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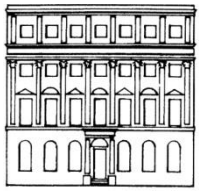

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PAUPER LETTERS AND PETITIONS FOR POOR RELIEF IN GERMANY AND GREAT BRITAIN, 1770–1914

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Historical research has shown a new and intensified interest in life testimonies (ego-documents) of the lower classes. In this context certain types of ego-documents, namely, letters, applications, and petitions written by or for paupers applying for relief have attracted increasing attention in recent years, first in Britain, and now increasingly also in Germany and other European countries. Such 'pauper narratives' are preserved in local or county archives in Britain and elsewhere, often in large numbers. The German Historical Institute London (Andreas Gestrich) and the Centre of Medical Humanities at the University of Leicester (Steven A. King) are engaged in a joint project, generously funded for three years (1 May 2011 to 30 April 2014) by the German Research Foundation and the British Arts and Humanities Research Council, to collect, edit, and analyse such documents. This paper will introduce this project by outlining first its research contexts, secondly its aims and perspectives, and, finally, some preliminary results.

Research Context

The state of research on pauper letters and petitions still differs markedly in Britain and Germany. British literature on pauper narratives and related material has flourished over the last two decades,[1] intersecting with an increasingly sophisticated literature on working-class autobiography,[2] an emergent European literature

[1] See esp. the pivotal volume by Tim Hitchcock, Peter King, and Pamela Sharpe (eds.), *Chronicling Poverty: The Voices and Strategies of the English Poor, 1640–1840* (Basingstoke, 1997).

[2] For the rising interest in autobiographies see e.g. Rudolf Dekker (ed.), *Egodocuments and History: Autobiographical Writing in its Social Context since the Middle Ages* (Hilversum, 2002); Christa Hämmerle (ed.), *Plurality and Individuality: Autobiographical Cultures in Europe* (Vienna, 1995).

on petitions,[3] and 'ordinary writings' or *écritures ordinaires*,[4] to show that the poor and labouring classes were functionally literate and used language to assert and reflect their agency.[5] However, German historiography now also has a growing number of studies making use of petitions in general.[6] Some use them not only as a rich mine for portraying the everyday life of paupers,[7] but also to ask more far-reaching questions about their writing culture,[8] or about pauper rights, participation, and agency.[9] So far, work on pauper narratives

[3] Lex Heerma van Voss (ed.), *Petitions in Social History* (Cambridge, 2001); on the difference between letters and petitions see Peter Jones and Steven A. King, 'From Petition to Pauper Letter: The Development of an Epistolary Form' (unpublished manuscript) and for German letters and petitions also Andreas Gestrich, 'Das Leben der Armen: Ego-Dokumente als Quellen zur Geschichte von Armut und Armenfürsorge im 19. Jahrhundert', in Anke Sczesny, Rolf Kießling, and Johannes Burkhardt (eds.*), Prekariat im 19. Jahrhundert: Armenfürsorge und Alltagsbewältigung in Stadt und Land* (forthcoming 2013).

[4] Martyn Lyons (ed.), *Ordinary Writings, Personal Narratives* (Berne, 2007); Daniel Fabre (ed.), *Écritures ordinaires* (Paris, 1993).

[5] See also Martyn Lyons, 'New Directions in the History of Written Culture', *Culture and History Digital Journal*, 1/2 (Dec, 2012), online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.3989/chdj.2012.007>, accessed 9 Sept. 2013; Reiner Prass, 'Das Kreuz mit den Unterschriften: Von der Alphabetisierung zur Schriftkultur', *Historische Anthropologie*, 9/3 (2001), 384–404; on rural areas see Klaus-Joachim Lorenzen-Schmidt and Bjørn Poulsen (eds.), *Writing Peasants: Studies on Peasant Literacy in Early Modern Northern Europe* (Gylling, 2002).

