

Work and Makeshifts

Veranstalter: Dr. Sigrid Wadauer, University of Vienna

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Labour history, traditionally focused upon the working classes, social democratic parties and trade unions, lost its edge in German-speaking historiography long ago. Working conditions in shadow economies, fragmentation of labour markets, how the life of working people was affected by mass unemployment, and how they made do in times of economic crisis – these urgent themes have been neglected by historians for too long. Concentrating on interwar Austria, a new research project has begun to examine how new regulations, varying from the establishment of labour exchanges or social insurance schemes to the creation of statistical categories, produced new distinctions and hierarchies within the emerging world of a wage-earning society.¹ In order to describe how the lines between work and non-work became relevant for the lives of ordinary Austrian citizens the focus will be on the perspectives and practices of those women and men who had to make ends meet at the fringes of the labour market and in the informal economy. At the workshop „Work and Makeshifts“ speakers and guests from Germany, France and Italy were invited to discuss the state of affairs concerning the history of work and welfare in terms of sources, concepts and methods of research. Its multitude and range is reflected in the topical and methodological diversity of the papers presented.

In her introduction SIGRID WADAUER (University of Vienna) presented an overview of her project's future research agenda before she went on with her paper „Work as Makeshift – Makeshift as Work“. She sketched out how the use of the term „makeshift economy“, coined by Olwen Hufton in her analysis of eighteenth-century France, might in-

form a cultural history approach examining how meanings of work were historically produced between 1880 and 1940. To demonstrate which problems and questions lie ahead of her research team, Wadauer drew on her previous work and talked about the diversity of survival strategies which were developed by Austrian pedlars and vagrants during the 1920s in the face of massive changes in the labour market. The project will examine how different social logics concerning „work“ and „non-work“ operated on local, regional and national levels and produced paradoxical new hierarchies in the world of urban as well as rural labour. The question will be asked how new labour market restrictions transformed the choices and chances of ordinary people who populated that 'zone of vulnerability'², in which the death of a breadwinner, chronic disease, or the impossibility of finding a job could easily send a family into an exclusion spiral, ending up in dire want.

In her paper „Poverty, Women and Capability in Early Modern Europe“ LAURENCE FONTAINE (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris) described how women of the poorer classes in eighteenth-century Paris managed to take part in economic exchanges and thus generated enough income to make ends meet – even though they were officially excluded from the world of artisanship and commerce. Fontaine critically reviewed recent historiography on poverty and precariousness and argued that historians should adopt and adapt Amartya Sen's capability approach in order to be able to study systematically informal and illegal economic activities of the poor. Fontaine's contextualisation of „chain-pawn-broking“ transactions in early modern Paris supported the argument that pre-industrial economies were much more complex and offered a lot more opportunities to make money than previously thought by historians.³ In early modern Paris there was a huge demand for credit and, as Fontaine exemplified, female paupers seized their opportunities to make money: wo-

¹ „The Production of Work 1880-1938. Welfare, Labour-market and the Disputed Boundaries of Labour.“ See <http://pow.univie.ac.at/sitemap40062/> (13.10.2009).

² Robert Castel, *From Manual Workers to Wage Laborers. Transformations of the Social Question*. Translated and edited by Richard Boyd, New Brunswick 2003.

³ Laurence Fontaine, *L'Économie morale. Pauvreté, crédit et confiance dans l'Europe préindustrielle*, Paris 2008.

men calculated, they sold and bought things, pawned them, looked out for customers, established social networks, cooperated with moneylenders and were reliable und trustworthy „entrepreneurs“.

In her paper „Begging for Alms: A Legitimate or Illegitimate Way to Make Ends Meet? Changing Practices and Perceptions in the Nineteenth Century“ BEATE ALTHAMMER (University of Trier) focused on Prussia. Throughout the nineteenth century the government enacted laws and orders to restrict almsgiving and to criminalise beggars, but, according to Althammer, the population's attitudes towards begging did hardly change. In contrast, profound changes in the social profile of beggars indicate how urban labour markets were disrupted by economic crisis and the erratic development of industrial society: In the 1890s able-bodied skilled men, aged between 20 and 40, begged for alms to tide over phases of unemployment. At the same time women, children and infirm persons who had formed the majority of beggars during the 1830s had disappeared from the streets. Althammer looked at the self-representation of beggars and vagrants and stressed the fact that no commonly shared view was to be found on what makeshift economy meant to the people who lived in it: Some valued their freedom of movement and choice of employer, others again felt as a failure because they were not able to find a stable job and felt excluded from the chances of the evolving industrial society.

How the uncertain, unstable and insufficient wage earning opportunities which dominated the labour market structure of Imperial Germany were perceived by labourers was the theme of JÜRGEN SCHMIDT'S (Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin) paper „Work and Makeshifts in German Workers' Autobiographies about 1900“. Schmidt analysed how makeshift strategies were remembered by working-class authors. Unsurprisingly, individual makeshift practices which showed economic independence, such as seasonal migration or knitting, were freely talked about by authors whose worldview was openly socialist. Yet, themes such as old age, infirmity, social benefits from any kind of workers' insurance or social networks and solidary expe-

riences which would point to the powerlessness of the working class were hardly ever mentioned. In general, the attitude of authors towards makeshift practices was, according to Schmidt, ambivalent: Society and the state were criticised because they tolerated material want and widespread poverty. At the same time, members of the working class were encouraged to adapt to the values of bourgeois society in terms of their attitude towards work and family life. Begging or lodging and even more so petty crimes or prostitution were condemned as dishonouring and illegal activities. The assumption that women should stay in the house and care for household and children while male workers were the principle breadwinners of the family was shared by all authors and none of them called into question basic patterns of exploitation within industrial capitalism.

