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Vagabond in the Fugitive City: Hans Ostwald, Imperial Berlin and the Grossstadt-Dokumente

How did one talk about the new-fangled setting of the big city? Not long after his arrival in Berlin from provincial Bern in the winter of 1906, Robert Walser, just twenty-eight years old and an aspiring writer (and later an accomplished poet), reflected on the metropolis and the metropolitan arts. ‘I prefer the street to the theatre’, he wrote, and ‘the primitively-typed newspaper article is more edifying than a well-written novel.’ Relating the street (rather than the theatre) to the newspaper (as opposed to the novel), Walser suggested that traditional literary formats were no longer adequate to represent public life in modern cities. The turn-of-the-century newspaper, with its adventurous layout, short and discontinuous reportage and frequent daily editions, more nearly corresponded to the provisional and fragmentary nature of the city.

Walser’s youthful pronouncement was indicative of a wider debate about modern life and modern art. Did not the city, particularly the turbulent, fast-growing precincts of the industrial city, require new literary and artistic forms? Long before Walser, Baudelaire had posed just this question. Baudelaire argued that while the responsibility of art was always to capture the enduring aspect of the age, the nineteenth century was characterized by its fugitive formations. ‘La modernité’, he summarized in his famous 1863 essay, ‘The Painter of Modern Life’, ‘c’est le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent.’ The century therefore demanded more improvisational artistic practice. A ‘rapid . . . speed of execution’ was necessary amid ‘the daily metamorphosis of external things’. For Baudelaire, the challenge of any account of modern times was to focus on the mutability of society and, at the same time, to acknowledge the provisional nature of description and represen—

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tation. As a result, the metropolis came to be identified with more self-reflective and indeterminate ways of seeing, which can be summed up as the perspectives of turn-of-the-century modernism. ³

What was true of the late nineteenth-century city in general was epitomized by Berlin which, like its North American counterpart Chicago, had ‘telescopéd and grandly reproduced’ industrial development, making it ‘more awesome and more surreal’. ⁴ The exotic or surreal aspect of Berlin was not so much the city’s rapid growth or picturesque sociology as the almost vertiginous instability of its inventory and the restless motions of its transformation. Berlin literally exploded, jumping from one million inhabitants in 1877 to two million in 1905. And almost as many people lived in the ring of suburbs in which most newcomers settled, making Greater Berlin the third largest city in the world. Not only were Berlin’s buildings new, so much so that Baedeker admitted that three-quarters of the structures were ‘quite modern’ and, as a result, the city suffered from a ‘certain lack of historical interest’, but its inhabitants were disproportionately young. ⁵ Working men and women in their twenties made up the largest demographic subgroup, giving the city an unmistakably proletarian stamp and also a restless rhythm, since construction workers, clerks, waitresses and maids changed jobs and apartments with a frequency that no other major European city could match. It was no surprise that residents no longer recognized their home town. ‘Everything is provisional’, wrote the Vossische Zeitung’s feuilletonist, Arthur Eloesser, in 1912; although born in Berlin’s Prenzlauer Berg district in the 1870s, he found himself ‘less at home there than a newly arrived inhabitant, who does not have to cast off any inhibiting memories or troublesome sentiments’. Without the orientation of memory or tradition, life in the industrial city was like swimming ‘toward a shoreless future’. ⁶

Reassembling crowds in ever-changing urban tableaux, reconfiguring buildings and landmarks with each passing year, grafting on new additions of factories, tramcar lines and tenements, Imperial Berlin never acquired a distinctive or permanent physiognomy. It was primarily a work of improvisation. If Paris or even London was old and deep and layered, presenting a repose which provided the flâneur with an archaeology of memorabilia even in the wake of industrial reconstruction, Berlin was relentlessly new, superficial and thus persistently bewildering. ⁷ Eloesser and more reknowned observers such as Mark Twain, Walter Rathenau,
Georg Simmel and Karl Scheffler all found the city’s lack of character its distinguishing trait. By the end of the nineteenth century, Berlin provided a most congenial geography for modernism’s fugitive forms.

