

REVIEW ESSAY

Bourgeois Pursuits

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Bourgeois Society in Nineteenth-Century Europe. Ed. by Jürgen Kocka and Allan Mitchell. Berg, Oxford [etc.] 1993. xi, 468 pp. £39.95. (£17.95.)

BUDDE, GÜNILLA-FRIEDERIKE. *Auf dem Weg ins Bürgerleben. Kindheit und Erziehung in deutschen und englischen Bürgerfamilien 1840–1914*. [Bürgertum, Band 6.] Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1994. 512 pp. DM 68.00.

The book edited by Kocka and Mitchell is but the tip of one iceberg. This particular iceberg is a three-volume German study edited by Kocka which contains forty-six essays.¹ From these Kocka and Mitchell have selected seventeen. The original German publication was linked to a collaborative research project conducted at the Centre of Interdisciplinary Research at Bielefeld which has given rise to numerous journal articles, monographs and collections of essays.² The research project has continued to run at the University of Bielefeld where it has led to further publications.³ A four-volume collection of essays on the educated bourgeoisie (*Bildungsbürgertum*), of which Kocka was one of the editors, arose out of research centred on Heidelberg.⁴ Another project under the leadership of Lothar Gall at Frankfurt has produced a stream of publications.⁵ German academics are perhaps peculiar only in the degree of collective organization they bring to bear upon the historical study of the nineteenth-century European bourgeoisie. The subject also flourishes in Britain and is a growth area in other countries such as Italy and France. The Bielefeld project was distinguished also by its European and comparative approach and aspects of this have been taken up by the European University Institute in Florence.

¹ Jürgen Kocka (ed.), *Bürgertum im 19. Jahrhundert. Deutschland im europäischen Vergleich*, 3 vols (Munich, 1988).

² For example, Dieter Langewiesche (ed.), *Liberalismus im 19. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 1988) which arose out of a conference held at the Centre in Bielefeld.

³ Principally in the series *Bürgertum: Beiträge zur europäischen Gesellschaftsgeschichte* of which Budde's book is the sixth volume to appear.

⁴ Jürgen Kocka *et al.*, *Bildungsbürgertum im 19. Jahrhundert*, 4 vols (Stuttgart, 1985–1989).

⁵ To get a sense of the range of research involved in this project, see the three volumes edited by Gall and all published by Oldenbourg in Munich: *Stadt und Bürgertum im 19. Jahrhundert* (1990); *Vom alten zum neuen Bürgertum. Die mitteleuropäische Stadt im Umbruch 1780–1820* (1991); *Stadt und Bürgertum im Übergang von der traditionellen zur modernen Gesellschaft* (1993).

Partly this interest appears to be linked to a sense that the bourgeoisie has been undervalued. The onward march of labour appears to have ended. In any case it appears that the objective of the march for many was to become bourgeois and, where it was not, it has collapsed in failure. Historians have accordingly switched their attention from labour to the bourgeoisie. If liberal democracy and capitalism represent the “end of history” (whether as a realized, realizable or the only coherent utopian project) then it is understandable that the social group most closely bound up with that project – its values, structures, actions and achievements – comes to the forefront of the historian’s attention. Closely related subjects of interest are the nature of civil society, the social underpinnings of a free market economy, and the fate of what has in some quarters come to be termed “the Enlightenment project”.

