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Peter Fritzsche. *Reading Berlin 1900*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996. X+ 308 S. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-74881-1.

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Reading Berlin 1900 by Peter Fritzsche is a remarkable study of the life of one of the twentieth century's great metropolises, as seen, lived, and experienced on the pages of local mass-circulation newspapers. It is Fritzsche's contention that newspapers were central to the daily experience of contemporary Berliners; they were an indispensable guide to the modern big city and are in turn critical to our understanding of that time and that place. Thus, the double-meaning of the book's title is very appropriate. The perpetual motion and endemic change of the modern big city, Fritzsche asserts, found their ideal literary reflection in newspapers. But newspapers were more than mere reflection: they also helped to construct the modern metropolis as a site for the ongoing dramatization of modern life.

Fritzsche's well-written study of the culture of newspaper reading in turn-of-the-century Berlin offers an intriguing window into a world that is both familiar and fading rapidly. The author's discussion of the vital role that newspapers played in the life of this great and turbulent city is thoroughgoing and richly detailed. His analysis shows how Berlin was, in a sense, actually "created" by the very fact of the rise of a newspaper-reading public. Newspapers helped to define and attempted to order—with limited success—the unbounded space of the modern metropolis; to a large extent they aided the process by which public preoccupations were determined, and facilitated the marketing of Imperial Germany's prodigious industrial output. Newspapers promoted commercialism while redirecting and reconstructing German culture.

What accounts for the phenomenon Fritzsche so wonderfully describes? The author sensibly argues that the growing voice of "the public" in Germany's political affairs since the middle of the nineteenth century was

mediated in part through newspaper reading. He makes a good case for the argument that the development of a civil society in Germany was underway well before 1900. As Fritzsche shows, explanations that either dismiss the rise of a meaningful "public discourse"—as represented in public literature—or which look upon newspapers and other "ephemeral" publications as unlikely sources for the writing of German history in this era are incomplete. Fritzsche has bolstered the case for a new appreciation of a once neglected, yet plentiful, source, without resorting to simplistic notions of *Zeitgeist* or *milieu*. Moreover, the author maintains that turn-of-the-century technology enabled the making of a reading public: modern transportation (streetcars, buses, subways) prompted the invention of "railway reading" and electrification produced an illuminated world wherein reading could occur around the clock. Finally, the great migration from the German countryside to the cities—in Berlin's case, primarily from agricultural East Elbia—sembled an entire class of people thirsty for news about their new home. Newspapers served as their practical orientation, their cheap entertainment source, their basic news and information, and their daily titillation. In short, newspaper reading helped to mold and assimilate these newcomers into metropolitan Berliners—it was what they all had and experienced in common.

Reading Berlin is a compelling and fascinating book. Yet, the author's reading of Berlin reading is at times rather breezy, which raises the concern that something is being missed. In fact, the author's focus on the superficial and fleeting spectacle of the big city experience obscures the drama of high politics in Wilhelmine Germany, also generously reported in the mass-circulation dailies. Furthermore, although Fritzsche discusses the *Vorstadt* as a border zone of special interest, we learn nothing of the

fractious local politics, localism as a suburban ideology, and the debate over metropolitan consolidation. An elucidation of these issues might have aided our understanding of additional conditions that perpetuated the unsettled and unfinished nature of turn-of-the-century Berlin. Moreover, it is perhaps somewhat ironic that the more we learn about what was written and read about Imperial Berlin, the less we learn about those who read, about those who wrote, and about the place that seemed to absorb the attention of most if not all contemporary Berliners.

Finally, the book contains a number of redundancies

that might have been excised in an earlier draft. The absence of a bibliography forces the reader to reconstruct the literature and sources on which the study is based from the notes. The index is rather cursory for a book of this size. But these are minor quibbles and are not meant to detract from an important contribution to the new German cultural history.

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