

Outcasts and the Underworld in Late Medieval Europe

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The aim of this paper is to give a short review of people living at the bottom of society in late medieval Europe: vagrants, mercenaries, journeymen, beggars, prostitutes, unemployed servants, wandering scholars and so on.¹

For the title of the paper I have chosen the terms outcast and underworld. I will firstly explain the problems of definition: Can historians consider properly all these different kinds of people? In a second step I will make some remarks about the sources, and then I will try to give some examples of the general historical interest in the study of the medieval 'underworld' or to put it another way: The study of marginalised people is not a marginal problem in social history. In a fourth step I will describe how attitudes towards the so-called outcasts have changed together with the attitudes towards poverty around 1500.

The subject: The different definitions for being an outcast

Since Bronislaw Geremek's famous book about the underworld of Paris² many studies have investigated this problem in other cities. For instance in recent years the distinguished studies of Alexander Reverchon and Guido Schneider about the red-light district of Metz³ and about the bottom of society in late medieval Strasburg have appeared.⁴ Not only articles represent the modern discussion but also a most remarkable book describing the underworld of London in

1. For an introduction based on images, see Mellinkoff 1983.

2. Geremek 1976 and 1980.

3. Reverchon and Schneider 1996. For comparison see the study of medieval Ragusa: Janekovic-Römer 1995.

4. Voltmer 2000.

late medieval times by interpreting among other things the protocols of the London Coroners.⁵ Frank Rexroth refers to the modern research sufficiently carefully, so it is not necessary to repeat his well-founded results. But it is necessary to add my standpoint to the discussion. Geremek's classical studies were often criticised as an example of narrative social history only without any theoretical, and this means sociological analysis.⁶ But – in my opinion – Geremek was right, because it is not possible to define 'outcasts' and 'underworld' in sociological terms. The medieval *Büttel* could not capture the outcast, nor can we capture them by exact definitions.

A social group? That remains the question. Even for contemporaries it was not possible to make exact distinctions between the several groups of beggars; between those who only hung around and those who suffered – to quote a contemporary term – from deadly poorness.⁷ How exact are our distinctions between the poor man and the outcast? In times of penury the wandering outcast had to fear starvation whilst the locally well known poor could at least hope to get some alms. These poor men didn't die of hunger immediately, yet they suffered hunger and died commonly before their time in consequence of undernourishment.

Before discussing the modern attempts to capture the outcast by definition, we have to refer to an older attempt which convinces at first sight by using a term accorded in medieval and early modern sources. *Unehrlichkeit* described not only dishonourable members of society, but meant discrimination by law. And that makes the difference. The canon law discriminated against the *spielman*, the secular law discriminated in the thirteenth century against the champion; and the common man discriminated against the miller. It is evident, that *Unehrlichkeit* has got different roots and a different history.⁸ Therefore it cannot contribute much to solve the problem of a definition of outcast.

The inconsistency of *Unehrlichkeit* evolves from the fact that this term is taken from normative legislation and not officially speaking clergymen. The latter for instance considered the juggler as a servant of the devil, but these servants of the devil were at the same

5. Rexroth 1999.

6. Rexroth 1991.

7. Schubert 2001.

8. Schubert 1988(a).

time popular servants at the courts of ecclesiastical and secular princes.⁹ They were welcomed in the houses of citizens and at the fairs of peasants. In contrary to what was quoted, in late medieval legal sources *Unehrlichkeit* does not have a clearly defined content.

The hangman was considered to be dishonourable but nevertheless people sought his help because in medieval times he was the only expert in surgery, he was the only one who knew human anatomy.¹⁰ The miller was not dishonest by law, yet in medieval times he was considered to be some special kind of thief. But this didn't have any legal consequences. However, during the sixteenth century it became very difficult for him to place his sons in a craftsman-guild. In most cities – Hamburg is one exception – the popular perception of the dishonest miller led to the implementation of an accepted law by custom. He became a victim of a general development, which will be explained later on.

The concept of *Unehrlichkeit*, the concept of capturing the people of the underworld through legal terms became old fashioned in the 1980s.¹¹ During the last twenty years many historians were trying (following a study of František Graus in 1981)¹² to find special terms for all these 'outcasts', for all these members of the so-called medieval underworld. In this way the following terms became popular among historians: stigmatisation, marginalisation, deviance.¹³ In the title of my paper I used none of them. If you suppose this is an indirect program, you are right. The terms offer some advantage in their specific historical approach, but do not really help to clarify our subject.

