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Review of Between Work, Play and School: The Economic Function of Children of the Poorer Classes in Austria 1880-1939

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Zwischen Arbeit, Spiel, und Schule: Die ökonomische Funktion der Kinder ärmerer Schichten in Österreich, 1880–1939. By Maria Papathanassiou. Sozial und wirtschaftshistorische Studien. Edited by Markus Cerman et al. Vienna: Verlag für Geschichte und Politik, 1999. Pp. 332.

Since the later 1980s, historical examination of everyday childhood experience has provided needed balance to long-established studies of how adults in authority positions attempted to assist or control children. Maria Papathanassiou's comprehensive investigation of the economic role of Austrian children from poorer families in town and countryside is, in many respects, a synthesis of recent historiographic and theoretical literature in *Alltagsgeschichte* and in children's history. Her approach is influenced by the wider European focus offered in the works of scholars such as Orvar Löfgren, Colin Heywood, and Mary Jo Maynes, and by the Austria-specific research of historians including Ingrid Bauer, Reinhard Sieder, Christa Hämmerle, and Robert J. Wegs. However, Papathanassiou's extensive employment of a body of little-used archival material, the *Dokumentation lebensgeschichtlicher Aufzeichnungen* (held at the University of Vienna's Institut für Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte), allows her study to make a valuable contribution in its own right, both in its attention to detail and for the larger social-historical questions it raises for other scholars.

Papathanassiou limits her geographic focus almost exclusively to the area that would become the Republic of Austria, and she selects the significant time frame encompassing the reoccurring economic downturns of the late nineteenth century, the hungry First World War years, and the chaotic interwar period. Readers expecting a systematic linkage between significant macrodevelopments and the experience of everyday life will be disappointed, however; apart from an initial, short survey of political and legislative initiatives from the later eighteenth century to the 1930s, she focuses on how the larger structural concerns of scarcity, hunger, and un- or underemployment affected the lives of her autobiographers.

Papathanassiou's understanding of the category of children's work is shaped, in part, by the 1908 "Inquiry into Child Labor in Austria." This document established a quite broad sweep of activities in industry, agriculture, workshop, or retail shop that the imperial government designated as children's employment. Nevertheless, she indicates, the inquiry neglected a significant range of tasks that were vital to the survival of poorer families, particularly those in the countryside or smaller towns. Such labor included supervising younger siblings; hauling wood and water for food preparation, heating, and cleaning; and bringing meals to parents in the field or workshop. These tasks liberated parents and guardians to engage in remunerative labor, which was even more significant if one caretaker adult had died, had become ill, or was disabled. Indeed, according to 1908 figures, some 70.9 percent of girls and 44.2 percent of boys were engaged in housework as their primary task before and during their school years (p. 88). During breaks in the school year, many such children would join other children whose primary labor corresponded to officially designated work—tending animals; planting or harvesting; and sorting materials in factory, workshop, barn, or field in return for food, clothing, and, somewhat less frequently, a cash payment.

It is significant that Papathanassiou's sources reveal that children accepted work as a natural and important component of their lives. Telling evidence comes from her descriptions of children's reactions to routine work, but also to such phenomena as *Kindermärkte* and service contracts. Memoirs and interviews reveal that the close scrutiny, pinching, and poking children experienced at *Kindermärkte* rarely conjured up recollections of humiliation or fear—rather, those judged too weak or too young to be

selected for work by farmers or other would-be employers remembered feeling that they had let their families down (pp. 64–67). On the other hand, the sources often recalled fear of being contracted out to strangers and severe bouts of homesickness—despite a feeling of obligation to honor service contracts arranged by their legal guardians.

Obedience and an acute awareness of the importance of helping to relieve family poverty play a significant role in Papathanassiou's important discussion of "moral economy" (pp. 173–94). Influenced by E. P. Thompson, she situates the category of family-based economy within the reciprocal relations of the advantaged farmer, obliged to assist the propertyless, and the socially accepted demands on those better off made by poor peasants or day laborers living hand-to-mouth. "Moral economy" cemented social relations as it provided food for those in need, and it required acknowledgment of status differences in return for sustenance. Papathanassiou explains how integral this was to a poorer family's survival, as parents sent their children to engage in socially sanctioned begging at the doors of "their betters." Her autobiographical sources reveal a strong undercurrent of indignation that children were expected to offer up formulaic phrases such as "farmer, do you have something for me to eat?" followed by a meal on the premises or leftovers to take home, and concluding with "may God bless you." Although this ritual was understood as necessary by supplicant and provider, the autobiographers remembered feelings of humiliation and acute consciousness of status difference.

"Moral economy" also played a role in the context of school, where advantaged children occasionally shared meals with poorer classmates. Although Papathanassiou designates this a form of *Selbstversorgung*, she makes only passing reference to matters of status and humiliation within the peer group (instances of teasing or harassment) that reinforced awareness of social hierarchy. Her sources indicate that school was largely considered a site to recover from physical work, rather than a place where an interest in learning developed (p. 263); the exceptions are those politically self-conscious autobiographers who had become luminaries in the social democratic movement, such as Johann Böhm or Adelheid Popp. However, in an era of increasing basic literacy, one might surmise that something more than classroom napping and daydreaming occupied poorer children, particularly insofar as storytelling and poetry recital ranked among positive recollections of time spent with parents—suggesting that there may have been positive associations with learning stories, poetry, and song in schools.

To be fair, Papathanassiou's primary concern is the experience of childhood economic activity. In her concluding chapter she indicates areas into which social historians might inquire further on the basis of such source material, including such issues as children's sexuality, the effects of socialization into status hierarchies, the role of school as a forum for socialization, and the fluid boundary between work and play. Her study warrants praise for the thoroughness and range of insights consistent with its stated purpose.

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