REPRESENTING POVERTY: AMERICAN AND EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVES

Conference at the GHI, March 13-14, 2009. Co-sponsored by the GHI and the University of Paderborn. Conveners: Anke Ortlepp (GHI) and Christoph Ribbat (University of Paderborn). Participants: Vivyan C. Adair (Hamilton College, Clinton), Thomas Adams (Independent scholar, Washington DC), Beate Althammer (University of Trier), Ebony Coletu (Pace University, New York), Leon Dash (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign), Keith Gandal (Northern Illinois University, DeKalb), Dorothea Löbbermann (Humboldt University, Berlin), Claudia Müller (University of Leipzig), Alice O’Connor (University of California, Santa Barbara), Suleiman Osman (George Washington University), Christiane Reinecke (Humboldt University, Berlin), Corinna Unger (GHI), Sabine Veits-Falk (Stadtarchiv Salzburg), Thomas Waitz (University of Cologne), Welf Werner (Jacobs University, Bremen).

This conference invited historians, journalists, and scholars in literary and cultural studies to consider representations of poverty in modern North America and Europe. Over two days of lively discussion, the group of scholars from Austria, Germany, and the United States explored a broad range of narratives and images that have informed the discursive and political responses to and constructions of poverty: photographs, paintings, journalism, fiction, statistics, television, and film. A number of recent studies have critically analyzed the narratives of the poor, exposing the problematic ideologies underlying mainstream representations of “the poor” or “the underclass” as well as the attendant questions raised by the rhetoric of authenticity. In light of recent scholarly work on inequality—by Walter Benn Michaels and Gavin Jones, for instance—this conference’s premise suggested a more pragmatic approach to poverty and its representation, asking questions such as: How effective are such narratives in triggering social reform or cultural change? What options and strategies exist for photographers and journalists to alert audiences to the issue of poverty? What can literary and cultural history contribute to the field? The conveners hoped to provide a forum for innovative approaches to these questions. In order to foster productive interactions between younger and more established scholars, the conference participants included prominent scholars (some of them authors of seminal studies in the field) as well as postdocs and doctoral students.
In the first panel, titled “Representing Poverty in the Long Nineteenth Century,” participants discussed new perspectives on poverty in the nineteenth century, a well-researched period that nonetheless still prompts a variety of questions regarding new sources and methodological approaches. Sabine Veits-Falk analyzed Austrian genre painting of the mid-nineteenth century, focusing specifically on transformations from quasi-medieval charity to more systematic, modern poor relief. Painting and graphics, Veits-Falk argued, both reflected and helped to shape these transformations. Examining cultural texts produced a few decades later, Beate Althammer analyzed narratives of the homeless around 1900. Althammer read the journalism of American author Josiah Flynt (published in 1899 as *Tramping with Tramps*) and the German early-twentieth-century writer Hans Ostwald as cultural texts explicitly catering to a curious middle-class audience. Althammer looked at the significance of role play and role switching in these texts and connected them to the work of contemporary German journalist Günter Wallraff, whose most recent project on German homeless people resembles Flynt’s and Oswald’s narratives in significant ways. Linkages between the late nineteenth century and the contemporary period were also prominent in Keith Gandal’s presentation, which reflected on his study *The Virtues of the Viscious* by discussing theoretical and methodological questions pertaining to the analysis of past representations of poverty. Gandal criticized totalizing, presentist, and discontinuous approaches to such historical texts as Jacob A. Riis’ *How the Other Half Lives*, arguing that readings that are interested only in the technology of surveillance ignored the actual contributions that Riis as a writer and social reformer made to urban improvement. Gandal’s contribution argued for a more respectful and historically more accurate reading of such early reformers.