The term deviance I would reserve for special marginal groups, the apostates and converts, the heretics and all those who were far from common and accustomed piety.

Stigmatisation has become a key word in the interpretation of lower classes. But the term covers not only the different kinds of human behaviour but also the different levels of social estimation. The term promises to link a problem of social history with the history of mentalities. But do the sources really allow an interpreta-

9. Schubert 1995, pp. 111-30.

10. Oppelt 1976.

11. Rexroth 1995.

12. Graus 1981.

13. Hartung 1986 and 1989; Hergemöller 1994.

tion in that way? Of course many people looked at the poor with disregard. But there was no chance to define for instance the vagabonds as a special public nuisance which had to be expelled from a city. In no way could these vagabonds be distinguished from those poor peasants who drifted to the cities. Their rural exodus, the migration from the land, was a requirement for the growth of late medieval cities.

In contrast to stigmatisation and deviance, marginalisation is a concept I can agree with provided it does not enclose exclusion. I will give an example for the seeming contradiction. The whores in the *Frauenhaus*, the medieval brothel, had a special place in the church, but they were not excluded from the service. It was a work of piety to help these poor women; it was even a work of piety to marry them.¹⁴ It was well known, that prostitution was a derivation of poverty. The concept of stigmatisation had to fail because it neglected a simple fact: In medieval times people believed unshakably in the cleansing function of penance, of *Buße*, not only in a religious but also in a social sense.

Like the married former prostitute¹⁵ the hangman could wash off his sins. We mention the hangman in order to demonstrate that there are no substantial differences between the seemingly old fashioned comprehension of *Unehrlichkeit* and the seemingly modern comprehension of stigmatisation.¹⁶ Like the concept of *Unehrlichkeit* the concept of stigmatisation confuses medieval with early modern times. It also confuses the importance of *Buße*, which in medieval times was a sociological fact, with the individual one it had in the era of confessionism.

Those who try to describe the condition of living at the bottom of society open a window upon normal social problems in society. Considering this, I would like to show why research into marginalised people is not a marginal matter. The point is: Do the members of the medieval underworld live at the bottom of the social hierarchy or outside of society? Let me try to investigate to what extent syntheses and case studies complement each other, to ask what each method of research can offer the other. To make the question take shape, I will also connect it with an analysis of the sources.

14. P. Schuster 1992; B. Schuster 1995.

15. P. Schuster 1994.

16. Benecke 1889.

The sources

Although the issue of outcasts and underworld is a subject of European history, I'd like to discuss the problem by facing just German sources. One should mention that the monographies of Geremek and Rexroth with their great importance for the international discussion focus on capital cities, a very special form of settlement in the medieval world. There were no comparable cities in Germany. Cologne as the largest German town had in its medieval era at best 40,000 inhabitants.¹⁷

The material I deal with mainly depends on official sources. Still I have to accept the old proverb *De normalibus non in actis* ('Normality is not being recorded'). And the poor and the outcast were looked upon as a normal occurrence. There is no way to get systematic or even demographic information about the outcasts from serial sources.

In looking at the conditions of the medieval way of life the problem of the outcasts or of the underworld is the problem of vagrancy or of migration.¹⁸ This reveals another obstacle: The sources only reflect the problems of sedentary communities. Like a puzzle of which most parts are lost, the perception of the outcasts has to be laboriously reconstructed; or (using another metaphor) our attempt is like that of a French pointilist who has to paint a large picture with a small amount of paint. This is the typical lament of a historian over the lack of information.

The German statistical sources cannot be compared with those of England. For instance: There is no corresponding tradition to the English episcopal registers in medieval Germany – we cannot refer to similar sources, when we are concerned with the history of criminality, the history of marginality, or the history of poverty.

Germany's lack of sources in comparison to England is further exacerbated by the backwardness of administrative practice. But nevertheless let me accept the challenge and let me try to explain the difficulties by referring to the German sources. During the last two generations German historians had great hopes that they could understand social stratification in the medieval town by an analysis of urban tax-lists and account books. In general, Ger-

17. Cf. in our context Lassotta 1993.

18. McCall 1979; Scribner 1988; Evans, ed. 1988; Graus 1989.

man urban accountancy first became serial at the beginning of the fifteenth century; lists of inhabitants, *Bürgerlisten*, even in a large city like Nürnberg did not exist before the middle of the fifteenth century. The exception is Frankfurt.¹⁹ It lists the new *Bürger* (that means inhabitants of towns who are provided with special rights and privileges) since the beginning of the fourteenth century.