Robert Walser’s turn-of-the-century commendation of boulevard newspapers, and also futurist appeals for a cinemagraphic literature some years later or Alfred Döblin’s insistent cry ‘Away from the Book’ (Los vom Buch) and his subsequent experiments with non-narrative techniques of serialization, layering and montage in Berlin Alexanderplatz, suggest how modern Berlin emboldened a new set of metropolitan mapmakers, redirected urban chroniclers and fashioned new ways of telling tales.8

One of the most ambitious and sustained efforts to account for the novel premises of the industrial city was undertaken along the border between literature and sociology by Hans Ostwald, whose edition of fifty pamphlet-sized Grossstadt-Dokumente between 1904 and 1908 ranks alongside Charles Booth’s volumes on London and the collected works of the Chicago School of Sociology. Ostwald conceived of a series of short investigations, each about one hundred pages long and marketed separately, but which together would encompass urban experience, not by compiling exhaustive records, but rather by varying angles of observation and introducing different voices. Although Ostwald directed the project, and wrote five pamphlets himself, the significance of the Grossstadt-Dokumente lies in the diversity of the thirty-odd contributors he assembled. The list of prominent authors whom Ostwald was able to persuade to contribute a pamphlet is impressive. They included such prominent figures as the Social Democrat Reichstag deputy Albert Südekum; Magnus Hirschfeld, a well-known Berlin physician and advocate of homosexual rights; the popular novelist Hans Hyan, Imperial Germany’s equivalent of Jack London; and the literary critic Julius Bab. Ostwald also found more obscure observers to write up their particular glimpses of the city: series authors included several lawyers, a teacher, a clerk, a policeman, a musician and two anonymous Lebeweltmänner (men about town), Satyr and Spektator.9

Ostwald and his collaborators basically revised conceptions of the metropolis by expanding the geographical and social parameters of city reportage and restoring a complexity and liveliness to city characters. What makes Ostwald even more interesting is that he formulated his project keenly aware that the city had
implicated the ways and means of representation, just as Walser had indicated. As a result, his documents combined a multitude of narrative techniques, assumed a variety of optical vantages, and disowned fixed or authoritative views of the city.

For Ostwald, Berlin was a place of instability and mutation, a storyline that he reworked happily for a generation but one from which, as we shall see, he later, in the 1920s, recoiled in horror. This movement from urban virtuoso in the imperial capital to alarmed bystander in Weimar Berlin indicated the Janus face of German modernism and reproduced its darkening features and ominous reactions.10

After years of wandering the German countryside as an itinerant craftsman, Ostwald returned to Berlin, the city of his birth, in the late 1890s. What he found in the capital was a brand new terrain as fresh and unaccountable as the rural landscape he had just left. After completing a novel based on his vagabonding,11 Ostwald set out to explore the metropolis with the aimless meander of the Wanderbursche. Ostwald’s documentary views of the city rested on his marginal status as a vagabond and the itinerant nature of his subsequent urban excursions. The Landstreicher had become Stadtstreicher. In many ways, Ostwald was the literary flâneur whom Walter Benjamin looked for in turn-of-the-century Berlin but never found.

The nineteenth-century city invited the vagabond. Although cities had been fabricated and designed, piece by piece, they had taken on fantastic proportions in the ‘last decades’.12 Again and again, Ostwald referred to the obscure streets and dark corners of the Grossstadt, a territory that was unknown not so much because technical handicaps or inadequate knowledge or even social disdain had left the city unexplored like, for example, the blank spaces on a nineteenth-century European’s map of Africa, but rather because Berlin or Hamburg or any other industrial city was such a brand new conglomeration. Its mystery lay in its novelty. A series of spectacular turn-of-the-century court cases which featured an underworld of corruption, prostitution and murder added to the sense that Berlin constituted a new and rather forbidding territory.13 With this in mind, Ostwald set out to publish a series of pamphlets to provide some sort of documentation of the diversity and to offer a guide (‘Wegweiser’) through the labyrinth of the city. In the years before the first world war, his Grossstadt-Dokumente found a ready audience among city people; the pam-
phlets went through as many as ten or fifteen editions in just two or three years; a few even remain in print today.

Ostwald was obviously not the first ‘Stadtstreicher’, but those investigators who came before him — Julius Rodenberg, Otto von Leixner, Paul Göhre — generally sought out working-class poverty and irreligion and described urban degeneracy. Ostwald, by contrast, focused on the city as a new but integral landscape. Although Ostwald explored the worst slums in the Scheunenviertel, he also introduced the nouveau-riche Westend, traffic around Potsdamer Platz, and new tenement districts on the city periphery. He and his associates investigated not only prostitutes and pimps but well-to-do men about town, and homeworkers, policemen, teachers and feminists; while the Grossstadt-Dokumente recounted a garish Berlin at night, they did not neglect the workaday business of the garment district on Hausvogteiplatz, Wertheim’s grand department store on Leipziger Platz, or the banking empires on Behrenstrasse, and visited cafés, theatres and cabarets, and described religious revivals on Saturday nights and ‘Berliner Sport’ on Sunday afternoons.

