From the Blanketeers to the Present: Understanding Protests of the Unemployed

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Bericht von: Matthias Reiss, Department of History, University of Exeter

Why are the unemployed so passive? Why do they not go on the streets to protest against their fate together? These questions have troubled historians and sociologists ever since the publication of the Marienthal study in the 1930s. This seminal work by Paul Lazarsfeld, Marie Jahoda, and Hans Zeisel, together with other studies in different countries, supposedly proved that after losing their jobs workers eventually enter a downward cycle of depression and despair which ultimately leads to complete political apathy. The so-called Marienthal thesis is still widely accepted, although a number of historical studies have shown that not all unemployed by far remain passive and that their protest, or at least the fear of it, has profoundly influenced and shaped emerging welfare systems in industrial societies since the late nineteenth century. Even at the time when Lazarsfeld and his colleagues studied the unemployed of Marienthal, Hunger Marches and other forms of organized popular resistance provided an outlet for the frustrations and demands of the unemployed in Germany, Great Britain, France, and the United States. While only a fraction of the registered unemployed participated in these organized collective efforts, such protest activities often enjoyed tremendous local and regional support and were carefully watched by the state. Those who did not join them frequently developed individual strategies of protest and resistance.

The attractive simplicity of the Marienthal thesis and the fact that it was backed up by empirical data and contemporary observation can be seen as one reason why the historical profession has for so long paid little attention to the protest of the unemployed. Other reasons were that the protest of the workless was to a large extent dominated by the radical political left and that the unemployed were primarily interested in improving their standard of living. Classified as insignificant, short-lived Communist stunts and as too materialistic to claim revolutionary flavour or qualify as class-conscious working-class activity, unemployed protest triggered little interest across the whole of the political spectrum. However, rising unemployment figures across the industrialized world since the 1980s have led to the renewal of unemployed protest in many countries and to coordinated activities across national borders. This attracted the attention of political scientists as well as social psychologists, and in recent years also of historians.

To bring the different strands of research on this issue together and to place recent protest activities into a historical context, the German Historical Institute London (GHIL) in collaboration with the Society for the Study of Labour History held a conference at the Institute's premises in Bloomsbury on 16–17 February 2007. For the first time participants from Germany, Great Britain, Ireland, France, the United States, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Israel, working in the fields of history, political science, and social psychology, came together to discuss the focus, method, and results of their research and foster cooperation for further projects.

The conference was opened by the GHIL's director, Andreas Gestrich, and the two organizers, Matt Perry (University of Newcastle) and Matthias Reiss (GHIL/University of Exeter). The speakers in the first session, which was chaired by Matthias Reiss, summarized the state of the field through the lens of their respective academic disciplines, social psychology and history. Based on his research on the Dutch unemployed movements, Bert Klandermans's (Free University Amsterdam) keynote speech addressed the question of why it is so difficult to organize the workless. Klandermans presented a thoroughly structured overview of the process and dynamics of participation in collective protest activities. Unemployed protest is frequently discounted because not all the unemployed participate and it is often short-lived. Klandermans rose these issues by pointing out that the 'free

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rider' problem affects all social movements: Members of an aggrieved group often regard not joining a public protest as the most efficient strategy in terms of costs and benefits, as long as they expect others to voice their demands and themselves to benefit from others' engagement. Klandermans also pointed out that more research has been done on why people participate in protest than on why they quit, and that the dynamics of disengagement needed to be studied further.

Richard Croucher (Middlesex University), who was once the chairperson of an unemployed work centre, examined the conference topic from a historical perspective. Croucher defined unemployed movements as organizations of, in contrast to movements for, the unemployed, which are concerned with the problems of the workless. He stressed the large number of people around the world who had direct or indirect experience of unemployment in the twentieth century and the value of this issue as an indicator to examine the positions of trade unions, social democratic parties, and cooperative movements. According to Croucher, the little attention unemployed protest has so far received cannot be justified from an archival viewpoint, although the short-lived and fragmented nature of many unemployed organizations does impede historical research. Identifying gaps in the existing scholarship, Croucher argued that, for example, the issue of leadership, the blend of motivational forces, and the role of trade unions and the Catholic Church needed further work.

