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978-0-521-38692-0 - Property, Production, and Family in Neckarhausen, 1700-1870

David Warren Sabean

Excerpt

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Introduction

For what I really wish to work out is a *science of singularity*; that is to say, a science of the relationship that links everyday pursuits to particular circumstances. And only in the *local* network of labor and recreation can one grasp how, within a grid of socio-economic constraints, these pursuits unfailingly establish relational tactics (a struggle for life), artistic creations (an aesthetic), and autonomous initiatives (an ethic). The characteristically subtle logic of these “ordinary” activities comes to light only in the details.¹

– de Certeau

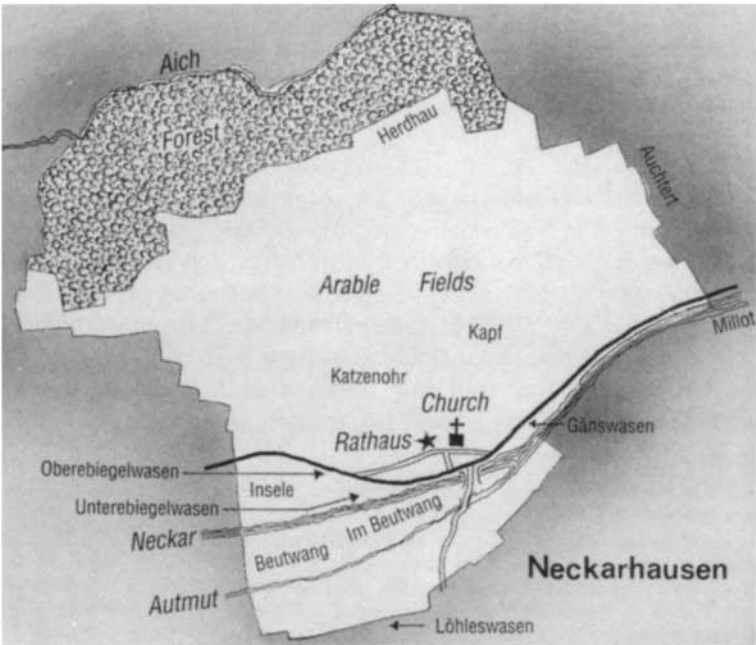
This book deals with the ordinary experiences of people living in one South German village. It focuses on the internal relations of the family and is part of a larger exploration of the dynamics of kinship, which will be developed further in a subsequent volume.² The study begins in 1700, by which time the village had largely recovered from the Thirty Years War and established the land-holding patterns and occupational structure which would characterize it until the late nineteenth century, and ends in 1870, after the population had tripled in size, carried through a green revolution, and become enmeshed in regional and international markets.

Neckarhausen was not distinguished from many other villages belonging to the Duchy – from 1806, the Kingdom – of Württemberg in any special way, except for the fact that in the course of the nineteenth century it came to be well known for the quality of its flax. Despite major adjustments, its agriculture throughout the entire period was concentrated on raising spelt, a form of winter wheat widely grown in Swabia and particularly adapted to the weather conditions of the region. Spelt was cultivated in a progressively modified three-field system of crop rotation. Like most villages in the low country between the Black Forest and the Swabian Alb, Neckarhausen had adopted the practice of partible inheritance, which redistributed family property in each generation by according equal amounts of land and other assets to all the children. The region became a classic land of small peasant agriculture, characterized by ever more

