

On Child Rearing in the Villages of the Southern German Principality of Ansbach (1787)

Abstract

This text offers a plausible description of village conditions, but its method of interpretation betrays the tendency of Enlightenment moralists to deplore the apparent “disorder” and “irrationality” of common people’s lives, as well as – in this case – the non-hierarchical nature of their families.

Source

Statistical and Topographical Description of the Burgraviate of Nuremberg below the Mountains or of the Principality of Brandenburg-Anspach

Johann Bernhard Fischer

[...]

Peasants in the district of Ansbach love a clean domestic interior. They live well, but not luxuriously. [...]

The proximity of the capital, as well as the peasants’ frequent visits there, may contribute to the fact that, in our area, this class of people is more cultured and polite than in more remote parts.

The rough upbringing of the peasant children can only produce a rough character. Mothers are used to breastfeeding their children for one or two years and even longer. Thus the *stamina vitae* [i.e. life bonds] adhere more strongly than with children who have been fed artificial drink and food that is not nearly as good as mother’s milk. For this very reason, they learn to walk earlier and suffer less from teething than those children whose mothers deny them this singular and best nourishment.

Until their sixth year, these peasant children hardly receive any instruction but instead are left to their own devices like Rousseau’s Emile. The parents rely on their children for all sorts of easy field work as soon as their strength permits it. From age six to twelve, they attend school [...]. Apart from a little reading and even less writing they do not learn anything that could be of use to them in the future. As a result, when you present these children with useful books other than religious ones (for those are the only ones used in their instruction), their ability to read ceases; the impact on adults is even more unfortunate, for, when the season for field work is over, they cannot amuse themselves in any other way during those long winter nights than in pubs, with brandy, card games, and improper jokes and pranks in the spinning rooms or so called presiding, all of which are always a source of vice and wild behavior.

Another characteristic of the rural population’s domestic life is that parents and children live together as if no subordination existed. Children address their parents by their first name [*dutzen*] and behave as if they were their equals. When confronted with this unseemliness, their naïve reply is that they are on a first-name basis with our Lord as well. As a result, even small children often order their parents around in a wild manner, openly criticize their actions, and habitually deny obedience where it is absolutely necessary.

Is there any possible source for the abundant superstition among the common people other than neglected education? What is the source of the peasant’s belief that religion essentially consists of going to church, confessing, and receiving communion? – And doesn’t this necessarily lead to this sad truth:

that the rural population is so far behind in the practical aspects of Christ's religion, in morals and social virtues, that deceit and nepotism in trade and everyday life are increasingly common among them to the point where civic life, in all its aspects, is ill affected by it? – Finally, what is the source of this stubborn and stupid adherence to the customs of their fathers and the old ways in general? To the effect that the new, better, and more useful cannot find a place with them and in illness they would rather consult a knacker or a quack [*Empyriker*] than a skilled physician. – Surely all of this is a result of their neglected education.

Source: Johann Bernhard Fischer, *Statistische und topographische Beschreibung des Burggraftums Nürnberg unterhalb des Gebürgs oder des Fürstentums Brandenburg-Anspach*, Volume 2. Ansbach, 1787, pp. 10–14; reprinted in Jürgen Schlumbohm, ed., *Kinderstuben, Wie Kinder zu Bauern, Bürgern, Aristokraten wurden 1700-1850*. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1983, pp. 77–78.

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