The Grossstadt-Dokumente unfurled new maps of the city. While the landmarks of the Reichshauptstadt — the Stadtschloss, Unter den Linden, the various armouries and barracks — faded from view, the elements of the industrial city — social welfare institutions, the criminal justice system, tenement housing — emerged more clearly. Ostwald thereby become one of the first investigators to take stock of Berlin as a metropolis. The Grossstadt-Dokumente also suggested ways to approach the city. Ostwald’s chroniclers presented the urban setting as a complex but comprehensible ecology in which separate roles, functions and inter-relations could be uncovered and annotated. Cafés and dance-halls, for example, were discussed in social terms of the clientèle they served; local neighbourhoods were shown to produce their own characteristic institutions. Readers were led through the garment industry: the physical layout of the Hausvogteiplatz, factory-owners, salesmen, the international market, the ‘Gelbsterne’ (or models), the middlemen and, finally, impoverished homeworkers.14

Even the most shocking aspects of the city had an ecological coherence which the Naturalist emphasis on urban depravity and deformation had missed entirely. In an extensive discussion of pimps and prostitutes, for example, Ostwald analysed the poor working conditions of maids and waitresses, the pressures on
middle-class girls to keep up appearances, the attractions of independence, and the pull of passion and love, even in the underworld. From this, Ostwald concluded that neither prostitutes nor pimps could be regarded as passive victims. Rather they appeared in the *Grossstadt-Dokumente* as full-blooded individuals with emotional needs and desires who had scripted their own lives to a large degree. Indeed, Ostwald is notable because he was one of the few German authors to portray the underclass with full and sympathetic strokes.

Although Ostwald did not obscure from view the hardship and misfortune of the city, he formulated an early version of structural-functionalism, an innovation which broke decisively with prevailing views that had generally seen the city as a degenerate, unnatural formation. For all structural-functionalism's misleading and often Panglossian assumptions about social harmony and balance, Ostwald's method approached urban settings with respect; he sought to identify working components and useful relations rather than malfunctioning parts. Readers of the *Grossstadt-Dokumente* did not find the otherwise familiar misanthropes who stocked the fiction of best-selling naturalist writers such as Clara Viebig or Max Kretzer; nor did they find the apocalyptic forebodings of Expressionistic poets Georg Heym and Jakob van Hoddis. Rather, the city was presented as something of 'cultural value', a functioning organism with 'advantages' as well as 'deplorable conditions'. As an empathetic, explanatory sociology, the *Grossstadt-Dokumente* provided urban readers with a compelling counterpoint to the widely distributed anti-urban tracts of the Wilhelmine period.

One sets the *Grossstadt-Dokumente* aside with an overwhelming sense of abundance. Wandering alongside Ostwald on his 'Stadtstreichereien', crossing and recrossing the city garden, readers were introduced to a rich variety of sights and sounds and characters in highly evolved settings. Evidently, the industrial metropolis, like the German countryside, could be explored for a complex ecology of lifestyles and customs. More significant than the actual introductions to the matters of the city, however, was the way Ostwald looked at and represented the city. Adopting the restless practice of the browser, the lazy meander of the *Landstreicher*, the furtive assemblages of the *bricoleur*, Ostwald was able to reveal the fantastic variety and transitory inventory of the metropolitan archive. It was these very formalities which made the *Grossstadt-
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*Dokumente* so innovative and compelling. No Berlin chronicler, whether Friedrich Sass and Ernst Dronke in the 1840s or Julius Rodenberg and Johannes Trojan in the 1880s and 1890s, had so consciously let the city influence the style and format of representation as Hans Ostwald.19

Ostwald addressed head-on the problem of literary modernism. He questioned the adequacy of conventional narratives to represent the fantastic big-city compound of fleeting sensations. Given the ‘bewildering speed’ with which the city had grown at the end of the nineteenth century, it was no longer possible, Ostwald maintained, to capture city matters in a single work of art. Metropolitan stock was too sprawling and too indeterminate to be held fast by even the voluminous ‘applied sociology’ of Emile Zola’s realist novels. At the same time, academic studies, however comprehensive in scope, were too detached to relate recognizable life experiences or register the drastic changes of the city. A plausible account of metropolitan diversity required literary formats which forsook complete inventory for ‘short, crisp’ reportage. Quickly assembled documentations, Ostwald argued, were best suited to report on the vast and transitory contents of the city.20

Some ten years earlier, Otto von Leixner had come to the same conclusion. Although Leixner, in his *Soziale Briefe aus Berlin*, limited himself to an investigation of the working classes, he conceded that the industrial city had made conventional literary approaches obsolete.21

For a number of reasons, it is impossible to portray the diversity of today’s city comprehensively. The number of events is so great that no single narrator, even with the best of will, can oversee everything... Another factor makes it complicated to fix a picture: the rapid fluctuation of scenes. Lots of things that appear to be stable today, are already gone tomorrow; sentiments and opinions change.