Andrew Thorpe (University of Exeter) then introduced Margrit Schulte Beerbühl (Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf), who opened the case studies with a paper on the March of the Blanketeers in March 1817. Although not the first of the unemployed Hunger Marches in Britain, it was the best known of that period. Summarizing the negative judgements passed by historians on this march, Schulte Beerbühl recounted the event, arguing that it built on existing patterns of public protest and resulted from various unsuccessful collective attempts to get relief. She attributed the failure of the march to the lack of staunch leadership, weak organization, and a climate unfavourable for such activities. According to Schulte Beerbühl, labour historians' preoccupation with political reform, revolutionary movements, trade unionism, and pre-industrial hunger riots has led them to pay little attention to the March of the Blanketeers, which does not fit neatly into any of these categories.

Because of a cancellation, this was the only paper on the early protest of the unemployed. The following panel, 'The Golden Age of Unemployed Protest', chaired by David DeVries (Tel Aviv University), focused on the interwar years. Jeannette Gabriel's (City University of New York) paper, ' „Natural Love for a Good Thing": The Unemployed Workers' Movement's Struggle for a Government Jobs' Programme, 1931–1942', turned attention to the protest of the unemployed in the United States during the New Deal. After the stock market crash of 1929, unemployed groups began to organize in local areas and by the early 1930s small groups held weekly meetings in tens of thousands of communities, arranged rent strikes and marches to relief offices, and even coordinated marches to Washington D.C. Because of its geographical and political divisions, however, the unemployed movement was unable to prevent the termination of the first short-lived government work programme in 1934. The second, much less generous and inclusive government work programme, the Works Progress Administration (WPA), was created in the following year. When it, too, came under threat, however, a now unified unemployed movement was able to offer successful resistance in alliance with the newly created industrial labour federation, the Congress of Industrial Action. The movement even organized occupations of buildings in state capitals, and the actions of the unemployed forced several state legislatures to back down from proposals to discontinue funding for government jobs' programmes in 1936. The movement's pressure on state and national government officials, Gabriel concluded, ensured the continuation of the WPA until 1942, long after the Roosevelt administration intended it to be dismantled.

In 'Community, Crisis, Party and State: Explaining Unemployed Protest in the Ruhr at the End of the Weimar Republic', Alex Zukas (National University, San Diego) stressed

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the success of the Communists in organizing the unemployed in this highly industrialized part of Germany. Unemployment was the issue which helped the Communist party to gain influence and win elections in this region, which contained many young people, high unemployment, and tight-knit working-class communities. Ninety percent of the unemployed protest was organized by the Communists and their organizations, who linked immediate demands with longer-term ones. By the mid-1930s, Communist street and community cells outnumbered factory cells, and their well-organized protest covered mass marches, the occupation of town halls, and other activities.

Philip H. Slaby (Guilford College, Greensboro NC) then spoke on 'The Protests of Jobless Immigrants in Interwar France', a group so far largely neglected by historians. Slaby focused on the largely Polish immigrants in Pas-de-Calais from 1932 to 1934. The economic crisis and rising unemployment led to increased pressure on the immigrants to return to their countries of origin. Many French perceived them as a threat to their economic interests and to national security at the same time. Under government pressure, coal-mining companies sought to remove foreign miners from their payrolls and tried to coax them into accepting voluntary repatriation to their native countries, while state officials in the département exercised their considerable discretionary powers to override immigrants' rights. Despite the threat of forcible deportation, foreign workers began to protest in the spring of 1934, aided by the trade unions, and their unrest culminated in three days of often violent protests in May of that year. Local authorities saw this as a vindication of their hard line and continued it in defiance of clear instructions from the central authorities in Paris. In 1935, however, the national government itself enacted discriminatory legislation against immigrants which, for example, allowed the expulsion of unemployed foreigners after a period of grace, even if they were legal residents.

The second day of the conference started with a session on the media, which was chaired by David Stewart (University of Central Lancashire, Preston). Antoine Capet (University of Rouen) spoke on the 'Protests of the Unemployed in Victor Gollancz's Left Book Club'. While the Left Book Club, formed in 1936, was mostly associated with foreign affairs, a number of its publications addressed the domestic issue of unemployment without explictly indicating this in their titles. Capet argued that for the authors of the Left Book Club the struggle against fascism and unemployment was essentially the same, as the former was seen as leading to the latter. Wal Hannington in particular, the leading figure of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM), stressed this nexus in his books and presented his organization and its protest activities as a means of preventing the workless from falling for fascist seducers. Hannington and other authors defended the unemployed against accusations of laziness, but the Club also published testimonies by un- or underemployed workers. According to Capet, all Left Book Club publications projected a picture of doom and gloom when dealing with unemployment, which became part of a discourse of warning during and after the Second World War. The Left Book Club was dissolved in October 1948, partly because the disappearance of unemployment and the capital it could make by its representations of it, had deprived the Club of one of its mainstays.