In the accounting records expenses for jugglers, for actors and actresses, for professional wandering musicians, flutists and so on are to be found.²⁰ These are important hints, testifying to the astonishing lack of effectiveness of clerical discrimination. All these people were condemned by the Church as servants of the devil and were supposed to be excluded from the sacraments, but instead they were hired and were paid by municipal officials.

However, the tax-lists as main urban sources for social stratification are not suitable for answering our questions concerning outcasts. In tax-lists the outcasts were not the subject of attention. Although these lists do contain some valuable statements for the understanding of poverty, it is evident that the outcast, who was accustomed to hide himself when necessary, could not be found by tax-collectors, when for example in the late fifteenth century the diet of the Holy Roman Empire (1495) tried to tax even the poor in a German attempt at a poll tax, the so-called *gemeiner Pfennig*. The listed so-called 'have-not', the German *habnit* or *habenichts*, 'have-nothing', signified someone who did not possess anything to declare for taxes: the 'fiscal poor' in England, the 'pauvre fiscal' in France. One should remember that poverty in late medieval Germany was a widespread phenomenon in the cities and affected up to 50 per cent of the inhabitants.²¹

Without any doubt the so-called *Verfestungsbücher* (*libri proscritionum*) are an important kind of source.²² They listed persons who were forbidden to enter the town again and who were proscribed. But they only name persons and list the reasons for proscription, they do not give insights into the circumstances and therefore they are quite difficult to interpret for historians who are interested in the history of criminality or even in the history of outcasts.

19. Bücher 1886.

20. Schubert 1995, pp. 174-88.

21. Schubert 2001, pp. 660-63.

22. Frensdorff 1875; Vogtherr 1984.

The so-called *Stadtbücher*, books registering the liberties and the statutes of a town, contain the urban legislation, from which in medieval Germany the legislation of both the secular and the clerical princes was derived. From these books we get information about the rules and the dangers of daily life. For instance, in German towns as well as in the English ones, there were high penalties for persons who habitually did not obey the curfew. This was not only applied to the poor and the outcast, who were the suspected cause of robbery or manslaughter, but also to the normal *Bürger*. The poor and the outcast were not usually a special subject of such regulations.

I also want to make some remarks on the sources, even though one could get the impression that this just continues the traditional lament of us historians over missing links. But beyond the said grief, the survey of the main sources intends to arrive at a statement of our general problem: the perception of poverty. And indeed this survey tries to trace back the perception of poverty. Poverty was such a normal manifestation that it was unnecessary to mention it explicitly. In late medieval times – in opposition to the early modern period – there were seldom special statutes for beggars or outcasts. We must accept the *De normalibus non in actis*, and that in medieval times the poor and the outcast were looked upon as normal. The dishonourable persons mentioned previously did not drop out of a fictive society, because people had to live together – and they did.

The sources, the society and the vagrants

There are no special sources or types of records we can consult. We must consult them all. Referring to the urban sources I have to mention the chronicles, which for Germany are edited in a great collection.²³ Like all chronicles they were not interested in normal everyday life, but from time to time they do give us significant answers, describing the circumstances of urban events. In the following example the chronicler was interested in the Dominicans in Erfurt. The townsfolk scoffed at them by comparing them to the magpies on their church tower: The magpies looked like the

23. *Die Chroniken der deutschen Städte*. 1862-1931.

Dominicans (or the other way round) and were considered to be stealing, too. The unhappy monks hired an *abenteuer man*, who was able to climb up the tower.²⁴ An ‘adventurer’ – often mentioned in urban chronicles – was not a man who represented the *aventure* in high medieval epics. What *Abenteurer* really meant is explained in the letters of merchants, delivering merchandise: *Auf dein Abenteuer* – ‘on your own risk’. In this sense an *Abenteurer* was a man without liability. Our *Abenteurer* in Erfurt ascended the tower and destroyed the nests of the magpies. For this dangerous job he demanded five weeks food and shelter. A vagrant’s good fortune: to obtain for a short time a better way of life than usual.