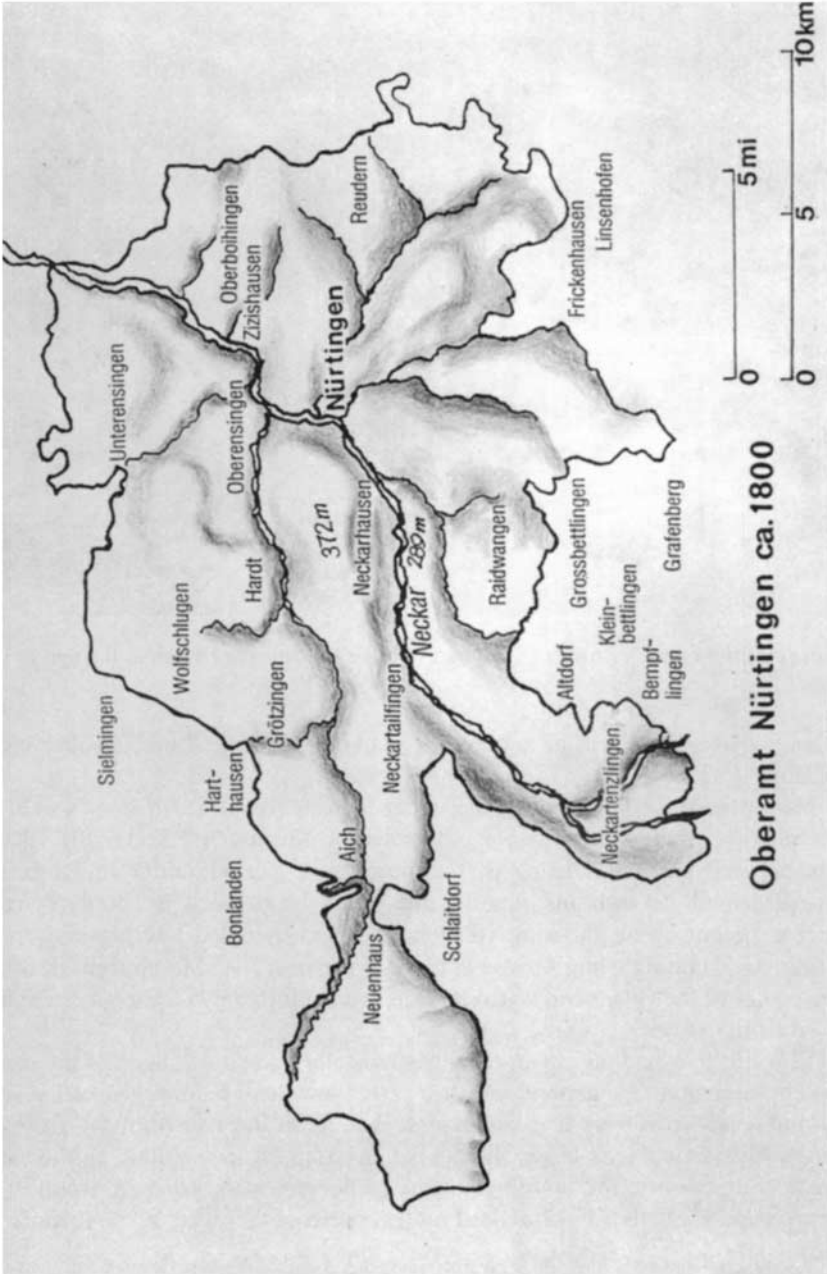
¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, 1984), p. ix.

² Throughout this book, reference is made to another book in preparation on kinship in Neckarhausen. It is sometimes referred to as “Volume 2” or the “volume on kinship.” It deals with the systems of marriage alliance and ritual kinship and examines the practices of child naming, guardianship, and underwriting debts. It examines the interactions of kin with each other, the language of kinship, and the strategic use of people related to each other by blood or connected through marriage. The volume has no title yet, but Cambridge University Press expects to publish it.

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Village center facing east with the Rathaus on the left and the church at the end of the street.

intensive use of the soil as succeeding generations worked ever smaller plots of land.

Neckarhausen is situated on the upper Neckar River, a half hour's walk to the nearby administrative and market town of Nürtingen.³ Today the village has become part of Nürtingen, but during the period under investigation it maintained its own institutions and jealously guarded its borders from encroachment by neighboring villagers and townspeople. The highway from Tübingen, running along the north bank of the river, used to go right through the center of the village but was relocated even before the Neckar was straightened in the 1830s.

The village is laid out on an east-west axis along the north bank of the river, which interrupts its general northeasterly flow just before Neckarhausen, turning eastward for several kilometers. Parallel to the course of the river on the north side is a long ridge, which rises up from the valley floor. In the early eighteenth century, the buildings of the settlement were grouped around the church and Rathaus a few hundred meters north of the river, in the manner of

³ For an introduction to the village and surrounding communities, see Königlicher statistisch-topographischer Bureau, *Beschreibung des Oberamts Nürtingen* (Stuttgart and Tübingen, 1848); and Hans Schwenkel, ed., *Heimatbuch des Kreises Nürtingen*, 2 vols. (Würzburg: Konrad Triltsch for the Kreisverband Nürtingen, 1950, 1953). See also *Pfarrbericht* (1828), I.KA, A39, Bü 3060.

