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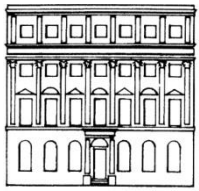

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POVERTY RESEARCH FROM BELOW: LETTERS AND PETITIONS BY THE POOR

ANKE SCZESNY

HERBERT UERLINGS, NINA TRAUTH, and LUKAS CLEMENS (eds.), *Armut: Perspektiven in Kunst und Gesellschaft. Eine Ausstellung des Sonderforschungsbereichs 600 'Fremdheit und Armut', Universität Trier in Kooperation mit dem Stadtmuseum Simeonstift Trier und dem Rheinischen Landesmuseum Trier, 10. April 2011–31. Juli 2011*, exhibition catalogue (Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 2011), 448 pp. ISBN 978 3 89678 859 7. €49.90

ANDREA PHILLIPS and MARKUS MIESSEN (eds.), *Caring Culture: Art, Architecture and the Politics of Health (Actors, Agents and Attendants)* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011), 336 pp. ISBN 978 1 934105 71 9. €25.00

KONRAD KRIMM, DOROTHEE MUSSGNUG, and THEODOR STROHM (eds.), *Armut und Fürsorge in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Oberrheinische Studien, 29 (Ostfildern: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 2011), 302 pp. ISBN 978 3 7995 7829 5. €34.00

JOSEF MOOSER and SIMON WENGER (eds.), *Armut und Fürsorge in Basel: Armutspolitik vom 13. Jahrhundert bis heute*, Beiträge zur Basler Geschichte (Basel: Christoph Merian Verlag, 2011), 296 pp. ISBN 978 3 85616 523 9. CHF 29.00. €22.00

JOANNE MCEWAN and PAMELA SHARPE (eds.), *Accommodating Poverty: The Housing and Living Arrangements of the English Poor, c.1600–1850* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), xiv + 292 pp. ISBN 978 0 230 54242 6. £60.00

ALANNAH TOMKINS, *The Experience of Urban Poverty, 1723–82: Parish, Charity and Credit* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), xii + 289 pp. ISBN 978 0 7190 7504 9. £55.00

Poverty is multi-dimensional: it is relative and subjective, sometimes voluntary but mostly involuntary, and has pervaded all societies and cultures for centuries. It signifies an existential, economic, social, and

Trans. Angela Davies (GHIL).

cultural lack. For centuries, different measures have been taken against poverty—by spiritual, secular, or aristocratic powers; by churches and communities; by democracies and dictatorships. But poverty is still with us, whether open or hidden.

Historiography has also dealt with poverty in many ways, both its causes and the measures taken to combat it in religious, demographic, economic, and war-related contexts. Over the last twenty years or so, however, the approach taken by historians has shifted from the macro to the micro level. In other words, the poor are starting to speak for themselves. Using serial sources from both urban and rural settings, such as letters written by the poor, requests for assistance, autobiographies, inventories, wills, and so on, historians are now investigating how the poor saw and dealt with issues such as old age, sickness, unemployment, and life-cycle related distress.

The volumes to be reviewed here—monographs, edited volumes of collected essays, and an exhibition catalogue—will be examined against this background to reveal similarities and differences in various spaces and times. The research perspectives of these works, which deal fundamentally with poverty and poor relief, cover an extraordinary range, from art and society (Uerlings, Trauth, and Clemens) to the current restructuring of social policy in an interdisciplinary setting (Phillips and Miessen). In addition, there are classic works (Krimm, Mussgnug, and Strohm; Mooser and Wenger) and specific investigations which take a new approach to welfare and indigence by focusing on the housing and living conditions of the poor (McEwan and Sharpe), or on credit arrangements (Tomkins). This list reflects the course taken by this review article, but also shows why, given the range of volumes under review, we will have to dispense with a definition of poverty, and any differentiation between poverty and indigence.

