

Visual Representations of the Unemployed

Konferenz des German Historical Institute London und der University of Exeter
Exeter, 12. bis 13. Dezember 2008

Unemployment is a perennial problem in modern industrial societies. Recurring economic depressions repeatedly throw large numbers of people out of paid employment and make them dependent on benefits of some sort. Rising welfare and benefit expenditures produce public discussions about the character of „the unemployed“ and create a flood of textual and visual representations which are used in the debate about how to best deal with those who are out of work. Yet while the iconology of poverty has attracted some scholarly attention, the iconology of the unemployed has largely failed to do so. The conference „Visual Representations of the Unemployed“ at the University of Exeter was the first organized for the purpose of discussing whether there is an iconology of the unemployed, how it has changed over time, whether it is trans-national in character and how it influenced the political and social discourse about the workless in various countries and different periods.

The conference, which brought together historians, art historians, sociologists, and experts on film studies and photography, was organized by Matthias Reiss (History, University of Exeter) and sponsored by the German Historical Institute London and the University of Exeter's Department of History. After a short introduction by *Matthias Reiss*, *Sam Smiles* (Art History, University of Plymouth) chaired the first panel on „Foundations“. In his paper „To See is to Believe? Images and Social History“, *Jens Jäger* (Collaborative Research Center „Media and Cultural Communication“, University of Cologne) addressed the problems of interpreting images which are positioned at the intersection of social documentation, art and politics. Jäger focused especially on the photo of an unemployed Georgian villager which the World Bank offers free of charge on its website to document the work it does in countries it considers underdeveloped. The purpose of the photograph was to give an abstract problem a face. Using this and other photos, Jäger asked whether we can believe what we see – both literally and metaphorically – in a photo. The institutional context and the prestige of the artist provide some solutions to this problem. However, Jäger argues that it is ultimately impossible to show that people are out of work without relying on additional textual explanations or familiar – if largely outdated icons – such as the dole queue or the individual with the cardboard sign which identifies him or her as looking for work.

In his paper on „Visual Representations of Poverty and Idleness in the Early Modern Period“, *Andreas Gestrich* (German Historical Institute London) showed that these problems already existed well before the industrial revolution. William Hogarth, for example, had to mark one of his figures with a sign „out of employ“ on his forehead to identify him as unemployed. However, Gestrich stressed that only a few selected groups, such as mercenaries or journeymen, were in danger of becoming „unemployed“ in the modern sense of the word during the Early Modern period. Poverty was the dominant problem for the majority of the population, and a rich iconology of poverty has developed since medieval times. Some of the images developed during this and later periods, such as the resident deserving poor or the fraudulent beggar, later influenced the image of the unemployed during the industrial era.

Speaking on „Representations of the Unemployed in German Art before the First World War“, *Ute Wrocklage* (Art History, Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg) confirmed that the visualization of the unemployed in Germany initially resembled the depiction of beggars and vagabonds. The main difference was that the jobless were depicted younger and stronger than the poor, who were pictured as disabled and old. The use of signs and symbols associated with beggars, such as sticks, bundles, dogs or melancholy, reflected the bourgeois view that the unemployed were themselves responsible for their fate. At the same time, the artists also began to identify the unemployed with the political left by using markers such as a red scarf or handkerchief or certain types of beards. Around the turn of the twentieth century, the iconology of the unemployed changed and expanded as unemployment came to be recognized as an economic problem and the influence and militancy of the working class grew. The unemployed were now shown in public places and in groups to stress that unemployment was a mass phenomenon. The hands of the unemployed remain largely invisible as a sign of their inactivity. There is no communication between them or with the viewer, and they are static or move only slowly. All the pictures now emphasized the psychological and social effects of unemployment, although economic deprivation also remained a topic. Wrocklage concluded that much of the iconology of the unemployed familiar from the Great Depression was developed around the turn of the century, although some of it was later altered and infused with new meaning.

„Film“, the final section of the day, was chaired by *Will Higbee* (French and Film Studies, University of Exeter). *Steve Cannon* (Media Studies, University of Sunderland) talked about „Social Realism‘ and the Unemployed in Contemporary European Film“. Cannon focused especially on the Spanish film „Los Lunes al Sol“ (Fernando León de Aranoa, 2002), which was inspired by the French unemployed movement of the 1990s. „Los Lunes al Sol“ is based in Northern Spain and features a group of men who deal with their unemployment in different ways. At the end of the film, they capture a ferry for a symbolic but futile protest. Unable to pilot the vessel, they drift on the river for another „Monday in the Sun“. Cannon contrasted this ending with the British film „The Full Monty“ and its affirmation of capitalist values. He also placed „Los Lunes al Sol“ into the context of the contemporary collective protest in Spain against the war in Iraq.

Unemployment was also marginal to the film industry of the 1930s, as *Matt Perry* (History, University of Newcastle) explained in his paper „Visualising Unemployment through the Aesthetics of Capitalist Modernity: Case Studies in Films from the 1930s“. Referring to feature films from Great Britain, the United States, France and Germany, Perry explained the various ways the unemployed and unemployment were represented in movies of the 1930s. Directors used archetypal images of the unemployed, such as the tramp or the workman, to visualize the unemployed. Laid-off workers expressed their torment by looking down, avoiding eye contact or keeping their hands in their pockets. However, the unemployed were also visualized through collective protest or their antithesis, such as landlords or bosses. Unemployment itself was depicted through newspaper headlines or the landscape of unemployment. Geographical signifiers of unemployment were contrasted with their opposites. Many films were critical of capitalist modernity and suggested that alternatives to it existed. Perry concluded that the films of the 1930s contributed to the development of a transnational repertoire of visual representation which is still influential today.

