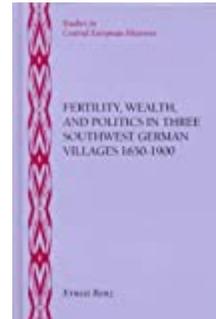




Ernest Benz. *Fertility, Wealth, and Politics in Southwest German Villages, 1650-1900.* Boston: Brill, 1999. xviii + 295 pp. \$98.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-391-04093-9.



Reviewed by David M. Luebke (Department of History, University of Oregon)

Published on H-German (September, 2003)

Innovation and Demographic Transition

Innovation and Demographic Transition

The central contention of this book is that in the early-nineteenth century, family limitation was so radically novel that no historical model that reduces demographic behavior to status or class situation can explain its transformations fully. At issue is rural Europe's passage from the old demographic regime, in which populations were controlled by a Malthusian combination of postponed marriage and high marital fertility, into a modern system of managed reproduction, in which people married younger and kept their families relatively small. Not all occupational groups began this transition simultaneously, however, nor did the same group follow identical trajectories in different economic environments and sociopolitical settings. To explain these variations of context and pace, Ernest Benz argues, historical demographers must expand their horizons beyond vital statistics to include such factors as communal organization and the local texture of collective memory. Methodologically, then, Benz's study is a cliometric venture into the preconditions of innovation. It leads him to reject psychological accounts of the demographic transition.

At its core are the reproductive histories of some 4,000 couples who inhabited three adjacent Catholic villages in the Rhine valley—Grafenhausen, Kappel and Rust—between 1650 and 1900. Despite their proximity, the three villages differed in crucial ways. In well-to-do Grafenhausen and impoverished Rust, wealth was distributed more evenly than in Kappel, where it tended to polarize between rich and poor. Agriculture dominated the economies of all three villages, of course, although weaving and artisan trades were more prominent in Rust. Grafenhausen led the shift toward tobacco farming after 1800, but resisted the introduction of processing plants later in the century, even as Rust transformed into an industrial “cigar village.” The initiative that Grafenhausen displayed in agricultural innovation was mirrored in demographic behavior. By any measure—age at first marriage, birth intervals, and age at penultimate childbirth—family limitation took hold in Grafenhausen several decades earlier than in the other two villages. By 1900, three-quarters of Grafenhausen's couples were practicing some form of family limitation. The corresponding figure in Kappel, where the Malthusian regime persisted longest, was only 18 percent.

Why such disparities? Benz's approach emphasizes the assumptions that couples used to calculate the potential cost of adding a child, which in turn causes him to reject Oedipal models of pre-modern family dynamics. These hold that Malthusian controls on marriage were suffused with tension between fathers who clung to property and sons who were forced to postpone marriage until they could inherit. But Benz finds no trace of Oedipal tension. In systems of partible inheritance, as he shows in chapter four, a couple's wealth typically peaked *after* the childbearing years, mainly because inheritance shares arrived in dribs and drabs, not all at once, and from both parents, not just fathers. Family limitation strategies were therefore implemented in reasonable anticipation of future wealth, not in response to Oedipal crisis. No surprise, then, that in all three villages, the daughters and sons of solid farmer-proprietors were first to exit the Malthusian regime. Furthermore, as Benz argues in chapters 8 and 9, the threat of land fragmentation added powerful incentives for limiting the number of offspring.

But all this begs the question of how, if family limitation was so utterly new, it started in the first place. Benz's answer breaks new ground by seeking the sources of innovation in collective memory and social organization. Villages that possessed inclusive structures of communal decision-making and had triumphed in eighteenth-century agrarian conflicts entered the nineteenth century, as Grafenhausen did, "with the confidence that the system could be made to work for them" (p. 181). Benz argues that such dispositions were related to demographic behavior. His analysis of factional alignments during the 1820s, for example, suggests that the beneficiaries of eighteenth-century collective action were also more likely to practice family limitation. In Benz's sample villages, at least, strong and assertive communes were the eighteenth-century "incubators" for receptivity to all kinds of innovation, demographic as well as agricultural and political. By the same token, extremes of social inequality in the early modern period inhibited demographic transition later on. These insights argue against theories that present anticlericalism and family limitation as the expressions of a secularized outlook on life. In the 1870s, it is true, voters in Grafenhausen were more re-

ceptive to the National Liberal party than their neighbors in Kappel and Rust, whose political allegiances rested firmly with the Catholic Center party. More important than ideology, however, was their hard-won ability to recognize opportunities and to pursue their advantage.

The strengths and weaknesses of this study are partly determined by the character of its sources. Genealogical compendia enable Benz to reconstruct highly complex histories of property fragmentation and reconstitution, for example, but these sources rarely supply precise data on wealth. In order to classify families as "rich" or "poor," Benz must turn to tax rolls and land cadastres. Given the importance Benz attaches to distributions of wealth, it is a pity that he does not use these supplemental sources for a systematic comparison of the three villages. Such a comparison might clarify a question of state power: as Benz notes in chapter 5, elevated property qualifications made access to marriage more difficult between 1803 and 1858, resulting in a sharp increase of illegitimate births. Clearly, extramarital continence was no longer part of the demographic regime. An analysis of wealth might show how many people in Kappel and Rust simply could not clear the property hurdle. Did law, in addition to mentality, keep the poor trapped in a Malthusian cage?

It might also offer a more solid basis for evaluating the historical links he finds between communalism, relatively egalitarian distributions of wealth, and a propensity to innovate. Benz is careful to caution against taking his villages as paradigmatic. His overarching point, after all, is to stress the local idiosyncrasy of social dynamics underlying the demographic transition. Still, the connections on which his argument depends must stand or fall by the same, exacting standard that Benz applies to theories of secularization and Oedipal tension.

Copyright (c) 2003 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 other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

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

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

Citation: David M. Luebke. Review of Benz, Ernest, *Fertility, Wealth, and Politics in Southwest German Villages, 1650-1900*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8089>

Copyright © 2003 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.