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Conference Report: *Social Data on Inequality in Historical Perspective*

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Social Data on Inequality in Historical Perspective. Workshop held at the Werner Reimers Foundation, Bad Homburg, 6–7 November 2023. Funded by the Werner Reimers Foundation. Conveners: Albrecht Graf von Kalnein (Werner Reimers Foundation), Lutz Raphael (Trier University), and Christina von Hodenberg (GHIL).

This year, the working group ‘Social Data and Contemporary History’ focused its workshop on inequality research and the possibilities and challenges associated with the use of social data in this research field. Lutz Raphael opened the workshop by presenting its thematic foci. The first item on the agenda was to broaden the geographical perspective by comparing notes on British and German approaches to social data. Next, he posed the question of how much knowledge needs to be available, and to what extent we need a history of knowledge about the origins, the production, and the collectors of contemporary inequality data to then be able to work with the data itself. He then drew attention to how qualitative and quantitative data can be integrated into historical research and connected with one another, and finally, invited the historians and social scientists to present their projects and explain their work using data, the aim of the workshop being to scrutinize and develop existing practices and methods.

The first panel began with a German–British comparison. Felix Römer (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin) asked how actors and their respective views of society influenced the production of social statistics and knowledge about economic inequality in Great Britain and the Federal Republic of Germany from 1945. According to Römer, the state itself has been a central actor in the production and management of this knowledge. Social science research on inequality has relied on data produced by the state. Not only has the state collected a lot of data, it has also decided what to publish, and in addition, it is only state actors who have been able to judge the quality of the data. Römer argued that this approach to data has followed a political agenda and has also been employed in state campaigns. Ignorance about methods of data collection has led to the circulation and reproduction of inaccurate figures over long periods of time. It is therefore important

Translated by Marielle Sutherland (GHIL).

for historians to conduct archival research into this statistical meta-knowledge and take it into consideration when using figures.

In his paper, Marc Buggeln (Europa-Universität Flensburg) linked social inequality with tax policies across a range of Western countries in a long historiographical perspective and described the challenges of examining these connections. During his research, he came across data sets that returned different results on the relative proportions of direct and indirect taxes. In addition, differences between data collection processes and a lack of knowledge about the surveys meant it was difficult to compare governmental tax policies. Comparative data has only been available since the OECD database was established in 1965. It is therefore important, he argued, to ask how people handled data before this—how they collected and then analysed it. In particular, the study of taxes and social inequality requires knowledge of contemporary statistics based on quantitative data. Once the data and the associated history of knowledge have been acquired, it is then possible to make an international comparison.

Presenting her planned research project—a collective biography that will primarily focus on women—Jenny Pleinen (FernUniversität in Hagen), too, argued that the state is an important actor, in that individual knowledge about social inequality can be influenced by state control. Her idea is to connect individual biographies in clusters and use serial sources to work out how state decisions have affected individuals and in what ways people have adapted their lives to societal structures and changing conditions. She plans to include a broad range of categories such as gender, wealth, and nationality. Divorce law, for example, or joint taxation of married couples are interesting for certain age groups or from the perspective of women. Pleinen saw challenges in terms of the acquisition and compilation of data that could be useful for the project.

In the second panel, the British historian Jon Lawrence (University of Exeter) talked about his work with interviews conducted in post-war England, which he is re-analysing and historicizing from a source-critical perspective for a study on the meaning of ‘community’ during this period. Using interview transcripts as examples, he demonstrated the various challenges, such as gaps and omissions in transcripts, and acknowledged that, if available, it is very useful to have

early researchers' written recollections or original audio recordings in addition. This makes it possible to reconstruct the data collection process more accurately, detect ways in which the researchers influenced the interview, and ask new questions of the social data. One of the advantages of these interviews over oral history interviews, he argued, is that they have no retrospective 'filter' but are contemporary snapshots of history. When using pre-compiled data, it is still, however, important to take into account the interview setting in each case and not simply repeat the interpretations and findings of these studies. Researchers need to ask their own questions in order to generate their own insights.

In the third panel of the workshop, the sociologist Christoph Weischer (University of Münster) explained to the audience of historians how social inequalities can be captured by a social structure analysis, and how microdata has been generated within the social sciences over time. The collection of cross-sectional data that began in the 1950s was followed by longitudinal studies and trend data from the 1980s onwards and process-generated data in the 1990s. During this period there was also increased interest in qualitative microdata as a route to understanding social inequalities. Weischer explained that the 'praxeological protheory' of social differentiation he was presenting involves amalgamating qualitative and quantitative data on the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels, and combining appropriate empirical methods. This provides the basis for a multi-dimensional understanding of social inequalities that incorporates economic and legal inequalities alongside fundamental preconditions such as health. This theory, he argued, is not about taking a historical snapshot but about tracing observable historical change.