The point of Leixner’s epistolary or Ostwald’s documentary instalments was to bring Berlin’s diversity to light by way of first-hand illustrations rather than to classify and ‘nail down’ (*festzunageln*) the city once and for all.22

The most effective and popular way to reveal the diversity of the metropolis was simply to ramble through the city in search of variations on a theme. Eberhard Buchner, for example undertook a study of Berlin cabarets, describing ‘Volksvarieté’, ‘Familienvarieté’, ‘Vorstadtvariaté’, ‘Räuberhöhle’ and ‘Interna-
tionale Varieté’. Ostwald himself journeyed to half a dozen different ‘Tanzlokalen’ tucked into interior courtyards, clustered around ‘das goldene Eck’ at Oranienburger Tor, or scattered, ‘ganz weit draussen’, on the city periphery. The pamphlets that were the products of these physiognomical excursions added up to a string of loose scenes, as diverse as they were inconclusive. ‘Satyr’, who on the basis of personal experience recounted Lebeweltnächte in der Friedrichstadt, described his project as simply fragments: his sketches reproduced the ‘genüsslicher Müßiggänger’’s nocturnal sampling (‘durchkosten’) of the city.

Perhaps the most innovative of the Grossstadt-Dokumente was the so-called ‘diary’ of a Berlin musician. According to the afterword, the author, Victor Noack, purchased the diary from a dance-hall pianist who had married, settled down and finally left behind the itinerant life of a grosstadt Musikant. Recounting the struggle to find gigs, wandering through dance-halls across Berlin, it is a superb documentation of the uncertainties of big-city life. In all likelihood, the afterword was invented to lend an aura of authenticity to the manuscript, which Noack composed himself. But the fact remains that the chronicler found an innovative, highly successful way to convey the transitory nature of the metropolis: the loose, unconnected format of ‘diary’ entries.

Ostwald’s physiognomical excursions through city places, Satyr’s night-time browsing and Noack’s diary entries were all literary experiments which sought to record the vast and shifting inventory of the city. Each form neglected narrative order and cohesive story-lines in order to emphasize the disorderly, transient and abundant contents of the city. At each stop across Berlin, in the cafés and dance-halls and underworld dives, which are all precisely located and carefully described, Ostwald, Noack and others collected distinctive urban moments: cries, whispers, murmurs, even whole conversations and life stories. Documentation thereby not only provided a first-hand account of city life but remained faithful to the kaleidoscopic quality that the chroniclers believed to be the distinctive quality of the metropolis.

Deliberately honing a feuilletonistic style to ‘write’ the big city, blurring the distinction between literature and sociology, Ostwald picked up the talk of two homeless men on a park bench, the whisper of prostitutes propositioning their clients in the Kaiser-Gallerie, the cries of young street-hawkers selling matches along Friedrichstrasse. Elsewhere, Ostwald clambered aboard a sub-
urban train to observe young women on the way to a dance in Friedenau. He reproduced their conversation and laughter, described their clothes and mimicked the sounds of the dance band. What he did not do, however, was to tell a story with a beginning and an end; he simply sketched a scene, provided another alternative of metropolitan life. To try to tell street stories according to dramatic requirements was to distort metropolitan matters. Life in homeless shelters, which Ostwald discussed in a lengthy review of Maxim Gorki’s work, or any other urban institution was simply an accumulation of ‘loose scenes’: ‘All the requirements of drama cannot capture them. There is simply no build-up, no plot, no climax that is brought about by a dramatic character’ or incident.

Ostwald was unapologetic about the informal literary treatment of sociological observations. He claimed that this approach was the only way to convey ‘the most direct impressions’. Berlin’s ‘Grossstadt’ chroniclers thus formed an ‘anti-sociological’ chorus that took the side of ‘feeling’, ‘intuition’ and art in the raucous turn-of-the-century debates between literature and science.

At each stop, the *Grossstadt-Dokumente* also introduced readers to specific places and specific people. Berlin thereby gained a rich pointillist splendour. Ostwald took readers along to a hangout of pimps and prostitutes, the famous Café National at 76 Friedrichstrasse. We learn that the districts around the Tiergarten, Bellevuestrasse, Schadowstrasse and Flottwellstrasse contained the addresses of Berlin’s finest gaming clubs. Author Albert Weidner provided a close description of an anarchist tavern between Brunnen- and Ackerstrasse in the neighbourhood of Wedding. Further north, Albert Südekum ventured up to the ‘dritter Stock des Quergebäudes’ in a sidestreet tenement near Reinickendorfer Strasse. Other contributors carefully described the law courts at Moabit or the commercial palaces on Hausvogteiplatz.