British scholars have taken the lead in research on poverty from below.[1] They were the first to recognize the specific informative

[1] In addition to the publications under review here, see Tim Hitchcock, Peter King, and Pamela Sharpe (eds.), *Chronicling Poverty: The Voices and Strategies of the English Poor, 1640–1840* (Basingstoke, 1997); on sickness and poverty, see now Andreas Gestrich, Elizabeth Hurren, and Steven King (eds.), *Poverty and Sickness in Modern Europe: Narratives of the Sick Poor, 1780–1938* (London, 2012); see also the research project currently being conducted at the German Historical Institute London by Andreas Gestrich and Steven King, 'Pauper

value of serial sources and have presented remarkable new interpretations and results, including reflections on the flexibility of the poor in situations of crisis, their awareness of a right to support, their self-confidence, living conditions, credit arrangements, and so on.

In the meantime, however, this research method is also gaining a foothold in Germany. Collaborative Research Centre 600 Foreignness and Poverty: The Transformation of Forms of Inclusion and Exclusion from Antiquity to the Present, set up at the University of Trier in 2002, can be seen as a pioneer in this field.[2] In this context, an exhibition entitled 'Poverty: Perspectives in Art and Society' was organized in cooperation with the Stadtmuseum Simeonstift and the Rheinisches Landesmuseum, both in Trier. The volume accompanying the exhibition, which was put on in 2011, is impressive in terms of both appearance and content. A large, lavishly illustrated book, it far exceeds the usual expectations of an exhibition catalogue. It is divided into three sections—Key Concepts, Essays, and Catalogue—whose contents are not merely juxtaposed, but overlap and complement each other in a positive way. After the section entitled Key Concepts, which provides a common vocabulary 'in the sense of making suggestions for interpretation, not prescribing irrefutable certainties' (Herbert Uerlings, p. 22), the following thirty essays, divided into four parts, form the main part of the book.

After the introductory essay, an outstanding survey of poverty and welfare since late Antiquity by Lutz Raphael, the first two parts in the essay section, entitled 'Ideological Concepts' and 'Patterns of the Ruling Order' under the heading 'Long-Term Perspectives' are concerned mainly with representations of poverty and the institutionalization of poor relief, both in a religious setting and in the context of changing political doctrines. The following essays, under the heading 'Poverty and Representation', look at the media and process-

Letters and Petitions for Poor Relief in Germany and Great Britain, 1770–1914', online at <http://www.ghil.ac.uk/research/solidarity_and_care/pauper_letters_and_petitions.html>, accessed 29 May 2013; and the project being conducted by Jeremy Boulton et al., 'Pauper Lives in Georgian London and Manchester', online at <http://research.ncl.ac.uk/pauperlives/>, accessed 29 May 2013.

[2] See <http://www.sfb600.uni-trier.de/>, accessed 29 May 2013, where the most recently published research can be found.

es of inclusion and exclusion relating to the poor. Although these sections contain few explicit statements by the poor, the perspective of the poor themselves at least implicitly serves as a backdrop, for example, in the essay by Nina Trauth ('Testimonials of Poverty? Pictorial Strategies in Documentary Art'), which deals with the truth content of photographs from the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries. Until the twentieth century, Trauth argues, photographs were documentary statements *about* the poor, partly because they were mostly taken without the knowledge of their subjects. Thereafter a style emerged in which the self-representation of the poor moved to centre stage, documenting their situation. Because they return the look of the observer, she suggests, they are granted a 'certain dignity *qua* representation' (p. 159). Thus documentation is a means of self-representation of the poor by which 'documentary images . . . and every truth claim . . . are to be historicized . . . and located within their specific historical period in time', so that, *sui generis*, they can serve 'the creation of solidarity with the poor' (p. 159).

Beate Althammer can claim something similar in respect of social reportage around 1900. Despite the way in which American and German journalists mingled incognito with the unemployed and vagabonds, and went into shelters for the homeless in order to be able to document the lives and survival of these marginal groups as 'authentically' as possible, their reports are ambivalent, Althammer suggests, because in line with contemporary prejudices, they were torn between sympathy and rejection. Nonetheless, they managed 'to shift the marginalized and . . . their life worlds into society's horizon of perception' (p. 223).

This is also achieved by the Catalogue section of the exhibition volume, which operates under the following perspectives: Documentation, Appeal, Ideal, Stigma, Reform, and, Poverty in Antiquity. The sometimes shocking illustrations and photographs, reaching to the present day, have comprehensive accompanying texts which not only describe the visual material but also explain its background. These texts clearly relate to the preceding essays, but still (intend to) leave the observer perplexed and puzzled. In sum, the volume *Armut: Perspektiven in Kunst und Gesellschaft* is not just a 'basic reference work' (Uehrlings, Introduction, p. 20) on the subject of poverty, as the extensive bibliography at the end of the volume shows. It is also a work that, despite the multi-dimensionality of poverty, offers

a consistent representation and interpretation of poverty and poor relief within a broad chronological and thematic panorama.

The edited volume of essays, *Caring Culture: Art, Architecture and the Politics of Public Health*, which goes back to a conference entitled 'Speculations on the Cultural Organizations of Civility' initiated and organized by the Foundation for Art and Public Domain (SKOR) in October 2011, is much more heterogeneous in nature. Twenty-one interdisciplinary contributions by artists, curators, politicians, and architects can be divided into essays, interviews, photographic documentations, and diary-like notes. They look at the neo-liberal economic model of health care and welfare that is dominant in Western European democracies, especially the Netherlands and Britain, and ask how the privatizations which have been undertaken have affected the welfare system, and what consequences they have had. They also address the question of what chances there are for artists, designers, and architects within the health and social care systems to express criticism of these changes in their chosen media.

The essays take different positions on the changing shape of the health and social care systems. Andrea Phillips, for example, describes the existing concept of welfare as too patriarchal, that is, as dominating the recipient, and then places this in relation to art, whose task, she argues is to regulate or criticize the new welfare concepts (p. 56). Mark Fischer subscribes to the interpretation of the political and historical development of neo-liberalism in Britain, which, in his view, is mutating into 'a zombified mode of power' (p. 63) as welfare support is cut, public institutions are privatized, and people are forced to be more self-reliant. At this point Fisher picks up on the striking increase in the incidence of mental illness, which, he suggests, is attributable to the 'massive privatization of stress' (p. 69). External factors are no longer seen as producing strain on workers, he goes on, but unhealthy working conditions that induce illness are blamed on workers themselves, who now have to take responsibility for their own illnesses. These neo-liberal developments can only be halted, Fisher suggests, by developing new corporate entities and systems, something that will require the sort of inventiveness and creative courage displayed by the founders of the labour movement in the nineteenth century. Steven de Waal, by contrast, wants to see individuals assume more responsibility for themselves. He sees bureaucratization as a negative factor inhibiting innovative creativi-

ty, and the burgeoning of administration as an independent force as degrading people into mere 'non-responsible' recipients.

Sally Tallant, arguing equally clearly, points out that the transformation of the welfare state has not only exacerbated the contrast between rich and poor, but that the state, in taking recourse to Victorian concepts, has reverted to distinguishing between the deserving and the undeserving poor. This, she argues, is the outcome of 'a perverse and moralizing mentality' (p. 147), and the reason for it lies in British Conservatism—catchphrase: the Big Society—which wants to transfer the state's responsibilities to the individual, passing social commitments to communities and citizens although these are part of the state's duties. Voluntary activities of this sort, however, create inequalities, she points out. Few people can afford to engage in them, with the result that 'moral choices are being eroded and articulated as moral obligations' (p. 147). Tallant suggests that drawing on the experience and knowledge of old people, for instance, would enrich society far more than the entire welfare state, and she goes on to illustrate this with reference to a number of works of art. From various additional perspectives, this volume aims to integrate art and society more closely in order to counteract the further decline of the welfare state and the collateral damage done by neo-liberalism, which not only wants to leave individuals to their own devices, but also seeks to instrumentalize art and culture.