This stress on bourgeois achievement has also questioned, even rejected, the idea that the bourgeoisie capitulated to the values and assimilated into the ranks of noble elites. Thus Hobsbawm writes of integration based on economic success in Britain. Kaelble stresses the isolation of the industrial magnates and the central political importance of a bourgeois state elite in Germany and of a politically active bourgeoisie in the Third Republic. Merrigi argues that a professional bourgeoisie educated in the humanities came to dominate the state in Italy, although they were highly regionalized, close to the landed elites and rather negative towards modern economic development. Ranki argues that a new bourgeoisie trading in agricultural products and with a large German and Jewish element swiftly emerged in Hungary after mid-century and much of this was successfully integrated into the nobility, even if state office remained under the control of a more independent section of nobility. Mosse makes some more wide-ranging comparisons across four countries. These studies which focus on the structural position of the bourgeoisie in relation to the state and the nobility are given further support from the contributions by economic historians. The relative isolation of German entrepreneurs can be better understood in the light of the comparison of large businesses in Germany, France and Britain by Cassis. Their closer links to the state compared to French entrepreneurs is considered from the particular angle of entrepreneurial authority by Fridenson, and the way in which economic transactions are subject to moral constraints (whether embodied in law or not) is considered comparatively by Tilly.

It is further argued that, even where there was a high degree of imitation, assimilation or integration, this often has to be understood from a bourgeois perspective. Ute Frevert, in an essay on the duel, argues that its practice by German men of bourgeois origin was a case of cultural appropriation suited to the particular values of the educated bourgeoisie, such as the development of character and individuality. Ranki stresses the “bourgeois” manner in which landed estates were

run by the recently ennobled. Other recent work has explored the same themes in such matters as the building of villas or the adoption of titles and honours.⁶

At the same time there is a stress upon the variability and changeability of the bourgeoisie. First, there is its variability within any one country. Kocka in his introduction considers the different elements of the bourgeoisie (e.g. professional, entrepreneurial, state-service), each with its own internal occupational differentiations and changing relationships to each other. Second, there is the variability between countries. One thing which is emphasized in essays which circle round comparisons of other countries with Germany is the centrality of a German state-official class of bourgeois origins based on formal educational qualifications. Third, there is change over time such as the well-worn idea of the shift of second- or third-generation entrepreneurs out of active economic life. All these issues raise the question of the unity of the bourgeoisie as a class and whether, if there is such a unity, it is to be located at the level of the economy, the polity or culture or by certain ways in which these combine.

The issue of the unity of the bourgeoisie raises the question of its boundaries above and below. I have already mentioned essays which focus on the first. Only a couple of essays deal with relations with those below. Eisenberg argues ingeniously that it was the construction of a powerful, autonomous labour movement across economic, political and cultural spheres in England which created the basis for effective cooperation with bourgeois groups; whereas the lack of such autonomy in Germany led to conflict and a focus on class-based politics. Haupt considers the less clear-cut relationships between bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie in France and Germany, finding more points of similarity than difference.

Some studies of bourgeois values have moved beyond description to focus on contradictions or limitations. A central idea is that of a tension between the universalism of bourgeois claims about equality between free individuals and the reality of informal and formal discrimination. Vogel compares the legal treatment of women's property rights in Britain and Germany, highlighting differences but also pinpointing similar contradictions, e.g. when, in order to protect family property rights, an assertion of the capacity of widows to make rational decisions has to be injected into a discourse which increasingly stresses the biological roots of women's incapacity in this regard. This in turn raises the issue

⁶ Dolores L. Augustine, *Patricians and Parvenus: Wealth and High Society in Wilhelmine Germany* (Oxford and Providence, 1994); Karin Kaudelka-Hanisch, "The Titled Businessman: Prussian Commercial Councillors in the Rhineland and Westphalia during the Nineteenth Century", in D. Blackbourn and R.J. Evans (eds), *The German Bourgeoisie: Essays on the Social History of the German Middle Class from the Late Eighteenth to the Early Twentieth Century* (London, 1991), pp. 87–114.

of whether this contradiction is a contingent or necessary feature of bourgeois society. Volkov looks at the limitations on the assimilation of Jews even when, as was the case in Germany, Jews were overwhelmingly bourgeois in occupational and attitudinal terms. Kaschuba provides examples of how formal equality is undermined by informal distinctions based on inequalities of dress or income or cultural knowledge. This essay raises the larger point, considered also by Kocka, as to whether any positive sense of bourgeois identity and unity is constructed (often precariously) at the level of culture rather than of economy, society or polity where it is difference and conflict which are most marked.

