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Social Stereotypes and History

Although a heavily stereotyped group themselves, historians have so far made little use of social stereotypes as an analytical category. While there are numerous books on racial and ethnic, national, religious, and gender stereotypes in history, social stereotypes have been mostly ignored. While there is no lack of theoretical work on this subject by social psychologists, many historians prefer to talk about “images”, “clichés”, “figures”, or “types” when dealing with widely held beliefs about certain social groups.

To examine why historians have not made more use of social stereotypes as an analytical category, the German Historical Institute London organized an international, interdisciplinary conference on this topic, bringing together social psychologists and historians from different countries and different fields of expertise. After a short welcome by the Institute’s director, Hagen Schulze (GHI London), Matthias Reiß (GHI London), who developed and organized the conference, pointed towards the potential of social stereotypes in providing a link between mentalities and social practices in the past. He stated that the aim of the conference was to provide a broad overview of the different ways in which historians have used social stereotypes as a research tool in their work, and to discuss the usefulness and limitations of this concept.

The keynote speech was given by Victoria Mather (London), the author of the “Social Stereotypes” column in the *Telegraph Magazine*, which has also been published in several books. Mather described stereotypes as a form

of social shorthand and suggested that the reason for the popularity of her column, which, despite initial expectations, has been going for twelve years, is that it is neither patronizing nor malevolent. People recognize themselves and others, and take pleasure in doing so. Her social stereotypes describe little social battles in the minutiae of life, and these battles are the reason why these stereotypes exist. Mather conceded that to judge people based on stereotypes is a bad thing, but argued that there is often no other way, given the predominance of image and social fluidity nowadays. After a short discussion, Russell Spears (University of Cardiff), supported by Alex Haslam (University of Exeter), presented a theoretical introduction to the history and theory of stereotype formation in the field of social psychology. They listed the changing definitions of stereotypes and discussed the various approaches and theories developed since Walter Lippmann defined stereotypes as “pictures in our heads” in 1922. They concluded that it had taken a long time for the social psychology of stereotyping to get social, and that it might take even longer to get historical. Yet they argued that social psychology has much to offer historians, who often only use standard, individual-centred psychoanalysis in their works. More advanced theoretical models are, however, compatible with non-individualist approaches to history, and can benefit research on social movements and social processes in the past.

The rest of the day was devoted to examining occupational stereotypes in two panels on “The Working World”. The first was chaired by Andreas Gestrich (University of Trier) and focused on the two largest groups of employ-

ees in pre-industrial times: the domestic servant and the agricultural labourer. In her paper on the former, Carolyn Steedman (University of Warwick) pointed out that over the last thirty years, not only social psychologists, but also scholars from a number of other fields (for example, cultural studies and gay studies) have concluded that social stereotypes form a useful concept for inquiry and analysis. However, she questioned whether it is of much use for historians, as historical research tends to construct social stereotypes. Steedman proposed a category of “historical stereotypes” as a sub-division of social stereotypes. “Historical stereotypes” are constructed and established by historical research, writing, and representation of various kinds, and are employed by a wide variety of people to furnish individual imaginations. Using the historical research (or the lack of it) on domestic servants and the contemporary representation of them on television as an example, Steedman showed how imagination, assumptions, and plot-lines shaped the stereotype of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century domestic servant. She conceded that attention to stereotypes can be useful after all to raise awareness of the constraints and necessities of history as a form of writing and cognition, and its role in the making of social stereotypes in modern society.

