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THE ANALYSIS OF PETITIONS MADE FOR POOR
RELIEF DURING THE 19TH CENTURY

The discovery of up to 4000 petitions for financial assistance, made by impoverished inhabitants of the urban district of Kassel and directed towards the town's police headquarters (during the period 1870 - 1912), has for the first time in the field of historical research on poverty enabled a systematic quantitative analysis of a whole set of mass records accumulated by urban authorities.

For the first time, this has also led to the basic possibility of identifying and describing the social situation of the real 'subjects' of national and local poor relief policies during the course of the 19th century.

1. Scope of Project

Although there is no one factor of an individual's or of society's economic and political life which is not directly or indirectly connected with the situation and problems of the poor, an exact definition of what is poor has, both in the past and in the present, not been subject to an objective appraisal. It is based on subjective assumptions and undergoes many periodical geographical and legal changes(1). However, assuming certain limits in time and space, the following definition can be viewed as being generally valid: Someone can be regarded as being poor if he is to be found at the bureaucratic level of poor relief. Poverty-related statistics can therefore only be found for those poor who are officially registered as petitioning for assistance and not for the poor in general.

However, in spite of restricting the definition of the poor to such officially registered petitioners, it is, with regard to petitions made to the police headquarters in Kassel, impossible to talk in terms of the poor of Kassel, since there were three sectors which had a fundamental part to play in the more or less closely related network of civic welfare facilities during the 19th century:

- a) the clerical sector (being the oldest), primarily responsible for hospital care;
- b) the private sector, comprising the many donations contributed by wealthy citizens and generally dedicated to fulfilling very specific tasks in accordance with the desires of their respective donors;
- c) the official public authorities sector, represented by the police headquarters, whose responsibilities in their function as an 'administrative police-force' stretched beyond just catering for the poor and included welfare in general, protection of young people, public health and veterinary care, security

and food control etc. - This important area of welfare was to gain even more importance towards the end of the 19th century via the Social Insurance Laws for which a special 'Secretariat for Accident, Old-Age and Disability Insurance' was founded in 1896 with an eye towards implementing such laws.

In its function as local relief institution the police headquarters in Kassel was just one albeit one of the most important parts of a historically emerging system of competence division between more or less rationally operated relief facilities, which often had differing and separate spheres of responsibilities and activities.

A set of records with information on the personal status of almost 4000 petitioners can be found in the police headquarters (covering the period 1870 - 1912). This provides the data base for this analysis.

2. The records

The petitions are to be found partly in the form of individual 'short biographies' (particularly during the first period of investigation) and partly in the form of rubricated questionnaires. The following petition supplies both personal and financial details concerning the petitioner:

Personal Particulars: Surname, Christian Name; Native Place; Street, House Number; Age; Sex; Family Status; Occupation; Occupation of Marital Partner; if Widow or Widower - Occupation of Former Marital Partner; Number of Children; Names, Ages, Occupation of Children; Reasons for Employment Incapacity; 'Character and Conduct'.

Financial Particulars: Amount of Property and Effects; Amount of Income; Amount of Debts; Existence of Relatives liable for Maintenance Payment and (if available) the Ability of the Former to carry out such Payments; Source of Financial Support up to date, its Extent and Duration; Extent and Duration of Financial Assistance applied for.

The actual petition is often followed by a memorandum stating whether assistance was granted in part, in full and for what period or whether it was rejected and what reason was given for this rejection.

3. Analysis Objectives

With the help of such categorisations the questions to be asked can be formulated as follows:

- a) which age-groups (sub-divided into 1-20, 20-40 year olds and over 40s),
- b) which occupational categories (sub-divided into day labourers, workmen, craftsmen, service occupations) were forced to apply for poor relief and how often was this the case,
- c) which reasons were most frequently given for impoverishment (deduced from the variables age, reasons for employment incapacity, debts, non-existence of relatives liable for maintenance, number of children),
- d) the variables 'Street, House Number' may enable sociotopographic investigations,
- e) by means of correlating the different variables the social and financial situation of those in need of assistance can be investigated,
- f) the memorandum contained in the petition allows conclusions to be drawn on the kind and extent of the authorities' reaction to each individual situation of dire need. In conjunction with the variables 'Character and Conduct', statements can be made on whether or not certain sections of the population received 'preferential' treatment or 'antipathetic' treatment. A petition made in 1896 in which the rubric 'Character and Conduct' catches the eye would seem to corroborate this assertion. In this instance it was apparent that the political attitude of the petitioner played an important part in the authorities' final decision for or against granting assistance - to put it more concisely, politically 'left-wing petitioners' were subject to considerable restrictions thus limiting their access to official assistance by the authorities. (2)

4. Procedure

The objective is to restructure the total source of information consisting of almost 4000 petitions for assistance in a representative manner according to a disproportionately stratified random selection procedure. Unfortunately, much of the information is incomplete as not all of the categorisations are available or have been handed down in the documents under review. The petitions have, with the exception of the period 1870 - 74, been handed down in alphabetical order. These first four years will therefore incorporate all data available for this period. An alphabetical selection will be employed for the years following this period. After 1873 the whole investigation period will be covered by the letters 'B', 'G', 'M' and 'S'. Approximately 400 (of the period 1870 - 74) and 1500 petitions selected through a combination of the letters 'B' (approximately 700) and 'S' (approximately 800) should provide a sufficiently representative and informative investigational quantity since almost every second petitioner is thus subject to an 'interview'.

FOOTNOTES

1 Probably the most proficient contemporary expert on poverty research - E. Münsterberg - has always pointed toward this fact. However, in spite of the relativity of the definition of poverty, he too was convinced of the necessity of a constructive statistical approach, which is aware of the limits imposed upon it by such relativity. - Emil Münsterberg, Die deutsche Armengesetzgebung und das Material zu ihrer Reform, in: Staats- und socialwissenschaftliche Forschungen, Vol. 6, ed. Gustav Schmoller, Leipzig 1887, p. 33.

2 The following can thus be found in the petition's 'Character and Conduct' rubric:

"Although nothing unfavourable registered, the petitioner does, however, subscribe to the 'Volksblatt' and is subsequently a social democrat... The statements made in the petition are correct. The applicant, however, is neither regarded as worthy of nor needy of assistance since he officially supports social democracy by subscribing to the 'Volksblatt', has grown-up children and is otherwise healthy', in: STA. Mbg., Rep. No. 175/597.

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