

## Comptes rendus — Book Reviews

### *Prices and Wages in Early Modern Germany*

WILHELM ABEL. — *Massenarmut und Hungerkrisen im vorindustriellen Deutschland*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1972.

For many years now it has been French scholarship that has led the field in social history, especially in early modern studies, where the works of Braudel, Mousnier, Goubert and Le Roy Ladurie, to name only a few, have followed in the steps of Marc Bloch and the 'Annales' school. Works like Keith Thomas: *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971) have meant that early modern English social history could keep some pace with the French scholars. Equally, English demography has been popularized by Peter Laslett: *The World we have Lost* (1965). Henry Kamen: *The Iron Century. Social Change in Europe 1550-1660* (1971) extended coverage to early modern central Europe by giving the Gipsy problem its first significant treatment, and by drawing fuller attention to the endemic peasant rebellions of the Austrian and Alpine lands after the great failure of 1525 in Germany.

The Oxford journal, *Past and Present*, has now thrived for two decades due to a considerable extent by making available to English-speaking readers many of the issues originally raised by French social history research, notably as regards the conditions for rebellions in early modern Europe. But the "seventeenth century crisis" was debated in the 1960's without focus on central Europe, despite a very fruitful article by Henry Kamen, which perhaps came too late to be worked into the "General Crisis" discussion.<sup>1</sup> One wonders whether this was due to the lack of research on the part of early modern German social historians rather than to the linguistic insularity of their English-speaking counterparts. Hardly, if one judges from a provocative short study by the Göttingen agrarian historian, Wilhelm Abel, whose *Mass Poverty and Hunger Crises in Pre-industrial Germany* is a summary of his most important previous books.<sup>2</sup>

Abel's book is a very gloomy study of the relationship between wages and basic cereal food prices during the early modern period. It can thus be used by historians who concentrate primarily on reason for rebellion, riot and unrest in this era. It has, however, to be contrasted with the school of economic historians who traditionally look to early modern Europe to provide them with background reasons for explaining industrial take-off in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century. For this purpose it is demographic evidence rather than price and wage data that are used. In contrast the essay of J. J. Spengler: "Demographic Factors and Early Modern Economic Development," in D. V. Glass and R. Revell, eds., *Population and Social Change* (1972) seeks to answer questions about the demographic causes of the industrial revolution rather than the nature of pre-industrial early European Society "per se." About early modern economic conditions, Spengler is optimistic where Abel is gloomy. Who is to be believed?

<sup>1</sup> H. KAMEN, "The Economic and Social Consequences of the Thirty Years war," *Past and Present*, No. 39, April 1968, pp. 44-61. Cf. T. ASTON, ed., *Crisis in Europe 1560-1660, Essays from "Past and Present"*, London, 1965.

<sup>2</sup> W. ABEL, *Massenarmut und Hungerkrisen im Vorindustriellen Deutschland*, Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1972, 5.80 DM. Cf. Wilhelm ABEL, *Agrarkrisen und Agrarkonjunktur. Eine Geschichte der Land- und Ernährungs wirtschaft Mitteleuropas seit dem hohen Mittelalter*, 1935, 2nd ed., 1966; Wilhelm ABEL, *Geschichte der deutschen Landwirtschaft, vom Frühen Mittelalter bis zum 19. Jahrhundert*, 1962, 2nd ed., 1967.

Spengler talks of a very limited population growth allowing for sufficient capital formation in early modern western Europe for take-off to industrialization. He gambles everything on this modest population growth, and consequently gives a rosy picture of standards of life in early modern Europe.

Even if English incomes and wages were not much greater in the late-seventeenth century than in the late-fifteenth, the slowness with which the population grew at least permitted the standards attained in the late-fifteenth century to be retained and perhaps even improved (pp. 90-91).

Spengler continues his favourable attitude to the early modern European economy and gives cold comfort to underdeveloped countries in this year (1974) of United Nations' scrutiny into galloping world population.

By comparison with many present-day pre-industrial economies in Africa and Asia, the English economy of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries had reached a relatively advanced stage of economic organisation. So, too, no doubt, had certain other countries (p. 91).

But had they? Not if Abel's case is to be believed.

Abel argues that for the regions of Germany/Austria the relationship between real prices and wages for the unspecified labourer, as well as the amount of regular work available to such a person was so *favourable* in the fifteenth century that he achieved a level of well-being not reached again by his descendants until well into our own century. During the course of the sixteenth century crucially selective price increases began to cut the value of real wages and this trend continued inexorably until the era of industrialization towards the end of the nineteenth century.

Abel's most interesting chapter is probably the one where he explains the decline of wages in terms of purchasing power during the sixteenth century (pp. 16-29). To Abel the main cause of this decline in common living standards was the increase in population in the sixteenth century. As there were relatively more people than there were jobs, those in work had to be increasingly grateful for any economic conditions they were offered.

