

Book Review

The Anxiety of Ascent: Middle-Class Narratives in Germany and America

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Citation: Harrington, A. (2019). The Anxiety of Ascent: Middle-Class Narratives in Germany and America, *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 4(1), 06. <https://doi.org/10.20897/jcasc/5849>

Published: July 19, 2019

Doidge, S. (2019). *The Anxiety of Ascent: Middle-Class Narratives in Germany and America*. London and New York: Routledge.

Sociologists and social commentators have long debated a question of what might be called the ethical ‘validity claim’ of middle-class culture and ideas in the formation of Western advanced industrial societies. Are middle-class worldviews to be seen, with Marx, as essentially relative phenomena, essentially class-conditioned and ideological? Or are they to be seen, with Max Weber, as in some way ethical value-systems *sui generis*, with a potentially more generalizable, more ‘universal’ normative status in global cultural-historical investigation? Are middle-class attitudes to work, family life, politics and individual self-fulfilment to be seen as suggesting an in some sense ‘anthropological’ structure of moral leadership in life – of directive ‘conduct of life’ in Weber’s sense? Scott Doidge’s *The Anxiety of Ascent* explores the second of these two idioms of response, tracing the rise, influence and vicissitudes of middle-class narratives of life in late nineteenth century Germany and twentieth century post-war America. At the forefront are four intensive vignettes of middle-class mentality in the Western literary imagination, beginning with the nineteenth century significance in Germany of the novel *Debt and Credit* by Gustav Freytag (1855), then turning to Thomas Mann’s well-known *Buddenbrooks* of 1901, then moving to the case of the US domestic comedy TV series *Father Knows Best*, broadcast in America between 1954 and 1960, and concluding with the contemporary cable series *Mad Men*, set in 1960s New York. In each case, Doidge traces how a particular repertoire of moral norms and attitudes to work and money, to love, sex and family life, and to friends, business colleagues and rivals, responds and adapts to challenges, dilemmas and situations of shame or moral compromise. And as Doidge shows, these same attitudes enter into states of deep structural crisis and uncertainty at periodic moments. Paradigmatically, we see this in the story of the decline and fall of Mann’s North-German Protestant business family, with clear echoes a century later in the travails of the characters of *Mad Men* (notably, Peggy Lee’s 1969 hit ‘Is That All There Is?’, played as a backing track in the series, takes its lead from Mann’s short story of 1896, ‘Disillusionment’) – and yet the relevant habits of life still persist and resolve themselves at some level as enduring, if fragmented, cores of meaning. Mann’s sociological worldview has long been of concern to scholars from Wolf Lepenies to Harvey Goldman, but Doidge enriches our understanding of *Buddenbrooks* and connects it both to earlier German antecedents and to the multi-layered panorama of American post-war suburban social commentary, particularly as this plays out in the work of figures from C. Wright Mills and David Riesman to William Whyte and others.

This is a beautifully written study, replete with many fine close readings of key scenes and character relationships in the literary and fictional examination of modern Western middle-class social life. Yet one loose cluster of questions perhaps lingers at the end. Rather absent from the book is any sense that the constellations so intricately described in the study might essentially be a thing of the past – that these so classically White Anglo-Saxon Protestant figurations, once the backbone of the flourishing and broadly socially equitable economies of countries

such as post-war America, might no longer stand today in any unproblematic way as the salient central descriptors, either of 'middle class life' or of 'work' or of any current 'work ethic'. In a couple of somewhat cursory paragraphs in the concluding pages of the book, Doidge suggests that the arguments of figures such as Bauman, Beck, Sennett and others concerning the new circumstances of insecure employment following the neoliberal turn of Western economies since the 1980s might not be 'new arguments'. Yet these surely are not merely 'arguments'; they are, in all fairness, statements of fact – and they surely *do* point in an important sense to conditions of life that *are* genuinely new. The largely ethnically homogenous and nationally contained position of the German and American middle classes in 1900 and 1960 is not directly comparable to the situation of mobile middle-class actors today on the global transnational plane. That Weber's Protestant ethic has today been replaced by a distinctively 'new spirit of capitalism' (in the sense of Boltanski and Chiapello), that work has become for vast sections of society today quite deeply 'precarious', that wealth and income differentials have increased exponentially over the past four decades, and that structures and institutions of social solidarity are today but a pale shadow of the conditions of Western post-war social-market economies – all of these states of affairs are rather conspicuously absent from the frame of this book. Though it is clear that some kind of world-historically significant 'image of man' remains in the portraits of life painted by the writers discussed in the study, it seems important that this rather distinctively Western historic *Weltanschauung* is addressed today within a sense of the global distance and relativity that is its due.