Alun Howkins (University of Sussex) then talked about the contested, changing, and politicized stereotypes of rural men and women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Citing examples from various European countries, Howkins pointed out the existence of two conflicting stereotypes of peasants. On the one hand was the image of the poor, ignorant, dirty peasant, who was hardly regarded as human, almost as an animal. On the other was the stereotype of peasants as authentic and sincere, which depicted them as the bearers of tradition and religion, and praised their music and speech. This contradiction was also apparent when the stereotype was broken down along gender lines. Country women, for example, were celebrated in various forms, but also depicted as bold, rough, and unsexed by field work. According to Howkins, the negative stereotype dominated until the end of the nineteenth century, when, under the influence of Social Darwinism, “the town” became the enemy and was identified with degeneration. From the 1880s on, the stereotype of the peasant became politicized all over Europe. In new states like Finland and Ireland, for example, it was employed to support a national renaissance based on rural culture. Howkins concluded that the stereotype of the agricultural worker was largely created by the urban Ä©lite and reflected urban ideas, and that

its politicized form was mostly mobilized by the right.

The second panel of the day dealt with modern white-collar service jobs and was chaired by Hans Henning Hahn (University of Oldenburg). Sabine Biebl (University of Munich) focused on the period between the end of the nineteenth century and the end of the Weimar Republic, during which the image of white-collar workers (*Angestellten*) was consolidated. Biebl pointed to the difficulty of finding a common name, let alone a meaning, for this new and very heterogeneous group of office workers. The primary sources for the identity of white-collar workers as a distinct social group were, first, their privileged position within the production process, which they defended even after the economic reasons for it began to disappear, and secondly, their social distance from blue-collar workers. During the Weimar Republic, their claim to special social status became politicized, and the *Angestellten* were positioned as a buffer between the working class and the upper class in society. Thus in contrast to many other stereotypes, the image of the white-collar worker was defined primarily in relation to already existing social groups, and not in terms of their supposedly defining common characteristics and traits. In the media, however, the *Angestellte* were represented by several story-lines and social stereotypes—for example, the old accountant, the merchant, banker, or publisher, and the young female secretary or shop assistant. The majority of these figures were presented as representatives of a new era, as individualists, and figures in transit, who were either on the move upwards or in steady social decline, and who reflected the modern capitalist society of the Weimar Republic in condensed form. These narratives, in return, were used to discuss and negotiate the structuring principles of this society.

Like the *Angestellte*, the profession of librarian in its modern form is also relatively new, and its early history is inseparably intertwined with the stereotype of those who chose librarianship as a career, according to Candace Benefiel (Texas A&M). It was the feminization of the profession which to a large degree created the image of the librarian as an educated, unattractive, unstylish, unmarried, pedantic woman who spends her days shushing people. This stereotype resulted from the low pay of librarians, the practical necessities of the job, the expectations of library patrons, and the pressure on newly married women to quit the profession. Librarianship was one of the few careers open to college-educated women in the nineteenth century, and the steady increase in the number of female librarians at the end of this century shaped the profession’s image and identity. The legacy

of these early librarians left a lasting impression on the public consciousness, partly because it had some basis in reality, but mostly because it was reinforced over time through stereotypical depictions of librarians in films, novels, advertisements, comic books, cartoons, and television. Benefiel concluded that, driven by economic and demographic convenience, the stereotype of the librarian has been remarkably stable over a long period. She suggested that it has been codified by various media to such an extent that it forms more of a caricature than a stereotype. Librarians fear that it contributes to the marginalization of their profession, both in terms of respect and remuneration, and are obsessed with how others see them. However, if librarians cease to worry so much about the stereotype of their profession, Benefiel concluded, they might find that others do not take it so seriously either.

The next day began with a comparative session on the stereotype of “the father” in the USA, Britain, and Germany, chaired by Christoph Conrad (Geneva). According to Jörgen Martschukat (Erfurt), “the father” is one of the most powerful stereotypes in American history. From the Founding Fathers to the present day, fatherhood has been described as ultimate objective of very individual American man’s longing, but also as a cornerstone of the liberal capitalist republic, and as a metaphor and embodiment of rationality, responsibility, and reliability. Yet, despite the longevity and power of this normative belief about the ideal man, the corresponding nuclear family with homemaking mother and breadwinning father has hardly ever represented the household arrangements of a majority of Americans. Only in the 1950s did this normative ideal seem to correspond to reality. However, Martschukat argued that during that period two contradictory stereotypes of ideal manhood clashed with each other, posing a dilemma for American men: that of the caring, responsible father who was a provider and breadwinner, and that of the self-determined, autonomous, virile man who was an energetic explorer. The flip side of the stereotype of the responsible father and breadwinner was the emasculated conformist “man in the grey flannel suit”, embodied by the main protagonist of this 1950s book and film, Tom Rath. The way out of the dilemma was to promote the “hobby” as an outlet for male creative energy. In addition, magazines like *Playboy* began to cater to male fantasies. The 1950s discourse on the weakening of American men as a result of the demands of a conformist society nevertheless strengthened the hegemonic position of heterosexual, white, middle-class men. At the same time, however,

