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Book Review: Unemployment and Protest: New Perspectives on Two Centuries of Contention - Edited by Matthias Reiss and Matt Perry

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The book is a collection of essays based mainly on papers presented at a conference organised by the German Historical Institute, London, in 2007 in conjunction with the Society for the Study of Labour History and consists of 14 essays arranged in five substantive parts covering a 200 year panorama with an impressively diverse range of experiences from Beerbuhl’s work on the Blanketeers of early nineteenth century Britain through to Vietor-Englander’s examination of ‘Unemployed Protest in Germany in the Internet Era’ and deals with countries as various as Austria, Britain, France, Germany, New Zealand, Palestine and the USA, although the majority focus on Britain and Western Europe. However, there is a clear interest in the interwar period with four essays grouped into a part entitled ‘The Golden Age of Unemployed Movements’, while five other essays are also located during this period.

The essays are introduced and grounded in two themes. Firstly, one by the two editors on ‘Marienthal’ an Austrian textile producing village which, during 1931-1932, was the subject of ‘socio-graphic’ research into its two year experience of high levels of unemployment by a team of Vienna based researchers with a cross-disciplinary remit. Secondly, through an exposition by Klandermans of the predominant social psychological theories underpinning unemployment as a social phenomenon. The collection attempts to challenge the accepted notion that the unemployed were essentially passive and seeks to demonstrate the variety of instances through which different individuals and organisation responded to the experience of unemployment.

One of the greatest challenges involved in producing a collection such as this is to achieve something cohesive from a range of writers working with a variety of sources and styles from different countries. That the editors and contributors have been able to craft a work of such remarkable accessibility and uniformity of structure and style deserves credit. Similarly, with a collection covering such a diversity of periods and situations there is a tendency to perceive it as an ‘overview’ rather than offering detailed insights. In fact, one of its great strengths is that there is a good deal of research and interpretation based on primary sources.

Any issues with this collection at are the level of what alternative approaches might have been taken or topics which might have surfaced which have not or have not done so in a substantial way. While the collection does not purport to offer an overarching comparative historical analysis of the experience of unemployment, the reader could be left wondering whether it behaves such an analysis, given that it deals with reaction to unemployment through a range
of outcomes, from the passive, as demonstrated in Chase’s ironstone mining communities of
East Cleveland, England, to Zukas’s description of unemployed workers slugging it out in
violent and wearisome street battles with the Shutzpolizei in Weimar Germany’s Ruhrgebiet
, both during the interwar period. These and other essays tend to beg the question of
comparability. Is it possible to identify specific confluences of economic, social and political
factors, which in the circumstances described in this work, would manifest themselves toward
passivity or a propensity toward collective action and are there any general conclusions which
might be drawn from these?

Another issue with the approach taken is that unemployment is largely assumed to be of the
same type between time and place. As the collection focuses on unemployment as a social
phenomenon it is sometimes easy to lose sight of the fact that unemployment is essentially
cased by economic factors and has different outcomes giving rise to different types of
unemployment such as cyclical, frictional and structural as well as manifesting itself as short
and longer-term unemployment. This is not given explicit attention in the collection and it is
not clear how the unemployed reacted to these different circumstances. Indeed, one of the
great bugbears for many workers especially during the interwar period was underemployment
as opposed to unemployment in which workers experienced spasmodic or short-time patterns
of work. This is mentioned in a number of essays, but it is either assumed to be synchronous
with unemployment or not given substantive treatment in its own right. Decisions to become
involved in protest might well have been even more finely balanced in circumstances where
underemployment was the predominant experience.

Rather than offer a comparative historical analysis the collection concludes with an essay by
Chabanet and Faniel which deals with the ‘mobilizat of the unemployed’ as a ‘recurrent
but relatively invisible phenomena’. This again emphasises the largely theoretical
underpinning of the collection through a discussion of several themes such as identity, social
stigmatisation and spatial proximity as a way of explaining reaction to unemployment as an
historical phenomenon. While there is quite rightly a place for theoretical explanations of the
historical phenomena, and, moreover, one which accords with the European historical
tradition, it remains a debateable point whether handling such diversity of experience could be
more effectively advanced through the application of theoretical considerations or through an
attempt at comparative historical analysis.

Nevertheless, leaving aside questions of approach, the work offers a well-researched and well
written collection of essays which should re-invigorate the debate about the historical
experience of unemployment, while it has important contemporary relevance given the return
of unemployment to western economies as market solutions once again fail.