[6] For an overview of recent German language research see esp. Andreas Würgler, 'Bitten und Begehren: Suppliken und Gravamina in der deutschsprachigen Frühneuzeitforschung', in Cecilia Nubola and Andreas Würgler (eds.), *Bittschriften und Gravamina: Politik, Verwaltung und Justiz in Europa (14.–18. Jahrhundert)* (Berlin, 2005), 17–52.

[7] Helmut Bräuer, 'Persönliche Bittschriften als sozial- und mentalitätsgeschichtliche Quellen: Beobachtungen aus frühneuzeitlichen Städten Obersachsens', in Gerhard Ammerer, Christian Rohr, and Alfred Stefan Weiß (eds.), *Tradition und Wandel: Beiträge zur Kirchen-, Gesellschafts- und Kulturgeschichte. Festschrift für Heinz Dopsch* (Vienna, 2001), 294–304.

[8] Otto Ulbricht, 'Supplikationen als Ego-Dokumente: Bittschriften von Leibeigenen aus der ersten Hälfte des 17. Jahrhunderts als Beispiel', in Winfried Schulze (ed.), *Ego-Dokumente: Annäherungen an den Menschen in der Geschichte* (Berlin, 1996), 149–79.

[9] Robert Jütte, 'Sprachliches Handeln und kommunikative Situation: Der Diskurs zwischen Obrigkeit und Untertanen am Beginn der Neuzeit', in

(and more widely on 'ordinary writing') has tended to focus on several key issues.

1. *The texts themselves as material objects.* Thomas Sokoll's 2001 edition of Essex pauper letters provides the editing benchmark for all pauper narratives,[10] and his central concern in this volume is with the appreciation of the texture of the letters themselves. He has developed this work to look at issues such as the deployment and development of rhetoric, orthography, and typology, suggesting that English narratives fall into one of three types, ranging from the formally structured petition (by far the least important in the English context, but dominant in the German setting) to the familiar letter.[11] Sokoll's work is a key foundation for the approach to editing and understanding the narrative material that we intend to collect and disseminate.

2. *The place of these letters and petitions in marking the shift from oral to literate culture.*[12] Within the wider historiography of the rise of reading, writing, and publishing, pauper letters push back the date of an effective literate culture for ordinary people, and illustrate how, for many decades in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, oral and literate cultures survived side-by-side, each reinforcing the other.[13] In Germany questions concerning not only the reading, but

Harry Kühnel (ed.), *Kommunikation und Alltag in Spätmittelalter und früher Neuzeit* (Vienna, 1992), 159–81; Christa Hämmerle, 'Bitten—Klagen—Fordern: Erste Überlegungen zu Bittbriefen österreichischer Unterschichtsfrauen (1865–1918)', *BIOS: Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung, Oral History und Lebensverlaufsanalysen*, 16 (2003), 87–110.

[10] Thomas Sokoll, *Essex Pauper Letters 1731–1837* (Oxford, 2001).

[11] Id., 'Writing for Relief: Rhetoric in English Pauper Letters 1800–1834', in Andreas Gestrich, Steven A. King, and Lutz Raphael (eds.), *Being Poor in Modern Europe* (Berne, 2006), 91–111.

[12] Adam Fox, 'Custom, Memory and the Authority of Writing', in Paul Griffiths, Adam Fox, and Steve Hindle (eds.), *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke, 1996), 89–116. For Germany see the seminal volume by Ian McNeely, *The Emancipation of Writing: German Civil Society in the Making, 1790s–1820s* (Berkeley, 2003).

[13] Bob Bushaway, 'Things Said or Sung a Thousand Times: Customary Society and Oral Culture in Rural England 1700–1900', in Adam Fox and Daniel Woolf (eds.), *The Spoken Word: Oral Culture in Britain 1500–1850* (Manchester, 2002), 256–76. See also Martyn Lyons, *Reading Cultures and Writing Practices in Nineteenth-Century France* (Toronto, 2008), 151–66.

also the writing culture of the lower classes (a well-established field, especially in folklore studies) have also attracted a renewed and interdisciplinary interest.[14] It is symptomatic, however, that as far as letter-writing is concerned, much of this work is based on migrant letters because of the scarcity of other edited material.[15] Impressive numbers of migrant letters have been collected and edited in recent decades.[16] Pauper letters and petitions, however, have been almost completely ignored.

