



Thomas Max Safley. *Children of the Laboring Poor: Expectation and Experience among the Orphans of Early Modern Augsburg.* Leiden: Brill, 2005. xvi + 496 pp. \$129.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-391-04224-7.

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Published on H-German (November, 2006)

Forces that Shape the Lives of Orphans

Throughout Thomas Safley's second monograph on the orphanages of early modern Augsburg, we see an emphasis on the constant tensions between institutional authority and individual agency as the prime influence on the lives of the city's orphans. In an earlier volume based on the records of these orphanages, Safley analyzed the economic activities of the institutions and traced the manner in which they constantly adapted their practices in order to provide acceptable care frugally.[1] Safley has now shifted his lens from an institutional analysis to focus upon the orphans themselves in an attempt to uncover and analyze the roles they played in influencing their own care.

Between 1572 and 1806 at least 5,734 orphans were cared for in Augsburg's orphanages. The "orphan books," which provide a rich trove of information about these orphans, have been supplemented by a thorough investigation of the surviving civic, criminal and financial records. This large pool of data across more than two centuries gives Safley the opportunity to probe traditional theories about poverty and "the poor" as well as develop some new hypotheses of his own. Safley is certainly not alone in his attempt to look more carefully at recipients rather than merely administrators of poor relief. One of the key strengths of this current study, however, is that he does not feel constrained by the need to come up with conclusions that are generally applicable to "the poor" and which cause most recent studies on poverty to lose sight of the extent of poor people's individuality and their capacity for self-determination. Obviously the institu-

tional regulations of the orphanages must be analyzed, but Safley tries to include the self-regulation of the orphans as an equally integral part of the analysis.

Two elements, in particular, of the book's organization ensure that Safley is able to make several important general conclusions while allowing thousands of individual poor people to call modern generalizations into question. First, the book is organized into three major sections that follow the life-cycle of orphans. Part 1 consists of three chapters that delve into the family and household backgrounds of the orphans. The four chapters of part 2 consider the nature of discipline within the orphanage and the ways in which orphans perceived and reacted to the orphanages' regimes. Part 3's three chapters track particular fates of orphans who left the orphanage—those who died and those who survived to enter urban society—and attempt to gauge the efficacy of charity. Second, Safley maintains a sophisticated mix of statistical analysis, enabling him to generalize about his almost 6,000 orphans, and relevant case studies both enliven the statistics and reveal complex life situations that deny simple sweeping statements.

Most chapters pick up a historiographical argument and test it against the data from Augsburg's orphans. Chapter 1 explores the dissolution of households and the socio-economic circumstances that led one to the orphanage. Loss of one or both parents—through death, abandonment or some temporary problems, such as illness, unemployment or arrest—exposed the early mod-

ern family to what has been called the “adaptive family economy.” Although this model was developed to explain the adaptability found in English households during the transition to an industrial economy, Safley demonstrates that such household flexibility was not the product of industrial capitalism. Indeed, the limitations of the theory become clear as the “adaptive family economy” model treats the household in a vacuum, emphasizing an orderly set of economic behaviors. But in times of crisis, Safley shows, household adaptation was shaped by a complex web of external influences: neighbors and relatives, patrons and employers, church and civic institutions all affected prospects for family survival. To be sure, we see household adaptation on the deaths of parents, but such flexibility is far more complicated than the theory implies. Augsburg’s orphans and their families demonstrated a tremendous and inventive capacity to use all means at their disposal, adopting an “economy of makeshifts” and showing a willingness to try anything to remain independent.

Even when faced with limited choices, the poor nevertheless exercised an active attitude in maintaining their survival, including their self-representation to authorities in order to achieve specific ends. Chapters 2 and 3 further deepen the analysis of the various strategies used by families of Augsburg’s orphans. Safley asks whether the poor were “presentist” and still unemancipated, after Max Weber, from “traditionalism.” These generalizations, which include the presumption of resistance to change and inability to plan for the future and amass capital because of an irrational focus on the present, have frequently been applied to the poor and the marginal. Instead, Safley demonstrates that the economically marginal turned to a nexus of social relationships in order to adapt to situations of crisis or need. By following several particular cases, we see the poor adopting by employments, makeshifts, schemes, turning to relatives and gaining credit in order to meet the household’s most serious demands. Thus, their activities suggest resourcefulness and ambition within Augsburg’s market economy and offer a very different picture from the economic passivity or perhaps even immorality imputed to “presentist” deviants and “traditional” laborers.

Failure and debt did not necessarily result from economic irrationality as much as from limited resources or economic misfortune, which affected many households. Indeed, several illustrations of complicated revolving debts and credit uncovered by Safley imply sophisticated calculation by the poor rather than presentist fecklessness. In this section we also see an effective ex-

amination of the permeable boundaries of the household. The membership of a household cannot be neatly defined, and the economic success of both household and workshop were also tightly connected. As the laboring poor planned and negotiated their futures, they demonstrated an ability to create and exploit opportunities; institutional poor relief and the orphanages could be among the assets calculated by the poor to improve their quality of life.

