

Emotional Cities
Debates on Urban Change in Berlin and Cairo 1860-1910

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The onrush of urban modernity and its apparent emotional consequences suture Berlin and Cairo in Prestel's *Emotional Cities*. As a social and cultural history, emphasizing emotions affords a focus on how individuals and institutions negotiated a period of considerable change. Prestel wisely avoids the trap of claiming some special, singular relationship between these two distant cities. Nor do personalities come to bear the weight of history. A few people move between Cairo and Berlin, including in the book's opening pages, but this crosstown traffic rarely feels central to the book's chief claims.

Instead, the central claims of this book bear on how comparable anxieties surfaced in the two cities, reflecting similarities in their histories. For Berlin, Prestel covers debates about: love, sexuality, and morality; consumerism, prostitution, and excitement; calm, nerves, and suburban development. For Cairo, he considers debates about: gender, rationality, and emotionality; colonial rule, urban districts, and pleasure; emotional reform, physical exercise, and suburban retreat. The chapters fall roughly into thematic pairs; thus, for example, the chapter on urban consumer culture around Berlin's Friedrichstraße is matched with the following chapter on Cairo's Azbakiyya district.

Prestel documents similar discourses of emotional transformation in Berlin and Cairo, suggesting a resemblance in dynamics that defies the cities' standard separation into different historical lineages ('Middle Eastern', 'European', 'Christian', 'Islamic') or stages ('delayed' urbanisation). He argues that the history of emotions can overcome Eurocentric pitfalls. An 'emotional cities' paradigm promises, for Prestel, a properly global urban history. By tracking emotions rather than dominant models of modernization or westernization, urban historians can 'unravel national and regional approaches to the history of cities' (3). Unfortunately, Prestel structures the book as a series of discrete, alternating case study chapters on these topics (Berlin, Cairo, Berlin ...). As he acknowledges, rather than any unravelling, this structure keeps the study bound in place. Nonetheless, the payoff for the book's structure is a series of rich, evocative chapters. Prestel has an eye for the intriguing detail and the interesting story,

which is remarkable given the multiple languages of the primary source material he has plumbed for the book.

In both Berlin and Cairo during 1860–1910, it became common to propose the rise of specifically urban emotions. The book outlines a trajectory from new emotional practices to efforts to shape emotions through reforms. In Cairo from the 1860s, Arabic authors praised urban life as fostering men’s rationality (*‘aql*)—an education of the heart, engendering middle-class sociability through controlled bodies and passions. *‘Aql* here meant controlling and fostering certain emotions. Prestel’s research underlines that the reality of this rationality was limited, and largely underpinned social distinction. In Berlin, meanwhile, the city was apparently threatened by rapid industrialization, and new relations of production and migration. The professional classes diagnosed a loss of a ‘feeling of morality’ (*sittliches Gefühl*), fixated on corrupting nightlife and new forms of intimacy.

In the 1870s and through the 1880s, theories of the body as an energetic system came to prominence, with ‘nerves’ playing an important role in urban debates about excessively excited feelings, leading to a loss of control: Friedrichstraße and Azbakiyya instilled ambiguous and troubling emotions. Walking in these districts was described in terms thick with emotion: disgust, love, embarrassment, awe, agony, shame, curiosity, anger, and fear. Prestel pays close attention to gender throughout the book, and here notes that the presence of female sex workers was bound up in claims about ‘threats to rationality and a rising emotionality’ (73) in men. Women also increasingly enjoyed leisure time as consumers and theatregoers around Friedrichstraße. Police and social commentators struggled to navigate the mingling of middle-class women and working-class women (including sex workers). As in Berlin, blurred class distinctions in Cairo caused handwringing. Declining middle-class rationality meant that the working class could apparently ‘gain control over middle-class men through their emotions’ (134). Weak *‘aql* was twinned with men’s weak bodies in Cairo (167). The city began to figure as a place of dangerous feelings and harmful practices, dated roughly to British occupation and colonial rule.

Over the following two decades, schemes in both cities sought to counter the gloomy picture of urban life, and the purported material effects of emotional excitement on health. By the turn of the century, critics substantiated claims about emotion through new research in the bodily sciences—physiology, anatomy, medicine, and psychology. In Berlin, new suburbs distant from the city’s apartment blocks were said to provide calm and positive emotions, away from the ‘nervousness’ of fatiguing urban life. Likewise, ‘physical culture’ (gymnastics, bodybuilding, sunbathing, sports clubs, and so on) could control emotionality and train the body to avoid overstimulation. Similar developments in Cairo saw exercise heralded as fostering rationality and positive emotions. The city/country split saw the countryside outside Cairo valorized as a site for authentic emotions lost by city dwellers. Suburban

developments were effectively sold as forms of disalienation for the middle class. In Berlin and Cairo, these retreats to the urban fringe repeated social differentiation, as the working class was left to often poor-quality inner city housing. In both cities, this moment also saw discourses of nationalism entangled with portrayals of strong and rational male bodies—a fact played out with deadly consequences in Germany in following decades.

The sweeping title of Prestel's study (*Emotional Cities*) stakes its place in a confluence of emotional and urban histories; the field-defining title isolates something implicit in the book's approach. We tend to associate cities with modernity and rationalization—the increasing complexity of social life that demanded bureaucratization, quantification, cartography, urban plans, and so forth. These essential features remain present in Prestel's book. However, another dimension of commentary on urbanization became concerned with the effects of city life on inhabitants' psychic life: the well-known examples of Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin are there to prove it with Berlin. The examples from Cairo are lesser known in work from the Global North. Bringing them to prominence and into dialogue is a major achievement of Prestel's book.