3. *The study of life cycle groups and conditions.* Pauper narratives have overwhelmingly been used to illustrate and analyse the poverty and relief experiences of groups such as the aged, sick, widows, the dying, and children.[17] Such work has afforded valuable new

[14] See Stephan Elspaß, *Sprachgeschichte von unten: Untersuchungen zum geschriebenen Alltagsdeutsch im 19. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen, 2005); or the older studies by Marion Klenk, *Sprache im Kontext sozialer Lebenswelt: Eine Untersuchung zur Arbeiterschriftsprache im 19. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen, 1997); Isa Schikorsky, *Private Schriftlichkeit im 19. Jahrhundert: Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des alltäglichen Sprachverhaltens 'kleiner Leute'* (Tübingen, 1990); Siegfried Grosse, Martin Grimberg, and Thomas Hölscher, '*Denn das Schreiben gehört nicht zu meiner täglichen Beschäftigung': Der Alltag kleiner Leute in Bittschriften, Briefen und Berichten aus dem 19. Jahrhundert* (Bonn, 1989).

[15] Stephan Elspaß, 'Briefe rheinischer Auswanderer als Quellen einer Regionalsprachgeschichte', *Rheinische Vierteljahrsblätter*, 72 (2008), 147–65; id., '"Everyday language" in Emigrant Letters and its Implications on Language Historiography: The German Case', in Wim Vandenbussche and Stephan Elspaß (eds.), *Lower Class Language Use in the Nineteenth Century*, special issue of *Multilingua: Journal of Cross-Cultural and Interlanguage Communication*, 26/2–3 (2007), 151–65.

[16] See esp. the numerous publications by Wolfgang Helbich and Walter Kamphoefner and the network of collections they have created: <http://www.auswandererbriefe.de/sammlung.html>, accessed 9 Sept. 2013 (with an extensive bibliography of editions and secondary work on the topic). Some of these editions are also interesting and relevant to this project, as migrants frequently reflected on the poverty they escaped, its causes, and their new lives in the New World.

[17] Thomas Sokoll, 'Old Age in Poverty: The Record of Essex Pauper Letters, 1780–1834', in Hitchcock, King, and Sharpe (eds.), *Chronicling Poverty*, 127–54; Thomas Sokoll, 'Armut im Alter im Spiegel englischer Armenbriefe des ausgehenden 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts', in Christoph Conrad and Hans-Joachim von Kondratowitz (eds.), *Zur Kulturgeschichte des Alterns* (Berlin, 1993), 39–76; Stephanie Lorenz, *Verarmungsverläufe bei adligen Frauen: Bitt-*

insights into the thoughts and strategies of the dependent poor, and into the nature of their understanding of the obligations of communities and the local state. To take just one example, it has become increasingly clear that female letter writers deployed complex rhetorical arguments in their engagement with officials, simultaneously emphasizing their dependence as women and the moral obligations of the community to the weaker sex, while forcefully asserting their rights to relief as common citizens.[18]

4. *The study of agency and concepts of entitlement.* There has been an increasing interest in the degree to which 'ordinary writing' reveals the labouring classes to have had an understanding of, and a desire to participate in, the political process, using storytelling, rumour, and balladry to assert a 'political' voice.[19] Pauper narratives reveal that paupers were not, and did not conceive of themselves as being, in a situation of structural dependence, with all that this implies about the need for subservient behaviour, gratitude, deference, and passivity. While paupers certainly claimed to be humble, grateful, and sorry in their approaches to the local state, in practice it is striking how often the poor asserted their 'rights' (moral, legal, or Christian) and the 'duty' of the parish. Equally, pauper letters are replete with insults, challenges to the authority of officials, and accounts of behaviour that suggests anything but deference. Yet even such paupers manage to establish an entitlement.

schriften an den preußischen König in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts (Berlin, 2011); Christina Vanja, 'Patientenbiographien im Spiegel frühneuzeitlicher Bittschriften', *BIOS: Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung, Oral History und Lebensverlaufsanalysen*, 19/1 (2006), 26–35.