Most of the essays focus on cultural, economic or social themes. In one very wide-ranging essay Langewiesche considers the political dimension, in particular comparing German liberalism with other cases. He argues that its distinctive character first became clear with unification. The role of the Prussian state and army distanced liberals from state power. The institutional innovation of a democratic franchise for a parliament without sovereign powers also dealt a peculiarly damaging blow to liberalism. These points provide a useful basis for comparison with other countries. Mitchell, comparing German and French liberalism, looks at their different responses to state intervention in the public health sphere – one stressing the need to enforce scientific understanding, the other the rights of individuals to make their own decisions.

So an earlier picture of relatively clear-cut success (e.g. Britain) or failure (e.g. Germany) on the part of the modern bourgeoisie gives way to a variety of stories. The bourgeoisie is always “there”, even if difficult to identify. Its story is usually one of success but this is often indirect and subtle and is given some such label as “hegemony” in order to make this point. There is no expectation that the bourgeoisie should be particularly liberal in politics or economics and it is difficult to identify a distinctively “bourgeois” culture. Instead of juxtaposing tradition (nobility, hierarchy, monarchy, authority, agriculture) to modernity (bourgeoisie, social mobility, parliament, democracy, industry) we are presented instead with a series of reflections on the “ambiguities”, even the “pathologies” of the modern. The bourgeoisie and the modern have triumphed, but the sheer scale, complexity and variety of the triumph makes it difficult to work out what this actually means.

Partly this is the inevitable result of an increasingly diffuse and wide-ranging research agenda. When trying to reduce even these seventeen essays, let alone the much greater volume of recent work on the European bourgeoisie, to some common denominators, it is not surprising if the result is rather bland generalization accompanied by gestures towards the range of material. Many of the essays published here are fascinating and illuminating (though I cannot work out why these were selected and not others), but the book is too fragmentary to satisfy this reviewer. This is because a second reason for fragmentation is the penchant for

over-expanding terms like bourgeoisie and modernity and replacing focused analysis with subtle description.

By contrast, Budde's sustained piece of comparative history produces some very specific conclusions about similarities and differences in bourgeois families in Britain and Germany from mid-nineteenth century to the First World War. This is not simply because it is a monograph with a particular focus but also because of a clear analytical approach and a determination to reach judgements where the evidence allows.

The evidence consists of some 400 autobiographical accounts of men and women who grew up in this period. Roughly sixty of these are unpublished in such forms as diaries, correspondence and interviews (e.g. from the Oral History Archive at the University of Essex). The remainder are published autobiographies. About 350 are by authors of bourgeois origin; the others come from rather humbler backgrounds and are used as a control. Autobiographies are themselves testimony to some kind of success and literary inclination and therefore constitute a biased sample. Even when a large number are considered, there can be systematic distortions within this sample (e.g. the way successful women might exaggerate the obstacles placed in their path during childhood). Many important subjects such as sexuality were taboo, even in unpublished material. The autobiography is an art form and the historian must be alert to the ways its traditions and imperatives shape the narrative (autobiography rarely departs from the classical narrative form). Budde is well aware of these problems. But, as she points out, the autobiography is peculiarly associated with bourgeois attitudes and it offers us a way into the "inside" of bourgeois lives which perhaps no other evidence provides. The family is, in many respects, the hidden core of bourgeois society: the core by virtue of the way it shapes people from birth and the supreme value placed upon it in bourgeois morality; hidden because of its association with intimacy, privacy and even with inarticulacy. Historians of the bourgeoisie more easily explore its position within society, its occupational breakdown, political preferences and involvement in all kinds of associations than the nature of family life.

The book is divided into three main sections: the family as institution (above all, in its role as transmitter of culture), gender roles and national differences. I can only summarize and comment upon the major arguments Budde advances in these three parts.