While this publication is future-oriented and explores the chances of overcoming the crisis of the welfare state in Western European societies in a highly political way, the conference volume edited by Konrad Krimm, Dorothee Mussgnug, and Theodor Strohm, *Armut und Fürsorge in der frühen Neuzeit*, deals with religious forms of poor relief, something which could have been mentioned in the title. Based on a conference held in October 2008, the volume starts by looking at 'Transformations of the Sixteenth Century'. These are illustrated mainly by reference to regulations governing alms, beggars, and the police; imperial regulations; reforms in urban poor relief; and secular as well as ecclesiastical innovations. These transformations are investigated both in local settings (Dorothee Mussgnung on the Electoral Palatinate) and in Europe more widely (Theodor Strohm). Despite Strohm's European perspective, it comes as a surprise that in his introduction to the volume he presents the Thirty Years War as 'a consequence of the religious division of the country' (p. 9), while for

the last twenty years or so, historiography has seen it as a war of state-building.[3]

Taking an institutional and normative view, Heinrich Pompey asks what lay behind the charitable practices of the churches, what different motives inspired the charities and deaneries of the churches emerging in the early modern period, and what specific impact they had on poor relief (p. 41). He points out that the impossibility of 'directly questioning the subjects' (p. 42) is a difficulty in establishing motivations. This somewhat one-sided theological and theoretical look at changes in poor relief, mitigated only by one footnote pointing out that there were also purely pragmatic intentions (p. 56, n. 118), leaves out the complexity of church and community,[4] while also constructing a dichotomy between the old and reformed church that no longer features in this extreme form in current research.

After the account of sixteenth-century transitions would have been a good place for the section on 'Welfare under Enlightened Absolutism', which clarifies chronological developments in poverty and welfare. Instead, it is placed at the end of the volume. In any case, Hans Ammerich introduces the Enlightened absolutist approach to welfare with a case study of poor relief in the Bishopric of Speyer. Taking the example of social policy, which he defines as 'measures implemented in the health system, poor relief . . . and in the supply system' (p. 208), and precautionary ones in the education system, for example, or in economic policy, Ammerich describes the activities of the bishops of Speyer in the eighteenth century. By establishing prisons, work houses, and orphanages, reforming education, setting up a fund for widows, introducing new alms regulations (1771), and building a new hospital, they made a considerable contribution to social provision for the people.

Sebastian Schmidt deals with the significance of monastic welfare activities during the Enlightenment by looking at poor relief in the Electorate of Mainz; Bernhard Schneider investigates Catholic poor relief in the Bishopric of Constance in the eighteenth century; and Frank Konersmann, studying the orphanage (founded in 1759) of the

[3] See Johannes Burkhardt, *Der Dreißigjährige Krieg* (Frankfurt am Main, 1992).
[4] On the interaction between church and community see Rolf Kießling, Thomas M. Safley, and Lee Palmer Wandel (eds.), *Im Ringen um die Reformation: Kirchen und Prädikanten, Rat und Gemeinden in Augsburg* (Epfendorf, Neckar, 2011).

Duchy of Palatinate-Zweibrücken and the lunatic asylum of Eben-Ezer, which was established in the county of Lippe in 1871 and survived into the 1950s, analyses the position of the two institutions outside society and the liminal experiences, in an anthropological sense, to which this gave rise. This refers both to the 'peculiarities of Christian social work . . . in an institutional framework' (p. 270), and to the carers in such institutions as well as the inmates, who were 'directly and constantly confronted with Christian demands' (p. 270). At the end of his essay, Konersmann concedes that this historiographical construct for systematic research on Christian welfare activity requires more practical research. But he already regards it as a vehicle for asking 'specific questions about structural elements and structural problems' (p. 293) in Christian welfare activity.

