



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 3. From Vormärz to Prussian Dominance, 1815-1866

Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl: Excerpt from *Land and People* (1851)

In this passage from *Land and People* (1851), Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl postulates that Germany is comprised of three regions marked by differences in the relationship between city and countryside. According to Riehl, the respective inhabitants of these regions differ fundamentally as well. Additionally, he criticizes the "artificial" transformation of cities into traffic junctions and centers of industry, which, in his view, favored *Kleinstaaterei* and impeded German national reform.

First Chapter

Local groups of communities in Germany. Natural and artificial cities. The large cities.

The existence of the contrast between city and country was at the beginning of our century held to be such a common truth that no political person found it worth talking about.

Now the claim that in Germany there is still a distinction between city and country has become, for the one side, a political creed and, for the other side, a heresy. I still believe in city and country, not because it fits in my political system, but rather because I have to believe in the facts, which are presented daily to my senses.

There are many types of city and country in Germany, and the ranges of these natural opposites are so rich, so intertwined, that the one-sided observer may likely believe that city and country no longer exist.

The varied geography of Germany definitely affects the contrast between city and country. Cities and villages are structured in large groups, separated by ineradicable natural differences on the basis of soil formation. The interaction of land and people was also a given, an interaction whose outer forms have certainly been much changed through historical facts and the political course of the nation, but which cannot be shaken in its foundation.

In the highlands, where the wilderness reigns, where forest and field are eternally marked by nature, the countryside rules over the cities. The scattered cities are usually just large villages. Where cliffs and chasms separate village from village, farm from farm, there can only and forever be peasants and no burghers. Wherever a neighbor plans in the autumn the next visit to

another neighbor in the spring, "when the mountain passes are open again," this is where nature determines the shape of the cities. The village itself often appears here in its original form as a group of occasional farms. Indeed, the solitary farm – the wilds, as it is called in the South – was often a community unto itself. The isolation of the farms gives the people a quite distinctive social character. This kind of peasant is the original peasant: closed to the outside world and solidified in his customs, backward in his education and his needs. He is a whole man in his heart and soul, but politically he is a sheep-like child. The isolated farm also has its own ethical face, and its own type of vices like the big city.

This zone of pure farmland is by no means small in Germany. It stretches across a large part of Tyrol, upper and lower Austria, Steiermark, Kärnten, the Bavarian highland, over the higher, less cultivable areas of almost all of the German central mountainous regions and over the marshlands on the North Sea and Baltic Sea coasts. In all of these areas the people appear to be in their purest, but also rawest, natural form; they stand out against the rest of Germany like forest against field, like an impassable road against a wide-open highway. They are poor in historical monuments; the people themselves with their farms, villages, and communities constitute the only monuments. Art history bypassed this region; like the history of trade and industry, it followed the rivers and lowlands; it does not climb willingly into the inner mountain regions. The most artful trade is peasant work in every mountainous region, as it is in the Black Forest, in Erzgebirge, in the Bavarian Alps, and in Tyrol. For the watchmakers, lace-makers, fiddle-makers, and woodcarvers are peasants in a social sense, even if their hands have never touched a plow.

Let us descend deeper into the hills and high plateaus of the south and into the large, open north German plains, where we find the large, true villages next to impressive and in part large cities with the same definite urban character and at the same time, the richest self-contained manors, the most significant and the best preserved remains of the old seats of the landed gentry. Here areas most clearly urban and rural in nature abut one another. These land masses make up the main area of the greater German states, namely Austria, Prussia, and Bavaria. Here are to be found a large number of the most important of the old imperial and Hanseatic cities, in which the most curious bourgeois life still exists today, complete with many of the remnants, if not of the ancient special privileges, then certainly of their offshoots. However, here you will also find the large granaries of Germany. In the sizeable, wealthy villages of this broad, fruitful land, the later village community constitution, as well as the customs and the lifestyle of the genuine German peasant, were most thoroughly formed. The most socially original of these regions, Westphalia, shows us how the different forms of settlement in the form of farms, aristocratic lands, villages, and cities can exist next to each other and, at the same time, the contrast between city and countryside can still be strictly maintained. To the north of the River Lippe are found the court peasants, to the south the village peasants. Beside communities of the formerly free, genuinely aristocratic court peasants, there are communities that still preserve their relationship to the landed gentry out of habit and devotion, even if they are no longer legally required to do so. Beside former imperial cities, there are former princely cities and

modern industrial cities; the individual character has been preserved with all of them, but the great contrast between city and countryside has nowhere disappeared.

It is considerably different in central Germany and in the southwest, the paradise of the political fragmentation born of the small German state. Here the differences between urban and rural communities are rapidly being erased. Only the higher mountain regions, which I already mentioned above, are also an exception to this here. Social levelers like to take this one small part for the whole and ascribe to all of Germany that which is true only for this lesser Germany in the narrowest sense.

In the large landmasses of southern and northern Germany, the Thirty Years War did more lasting damage to the cities than to the villages. The Mecklenburgish, Pomeranian, the old Bavarian peasant today is still a more important social power than the citizens of these areas, whose small cities often remain social ruins. In fragmented central Germany, by contrast, where the Peasants' War had prepared the way for the Thirty Years War, where in the struggle for sovereignty of the many small imperial estates the dominance of the small city and its mentality were most well preserved, the cities first began again to flourish. This flourishing was feeble enough in the miserable age of the wig and the plait; still, the numerous cities of princes and bishops also formed the decisive center of a hundred tiny regions. Thus the small cities dominated the eighteenth century; the large ones will dominate the nineteenth. This proposition becomes most illuminating if one looks at the history of central Germany.

