Karl Scheffler

Berlin – The Psychogramme of a City

Edited and with an introduction by Florian Illies

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Sample translation by Michael Hofmann

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Complete English translation by Michael Hofmann available

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A classic not just for Berliners, but one that helps to understand ›metropolitan psychogrammes‹ of other cities such as Paris, Vienna or London as well

ABOUT THE BOOK:

Berlin, writes Karl Scheffler at the end of his classic 1910 portrait of the city, is damned »forever to become and never to be«. Unlike London or Paris, the metropolis on the Spree lacked an organic principle of development. It was nothing more than a colonial city, its sole purpose to conquer the East, its inhabitants a hodgepodge of materialistic individualists. No art or culture with which it might compete with the great cities of the world. Nothing but provincialism and culinary aberrations far and wide. Berlin: »City of preserves, tinned vegetables and all-purpose dipping sauce«.

Scheffler could not have anticipated that his dictum would prove prophetic. From the golden twenties to the anarchic nineties and its status of world capital of hipsterdom at the beginning of the new millennium – hardly has another author captured the fascinating and unique character of the city as perfectly. The formerly divided city has become the symbol of a new urbanity, blessed with the privilege of never having to be, but forever to become.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Karl Scheffler was an art critic and publicist. In 1906 he published *The Germans and their Art: A Necessary Polemic*, a vehement plea for impressionism as the artform of modernity. He was the editor of the influential journal *Kunst und Künstler* from 1907 until 1933, when it was banned by the Nazis.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR:

Michael Hofmann, born in Freiburg, Germany, in 1957, is a poet and author writing in English and has created award-winning translations of works by the likes of Franz Kafka, Patrick Süskind, Herta Müller, Wolfgang Koeppen and Kurt Tucholsky from German into English. For his own works, he has received many accolades including the Cholmondeley Award, the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize and the Arts Council Writer's Award.

Karl Scheffler

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Content:

‘The sun stood high to greet the earth,
As on the day you were born.
You got up and left: and prospered
According to the law of origin.’

Goethe

On Method

Cities are like people, no two the same.

Each one is a personality, with its specific mood, its specific aspect or character that imprints itself on the beholder. In considering this character, it makes no difference whether one was happy in a place or not, enjoyed living there or not; it is a matter of impressions that contain *in nuce* the whole history of the city, impressions whose objective reality transcends any feelings of sympathy or antipathy one might have. There is such a thing as a synthesizing instinct that takes what one might otherwise have termed the soul of the individual city and precipitates it as atmosphere. Every city is a record of the conditions of its founding, the factors that went into making it and making it the way it is. And this quality, persisting over hundreds of years in habits and customs, traffic and trade, architecture and costume, is continuously at work, shaping each detail, so that you see yourself confronting a singularity, without being able to say what makes it so singular. It would be erring on the side of concreteness if one were to say the different atmospheres can be perceived in the way the eye distinguishes colours; nearer to the truth to say they are like different odours. Nor is it saying much to claim that cities may be aristocratic and plebeian, cheerful and gloomy, melancholy and idyllic, patrician and arriviste. Such words are as inadequate to describe a city as they are a person. It's all in the eye of the beholder.

Nevertheless, you won't grasp the individuality of a city until the feelings you have about it turn into thoughts, unless you make a historic analysis of the instinctive sensations in which the embryonic genesis of the city proposes itself to you, till you succeed in anchoring your instinctive response in the history a second time, consciously.

This type of analysis, this contemplation of a people's character from the way it sets about building a city, is always tremendously instructive and pleasurable. Because if one makes the attempt to read the psychogramme of a city, one becomes aware of energies that are beyond good and bad. Wherever necessity and destiny take on visible form, you can only look on in awe. It's not only an act of obedience to nature, it can be a wise act to seek to identify the critical forces in places where sympathy doesn't necessarily obtain, to take an objective view of things

from which you feel yourself repelled. It is only in this way that one may be reconciled to the essential tragedy of all living beings.