activists of the civil rights, women’s rights, and gay rights movements pushed the limits and took their lives into their own hands, thus displaying character traits that, up to that point, had been exclusively reserved for heterosexual white men.

The father as breadwinner also figured large in the paper by John Tosh (Roehampton University) on paternal stereotypes in England since the Victorian period. For the Victorians, fatherhood was essentially a social status and an ordained stage of life. Consequently, the stereotype of fatherhood was not primarily concerned with the quality of a relationship, but with the performance of a social role. The pre-eminent criterion of a good father was his success as a bread winner. In addition, he had to maintain his patriarchal authority, in which he was supported by the law and religious conviction, and to prepare his sons for their place in the adult masculine world. The latter was increasingly difficult to achieve in Victorian times because of decline of patronage and the growth of professionalism, while the father’s traditional responsibility for the moral education of his children was undermined by absentee bread-winning and the growing belief that this was the mother’s ordained sphere. According to Tosh, the Victorian experience still bears on present-day debates about fatherhood. Absentee bread-winning is the strongest link with the Victorian pattern, while the Victorian anxiety about fitting boys into a mould of manliness has very little resonance today. Tosh argued that there is ample evidence that Victorian fathers were less remote and emotionally detached from the children than the stereotype of the unbending patriarch has made us made believe. He concluded that despite the legal and social encroachments on the power and prestige of the father, the power of the inherited stereotype remains strong. According to Tosh, the performance of fatherhood is rooted in images which represent a lost perfection or a primitive condition from which we would like to be free. By distinguishing between the findings of social history and culturally powerful stereotypes, historians could have a positive impact on popular culture.

Till van Rahden (University of Cologne) examined stereotypical notions of fatherhood in the Federal Republic of Germany by focusing on Alexander Mitscherlich’s book *Society without the Father* (1963). In the context of post-Second World War debates in West Germany, fatherlessness explicitly also included situations where men did not exercise their paternal function. Since the 1950s, this discussion has developed into a central public obsession. “The father” became an important symbol in the debate about the perceived social and cultural crisis of post-

war West Germany, and about the meaning of authority in a democratic polity. While conservatives in particular viewed fatherlessness as a threat to society, others began to consider it a blessing. Mitscherlich's book tapped into this debate and became an instant success. It took certain elements of the pessimistic reading of fatherlessness seriously, while trying to enlist support for an egalitarian vision of society, and providing a blue print for future forms of education that prepared for a "society without a father". Mitscherlich wanted West Germans to embrace the symbolic fatherlessness of democratic polities as a chance to free themselves from false authority. According to van Rahden, the political significance of his book can hardly be overrated, as the search for new forms of fatherhood was vital to social and cultural transformations in Germany from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s. Mitscherlich was the first to argue that it was necessary to undo the nexus between democracy and authority on the one hand, and the search for new forms of paternal authority within the family on the other. Thus *Society without the Father* ironically marked the beginning of the end of early West Germany's obsession with the question of fatherlessness.