Ingrid Hayes (Paris 1-La Sorbonne) discussed the history of 'Lorraine Coeur d'Acier, 1979–1980: A Radio Station in Longwy against the Dismantling of the Steel Industry'. Threatened with unemployment, the steelworkers started an unprecedented eight-month-long protest in December 1978, based on the strong tradition of workers' militancy in this region. New forums of action were created which took the struggle out of the factories. They organized demonstrations by children, blockades, and occupations of government buildings. In addition, an illegal 'free radio' station, NCA, was set up by the trade union CGT and run by two journalists from Paris. Anybody could interrupt the programme and women had their own time on air. Gradually, NCA became a local station and the struggle to protect it replaced the struggle for the steel industry. The people who spoke on air where mostly not elected leaders and many felt that participating in NCA broadened their

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horizons and enabled them to imagine a different future for themselves. In the summer of 1980, however, the CGT fired the two journalists and stopped supporting the station.

As Hayes's paper showed, the individual dimension and implications of unemployed protest should not be neglected in favour of the traditional focus on collective street protest. Indeed, the first paper of the panel 'Beyond Collective Protest', which was chaired by Cybele Locke (Connecticut College), suggested that collective protest was not necessarily the natural reaction of those on the fringes of the labour market. In 'Protesting Individuals: The French Unemployed in the 1930s', Michael Seidman (University of North Carolina-Wilmington) contested the notion established by Marie Jahoda and others that unemployment was a curse or something evil that always had profoundly destructive effects. Focusing on French women, in particular cleaning women, in the 1930s, Seidman argued that a significant number committed deception or benefit fraud. He stated that unemployment, absenteeism, and violation of rules established by the state could be seen as acts of individual resistance to the dominant model and ideal of wage labour. Denunciations of such acts were frequent and often paired with descriptions of immoral behaviour, such as drunkenness. Seidman concluded that such acts of individual resistance contradict the prevailing image of working-class solidarity and productiveness.

In contrast, Stephanie Ward's (University of Aberystwyth) paper 'New Perspectives on British Interwar Unemployed Protests: The Case of the Means Test' dealt with forms of protest against unemployment which were deemed more respectable then street protest. While historians have so far dealt mostly with the NUWM's marches against the means test after its re-introduction in 1931, the test was the focus of much protest by different groups. The demand for its abolition channelled the anger of the unemployed into one clear aim and acted as an umbrella for wider grievances. It provided a clear target in the form of officials, buildings, and organizations, and a wide range of people were able to participate in the protest because the demand for abolition was not revolutionary. Ward stressed that opposition to the test was expressed not only in big marches and rallies. To focus exclusively on them creates a false impression of the much wider levels of discontent with the test. Deputations, petitions, letters, and meetings provided outlets for positive action without radical connotations, and Ward argued that these forms of protest were taken seriously by the authorities. They could not easily be ignored, were deemed more respectable than street protest, and generated support against the test, which made the large demonstrations possible.

Malcolm Chase (University of Leeds) concluded this panel by arguing that failure to protest was the norm for the unemployed between the world wars. In his case study on 'The Ironstone Mining Communities of East Cleveland in Interwar Britain', Chase described attempts to occupy unemployed miners on a plot of land aptly named 'Heartbreak Hill'. A large proportion of the 2,600 registered allotment societies in 1936 were associated with the unemployed, but the effort in East Cleveland was a communal farming project, not an allotment society, and was initiated by the local squire. Chase described it as an exercise in Tory paternalism in a marginal seat which aimed to demonstrate to the unemployed that the local social and political elite cared about them and that something practical was being done. He highlighted the environmentalist and racialist ideas on which the project was based and its connections with the German youth movement and later National Socialism. The movement back to the land had a certain appeal for the unemployed miners during the depression, although they preferred individual allotments over communal farming. Chase concluded that voluntary schemes like this one diffused tensions and depoliticized the unemployed during the interwar period.