Bourgeois families begin with marriages so that is where Budde starts. She traces the balance or tension between marriage as a calculated union and a commitment of the heart, pointing out that generally *mésalliances* were avoided but children did have rights of refusal. She also explores the networks through which potential partners could meet, the character of engagements, weddings and honeymoons. Husbands were generally older than wives, average marital age increased over the period, and German men married later than their English counterparts. (This may

simply reflect the greater weight of professionally qualified men in the German sample and the fact that they had to defer marriage until they had acquired qualifications and security of office.) The vow of “till death us do part” was generally fulfilled, though whether this was due to restrictive divorce laws, low expectations or a strong animus against separation or divorce is not clear. Women generally gave up property rights on marriage though Budde confirms Vogel’s argument that initially the situation was less favourable in Britain but that three laws passed between 1870 and 1893 greatly improved matters. Also in the later part of the period such issues as birth control and women’s rights were more explicitly addressed in England. Birth control clearly was practised, especially by the end of the period when family sizes reduced markedly, but the subject is rarely alluded to. (Although the practice does require acknowledgement and appropriate action which suggests an explicitness about sexual relations, if only in the privacy of the marital bed.) It is a pity Budde did not enquire into confessional differences in this regard.

Also taboo was the discussion of money, but bourgeois lifestyles required a reasonable minimum (to keep a wife at home, to employ at least one servant, to maintain a respectable household) although frugality was preached and practised as a virtue, not simply a necessity.

Budde’s English figures appear somewhat wealthier than their German counterparts. Budde argues that already by the beginning of the period the English pattern was for settlement in their own houses in exclusive suburbs while many Germans lived in rented accommodation in mixed city districts. I think she might exaggerate this trend for England, maybe because many of her sample come from London. (It would have been useful to have a geographical breakdown of the samples.)

A central theme that is already clear by now is that the father is increasingly taken up by work and other outside commitments. This trend, as well as increased wealth, accounts for the greater formality with which the family is presented to the outside world, and also for the greater emphasis placed upon the mother as the guardian of the family. Much of this is explored through considerations of family rituals (meals, outings, festivals, holidays, etc.).

Childhood as a special state is arguably a bourgeois construct and Budde explores this in terms of children’s literature, games and toys. It is fascinating to observe the popularity of *Robinson Crusoe* in both cultures. Another theme which anticipates later sections is how much more quickly childhood ends for English boys as they are removed to boarding schools. Finally Budde considers cultural activities, both within the home and beyond. Music above all – and Budde explores Max Weber’s assertion that the piano was the bourgeois instrument *par excellence* – could be raised almost to the status of a religious experience. I wonder whether Budde does not follow Nipperdey’s argument a little too closely here and whether in turn that argument was an historical

rationalization of the compelling image presented by *Buddenbrooks*.⁷ However, the history of the concert and the public rhetoric which surrounds it supports the argument, in England as well as Germany.

In the section on gender the theme of the marginalization of increasingly busy fathers complemented by more significant mothers reappears. This in turn has profound implications for the position of children and the different experiences of sons and daughters. Gender divisions in childhood are explored through games and schooling. It would appear that these divisions became deeper and at the same time generated more tension, especially for girls. It is clear that many girls, to judge by their autobiographies, resented the subordination and dullness that was involved. What is more, picking up again on Vogel's essay, there was much inconsistency and bad faith in what was preached. Girls were expected to put more faith than boys in reason as a means of settling disputes (and in principle bourgeois families preferred reason to force); yet by the time they became women they were supposed to be the less rational creatures. Already the tension was producing protest, even rebellion. At the same time the reduction of family size, the opening up of some career opportunities for women, and the sense that the "true" values of equality and freedom were being denied meant that there was a fragility to this ideology of separate spheres and natures. Fascinatingly Budde provides examples of where it is fathers rather than mothers who support a more independent path for their daughters.

Budde recognizes that the family does not stop at parents and children. Other relatives such as aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents play their part. A bourgeois household almost by definition had at least one domestic servant who, if not part of the family, stood in an intimate relationship to the family.