One of the saddest consequences of the Thirty Years War is, in my opinion, the fact that in many areas of Germany, the achievement of the proper balance between city and country was delayed. It enabled a one-sided emphasis on the interests first of the small cities, then of the large ones, to take priority over the interests of the people of the countryside. Thus a hollow blooming of city life devoid of all natural energy was created, next to a rural population that was healthy at its core but which was materially disadvantaged and socially and politically isolated.

After the Peace of Westphalia, all the sad signs of the complete breakup of most farms began to emerge in central Germany, and with it the destruction of the power of the peasants. Horse breeding, which requires large, self-contained farms, disappears first. Then there is a decrease in oxen, then cows, until finally only goats remain as the true domestic animals of the fourth estate, which, without property of its own, can let the goats graze on wastelands and paths and, when the wretchedness is complete, run loose in the grassy alleys of villages and cities.

Even more disturbing is the fact that after the Thirty Years War, the number of families in the villages frequently increased, while the number of houses decreased. Before that time, nearly every family lived in its own house, but now there are already a lot of tenants. However, to rent is not at all peasant-like; in a proper village every family must have its own house, even if it is just a hut. So as tenants move into the houses, the city moves into the countryside.

If one finds a whole range of settlements on the middle Rhine, for example, where it is almost impossible to tell whether they are villages or cities, then these are hybrids blessed by the devil, monuments to political helplessness and social weariness, documents for the obsolescence of rural areas and the unnaturalness of their conditions. Such village-cities are not normally the place where burghers and peasants exist side by side, but rather places of the bourgeois and peasant proletariat. "If all the peasants of the city go to the fields, then there are no more burghers at home."

The ruined villages of southern and central Germany stand together with the artificial cities. Nowhere are there so many "artificial cities" as in Germany where, spiting nature and history, the land has been forced to become the trading centers for both spiritual and material traffic. Nowhere are there so many cities that extort and feign a significance to which they have no right, which through the moods of individuals or because of wrong government policies have become hothouse flowers. These artificial cities have everywhere displaced the natural channels of trade and commerce. They have brought the emphasis on the economy into conflict with the emphasis on politics and thereby helped to shake the foundation of the material blossom of the nation. Wherever we cast an eye upon the map of Germany, we see ancient hubs of trade and commerce shoved aside, while cities have been made the centers of the land and, using all available artificial means, have been built up, cities which according to their location should figure at best as villages or rural towns. The story of the artificial cities is more important than one would like to believe, for it touches upon the sorest point of our twisted nation-building, it is closely related to the great story of our material helplessness and fragmentation, and can speak casually of a most deeply justified resentment and sorrow.

In 1848 and 1849 Rheinhessen was mainly democratically inclined. This province, however, would have been of an entirely different view if one hadn't pushed Mainz into the corner with the building of the Taunus and Main-Neckar railroad, which benefited the artificial middle point of the region, namely Darmstadt. Similar facts could be claimed of almost all natural centers of trade and commerce, and linked to this are a series of remarkable experiences that we have had in recent years. A deep hatred has entered our revolutionary movement, a jealousy continuously expressed in a running battle of the natural, historical cities against the artificial cities, which represent a slap in the face of history. In a good many smaller lands, the thirst for freedom stemmed from the desire to be relieved of the burden of its artificial capital more than the desire to be rid of all of the burdens imposed upon the land by this capital over generations. This relates to the clear impression that, in so many old seats of industry and trade, radicalism reigns not only among the proletariat, but especially among the well-off business people; that in many former imperial cities, which once were the cradle of the genuinely conservative German middle class, now the destructive modern social teachings gain entry the most easily. The old complaint about the stepmother love which the modern state has shown toward the material blossom of these cities has found in the new political movement new fodder, and so has caused the curious distortion in party-building, whereby the propertied, wealthiest, most upright burgher goes hand-in-hand with the homeless, propertyless apostles of revolution.

When I speak of artificial cities and artificial national centers, I think about Karlsruhe in contrast with Mannheim and Constance, etc. I think about Stuttgart in contrast to Esslingen, Reutlingen and Heilbronn, about Darmstadt in contrast to Mainz and Frankfurt, about Wiesbaden in relation to Limburg, about the capital cities of the northwest German states in contrast to Hamburg, Lübeck, and Bremen and so on throughout almost all of Germany. The unnaturalness and eccentricity of the artificial cities under discussion here is not founded upon the fact that they exist at all as cities, for many of them are ancient. Nor does it rest upon the fact that they happen to be royal seats, which as far as I'm concerned can date back many long centuries. It rests solely upon the fact that one has tried to artificially elevate these cities to be traffic hubs, to be seats of industry, to be large cities. We find with the artificial cities exactly the same situation as with the small states, which would certainly have the right to exist, if only they did not aspire to exist as large states. And in fact the artificial cities are the proper bases and buttresses for the political fragmentation born of the existence of the many small states, as both have the same reason to fear the natural reform of our national conditions.

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Source: Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, *Land und Leute* [*Land and People*] (1851). Stuttgart and Berlin: J.G. Cotta'sche Buchhandlung, 1908, pp. 89-96.

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