



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



Reviewed by Benjamin Lapp

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Peter Fritzsche's *Reading Berlin 1900* is an admirable and innovative exploration of the ways in which the rapid growth of Wilhelmina Berlin was reflected in and influenced by the mass circulation newspapers of the city. Fritzsche, a Professor of History at the University of Illinois and the author of several highly regarded books on German history, focuses on an urban setting as a way of illuminating Germany's growing pains at the beginning of the twentieth century. By 1900, Berlin had become one of Europe's great urban centers; the growth of the new German state's capital had happened with remarkable speed in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Berlin was thus defined by a state of constant change and turbulence, which distinguished it from older European metropolises such as Vienna, Paris and London. The city's frenetic growth was mirrored in the proliferation of big-city newspapers which described it. The "built city" and the "word city" embellished one another.

After providing a brief and helpful institutional overview of the rise of mass-circulation papers like the *BZ am Mittag*, the *Lokal-Anzeiger*,

the *Berliner Tageblatt* and the *Berliner Morgenpost*, Fritzsche shows the ways in which these newspapers performed functions central to the urban setting. In very practical ways, the newspapers served to orient a mass readership to the big-city environment: they advertised jobs, announced events and entertainments, and generally provided their readership with signposts for navigating a rapidly changing metropolis. "The city," Fritzsche writes, "simply could not be used without the guidance of newspapers" (p. 18). Furthermore, initiating the tradition of tabloid journalism, these newspapers self-consciously engaged in sensationalism, titillating their readership and creating an intensely engaging experience of ongoing spectacle. The other side of sensationalist reporting as the determined effort to avoid any serious social analysis by focusing the reader's attention on the ephemeral and spectacular.

Nevertheless, Fritzsche emphasizes, despite their avoidance of "deep" analysis, newspapers articulated in profound ways central aspects of the modernist sensibility. In the mass-circulation

newspapers, he points out, "the front-page alteration of stories, each disconnected and discontinuous, resembled in miniature the thoroughly mobilized urban landscape" (p. 189). Drawing heavily on the insights of writers like Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel, Fritzsche demonstrates how print journalism exemplified the modernist experience of fragmentation, instability, speed and transience. In his concluding chapter, the author points out that the importance of newspapers in shaping a specifically urban experience diminished with the rise of new medias like radio and cinema.

Fritzsche's book contributes to our knowledge of Berlin, modern Germany and modern urban experience more generally. Well-researched and well-written, *Reading Berlin 1900* is a highly informative and stimulating study.

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