



Kirsten O. Frieling. *Ausdruck macht Eindruck: Bürgerliche Körperpraktiken in sozialer Kommunikation um 1800.* Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2003. 174 S. \$32.95 (paper), ISBN 978-3-631-50716-2.



Reviewed by Erik Jensen (Department of History, Miami University)

Published on H-German (March, 2005)

Learning to Show Some Self-Control

From table manners to posture to one's preferred brand of jeans, an individual's mannerisms, physical comportment, and self-presentation tell a lot about a person, or at least this is the premise that underlies fashion advertising, etiquette training, and the entire literary genre known as comedy of manners. Although anthropologists and sociologists have, for decades, studied how social groups have cultivated and interpreted various bodily practices, trained historians have only relatively recently started to engage in this rich field of inquiry.

In her book *Ausdruck macht Eindruck*, Kirsten Frieling offers a useful examination of the body as a medium of communication and a marker of social identity in Germany from the late-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, a period of profound transition in German society. The new *Wirtschaftsbürgertum* (manufacturers, bankers) and *Bildungsbürgertum* (academics, educated civil servants, professionals) had supplanted the old *Stadtbürgertum* (traders, skilled artisans) during this period, and they were increasingly displacing the nobility as Central Europe's leading culture brokers. This same

period also witnessed the establishment of new gender-specific traits that would shape ideal masculinity and femininity for the next century.

Frieling argues that the physical body played a central role in this social transformation. By conforming to certain facial expressions, clothing styles, and modes of walking, dancing, and sitting, members of the *Bürgertum* identified themselves as part of an important social group. These same practices also demarcated the boundaries of that social group by explicitly defining middle-class comportment against that of the lower classes and the nobility. (Note: Throughout this review, I use the adjective "middle-class" as an admittedly imprecise translation of *bürgerlich*.)

Frieling grounds her study in an examination of the normative ideals for middle-class behavior, as established in nine etiquette handbooks (*Anstandsbücher*) published between 1790 and 1850. These handbooks aimed not only at a middle-class audience, but also at that segment of the nobility that Frieling defines as "gebildet" (upholding the values of *Bildung*, especially continuous self-improvement). Given this intended readership (and

the fact that two of the handbooks were penned by aristocrats), the books are, not surprisingly, much stricter in policing the borders between the *Bürgerertum* and the lower orders than they are about monitoring the distinctions between the *Bürgerertum* and the upper classes. Nevertheless, all nine clearly saw middle-class behavior as superior to that of both the upper and the lower classes and held this superiority up as an implicit justification for the increasingly powerful position that the *Bürgerertum* played in German society.

The *Anstandsbücher* offered an array of advice to their readers, ranging from the proper execution of a bow (*Kompliment*) to the optimal amount of accessorizing. In so doing, they differentiated between four categories of self-presentation: facial expressions (*Mimik*), gestures (*Gesten*), physical bearing (*Körperhaltungen*), and clothing (*Kleidung*). Frieling adopts this same division in her summary of the handbooks' general themes, which occupies the first two thirds of her study.

The specific advice within the etiquette handbooks vacillated between a frustrating vagueness (one's gait while walking should be "neither too fast, nor too slow," p. 58) and an amusing precision ("the steps [while walking] should be the same size and the feet should be set down in the same manner [each time]," p. 59), but it clearly tended toward the former. The readers were generally left to themselves to negotiate the often fine line between self-confidence (good) and pride (bad), between paying attention to one's dance partner and ogling him or her, and between maintaining an upright carriage and appearing "stiff."

With one exception, the handbooks that Frieling has selected were written by men and aimed primarily at a male audience. Nevertheless, all of them addressed differences in the comportment of men and women, and Frieling incorporates a gender analysis into her study. She underscores the fact that men were expected to exude independence above all else, whereas women were to play a clearly passive role. Frieling does not interpret this as an indication that a hierarchical gender order had emerged by the early-nineteenth century, however. Instead, she argues that these authors saw masculinity and femininity as complementary, whereby the strengths of each one compensated for the shortcomings of the other. Men, for example, relied on women's superior graces and sensitivity in social situations. Furthermore, propriety dictated that a man always treat a woman as he would someone from a higher social class (regardless of the woman's actual social standing), and

Frieling suggests this as a further indication that women did not yet occupy an inferior status vis-à-vis men. In so arguing, Frieling seems to rule out the possibility that the (predominantly male) authors saw women as both complementary to men and inferior to them at the same time and that the concepts of hierarchy and complementarity are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Still, this is a provocative thesis and one for which Frieling could have built a stronger case by developing some of her points in greater depth and by examining some of the material that she relegates to the footnotes. The etiquette handbooks, for instance, depicted middle-class women as lacking in reason (*Verstand*) only in comparison to middle-class men. When compared to men of the lower classes, however, middle-class women were seen to have far greater powers of reason. Moreover, at least one of Frieling's authors believed that "ugly women" possessed far more reason than their beautiful counterparts, because, by necessity, they had to rely on their wit and conversational skills to attract a partner (p. 84, fn 482). Such attitudes, if interrogated more intensively, might further support Frieling's contention. At the very least, they show that middle-class women were not considered rationally inferior to all men, that women could develop their faculties of reason when forced (or allowed) by circumstance to do so, and that the authors of the handbooks may not necessarily have believed in the existence of essential differences between men and women, biological or otherwise.