The second section, entitled 'Dealing with Illness and Poverty', would have been better placed as the final section in the book because its essays address specific problems. It also presents official directives, illustrated by the cases of leprosy (Elisabeth Clementz), early modern plague processions on the Upper Rhine (Kirsten Renate Seelbach), and Jewish poor relief to the present day, using the example of burial brotherhoods (Uri R. Kaufmann). Taking a regional history approach, Helmut Neumaier discusses poverty and how it was dealt with in the areas being built on by the Imperial Knights. He deserves credit for providing a definition of the poor, and distinguishing between beggars, the domestic poor, peasants, and those impoverished by war.

Annemarie Kinzelbach examines poverty and illness in the early modern towns of upper Germany. Working critically with the sources, she demonstrates accurately and methodically that without openly asking for help, the sick 'implicitly [formulated] a claim for support that was based on social capital' (p. 148) or on 'social networks, which generally facilitated access to the relevant forms of assistance' (p. 149). And even if an explicit request for help was made because of illness or poverty, any stigmatization of the petitioner depended on the distress caused by events related to life stages—including being an apprentice, a child, a single woman, pregnant, or old—which made them particularly worthy of assistance. This, of course, did not apply to 'foreign' supplicants, who were supported only within the framework of the established norms, and no further. Kinzelbach draws this distinction on the basis of the 'voices of the

(poor) sick in official documents' (p. 147). The evidence from the statements of those involved stands out, despite gaps in the records. This also relativizes any suggestion that poor relief was dispensed along strictly confessional lines. According to Kinzelbach, a traditional, Christian value system was not the only factor influencing the help granted to the poor in need. The rendering of assistance could also be ascribed to the 'common good', which served not only the 'restoration of an individual's ability to function, but also . . . the preservation of the urban community' (p. 176).

Taking personal statements by Ulrich Bräker (1735–98), a poor man in Tockenburg who tried to earn his living as a 'spinner, weaver, dealer in yarn, printer and distributor of cotton' (p. 177) as an example, Susanne Hoffmann examines poverty and poor relief. According to Bräker, harvests spoiled by bad weather, negative economic developments, poverty, and illness could all result in indigence, but he blamed the able-bodied poor for their penchant for luxury which, at bad times, drove them into ruin. Bräker's interpretation of the substantive relationship between work and poverty is, however, ambivalent as he 'praised both work and poverty, and at the same time liked to indulge in despised idleness' (p. 181). As already hinted at in Kinzelbach's essay, social capital also played a large part in Bräker's biography, for self-help at times of illness as well as borrowing in times of need were largely dependent on the 'good reputation' of the person needing support, which therefore had to be preserved under all circumstances. This could mean that, vice versa, an 'increase in economic capital', for example, by receiving poor relief, had to be paid for 'by a loss of social capital' (p. 189). The rational strategies pursued by the poor in Bräker's reports, whose views changed 'between Pietism and Enlightenment, between a work ethic and ideas of education' (p. 192) reveal the limitations of poor relief seen purely in institutional terms, as individual 'economies of the makeshift' are ignored.

This volume leaves a somewhat mixed impression because of its rather imprecise title, the division into sections which does not quite make sense, and the inclusion of some essays which are not entirely up to date with the current state of research. Those studies, however, which in addition to looking at the normative level investigate the practical aspect of poor relief from below significantly mitigate this impression.

Unlike the publications discussed above, which are limited to the early modern period, the volume *Armut und Fürsorge in Basel* deals with a longer period, from the thirteenth century to the present, but concentrates on local policy for the poor. It shows how policy for the poor developed over time, and focuses on specific themes relative to Switzerland or Basel in particular.

