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Journalist Johannes Gross Pleads for a More Urbane Berlin Republic (1995)

Frustrated with the provincialism of politics and the lack of communication among the elites in Bonn, journalist Johannes Gross pleads for the emergence of a more urbane and cosmopolitan political style in Berlin – one commensurate with the increased importance of the larger Federal Republic.

The Capital

[. . .]

Bonn, the capital without any historical qualifications, owing its existence mostly to its proximity to the house of old Adenauer, symbolized a discontinuity in German history that was greatly desired by the Germans. Its name alone seemed to guarantee that German power-politics would no longer be pursued, that from now on politics would in fact be more idyllic than dangerous and unworthy of any undue regard; politics was not the most important thing in the life of the nation.

Bonn's political style was in line with this. Politics lived in Bonn like a lodger, isolated from the goings-on of the old city; only the civil servants reside there, cultivating relationships among themselves in tight quarters in their newly erected apartment buildings. The parliamentarians come to the capital only during the weeks when parliament is in session – from Monday afternoon to noon on Friday; they live in small apartments without family and spend their free time in the many places that have been provided for them and where they have to pay little or nothing. Contact with the world beyond the party faction, parliament, the state representation from back home, or a closely connected interest group is not part of the regular program. [. . .] It follows that Bonn's political style was always one of self-isolation from society and within politics and that it also involved the self-isolation of its members from one another. That is why Bonn-style politics were always mediated, through formal conferences, through press statements, often addressed not to the public but to someone who could have been an informal conversation partner under different circumstances, and through the support of the media.

The second constitutive element of the Bonn style was the absence of the people. Bonn is a medium-sized city, dominated by federal government personnel, and by the university with its professors and students; local residents, who are scattered everywhere and who provide the necessary day-to-day services, account for the remainder of the population. There are virtually no workers because large businesses are missing; there is a flag factory that is still well-known beyond the city and the manufacturer of prodigious quantities of gummi bears; and there is someone who cooks up egg-liquor. Bonn cannot perceive problems in the economy or the labor market as its own. [. . .]

The federal capital of Berlin will create a political style that is fundamentally different. There is no way that the name Berlin can be linked to the word “provincial,” which always clung to Bonn – unfairly so, because the politics conducted in Bonn from Adenauer onwards was by no means provincial in caliber, but certainly held its own in terms of efficiency and results alongside the politicking done in large capitals. The goings-on in Bonn were seen as provincial in Munich, Frankfurt, and Hamburg, though it was not recognized that these cities were in fact provincial themselves – though only in terms of politics, of course. They were home to a political naiveté that believed itself morally superior; the *Stammtische*¹ where people engaged in feeble moralizing were found in those cities, not in Bonn. Anyhow: the metropolitan flair that is being restored ever more nimbly and the character of Berlin will guard against the stigma of provincialness.

On behalf of the new capital and the old, one must first state the simple truth that in the coming decades Berlin can only win, and every other German metropolis can only lose. However, a second simple truth must be added straight away: every capital is threatened by a loss of political substance, and that is especially true of the European capitals. As long as the capital market is global and free, there will be no government that is still the master of its national economy in the long-accustomed way, and European unification irrefutably brings the loss of competencies in its wake, a loss that is increasingly draining everything outside of the economy as well, even if the process of unification will not formally include foreign and security policy for a very long time to come. [. . .]

Yet the capital cities, Berlin included, will be left with a substantial political preserve. The internal makeup of the states will be determined in these cities, and, because no one wants to put his soul at someone else’s disposal, we Germans, too, will finally abandon the urge – not infrequently felt in Bonn – to delegate as much as possible of our own affairs to Europe and to excuse ourselves from politics (which also revealed itself in the fact that we prefer small-caliber personnel for the European bodies and thus exempt ourselves from any significant influence). Berlin will become a capital in the same way that Paris and London are capitals. Our capital has firm cultural foundations but insufficient social and economic ones, and virtually no unbroken tradition that could be carried on. The city, which is dealing with reunification with more difficulty than the country as a whole – the mutual dislike between the less-subsidized Western petty

¹ Tables reserved for pub regulars – trans.

bourgeoisie and its not yet sufficiently subsidized Eastern counterpart may last for decades to come – is starting off in the novel situation of not being both the federal capital and the capital of the largest constituent state. Prussia's existence was formally terminated by the Allied Control Council in 1947, though it merely issued the death certificate, since Prussian history had come to an end in 1932, at the latest, with the "Prussian coup" of Reich Chancellor von Papen. [. . .]

