

Separate Stairways for Different Social Classes (1903)

Abstract

This excerpt from a text by the writer Johannes Trojan shows the absurd extent to which the spatial separation of the upper and lower social classes in Wilhelmine Germany could go. The author, a member of the upper classes and editor-in-chief of the satirical weekly magazine *Kladderadatsch*, condemns the social convention of allowing only certain people to enter an apartment building via the front stairs – the decision on this privilege depended largely on external appearance and other visible characteristics.

Source

“Only for the entitled!” is the message that habitually confronts the visitor on the front stairs of our building on the west side of Berlin. It annoys me every time I read it. There is something supercilious and inflammatory about it, and I personally place no value on the expression “entitled.” In Berlin, however, the word “entitled” is very popular. “Apartments for the entitled” are those furnished with a semblance of exclusivity, with marble made of stucco, with “wood” paneling made of paper, and various and sundry optical illusions. In fact, the proud word “entitled” does not even suffice. One has developed a frightful hyperbole, “highly entitled,” which belongs somewhere in the category of crude linguistic nonsense. To reiterate, I do not like the word “entitled,” and I tell myself: Even if one grants the term a certain meaning, it remains difficult to determine, in any specific case, who indeed belongs to the entitled set and who does not. Admittedly, I do not have to trouble myself personally with this question. It is the doorman’s responsibility to allow the “entitled” to ascend by way of the front stairs and to send the “un-entitled” to the back. But does the doorman always make the right decision? Is he enough of a judge of human nature to distinguish between the “entitled” and the “un-entitled”? No, in most cases, he most certainly is not. He merely guides himself by outward appearances and judges accordingly. He calmly permits sycophants and even worse characters to stroll up the front stairs, that is to say, if they are not completely in rags and have nothing in their hands except for a cane or an umbrella. However, if someone carrying a package, or anything else from which one might deduce that he belongs to the “working class,” shows any intention of using the front stairs, the doorman swoops down on him like a madman and chases him to the back stairs. Residents will sometimes let a man out the front door out of laziness or in order to make it easier for him if he has something to carry because the back stairs are often quite steep. One hopes on such occasions that the doorman will perhaps not see, but he always does and comes storming up the stairs to protest the violation of building ordinances. What noise and commotion ensues as a result! And yet, formerly, one managed to use the front and back stairs just fine without such rigorous rules. It makes complete sense that those who have business to conduct in the back rooms take the back stairs. In the new “entitled” residences on the west side of Berlin, an endless corridor tends to separate the front rooms, in which “the entitled” congregate, from the kitchen and the back entrance. Consequently, anyone who comes up the back stairs almost entirely escapes the housewife’s control. For this reason alone, those who have household business (or presume to have household business) to conduct already have a great interest in using the back stairs. The doorman need not keep watch with such painful vigilance over adherence to stairway usage protocol. He rarely fails, however, to let down his guard. In one west side apartment building in which I once lived, my own children were apprehended by the doorman when they came from the bakers carrying bread and were summarily redirected from the front stairs to the back stairs. Heaven forbid! Could any of the residents be offended by a child carrying bread? Even a dyed in the wool, upper civil servant could hazard to cast a friendly glance at a small girl carrying a large loaf of bread, as large as they bake them in this fancy era, without compromising himself. Since I myself am in the habit of picking up this or that item from the

market and taking it home with me, I am forever worried that the doorman will one day prevent me from using the front stairs.

Source: Johannes Trojan, *Berliner Bilder: Hundert Momentaufnahmen*, 2nd edition. Berlin, 1903, pp. 1-3.; reprinted in Jens Flemming, Klaus Saul, and Peter-Christian Witt, eds. *Quellen zur Alltagsgeschichte der Deutschen 1871–1914*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997, pp. 70–71.

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