The four chapters in the middle section of the book delve into both the circumstances surrounding admission to an orphanage and the material and religious regimes that governed life inside its walls. The pliancy of poor relief is most obvious in this section; static institutional histories cannot capture the flexibility that was inherent in the day-to-day operation of Augsburg’s orphanages. Safley explores the ways the poor appropriated regulations and institutions in order to represent their circumstances to the authorities most effectively, as well as the ways that authorities were prepared to respond, often in violation of their own ordinances. Administrators examined all petitions for admission and usually looked for relatives capable of supporting their kin as foster children. In their petitions, the poor used language to meet the administrators’ expectations, especially emphasizing their will to work. And administrators understood that timely resort to the orphanage could prevent a descent into poverty and perhaps maximize later poor relief resources.

Moving beyond frameworks established by social disciplining paradigms and by Foucault, Safley deals with the material regime (the regularity and uniformity of shelter, diet, clothing, prayers, and so on) to discover not only the discipline involved in the orphanage, but more interestingly the extent that the residents absorbed and appropriated discipline. Where departures from the discipline regime have usually been described in terms of “deviance and discipline,” Safley attempts to adopt the perspective of the orphans and offers, instead, the possible framework of “connivance and cooptation.” Less than 3 percent drew the notice of orphanage administrators as religious renegades, but by their conformity we have little record of what they believed. Safley tries to evaluate whether religious confessionalization could erase the inconsistencies between private conviction and public conformity. Of course, throughout this entire section of implications and inferences, Safley acknowledges that the voices of the orphans have been lost in adult concerns and interpretations.

The ultimate goal of Augsburg's orphanages was to help orphans acquire and maintain a *Nahrung*. Such a social competency went beyond mere acquisition of a trade or simple self-sufficiency to include the inculcation of a system of shared values and to place the person within a complex social network of reciprocal obligations. Safley is correct in pointing out that current literature on early modern institutional relief does not include analysis of a similar goal in other orphanages or workhouses. It will be interesting in subsequent studies to see if Augsburg's seemingly singular emphasis on *Nahrung* is indeed as unusual as it appears at present.

Just under 40 percent of Augsburg's orphans died in residence. Chapter 8 turns to look at the 75.8 percent of the survivors who went on to enter the workforce. Regulations required that orphans be placed in trades according to their *Lust und Liebe*. Of course, in order to know the orphans' inclinations and preferences, the administrators had to handle each orphan as a unique case. The orphanages did not always place orphans in the cheapest crafts; indeed, on occasion orphans were placed into the highest-priced apprenticeships. Safley traces changes in the duties of masters and the complex interests involved in the apprenticeship relationship. Orphanages lessened some of the risks and labor costs for masters and hence reduced the transaction costs involved in apprenticing or hiring orphans. This then gave their orphans a competitive edge in the labor market. Unfortunately the sources reveal very little about female out-placement. But Safley is able to conclude that orphanages seem to have provided women with similar treatment as men but in a different labor world: namely one of temporary and dependent labor in the home.

Safley finally turns to look at the orphanages' "failures," to see what happened to orphans who did not achieve a *Nahrung*. These include orphans who were placed repeatedly and were unable to find stable employment, those disciplined for violating social norms, those who returned to the orphanage for assistance after encountering economic problems and those who stayed permanently in residence, unable to support themselves. After a discussion on the historiography on marginality and boundaries, Safley questions the negative notion of margin as an inversion of the mainstream. Here we

see people moving back and forth across boundaries that were not fixed. Each case was treated uniquely by authorities, demonstrating the complex dynamics of exclusion as well as the possibility of rehabilitation. In one of the book's more interesting sections of anecdotes, Safley looks closely at the very small number of orphans who lived beyond the margins of the mainstream—for instance, those who were expelled or involved in criminal behavior. Yet, for them the margin did not exist; they lived apart from society and constructed rituals and structures of their own, and we witness them fashioning an alternative social and moral universe within the community they joined outside the mainstream of society.

Safley has provided a compelling investigation of poverty and the poor. His major emphasis is on the resourcefulness demonstrated by the poor, particularly in times of crisis. By looking carefully at their social networks, self-representation to authorities, debt and credit strategies, employment histories and interaction with relief institutions, Safley has called into question often simplistic generalizations made about the poor. He does not merely provide a handful of anecdotes simply in order to dismiss a theory, but instead, he refines these models to give us a far more complicated and interesting picture of the lives of the poor. By structuring each chapter so that it can virtually stand alone in its thematic analysis, Safley has made his arguments even more focused and potent. This strategy, however, does lead to occasional redundancies: for example, the definition of *Nahrung* appears five or six times throughout the book. The lengthy time-frame of the study also allows for some broad comparisons and interesting speculations about the movement through the early modern period into the rise of industrial capitalism. Augsburg's orphans maintained a complex range of relief strategies of their own which frequently side-stepped external controls. The poor took actions to demand that they be treated on their own terms, and Thomas Safley, taking advantage of a large cache of sources, has met their demand with a sophisticated and engaging analysis.

Note

[1]. Thomas Max Safley, *Charity and Economy in the Orphanages of Early Modern Augsburg* (Boston: Humanities Press, 1997).

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Citation: Timothy Fehler. Review of Safley, Thomas Max, *Children of the Laboring Poor: Expectation and Experience among the Orphans of Early Modern Augsburg*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. November, 2006.

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