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Arable fields with the village forest in the background.

a typical nucleated village. As the population grew, the inhabited area slowly expanded up the hill and eventually pushed along the slope of the ridge, especially eastward toward Nürtingen. Atop the ridge 100 meters above the valley floor is a broad flat plateau where the narrow strips worked by the villagers were distributed into furlongs (*Felder*), which in turn were grouped into three large fields (*Zelgen*). On the other side of the arable fields, a considerable forest of 447 Morgen (141 hectare, 348 acres) belonging to the village invited predatory incursions by villagers from Grötzingen and Oberensingen. From the Rathaus at the center of the village to the edge of the arable fields at the top of the slope, the distance is about 1 kilometer, and to the woods at the far side of the tableland, another 2.5 kilometers. Looking back from the fields in the direction of the village and river, one sees in the distance the long escarpment of the Swabian Alb, running in a northeast-southwest direction, with the rolling lowlands in between dotted with villages similar to Neckarhausen.

Proceeding back down the hill on either side of the inhabited area, we encounter the mixed orchard meadows which were developed at the turn of the nineteenth century and are so frequently found in the region today. They were the foundation for both stock raising and a considerable fruit harvest.⁴ Some of

⁴ The apple tithe itself frequently amounted to over 2,000 simri (44,300 liters, total harvest 443,000 liters) by the mid-nineteenth century; *Beschreibung Nürtingen*, pp. 65–7.

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Arable fields facing toward the Swabian Alb.

the steeper slopes were devoted to viniculture until 1817, when everyone finally agreed that the wine was too sour to drink with any pleasure. At the bottom of the incline, all along the river, the village had its communal pastures and wet meadows, cultivated intensively from the beginning of the nineteenth century. Until the river course was “corrected,” this area was subject to flooding in most years, and even today every other decade or so a destructive flood can disrupt the economy of various communities situated along the valley floor.

Scattered about the village territory (*Markung*) were areas set aside for vegetable gardens or for flax and hemp cultivation. Neckarhausen sold considerable amounts of raw flax, kept many people busy spinning, and had 30 weaving frames in use as late as the mid-nineteenth century.⁵ In some of the meadows along the river and in some of the small communal parcels up the hill, villagers laid their linen cloths out to bleach, and pools by the river provided places to soak raw flax in preparation for extracting fibers. The geese were herded in one of the low-lying wet meadows until the 1830s. The district (*Oberamt*) of Nürtingen was one of the most important sheep-raising areas in Württemberg, and Neckarhausen had a considerable herd, which in the eighteenth century grazed on the fallow and in the nineteenth increasingly on intensive pastures set aside for its use.⁶ Over toward Nürtingen in the Millot, there was a stone

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 177ff.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.76.

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quarry which produced building and paving stone, and whetstones were obtained from the valley of the contributory Aich. The Neckar River bank itself was a source of gravel and sand. Up on the hill there was a hut for producing saltpeter which the village leased out on an annual contract. Rights to fish in the river belonged to fishermen in Nürtingen, and the river was used by raftsmen for transporting timber from further upstream. Once the river was straightened, the village planted willows all along the bank and used the wands for basket production. Altogether, the agricultural and forest lands of the village included 1796 Morgen (measured in 1846: 566.2 hectares, 1368.5 acres), distributed among 77 families around 1700 (on average 23.2 M. or 17.7 acres) and 218 families by 1870 (on average 8.2 M. or 6.2 acres).⁷

Neckarhausen is situated in an undulating lowland under the Swabian Alb (*Albvorland*), where limestone plateaus alternate with valleys composed of clay and marl.⁸ In contrast to the region north of Stuttgart, which is characterized by geological folding and relatively extended areas of consistent stratification, this southern territory shows signs of faulting and abrupt alterations, with a variegated pattern of micro regions. In general, the soils of the region consist of rich, heavy clays derived from the limestone substratum. In Neckarhausen, the soils on the plateau, which contains the arable fields, are mostly loess; those of the south slope with orchards and meadows consist of marl; and the valley floor with its wet meadows and pastures is made up of heavy clay with a limestone substratum.⁹ The climate is influenced both by the oceanic and the continental systems, which can bring cold or mild winters and varying amounts of rain.¹⁰

Some readers might ask whether a study of this kind can produce results of general interest or comparative significance. These two questions are seldom distinguished from each other. Yet they can lead in quite different directions. In many instances, the comparative method is used precisely to establish the uniqueness of some institutional arrangement, pattern of behavior, or element of culture. In fact, comparative historians, anthropologists, or sociologists who are careful about their methodological procedures use comparison for the most part to establish the peculiar traits of a particular cultural area, familial structure, economic formation, or the like. Particularity, specificity, and context

⁷ *Ibid.*, Anhang. If we subtract the forest from the total, then the average household in 1700 had 13.3 acres (5.5 hectares) agricultural land; in 1870, 4.7 acres (2.0 hectares).