Just as every human being is half typical – the product of genus and species – and half unique – the result of a particular combination of forces – so each city shows typical marks of its coming into being alongside unique signs of development specific to itself. All our historic cities went through the same process of evolution. Every one of them is the focus of greater or lesser areas of interest; everywhere the city of the merchant class, the clergy, the nobility, radiating out from the town hall, the church, the castle or court; the initial settlement becomes a fortified town, which as it grows bursts one wall after another, till finally all walls are left behind, and the suburbs surge unpredictably out into the surrounding country. In every one of our old cities you can identify ring roads following the erstwhile walls and trenches, and radials heading out from the core into the countryside, and everywhere too there are comparable constellations of the most important buildings; in a word, you see everywhere how the same social and economic needs make for a typical structure of the form of a city. But this regular, even invariable, form of becoming enacts itself differently wherever it takes place. Just as people may have numerous factors in common in the way they think and feel, while remaining physically and spiritually discrete individuals, and each human being is unprecedented and unrepeatable, so too each city is something unique.

There are cities one can only describe from the point of view of their origins, and others for which more important is what they have become. The former are almost always the true capitals, they are the focus of their respective countries or provinces, they are beautiful and prosperous, well-grown and harmonious organisms; while the others are generally places whose development was attended by difficulties, that were forced to adjust to unfavourable circumstances, and managed to prevail by sometimes artificial means. While the former resemble happy, well-balanced persons with noble and fully developed gifts, the latter are characters who have experienced the rough edges of life, and by dint of the expenditure of so much effort, have become unlovable and problematic.

Among the cities of the latter sort is Berlin. It is no individual confident of victory who subdues all comers; it is no place in which a German may feel himself at home, where he will see the most noble national traditions and the genesis of an urban history step out to greet him in a living way in the form of a solidified city culture. Rather, Berlin is a gigantic agglomeration of exigency, of need, and far harder than other cities to grasp as an entity. Nevertheless, it too is an organism and an individual, and demands to be understood as such. More than any other German city, it calls for the objective approach beyond sympathy and antipathy, the seemingly cool and indifferent mode of investigation that alone is able to lift the veil of historical necessity a little. Only a look at the historical laws governing the evolution and development of Berlin, a look at the almost tragic fate of this city in its happiness and misery, is capable of modulating the violent instincts of rejection to a kind of awe. Where blanket approval is impossible, and the rejection of what history has bequeathed us would be absurd, all that is left to us is the long view that takes in both the isolated object and the law of its growth, and allows us for a moment almost to set aside such terms as ugly and beautiful.

I said: almost! For who can persist for long in the point of view of a benumbed and impersonal awe!

Development as Destiny

The Colonial City

Looking for a term that applied equally to the million-strong capital city and metropolis and the original settlement of Germanic farmers and Wendish fishermen, I came upon a suggestive remark in Eduard Heyck's book *Deutsche Geschichte*, where he says that the person born east of the Elbe still carries 'a faint but perceptible whiff of the colonist.' Apply this happy formulation to our examination of Berlin, the capital of Eastelbia, and we may arrive at the conclusion that Berlin was always the royal city in a conquered land. Even now, centuries later, it remains in some sense a colonial city.

