

## **Writing the Lives of the Poor, German Historical Institute, London, 28-30 November 2013**

The historiography of the dependent or marginal poor has long drawn on a range of writings - surveys, newspaper reporting, government enquiries, and occasionally biographies collected by the middling sorts - *about* this group. Formalized petitions from (or more usually on behalf of) the powerless to the powerful, seeking alms, appealing for justice or jostling for admission to various institutions, have also been an important mainstay of welfare studies. In the last 15 years, however, it has become increasingly clear that the very poorest elements of European, Middle and Far Eastern society were rather more literate than has often been allowed. They wrote autobiographies, diaries, stories/fairy stories or poems, some published but many more still in manuscript form. Above all it has become clear that the poor wrote as individuals or a collective to assert their claims to welfare. In some places their words were mediated by scribes but it becomes increasingly clear that in others the 'pauper narrative' directly represents the word, thoughts, sentiments and strategies of the poor themselves. Such documents – part of an expanding range of areas in which the poor of the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were called upon to construct or rehearse their 'story' – represent a complex interplay of rhetoric, fact, claims-making and lies/silences/embellishments. Sensitively used, however, they provide a unique window onto the experience of poverty and the nature of the welfare systems and power structures with which the poor engaged. This conference, organised jointly between the German Historical Institute, London and the University of Leicester Centre for Medical Humanities, will explore the question of how the poor between the seventeenth and twenty-first centuries sought to 'write' their lives. Focussing on particular groups (for instance the sick poor), countries or periods, we will be particularly interested in issues such as the use of rhetoric and embellishment, interpreting silence in narratives, the origins of language, the concept of honesty, outcomes and the nature of power relationships within welfare systems. If you are interested in offering a paper for this conference, please contact Professor Steven King ([sak28@le.ac.uk](mailto:sak28@le.ac.uk)) or Professor Dr Andreas Gestrich ([gestrich@ghil.ac.uk](mailto:gestrich@ghil.ac.uk)) by 15 September 2013.