

Buddenbrook

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Abstract

At first glance, the clues that call for a comparison or, more aptly, a parallel, are obvious. Both the work of the young Thomas Mann, *Buddenbrook*, as well as the historical archives of Marseille (the city's Chamber of Commerce archives and the Bouches-du-Rhone Department's archives) portray the commercial society of two European cities that although located in different countries, they are equally special in their national space: Lubeck, a hanseatic city with special privileges, and Marseille, a Mediterranean and French port with a port-franc status. This study deals with these two commercial communities in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, when major changes affected the domain of commerce and trade. From *Zollverein*, the customs union of the German states, to the 1860 Anglo-French trade agreement these two cities gradually lost their privileges and distinctiveness as the expansion of free trade constantly extended the space of commercial exchanges, thereby multiplying the numbers of new competitors and overturning traditional uses and practices.

It is at this point that the parallels run out and the didactic influence of comparison begins. *Buddenbrook's* poetic structure may serve as a starting point for a historical analysis of the city's commercial society. The Buddenbrook family suffocates and dies, first financially and then physically, due to its estrangement from collective existence, a guilt-ridden withdrawal from the sphere that constituted its power as part of the bourgeoisie. Can we use this psychological experience, described at a family level, to analyse the behaviour of a commercial community which, by virtue of the institutional framework and its own inability to penetrate into it, is forced to a 'subjectivity' that is increasingly apolitical?