At the same time, readers met actual people: exclamations, rough talk, interviews and life stories all become repositories of the experience of living in Berlin. In Satyr’s account of night-life in the Friedrichstadt, for example, we get to know Der Leutnant, Der ‘Bookmaker’, Der Börsenschnorpel and ‘Hitty’. Hans Hyan introduced criminals such as ‘Revolverfred’ and ‘Narbenemil’ (Scarface Emil). The *Grossstadt* chroniclers typically presented a stage full of ‘types’ along their physiognomical excursions: the
various life-histories of pimps, the different routes to unwed motherhood, the diverse destinies of cabaret players. Indeed, a number of Grossstadt-Dokumente were simply collections of recounted first-hand experiences. Although the authors generally interspersed their own commentary, the separate layout and distinctive voices of these case-studies suggested an abundant, complex metropolis that could be grasped only at the level of the individual. The documents thereby composed a detailed inventory that undermined again and again any overarching order or even social sameness to Berlin.

The disorder of the city disassembled and fragmented the narrative style of the Grossstadt-Dokumente and also littered the documents themselves. Long before Döblin, Ostwald collected all kinds of urban debris. Ostwald reproduced advertisements and republished brochures and flyers handed out along the streets. Leo Colze concluded his investigation of the department store with a two-page list of items that could be purchased in the Kaufhaus des Westens. Ostwald also reassembled snippets of conversations, recorded cabaret chansons and favourite dance numbers, and scattered his texts with slang. Hans Hyan went so far as to provide a dictionary of underworld slang; Magnus Hirschfeld did the same for homosexuals. Albert Weidner introduced authentic documents and speeches into his account of Berlin anarchism. Various pamphlets also provided long extracts from letters, an approach that not only recreated the immediacy of social experience but also reproduced the montage effect of city sensations.

Hans Ostwald’s Streifzüge through the city must be placed in the well-mined field of urban physiognomy. At first glance, he seems simply to introduce readers to the salacious aspects of Berlin: cabarets, prostitutes, homosexuals. What makes Ostwald’s project distinctive, however, is that his descriptions of Berlin did not create composites and typologies but rather revealed the endless variety of the city. His physiognomical readings of the rapidly changing metropolis tended to admit more disorder and flux than the urban tableaux of the eighteenth or nineteenth century. The innumerable differences of habit, speech, figure and dress that were recounted and rearranged in the Grossstadt-Dokumente underscored the very limitations of typology. This attention to difference tended to undermine a coherent vision of the city. On-site reports, behind-the-scene investigations and portraits of specific places and passing events emphasized the singular and
particular aspects of the city at the expense of more generic patterns. What physiognomies gained in detail they thus lost in universality: Momentbilder, snapshots of city places and city people, accented the transitory and fluctuating composition of the metropolis. In this case, the practice of urban physiognomy, which threatened to typecast city people, also trained observers to examine and re-examine metropolitan marginalia and to question any form-fitting cohesion that might be imposed on the city. Insofar as it retrieved fragmentary and ill-fitting elements to insist on new contrasts and new variations, Ostwald’s Berlin physiognomy posed a basic challenge to the authority of generic categories and grand schemata.

The Grossstadt-Dokumente described the transitory archive of the city in other ways as well. Various kinds of texts — diaries, letters, interviews, case-studies, conversations, dictionaries — composed a word city whose formal characteristics reproduced the fluctuating and kaleidoscopic experience of the industrial city. Both in style and substance, then, the Grossstadt-Dokumente’s approach to the city can be regarded as distinctively modernist. Ostwald and his fellow urban explorers constantly amended the ways and means of representing Berlin, experiments which became essential parts of the metropolitan story. As Georg Simmel had noted in a study of Rodin: modern ‘art not merely mirrors a world in motion... its very mirror has itself become more labile’.35

There is little in early twentieth-century urban sociology to match the imaginative breadth of Ostwald’s attempt to account for the industrial city. Charles Booth’s Life and Labour of the People of London, which appeared in seventeen volumes between 1889 and 1903, is more monumental in scope but far less innovative in style or approach than Ostwald’s documents. Although Booth loved ‘evening roaming’ and visited the ‘coffee palaces’, music halls and missions of London’s East End, he purposefully practised a scientific method which muffled the voices of London people. He relied heavily on statistical techniques and questionnaires distributed to social workers; only at the end of the investigative process did he permit his associates to interview the subjects themselves. As a result, the reports were prepared without the extensive use of direct quotations and were generally written in the third person. They are entirely inflected with the authoritative tone of comprehensiveness, something Ostwald deliberately eschewed. Even so, the dry and detached style of English empiri-
cism occasionally gave way and Booth anticipated Ostwald by introducing specific families such as Reuben Green and his children or the Grants and the M'Phersons, provided detailed descriptions of Shelton Street or Macklin Street, and itemized the papers found on the corpse of a young pauper, which included a ‘bailiff’s business card, which announced, “Undesirable tenants speedily ejected”’, a “hearty welcome” card to a free meal at a mission-hall’, ‘four halves of four cancelled checks’, and ‘a letter commencing “My dear son” and ending “Your affectionate mother”’.36