⁸ I have based my description of the geography of the region on Friedrich Huttenlocher, *Baden-Württemberg, kleine geographische Landeskunde*, 3d. ed., Schriftenreihe der Kommission für geschichtliche Landeskunde Baden-Württemberg, vol. 2 (Karlsruhe, 1968), pp. 12–27, 41–50. See also *Heimathuch Nürtingen*, vol. 2, pp. 590–2.

⁹ *Heimathuch Nürtingen*, vol. 2, pp. 591–2.

¹⁰ The average annual temperature is 8°–9°C. (46°–48°F), ranging from 18°–19°C. (64°–66°F.) in July to just under 0°C. (32°F.) in January. The average annual rainfall ranges from 70 to 90 centimeters (27.6–35.4 inches); Huttenlocher, *Landeskunde*, pp. 40–6.

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are usually the point of even the most general application of the comparative method.¹¹

Generalization is itself not without ambiguity and can be thought of in at least three ways. First, there is the desideratum of typicality or statistical representativeness. In what way does Neckarhausen represent practices and behaviors which can be found elsewhere, either over a larger geographical area such as the district of Nürtingen, the Duchy of Württemberg, South Germany, Central Europe, or across cultures to embrace certain kinds of social formations – peasant, agricultural, partible inheritance, rural, Protestant pietist, and so forth? The answer has in part to do with scale. I could have studied one family or a region or a state, or I could have focused on a particular topic such as small peasant society in periods of intensification and capitalization, selecting as a case study one farm, one village, one epoch, or a series of different examples. It is not the scale of the exercise which determines the importance of its questions, since any unit of analysis is open to the same demand to go beyond its limits. In some ways, whether a territory is of satisfactory size is a matter of perspective. From the point of view of someone, say, in southern California, there is not a great deal of difference between Neckarhausen and Württemberg, and most people have heard of the latter only because their Porsche came from somewhere in the middle of it.

The relevance of scale has largely to do with the nature of the questions. For example, a philological investigation of a word such as “hausen” in the context of its daily use could not be carried out over a much wider area than I have done in Chapter 3. Moreover, it would be irrelevant to a general study of peasant societies as such. Hans Medick tells me that in Laichingen, a village about 30 kilometers from Neckarhausen, “hausen” was used in circumstances similar to those found in this study, but 50 years earlier. Such a comparative perspective shows how irritating the demand for generalization can be when complex issues of social interaction are raised. In the first place, it devalues the “merely local,” and in the second, forces the researcher along the wrong path by implying that frequency of use and areal distribution are relevant criteria for judging significance. The fact that the terms of discourse in Laichingen are out of phase with those pertaining to Neckarhausen forces us to pose strong analytical questions about ideology, social differentiation, and the chronology of economic and social change rather than weak ones about statistical spread.

Another problem with areal significance is that it draws our attention away from social discourse. De Certeau makes a useful distinction between the “circulation of a representation” (e.g., by teachers and preachers) and its use, or between the production of an image and the “secondary production hidden in the process of utilization.”¹² This kind of linguistic model, which distin-

¹¹ A good example is Jack Goody, *Production and Reproduction: A Comparative Study of the Domestic Domain*, Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology, vol. 17 (Cambridge, 1976). But see George Peter Murdock, *Social Structure* (New York, 1949).

¹² De Certeau, *Practice*, p. xiii.

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guishes between performance and competence, where speaking is not reducible to a knowledge of language, fixes our attention on particular acts of communication, on the appropriation and reappropriation of language by speakers. According to Bakhtin, “the task of understanding does not basically amount to recognizing the form used, but rather to understanding it in a particular, concrete context, to understanding its meaning in a particular utterance, i.e. it amounts to understanding its novelty and not to recognizing its identity.”¹³