Berlin was never a natural centre, never the predestined capital of Germany. It was always way off to the side of the principal territories of German culture, yes, of German history; in all its uncouth scale, it somehow grew off to one side of these. For hundreds of years, Berlin was barely mentioned when the affairs of the German Reich were discussed; this city was always extrinsic, and to some extent remains so today. Even now Berlin is a frontier city, and lies, as it has always done, on the eastern fringes of German culture. If you set off into the morning sun, no sooner have you left the gates of this frontier city than you will be in the East. The East! Which is to say: the wide, flat, immeasurable foreland of Germania, the old colonial land taken piece by piece from the less proficient Slav races, the Wends and Poles, reclaimed mile after mile from a barren inhospitable nature. The stream of German culture just about reached Berlin from its sources to the South and the West; then it dried up, as though the vast Ice Age moraine on whose sand Berlin is built had swallowed it all up. Any further East, and you would be in the great beyond. The relation of the East of Germany to the South and the West is as that of a daughter land to a motherland. Berlin is an outpost, just barely far enough West not to risk being cut off; but what comes after is steppe that seems to extend all the way into Russia: small towns, country towns, little administrative centres. In melancholy solitude, the arable and heathland rolls on forever; looking in any direction, the eye sees either the useful and practical, or just a hopeless desert, the forever yesterday or whatever is sufficient unto the day. Even the climate feels easterly, a little like the climate of the steppes. However long this land has been part of the Reich, it still feels newly acquired, and inhabited by a race of tough and hardy pioneers.

Don’t come to me with the names of cities that lie even further east, Dresden, Breslau, Stettin, Danzig or Königsberg. Contrary to geographical fact, Dresden doesn’t feel east of Magdeburg; it is on the Elbe, not in Eastelbia. Breslau is orientated less towards Berlin than to the South, to Austria and to Vienna. And towns like Stettin or Danzig, yes, even to some extent Frankfurt an der Oder, belong not to the East, but the North. They are sea towns, coastal towns; they prove, if proof were necessary, that water was always better at creating connections than land, that it was the sailor not the land man who was the communicator and establisher of cultural forms. Stettin, Danzig and Königsberg, yes, even Riga and Tallinn, were as it were, fellows of Hamburg and Lübeck, foundations of the same Lower German spirit of enterprise, sites of the same Lower German culture of prosperity. Hanseatic and other trading cities are all infinitely more cosmopolitan in their freely adopted bourgeois restraint. They always felt closer to Denmark, Sweden and Holland than to any of the cities in the interior. Berlin, on the other hand, had the feeling of being far inland, landlocked in the sandy scrub and woodland of a thinly and artificially populated colony. For a long time it was not on the map, being at best a way-station on the main caravan routes from the South to the North and the Northeast; a distribution point for goods destined for the East; a refuge for those who had nothing to lose. It was rare for anyone who could have stayed in the motherland freely to choose this city. The lower taxes and other privileges historically extended in Berlin are evidence how difficult it was to keep pioneers in this German edgeland. Other towns in Brandenburg, such as Spandau or Potsdam that came into being at roughly the same time as Berlin, and incidentally also as Wendish fishing villages, were distinguished from the place on the Spree crossing by one crucial factor. Their situations were protected, hidden if you like, behind Berlin, and in its shadow. From the outset they didn’t carry the germ of extension within them, whereas Berlin was on the open highway, where the trade routes had found a way through swamp and marsh over the Spree. For the purposes of the Middle Ages such places as Spandau, Prenzlau, Bernau, Rathenau, Stendal, Brandenburg and others were far more typical. They all enjoyed greater significance, whether as castles and fortresses, places of refuge for the country population, bishops’ seats, residences and cultural oases, than the unprotected Berlin, a sort of chance settlement in its exposed situation. From the very start then Berlin had something of the shapelessness of a modern industrial city. The Berliners were involved in the same sort of struggle to survive against the depredations of the Wends as the other towns named; but they also instinctively saw in East Brandenburg their most

important market. They didn't try to shut themselves off, they made connections reaching deep into Polish territory. And thus, through a role as intermediary between the Germans to the West and the newly German East, without ever having been conceived as a trading town, Berlin came to be a foundation not of self-defence but of enterprise. This was the basis of its modern scale and standing; it gave the town a significance beyond its actual, rather doubtful power. It is often the case that history shows us colonies, once their raw youthful energy is seasoned, overtaking the motherland; so the half-disregarded, half-contemned Berlin, effortfully developing in its distant Eastern locale, became a power, the focus of a new state, and ultimately of an Empire. In spite of which, it has remained a colonial town, always primarily dependent on the respective strength at any given time of Prussia, Silesia and Poland, always facing East and always offering each successive generation a new pioneering fantasy. It has come to be what it is, because its history as a city in a certain way reflects the history of Brandenburg and of the whole Eastern colonial country. From the very beginning its raw, unstructured quality left room for limitless possibilities.