In her paper „Unemployment, Poverty and Makeshifts: The Experiences and Narratives of the Unemployed in Trier and Surroundings, 1918-1933“ TAMARA STAZIC-WENDT (University of Trier) analysed survival strategies of working people hit by unemployment in Rhenish Prussia during the 1920s. In Germany, the Social Democratic government of the Weimar Republic had, for the first time, set up a nationwide system of unemployment support (*Erwerbslosenfuersorge*). Stazic-Wendt used Trier as a case study to argue that this newly established system failed to protect a large part of the labouring population from grave material and social consequences of unemployment. Because the system was conceived to assist only certain branches and to tide over rather short periods of unemployment many people were permanently excluded from its support and thus had to fall back on local poor relief (*Armenfuersorge*). Stazic-Wendt showed persuasively that only when all their resources were completely exhausted, unemployed persons chose to apply for 'traditional' poor relief, a repressive support system tainted with stigma. Despite experts knowing at the time that mass unemployment was caused structurally, the unemployed were still accused of „work-shyness“, laziness and a lack of morality. Stazic-Wendt emphasised that de facto relief payments were insufficient. In fact, wo-

men played a central role in a family's makeshift economy: They established credit networks, organised peddling licences, or handed in relief applications. Stazic-Wendt's pioneering analysis of the social administration's case files clearly shows how structural unemployment grew locally from the early years of the Weimar Republic onwards while national employment statistics did in no way point to the massive dimension of the ongoing fragmentation of the labour market.

The final paper „Makeshifts without Work? Young Workers, National-Socialist Education and Specialised Fun in Vienna, 1941-1944“ given by ALEXANDER MEJSTRIK (University of Vienna) dealt with resistance against work obligations in national socialist Austria. Mejstrik examined if and how different attitudes towards work were shaped by national socialist education ideology, which ascribed 'transforming' value to work. Within the NS-concept of *Völkisch-Sein* members of the *Volksgemeinschaft* had to learn to put *Gemeinschaft* first and thus to become a „true“ German who would have „earned“ his right to be a German citizen. Mejstrik used multivariate correspondence analysis⁴ to reconstruct a multidimensional social space within which he located variations, contrasts and paradoxes in the working habits of young Austrian people. The statistical approach was supplemented by telling the story of four individual cases, which indicated that education and upbringing strongly impacted on attitudes towards work but that they did not determine conformity or resistance to work obligations imposed on young people by National Socialists. The conference concluded with a very stimulating city walk through *Red Vienna*, guided by Helmut Weihsmann.⁵

The fruitful discussions revealed a kaleidoscope of questions to be clarified by future research. They can be grouped into four themes, all of which need to be gendered as well:

1) How to conceptualize social relations between working and non-working people at

different points in time: How did fights for scarce resources relate to notions of social solidarity? Who was deemed to be trustworthy and receive credit? Which methods need to be invented to distinguish regional patterns of welfare regimes?

2) How to operationalize the idea of agency in relation to working-class and poor people if one keeps in mind social inequalities within historical societies and economies: Where did people acquire their attitude towards work? Was it learned, hereditary, imposed on them, ascribed by contemporaries? How did people adapt to worsening or indeed to improving economic circumstances? Can these complex processes and negotiations be fruitfully analysed by using the term makeshift economy?

3) How to include reactions of institutions, like guilds, governments or churches to the changing nature of work and non-work: How can we measure whether new regulations of the labour market and the establishment of social insurance against social risks improved the situation of the poor and unemployed in the long run? How did the ideas of administrators impact on the poor's rhetoric of necessity?

4) How to locate relevant evidence, individual as well as statistical, and use the material in a careful, responsible and reflected manner: How does the availability, form and narrative style of sources shape the historiographical construction of the research objective?

Conference overview:

Sigrid WADAUER (University of Vienna): Introduction Work as Makeshift – Makeshift as Work?

Laurence FONTAINE (EHESS Paris): Poverty, Women and Capability in Early Modern Europe

Beate ALTHAMMER (University of Trier): Begging for Alms. A Legitimate or Illegitimate Way to Make Ends Meet? Changing Practices and Perceptions in the Nineteenth Century

Jürgen SCHMIDT (WZ Berlin): Work and Makeshifts in German Workers' Autobiographies about 1900

Tamara STAZIC-WENDT (University of

⁴This statistical approach has become well-known through the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Cf. Idem, *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Cambridge 1984.

⁵Weihsmann is the author of *Das rote Wien. Sozialdemokratische Architektur und Kommunalpolitik 1919-1934*, Wien 2001.

Trier): Unemployment, Poverty, and Makeshifts: The Experiences and Narratives of the Unemployed in Trier and Surroundings, 1918- 1933

Alexander MEJSTRIK (University of Vienna): Makeshifts without Work? Young Workers, National-Socialist Education and Specialised Fun in Vienna, 1941-1944

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