[18] Steven A. King, '"The particular claims of a woman and a mother": Gender, Belonging and Rights to Medical Relief in England 1800–1840s', in A. Andresen, T. Grønle, W. Hubbard, T. Rymin, and S. A. Skålevåg (eds.), *Citizens, Courtrooms, Crossings* (Bergen, 2008), 21–38.

[19] Sokoll, *Essex Pauper Letters*; Tim Harris (ed.), *The Politics of the Excluded c.1500–1850* (Basingstoke, 2001); Klaus Tenfelde and Helmuth Trischler (eds.), *Bis vor die Stufen des Throns: Bittschriften und Beschwerden von Bergleuten im Zeitalter der Industrialisierung* (Munich, 1986).

Aims and Objectives of the Project

There is, then, a considerable body of work on which this project can draw. Nonetheless, important gaps in the literature and, in particular, in the source base remain, and this is a central rationale for our project. The prime objectives of the project, therefore, are to collect such source material, to make it available for research on a larger and more comprehensive scale, to further its analysis, and to contribute to interdisciplinary research on popular writing.

1. *Extension of source base*. Even for Britain there are still significant gaps in the availability of pauper letters in published collections. Those for counties such as Essex and communities such as Kirkby Lonsdale are well known,[20] but there is so far only one other collection of published material, primarily from the south-west of England.[21] For the English Midlands and south, the north-east, west, and especially Scotland and Wales, the coverage of collected and transcribed or even published letters is either patchy or non-existent. The project will initially concentrate on these 'missing' counties. Eventually, however, all British counties will be represented in the project database.

For Germany, no edited collections of pauper letters are available at all.[22] This is not because such letters and petitions do not exist or have not survived in the archives. On the contrary, many German archives have large holdings of material concerning poor relief and most also contain letters and petitions. However, unlike in Britain they are not deposited in the centralized holdings of county archives, but have to be searched for in individual town or village archives.

[20] James Taylor, 'A Different Kind of Speenhamland: Non-Resident Relief in the Industrial Revolution', *Journal of British Studies*, 30 (1991), 183–208.

[21] Steven A. King, Thomas Nutt, and Alanah Tomkins, *Narratives of the Poor in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London, 2006).

[22] There is, however, also another project in Germany directed by Rolf Kießling and Anke Sczesny (Augsburg) and funded by the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung, which is based primarily on such letters and petitions: 'Armut in Stadt und Land vom Ende des Alten Reiches bis zum Ersten Weltkrieg'. See <http://www.fritz-thyssen-stiftung.de/foerderung/gefoerderte-vorhaben/projekt/pl/armut-in-stadt-und-land-vom-en/p/83/?no_cache=1>, accessed 9 Sept. 2013. See also Anke Sczesny, *Der lange Weg in die Fuggerei: Augsburger Armenbriefe des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Augsburg, 2012).