The Inhabitants

Berlin came into being like no other European capital. They were the logical centres, the places where their peoples' best energies flowed together as their collective confidence grew; they were at the heart of the country, to which all forces tended, in order to go out again replenished and refreshed. And so we find, in capitals like Paris, Vienna, London, Copenhagen, and in major cities like Hamburg, Cologne, Dresden or Munich, a real, defined urban economy and a population that was a microcosm of the nation. A population that embodies the qualities of the nation in a pure form, and in whom everything that in the provinces is instinct becomes conscious. Berlin is not like that. It came into being as the result of a push by pioneering Germanic tribes into Wend territory. The only times it grew thereafter was when there was a further push from the West, or the South, or even from abroad. If the number of its inhabitants increased, it was because the local counts, Electors or kings imported a new batch of colonists. Berlin was in every detail a colonial city, every bit as much as the American and Australian cities that popped up out of the bush somewhere. And, just as the American Yankee was the product of German, English, Irish, Scandinavian and Slavic elements, so the Berliner is the outcome of a mingling of blood from every German province, with the addition of Holland, France and some of the Slavic countries. This mingling would never have taken place had it not been for the conquest of the country; the exigencies of frontier life made it happen. It took danger and hunger to dissolve the alien elements into one. Emigrants tend by their nature not to belong to the crème de la crème. The efficient individual who makes his way was at all times able to stay home and take the reins there. Those colonists who moved out to the joyless East, who moved or allowed themselves to be persuaded to go to the joyless German settlement of Berlin, at first by the lessors, the monks and margraves, later on by kings and electors, and finally by the new economic promise of the metropolis, they were basically disinherited in whole or in part. They were energetic, determined, acquisitive and freedom-desiring individuals, younger sons, the oppressed, the unpropertied, and such as did not enjoy the best of reputations at home. And then there was the great mass of refugees or desperadoes who were drawn there by entrepreneurs with the offer of cheap building-land or were beguiled to come by their own predecessors. This sort of mixed population is not greatly interested in the furtherance of culture. It comes late if at all to the enjoyment of rest, is hard to mould into any sort of community, and is therefore unlikely to

create any exquisite new social organizations. But against that it is obdurate, practical-minded, tough and unyielding in the battle for existence, often develops entrepreneurial gifts in the Yankee manner and is in a general sense good at getting its way.

The Berliner as we encounter him today should be seen as the son of emigrants. A descendant of the first Old Friesians and Lower Saxons who penetrated from the Altmark in the twelfth century, forced the Wends back to Alt-Kölln on the swampy river-islands and settled themselves on the right bank of the river; a scion of the German pioneers led by Cistercian monks, those Rhinelanders and Dutchmen who heard the call of Albrecht the Bear, conqueror of the Wends, and whose experience in the cultivation of swampy and sandy land made them especially well-suited to working the soil of Brandenburg. In the wake of these first settlers who prevailed by plough and sword, came waves of further settlers over the centuries. They came from all sides during the reigns of the Ascanians and the Wittelsbachs, during the struggles between the bourgeoisie and the nobility, while Brandenburg was conquered, laid waste, sold off and treated as a distant farm by the nobles who owned it and only wanted to see the tithe from it. They came as mercenaries, adventurers and wanderers and stayed as settlers, as ploughmen, artisans or small traders in Kölln and Berlin. Once the conquered Wends ceased to be enemies and pariahs, once they were less rigidly forced to dwell in their hamlets and swamp settlements, out of the way of the new masters, there was some German-Slavic miscegenation. As elements of the Wendish language were adopted into that of the conquerors and a characteristic settlers' language began to evolve, so the thinking and feeling of the conquered began to be subsumed into those of the victors, affecting their quality, and influencing important traits of what in subsequent history proposes itself as characteristic of Brandenburg and specifically of Berlin. This German-Slavic mixture of races has created its own type of being across the entire Northeast, as far South as Saxony and Silesia; what it made in Berlin had its own distinctiveness, because the mixing of races occurred there earlier and more pervasively than elsewhere. The mixing was well underway by the time the Hohenzollerns first arrived in Brandenburg, when the Black Death made its choking way through the dirty lanes of the two Spree towns of Kölln and Berlin, depopulating the young settlement, and demanding more fresh arrivals from the Reich. At the beginning of the 16th century such terms of abuse as 'Wendish dogs' or 'bastard Wends' that were once regularly heard rending the air on the Mühlendamm or the Lange Brücke have fallen