The Chicago School of Sociology, which William Isaac Thomas founded in the 1890s and Robert Ezra Park brought to national attention in the 1910s and 1920s, is much closer in spirit to Ostwald’s project. Like Ostwald and his associates, University of Chicago sociologists emphasized a subjective, documentary and even playful approach to the city which borrowed heavily from the imaginative repertoire of the big-city reporter. Park urged his students to ramble through the city, ‘mosey around’, assume aliases and other roles and, thereby, like an ethnographer abroad, make sense of the characters and customs on city streets and in storefront places. The result was path-breaking sociologies of gangs, hoboes, hotels, dance-halls and various Chicago neighbourhoods. Each study introduced readers to distinctive voices and specific locations which, taken together, revealed the city as a colourful, fragmented mosaic, criss-crossed by abrasive juxtapositions. Although Park stressed the overall ecological order of the city, his documentary method accented those metropolitan elements that were singular, in flux or different. Indeed, as Thomas remembered in an autobiographical statement, it was the haphazard scattering of urban debris that first inspired his investigative sociology:

I trace the origin of my interest in the document to a long letter picked up on a rainy day in the alley behind my house, a letter from a girl who was taking a training course in a hospital, to her father concerning family relationships and discords. It occurred to me at the time that one would learn a great deal if one had a great many letters of this kind.37

Of course, neither the fragmented readings of the Chicago School nor Hans Ostwald’s pointillist account of Berlin was wholly innocent. The fugitive appearance of Berlin was heightened by the highly selective angles of perception Ostwald favoured. The
casual browsers of the city in fact returned again and again to particular points of circulation: the tenement courtyard (but rarely tenement apartments themselves); the periphery where the matters of the city collided with the stock of the countryside; turbulent zones of transition in the city centre (but not the built-up districts where most people lived); the garish shopping arcades (but not plainer commercial avenues); dance-halls (but not ordinary working-class cafés); twilight (but not midday). Interstitial areas such as these choreographed urban collisions and urban juxtapositions, brought all manner of opposites together, presented an 'always changing, always colourful picture', and thus told much more interesting stories.38

The fugitive city that the *Grossstadt-Dokumente* described was a distinctly modernist topos in which elements were constantly in flux and certainties banished, and which bent and shifted angles of perception. In this case, documentation did not serve to make the metropolis more legible or less frightening to the middle classes, an impression which, according to Walter Benjamin, had been the primary intention of earlier urban physiognomies. Nonetheless, the innovative practice of Ostwald's documents and the sympathetic, meandering habitude of his *Stadtstreicher* obscured as many aspects as they revealed. A focus on interstitial spaces, on zones of transition, on colourful life-histories tended to disassemble and fragment a city that was, at the same time, becoming more uniform under the impress of the industrial work rhythms. If authors such as Albert Weidner made a study of Berlin anarchists, they practically ignored Berlin proletarians. Ostwald and his associates made little effort to look at daily life in the tenements or working conditions in the factories. A mosaic pattern of neighbourhood taverns and *Vorstadt* dance-halls left obscure the increasingly city-wide leisure habits that were emerging around the Wannsee, Lunapark, Aschingers and store-front cinemas.

The focus on instability and variability was itself a construction that suited the sensibility of turn-of-the-century modernism. In the hands of Ostwald, the city emerged as a fantastic place abundant with possibility. He located the city's character in the ceaseless rhythms of mutation, experimented with modernist forms of representation that were adequate to this mutability, and did so without nostalgia for an older civic experience.

Yet, the Berlin that had been an exciting journey of discovery in the years 1904–8, in which Ostwald could challenge the preten-
sions and assumptions of the Wilhelmine establishment with symp-
thpathetic portraits of prostitutes, vagabonds and other metropolitan
marginalia, turned increasingly ominous after the hardship years
of war and revolution. Although Ostwald never updated the
Grossstadt-Dokumente, he continued to tell stories about Berlin.
His most influential book during the Weimar years was Sittege-
schichte der Inflation, ‘ein Kulturdkument’, as he put it.39 Many
of the same characters introduced in the Grossstadt-Dokumente
reappear in the Sittengeschichte: criminals, gamblers, hustlers, pros-
titutes, musicians, occultists. But rather than exotic mutations on
the new ground of the industrial city, they are vilified as parasites.
Rather than expanding the idea of ‘Volk’ and bringing city people
of all kinds closer together — the often-stated goal of Ostwald’s
earlier documentaries — the Sittengeschichte polices the borders
surrounding the Volk, at once emphasizing and segregating the
margins in an effort to make more sanitary the core.