This is probably why, although they have been used occasionally for illustrative purposes, neither petitions nor ordinary letters written by or for paupers asking for relief have been collected, edited, or analysed in any systematic way.[23]

2. *Extending the search to different types of 'pauper narratives'.* British research has so far focused primarily on what Thomas Sokoll termed 'pauper letters', that is, letters from people who were not residing in their home parish writing home and asking the overseers to send them money when they got into financial difficulties as a result of unemployment, illness, or old age. Such letters are found primarily for the time before the New Poor Law of 1834, and editions of these sources have therefore mostly concentrated on the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Under the New Poor Law such money transfers tended to be made between the Poor Law Unions and not to individuals directly. However, this does not mean that letters and petitions stopped being written after 1834. This is especially true if the search for these documents is extended beyond parish or Poor Law Union records to include the papers of private charities and other archives, such as the estate papers of noble landowners. There are also significant gaps in the range of narrative material collected. The British literature has overwhelmingly focused on the collection and analysis of pauper letters. In common with other European countries, however, as recently exemplified by the work of Martyn Lyons,[24] a wide range of other narrative material also exists. This includes correspondence between officials, correspondence by epistolary advocates, petitions, begging letters, and balladry/storytelling. While it is beyond the scope of the project described here to

[23] Exeptions are e.g. Hämmerle, 'Bitten—Klagen—Fordern'; see also n. 22 (above) for Rolf Kießling and Anke Sczesny's (Augsburg) current project. Pauper letters also form part of an innovative study of homeless paupers in the Westphalian 'workhouse' of Benninghausen by Eva Maria Lerche, *Alltag und Lebenswelt von heimatlosen Armen: Eine Mikrostudie über die Insassinnen und Insassen des westfälischen Landarmenhauses Benninghausen (1844–1891)* (Münster, 2009) and of several studies of pauper medicine, such as Angela Schattner, 'Probleme im Umgang mit Bittschriften und Autobiographien aus dem 18. Jahrhundert am Beispiel der Epilepsie', in Philipp Osten (ed.), *Patientendokumente: Krankheit in Selbstzeugnissen* (Stuttgart, 2010), 99–114; workers' petitions are edited and analysed in Tenfelde and Trischler (eds.), *Bis vor die Stufen des Throns*.

[24] Lyons (ed.), *Ordinary Writings*.

collect all such material, a sample at least is needed for a true understanding of the place, language, and strategy of pauper letters and their reception by officials.

In Germany the 'classic' pauper letter in which paupers living outside their home parish asked the overseers of their place of settlement for relief tends to be rare. Rather, the majority of letters in Germany are from paupers living within their parish, writing to the board asking, in a more or less formal way, for support. Paupers might have chosen to write rather than to ask in person because they were ashamed to be seen in this situation, or they might have written to the local nobility for a sign of special favour at a time of distress. Some turned to superior levels of the local administration after their applications had been turned down by the board, and asked them to intervene and review the decision. Many also wrote to private charities. Such correspondence is available in both Germany and Britain, and it is necessary to include it in the body of source material collected by the project in order to gain a fuller picture of the writing activities of paupers.

3. *Regional variance of pauper language and development over time.* The project aims to collect sources and select them for publication in a way which will allow historians (and students of other subjects) to investigate regional and national differences, and to analyse how the genre, its usage and functions, developed over time in both Britain and Germany. For Britain this poses no major problem as all counties will be represented in the larger database, at least up to the New Poor Law of 1834. After this point 'classic' pauper letters become less frequent and the search for them more difficult. Even though there is enough other material to make up for this lack of letters written from outside the parish, this might result in a slightly less even coverage of the British counties in the second half of the nineteenth century.

For Germany, where there is no equivalent to the holdings of pauper letters in the British county archives, the project had to identify well-sorted local archives and find a way of combining the quality of the archival documentation with criteria which allow meaningful regional and international comparisons, and the analysis of structural change over time. Differences between predominantly Catholic and Protestant areas also had to be taken into consideration. This eventually resulted in project researchers searching and using about twenty local archival collections. The sample ranges from the coastal

regions of the north to southern Germany, from old Hanse or imperial cities such as Stralsund, Frankfurt, Cologne, and Ulm to rural districts such as northern Friesland and Württemberg, and from industrial towns such as Essen in the west and Eisenach in the east to rural noble estates such as those of the Hesse counts of Erbach or the dukes of Hohenlohe.

