

Representing Poverty. American and European Perspectives

Conference cosponsored by the GHI Washington

and the University of Paderborn at the German Historical Institute

Conveners: Anke Ortlepp (GHI) and Christoph Ribbat (University of Paderborn)

Washington D.C., 13. bis 14. März 2009

Participants: *Vivyan C. Adair* (Hamilton College), *Thomas Adams* (independent scholar, Washington), *Beate Althammer* (University of Trier), *Ebony Coletu* (Pace University), *Leon Dash* (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), *Keith Gandal* (Northern Illinois University), *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 culture studies to consider representations of poverty in modern North America and Europe. In two days of lively discussions, the group of scholars from Austria, Germany, and the US explored a broad range of narratives and images that inform the discursive and political responses to (and constructions of) poverty: photographs, painting, journalism, fiction, statistics, graphs, television, film. A number of influential studies have analyzed the narratives of the poor closely and critically in recent years, exposing the problematic ideologies underlying mainstream representations of „the poor“ and/or „the underclass“ and the attendant questions raised by the rhetoric of authenticity. In light of recent scholarly work on inequality – for instance, by Walter Benn Michaels and Gavin Jones – 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 and/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. Allowing for productive interactions between younger and more established scholars, the conference participants included prominent mid-career scholars (some of them authors of seminal studies in the field) as well as postdocs and Ph.D. students.

In the first panel, „Representing Poverty in the Long Nineteenth Century“, scholars discussed new perspectives on nineteenth-century poverty, a well-researched period that nonetheless still prompts a variety of questions regarding new sources and methodological approaches. *Sabine Veits-Falk* studied Austrian genre painting of the mid-nineteenth century, focusing specifically on transformations from quasi-medieval charity to a more systematic, modernized poor relief. Painting and graphics, Veits-Falk argued, both reflected and helped shape these transformations. Examining cultural texts produced a few decades later, *Beate Althammer* perused narratives of the homeless around 1900. Althammer read the journalism of American author Josiah Flynt (published in 1899 as „Tramping with Tramps“) and early twentieth-century German 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 the German homeless seems to resemble

Flynt's and Oswald's narratives in significant ways. Also linking the late nineteenth century and the contemporary period in his talk, *Keith Gandal*, in reflecting on his study „The Virtues of the Vicious“, presented a discussion of 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's „How the Other Half Lives“, arguing that readings interested only in the technology of surveillance ignored Riis's actual contributions to urban improvement as a writer and social reformer. Gandal's contribution argued for a more respectful and more historically 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 Löbberrmann* assessed the representation of homelessness in contemporary American literature. As literary protagonists, Löbberrmann argued, the homeless make urban problems visible and challenge concepts of urban space. In an age of gated communities, Löbberrmann pointed out, the boundaries between inside and outside become ever more rigid in the American city – and the homeless person functions as a striking reminder of the constructedness of these borders. Addressing the urban context of New York City, *Ebony Coletu* presented a discussion of narratives of poverty in the „Neediest Cases“ series in the „New York Times“, thus 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 motives of these mini-narratives. She probed such issues as dignity, the deserving poor, the republican ethos, and race, concluding how 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“. Discussing sources that are quite different in tone, *Claudia Müller* and *Thomas Waitz* in their respective papers 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, apparent embodiments of a resistance to dominant ideas of the work ethic and the workout. 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 „underclass 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/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 perspective of 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 moved away from the media representations and toward the discourse of the poverty experts. *Vivyan C. Adair* opened the panel called „Experts“ with her own life story. As a single mother in poverty, Adair managed, via education, to forge an academic career. At the same time she remains conscious of the highly problematic political implications of the „success story“ she is able to tell 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 goals, yet also on some of the conceptual difficulties the project entails. Adair focused particularly on her project as a counter-narrative to the prevailing narrative of poor women as „welfare queens“. *Christiane Reinecke* then moved the discussion back 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, had 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 a close analysis of the survey's goals, O'Connor discovered a form of social investigation that questioned the ideology of capitalism and reframed what formerly seemed like mere individualized problems rather than larger social questions. In the concluding presentation, the economist *Welf Werner* looked at the surveys influencing our 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 a concluding discussion, participants weighed the options of cooperating in the future 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 interpret 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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