Another example from the sources, while searching for a revealing detail and hoping to solve a part of our puzzle: In the *Stadtbuch* of Schlettstadt all those who were banished from the town were registered, and amongst all these names – which are not of great interest, because we do not know the biographical background of the persons connected to them – there is the following note: *Heinrich Jocundus episcopus Constantiensis et Johannes Liber episcopus Churiensis*.²⁵ Of course these names do not appear in the official bishop lists of Chur and Constance. Johannes and Heinrich were wandering scholars and they called themselves *Jocundus* and *Liber* – it is to be noticed that the name *Jocundus* is a typical name of the medieval player or musician translatable as *Froidenreich*: plenty of joy. The name of the other vagrant *Liber* quotes a waggish definition of medieval ‘freedom’, the meaning which the German term *Vogelfreiheit* conserves. ‘Freedom’ as social danger: The man, who is ‘free’ has no protection. In front of the town’s clerk both vagrants made fun of being banished by giving themselves impressive titles, and the clerk far from stigmatising these wandering scholars, enjoyed the joke and wrote it into the official *Stadtbuch*: The bishops of Constance and Chur are banished from town. In the dialogue between outcasts and the authorities we can usually only hear the officials. In this case we can, indirectly, hear two vagrants.

Through his way of life the outcast is characterised as suffering extreme poverty, as a man without protection. Our adventurer in Erfurt demonstrated penury as the main problem of his lifestyle, and the vagrant in Schlettstadt who called himself *Liber* demon-

24. Schubert 1995, p. 11.

25. Schubert 1995, p. 28.

strated a special meaning of 'liberty' in medieval times: Free of bonds and without any protection. The hangman in late medieval Germany was often named *Freimann*, the prostitutes outside of official brothels were called *freie Frauen* and the name of the barefooted mercenary who fought at his own risk and not as the servant of a military entrepreneur (I used this term in respect to Fritz Redlich) was the *Freihart*.

The medieval merry tales provide another kind of detail: The plots of these tales are of course of less historical interest, but not the circumstances, because the merry tales tried to convince contemporaries that the story had really happened and they therefore created a believable background.²⁶ It is a similar method to that of examining the background in paintings for their realistic content, as Wim Blockmans proves in his contribution to this volume. Let me give an example of the importance of merry tales as historical sources: We do not know much about everyday life in medieval boarding houses. However, the plot of several stories is based upon the fact that, apart from in the big capitals, there were no specialized hostels, which meant: what was available as a hostel was visited by people of all social classes, including adventurers, gamblers, jugglers and journeymen. The merry tales often mention these men in a hostel. They were not excluded, but when the table was laid, the adventurer had to sit down at the end of the table, the better men sat at the head of table. When the dishes finally arrived from the head of the table to the ordinary part, the scanty and meagre rest was all the adventurer got. He chewed when the better people digested. I suppose the adventurer who had to stand up hungry was convinced of the concept of marginalisation.

According to the merry tales, the so-called outlaws were not excluded from society; on the contrary they are popular figures in these tales, for instance the famous Till Eulenspiegel. He became a representative of poor men who had to suffer a lot but were able to take revenge.

There was no identity of profession among all these outcasts, but there are remarkable signs of a group identity in the way of living amongst the wandering folk in the later Middle Ages. Since the end of the thirteenth century they had developed their own language: The Pedlar's French, the *Gerfgo* or argot; this *Rotwelsch* in Germany

26. Schubert 1986.

lived parasitically on the grammar of the common language but used words no outsider could understand.²⁷ To give an example: The German Rotwelsch phrase *Ein Gelbling schwächen* directly translated to 'to make a "Gelbling" weak' does not make much sense at first sight. The *Gelbling* is something of yellow colour. But in Rotwelsch *Einen Gelbling schwächen* means 'to drink a beer'. The German Rotwelsch word *Gleistrampelmarodepink* is a composition: *Gleistrampel*= a cow, *marode*= sickness, *pink*= the man. *Gleistrampelmarodepink* is the man who can cure the animals, the later veterinarian.

This jargon belonged by definition to a closed social network. (From this point of view the argot can be compared with the specific scientific jargon.) Its main function is to conceal meaning from outsiders. But reconsidering this function we must say: This use-pattern of a special language was not at all closed against society. The argot enriched the vocabulary of the common language. For instance the German words *beschickert sein* ('to be drunk'), or *malochen* ('to do a hard work') are both derived from Rotwelsch.