In the final panel, participants presented current research on social inequality in contemporary history. Helena Schwinghammer's (Leibniz Institute for Contemporary History) geographical focus was on the Vogtland region, spanning the border between Bavaria and Saxony, and its particular position in divided Germany. She explained that she was examining the history of the lives and labour of female textile workers in the region, and also looking beyond the end of the GDR at the impact the historical transition and the transformation in the 1990s had on the Vogtland's textile workers and subsequent generations in

Saxony and Bavaria. In order to access the experiences of these workers, Schwinghammer scoured the German Socio-Economic Panel's repeat survey for suitable cases, then set up oral history interviews in which she asked about the structural impacts of deindustrialization on social inequalities in the Vogtland, and its comparative effects on women across the region. The interviews revealed many cases of mothers in gainful employment at that time who then found themselves unemployed or forced to retrain. Women were less likely to work in industry, having been increasingly pushed into typically female professions such as social services or retail. The conditions worsened for those women, and only improved as their daughters entered the labour market.

Deindustrialization in Germany was also the theme of the contribution by Jonas Fey (German Institute for Adult Education—Leibniz Centre for Lifelong Learning)—this time its impact on adult education, and particularly on the *Volkshochschulen* (adult education centres), the best known providers of this service, since the 1970s. Fey pointed out that there has been linear growth in the requirements placed on employees, and obtaining qualifications is increasingly seen as a core duty in the working world. Adult education, he argued, has, among other things, increased labour market mobility and raised incomes, thereby reducing inequality. At the same time, however, not all people will take up adult education. In the workshop, Fey ran two mathematical models—difference-in-differences and two-way fixed—in order to determine the impact of deindustrialization on further education products. He used a data set published by the European Commission (from the ARDECO database) and statistics provided by adult education centres, emphasizing that the data from the various centres showed considerable variation, but that the large number of data sets enabled regional differentiation and quasi-experimental approaches and could also be of interest to historians.

Jürgen Dinkel's (LMU Munich) paper was about a classic inequality issue: inheritance and bequests. He focused on the case study of Baltimore in Maryland, USA, at the turn of the twentieth century. Setting out the history of knowledge on the production of social data at a local level, he scrutinized statistics, regularly published nationwide, on inheritance inequality in the USA. Dinkel's research revealed blind

spots in regional data, and he identified the following reasons for this: most inheritances had been recorded, but women and people of colour rarely registered their estates and are therefore underrepresented in contemporary statistics. Dinkel also observed that although the data has been repeatedly used by researchers, many studies do not take into account that in 1900 inheritances were only recorded in affluent areas of the city. Aware of these gaps, Dinkel assumed a considerably higher level of inheritance inequality. He argued that in practice, courts found it difficult to record all the information. This led to numerous errors, the consequences of which were often much more significant in bigger data sets. Dinkel's paper once again illustrated the importance of the history of knowledge in the use of historically collected data.

The final workshop paper showed how much qualitative data and interviews can potentially contribute to research into ideas of inequality. Till Hilmar (University of Vienna) conducted interviews with carers and engineers from the former GDR and Czechoslovakia, selecting people who were in their early twenties in 1989. In his analysis of the interviews, Hilmar identified patterns in the way people talked about inequality and their own experiences of it. He was able to compare how they evaluated these in the context of the societal transformation process over the decades. The interviewees picked out the years 1989 and 1990 as the beginning of long-term inequalities. They talked about their own economic agency in this period, and how they dealt with the ruptures that ensued from the *Wende*. Through the interviews, Hilmar showed that statements about unemployment and other experiences of inequality tended to be framed through individualized rather than structural interpretative paradigms, especially by the engineers. The individual respondents, however, thought it was important for their experiences to be comparable with those of others, and for the transformations to be analysed in similar ways.

Finally, Kerstin Brückweh (Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space) and Pascal Siegers (GESIS—Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences) summarized the two days of the workshop and their impressions of the talks and discussions, emphasizing that there are still many differences between historians and sociologists when it comes to talking about methods and data. Researchers of contemporary history must consider how qualitative social research can be

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implemented and whether it would be useful to develop a methodological canon and a catalogue of best practices for the subject so as to be able to explore with sociologists contexts in which both sides could work effectively with one another. They noted that it had become clear how important it is to know about data generation and how it is produced, and it was also striking that, thus far, historians have generally worked either with qualitative or with quantitative data sets. In future, it is worth asking how these two kinds of data can be combined effectively and employed in the study of contemporary history.

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