The fourth session, chaired by Alex Zukas (National University, San Diego), dealt with ranks in society. Speaking about the stereotype of the aristocrat, Karina Urbach (GHI London) pointed to its enormous political dimension in the nobility's struggle with the bourgeoisie for social, cultural, and economic predominance. The nobility tried to create a stereotype of itself which underlined its superiority and justified its privileges: the dashing aristocrat, who was tall, preferably thin, and equipped with a distinctive Caesarian face. Through charity and church work, and paternalistic treatment of tenants and staff, the stereotypical aristocrats kept rural communities together and outshone the egoism of the bourgeoisie. In contrast to the latter, the aristocracy saw themselves as unselfish, economically independent, and therefore hard to corrupt. In short, aristocrats regarded and pictured themselves as natural-born leaders. Today, the aristocracy still provides a glamour factor even in egalitarian societies like Germany, while it has reinvented itself as the guardian of the national heritage in Britain. The counter-stereotype, however, is distinctly less flattering. Since the eighteenth century, the aristocracy has increasingly played the part of the villain in European literature. The middle classes saw the nobles as a homogeneous formation, but divided them into different types. The fat, aristocratic, farmer-type landowner appeared next to his pale, slim, delicate, and bored ur-

ban cousin. According to Urbach, four major stereotypes existed in all countries: the corrupt, the lazy, the amoral, and the philistine aristocrat. Yet according to Flaubert, in regard to the nobility the bourgeoisie was torn between admiration and envy, so that its view of the upper classes was not all negative all of the time.

The two dominant stereotypes of the bourgeois, however, were both negative, according to Andreas Fahrmeir (University of Cologne). The bourgeois as a daft, boring, philistine existed next to the stereotype of the bourgeois as a sharp, money-grabbing, ruthless investor and oppressor. While the former could be male as well as female, the latter was almost certainly a man. While the bourgeois-as-philistine is commonly found in artistic productions, the "moneybag" is primarily the object of scholarly analysis and polemics. Common to both stereotypes is insistence on the importance of money to the bourgeois mind, which reduces immaterial values to cash terms. But while the philistine is pictured as genuinely stupid, the bourgeois-as-entrepreneur does not lack brains and wit. According to Fahrmeir, stereotypes of the bourgeois were, by and large, created, publicized, and perpetuated by people who were themselves part of the bourgeoisie. To a large extent, the figure of "the bourgeois" was a product of middle-class self-doubt, and it provided a negative counterfoil to middle-class aspirations of intellectual, material, and moral advancement. Because "the bourgeois" was a stereotypical figure, being one was a question of mentality rather than of objective social stratification. Fahrmeir concluded by suggesting that it was difficult to research the middle class without a stereotype or two as guidance. Stereotypes informed the way in which historical research was conceptualized, and Fahrmeir confessed that he was not entirely convinced that there was indeed a line which separated stereotypes from social entities in whose existence historians tend to believe.

The final session on "Crime and Punishment" was chaired by Frank BÄ¶sch (University of Bochum) and opened by Anja Johansen (University of Dundee). Comparing the stereotype of the policeman in France, Britain, and Germany, Johansen focused particularly on the image of this group among the generally law-abiding sections of society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As their encounters with the police tended to be few, their expectations of police behaviour reflected widely shared assumptions rather than the personal experience. According to Johansen, the stereotype of "the policeman" was rooted in his functions as well as in the organizational approaches to the public taken by the po-

lice. Whether positive or negative, the police came to epitomize the nature of the political regimes they served. While the British “Bobby” came to symbolize the civility and moderation of the liberal democratic British state, the French and German policeman represented the despotic, authoritarian, and militaristic nature of their respective regimes. In Britain, the authorities and the police succeeded in projecting a positive image, so that excessive violence was regarded as marginal and erroneous by large sections of the politically relevant part of the population. In France and Germany, however, even supporters of the existing political order viewed violence as standard police practice. This stereotype was deliberately used in some periods of French and German history to cover the actual weakness of the police, but it doomed attempts at other times to project a more positive image. Negative stereotypes of the policeman, Johansen concluded, are strongly shaped by past sins and very persistent, while positive stereotypes are difficult to achieve and easy to lose again. Hopes that institutional reforms would provide an effective solution to violent and arbitrary policing have been abandoned at the turn of the twenty-first century, and the stereotype of the policeman will remain ambiguous, even in modern democratic societies.