Contemporaries could not distinguish among the several kinds of homeless people.²⁸ In the cottages near the town-wall or even in churchyards beggars mingled with ruffians and rascals. They built huts in the unhealthy regions of the towns near the rivers, since they were forbidden to build huts on the bridges.

Those living in medieval slums before or behind the town-wall were lucky, as it at least offered a chance of survival, even though conditions were overcrowded and unhealthy, with wet and cold housing. All these homeless people were not integrated into the parish community, and I believe it is in this sense of the word that they were really 'outcasts'.

The history of outcasts and its general importance – The underworld as part of the medieval poverty

Our example of the adventurer in Erfurt gives some idea of the connection between underworld and poverty. What is poverty? Poverty cannot be defined in absolute terms.²⁹ There are vary-

27. Kluge 1901; Wolf 1956.

28. Mommsen and Schulze, eds. 1981.

29. Mollat 1974 and 1992; Geremek 1994.

ing shades in the appearance of destitution. Helpful for an understanding is Paul Slack's division between 'deep' and 'shallow' poverty,³⁰ or the division between an inner circle of poverty which is comparatively closely linked to society and an exterior circle, to which our so called underworld belongs. Poverty could be a part of the life of the simple craftsman who was forced to ask for alms from time to time, just as it was of the beggar who had to beg the whole year round. The exterior circle included all the homeless men and women and – not to forget – the homeless children tortured by penury. They all suffered from scab, the so-called beggars sickness, they all suffered from lice, because their clothes were never cleaned, they suffered from severe winters, when even stags died in the forests. The crying of poor homeless children, their lamenteous asking for alms was a common, every-day molestation, for the normal '*bürger*', the citizen. Indigence, hunger, unemployment, homelessness: Living in the exterior circle of poverty meant living in life-threatening poverty.

All these people living at the bottom, the members of the so-called underworld were not separated from society, this even though the impulse of compassion, given in the thirteenth century by the Franciscan Revolution, did begin to fade in the fifteenth century; alms were still given to all those people for Gods sake.³¹ Although vagrants aroused suspicion as quacks, card-sharps, fortune-tellers, wizards etc., and were often involved in doubtful activities, although they were regarded as low characters, they were not excluded from society. Reputable citizens played together with vagrants, ignoring the latter's reputation of carrying loaded dice. In the greater towns playing dice became proscribed in the fifteenth century.³² One should mention that usually the townsfolk didn't abide by that judgement of their magistrates too eagerly, but that is not our point of issue. Still the magistrates allowed playing dice in so called suspicious locals such as the brothel, and of course there were also exceptions, often assumed by historians to be normal. But it is quite easy to prove the exceptionality of such statutes. Life in the great or middle towns was not representative of that of the majority of citizens, most of who lived in small towns of

30. Slack 1988.

31. Schubert 1992.

32. Jütte 1988(b).

around 1,000 inhabitants. In late medieval Germany – and the figures appear to be comparable in France and England – more than 90 per cent of all citizens lived in those small towns. This ‘normal life’ is far more accurately reflected by the records of the municipal clerk of Volkach, a market place near Würzburg, than in the statutes, which even in the great cities were isolated in the urban legislation. In the year 1504 the clerk created a *Stadtbuch* and listed all kinds of ‘officials’. And unlike modern times: He did not avoid including both ladies of the local brothel as being an important part of the town’s public life.³³

Neither was giving alms to members of the underworld uncommon, because in spite of various contemporary perceptions of poverty it was a well-known fact that there were no remedies against poverty, no remedies against the problem of unemployment, no remedies for helping the poor and weak, old men and women, who were unable to earn some money. Giving alms to all those who asked for them without making strict divisions could at least give the donor the feeling of not being completely helpless in the face of this common misery. And not to forget: Giving alms not only supported the poor, but aided in the salvation of the donor. In regard of medieval charity we must notice: Alms could only provide relief to the poor, but were not a real help.

We also have to distinguish between seasonal poverty and permanent poverty. As soon as prices began to rise begging also increased, because of the shortage of work. In times of greater dearth the tight labour-market nearly collapsed, and poor men and women had no opportunity to earn money.³⁴ There were – so remembered by a chronicler of Constance in the year 1438 – many servants in the streets tortured by hunger, who even offered to serve for no wages if only they would be provided with food. The problem of the cost of living was reduced to a problem of survival.