Each chapter details by way of extensive documentary quo-
tations and lurid illustrations yet another aspect of inflationary
vice and each concludes with a sentence that single-handedly
restores the virtue of the majority. And, for the first time, Ostwald
repeatedly introduces the ‘German people’, ‘German civil ser-
vants, or ‘German women’, a unified national subject he had not
distinguished in his pre-war writings. Threatened by inflationary
fevers, rapacious outside pressures and internal division, the
‘German people’ held fast, continuing ‘to believe in their futures’.
Despite extortion, bribery and corruption, ‘the great majority of
German civil servants remained incorruptible’, apparently because
the ‘gainfully employed are always immune to the virus of specu-
lation’. ‘Male or female’, Ostwald wrote in a typical concluding
section, ‘students remained objective and purposeful, despite the
moral confusions of the time.’ The same applied to ‘the majority
of German women’.40

For Ostwald, the carnival of the city at the turn of the century
had collapsed into a house of horrors of which he wanted no part.
The modernist features of the city in 1924 recall those of 1904 —
instability, mutability, uncertainty — but they are invoked to
extinguish rather than celebrate difference. The colourful play on
metropolitan identities and metropolitan niches had been sub-
sumed by the grinding work of social homogenization which
emphasized the virtuous sameness — the basic thrift and hard
work — of the German people. This remarkable ‘displacement of
difference’ is understandable only against the background of war, which licensed an overarching nationalist project that promised to recast and administer Germans. By the 1920s, Hans Ostwald had placed himself in the service of this grander, sternler ideal and left behind the more cosmopolitan uncertainties of pre-war Berlin.

Notes


9. See Ostwald’s outline of the project in the endpages of Julius Bab, Die
Berliner Bohème, Grosstadt-Dokumente, Band 2 (Berlin 1904). Otherwise, very little is known about Ostwald, who left few substantial traces in literary archives and has received no scholarly attention. Born in Berlin on 31 July 1873, Ostwald died in obscurity in Berlin-Zehlendorf on 8 February 1940. The fifty Grosstadt-Dokumente (Berlin 1904–8) included the following titles on Berlin, in order of appearance: Hans Ostwald, Dunkle Winkel in Berlin; Julius Bab, Die Berliner Bohème; Magnus Hirschfeld, Berlins drittes Geschlecht; Hans Ostwald, Berliner Tanzlokale; Hans Ostwald, Zuhältertum in Berlin; Eberhard Buchner, Sekten und Sektierer in Berlin; Hans Ostwald, Berliner Kaffeehäuser; Georg Bernhard, Berliner Banken und Geldverkehr; Albert Weidner, Aus den Tiefen der Berliner Arbeiterbewegung; Arno Loeb, Berliner Konfektion; Victor Noack, Was ein Berliner Musikant erlebte; Johannes Tews, Berliner Lehrer. J. Werthauer, Berliner Schwindel; Eberhard Buchner, Variété und Tingeltangel in Berlin; Wilhelm Hammer, Zehn Lebensläufe Berliner Kontrollmädchen; Friedrich Hoeniger, Berliner Gerichte; Spektator, Berliner Klubs; Ella Mensch, Bildersümpfer in der Berliner Frauenbewegung; Max Marcuse, Uneheliche Mütter; Hans Hyán, Schwere Jungen; Walter Turszinsky, Berliner Theater; Satyr, Lebeweltmacher der Friedrichstadt; J. Werthauer, Moabitirium; Ernst Schuchardt, Sechs Monate Arbeits- haus; Assessor, Berliner Polizei; Hans Ostwald, Berliner Spielertum; Hans Freimark, Moderne Geistergeschwörer; Karl W. Baer, Der internationale Mäch- chenhandel; Leo Benario, Die Wucherer und ihre Opfer; J. Werthauer, Sittlichkeitsdelikte der Grosstadt; Magnus Hirschfeld, Die Gurgel von Berlin; Walter Bahn, Meine Klienten; Clerk, Berliner Beamte; Martin Ebeling, Grosstadt Sozialismus; Albert Südekum, Grosstädtisches Wohnungsellend; Leo Colze, Berliner Waren- häuser; Georg Buschan, Geschlecht und Verbrechen; Alfred Lasson, Gefährdete und verwahrloste Jugend; and Edmund Edel, Neu-Berlin.


