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[Book review of] Wilhelm Stahl: Der Elitekreislauf in der Unternehmerschaft: eine empirische Untersuchung für den deutschsprachigen Raum. Frankfurt/M. [u.a.]: Deutsch, 1973

Business history review

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DER ELITEKREISLAUF IN DER UNTERNEHMERSCHAFT: EINE EMPIRISCHE UNTERSUCHUNG FÜR DEN DEUTSCHSPRACHIGEN RAUM. ***By Wilhelm Stahl. Frankfurt am Main and Zürich, Deutsch, 1973, pp. xxxvi + 320. DM 29.80.***

Reviewed by Jürgen Kocka
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This dissertation contains important quantitative data on the social and geographical origins, mobility, religious and educational backgrounds, and career patterns of German entrepreneurs of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. It is based on a survey of 728 entrepreneurs and managers, born between 1700 and 1900, and listed in the first eight volumes of the as-yet incomplete *Neue Deutsche Bibliographie* (*NDB*), which cover the entries from A to Ha. In addition, the author has collected data on twenty-one family enterprises and the families running them, for several generations.

The book has many remarkable weaknesses. Anyone who has worked with the brief biographical sketches in the *NDB* knows how difficult it is to classify the information with any precision according to types of entrepreneur or manager, occupational status, educational background, age when starting a specific position, family relations, etc. Very often the data are imperfect or ambiguous, and often the evidence eludes easy categorization. Wilhelm Stahl neither sufficiently discusses the problems and limits of his sources, nor reveals the methods and procedures by which he has handled them. Stahl's interpretation of his findings in terms of elite theory (discussed in the first chapter on a general level) is very reluctant, half-hearted, and there is virtually no interpretation in terms of German social and economic history. Often data would become meaningful only if they were compared with other figures, e.g. with data on the social background of entrepreneurs in other countries, or on other occupational groups in Germany. Both types of data are available in the literature to a limited extent, but have not been taken into consideration. The distribution of a specific variable in the group of entrepreneurs is only rarely compared with the distribution of the same variable within the whole population.

In spite of these avoidable weaknesses and in spite of some unavoidable ones — e.g. the built-in bias of the sample in favor of well-known, outstanding entrepreneurs — the book presents data which are very useful for entrepreneurial research, mobility studies, and other fields of social and economic history, and which are available nowhere else. Stahl uses them for comparing owner-entrepreneurs with salaried entrepreneurs (managers), for comparing eighteenth- and nineteenth-century born entrepreneurs. His data on the occupations of the fathers and grandfathers of entrepreneurs indicate a larger proportion of entrepreneurs

stemming from professional and civil servant circles (*Bildungsbürgertum*), and to a smaller rate of self-recruitment of entrepreneurs than was found by Hartmut Kaelble in his recent mobility study (*Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, vol. 60, 1973). Stahl's study of geographical backgrounds successfully corrects the older figures of Eulenburg, and shows that geographic mobility was much higher among managers than among owner-entrepreneurs. The book includes the best available data on the over-representation of Protestants among German businessmen, without offering a convincing interpretation of this phenomenon, which has been hotly debated since Max Weber's work. Stahl argues that owner-entrepreneurs were about twenty-nine, and managers about thirty-nine years old, on the average, when they established their business or moved into entrepreneurial positions. He finds that only 5 to 6 per cent of his sample were ennobled. In exploring generational sequences within family enterprises he demonstrates that the succession of three generations in the leadership of one business has been frequent, but that the succession of more than three generations was very rare (the *Buddenbrook* effect). He convincingly documents the high probability that the sons, grandsons, and great-grandsons of entrepreneurs stay within the upper and upper-middle strata of the social pyramid. Other studies of this kind using the same type and other types of sources will have to check the validity and reliability of these data, provide further differentiation (such as by region), and interpret the results in terms of German social and economic history in comparative perspective.

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