To resume our main question: It is not possible for historians to integrate poverty into a framework of social statistics, but they have nevertheless, the great possibility of describing the social problems of late medieval society by focussing upon the problems of the everyday life of the poor. In our case: We admire medieval buildings,

33. Kramer 1985.

34. Those are the same problems in early modern times, cf. Dinges 1988; Jütte 1994.

but we do not recognize the process of constructing these buildings as being part of the labour market. In Italy the construction season usually lasted two months longer than in more northern areas. This was to the advantage of the many poor unskilled workers, who were needed for medieval architecture, the labour market was open two months longer; and these two months had an immense effect upon their income – in the winter all the workers were unemployed and out of work.

The labour market of a town depended to a large degree upon the price of grain. For instance the citizens of Nürnberg in the so called *Fasnachtsspiele* – the carnival plays – were used to make fun of the foolish and impolite peasants: But the same citizens had to deal with reality when the prices of grain once again rose, and the laughing soon stopped. We should not underestimate the impact of the price of grain on social attitudes and even seasonal begging.

The problem of seasonal begging is a structural one. In distinction from the structures of poverty it is necessary to describe the individual conditions of poverty. Is it at all possible to provide an adequate description? According to Petrarca the life of the little people is beyond historical interest. Of course from our point of view Petrarca is wrong, but from that of his contemporaries he was right. Sometimes and in passing they mention poverty or the seasonal increase in begging, but to discuss the reasons of poverty did not belong to the scope of their intellectual interest.³⁵

Petrarca and his contemporaries were not pitiless. The special bag for alms containing small coins for the poor was part of late medieval fashion. But these crying and singing people (singing was common for begging in medieval Germany) appeared to be a case of every-day misery to a person of average income, not a case of intellectual interest. Where can we find the sources for the main obstacles in the life of the poor and thus the individual reasons for begging? In my opinion, one chance for historians is the examination of fraudulent begging. Bronislaw Geremek and Frank Rexroth mentioned this sort of fraudulent beggar in Paris and London and Robert Jütte discovered in the smaller towns of southern Germany a similar social type.³⁶ In London and Paris officials and magi-

35. Schubert 1988(b).

36. Jütte 1988(a).

strates were confronted with the same problem: how to distinguish the real beggar from the beggar with fraudulent intentions?

To avoid moralistic interpretations: To have no protection and to live in extreme poverty were the biggest risks in the life of outcasts. Often they could only live by acquiring illegal strategies of survival. Theft was not the monopoly of poor men and women, but the crimes of the poor generally were those most likely to come to court, especially when they were committed by strangers.

The problems of late medieval magistrates are not ours. But we have to be thankful for their investigations. No one knows society better than the beggar who is urged to live from its charity. The fraudulent beggar had to convince people. The worry of the magistrates was that people would give alms to beggars who didn't deserve them. However, the people who gave alms to a fraudulent beggar were convinced of his penury.

Poverty in the underworld can be caused by the same reasons as poverty in common society. I will identify three reasons, often used as arguments for begging by fraudulent beggars. Their tears were false, but the explanation for their penury, they argued, was taken from a believable background.³⁷

The primary reason for poverty – the main camouflage for fraudulent beggars and beggar women – was to have too many children. Therefore beggar women borrowed children from others, in order to have a visually convincing argument for begging. The people who gave alms to them knew: Poor parents had great difficulties feeding their children. This is reflected in the tale of 'Hänsel and Gretel'. A related reason: miscarriage. Fraudulent beggar women asked for alms pretending to have just given birth to a child or having suffered a miscarriage. The reason for this begging was usually convincing to contemporaries. These women could not work, could not earn a living, and for poor women married or unmarried, it was necessary to raise money. In several cities foundations of special alms were made in order to help poor maidens in their postnatal poverty.

The second reason: illness. Beggars pretended to be born blind or to be born dumb, others pretended to suffer from epilepsy using soap hidden in their throat. Most astonishing is another method of simulation: The medieval leper is assumed to have been entirely

37. Schubert 1998.

excluded from society, living in special hospitals outside the village and cities. But the information fraudulent beggars have given to historians is that even though leprosy was thought of as extremely contagious there were wandering beggars asking for alms as lepers. In the German argot, in the *Rotwelsch*, a beggar who was able to master this kind of simulation was called *Jungfrau*, 'a virgin', because he is unsullied, untouched by the disease.