Frieling devotes the last third of her book to examining the ways in which body language and self-presentation helped to define the social boundaries between the *Bürgerertum* and other groups, and this is where the real strength of her study lies. Frieling underscores the fuzziness of the various authors' attempts to establish a social boundary between the *Bürgerertum* and the aristocracy. On the one hand, the authors fully accepted that a noble birth conferred higher social standing. On the other hand, they nevertheless insisted upon the superiority of the *Bürgerertum* to the aristocracy by virtue of its moderation and reason, as opposed to the latter's excessiveness and ostentation. This ambivalence, according to Frieling, reflected both the inclusion of "gebildete" aristocrats within the emerging *bürgerliche Kultur* and the transitional nature of the period in question. German society had clearly begun to shift toward a merit-based order, but birth continued to serve as the primary source of social legitimacy.

The distinctions between the *Bürgerertum* and the

lower orders were far more sharply drawn, and all of the handbooks insisted that the differences between a middle-class man and a peasant could be read on the bodies themselves. Whereas the lower classes engaged in back-breaking manual labor and therefore appeared dirty, stooped, and quivering, members of the *Bürgerertum* worked primarily in offices, and the handbooks correspondingly inculcated exacting standards of cleanliness, uprightness, and steadiness. At the end of this section, Frieling speculates as to whether these handbooks viewed middle-class comportment as a universal and potentially emancipatory ideal. In other words, could the lower classes, too, have adopted the recommended mannerisms, gait, and bearing discussed in the handbooks and thereby gained access to the upwardly mobile *Bürgerertum*? It is an interesting and important question, but, unfortunately, Frieling ventures no further in her book than to raise it.

This book is a slightly revised version of Frieling's *Magisterarbeit* (Greifswald 2002), and considering that this is the work of a scholar in the very early stage of her academic career, *Ausdruck macht Eindruck* is quite impressive. Frieling effectively teases out the overarching themes from the nine handbooks with which she works, and she actively engages with the scores of recent works on gender history, social history, and the history of the body in her exhaustive footnotes and thorough bibliography.

There are limitations to Frieling's work, however, the most significant of which is its very small sampling from the dozens of etiquette handbooks that appeared during this period. Frieling looks at only nine of these, and she acknowledges that she based her selection partly on which books were available through interlibrary loan (p. 25).

In addition, Frieling's study would have benefited from a greater attention to the debates and disruptions within and between the *Anstandsbücher* that she does examine. Frieling tends to treat the nine authors as all of one piece, presenting a unified and uniform discourse

that spanned sixty years of German history, and she argues explicitly for the relative stability of *bürgerlich* norms between 1790 and 1850. The result is surprisingly ahistorical, and it also belies the quotations from the handbooks that appear in many of her own footnotes, which indicate interesting tensions and disagreements. In one footnote, Frieling alludes to a disagreement over just how closely the middle classes should follow fashion trends (p. 104, fn 603), but she does not expand on this observation, nor does she integrate a discussion of it into her main text. A later footnote reveals a debate over exactly how much physical deference one should show to the nobility (p. 115, fn 657), which seems central to Frieling's analysis of the blurring social boundaries between the *Bürgerertum* and the aristocracy. Such debates do not necessarily undercut Frieling's argument for the relative stability of the normative ideals of *bürgerlich* behavior, but they do suggest that these ideals were not simply replicated from decade to decade in a completely uncontested manner.

Finally, some of the fundamental paradoxes within the individual handbooks themselves deserve greater attention. The *Anstandsbücher* repeatedly underscore the importance of "naturalness" to middle-class bearing, but Frieling only briefly mentions the irony of having guidebooks instructing their readers in how to act naturally (p. 133). All nine authors insisted that the exterior body should simply reflect one's interior self. At the same time, though, these handbooks encouraged their readers to maintain a poker face (p. 47); to express certain feelings, while concealing others (p. 50); to practice hand gestures, so that they become automatic (p. 52); and to emulate the techniques by which stage actors control their countenances (pp. 75-76). This tension between valuing the "natural" self and coaching readers in how to mask it warrants further investigation.

Despite its shortcomings, though, *Ausdruck macht Eindruck* offers a useful introduction to a fascinating and under-examined subject that has played a central role in the emergence and consolidation of the nineteenth-century *Bürgerertum*.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Erik Jensen. Review of Frieling, Kirsten O., *Ausdruck macht Eindruck: Bürgerliche Körperpraktiken in sozialer Kommunikation um 1800*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. March, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10277>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.