The first four essays, by Katharina Simon-Muscheid, Susanna Burghartz, Claudia Opitz-Belakhal, and Sara Janner, concisely present the development of poor relief and policy for the poor in Basel from the late Middle Ages to the nineteenth century. A constant theme throughout these centuries is the ever expanding policy of repression on the part of the authorities, which destroyed the former charity sector and the acceptance of it by the poor. Ever new regulations for beggars and the poor divided them into 'deserving' and 'undeserving', and the increase in the number of poorhouses, orphanages, and workhouses along with the institutionalization of almsgiving meant that poor relief was communalized and bureaucratized. These exclusion mechanisms were exacerbated by the sixteenth-century laws governing citizenship and the right of domicile (*Heimatrecht*), which were designed to exclude needy foreigners and those from rural areas from any form of support, especially at times of crisis.

This process can be followed into the twentieth century, as the principle of a home parish was not abolished in Switzerland until 1975 (Sonja Matter; Georg Kreis). The right of domicile and citizenship law were also used to prevent poor people from getting married, as only those who could support a family were permitted to marry. In her essay, Regina Wecker describes how this led to the birth of illegitimate children and sometimes even to infanticide because of the 'moral stigma' (p. 207). Although this ban on marriage was liberalized in 1874, marriage law was changed in 1912 to state that 'under no circumstances are the insane fit to marry' (p. 208). Consequently, marriage was no longer the main issue, but public health. This opened the door to eugenics, and forced sterilizations and abortions were the result. In other words: 'Attempts were made to eliminate old social problems using the new medical opportunities offered by the twentieth century' (p. 214).

The main focus of this volume is on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to which six essays are devoted (Martin Leng-

wiler, Regula Zürcher, Urs Hofmann, Bernard Degen, Mirjam Häsler Kristmann, and Josef Mooser). They cast light on the transformation of poor relief into a state social policy from various different perspectives. There are some redundancies, in particular, in Gaby Sutter's essay on public welfare in the twentieth century, in which she repeatedly refers to several other authors, which makes reading somewhat tiresome. Yet it also reflects the complexity of Basel's poor relief, which was divided into social welfare for the citizens of Basel (Bürgerliches Armenamt from 1900; Bürgerliches Fürsorgeamt from 1930) and support for people from other home parishes who had settled in Basel, essentially provided by the Gesellschaft für das Gute und Gemeinnützige (Society for the Good and Charitable), church communities, religious societies, and other private associations. This voluntary sector was absorbed by universal poor relief which, after the principle of a home parish was abolished in 1975, was merged with the social welfare office (Bürgerliches Fürsorgeamt).

What is striking about Basel's policy for the poor is that the division into 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor—benefit scroungers in today's parlance—continues to the present day, perpetuating a work ethos dating from the late Middle Ages according to which gainful employment protects against poverty, as Ulrich Bräker had put it in the eighteenth century. Simon Wenger argues, however, that this 'cannot do justice to the complexity of the issues because it ignores the norms, structures, and mechanisms of social inequality by which people are forced into poverty, or kept imprisoned in it' (p. 266). This is explained in Regula Zürcher's essay, which looks at the nineteenth-century temperance movement from the point of view of those affected. Taking as an example an application to emigrate, she describes alcohol abuse in the nineteenth century ('Elendsalkoholismus', p. 126), a condition that affected mainly men, who thereby cast their families into disaster. Zürcher also links the teetotal movement with the contemporary image of poverty, because 'poverty was seen as self-inflicted and mainly male in character, while families were regarded as innocent "collateral" victims' (p. 131). The split between the deserving and undeserving poor thus continued to perpetuate itself.