4. *Database and open-access online edition.* The project will make these sources available in a way which allows historians, linguists, and scholars of other subjects interested in such documents to use them for their research. The data will be available electronically, partly as an open-access online edition which fulfils all the requirements of a scholarly edition of historical sources, partly as a large database of several thousand letters and petitions with fewer metadata and historical annotations, open for scholarly use upon request. The edition will be based on the software DENQ developed by Jörg Hörnschemeyer at the German Historical Institute in Rome,[25] and will be permanently stored and accessible on *perspectivia.net*, the international online publication platform for the institutes of the Max Weber Stiftung.[26]

Preliminary Results

So far the project has transcribed and digitized about 4,000 letters and collected many more, in particular on the British side, and is preparing a selection of these for a comparative online edition. This edition will contrast ten German with ten British localities, presenting about fifty cases for each locality over the long nineteenth century. Introductory comparative texts and comments will allow these sources to be read as a comparative history of nineteenth-century poor relief and welfare state development from below. A Beta version of this edition is already in place, and the online edition is due to be officially launched in May 2014.

As far as the analysis of the material is concerned, the project combines local or regional studies in the framework of two Ph.D.

[25] DENQ is a German acronym for Digital Edition of Sources on Modern History (Digitale Edition Neuzeitlicher Quellen). For DENQ see <http://digiversity.net/2010/denq/>, accessed 9 Sept. 2013.

[26] See <http://quellen.perspectivia.net/>, accessed 9 Sept. 2013.

theses[27] with overarching comparative analysis of the material. There are several ways in which we aim to promote research on these sources and on the history of poor relief in general.

Pauper letters have mostly been used as individual examples to illustrate key themes such as agency, the range of the linguistic register, and the strategic use of arguments such as hunger, illness, or old age. Attempts to draw on perspectives from linguistics or English literature, both disciplines with established theoretical and practical models for understanding and using narrative material,[28] have been much rarer. This project endeavours not only to safeguard the interdisciplinary usability of the database, but also to deploy sophisticated electronic tools and methods for the linguistic analysis of such texts, and to cooperate internationally with linguists interested in our material. First attempts to use qualitative data analysis software (QDAS) were published by Steven King before the project started. The textual analysis package NVIVO was used to investigate differences in the linguistic corpus and negotiating strategies of urban versus rural paupers.[29] More recently it has been used to analyse how the English poor used and understood the concept of kinship in making claims and writing letters, suggesting that far from the English poor having narrow and shallow kinship links, they demonstrated considerable kinship fluidity and flexibility.[30] Other project papers

[27] Daniela Heinisch is the Ph.D. student working on the German part of the project at the GHIL and her topic is 'Petitions to the Frankfurt City Council'. For her thesis see her contribution in this *Bulletin*. Ben Harvey is the Ph.D. student on the Leicester part of the project and he is working on 'Pauper Narratives and the Contestation of Relief in the Welsh Borderlands'.

[28] For recent corpus linguistic approaches see e.g. Terttu Nevalainen and Sanna-Kaisa Tanskanen (eds.), *Letter Writing* (Amsterdam, 2007); Marina Dossena and Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade (eds.), *Studies in Late Modern English Correspondence: Methodology and Data* (Berne, 2008); Marina Dossena and Susan M. Fitzmaurice (eds.), *Business and Official Correspondence: Historical Investigations* (Berne, 2006). For German-language oriented analysis see Klenk, *Sprache im Kontext*; Elspaß, *Sprachgeschichte von unten*.

[29] Steven A. King, 'Friendship, Kinship and Belonging in the Letters of Urban Paupers 1800–1840', *Historical Social Research*, 33 (2008), 249–77.

