



“Writing the Lives of the Poor”

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This conference arose out of a joint Anglo-German research project, “Pauper Letters and Petitions for Poor Relief in Germany and Great Britain, 1770–1914”, funded by the UK’s Arts & Humanities Research Council, and directed by Prof. Steven King (University of Leicester) and Prof. Dr. Andreas Gestrich (Director, German Historical Institute London). These narratives comprise letters and petitions written by paupers seeking some form of relief. In describing the circumstances which led them to appeal for help, the authors construct autobiographical vignettes. The project aims to construct an online, edited corpus of such texts, which survive in considerable numbers in British and German archives.

The conference sought to examine how these life writings might contribute to understanding the lives of the poor. Several connected themes emerged. Firstly, by investigating a wide range of the vignettes contained in such archival sources, it becomes possible to discern contextual factors which are only implicitly present in the narratives. These include the specific nature of poverty and the family economy, and the norms of aristocratic benevolence or state administrative practice, in a particular locality. Secondly, these texts reveal the knowledge which the poor possessed of both their legal rights, and the informal norms governing the dispensing of charity. Thirdly, they demonstrate the ways in which the poor, addressing those with power, wealth and authority over them, tailored their language to fit the requirements of state, municipality or local nobility as dispensers of assistance. Finally, it is apparent that the poor could in some circumstances use such knowledge and command of language to force through their claims.

One group of papers developed these themes through analysis of pauper letters addressed to charitable authorities in various historical contexts. In the Tyrol and Vorarlberg regions in the nineteenth century, the local Roman Catholic hierarchy imposed a particularly restrictive version of its marriage policies in an effort to discourage poor people from marrying. The records of those seeking dispensations, often a widower wishing to marry his sister-in-law, contain autobiographical fragments. These were strategic communications, part of the wider dossier attaching to each case. Margareth Lanzinger showed how applicants had to negotiate the sometimes conflicting levels of a complex church hierarchy, and be aware of when wider changes in policy or personnel might allow a previously denied claim to be revived. Sebastian Felten's analysis of petitions to the counts of Erbach-Fürstenau showed that they gave a glimpse of the usual financial strategies of the poor; their requests for money were in response to "liquidity crises", provoked by unexpected events for which they had not been able to plan. The counts' responses combined philanthropy with prudence: three-quarters of requests for cash were granted, but none of those for credit. In a complementary paper, Herbert Eiden contrasted how pauper narratives in the fenland and woodland communities of East Frisia and Erbach-Fürstenau addressed the local authority and the count in different ways attuned to the specific exercise of power. In her examination of letters to be admitted to, or to remain in, the Fuggerer settlement in Augsburg, Anke Sczesny contrasted one petitioner who directly addressed the organisation's ethos, appealing to its fatherly feelings and civic aims, with another who took a defiant stand, defending herself, making accusations and threats, and demanding compensation.

Two other case studies considered examples where the poor were able to exercise greater leverage. In early eighteenth-century Constantinople, petitions were sent to the Sultan asking for *vazife* (hitherto a wage for work done) as charity, due to the poverty of the owner. Here, argued Semih Çelik, it was the poor who initiated the transformation of a non-charity system into a charity, negotiating and testing the generous image of the sultan as charitable giver. The fact of that some recipients were falsely denounced as dead reveals both competition among the poor to obtain these benefits, and their networks of information about the resources available and the means to secure them. The British New Poor Law of 1834 did not encourage paupers to write in to the authorities, but they did so nonetheless – with complaints concerning denial or cut-back of relief, medical neglect, and ill treatment. Paul Carter's presentation emphasised what the letters reveal about what the poor *knew*, including the precise language of the law, and the administrative procedures it established, and how they could turn this knowledge to their advantage. (Simone Wegge's paper drew attention to

migrant correspondence as a source for understanding another response to poverty – voluntary migration, and the familial strategies, expectations and self-representations it entailed.)

A second group of papers widened the context, exploring different representations of the homeless in the public sphere in twentieth-century Germany, and the ways these were created to establish, negotiate or challenge a dominant image. Nadine Recktenwald identified three spaces in which the voice of the homeless might be heard in the Weimar Republic: the street, the offices of the administration, and the asylum. In each of these spaces, homeless people – as individuals, as political advocates, or as communities (such as those gathered in the “homeless houses” used as temporary accommodation) – tried to reverse the stigma attaching to their condition, and assert claims as citizens to their welfare rights. Christoph Lorke analysed the efforts of the GDR regime in the 1960s and 1970s to publicise in the media model biographies of large families, living under precarious circumstances, as conforming to the norms of the socialist ideal, and reciprocally benefitting from its policies (thereby justifying the state aid they received, in contrast to the supposed conditions in the capitalist West). Gertraud Koch and Bernd Jürgen Warneken presented findings from current research on self-representations of the homeless in street papers since the early 1990s. In contrast to the Weimar period, there are no attempts to present homelessness as a positive alternative way of life. Instead, the autobiographical narratives aim at reintegration, with authors demonstrating their personal application to solving their problems. There are isolated criticisms of individuals, but not of the wider social system. These vignettes, by named authors, are close to the editorial line of the street papers, stressing the capacities and agency of the homeless, and their creative survival work.