Power: the third reason for poverty. Wandering beggars demonstrated their penury by showing the chains or part of chains from the prisons they pretended to have escaped from. The people who gave alms to these beggars were convinced that the prison, even if it was an official one, was only an instrument of power, dangerous for men and without legitimacy to keep society in order. This special type of a fraudulent beggar personified a good, but in constitutional history forgotten, part of the mentality of common people. A monopoly of power belonging to the state appeared odd to them. On the contrary they were convinced that the power of rich men, either noblemen or influential citizens, was not necessarily beneficial for poor men and women.

Let us try to explain, why the underworld in the modern sense of the word was only a problem of the greater urban societies: Let us compare one outcast in a settlement of 10 neighbours, with 10 outcasts in a village of 100 inhabitants and 100 outcasts in a town of 1,000 citizens. In each case they constitute 10 per cent of the population, the difference being that in the first two cases it was possible to integrate the outcasts into society, or at least to live with them, but in the third case a social group of its own could emerge. Still our example of Volkach demonstrates, that even in a market place of around 1,000 inhabitants, the normal form of urban living, the neighbourhood, was able to prevent a social group of outcasts. Of course, the citizen looked with disregard upon a poor man, who for instance earned his living driving geese to the market: *Hans Gensmelker*. But the nickname proves that he was, although disregarded, a member of urban society. Disregarded could also be a member of the established society because she was lacking in patience: *Thrut Ungeduld*.

All these *sackträger*, these 'ribalds' were not completely excluded. In urban society the economy needed temporary workers, the masters of houses needed someone to clean the toilets (the so-called *Goldgräber*) and in a tedious society people were looking

for entertainment. The discriminated *ribalde* – different from the French soldier – was also an expert in gambling often considered to be a cheat. Living in crowded huts, often in the graveyards or on the corners of narrow streets, these people were associated with poor beggars, proscribed thieves and so on. All these poor men were only known by nicknames, often discriminating ones like *Scheißbrunnen*. All of them were asking for charity. And they did receive alms because, in a deeply religious society, giving alms was a kind of assurance to reach heaven.

The great change, or: Why it's so difficult to understand the medieval underworld?

The main problem consists not only of finding the sources, but also of interpreting them properly. Historians are part of history. Their imagination is inspired by historical developments. It is impossible to understand the specific character of marginal social groups in medieval times without knowledge of how society perceived them. The change in this perception at the end of medieval times leads modern historians to at least two differing perspectives, which, if not carefully handled, could cause some confusion.

A great social change took place from late medieval to early modern times, especially in the sixteenth century, an often forgotten change, because historians commonly prefer the higher ranks of society as their subject of research. This great change was not a part of the Reformation, because its roots can be found in the generation before Martin Luther. The Reformation itself was a part of the new humanistic inspired political thought.³⁸

The keyword for the new ideas of public order is the term *gute Policy*, a term arising in Germany around 1500. Like in other countries in early modern Europe the aims of a Christian and well organized state were based on the use of legislation as an instrument of state-controlled order. This legislation involved the discrimination of all vagrants, outcasts and all the homeless men and women who were assumed to have chosen idleness, i.e. that they wanted to be unemployed. They became victims of a new social thinking. Social stereotypes came into fashion in early modern Europe: the

38. Schubert 2000.

sturdy, the idle beggar. The ‘masterless men’ in England were stigmatised in the new legislation in the same way as the *herrenlose Gesindel* were in German territories.³⁹ The changing meaning of the word *Gesindel* shows the effect of this legislation. In late medieval times *Gesindel* did not have any pejorative or negative sense, it merely denominated a lower rank of servant, but in the sixteenth century the meaning of the word was over-imposed by the negative sense of ‘rabble’.

The example of the Gipsies, a kind of homeless wandering people, *fahrendes Volk*, testifies to this great change.⁴⁰ Coming to Germany for the first time in 1417 they always got alms because people had compassion with these dark men and women who told them the legend, that their ancestors lost their homes in Egypt, because they had given shelter to the fleeing holy family.