[30] Steven A. King, 'Forme et fonction de la parenté chez les populations pauvres d'Angleterre, 1800–1840', *Annales*, 65 (2010), 1147–74.

using word frequency lists and collocation analysis are in preparation.[31]

Related to this methodological issue, it has become increasingly clear that the linguistic register used by British paupers contains phrases, sentiments, and rhetoric appropriated directly from the letters of officials, the law, official publications, letter books, newspapers, and political/politicized documents such as speeches by radicals. Writing pauper letters was, in other words, an organic process that must be firmly linked with the development of a much wider body of ordinary writing. This also includes the problem of the role of scribes and the question of the authenticity of the letters. The project explores the practices of writing and uses the letters as a basis for analysing the production of different types of narrative, including the writing down of oral depositions of paupers, the collaborative production of letters by paupers and scribes, and letters written by the paupers themselves.[32] The extensive and enforced use of scribes was particular to German (poor relief) bureaucracy, and the project analyses the changes in pauper language after the decline of official or commercial scribes in the mid nineteenth century. It links in well with other research on administrative language.[33]

In this context of linguistic analysis the project also explores the distinctive rhetorical, strategic, and linguistic registers of different life cycle and gender groups. A particular feature of King's work has been the suggestion that the sick, women, mothers of illegitimate

[31] Andreas Gestrich and Daniela Heinisch: ' "They sit for days and have only their sorrow to eat": Old Age Poverty in German and British Pauper Narratives', in Beate Althammer, Lutz Raphael, and Tamara Stazic-Wendt (eds.), *Rescuing the Vulnerable: Poverty, Welfare and Social Ties in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Europe* (forthcoming, 2014).

[32] See Gestrich, 'Das Leben der Armen'; and Jones and King, 'From Petition to Pauper Letter'. On the process of letter-writing see also Andreas Gestrich, Elizabeth Hurren, and Steven A. King, 'Narratives of Poverty and Sickness in Europe 1780 to 1938: Sources, Methods and Experiences', in eid. (eds.), *Poverty and Sickness in Modern Europe* (London, 2012) 1–33, at 15.

[33] Peter Becker (ed.), *Sprachvollzug im Amt: Kommunikation und Verwaltung im Europa des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts* (Bielefeld, 2011); id. and Rüdiger von Krosigk (eds.), *Figures of Authority: Contributions Towards a Cultural History of Governance from the Seventeenth to the Twentienth Century* (Berne, 2008); Michael Herzfeld, *The Social Production of Indifference: Exploring the Symbolic Roots of Western Bureaucracy* (Chicago, 1993).

children, and the aged each possessed and employed a distinctive linguistic register and strategy when making their claims to entitlement. In the case of the aged, for instance, there was a clear tendency for old people in Britain to focus on specific claims (shirts, specified amounts of cash, etc.) and specific explanations for their dependence (a spell of illness, a sick wife, theft of goods, etc.) when initially approaching officials.[34] Analysing such claims and strategies on the German side and finding the voice of women is also at the centre of Daniela Heinisch's work, which concentrates on women's petitions to the Frankfurt town council at the turn of the eighteenth century. Even though these petitions were all written by men, mostly local doctors for the poor, on behalf of women, this does not mean that they did not have any influence on what demands were made and how they were formulated.[35] However, the problem of authenticity of language and voice in the context of multiple authorship is a major interest of the project.

Much of the project's work centres on the question of agency of the poor, and this is also at the heart of the general interest in 'ordinary writing'. How far were the poor able to claim and defend agency in their negotiations with local relief officials and the wider rate-paying bodies in Britain and Germany? While poverty and applying for relief is often seen as tying paupers into a hierarchical relationship in which deference, appropriate behaviour, and gratitude were the defining expectations of the poor, this project, along with other recent research, suggests that the British poor maintained and claimed considerable agency. They quickly came to appreciate the law of welfare's extensive 'grey areas', and deployed the language of custom, belonging, rights, Christian duty, nakedness, and dignity to exploit these grey areas and assert their rights to relief even where none legally existed.[36] The research on the German sources also

[34] King, 'The particular claims of a woman and a mother'.

