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Catterall, Stephen

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

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***Unemployment and Protest: New Perspectives on Two Centuries of Contention.* Matthias Reiss and Matt Perry (eds).** The German Historical Institute, London, Oxford University Press. 2011. vi-ix + 438pp. £75.

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 organisations 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 are at 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 caused 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 'mobilization 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.

University of Huddersfield

STEPHEN CATTERALL