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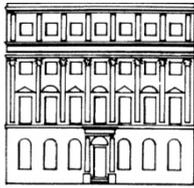# London

BULLETIN

Poverty in Modern Europe: Micro-Perspectives on the Formation of the Welfare State in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. Conference organized by the German Historical Institute London and Collaborative Research Centre 600 Foreignness and Poverty, University of Trier, and held at the GHIL, 10–12 May 2012.

For the last twelve years, Collaborative Research Centre 600, based at the University of Trier, has been investigating foreignness and poverty, and looking at changes in the forms of inclusion and exclusion associated with these situations of risk. The conference 'Poverty in Modern Europe', held in London on 10–12 May 2012, marked the conclusion of sub-projects B4 (Poverty and Policy for the Poor in European Cities of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries) and B5 (Poverty in Rural Areas Between State Welfare Policy, Humanitarian and Religious Philanthropy, and Self-Help in the Industrial Age, 1860–1975). As such, it dealt with micro-historical and regional history approaches to poverty and the development of the welfare state, with the main focus on spatial differentiation of self-perception, the capacity to act, and strategies of action on the part of the poor and the authorities. In addition, a special interest was taken in the interaction between regional and national policies for the poor, in particular when dealing with special groups such as orphans, the mentally ill, beggars, and vagrants.

The first panel, entitled 'Spatial Patterns', was devoted to describing and explaining regional and local patterns in social policy, and to presenting micro-historical case studies on the spatial experiences of the poor. All four papers in this section were comparative studies. They demonstrated the different ways in which a spatial approach to poverty can advance our knowledge. Mel Cousins (Glasgow) and Douglas Brown (London) respectively dealt with the regional differences in patterns of welfare in Ireland before and after the Great Famine, and in England and Wales. Cousins pointed out that in the Irish regions, average levels of poor relief continued to reflect different levels of prosperity, despite the uniform regulations of the New Poor Law. Denomination was another important factor: Protestant regions tended to be less generous than Catholic ones. In the case of England and Wales, Brown established the existence of a north–south

divide in poverty. In contrast to Ireland, however, its impact was reduced by the introduction of the New Poor Law in 1834. The newly established Poor Law Unions observed each other and correlated their practices. The influence of guidelines and tactics laid down in London gradually decreased, however, as the distance from the capital increased. Hans-Christian Petersen (Mainz) looked at the poor themselves, asking how they acted in the cities of London and St Petersburg, and what spaces they used. His investigation was based mainly on ego-documents. Despite the infrastructural differences between the two cities, significant commonalities emerged. In both cases, the poor were strongly tied to the quarters in which they lived, and created their own places in terms of which they defined their identities. Finally, Christiane Reinecke (Hamburg) traced a geography of poverty in West Berlin, Hamburg, Munich, and Paris. Especially in France, the poor were labelled in terms of the specific quarter they lived in, leading to an association between space and social problems which gave rise to discussions among social scientists and the general public. In Germany, the convention of municipal authorities (*Städtetag*) and the student movement in particular drew the attention of the media to the threat of the ghettoization of poverty.

The second panel looked specifically at poverty in rural areas, drawing examples from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. It emerged that at different times in different regions, rural women, refugees, and migrants were at special risk of poverty. In her contribution, Sonja Matter (Berne) investigated the connection between rural and urban poverty in Switzerland at the beginning of the twentieth century. Given the high rates of movement from the country to the cities within Switzerland, she pointed in particular to the difficulties caused by the longevity of the right of domicile. The discrepancy between professional workers in the towns and untrained volunteers in the country led to considerable losses through attrition at the expense of the poor. Marcel Boldorf (Bochum) studied Brandenburg, which had to cope with enormous numbers of refugees from the Soviet occupation zones at the end of the Second World War. They posed a huge challenge to the resources of rural poor relief. The young GDR exerted control over the local members of the Poor Commission who were members of the Party. The criterion on which they based their decisions was strictly the ability or inability to work.