[35] See her article below and Daniela Heinisch, 'Unterstützungsgesuche und Bittschreiben von Frauen an den Frankfurter Rat, 1770–1809', in Sczesny, Kießling, and Burkhardt (eds.), *Prekariat im 19. Jahrhundert*.

[36] See e.g. Steven A. King, 'Kleidung und Würde: Über die Aushandlung der Armenunterstützung in England, 1800–40', in Sylvia Hahn, Nadja Lobner, and Clemens Sedmak (eds.), *Armut in Europa 1500–2000* (Innsbruck, 2010), 82–99; Steven A. King, 'Negotiating the Law of Poor Relief in England, 1800–1840', *History*, 96 (2011), 410–35.

shows that the negotiating power of paupers was considerable. Complaints and petitions by paupers to the higher echelons of local administration to revise negative decisions taken by their poor relief boards generally resulted in a whole series of new administrative correspondence and inquests into their cases. Frequently, legitimate causes of complaint were respected and decisions at least partially revised. Similarly, petitions to the local nobility, even though they required particularly deferential language, were often a successful alternative (or addition) to parish relief. Pauper language in general, however, was markedly more deferential in Germany than in England (not necessarily Scotland). So far it seems that the wider political debates of the late nineteenth century on the social questions and social rights of the working classes had little immediate effect on the language used by paupers. In Germany, it was more the First World War and subsequent revolution and the economic crisis of the interwar period that seem to have brought this *ancien régime* of deferential pauper petitions for relief to an end.[37]

Finally, the material already collected seems to indicate that despite some general shifts over time, marked regional differences in the language and agency of the poor persisted. Comparative work on these differences at regional level and across state boundaries poses the greatest challenge for this project. During the nineteenth century most European states introduced some general legal regulations governing the granting of poor relief. Even in Britain, however, where overarching legislation of this sort was put into place by the New Poor Law as early as 1834, regional differences in levels of relief seem to have remained remarkably strong over the entire nineteenth century.[38] It is one of the hypotheses of this project that regional differences in levels of public generosity in Britain also influenced the

[37] This topic was at the centre of a paper by Andreas Gestrich on 'German Pauper Letters and Petitions for Relief: New Perspectives on Nineteenth-Century Poor Relief' delivered at a conference organized by Lutz Raphael and entitled 'Poverty and Welfare in Modern German History: New Perspectives in Current Research', held at the European Studies Centre, St Antony's College Oxford, 16–17 Mar. 2012. The proceedings of this conference are being prepared for publication.

[38] For this observation see Steven A. King, 'Welfare Regimes and Welfare Regions in Britain and Europe, *c*.1750–1860', *Journal of Modern European History*, 9 (2011), 44–67.

ways in which paupers perceived themselves and their rights, and how they interacted with the local authorities. According to the German Empire's official poor relief statistics, such differences in the levels of relief, that is, the money spent on poor relief per pauper or per head of population, must have been pronounced in Germany, too, right through the nineteenth century. Whether, as in Britain, this really corresponds to differences in the style and rhetorical strategies of pauper letters and petitions can only be explored when the transcriptions of the selected areas are complete.

The project funding will end in 2014, when a wide range of material will be available for purposes of teaching and research. Several papers and edited volumes are in the making as additional outcomes of this project. It is to be hoped, however, that especially for Germany this is only the beginning and not the end of a systematic search for and analysis of this fascinating genre of 'ordinary writing'. Other students of poverty and poor relief (but also genealogists and other researchers working with this material) are, therefore, welcome to access and supplement this database with their own collections of pauper letters and petitions for relief, or person-related data, in order to make this into an expanding research tool able to create and answer complex questions about the writing cultures and agency of the poor.[39]

[39] Please direct requests for access to Steven A. King, Professor of Economic and Social History, University of Leicester, School of History, University Road, Leicester LE1 7RH (email: sak28@le.ac.uk) or Andreas Gestrich, Director, German Historical Institute London, 17 Bloomsbury Square, London WC1A 2NJ (email: gestrich@ghil.ac.uk).