Using evidence already collected in the 1930's by Elsass and Pribram as part of a history of wages and prices in early modern Germany/Austria, Abel produces some interesting statistics from cities like Nuremberg, Augsburg, Cologne, Frankfurt am Main and Vienna. In Hamburg for example the official wages of carpenters and weavers rose by forty per cent during the sixteenth century, while the price of their basic foodstuff, rye-meal for black bread, rose by 380 per cent. Similar trends were traced for England, France, the Low Countries and Poland.<sup>3</sup> What had happened, one wonders, to the favourable wage situation recorded at the end of the fifteenth century? Can we believe Nuremberg for example, which Gerald Strauss optimistically describes for the period of 1470 to 1500 as having few families crowded close to one another; as providing acceptable conditions of work, sufficient pay at least for a daily meat dish, except on fast days, when there was ample fresh and salted fish, with two meat courses per day by no means exceptional. Nor was Strauss talking specifically or exclusively about the richer town council families of burghers.<sup>4</sup>

In the graphs which Abel produces for the sixteenth century he plots wages as the cost of a man's labour, therefore as an aspect of prices in general. The wage-price line dips, becomes horizontal or at best rises gently in a way similar to the price lines of manufac-

<sup>3</sup> ABEL, *Massenarmut*, p. 23. Cf. M. J. ELSASS, *Umriss einer Geschichte der Preise und Löhne in Deutschland*, 2 volumes (Leiden: 1936-49); A. F. PRIBRAM, R. GEYER and F. KORAN, *Materialien zur Geschichte der Preise und Löhne in Österreich* (Vienna: 1939).

<sup>4</sup> G. STRAUSS, *Nuremberg in the 16th Century* (New York: 1966), pp. 200-201.

tured goods. But cereals, as essential, high calorie foods climb steeply off the page as the century wears on. In sixteenth century Austria for example wages remained constant, manufactured goods rose by one quarter, whilst cereal prices increased by an average of two and a half times. Even so, Abel reckons that a building worker at the end of the sixteenth century could still earn in a full day's work the equivalent of 23,000 calories of rye, pease or beans. If he used his wages to buy meat and dairy products, then he only earned enough to purchase 7,000 calories.<sup>5</sup> Abel concluded from this that, although meat prices did not rise, they remained beyond the reach of ordinary family budgets. However much cereal prices rose, flour products were still the best buy in calorific terms. The more that cereal prices rose, so the less the labourer and his dependents could afford to buy anything else.

But the problem is not so much to trace the depressing decline of real wages, in early modern times, as to question how this decline came about, and indeed whether the working family was really quite well off in the fifteenth century before this decline was firmly under way. It is here that we now require thorough demographic studies of the local and regional evidence from German social historians. Abel has opened the way with his fruitful and provocative statements about declining living standards. Spengler thought that the early modern European population growth rate was slow enough for industrial take-off. Abel thinks that it was still too fast to be able effectively to prevent underemployment, rise in prices and relative fall in wages. Who is right? We do not as yet know. That is why Abel's book is so important to bring to the notice of social historians in general, for it is hoped that Abel's hypotheses will encourage a new school of demography that will look at pre-industrial problems of prices, wages and production in relationship to population as a resource in its own right, and not bother so much about getting its predictions right for growth take-off into later industrialisation and capital.

Gerhard BENECKE,  
University of Kent at Canterbury.

\* \* \*

INGOMAR Bog, ed. — *Der Aussenhandel Ostmitteleuropas 1450-1650*. Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 1971.

In 1967 a symposium was organized by Professor Bog at the Institute of Economic and Social History at Marburg/Lahn, Federal Republic of Germany, to inquire into the trade relations and organization of early modern east-central and central Europe. This book publishes the papers presented at that meeting. It is subtitled *The economies of east-central Europe in their relations with central Europe*. By east-central Europe is meant Poland, Silesia, Bohemia, Moravia, Slovakia, Hungary and Croatia. By central Europe is meant the territories of the early modern German Empire, from Vienna and the Alpine lands, through to Nuremberg and up to the Baltic.

There are 27 articles in all from Hungarian, Polish, Czechoslovak, Yugoslav, West German and Austrian specialists. Two articles are in French, the rest in the German language. East Europeans have made all but five of the contributions.

Ingomar Bog outlines five broad areas of research in an otherwise far too brief introduction. Under examination are (1) export trade balances between the territories of early modern east-central and central Europe (essays 1-5); (2) central markets in the east-west exchange of goods (essays 6-11, 17-19); (3) trading commodities and transport routes (essays 12-16); (4) cattle trade, its routes, organization and volume, as well as social reper-

<sup>5</sup> ABEL, *Massenarmut*, pp. 22-5, 33.