Boldorf particularly stressed the pressure put on single mothers: even in rural Brandenburg, women in particular were at risk of poverty. Elisabeth Grüner (Trier) demonstrated the existence of the same problem during the 1950s and 1960s in the Odenwald area, where the number of single women had increased markedly after the war. Like Boldorf, Grüner also emphasized that medical certification of inability to work and a willingness to work were central to the granting of assistance. Susanne Hahn (Trier), finally, analysed the academic perception of rural poverty in the same period. She found that in the social sciences, researchers saw poverty predominantly as an urban problem, while in relation to rural areas, they long spoke only of backwardness and infrastructural weaknesses. Rural poverty afflicted especially older people as farmers did not receive a pension, young people who had few or no opportunities for training, and women who had no income of their own.

The third panel, entitled 'Languages of Poverty', looked at the perceptions of the poor and the forms in which they expressed themselves. The papers by Hubertus Jahn (Cambridge) and Andreas Gestrich/Daniela Heinisch (London) on the long nineteenth century and the contribution by Dorothee Lürbke (Freiburg) on requests for support from the GDR were based on similar sources: petitions and requests for support from the impoverished. For a long time, petitions in many regions were drawn up by writers who mostly remained anonymous, while letters and requests for support more often reveal the authentic voices of the poor themselves. Regardless of authorship, all of these sources deployed strategic patterns of argument and used turns of phrase that held out the promise of success. Drawing on the social image of the deserving poor, these writings pointed to external circumstances as the reason for the petitioner's misery, while personal information to be revealed was selected with an eye to the success of the petition. Yet reading between the lines, we can find important information in these sources about the poor and their social universe. At the conference, the issues of what room for manoeuvre the poor had, how closely the language and content of their letters and petitions were modelled on what the authorities wanted to read, and thus to what extent they revealed the perceptions of the poor themselves were hotly debated. In his paper, however, Paul-André Rosental (Paris) pointed to the significant room for manoeuvre possessed by Czechoslovak immigrants to France at

the turn of the twentieth century. He underlined the importance of the public pressure they were able to exert for the fact that migrants gradually received equal social rights with citizens. This not only changed the self-perceptions of migrants, but their improved social status meant that they had better chances of getting work. A bilateral treaty concluded in 1920 regulated issues such as sickness benefits, pensions, and salaries.

The last three panels concerned specific 'problem groups' and how they were dealt with in the context of the development of European industrial society and the modern welfare state. To start with, the new connection between unemployment and poverty was investigated. Despite a similar stigma, the unemployed perceived unemployment in different ways. Behind this discussion lay the question of the validity of Marie Jahoda's classic study *Marienthal* and the apathy of the unemployed. Tamara Stazic-Went (Trier) took up Jahoda's argument and spoke of the unbearable social existence of the unemployed in the southern Rhine Province during the interwar period. Despite high levels of unemployment, many unemployed, especially in rural areas, were reluctant to apply for assistance and only did so after extended periods of unemployment. About two-thirds of the applicants were between the ages of 21 and 40 and had children, a fact that the authorities and experts frequently used to refute their need. Irina Vana (Vienna) investigated the unemployed in Austria during the same period. Her findings were based on sixty-seven biographical reports and interviews which make clear that it is necessary to differentiation between voluntary and involuntary, temporary and permanent joblessness and non-employment. Depression and social isolation were not always the consequence; joblessness could be perceived as a liberation which granted space for self-development. Elizabeth A. Scott (Saskatchewan) presented an interesting model for the reintegration of the unemployed into the labour market that was tried out in England at the beginning of the twentieth century. During the period 1905 to 1908, more than 18,000 men applied for 350 places on the agricultural training programme at Honesty Bay. In her paper on the 'unemployed poor' Wiebke Wiede (Trier) looked at the 'rediscovery' of poverty in Britain and Germany since the 1960s in the context of social science and public debates about unemployment. She specifically emphasized discussions about the psychological impact of unemployment, and showed how seam-

143

lessly the new investigations built on studies of unemployment in the 1930s, resulting in similar forms of stigmatization.