All the essays offer competent, critical, and balanced analyses of poor relief from the perspectives of the history of science, the history of space, cultural history, or gender history. As a result, the reader gains a deep insight into the changing policy for the poor in the city

and canton of Basel from the late Middle Ages to the present day. Yet as the introduction puts it, the essays 'stress the perception of poverty and the poor from the perspective of actors in policy-making for the poor and the institutionalized forms of dealing with them . . . but this does not represent a synthesis, which would have to include the voices of those affected by poverty themselves' (p. 21). This points to one of the dilemmas of the field of poverty research, which requires macro history, that is, a perspective from above, to capture fundamental structural developments, but can get close to the actual manifestations of poverty, and resistance to it, only with the voices of the needy themselves.

The validity of the statements of the poor about poor relief and poverty is clearly illustrated in the volume *Accommodating Poverty: The Housing and Living Arrangements of the English Poor, c.1600–1850*. With the aim of examining the symbolic and material value of housing, the composition of households in relation to mobility during the process of British industrialization, and poor relief in the context of poorhouses and workhouses, this volume comprises eleven essays including a detailed introduction that covers the most recent research literature. In a highly differentiated way, the essays in this volume present the housing and living conditions of the poor, which have not so far been at the centre of research.

Jeremy Boulton's comments on the precarious conditions faced by London's poor, who were placed under great pressure by the need to pay rent, and his investigation, conducted with Leonard Schwarz, of high residential mobility in London reveal a mentality among the poor in which knowledge and the use of workhouses seems to have been part of a survival strategy. While Joanne McEwan looks at London's poor and their various dwellings, Adrian Green, drawing upon inventories, descriptions of houses, and biographies, establishes that between 1650 and 1830 most of the poor he investigated had at least the most necessary cooking utensils and bedsteads. He comes to the conclusion that even the poorest, so long as they had their own living space, 'usually had a pot to piss in' (p. 96). The other contributions, too, which deal with living in various different spaces, such as the British colonies (Sarah Lloyd), in the country (Steve Hindle), and in poorhouses (John Broad and Alannah Tomkins), or discuss the conditions under which single mothers lived and their life strategies (Samantha K. Williams) correct the general historical picture pro-

duced by research on poverty by analysing letters written by the poor, reports, and petitions for support. As a result, a much more differentiated image of the poor and the conditions under which they lived emerges.

Two contributions in particular, which relate not only to narratives of the poor and petitions but go beyond this type of source to look at different complexes of problems, deserve mention here. Tim Hitchcock looks at vagrants and vagrancy between norm and practice, while Steven King examines the life cycles of the poor and their family situations in Britain between 1800 and 1840.

Studying a number of (auto-)biographies of British vagrants in the eighteenth century, Hitchcock looks at their living conditions, where they slept, and how they were accepted in the places they stayed in. By doing this he questions previous historiography. This has tended to concentrate on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, on the expulsion of these unpopular figures, and on the characteristics that led to these expulsions, so that more is known about vagrancy than vagrants themselves. Against the background of detailed descriptions of vagrants' lives, Hitchcock presents a highly nuanced and complex picture of their ways of living. He shows that despite the increasingly harsh laws against vagrancy between 1700 and 1824, both men and women repeatedly found loopholes in their applications. This made it possible for them to live a life on the road and find opportunities for work, including illegal ones. Descriptions of places where this minority overnighted without being driven away, such as barns, outbuildings, on the roadside, and under bushes, shows the high degree of tolerance for them displayed by the resident population. This also contradicts the findings of historians that internal migration was subject to strict restrictions, suggesting that the laws to suppress vagrancy were often circumvented or broken, and that their effectiveness therefore needs to be questioned. Ultimately, these laws provoked the disobedience of vagrants so that they could survive on the streets. This illustrates the significance of these biographies, which are the only way in which we can begin to approach the experiences of the poor in the eighteenth century.

