

**Looking Behind the Facade of the Ghetto.
Perspectives of Cultural Sciences on
Urban Slum Areas and Their Inhabitants**

Veranstalter: Hans-Christian Petersen, Research Unit Historical Cultural Sciences, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz
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Bericht von: Paul Friedl, Historisches Seminar, Universität Mainz

The conference gathered 8 speakers (Mark D. Steinbergs talk had, unfortunately, to be cancelled) and about as many guests to discuss the possibilities of writing the story of a ghetto from „within“, as opposed to a perception from the outside. This means focussing not only on the living conditions and socio-economic characteristics of people living in poor or precarious urban districts, but also on how these inhabitants themselves perceived their world, how they rationalised their actions and which values they embraced. The case studies discussed ranged from the 19th century up to the present and included major European cities as well as one non-European example, namely San José in Costa Rica.

As Hans-Christian Petersen (Mainz) stated in his opening remarks, poverty is a persistent problem in all big cities. Poor people and their habitat, however, are often pictured in a homogeneous and stereotypical way. Identifying this way of looking at the ghetto as a kind of exotification he confronted it with an alternative: the heterogenisation of the ghetto, which focuses on the diversity inside the quarter. Thus, he defined the concerns of the conference as follows: To ask what cultural studies can contribute to such a change in perspective, and to counterbalance existing thick descriptions of relevant cases with a comparative perspective.

In the first keynote speech, PETER IMBUSCH (Wuppertal) concentrated on the power relations which form spatial structures. Cityscapes are therefore not to be considered as natural facts, but as shaped by power relations between people and as an expression of social inequality. Sketching some hypotheses for the conference, he emphasized the importance of a class-based concept of society to understand stigmatisation of poor urban ar-

reas and of the dire need for more empirical material produced by the actual inhabitants.

JERRY WHITE (London), as the second keynote speaker, presented the first case study, namely Campbell Bunk, a street in the London district Islington. Referring his interview-based research about the interwar period, he characterized „the Bunk“ both as a real location and as an iconic stylisation, both of which worked in two ways: first, as self-reproducing mechanisms of exclusion (mentioning a Bunk street address in a job interview automatically leads to disqualification), and second as sources of positive identification for the inhabitants (negative external views get internalised, e.g. when violence and fighting in everyday life is regarded as a pride of the bunk dwellers). The end of this particular milieu came, when in the 1960s Islington offered, what a new young and economically well-off middle class was looking for: an edgy inner city lifestyle and appropriate housing substance.

WOLFGANG MADERTHANER (Vienna) started his talk by stating that the texts produced by the elite and the avant-garde – typically the vantage point for „city as social text“ readings, especially in Vienna – do not mention and reflect the mass culture of the city. Poor inhabitants and run-down areas are much more the topic of sensationalist newspaper reports, like Victor Adler published them as one of the first in his weekly *Gleichheit* (Equality). There, a Vienna full of decline and deviance showed up, different from the Vienna myth produced by elitist discourses and the tourism industry. At the same time, reports about these phenomena reflect changes in political culture, e.g. when the poor masses, which first showed up only as chaotic hordes in hunger revolts became the grass roots of figures like Franz Schuhmeier and Karl Lueger, who now made politics with the support of the masses.

JOHANNA NIEDBALSKI (Berlin) drew attention to the ways in which lower classes spent their free time and to the social meanings of this amusement. According to Niedbalski the places of amusement in early 20th century Berlin can be divided into two broad categories: fun fairs and amusement parks. The first are smaller, less enclosed, operate

year round and require no entrance fee, while the second are larger, rather ambitious, often innovative parks, which require an entrance fee and additional payment for each single attraction. The funfairs served as easily available entertainment for the common people, often for a specific neighbourhood and its children. On the contrary they often raised conflict because of noise and dangers, which they were, especially in the 1920s, said to cause. The amusement parks drew a wider range of visitors, which were again segregated in the park among more and less expensive spots.

According to HANS-CHRISTIAN PETERSEN (Mainz) both Henri Lefebvre's idea of the „right to the city“ and the concept of gentrification, up to now used primarily in the context of post-1945 urban development, can be put to historical use. The latter seems at first impossible in St. Petersburg, where poverty and wealth are highly concentrated and intermingled, but the erection of new, high stone buildings in the centre in the place of old wooden buildings actually increased the rents and thus drove poor people to the fringes of the city. He then went on to show that up to now the significance of the inhabited places as well as means of expression such as clothing have been neglected in writing a more diverse history from below. Interpretations such as Carsten Goehrkes in his *Russischer Alltag* (Russian Everyday Life), as valuable as they are, repaint the established picture of limited and monotonous everyday lives of the poor.

