

Alfred Heggen, Alkohol und bürgerliche Gesellschaft im 19. Jahrhundert. Eine Studie zur deutschen Sozialgeschichte [Alcohol and Bourgeois Society in the 19th Century. A Study in German Social History]. Colloquium Verlag: Berlin, 1988. Pp. 227. DM 88.

Although the title suggests otherwise, this study by Heggen extends far beyond Germany in the nineteenth century: the book begins in late antiquity and covers non-German countries as well. Such a broadening of the perspective is very welcome, because only in this way can one fully assess the question of continuity and change in the basic model of alcohol use. Authoritative statements on this are rare even today, particularly concerning the development in Germany and Central Europe. The reader therefore approaches Heggen's book with great expectations.

However, a skepticism about whether the author is equal to this difficult task is already triggered by his introductory remarks on the nature of the question (pp. 3-7) and the state of the literature (pp. 20-28). Just about all the recent trends of historical scholarship are sweepingly claimed for this study, without illuminating the diametrical incompatibility of some of the concepts or establishing the author's own standpoint. No distinction is drawn between the concepts of Alltagsgeschichte (everyday history), social history, the social history of the Alltag, the history of society (in Hans-Ulrich Wehler's sense), or the history of mentalité in the Annales' sense, all of which are used. Furthermore, one seeks in vain for a definition of the "bourgeois society" of the title, a concept under much discussion at present. Historical-anthropological methods of enquiry are at one moment rejected (because they would be too demanding for the historian - p.3), but then put forward as the goal of the study (pp. 6 & 28). An historian can of course, and should, combine various approaches -- but not by aimlessly stringing them together.

The composition and division of the book do not testify to a mastery of the subject-matter. Under the three chapter headings the following themes are principally dealt with:

Chapter 1: Alcohol as an historical problem:

Attitudes toward alcohol and drinking practices in antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the 16th and 17th century; as well as (partly in contradiction to the Introduction) a discussion of the method of enquiry and the secondary literature.

Chapter 2: Mass poverty, the spirits craze and the temperance movements around 1830-1850:

Spirits in the Middle Ages; the struggle against the "drink devil" in the 16th and 17th centuries; Spirits in the 18th century; the technology of distilling from 1750-1830; the spirits craze from 1830-1850; the temperance movement (in the U.S.A. and England, too).

Chapter 3: The alcohol question in the late 19th century:
Consumption and production; the "social question" and the working class; the German Society Against the Abuse of Spirituous Liquors (DVMGG); abstinence associations; Social Democrats; the spirits tax; remarks on developments outside Germany.

In the following comments, only selected points of criticism are explored, which are used as typical examples of the quality of the work.

The explanation of distilling techniques takes up considerable space (23 out of 187 pages of text) in this volume, which is rather slim, considering the variety of themes announced. One discovers many interesting details from this section. Yet it is not made clear why, for example, the description of French equipment from the year 1773 needs to be given as much space as the discussion of the German abstinence movement (namely, five pages). In spite of the comprehensive nature of the discussion, important secondary literature is absent (Forbes et al.) The author's familiarity with the literature can only be described as inadequate not only here, but on many subjects (even when one takes into consideration the difficulty of mastering it for such a broadly-defined topic). This leads Heggen to such surprising theses as that of an "alcoholism of affluence" in the 16th century, right in the period of sinking real income and narrowing food options. The generally welcome use of older works of cultural history (such as Janssen, from whom Austin, too, drew most of his information about Germany) occurs without any critical distance. Thus, the remark in a popular work of 1867, that the 16th century was the "true boozing century" is simply accepted at face value. At the same time Heggen largely dispenses with quantitative data (a notable exception on p. 38). One can indeed argue about the value of comprehensive per-capita consumption figures, but Heggen's a priori reservation that hard data cannot be produced (e.g. p. 21) is just an attempt to protect himself. In fact very well-founded estimates of the "mash" volume tax can be made for Prussia in the "Pre-March" period before 1848; and for the so-called "boozing century" the author should have turned to the excellent calculations of Dirlmeier and Huntemann (-the latter is indeed in the bibliography, but one seeks his data in vain).

What is offered in the way of figures for the second half of the nineteenth century is an insult to the reader. Four diagrams on per-capita consumption are printed, containing strange lines, that are meant to follow the figures of W.G. Hoffmann which have been known since 1965--but this cannot be checked exactly, because the scale has been omitted. The author writes about the social structure of the Good Templars that the members seldom came from the working class, "as frequently the names of the societies clearly reveal" [sic!] (p.151). Elsewhere he at least borrows the figures published by Krabbe on the social structure--but this in

order to prove that most of the members had always led temperate lives even before joining (p. 153 f.).

These examples must suffice. In those sections which do not betray crass shortcomings, Heggen treads well-known paths (i.e. he follows above all James S. Roberts). It is not surprising that in such a work the interpretation must count as more than questionable. A critical examination of Heggen's reflections on the "basic anthropological phenomenon" of intoxication is not worth the effort. For the record the central thesis--if I have understood it correctly--is this: the absence of a "metaphysical orientation," that is, of faith, is the root of the alcohol problem; but so is the relief of spiritual and physical distress (pp. 74, 186 f.).

All this awakens an impression of embarrassing clumsiness, which the author further strengthens by strewing the text with grandiloquent remarks that are apparently intended to buttress the solidity of this historical scholar. Heggen wishes to show "how and why it really was thus" (p. 22--doubtless a bastardized Ranke quotation); he sustains himself in a "cautiously hermeneutic" manner, draws conclusions "with appropriate circumspection", and so on.

The greatest deficit of this work lies, however, not in the text itself, but in the "Systematic Bibliography of Literature and Sources." This is just where one would have wished that the author had been swayed by "appropriate circumspection," instead of which he fills a full 33 pages with the titles of primary and secondary sources, a goodly proportion of which clearly were either noted down extremely carelessly, or never passed through his hands. This can be shown easily, merely by glancing at the most important sources for his chosen themes. Indispensable titles were not incorporated into the discussion (e.g. the works of Johann Böttcher or of Brühl-Cramer), or are put in the wrong section of the bibliography, and mis-cited at that (e.g. Brühl-Cramer is cited twice: once as "Brühl, C., von", and once as "Buhl-Cramer, C., von"). I am not talking here about unavoidable printing errors, but rather about an attempt to claim undeserved credit. Because this is an extremely serious accusation, three further examples may be added: the important treatise on drunkenness by Horn, published in Stralsund in 1747, is also given double mention--once as "Horus, Ph.S., 1747", and then as "Horn, P.S., 1847." Under the heading "Alcoholism and the Working Class" an essay of Eduard Bernstein on the "temperance doctrine" is listed, though that essay is in fact exclusively concerned with eating. Finally, under the heading "Current Research on Alcoholism" there is the Habilitation thesis of Alexander Mitscherlich, "On the Origins of Addiction," but that work is exclusively concerned with a disease that consists of drinking vast amounts of cold water.

To sum up: grave defects both in the technical-methodological as well as the intellectual sense turn the reading of this volume

into a constant irritation. The preface by the (recently deceased) Nestor of German cultural history, Wilhelm Treue, cannot smooth over this, any more than the high-quality production with its, in part, apposite illustrations. The author was clearly not up to this (admittedly difficult) task.

One final point needs to be added: among the many books subsidized in 1988 by the prestigious German Research Society (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft), Heggen's study was ranked by a jury among the five best. There is no more telling proof of the relative backwardness of research in Germany into the history of alcohol.

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(Translated by Geoffrey Giles)