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Household Budgets as Sources of Food History. A Methodological Overview

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Historians are people who pick up present problems, but solve them in the past. Post mortem analyses of this kind are distinguished by mostly comprehensive explanations, by the breadth of implied facts, by the impressive quality of some episodes and anecdotes and by their complete uselessness for present problems of nutritional medicine, physiology and sociology. This seems to be the rating that historical lectures normally have at "modern" conferences. History of nutrition as a decorative accessory, as a relic of bourgeois past. So what can you really expect from this paper?

It will guide you into the past, of course, but it doesn't want to leave you there. Thereby it is obvious, that the history of any type of sources, in this case of household budgets, will not and cannot offer direct assistance for present methodological problems. But history can draw a contrasting picture - the different forms and expressions of historical household budgets will show neglected aspects of food consumption and human relations to food. To remove these deficits also in the present research seems to me imperative for an adequate picture of today's nutrition.

Household budgets are inventories of takings and spendings of private households. Although this definition doesn't make it necessary, this today usually means aggregated figures about monetary transactions of different household types. From the historical point of view this is only a special, even marginal group of the entire field of household budgets¹⁾. These originated - if you keep some very few precursors during the Middle Ages out of consideration - as a consequence of the Social Question which resulted from early industrialisation. The pauperisation of the rural classes through modern property rights for land and possession, through new ways of production in the home industry and through a growing population surplus led to first household budget surveys in England since the late 18th, in Germany since the first third of

the 19th century. They were parts of detailed reports about the situation of the rural lower classes, which draw a picture of problems and misery and should be used as a fundament of adequate governmental politics. In these early studies the household budget was the material point of crystallization of a large number of crisis symptoms which were entirely described and conveyed to the reader.

These reports had a very important disadvantage. Like the popular travel literature of those days they were often based upon a large number of subjective impressions whose validity was justly denied. There were no standards that could help to secure an "objective" assessment of the social situation of certain population groups. Against this background first methodological discussions were initiated which flow into two dispersing directions since the middle of the 19th century.

On the one hand in the wake of the British political arithmetics, the French positivism and the first attempts of the Belgian statistician Eduard DUCPETIAUX one tried to examine the quantitative takings and spendings of a large number of households over a longer period of time (one month or more). According to Ernst ENGEL, the main representative of this direction, politically relevant regularities of private consumption should be explored as an "instrument for the measuring and determination of the social climate"²⁾. At the end of the 1850s and at the beginning of the 1880s he established internationally accepted methodological standards which scheduled a period of one year for household budgets (later called "Wirtschaftsrechnungen") and he also tried to compare heterogeneous private households with first equivalence scales.

In contrast to this extensive form of household statistics stood the so-called intensive approach, which can be connected with the names of Frédéric LE PLAY and Gottlieb SCHNAPPER-ARNDT. Their aim was a very detailed,

almost picturelike "thick description" of single households, each of them representing as a type a large number of others. The monographs were compiled with the help of direct private contact, partly with participated observation and as a consequence they were very voluminous: LE PLAY's studies varied between 30 and 50 pages, SCHNAPPER-ARNDT's surveys were in no way inferior.

The polarisation between intensive and extensive method you will find in every popular historical and statistical compendium, it has become common knowledge. Nevertheless - when you compare the German historical delivery before the Second World War - nearly 1,800 single publications - with this strict dualism, its obvious that this polarisation gives a wrong picture of concrete budgets inquiries of this time.

From my point of view an adequate survey has to keep in mind the following points.

1. The theoretical background of both approaches was by no means completely different. They both represented an empirical and positivistic conception of science whose results should give "real" information about social life. The main representatives knew about this, for instance SCHNAPPER-ARNDT accepted the use of "Wirtschaftsrechnungen" as the dominant tool of private household statistics, while ENGEL realized that "monographs" were a sensible method to analyse the living conditions of these social classes, who were not able to keep a account book. The present work with household budgets follows this epistemological tradition until today and most of the numerous methodological essays don't reflect that this led to an epistemological deadlock.

2. Apart from some mass statistics, for instance in Berlin 1903 or in the German Empire 1907/8, the majority of household budgets before the First World War was of a type that I would like to call "qualitative household budgets". These are takings and spendings inventories of

individual households which, apart from the quantitative informations, contain also socio-economical and nutritional explanation variables of their own quality. Normally, these informations cannot be quantified. Words and figures are in a mutual explanation context which is not absorbed in an addition of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Even if the "real" historical consumption is the focus, the purchase and preparation of meals is often described, surroundings and orders of the meals become clear and, through the large number of integrated menus, food-stuffs and dishes can enter the viewpoint of the analyses. Although the figures correspond to ENGEL's standard, the historical everyday life becomes fully outlined and partly reconstructable through qualitative household budgets:

"The cooking and preparation of the dishes cannot claim the same thorough interest of the farmer's wife as of the urban housewife [...] The preparation is plain, without refinements, for modest and hungry people. The farmer's wife works quickly and almost mechanically. She does not weigh, she knows the quantities [...] The traditional dishes, bacon, flour dishes and vegetables, are efficiently prepared, nourishing and digestible despite their simplicity. This does not apply to fresh meat. The preparation of fresh beef does not have a tradition, the consumption increased only during recent years. To save some trouble and make the preparation easier, the beef in Wolfenweiler is cooked like everything else, often even boiled, so that it becomes tough and stringy"³⁾.

