Carola Groppe, Hamburg

Empathy in Families. The Education of Children and Adolescents in German Bourgeois Families in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries

Empathy and education are especially interrelated when individuality and subjectivity advance to societal values. Historically, this brings the 19th and 20th centuries into the focus of research. As a 'feeling' and value, empathy was likely widespread. In the European workers' movement, for example, it existed as a call for political and social solidarity, which is hardly imaginable without empathy. In the countryside, helping in villages in times of harvest or in times of general distress can be linked to empathy, to "putting oneself in someone else's shoes". Nevertheless, it was likely the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie who first wanted to anchor empathy also as a value in education. Empathy as a goal of education requires, like education in general, time, knowledge, and empowerment. Their allocation and development depend to a great extent on sociocultural inequalities (class, race, gender). At the same time, the poor source situation for other classes and milieus must be taken into account. Until now, we cannot say for sure what kind of education took place there.

Using the case study of a bourgeois family (entrepreneurial milieu) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, contemporary letters about education written by four pairs of parents will be examined to show the meaning of empathy in bourgeois education. The source material is extensive and refers to about 1,000 letters in the period 1860 to 1918. To analyze education in letters means to analyze written attitudes toward education and to analyze the formulation of educational goals. Empathy is therefore explored, on the one hand, in its importance for the parents themselves and their attitudes toward educational actions. On the other hand, empathy is examined as an educational goal for children of different ages (early education, education in late childhood and adolescence).

One question directs at the references of an education for empathy: Did it refer to empathic behavior towards one's own family of origin and kin, to empathy for peers outside the family, or to members of the same milieu, etc. The analysis also asks whether empathy education was differentiated by gender. It finally explores whether empathy was limited to national spaces or whether for example comparable sociocultural contexts were more important than national borders.