With its move to Berlin, the domestic isolation of German politics is coming to an end. A great capital has always functioned as more than a decision-making arena; it is also the first place to gauge public opinion in a country, the stock exchange where political and social ideas are traded and evaluated, and the place where the country's elites square off. The word itself and the concept of an "elite" fell into disrepute in the Germans' manic quest for egalitarianism after the war: they considered equality the quintessence of democracy, more so than freedom, and thus unwittingly dragged along a legacy of the "national community" of the Nazis. It is also correct that they no longer have the old elites at their disposal, [those elites] who, across all changes in political forms, see service to the common good as a worthwhile charge; at the same time, they have – as an unavoidable result of social selection and personal achievement – the most varied elites who shape the commentary, the conventions, and for the most part also the impact of society's actions in politics, the economy, science, and culture. The poor communication among the elites was characteristic for the old Federal Republic, because it had a multitude of centers but no capital in the full sense of the word.

[. . .]

Berlin will be the headquarters not only of federal politics, but also the center of the life of the individuals who will shape it. Previously, ministers and parliamentarians found it unappealing to settle themselves and their families in the capital for any length of time and to give up, in return, pleasant locales that could easily offer more than Bonn was able to. The large organizations, always dependent on contact with the federal power, will carry out their moves in one fell swoop, and that will also include those who never bothered to settle in Bonn, like the Confederation of German Trade Unions. Berlin will create what federal politics has not known until now: full political workweeks and social interaction among the politically talented, as is characteristic for all true capitals of the world.

During the Bonn era, the great figures in the arena of public opinion had no incentive to leave their nurseries and go to the capital. From Hamburg or Munich people might look upon the goings-on in Bonn kindly or disdainfully; a patronizing relationship to the political exertions of the constitutional organs residing in Bonn was not unnatural; headquarters or an imprint in Bonn did not enhance one's prestige, but diminished it. Exactly the opposite will be true for Berlin – a publication with national, let alone European, pretensions will be less able to realize them if it is not printed in Berlin. For German public opinion, Berlin will be New York and Washington in one. The Hollywood of Germany, which the city once was, is something it will become only in vestigial form; for now, there is no overpowering motivation for the entertainment industry to focus on Berlin. [. . .]

However, the first migratory movement of executive boards will be enough, alongside the large associations and the hundreds of smaller ones, to establish an economic-sector presence sufficient to change the political communication. Apart from the supra-regional media, which will move not only their editorial offices but also their publishing activities to Berlin, the question of a return to Berlin will arise very quickly for the myriad companies who carry the name of the capital in their own and fled during the time of the division. We can immediately add those businesses that rely on federal government contracts. [. . .]

The relocation of generously compensated businessmen still won't bring an upper middle class of wealth and education into the city, but it will bring a stratum that could become such a class and that immediately fulfills its function – people who not only have a house, but also open it up. That is an indispensable precondition for sociability and society, one to which political and academic personnel will also become accustomed and adapt. The new money will benefit the restaurant scene, which so far does not resemble that of a world city, and it will help to slowly correct the vulgarity of the streetscape. Only with this move will Kurfürstendamm have a chance to be comparable to the Faubourg St. Honoré or to Fifth Avenue. At the same time, Berlin will win back a public that wants to be supplied with a press that need not shy away from expressing itself in multiple syllables. Anyone who laments the current state of Berlin publications overlooks one great achievement: that of having produced, in the absence of an educated readership with capital ambitions, papers that would attract notice in the first place.

The Germans, who had grown accustomed to the political reality of Bonn over the course of three generations, must still learn that it was the exception and that Berlin will be the norm. The capital city dialogue between leaders and influential personalities in politics, the economy, and the media – a dialogue that is an everyday and perfectly normal occurrence in capital cities – will also eliminate certain defects, from which the Federal Republic did not suffer simply because it was hardly aware of them. They include the speechlessness of the elites in dealing both with each other and the democratic public. They include the economic cluelessness of politicians, which is unacceptable for a large industrial and exporting nation, as well as the equally harmful political naiveté that informs the majority of German businessmen. Above all, they include the distance separating those who run the media from politics and the economy.

Source: Johannes Gross, *Begründung einer Berliner Republik. Deutschland am Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts* [*Founding a Berlin Republic. Germany at the End of the Twentieth Century*]. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1995, pp. 85-94, 97, 98-99.

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