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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