The second conference panel explored the “media of poverty” in four contributions on literary fiction, journalism, and television. Dorothea Löbbermann assessed the representation of homelessness in contemporary American literature. As literary protagonists, Löbbermann argued, the homeless make urban problems visible and challenge concepts of urban space. In an age of gated communities, Löbbermann pointed out, the boundaries between inside and outside become ever more rigid in the American city. The homeless person functions as a striking reminder of the constructedness of these borders. Addressing the urban context of New York City, Ebony Coletu discussed the narratives of poverty in the “Neediest
Cases” series in the *New York Times*, exploring a century of poverty journalism and the relation between these case narratives and the tradition of American philanthropy. Coletu analyzed structural patterns in these texts, the use of images and captions, and central motifs of these mini-narratives. She probed such issues as dignity, the deserving poor, the republican ethos, and race, and concluded that the *Times* collection of “the most pitiful instances of want” in the twenty-first century seems to turn into a sort of “pay-per-view charity.” Claudia Müller and Thomas Weitz examined contemporary German representations of poverty. In her talk titled “The ‘Fat Poor’, the Work Ethic, and the Workout,” Claudia Müller investigated how a media discourse on the overweight poor imagines these individuals as a threat to society: embodiments of resistance to dominant ideas of the work ethic and physical fitness. Müller stressed how the traditional categorization of the poor as either deserving or undeserving heightens the significance of the stereotype. Thomas Waitz investigated a similar terrain in his discussion of “under-class television” (a term coined by the historian Paul Nolte). In German discussions of this media subgenre Waitz finds ritualized displays of traditional middle-class values, politics of taste and condescension, and, again, the dichotomy of the deserving and the undeserving poor.

The first day of the conference closed with a lecture and reading by one of the most prominent American journalists to publish on questions of urban poverty. Leon Dash, the Pulitzer-Prize-winning reporter for the *Washington Post*, discussed his book *Rosa Lee: A Mother and Her Family in Urban America* and the research methods and strategies that led to this project. Dash’s lecture offered a close look at a journalist’s approach to poverty as an extremely complex mixture of collective and individual factors.

On the second day of the conference, the focus shifted from media representations and to the discourse of poverty experts. Vivyan C. Adair opened the panel called “Experts” with her own life story. As a single mother living in poverty, Adair managed through education to forge a career in the academy. At the same time, she remains conscious of the highly problematic political implications of her “success story” in an expert culture dominated by ideas of individualism and lean government. Adair presented her project “The Missing Story of Ourselves: Poverty and the Promise of Higher Education,” a combination of photographic portraits and life stories, and reflected
on the project’s goals as well as its conceptual difficulties. In particular, Adair focused on her project as a counter-narrative to the prevailing narrative of poor women as “welfare queens.” Christiane Reinecke moved the discussion to the German context, exploring representations of social inequality in West German sociological studies between 1950 and 1989. Reinecke emphasized how empirical research on social inequality developed in close connection with political discourse. Graphs, lists, and statistics, she argued, have to be understood in the context of shifting political agendas. In similar terms, Alice O’Connor argued for a multi-layered history of social science and poverty reform, taking the Pittsburgh Survey of 1907/08 as an example. In her analysis of the survey’s goals, O’Connor discovered a form of social investigation that questioned the ideology of capitalism and reframed what had seemed like individual problems as part of larger social questions. In the concluding presentation, the economist Welf Werner looked at the surveys that influence contemporary discussions, arguing for a broader global perspective on poverty policies. Werner explored such concepts as Amartya Sen’s capabilities approach and the development of a “one world” strategy of welfare policies. He also reflected, from his perspective as an economist, on the intricate connections between narratives of poverty and political decision-making processes.

In the concluding discussion, participants weighed options of future cooperation on further and deeper interpretations of the various cultural narratives of poverty. The group agreed on a central issue that had emerged in the course of the discussion: the crucial importance of pictorial, journalistic, even fictional narratives of poverty in a given society’s framing of poverty issues and the necessity to pragmatically explore both the inner workings of these narratives and the way in which they shape public opinion and policy. The group decided to take the results of this conference as the starting point for collaborative projects on cultural and political representations of poverty, both in the United States and Germany.

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