of lights streams towards us. Right and left [there is] one store window after another, filled with masculine and feminine elegance. A polished stream of humanity flows up and down the street, laughing, flirting, gay, enjoying leisure. Strollers, idlers. Further on at Wittenbergplatz, [another] fairytale-like show of lights, sparkling treasures, reams of silks, gold brocade, bronze statuary, ostrich-feathers, store windows like jewelry boxes – [this is] the new department store. Ceaselessly, neck and neck, the people push on. The ruler calls. One cheerfully obeys.

I would like to refer to the new Leipzigerstrasse as "Tauenzienstrasse," the Leipzigerstrasse of idle strollers. Farther up in the old western part of the city, along Potsdamerplatz, where Wertheim, Tietz, and Jandorf hold sway, is the Leipzigerstrasse of labor. There, one finds a forever rushing stream of people, little populated by idlers. Here, at the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtnis Church, by contrast – bon vivants, young people, the Berlin "new west" smart set.

Every big city, when all is said and done, develops more or less according to its particular character and individuality. Berlin, the youngest of the European capitals, has undergone such rapid growth that even perceptive observers have failed to take in many of the more striking symptoms and elements of the transformation. The development of the west side of Berlin is, for example, one such symptom. More than one businessman will ask, shaking his head at the Spree metropolis' explosive expansion, how it can all be paid for. No one will deny, however, that the new center of a global metropolis is in the making. It will not be a mere extension of the old Berlin with its scurrying about and carrying on. Rather, a thoroughly independent, elegant, refined, [albeit] no less commercial Berlin is emerging with the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtnis Church as its focal point. And unconfined by any physical limitations, it is creating unprecedented modes of self-gratification in grand style. Those who have closely followed the development of Berlin over the last few years, who have experienced the commercial transformation of upper Leipzigerstrasse, will not doubt that Berlin life and commerce are gravitating westward. The

quarter, the city blocks extending from the Romanische Ecke, were particularly destined, given their location and architectural style, to give the big city an elegant frame, to lend cachet to Berlin's west side. Tauenzienstrasse is already a modern commercial street that will easily equal Leipzigerstrasse once all the plans made in the latter's image have been realized. Once a fashionable residential street along which many of our financial, intellectual, and artistic elites built their *Tuskula*,^[1] Tauenzienstrasse is increasingly becoming the main commercial artery of the west side. Barely finished houses fall to the pickaxe, so as to make room for consumer palaces. Shops are installed [in the ground floors of extant buildings], and the big firms of the old west side establish branches in shrewd recognition of the new business opportunities. The bottom floors of once tranquil apartment buildings are [similarly] becoming places of trade and commercial bazaars. The physiognomy of the entire street front is [being] transformed in one fell swoop. In no less grandiose a fashion, Kaufhaus des Westens has bestowed a new face on the entire area.

Small shopkeepers and firms that feel themselves too weak or insufficiently enterprising to keep up with the great department stores have left the area. New world class firms have taken their place, causing little harm to a local populace understandably long wont to demand the best. Here one breathes the air of a world class city. Many Americans, Englishmen, Frenchmen, Italians, yes, even Asians, have settled here and populate the elegant, in part entirely English- or American-style, inns and boarding houses. Theaters are being built. City squares are all acquiring features characteristic of the efflorescence taking place around them.

NOTES

^[1] *Tuskula* or *Tuskulum* (singular) refers to the ancient Roman town and to Cicero's estate there. At the turn of the previous century, erudite speakers still used the term as a synonym for "landed estate." It is rarely used today – trans.

Source of original German text: Leo Colze, *Berliner Warenhäuser*. Leipzig and Berlin, 1908, pp. 9–13. Available online at: <https://sammlungen.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/varia/content/pageview/8499623>

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