Schmidt, Alexander: *Reisen in die Moderne. Der Amerika-Diskurs des deutschen Bürgertums vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg im europäischen Vergleich*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag 1997. ISBN: 3-05-002859-9; 328 S.

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This book examines a range of classic questions regarding German „buergerliche" culture in the Wilhelmine era on the basis of German travelers' descriptions of the United States. Was the Wilhelmine „Buergertum" (to the extent one can speak of such a social formation) socially and politically authoritarian and „closed minded," or were the liberal, progressive ideals of the early nineteenth century still influential? To what extent was the German pattern in this regard different from or comparable to that found in other European countries?

Schmidt's premise is that observations regarding a foreign culture can serve as a key to understanding the culture of the observer (28, 288, 291). The apparent focus of travel literature is the Other, but the subtext is the writer's own concerns, fears, and ways of viewing the world. Because the United States seemed to embody forces that were transforming Germany (and much of the rest of the world), because of its great military and economic potential, and because millions of German emigrants had chosen it over their own country, it represented a challenge impossible to ignore.

Schmidt examines observations regarding a range of features of American (and, hence, German) society: equality and inequality; social mobility; the value of work; the place of women and the structure of the family; educational institutions; and the modern city. He compares what travellers wrote about America with what current scholarship suggests, to tease out blind spots and exaggerations. He also analyses similar travel reports from other European countries, principally France, but to some extent the United Kingdom as well. This last comparison suggests which features of the literature he is studying - and, hence, of the larger „buergerliche" culture it reflects - are specific to Germany, and which are pan-European.

„Fascination and horror" (243) were two common reactions to America: sometimes these sentiments were expressed in isolation, but often they reflected reactions to the same phenomena. The most conservative and most left-wing authors tended to be the most critical, although for different reasons: the former attacked the non-existence of traditional hierarchies, the latter the creation of new ones. Liberals, on the other hand, found in America the embodiment of many of the social ideals of the early nineteenth century „Buergertum": relative equality in social relations, especially in everyday encounters between citizens, social mobility, and high regard for work of all sorts. But even the liberals found that the destruction of traditional hierarchies and principles of order went further than they could accept. Cities where property owners could build what and where they wanted; families where the husband and father was treated as an equal by wife and perhaps even children; little respect for Culture of the higher variety; and, perhaps worst of all and the root of the matter, no independent, strong state standing above society to protect the weak, restrain the powerful, and to guide and to educate in general.

Does this evidence support or contradict arguments that in the Wilhelmine period the German „Buergertum" was violently prejudiced against democratic and pluralistic social and political forms? Schmidt argues, with much of the recent literature on the subject, that there was much that was liberal about „the „Buergertum"." It is true that the defensive reaction against the overturning of traditional hierarchies in America suggests „a more or less rigid defense of existing social and political hierarchies" (291). And it is also true that almost all the authors agreed that, while one might emulate America with regard to various technical matters, fundamentally what America taught was the danger of a „laissez faire" approach to modern problems: „the way into modernity had to be a German way," meaning, in particular, one guided by the hand of the state (295). But Schmidt finds the ultimate rejection of Americanization in many aspects of life less significant in answering the questions posed above than the apparent willingness to take the challenge of American society seriously as a basis for self-

criticism: „the understanding of American society [in the travel accounts] runs decidedly in a different direction from... a primarily negative (and primarily politically oriented) diagnosis [of the German „Buergertum“ in the Kaiserreich], which puts...the retreat from genuine „buergerliche“ values . . . in the foreground“ (184). He finds that the authors of the travel literature had a surprisingly accurate understanding of much of what they saw (177, 299), and that on the whole their judgments of America were „astonishingly positive“ (185, 289).

The questions Schmidt's work poses do not, of course, simply belong to the past. As he notes, the continuity in German and European views regarding the United States is striking (296). America is still often seen as the land of the future, as a challenge, as a model, and as an example of what should be avoided (although one would have to have very low expectations indeed – or read the evidence very selectively – to conclude that German, or European, views of America, at least as they are reflected in the press, are on the whole „astonishingly positive.") European views of America remain very much a reflection of the cultural and political outlook of the observers.