The papers by Beate Althammer (Trier), Sigrid Wadauer (Vienna), and Tehila Sasson (Berkeley) dealt with vagabonds and the homeless in a number of European countries, and started by demonstrating the importance of differentiating between the two groups. Vagrants were not necessarily homeless, and many families who had a roof over their heads earned their living by begging on the street. In addition to their own home, people often lacked the right of domicile. While many vagabonds were qualified workers, they had no right of domicile or, for example, as labour migrants within the Habsburg empire after the collapse of the monarchy, became foreigners without any rights. The papers given showed that the countries drawn upon as examples dealt very differently with vagabonds and that the boundary between legality and criminalized vagrancy was often porous. In France, fear of vagrants meant that vagabondage itself was often punished, whereas in England, proceedings were only taken against those who were actually begging. In general, the papers suggested that most vagrants were willing to work and searching for a job, and that they were without a fixed address for only a limited time.

The final panel dealt with a particularly vulnerable group of the poor, namely, children. In their papers, Nicoleta Roman (Bucharest) and Katharina Brandes (Trier) focused on children in orphanages and homes in Wallachia and Hamburg respectively. Both cases showed that children's homes were not intended just for orphans or abandoned children. They also represented a temporary solution to the problem of accommodating children until their families could improve their situation. Children from a problematic social background were to be offered an education to make them capable of independence. Similar motives emerged in the Swiss Associations for the Education of the Poor (*Armenerziehungsvereine*) which were studied by Ernst Guggisberg (Basel). Often children from a vulnerable social background were put into day care until their family's situation stabilized. The measures put in place by the European Recovery Fund to combat childhood poverty in Hungary after the First World War, investigated here by Friederike Kind-Kovács (Regensburg), turned into an international campaign for the welfare of children whose impact went far beyond Hungary's borders. As the most innocent victims of the war, children were seen as the representatives of

a generation that was threatened by social and moral degeneration as the result of childhood poverty and deprivation. This revealed clear parallels with the case studied by Brandes involving children who were also perceived as innocent but posing a potential futrue threat to society. Contributions by Christina Vanja (Kassel), Tanja Rietmann (Berne), and David Green (London), who examined work houses and reformatories in Germany, Switzerland, and England, detailed the treatment meted out, one step further down the line, to children, young people, and adults who were no longer seen as victims, but merely as troublemakers. Severe discipline was on the agenda in all three countries. Inmates of these homes were often treated like criminals. They had no control over the duration of their stay, and many suffered for the rest of their lives from the psychological consequences of their experiences in these institutions. Jens Gründler (Stuttgart), finally, looked at a psychiatric institution for the poor in Glasgow, investigating connections and power relations between the sick, their families, the medical staff, and the authorities responsible for the poor. While families were often actively involved in the committal, they tended to lose influence over the medical treatment of their relatives thereafter, although they could apply for their discharge. Both committal and discharge were the outcome of complex negotiations between families, doctors, and the authorities.

The conference largely featured micro-perspectival approaches, which made it possible to gain new insights into areas such as the perceptions of the poor in the light of their ego-documents, the extent to which patterns and opportunities for action in poor relief were tied to specific areas, and the stigmatization of the poor by the media, which started as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century. An interesting perspective for a systematic and comparative European analysis was offered by Serge Paugam (Paris). In a keynote lecture building on Durkheim's approaches to social solidarity, he combined various elementary forms of poverty with the poor's specific attachment links to society. The conference also showed, however, that the comparative interpretation of micro-historical findings presupposes a precise macro-historical investigation of the legal, political, and economic frameworks of welfare systems. In a second keynote lecture, Steven King (Leicester) demonstrated the usefulness of combining micro-historical and macro-historical perspectives by addressing the question of why the 'unworthy' were not excluded from poor

145

relief. He combined a comparative economic analysis of the costs of welfare state systems with a look at ego-documents produced by the poor. In sum, the conference offered a wide ranging and method-ologically considered inventory of the opportunities and limits of a micro-historical approach to the history of the European welfare states.

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