out of use. Because at that time, the infinitely varied elements of the double-town were sufficiently clarified; or rather, they had in a perfectly literal sense, ‘kissed and made up.’ Then, when the Thirty Years’ War had pummeled, almost demolished the two towns by the river crossing, so hopelessly exposed to any passing column of troops, when the population had been so drastically reduced that there were no more than 556 households remaining in Berlin and a further 379 in Kölln, when under Swedish dominion such misery prevailed in the moribund settlement that its citizens seriously considered a general abandonment of the town and a mass evacuation, then once again it was immigrants from elsewhere, summoned this time by the Grand Duke who came in to fill the gaps. The way that Berlin teetered on the brink of nonexistence in the Thirty Years’ War is a clear sign that even after several centuries, this was hardly a town bursting with self-confidence and sense of mission. Magdeburg fared worse, but no one considered abandoning it. Magdeburg provided a home to its inhabitants, it was a father-town in the true sense; and that was something that even in the late Renaissance Berlin was unable to be to its indwellers. The double-town was not a natural focus to which the life of the surrounding country was repeatedly drawn and where the elites clustered, rather an advance post requiring to be defended year after year, and to which ever new masses of people, Germans and Slavs, French and Jews had to be brought, often by force. Then when the streets began to be populated again under the tutelary rule of the wise Great Elector, when vacant apartments were occupied, ruined houses were rebuilt and new suburbs planned, even this inspired individual was not able to generate a creative affinity and sense of belonging. Because Berlin had once again become the place of a truly colonial mélange of peoples. French Huguenots, drawn thither in such numbers that they had to have whole sections of town assigned to them with their own schools, courts of law, churches and hospitals, who for a long time constituted more than a fifth of the population and domesticated the French language in Berlin, introduced unfamiliar Romanesque elements and cultural forms that were obliged to remain alien, because this town in the East was far from being able to be a fertile ground for the blessings of imported industries; immigrant Dutchmen, finding employment as builders and foremen, attempted to graft their familiar idiom to Brandenburg where no strong local style sought to accommodate them. Then there were the hordes from the Palatinate and from Switzerland, of Salzburgers and Bohemian and Moravian Methodists. Once again, it took the doughty efforts of several generations to make of Berlin’s refugees, the Dutch, the Waldensians, the Austrians and the rest of them into good

Brandenburgers. The populace was still a totally disharmonious collection of ethnic and national groupings, when the wars of Frederick the Great, when the armies of ever different conscript peoples were brought into the young Prussian capital, when the mighty will deployed its own ‘Commission for the Recruiting of Colonists’, and told its envoys in foreign parts to offer all kinds of perks to ‘industrious and disciplined’ workers, when with the help of people from the Palatinate, Swabians, Poles, Franks and Westphalians, the marshes of the Oder were drained, and more than one principality was annexed through peaceful means, and when all these foreigners were made to see Berlin as their capital. Nothing is more revealing of the priorities of the young colonial city even during the time of Frederick the Great than the almost desperate cry of the great colonizer: ‘People, give me people above all!’

