

**Summary Report of the International Seminar and Workshop on  
"The Social History of Poverty in Central Europe"**

Stemming from a series of studies on the peculiarities of poverty during the decades of communism in Hungary, the Max Weber Foundation for the Study of Social Initiatives (Budapest-Glasgow) invited interested social historians and sociologists to instigate a comparative research project on the social history of the reproduction of poverty in various parts of the Central European region. As a pilot for this project, an International Seminar and Workshop was held between 22-27 May, 1995 in Budapest. The Seminar and Workshop was driven by the recognition of the fact that the present post-communist condition of Central European societies cannot be understood without a thorough re-evaluation of the currents of the past four to seven decades. It is a common feature of the 20th century history of the region that people's experiences have been characterised by continuous external institutional pressures in the name of modernization from above, which, in turn, invoked varying techniques of adjustment and a great diversity of private and family strategies, frequently in opposition to these. Therefore, a true picture would emerge only by combining individual (and family) histories with macro-level analyses. The proposed comparative project envisages a co-operative effort of social historians and sociologists, who would conduct and evaluate three-generational family histories in their respective societies, based on life-history interviews. The result would be on one level a close-to-life information on the different experiences (persecution, adaptation, recovery) along the lines of major conflicts (class, religion, ethnicity,

etc.) in the region. On a second level of abstraction, the material may lend itself to several types of analysis, beginning with the contextual and the narrative, through a sociological one to a synthesis of *petit histoire* and the great events of the twentieth century. Finally, the insights gained by the evaluation of the distinct life histories may also be of practical use. By pointing to the actual drives of people's daily acts and behaviour in adapting to the repeatedly changed conditions of their lives --and particularly their relations to governmental and other institutions-- the multigenerational approach might offer new perspectives and suggestions on economic, social and political decision making. This approach is eminently relevant in informing the fight against the boom of poverty. Since massive reproduction of poverty through multigenerational transmission of social exclusion tends to skew the measures of social policy in the entire region, a historical perspective may be of great value in working out alternatives for social protection amid the dramatic systemic changes. That is all the more important, as the "resistance of poverty" is rarely addressed nowadays because of short-term responses to multifarious daily challenges, which tend to lead to the intensification of social tensions, rather than mitigating them.

The program of the Seminar and Workshop was constructed with the twofold aims of gaining insightful informations on new trends in the study of poverty, and to arrive to a common conceptual and methodological framework of the envisaged research project among the teams of scholars from the participating seven Central European countries (Czech Republic, Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia). During the first two days, four sessions were organized with

lectures and discussions on "New Approaches to Poverty", "Social Policy and Contemporary Poverty", "History, Culture and Memory" and "New Results and Problems in Qualitative Methods". Lectures were given, among others, by J. Berghman (Katolieke Universiteit Brabant), D. Bertaux (Centre d'Etudes des Mouvements), M. Chomiak (National Endowment for the Humanities), M. Molyneux (University of London), P. Pozzi (Centro de Estudios de Historia Obrera), H. Rebel (University of Arizona), A. Thomson (University of Sussex).

The following days were devoted to closed sessions of scholars of the region. All the seven Central European teams had been asked in advance to prepare a paper on previous major studies on poverty and life-history analyses in their respective countries. During the remaining part of the week, intense discussions took place over these papers, and also over the short oral presentations that the participants gave about the current country-specific manifestations of old and new poverty, marginalization and social exclusion amid the changed conditions of economic and political transformation. These discussions lended themselves in a detailed research proposal. The participants established their "Working Group for the Study of the Social History of Poverty in Central Europe", and agreed to start the first phase of the research by preparing two case-studies with three generations of families in move from agrarian background to industry around the turn of the 1950s and '60s (i.e., in the period of the expansion of socialist heavy industry).

The Working Group decided to organize its next follow-up Workshop in Poland in May, 1996.

The Max Weber Foundation for the Study of Social Initiatives agreed to publish the papers of the International Seminar and Workshop in its series "Review in Social Policy". The publication is expected to come out in November, 1995.

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