ILJA GERASIMOV (Kazan) on the basis of examples from early 20th century Russian cities Nizhny Novgorod, Kazan, Vilnius and Odessa, argued against applying discourse-analytical methods on the main sources (i.e. newspaper reports, police and court documents) for the social history of the urban poor. His main point was, that since lower strata did not use discourse the method of discourse analysis would produce misinterpretations. Instead, one would have to go beyond the texts to see actual (non-discursive or non-verbal) social practices and their users in a wider context. On the other hand, since these practices also carry meanings and since the historian can learn to understand them,

they too are open for interpretation. A pub brawl for example can, in police documents and through the discursive lens of the historian, become a manifestation for ethnic or confessional frictions, while in reality it may have been a quarrel between actual friends.

Much discussed was Gerasimov's terminology and analytical framework. Is „subalterns“ a suitable term for the social strata under question? Which of the described phenomena make the cities specifically „Russian“ or „imperial“, what, indeed, is specifically „urban“ about these social practices and what can also be observed in villages?

INGRID BRECKNER (Hamburg) presented three Hamburg city districts as examples of polarized urban development, that is in different stages of gentrification. Ottensen experienced urban renewal since the 1970s and gentrification from inside as well as from outside. The same process is much younger in St. Pauli, where gentrification started after the closing of a huge brewery, which created space for new construction process. Something similar is expected or feared to happen in Wilhelmsburg – up to now the „district of outcasts“ – where in 2013 two big international exhibitions will open.

The discussions of Breckner's talk focussed particularly on the usefulness of the concept of gentrification. Peter Imbusch claimed, that concept is not altogether inevitable, since the same processes can also be described as social change or modernisation. Jerry White thereupon defended the use of the term in a strict sense, i.e. a middle class population actively replacing a working class population. It should, however, not be used as a synonym for social change.

HAUKE JAN ROLF (Mainz) talked about two examples of spatial organisation of Nicaraguan Immigrants in Costa Rica: the squat La Carpio, population 20.000 with more than 50% Nicaraguans, and the public park La Merced. Conducting interviews with the inhabitants and users of the park respectively, Rolf was able to demonstrate, how Nicaraguan immigrants shape the respective quarters, e.g. commercially by attracting transport companies, which provide linkage to the Nicaraguan home country.

Most of the talks demonstrated the possi-

bility of getting inside the ghetto, the scarcity of sources written by the protagonists themselves notwithstanding. Consequently, the importance of oral history was emphasized several times. On the contrary Ilja Gerasimov stressed the importance of relying on correct interpretation of the widely available sources type – as fascinating as the rare diary or written correspondence of a poor day labourer may be for the historian. Hence the problem of studying the poor is not a methodological one but, as Peter Imbusch had already mentioned in his keynote, one of the lack of interest. Having demonstrated this, the conference and the planned publication of the papers have already made an instructive contribution to the research on historical and contemporary urban poverty and will hopefully spark further research.

Conference Overview:

Welcome addresses:

Elisabeth Oy-Marra (Research Unit Historical Cultural Sciences, Mainz)

Jan Kusber (Department for East European History, Mainz)

Opening: Hans-Christian Petersen (Mainz)

Keynote Speakers:

Peter Imbusch (Wuppertal): Urban Spaces in Comparative Perspective: Taking a Closer Look on Desintegration and Social Exclusion

Jerry White (London): The Worst Street in North London: Campbell Bunk, Islington, Between the Wars

Presentations:

Wolfgang Maderthaner (Vienna): Outcast Vienna. The Other Side of a Fin-de-Siècle Metropolis

Johanna Niedbalski (Berlin): Funfairs and Amusement Parks. A Social Topography of Pleasure in Early 20th Century Berlin

Hans-Christian Petersen (Mainz): Who Owns the City? Gentrification and the Creation of Social Spaces 'from Below' – St. Petersburg 1850-1914

Ilja Gerasimov (Kazan): The Subalterns Speak Out: Urban Plebeian Society in Late Imperial

Russia

Mark D. Steinberg (Illinois): The Experience of Violence among the Poor of St. Petersburg, 1905-1917 (CANCELLED)

Ingrid Breckner (Hamburg): Urban Pockets of Poverty under Gentrification Pressure - The Examples of Ottensen, St. Pauli und Wilhelmsburg in Hamburg

Hauke Jan Rolf (Mainz): The Location of Nicaraguan Migrants within Costa Rica's Metropolitan Area and the Spatial Effects on Their Social Support Networks

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