The final session, which was chaired by Matt Perry, dealt with 'Recent Project Activities' of the unemployed. In their paper 'Explaining the Mobilization of the Unemployed: About some Theoretical Issues', Didier Chabanet (Institute of Political Studies, Lyon) and Jean Faniel (Centre de recherche et d'information socio-politiques, Brussels) presented some of the results of their research on

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unemployed protest in ten different European countries since the mid-1970s. They argued, for example, that protests are more widespread in countries with high levels of social protection, as the expectations of the unemployed increase in line with their rights, and in countries with a pronounced separation between insiders and outsiders. They called trade union support a mixed blessing for unemployed movements and pointed out that collective action by the marginalized is more likely where levels of unionization and centralization are low. Nevertheless, Chabanet and Faniel stressed the crucial role of organizations in helping to transform objective grievances, subjectively perceived relative deprivations, and political opportunities into action and in providing links between local organizations. Faniel and Chabanet concluded by emphasizing that unemployed protest is a significant political phenomenon, and that the strategy of the unemployed has changed in recent years towards challenging the discourse about unemployment and the people affected by it.

This issue was picked up by Deborah Vietor-Englander (Technical University Darmstadt) in her paper on internet-based protest by the German unemployed since 2000. Her sample comprised six of around thirty internet forums, including those for civil servants working in benefits administration. Each forum is frequented by 3,500 to 7,000 users. Vietor-Englander summarized the recent changes in the German benefits system which increased pressure on the unemployed by reducing payments, introducting a means test after one year, 1-Euro jobs, and imposing tighter controls, including domestic visits. With 8.5 million Germans receiving benefits of some kind, unemployment is now affecting or threatening wider social circles, including skilled workers and academics, who have started to protest in public. Vietor-Englander pointed out that people who (still) have a job are easier to mobilize in vastly greater numbers than the actual unemployed, and the German trade unions have helped to organize their protests against job cuts and low wages. The unemployed, however, are using the internet forums to debate and dispute official unemployed figures, exchange experiences, and organize resistance to the regulations, for example, by educating the unemployed about their rights, encouraging lawsuits, and recommending lawyers. This has led to a massive increase in the number of court cases and the subsequent collapse of the system in Berlin. Gender- and age-specific problems are also discussed, as are problems of ethnicity, while attempts to deceive and cheat the system are explicitly not supported. Vietor-Englander ended by pointing out that the internet is also used by civil servants to share their experiences and views of the unemployed, which often focus on the apathy of the latter.

In his final comment on the conference, Dick Geary (University of Nottingham) picked up Chase's point by emphasizing that most workers were never engaged in any form of protest and that it was therefore not surprising that the more vulnerable unemployed also largely abstained from it. Geary also stressed the crucial role of the labour movement and the state in the success or failure of unemployed movements, and their divisive potential for the labour movement, which often saw itself as the organ of the productive workers only. According to Geary, one cannot totally discard the findings of social psychologists such as Paul Lazarsfeld as their observations have been confirmed by many contemporaries and also by subsequent studies. Some unemployed indeed despaired and became apathetic. The reaction to losing one's job depends on the individual psyche, the level of integration into social networks, individual expectations, and other factors. Geary pointed out that 'the unemployed' have multiple identities based on region, age, gender, faith, and political affiliation. As the unemployed are such an amorphous group, studies of unemployed protest have to pay attention to how an economic crisis undermines workers' solidarity and how individuals use niches in the system to survive. Geary argued that accommodation and resistance do not represent a dichotomy. Drawing an analogy with the behaviour of slaves, he stressed out that individuals often adopted highly rational survival strategies to deal with unemployment, and suggested that these need to be researched more.

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Seidman addressed some of these individual strategies in his paper, which had triggered a discussion on whether such actions could really be regarded as 'unemployed protest'. Similarly, the March of the Blanketeers had raised the question of whether its participants could already be called 'unemployed'. Vietor-Englander had pointed out that public protests of employed people against the spectre of unemployment were often more impressive and enjoyed more trade union support than the protests of the actual unemployed. What in fact constituted unemployed protest therefore needs to be more clearly defined. The conference showed that not all the unemployed by far were passive and accepted their fate, and that much more research work needs to be done, for example, on individual strategies, the dynamics of engagement and disengagement, and the importance of regional traditions. It was repeatedly pointed out during the conference that traditional labour history leaves little room to study the actions of the workless. While unemployed protest is still widely seen as an insignificant minority phenomenon within the historical profession, it is hoped that this conference has started to change this by fostering exchange between historians working on this subject and by initiating contacts across academic disciplines and national borders. Given that many European countries have experienced mass unemployment for decades, a fresh look at the behaviour of the unemployed could be called timely. A publication of the conference papers is planned.

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