The following day opened with a panel on photography, which was chaired by *Andrew Thorpe* (History, University of Exeter). *Jeannette Gabriel* (History, College of Mount Saint Vincent, New York) opened the panel with her paper „Pink Slips on Parade: Building the Unemployed Movement through Images of Everyday Protest, 1935-1939“. During the New Deal, the American government commissioned documentary photographs of the economic distress to create public support for its programs. These images depicted the unemployed as socially isolated, passive, humble and appreciative. Pictures such as Dorothea Lange’s „Migrant Mother“ have acquired iconic status and shaped our ideas about life in the United States during the Great Depression. Gabriel contrasted these official images with pictures taken of members of the unemployed

organization Workers' Alliance of America (WAA). The WAA organized the occupation of government buildings, strikes of relief workers, marches and other forms of protest, and was often able to gain concessions from the authorities in the late 1930s. These pictures show the degree of interracial cooperation in the unemployed movement as well as the leading role women played in the movement. Press photographs of WAA protest actions were published in American newspapers and have hitherto not been examined by historians. They reveal a completely different picture of the behaviour of the unemployed during the Depression than the documentary images commissioned by the government. Because the memory of the protest is gone, Gabriel concluded that the visual images are indispensable to fill the gap and create a more complete picture of how the jobless responded to their fate during the slump.

Antoine Capet (British Studies, University of Rouen) examined how photographs were used in Great Britain to convey a certain image of the unemployed. In his paper „Photographs of the British Unemployed in the Inter-War Years: Representation or Manipulation“, Capet showed a wide variety of pictures taken in the 1920s and 30s. Among other things, Capet highlighted the limited control photographers had over how their pictures were used, presented and interpreted. The pictures alone were often not sufficient to create a narrative. Even the use of familiar icons such as the queue or loafing men does not guarantee that the people in the photograph are clearly identifiable as unemployed. Captions are necessary to explain the context of an image, but also provided the possibility of manipulating the viewer. They were often changed or added later on, so that they did not necessarily reflect the intentions of the photographer. According to Capet, some captions twist the scene into a new direction which is not self-evident in the literal sense to the viewer. The only way photographers were able to retain a certain degree of control was by introducing documentary evidence in the image itself, which some of them did.

The final panel was chaired by *Matt Perry* and focused on the unemployed in political cartoons. In „Dragon Slayers and Dole Queues: Unemployment and the Unemployed in German Political Cartoons, 1974 to 1998“, *Matthias Reiss* examined 1,297 cartoons on unemployment published in 78 different German language newspapers or magazines. Reiss highlighted the use of iconography from the 1920s and 30s by the cartoonists. Although the cartoons rarely referred directly to mass unemployed in the Weimar Republic, they frequently alluded to it. The unemployed were rarely blamed for their fate, and from the second half of the 1980s onwards, cartoonists tended to portray the problem in individual instead of abstract terms. Unemployment among women or foreigners was rarely made a topic. The typical unemployed in the cartoons was a German male blue-collar worker isolated and abandoned by society but still actively looking for work. Unemployment was mostly depicted as a natural disaster or animal (especially a dragon) which appeared on the scene. The responsibility for fighting it was assigned to the politicians, but their incompetence and tendency to squabble with each other prevented a solution to the problem. By comparing his findings with the results of opinion polls, Reiss argued that the cartoons did reflect public opinion towards the jobless during the 25 years under examination.

Nicholas Hiley (British Cartoon Archive, University of Kent) concluded the conference with his paper, „If we only had a job, we could take a holiday: Unemployment in British Political Cartoons of the last Hundred Years“. Contrary to their German colleagues, British cartoonists struggled to find a favourite visual shorthand for unemployment or the unemployed. Unemployment was usually depicted as a natural disaster or ghost or shadow from which the politicians could not escape. The politicians were often depicted as uncaring about the fate of the jobless, but the latter rarely appear in the drawings. Although the character of Andy Cap became immensely popular in Britain and the United States, he could not be adapted by political cartoonists because he was already a cartoon figure. British cartoonists used the dole queue and other icons extensively in their works, but did not develop a new iconology of unemployment after the Great Depression.

The papers of the conference have shown that there is indeed an iconology of the unemployed which is distinct from the iconology of the poor. The jobless are usually pictured in groups, but as socially isolated and immobile. They are predominately male and usually depicted in public places rather than in their private homes. There is little communication between them or with the viewer. Iconic images, such as the dole queue or the cardboard sign, continue to dominate the visual representations of the unemployed, while older signifiers such as socialist tendencies or hidden hands have become less common. Protest continues to be a strong signifier of unemployed status in visual images, although the dominant stereotype of the jobless is one of political apathy since the „Marienthal“ study of the early 1930s. Images have been and are still used to create pity or sympathy or to assign blame. However, they have also been used to assert respectability and agency despite being out of work. The impact of these images, as well as the question of how the unemployed expressed their view of themselves through visual art, deserves more research.

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