Phillip M  ller (Weimar) spoke about the changing image of “the criminal” in Imperial Germany. Focusing on the case of the murderer Karl Rudolf Hennig, M  ller described how the police in Berlin tried to catch the criminal by putting up “wanted” posters and publishing personal descriptions in newspapers. According to M  ller, the standardized police description and photograph of a criminal, while supposedly scientific and unambiguous, also functioned to confirm the criminal nature of its object. The newspapers, however, while co-operating with the police search, transformed Hennig into a heroic figure by describing his audacious flight from the police over the rooftops of Berlin, while the public began to see the wanted criminal everywhere, even after he had long left the German capital. Supposed encounters with Hennig enhanced the social status of ordinary citizens, while others identified with the murderer and taunted the police by dressing up like him or sending the police postcards in his name. The police image of the criminal was thus less clear and more ambiguous than intended. It left room for an interpretation which regarded Hennig as a special and heroic individual who transgressed the norm. By participating in the hunt for Hennig, ordinary citizens could, at least for a short while, participate in his nimbus.

In her final comment, Ute Frevert (Yale) highlighted

the wealth of synonyms used for social stereotypes during the conference, including prejudice, images, social reputation, roles, clich  s, and satire. What we mean by “social stereotypes” was obviously difficult to define. Pointing to the brevity of Victoria Mather’s column, Frevert suggested that an essential characteristic of social stereotyping is the oversimplification of its objects by the use of only very few components. In contrast, academic research is usually more detailed, although it ultimately also condenses reality into a generalized picture. She also looked at the relationship between experience and stereotyping before turning to the function of the latter. Social stereotypes reduce complexity and foster social identity formation. Their popularization is closely linked with political usage, and power relationships can be mediated through stereotyping. Modern societies are hotbeds of stereotyping because they are complex and multi-faceted, but can we also find stereotypes in pre-modern times? Regarding the process of formation, Frevert pointed out that some social stereotypes have a very long pedigree, while others, like the *Angestellte*, are relatively new. Some media produce social stereotypes through narratives—for example, TV series, newspapers, and novels. In contrast, stereotyping in other media, such as photography, paintings, or cartoons, is static. Stereotype formation, Frevert emphasized, is usually a group process. She pointed out that the study of social stereotypes is relevant only when linked to social practices. For historians, disputes about stereotypes are interesting, as it is then that social images shape action. Frevert concluded by stressing the importance of national comparisons to highlight the underlying social structure of stereotyping.

In the following discussion, Spears pointed out that individuals reinforce stereotypes all the time. He also stressed that stereotypes are about political projects and produced for particular audiences. Hahn questioned the usefulness of distinguishing between national, social, and religious stereotypes, as these are often intertwined, and stressed that stereotypes tell us more about those who use them than about the stereotyped. Conrad suggested speaking about the plausibility instead of the accuracy of stereotypes. He argued that the experience of the advertising industry shows that the vast majority of attempted stereotyping goes wrong. Gestrich emphasized that the political use of stereotypes is important, and asked whether visualization is a pre-requisite for effective stereotypes, while Zukas suggested that cross-class examinations of one social stereotype might bring interesting results about the groups who use them.

Haslam, finally, stressed the importance of humour in group formation. To speak of the accuracy of a stereotype was, however, problematic, as there was no “truthful” view of social groups.

The conference showed that social stereotypes can and have been used successfully as a tool in historical research. However, it has also become clear that “social stereotype” is a very fluid concept, which is understood in different ways by different people and used for different purposes. A more intense dialogue between

historians and social psychologists, who, despite intense research in the field of social stereotyping, have so far shown little interest in the concept’s temporal dimension, might therefore be necessary to make it more useful as an analytical tool. The German Historical Institute’s conference tried to initiate closer co-operation of this sort between the two disciplines. While it has produced no consensus on what social stereotypes mean and how they can best be used, it seems that further exploration of this field might bring interesting results.

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