The second way in which generalization might be understood is in terms of a particular narrative of development; that is, Neckarhausen might be seen as an instance of a stage in the process of modernization, as a representative of a particular form of domestic group formation, as a typical instance of an economy of household production, or as a case of pre- or protocapitalist agricultural development. In this approach, the varieties of human society are considered a “sequence of specialized adaptations to different economic circumstances.”¹⁴ As a consequence, attention is turned away from the dynamics of social relations in a particular society to a grand narrative of human progress. Each new study recodes its findings to fit an objectified story already known to the observer. It is only the residue, when all the local color is washed away, which counts for essential knowledge of the subject. This approach does two things: It substitutes “our” story for “their” story, and it isolates us from interaction with “them.” Every aspect of dialogue is erased, whether it is the historian’s reciprocal fashioning of him- or herself in introspection – recognizing in “their peculiarities,” as Edmund Leach says, a mirror of our own¹⁵ – or whether it is the “cooperative” or “collaborative” construction of a narrative when the author no longer occupies the position of a transcendental observer.¹⁶ More important, the nature of the inquiry shifts from intersubjective communication processes underpinning the objectivized account to “essential” and “substantial” being. But “once dialogism and polyphony are recognized as modes of textual production, [such] monophonic authority is questioned.”¹⁷

A third form of generalization asks how a particular formation is to be measured against some criterion such as rationality: To what degree does it fulfill needs, master nature, or conform to an abstract concept of lawful behavior? Ultimately such questions come down to a notion of humanity which arose during the Enlightenment – namely, that each person represents its essence. The analytical problem is to go beyond the particulars to his or her essential

¹³ V. N. Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), p. 65. For the argument that Bakhtin wrote the work, see Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), pp. 146–7.

¹⁴ Edmund Leach, *Social Anthropology* (New York, 1982), p. 121.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 127. James Clifford, “Introduction: Partial Truths,” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley, 1986), pp. 1–26, here 23: “Every version of an ‘other,’ wherever found, is also the construction of a ‘self.’”

¹⁶ Stephen A. Tyler, “Post-Modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult Document,” in *Writing Culture*, ed. Clifford and Marcus, pp. 122–40, here 126.

¹⁷ James Clifford, “Introduction,” p. 14.

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rational or sensual core. This approach may be criticized for adopting artificial standards and norms, and even a follower of the tradition such as Habermas tries to rescue rationality without a fixed concept of human nature.¹⁸ According to the Enlightenment notions, individuals at their core are without relations, and as a result the individual is objectified and reified. This approach has been objected to in part because of the static nature of the categories. They are meant to catch common properties or, as Dumont puts it, the mere general as opposed to the universal.¹⁹ And with the latter term, Dumont brings us back again to the problem of introspection. In contrast to the search for the general, which leads inevitably to objectification, the search for the universal enables one to find truth for oneself. For Dumont as for a large number of other writers, the “disintegration of ‘Man’” appears to be rooted in a recognition of the arbitrariness of the criteria of rationality and the problematic boundary between nature and culture.²⁰

If approaches to the “general” seem problematic, does that throw us back to a new historicism? Is the interest in the concrete, the local, and the particular based on an assumption of individualism? Meinecke, for example, was out to replace a “generalizing” with an “individualizing” science. Historicism was supposed to liberate us from an unhistorical and naturalistic conception of man.²¹ It posited the existence of integrated, unique individualities, whether persons or nations, and in a similar fashion argued for an infinite variety of different historical forms. The facts of history are particular, individual, concrete, unrepeatable entities.²² Historical narrative offers a form of knowledge which reconstructs events in their unique individuality.

What distinguishes this study from historicism is that it does not make individualism a starting point. The *local* is interesting precisely because it offers a *locus* for observing relations. And we must be careful not to confuse the particular and singular with the individual, a point made by both de Certeau (cited at the beginning of the introduction) and Norbert Elias:

The traditional idea of the individuality of the single human being that underlies the historiography concerned with individualities presents a being standing completely alone, an isolated rather than just a single human being, a closed rather than an open system. What are actually observed are people who develop in and through relations to other people. By contrast, the individualistic historical tradition postulates individuals who are ultimately without relation.²³

¹⁸ Georg C. Iggers, “Historicism,” in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, ed. Philip P. Wiener (4 vols.: New York, 1973), vol. 2, pp. 456–64, here 463.

¹⁹ Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus. The Caste System and Its Implications*, trans. Mark Sainsbury (Chicago, 1970), p. 3.

²⁰ For example, see Leach, *Social Anthropology*, pp. 84–121. The phrase is from James Clifford, “Introduction,” p. 14.

²¹ Georg Iggers, “Historicism,” p. 457.

²² Hans Meyerhoff, “Introduction,” in *The Philosophy of History in Our Time* (New York, 1959), p. 19.

²³ Norbert Elias, *Court Society* (New York, 1983), p. 24.