Between 1880 and 1940 at least 2.000 single qualitative household budgets exist and during this time they were more important than the well known quantitative budgets of today.

3. Hardly any attention was paid till today to the social-hygienic and medicinal-physiological household budgets, which are quite different from actual research. Their number varies according to census, at least 150 titles could be mentioned. During the decade of crisis 1914-1923 and the late 1930s they contain important, irreplaceable informations. Established from questions about the problems of human metabolism, especially the question of protein minimum, they were later prepared in the course of the medical welfare work to determine the effects of for example war, inflation or unemployment on the state of nutrition and health or to determine the relationship between poi-

tre, caries or similar, and nutrition. These sources are thoroughly at variance with the ENGEL standards because they only cover short periods in few households. Still, they contain a large number of further informations about meals and dishes and the often neglected, but very important component of weight and height of the examined persons.

4. The forcing through of the methodological standards of the intensive method mainly took place during the Weimar Republic. It was less the consequence of the growing importance of mathematics for the economic sciences, but rather an increased functionalisation of household budgets in the wage scale and social politics, as it had already appeared in outlines since the turn of the century. When official price and living standard indices were firstly established in 1919, the various lobbies tried to influence the composition of the indices, and indirectly their own real wages with the help of own mass statistics. Thus, the individual budget disappeared in the statistical average size of single groups of characteristics. To improve the social conditions of the entire profession group, the householding of the individual families was pushed into the background. During National Socialism, this trend itself was ousted into the background, although the German Labor Front (Deutsche Arbeitsfront) also made mass surveys. But the great deal of attention that economists and sociologists paid to regional prosperity differences and to the social differences within the population was hardly continued at the beginning of the Federal Republic of Germany.

5. With the establishment of the "current household budgets (laufende Haushaltsrechnungen)" a concept of representative data surveys succeeded since 1949. It was more indebted to economic than to social policy, because after the end of war restrictions the German market economy needed detailed information about demand and consumption structures. The national income and consumption samples enforced since 1962/63 this trend by replacing the various greater budget enquiries of the 1950s. While the last ones concentrate only on selected social groups, but still contained individual budgets, the income and consumption samples tried to draw a representative picture of the whole society and worked only with average figures. Individual households, their food and nutrition habits were no longer the focus, "normal consumption" was the declared aim, even if the household types of the "current household budgets" still remind us of the con-

ceptions of the intensive method. Relying on the solidity of the Federal German household statistics, the wage scale partners and lobby groups stopped their own statistical efforts. So the early history of the Federal Republic of Germany was the real turning point for the removal of individual aspects out of the budget statistics. The methodological discussion since then dealt almost exclusively with these quantitative sources and led necessarily to an exclusion of individual and cultural aspects of food consumption and nutrition habits. If you consider on the other hand the great fund of qualitative household budgets, it becomes clear, that the history of German household budgets is a history of growing distance between (economic) science and the every day life of single households.

This development was the result of a specialized scientific view, which ignored consciously the complexity of human nutrition to get detailed answers on very specific socioeconomic questions. On the other hand, the history of qualitative household budgets shows that budgets can be a very useful source for exploring eating practices, meal-systems or forms of purchasing - stories which can't be told with quantitative budgets on an average level. Because of that a methodological discussion about quantitative indicators is only a secondary problem of dealing with household budgets - if you really want to use them for problems of nutrition and food. It would be more important to make different budget studies, which give also detailed informations about qualitative, cultural aspects of getting, preparing and consumption of food⁴⁾. Results of such studies would be very important not only for cultural but also for nutritional sciences and nutritional advice, because you can offer practices instead of normative consumption figures. The German household budget activities from the turn of the century show that such studies would be possible - not only in an official, but even in an institutional or private way.

1) For a more detailed view see SPIEKER-MANN, U. (1993).

2) ENGEL, E. (1881), p.389: "Instrument zur Messung und Bestimmung [...] des sozialen Klimas".

3) WOHLGEMUTH, M. (1913), pp. 88-89: "Das Kochen und Zureichten der Speisen kann bei der Bäuerin nicht dasselbe eingehende Interesse beanspruchen wie bei der städtischen Hausfrau [...] Die Zubereitung ist einfach, reizlos, ohne Feinheiten, für anspruchslose und hungrige Menschenkinder. Die Arbeiten gehen der Bäuerin schnell und beinahe mechanisch von der Hand. Sie wiegt

nicht ab, sie kennt die Quantitäten [...] Die traditionellen Speisen, Speck, Mehlspeisen und Gemüse, sind trotz ihrer Einfachheit gut und rationell, nahrhaft und verdaulich zubereitet. Anders ist dies beim frischen Fleisch. Die Zubereitung des frischen Rindfleisches ist nicht traditionell gegeben, erst in den letzten Jahren hat der Konsum stark zugenommen. Um die Zubereitung des frischen Rindfleisches möglichst zu vereinfachen und Mühe zu ersparen, wird das Rindfleisch in Wolfenweiler mit wenig Nachdenken wie alles andere gekocht, meist ganz ausgekocht, so daß es zäh und faserig ist".

4) May be this was the deeper meaning of Karl BÜCHER's (1906) witticism: "There has been enough talk about "method and technique"."

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