12. Hans Ostwald, Dunkle Winkel in Berlin, Grosstadt-Dokumente, Band 1 (Berlin 1905), i.


15. Hans Ostwald, Zuhältertum in Berlin, Grosstadt-Dokumente, Band 5 (Berlin 1905), 15–18; idem, ‘Gelegenheitsdörnchen’, in Berliner Dirmenent, 2 vols (Leipzig 1905), 5–6; Wilhelm Hammer, Zehn Lebensläufe Berliner Kontrollmädchen, Grosstadt-Dokumente, Band 23 (Berlin 1905), 100–11; and Max Marcuse, Uneheliche Mütter, Grosstadt-Dokumente, Band 27 (Berlin 1906), 49. See also Ostwald, Maxim Gorki (Berlin 1904), 25.

16. See also Ostwald, Landstreicher (Berlin n.d.), 2–4; idem, Vagabunden.

17. Description of Grosstadt-Dokumente in the endpages of Friedrich Hoeniger, Berliner Gerichte, Grosstadt-Dokumente. Band 24 (Berlin n.d.).


19. Even the superb analysis by Köhn, Strassenrausch, neglects the stylistic innovations of the documentation and thus underestimates Ostwald’s originality.
20. Ostwald, Dunkle Winkeln, op. cit., i.
22. Ostwald, 'Vorwort', Dunkle Winkeln, op. cit. Ostwald repeats his conviction that academic works distort by not respecting the mutability of their subject matter in Rinnsteinsprache. Lexicon der Gauner-, Dirnen- und Landstreicher sprache (Berlin 1911), 4.
23. Eberhard Buchner, Varieté und Tingeltangel, Grossstadt-Dokumente, Band 22 (Berlin 1905); and Hans Ostwald, Berliner Tanzlokale, Grossstadt-Dokumente, Band 4 (Berlin 1905).
24. Satyr, foreword, Lebeweltmächte der Friedrichstadt, Grossstadt-Dokumente, Band 30 (Berlin n.d.).
25. Victor Noack, Was ein Berliner Musikant erlebte, Grossstadt-Dokumente, Band 19 (Berlin n.d.). That Noack later published Der Deutsche Arbeiter-Sängerbund. Eine Materialsammlung des Bundes-Vorstandes (Berlin 1911) is a further indication that he is the author of the documentation. In any case, Noack would not have been the only author to create the form of the ‘lost’ diary. See, for example, Margarete Böhme (ed.), Tagebuch einer Verlorenen (Berlin 1903), which concerns a provincial girl. Thymian Gotteball, who meets an early death as a prostitute in Berlin. According to the new edition (Frankfurt 1989), the diary was probably written by Böhme. I owe this information to Charles W. Haithausen, ‘A New Beauty’: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s Images of Berlin, in idem and Heidrun Suhr (eds), Berlin: Culture and Metropolis (Minneapolis, MN 1990), 92 n91.
27. Hans Ostwald, Berliner Tanzlokale, Grossstadt-Dokumente, Band 4 (Berlin 1905). It was just this unseminal, unadorned serialization that Ostwald prized in Maxim Gorki’s tales of the urban underground. See Ostwald, Maxim Gorki, op. cit., 56.
29. Ostwald, Berliner Tanzlokale (Berlin 1905), 9. See also the summary of Dunkle Winkeln in the endpages of Hoeniger, Berliner Gerichte, op. cit.
31. Hoeniger, Berliner Gerichte, op. cit.; Loeb, Berliner Konfektion, op. cit.
32. Hans Hyan, Schwere Jungen, Grossstadt-Dokumente, Band 28 (Berlin 1906).
34. Leo Colze, Berliner Warenhäuser, Grossstadt-Dokumente, Band 47 (Berlin 1908), 78–9.
35. Simmel on Rodin quoted by Frisby, Fragments of Modernity, op. cit., 47.
37. Ulf Hannerz, Exploring the City: Inquiries Toward an Urban Anthropology (New York 1980), 21. See also Rolf Lindner, Die Entdeckung der Stadtkultur: Soziologie aus der Erfahrung der Reportage (Frankfurt 1990); Fred H. Matthews,
Quest for an American Sociology: Robert E. Park and the Chicago School (Montreal 1977); and Cappetti, Writing Chicago, op. cit.

38. Ostwald, Dunkle Winkeln, op. cit., 21. The same point is made for Booth by Judith R. Walkowitz, City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London (Chicago 1992), 34; and for the Chicago School by Lindner, Die Entdeckung der Stadtkultur, 110–12.


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