In 1498 the diet (*Reichstag*) of Freiburg ordered the Gipsies to leave the Empire. It was the beginning of condemnation. The *golden eeuw* of the Gipsies (to use an expression of Olav van Kappen) came to its end.⁴¹ At first nobody in Germany respected this order, which was hidden among two hundred paragraphs in a *Reichstagsabschied*, a decision of the diet. Nevertheless it was part of a whole body of prescriptions which expressed a new political idea, the idea of a disciplined society: the concept of the *gute Polizei*. This concept was repeated in the legislation of the territories. And in all these new laws and statutes, contrary to medieval legal custom, Gipsies were condemned. Gipsies became people outside of society.

Another example: In late medieval towns, even in smaller ones, brothels were to be found. The wandering whore had become sedentary. Everybody in a late medieval town knew the whores. It was not dishonourable to visit such a *Frauenhaus*, the German term for brothel. The wage of a whore, although very low, was usually guaranteed. But by the middle of the sixteenth century nearly all *Frauenhäuser* in the towns and the cities had been closed. The whore became the female counterpart of the male outcast. This was the beginning of the red-light culture.⁴²

39. Beier 1985; Schubert 1991.

40. Gilsenbach 1998.

41. Kappen 1965.

42. Roper 1985.

These are only two examples of a process, which we define as the formation of society. (The traditional focus on society is a model of hierarchy, looking at only five per cent of the population.) This process of change followed two tracks which eventually joined.

In late medieval times the extremely poor men and women were despised and ridiculed but they were not prosecuted for their way of life as they were in early modern times. Late medieval authors often criticised, what in their eyes, was the bad behaviour of the poor. But no one described them as later early modern theologians did, for instance William Perkins (1558-1602), the first English Calvinist, who wrote that the life of beggars and vagabonds resembled that of a beast.

The background for this process was provided by the increasing population. People had to find new rules for living together. The guilds tried to close their ranks against newcomers. *Unehrlichkeit* took on a new more widespread dimension. The social cleansing function of penitence vanished. The hangman could no longer become honourable by making a pilgrimage to Rome. The towns began to make immigration more difficult. The new ethos of work was about to be accepted, helping masters of the house to strengthen their position. At the centre of the developing society could be found the master of the house, the patron, and at the top of his society the lord, defining himself as father of the territory.

The perspective of the man on the street was another. The population increased rapidly and legislation started to condemn the poor, but nevertheless the compassion of ordinary people with poor men in general did not disappear immediately. But neither in Catholic nor in Protestant regions did there remain a single religious foundation of alms.⁴³ Begging became more difficult and begging became a shame. Therefore it was no longer beneficial for the majority of outcasts to hide themselves in the world of the poor. An underworld in the strict modern meaning, similar to that which already existed in the extensive late medieval cities of London and Paris, emerged in early modern time. But what in medieval times was an exception owing to the astonishing size of London and Paris became in early modern times rather normal.

43. Fischer 1979.

What is the reason for the great change?

It is not a change in the attitude of society to the problem of poverty, it is a constitutional problem. The German term *Obrigkeit* is – quoting English historians – ‘untranslatable’. *Obrigkeit* means: There is no difference in German territories between authority, administration and government. One attempt of the developing *Obrigkeit* (since the end of the fifteenth century) was to educate people to be members of a society, to which God could extend his grace. Therefore blasphemy and cursing, which were common in medieval times, were forbidden as was becoming drunk. About 1500 a new target of discrimination appeared in *Polizeiordnungen*, laws and statutes: the valid beggar.

This attempt was strengthened by the Reformation for different reasons. The reformators postulated begging to be generally forbidden. Giving alms was the most significant manner of *Werkgerechtigkeit*. Men must work. Discrimination of the valid beggar (blinded against the problems of unemployment) was at the same time the best argument against the most popular figure of the old church, the friar.

Let me conclude: The medieval underworld can not be described by terms like *Unehrlichkeit*, deviance, marginalisation or stigmatisation. All these terms are helpful to describe the social thinking after the development we have characterised as the great change, but using these terms for the description of medieval times brings an unnecessary dance on the slippery ice of anachronism. The medieval underworld is part of the biggest medieval social problem, poverty. To quote a remark made by Gerhard Jaritz: In the view of beggars and outcasts the sixteenth century was a dark one.⁴⁴

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44. The remark was put forward at the conference in Copenhagen in 1999.

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