One would not expect a population assembled in this way to be artistically inclined. That requires peace, leisure, and a safe and certain development. Not even an alien culture could be seeded. Because the strangers arriving from other, long-established cultures, and finding accommodation so readily in Berlin, they were all exiles, refugees, disinherited. For generations to come, their efforts had to be concentrated on founding a household, on making a new prosperity out of nothing. Whether they wanted to or not, they were obliged to think and act materialistically. Which is to say: they too had to obey the spirit of the town, whose fate had always stipulated that the inhabitants of Berlin were far too busy with the battle for survival, the struggle for bare existence for them ever to break through to any sense of self, to throw off the surplus that is required to make culture and art.

A city population with distinctive traits of its own doesn’t put in an appearance until the first decades of the nineteenth century. At that time, the various populations and racial meldings were better mingled than at any time before or since. It is only then that one begins to see a Berliner with some sort of distinctive identity. In the peaceful decades following the Seven Years’ War and still more in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars the foreign element finally begins to emerge as a specific aspect of the Berliner. Glimmerings of a sense of bourgeois leisure begin to appear. The Berliners of the period are still, as Goethe put it, ‘a bold bunch,’ sober, practical, materialistic, hard to impress or intimidate; but they are beginning to become a unit in some sense. They begin to grasp their purpose, the profane worth of their identity. There is nothing lazy in the Berliner as he now begins to appear. He is starved for knowledge to the point of zeal,

and wildly set on learning anything that can be learned; but as a skeptic and ironist – self-ironist, at that – he is the born critic of all those values he is incapable of producing himself. Full of interests, but hard to enthuse, with his unpictorial imagination always testing the material between his fingers; with no natural access to beauty or sonority, but able to do almost any work the day demands and that aids the day. In this Berliner, Mediterranean wit has been converted into a jeer, and a South German and Dutch sense of civilization have given rise to a hunger for culture that shows itself in eclecticism. There are distinct Slavic after-echoes, and provincial petit-bourgeois traits from Saxony and Silesia. The ethos is cool and unemotional, and many expressions betray an envious mockery of passionately earnest autodidacts. There is no pathos, neither real nor fake, and hence no ability to make oneself look good. There is no magnanimity in this city population and no aristocratic spirit of conciliation; instead, any amount of peasant pedantry and bureaucratic formalism. But there is also the low cunning of survivors of centuries of poverty and misery and the struggle for existence. And that gives rise to a knowing pretense that is only half-concealed behind a blurting uprightness. Nothing seems authentic to the Berliner of these best years except his unlovableness and his colonist's arrogance. No other population has so much in the way of order, discipline and behavior; and none has so little naive sense of naturalness. Desire for culture expresses itself in the form of insatiableness; that insatiableness in turn contains a genuine vitality.

One can't say that the Berliner of these best years, who set the sober accomplishing of day to day life above everything else, is an attractive fellow. But at long last he has a recognizable aspect. The barrenness of his part of the world, the history of his city has raised him to be dispassionate, taught him to appreciate the virtues of solidarity and made him outstanding material for political organizers, an ideal, discipline-hardy and still quarrelsome soldier. This character, who in a bourgeois context is something like a provincial Yankee, who for all his enterprisingness keeps a subaltern aspect, and whose watchword remains duty, made a strange and disagreeable impression on Germans from the West and the South. The only Germans who felt kinship with the Berliner in the times of German particularism were his Eastern neighbours in Silesia and Saxony, West Prussia and Brandenburg, in a word, the other denizens of the colonial soil. Because they could feel how much they had in common with the Berliner. From the perspective of the South or the West, the others looked on with dismay and suspicion as the Berlin self-

improver worked his way up, decade by decade, registered with pained astonishment the way the colonial capital presumed to direct the politics of the Reich, appearing to the sensibility of the dweller of the heartland utterly distant and remote, in a word, almost un-German.