Finally Budde seeks to summarize differences and similarities. The stress on the sacred character of the family, on the separation of spheres between fathers and mothers and the differences in treatment and expectation of sons and daughters are common. What I find most interesting are the major differences. Germans (and the sample is mainly Protestant) are much more indifferent to religion than the English bourgeoisie. That in turn has many implications for attitudes towards culture (*Stichwort*: religion as culture, culture as religion). Families were far more formal, divided and socially segregated in England (suburban living, boarding schools, more wealth and servants). The English appear much more as part of an integrated upper middle class whereas Germans are more thoroughly bourgeois and bound up with their families. (Women, for example, are far less involved in philanthropy than in England.) Yet Budde does not flinch from arguing that the clichés about the unpolitical German who is submissive to authority has much

⁷ Thomas Nipperdey, *Wie das Bürgertum die Moderne fand* (Berlin, 1988).

substance for the Wilhelmine period. She finds (though there is something of a jump from 1848–1849 to the *Kaiserreich*) a marked decline in political references in the German recollections compared to frequent allusions to elections and other political matters in England. And she argues that the more visible presence of the father as well as the independent authority of the *Gymnasium* compared to that of the boarding school which was dependent on parental fees meant that German boys were subject to a more pervasive authority. I was a little surprised by the point about discussions of politics figuring so little in German accounts but Budde has read masses of autobiographies and I have not. At the same time, Budde argues that boys before formal schooling mixed much more with children from other social groups in Germany. Yet it appears that it is the subsequent closing down on such experience in Germany as segregation was organized through the *Gymnasium* and university which mattered more, just as it was the less “bourgeois” English families which could allow more women independence in philanthropy and such careers as teaching and which in turn could encourage a stronger and more militant feminist movement. I did wonder at this point whether the over-representation of the *Bildungsbürgertum* in Budde’s sample was distorting the picture and also, certainly at the level of the *Gymnasium*, whether one should not take into account the considerable number of pupils of lower middle-class origin it admitted and the function it performed as an agency of upward social mobility.

Nevertheless, I found this an important and persuasive book. Budde does not strain for originality and is quite happy, if the evidence supports the point, to reiterate positions that we already “know”. Truisms often turn out to be true, and there is much virtue in saying so. What I especially like is the sense of differences and changes. The bourgeois family may well be a constant in both practice and rhetoric over the last couple of centuries but the nature of parental authority is altered by such things as the frequency with which a father is present to exercise that authority. Separation of the spheres is not some constant but a rather forced construct which becomes more extreme in practice but is also constantly beset by criticism and challenge. While “feudalization” is rejected, in line with the current historiographical consensus, the argument for German peculiarities is now related to modern forms of authoritarianism – starting at the top of the political system with Bismarck and the lack of a powerful parliament (why else the lack of interest in elections?), moving to the central place of a hierarchical bureaucracy (and bourgeois men as *Beamten* not only constitute a large part of Budde’s sample but this also appears to be the most attractive career choice), from there to the *Gymnasium* (experience of the university is omitted from this book) which furnished the discipline and qualifications, and finally to the tightly disciplined family.

This is a far more clear-cut picture than emerges from many modern studies of the bourgeoisie, German and otherwise. Precisely because of that it might be regarded with suspicion by those who stress the “infinite shades of grey”.⁸ But if there is any meaning to the construction of national identity, especially at the top of society, in increasingly powerful nation-states, one would expect certain dominant institutional practices and values to develop. Budde presents a powerful argument to this effect in relation to the bourgeois family. It modifies but does not undermine arguments about German *Sonderweg*. Above all, it shows that explicit comparative analysis can take us much further in the study of the modern bourgeoisie (and probably much else) than the accumulation of nuances and of subtle but theoretically innocent descriptions.

⁸ The term is Nipperdey’s, expressing a preference for this over the striking of judgements by the historian.