Schmidt is especially convincing when he argues that German responses to the United States were similar to, or even more open than, the European average. True, Germans travelers were in general more critical than average of the apparent weakness of the American state. But most Europeans who wrote about America, and here Schmidt means especially the French and the British, believed that society needed more guidance from above than existed in the United States (300). French visitors as a rule expressed even more horror than the Germans at the absence of Art, Culture, and table manners in the United States (the final chapter of a study of French travel reports from the same period, Jacques Portes' „Une Fascination Reticente“ (Nancy, 1990), is entitled „Y a-t-il une culture aux Etats-Unis?“: to which the answer was, for the most part, „non“).

Schmidt accounts for the relative openness of German visitors by reference to the continuing strength of liberal ideals, as well as the especially rapid pace of social and economic change in Germany, which challenged received institutions and mentalities, and the presence of a group of largely pro-American cultural intermediaries, the German emigrants, whose views often colored the travelers' impressions.

Schmidt's work certainly convinces that the description of the Wilhelmine „Buergertum“ as „authoritarian“ or „closed-minded“ fails to convey the questioning of and uncertainty about social structures and ideas that were so important a part of Wilhelmine society. The individuals who wrote the works he describes were not just backward looking or feudal: that is a caricature. Perhaps the strongest evidence of continuing sympathy for liberal values that Schmidt finds was the „genuine buergerliche critique of the „caste spirit“ of the...„Kaiserreich““ (120) that the encounter with America provoked in almost all German visitors. Conservatives as well as liberals found much that was appealing in the informality of American social relations, such as the relative unimportance of social or family background. And Schmidt shows that even in an area as intimate and as governed by tradition as gender roles, many German travelers were able to appreciate the beneficial consequences for women and society as a whole of the freedom and respect women enjoyed in America.

While Schmidt's account complicates, with justice, the received view of the Wilhelmine Buergertum, it does not suggest that the adjectives „authoritarian“ and even „closed-minded“ are entirely inappropriate. For example, the strength of the travelers' response to the absence of „caste spirit“ in America not only shows discomfort with the practices of their own society, but also, as Schmidt notes, confirms the strength of class and other social prejudices in the „Kaiserreich“. And how many of the observers whose work Schmidt analyzes who had reached respectable positions in German society, or similarly situated readers, would have treated those not their social equals with the degree of dignity found in comparable relations in America? Most of the travelers apparently dismissed the republican political system in the United States as corrupt and weak, and for the most part ignored the ethnic diversity of

the country. One wonders how to relate the findings of this book to what one knows about the political and social culture of the „Kaiserreich“. Where are Treitschke and the Pan-Germans? Are these self-critical, ambivalent, reflective „Buerger“ the same ones who had, a few years earlier, applauded Bismarck's often brutal crusades against Catholics, Socialists, and Poles (as many, though certainly not all, did)? To what extent did the impact of reports from America resemble what many of the writers and readers of the travel reports heard on Sunday mornings in church? America was a different kind of other world that challenged many of their own practices and beliefs, a world that was also in many ways attractive and not without influence on behavior, but one whose attractive features (amidst its many flaws) had an element of the theoretical, the dream-like.

European views of America have long fascinated scholars. As a result, many of the themes dealt with in this book have not been discovered for the first time by the author. In particular, Peter Brenner's „Reisen in die Neue Welt“ (Tuebingen, 1991), which includes a long section entitled „Die Erfahrung der Modernisierung,” covers some of the same ground. But thanks to his steady focus on the implications of the travel literature for an analysis of German „buergerliche“ culture, his comparative approach, the wealth of sources used, and a very thoughtful and nuanced analysis, Schmidt does far more than repeat others' findings. I recommend the book to all those interested in German society at the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth centuries.

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