In his study, Steven King also looks at ego documents, not autobiographies, but letters written by the poor. Drawing on 3,000 letters written in 78 parishes in Berkshire, Lancashire, and Northamptonshire between 1810 and 1840, he analyses the life cycles of the poor

and their family situations. In order to generalize from the huge amount of data he has assembled, King restricts the pool to those families that wrote several letters to their home parishes. On the basis of this selection, King can show that the poor, and especially the aged poor, displayed a remarkable tenacity in keeping their homes. Although permanently under threat of eviction, they managed to stay in their homes for years. His research also reveals complex and permeable family structures, something that considerably expands the findings of previous research, which tends to be based on snapshots rather than processes of development. Whether single people, married couples with children, or households that also supported relatives, all based the arguments in their petitions on these structures. In other words, they used housing, the household, and the family rhetorically and strategically. They drew on the language of living alone, or referred to their local roots, the bringing up of young children, illness, and old age. Depending on their concerns, they developed a semantics 'that shifted between housing as a salvation to housing as millstone' (p. 163). Statistical data can undoubtedly provide the background to research, but it is not enough to explain how the poor dealt with their poverty, or to show how complex their life situations and survival strategies were.

All contributions to this volume successfully combine the macro and micro levels of research on poverty while taking in the perspective of the needy on the basis of diverse yet subject-centred sources. As a result, this new methodology modifies and corrects dominant notions and ascriptions of poverty, welfare, and the poor, and produces a complex, detailed picture of people in distress and their strategies.

To examine this is also the aim of Alannah Tomkins's book, published in 2006, *The Experience of Urban Poverty, 1723–82: Parish, Charity and Credit*. Based on the investigation of twelve well-documented parishes in Oxford, Shrewsbury, and York, her study compiles biographies of the poor from community records and invoices. She aims to find the greatest possible common denominator between the various overlapping groups, without drawing on the letters of the poor or on-going legal proceedings, in order to examine the significance of statutory community support as opposed to non-statutory assistance in the life of the poor. She asks whether these forms of relief provided a secure and reliable safety net for the poor, or whether they were

merely sporadic services which contributed to the permanent uncertainties in the lives of the poor.

Tomkins presents the conditions under which the poor lived, drawing on life in the workhouse, traditional poor relief such as lodging in poorhouses, health care, and schools for the poor. The section on credit and pawn broking among those in distress is especially significant because this is a field that has hardly been researched so far, and it demonstrates the flexibility of the poor in their struggle against want. Using a pawn book covering a period of more than a year, from August 1777 to December 1778, Tomkins analyses nearly 11,000 pledges. This suggests that around 15 to 17 per cent of the population of York pawned their belongings at times of need. This group of vulnerable people can be further differentiated into those who sought out the pawnshop once, and those who repeatedly pawned some of their possessions in order to deal with problems that kept cropping up. This makeshift economy allowed the poor to overcome short-term crises, or to escape deeper misery as long as they possessed something to pawn.

At the end of her study, where Tomkins sums up its findings in the context of wider research, she explains why she excludes the voices of the poor themselves from her analysis, as indicated above. On the basis of autobiographies of four Oxford families, seemingly selected at random, she suggests that the analysis of life histories as an approach tends 'to privilege male stories' (p. 238). Yet she does not seem to take into account the women named in the biographies she presents. Thus Tomkins misses the chance to gain deeper insights into the experiences of poor men *and* women. Her wider conclusion, that these biographies came into being against the background 'of peculiarly needy, criminal or uniquely named families' (p. 238) while the majority of the Oxford poor did not leave such personal statements, is not a convincing reason for leaving out their biographies. Rather, case studies of this sort could cast more light on the horizon of experience of the poor, illuminating it from different perspectives and revealing much more detail, without necessarily having to be absolutized.

To sum up, the volumes reviewed here, which will appeal to a specialized, expert readership as much as to the interested general reader, reveal a wide spectrum of research methods and produce a range of results, even if not all the books have been discussed in

equal depth or every individual essay considered. But one thing should have become clear. In order to explore poverty and experiences of poverty, the survival strategies and makeshift economies of the poor, research on poverty cannot use the micro or the macro level alone. Rather, the combination of many approaches is needed to reveal the full complexity of a life lived in poverty.

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