In his keynote address, “Writing Upwards: how the weak wrote to the powerful”, Martyn Lyons used three examples to highlight the many different tones that could be used in “writing up” to those in authority, as historical circumstances and the balance of power changed. The letters of individual workers to the management of the Terni armaments factory in Italy revealed their peasant origins, through the nature of such demands as for a plot of land. Only after the First World War did the workers grow more confident, threatening legal action on occasion to support their case. In sharp contrast, the anonymous letters sent to the King of Italy during the war displayed rage and aggression in the accusations they made. In tracing the history of Australian Aboriginal petitions, Lyons analysed how the nineteenth-century petitions were produced by the joint action of two generations: the speaking generation of elders, who formulated the demands and whose signatures came first, and the younger generation to

whom the task of writing was delegated. An appeal to the British crown over the heads of local authorities was believed to be more effective, and the petitioners sought to master official discourse, claiming to “live like whiteman almost”. A revealing image of a 1963 petition, written on bark, showed a marked change of approach; bilingual, its very materiality embodied its call for intercultural dialogue.

Another cluster of papers examined the efforts of individuals to represent themselves directly to the public, across diverse genres. In the nineteenth century, a crucial element in gaining access to publication was the role of an intermediary or gatekeeper who might facilitate publication, while in return seeking some control over the content or reception of the text. Kevin Binfield’s paper explored the different efforts to two female servant-poets of the early nineteenth century to negotiate these pressures. In contrast, Susan Garrard argued that Mary Smith in her autobiography sought to create a new, self-legitimizing space for herself. Refusing the option of marriage, she stressed her identity as an independent, self-supporting woman worker. The tension between self-effacement and self-assertion, knowing one’s place and stating one’s case, within the limits imposed by economic dependence, are both visible in the extensive manuscripts of the nineteenth-century Finnish crofter Kustaa Brask. His ambition is evident in the range of his writings, covering religious, philosophical, social and agricultural topics. Under the terms of his contract as a crofter, Brask could lose his position for arrogance or disobedience. He sent many of his texts to the Finnish Literature Society, as members of his landlord’s family (some of whom belonged to the Society) were aware. Like several other contributors, Kaisa Kauranen referred to the value of James Scott’s concept of public and hidden transcripts in understanding such texts. Brask’s writings both embraced the Finnish national project of his time, arguing for agricultural improvement, while also expressing egalitarian sentiments and criticisms of despotism – though couching these in moralistic terms.

In the twentieth century, the role of intermediary was more often occupied by a voluntary or state institution. The British coal miner Bert Coombes’s autobiography *These Poor Hands* was published by the Left Book Club in 1939 as part of its effort to mobilise opinion against economic hardship at home as well as Fascism abroad. Antoine Capet showed how the text examines the roots of poverty in the coal mining community, stretching back two decades to the debts left by the strike of 1921, and perpetuated by the existence of chronic underemployment (seen as a deliberate tactic of the coal owners). The Turkish author Mahmut Makal had attended one of the village institutes established by the Kemalist regime, and became in turn a teacher there. His *Our Village* (1950) was

characterised by Karin Schweißgut as a generically eclectic mixture of short stories, anecdotes and documentation, whose writing and publication was fostered by the institute network. It describes from the inside the extreme poverty and exclusion from civilisation of rural life, a reality denied by official ideology and absent at that time from academic study and the media. In the Cold War atmosphere in which the book was published, however, the institute movement was closed down and Makal himself imprisoned. Schweißgut suggested that the figure of the teacher in the text embodied the gulf between state and people; his role is that of the outraged, unsuccessful enlightener. Coombes, Capet argued, was similarly distanced, by his literary ambitions, from the miners whose conditions he depicted so powerfully.



COURTESY OF NORFOLK MUSEUMS SERVICE

The format of the conference, with about thirty participants taking part throughout, allowed fruitful comparisons and contrasts between papers, and cross-referencing between discussions. A highlight was when Megan Dennis unrolled a facsimile of a 5-metre-long sampler stitched by Lorina

Bulwer, a woman “lunatic” inmate of Great Yarmouth Workhouse in the late nineteenth century. Archival research has established a chronology of the author’s life, and traced many of the people mentioned in the sampler. This striking narrative of protest, entirely in capital letters, expresses her anger at her lost rights and lack of freedom, as well as her experience of mental ill health. It provoked a lively discussion around the table of different ways in which it might be interpreted, with possible analogies to prisoners’ and psychiatric inmates’ writings, and outsider art, suggested.

The conference successfully exemplified ways in which life writings – from short vignettes to fully fledged autobiographies and memoirs – can be analysed, with due attention to context, language and genre, to reveal how those on the margins of society found opportunities to express their views and advance their claims.

Conference programme:

http://www.ghil.ac.uk/events_and_conferences/conferences_and_workshops/2013/writing_the_lives_of_the_poor.html

Great Yarmouth sampler:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01pfdk7>