Visual Representations of the Unemployed

Veranstalter: German Historical Institute London; University of Exeter
Datum, Ort: 12.12.2008-13.12.2008, Exeter
Bericht von: Matthias Reiß, Department of History, University of Exeter

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 spur 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 iconography of poverty has attracted some scholarly attention, the iconography of the unemployed has largely failed to do so. The conference 'Visual Representations of the Unemployed', held at the University of Exeter, was the first of its kind held for the purpose of discussing whether there is an iconography of the unemployed, how it has changed over time, whether it is transnational in character, and how it has influenced the political and social discourse about the workless in various countries and during different periods.

The conference was organized by Matthias Reiss (Exeter) and brought together historians, art historians, sociologists, and experts on film studies and photography. In his paper 'To See is to Believe? Images and Social History', JENS JÄGER (Cologne) addressed the challenges of interpreting images which are positioned at the intersection between social documentation, art, and politics. He focused especially on the photograph of an unemployed Georgian villager which the World Bank has posted on its website to document its work and to give an abstract problem a face. Jäger argued 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to show that people are out of work without relying on additional textual explanations or familiar, if largely outdated, icons such as the dole queue or the individual with the cardboard sign which identifies him or her as looking for work. ANDREAS GESTRICH (London) highlighted in his paper on 'Visual Representations of Poverty and Idleness in the Early Modern Period' that these problems had 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 iconography of poverty has developed since medieval times.

Speaking on 'Representations of the Unemployed in German Art before the First World War', UTE WROCKLAGE (Oldenburg) observed that the visualization of the unemployed in Germany initially resembled the depiction of beggars and vagabonds. The main difference was that the workless were depicted as younger as 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. Around the turn of the twentieth century, the iconography 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 in the pictures as a sign of their inactivity. There is no communication between them or with the viewer, and they are static or only move 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 iconography of the unemployed associated with the Great Depression was developed around the turn of the century, although some of it was later altered and infused with new meaning.

© H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved.

The final session of the day dealt with 'Film'. STEVE CANNON (Sunderland) talked about ' „Social Realism" and the Unemployed in Contemporary European Film'. Cannon focused especially on the Spanish film „Los Lunes al Sol" (Monday in the Sun, 2002), which was inspired by the French unemployed movement of the 1990s. „Los Lunes al Sol" is set 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 to stage 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 Spain's contemporary collective protest against the war in Iraq.

In his paper 'Visualizing Unemployment through the Aesthetics of Capitalist Modernity', MATT PERRY (Newcastle) focused on 1930s feature films from Great Britain, the United States, France, and Germany. In these films, directors used archetypical images, such as the tramp or the workman, to visualize the unemployed. Laid off workers expressed the torment they were going through 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'. 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. JEANNETTE GABRIEL (Mount Saint Vincent, NY) opened the panel with her paper 'Pink Slips on Parade: Building the Unemployed Movement through Images of Everyday Protest, 1935–9'. During the New Deal, the American government commissioned documentary photographs of the economic distress to create public support for its programmes. These images depicted the unemployed as socially isolated, passive and humble. Many of them 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), which organized the occupation of government buildings, strikes of relief workers, marches, and other forms of protest in the late 1930s. The WAA pictures show the degree of interracial cooperation in the unemployed movement as well as the leading role women played in it. Press photographs of WAA protest actions were published in American newspapers and reveal a completely different picture of the behaviour of the unemployed during the Depression from the documentary images commissioned by the government. Because the memory of the protest has faded, Gabriel concluded that the visual images are indispensable to fill the gap and create a more complete picture of how the workless responded to their fate during the slump.

ANTOINE CAPET (Rouen) examined how photographs were used in Great Britain to convey a particular 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 1930s. 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 identifiable with certainty as unemployed. Captions are necessary to explain the context of an image, but also provided a chance to manipulate 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 literally twist the scene into new directions. 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 focused on the unemployed in political cartoons. In 'Dragon Slayers and Dole Queues', MATTHIAS REISS examined

© H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved.

1,297 cartoons published in seventy-eight different German-language newspapers or magazines between 1974 and 1998. Reiss highlighted the use of iconography from the 1920s and 1930s 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 person 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 an animal (especially a dragon) which appeared on the scene. The responsibility for fighting it was assigned to the politicians, but their incompetence and proneness to squabble among each other prevented the problem being solved. By comparing his findings with the results of opinion polls, Reiss argued that the cartoons did reflect public opinion towards the workless during the twenty-five years under examination.

NICHOLAS HILEY (Canterbury) concluded the conference with his paper 'Unemployment in British Political Cartoons of the last Hundred Years'. Unlike 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, ghost, or shadow from which the politicians could not escape. Politicians were often depicted as uncaring towards the fate of the workless, 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 iconography of unemployment after the Great Depression.

The papers of the conference showed that there is, indeed, an iconography of the unemployed which is distinct from the iconography of the poor. The workless 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 workless has been one of political apathy since the Marienthal study of the early 1930s. Images were, and still are, 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.

Conference overview:

Foundations
Chair: Sam Smiles (Art History, University of Plymouth)

Jens Jäger (Collaborative Research Centre 'Media and Cultural Communication', University of Cologne): 'To See is to Believe? Images and Social History'

Andreas Gestrich (German Historical Institute London): 'Visual Representations of Poverty and Idleness in the Early Modern Period'

The Arts

Sam Smiles (Art History, University of Plymouth)

Ute Wrocklage (Art History, Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg): 'Representations of the Unemployed in German Art before the First World War'

Film
Chair: Will Higbee (French and Film Studies, University of Exeter)

Steve Cannon (Media Studies, University of Sunderland): ' „Los Lunes al Sol": „Social Realism" and the Unemployed in Contemporary

© H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved.

European Film'

Matt Perry (History, University of Newcastle): 'Visualising Unemployment through the Aesthetics of Capitalist Modernity: Case Studies in Films from the 1930s'

Photography
Chair: Andrew Thorpe (History, University of Exeter)

Jeannette Gabriel (College of Mount Saint Vincent, New York): 'Pink Slips on Parade: Building the Unemployed Movement through Images of Everyday Protest, 1935-1939'

Antoine Capet (British Studies, University of Rouen, France): 'Photographs of the British Unemployed in the Inter-War Years: Representation or Manipulation?'

Cartoons
Chair: Matt Perry (University of Newcastle)

Matthias Reiss (University of Exeter): 'Dragon Slayers and Dole Queues: Unemployment and the Unemployed in German Political Cartoons, 1974 to 1998'

Nicholas Hiley (British Cartoon Archive, University of Kent): '„If we only had a job, we could take a holiday": Unemployment in British Political Cartoons of the last Hundred Years'

Tagungsbericht *Visual Representations of the Unemployed*. 12.12.2008-13.12.2008, Exeter, in: H-Soz-u-Kult 23.04.2009.

© H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved.