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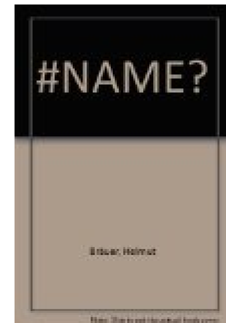
Helmut Braeuer. *"...Und hat seithero gebetlet": Bettler und Bettelwesen in Wien und NiederÖ¶sterreich wÖ¤hrend der Zeit Kaiser Leopolds I.* Vienna: BÖ¶hlau Verlag, 1996. 294 pp. 58 DM (paper), ISBN 978-3-205-98291-3.



Reviewed by John Spielman (Haverford College)
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The Beggars of Leopoldine Vienna

The unusual title for this study of mendicancy in Leopoldine Vienna and its hinterland is a quotation from the inquest of one Johannes Lercher, a fourteen-year-old youth from Prague who had worked for two years as a dog boy (*Hundebub*) in a noble house, ran away a few weeks before he was apprehended, and had since then been begging. Having been caught at this several times, he was sentenced to forced labor in chains (p. 134). This miniature biography encompases a number of the large problems Helmut Braeuer attempts to deal with in this work, centering around questions of who the beggars were, and how the political and social structures tried to deal with what seemed at least at the time to be a rapid and massive increase of beggars, particularly in the capital, Vienna.

As the imperial residence, Vienna attracted the wealthy elite of the realm, their patronage, and, alongside that, those who sought charitable alms. From the beginning Braeuer makes clear the methodological and source problems involved in dealing with people on the outer fringes of society. To begin with, virtually all the written sources are artifacts of the dominant authorities who represent the possessing classes. The only time the voices of the beggars themselves are heard is in records of their interrogation when they come before officials to be judged for infractions of one rule or another, or in some cases are apprehended for criminal acts. The one exception to this is hearings to determine whether or not a person was a "worthy" beggar and could be granted a civic permit to seek alms publicly in the city. Unfortunately, those records are less complete than the others, with the result that even the preservation of documents skews the inquiry toward beggars who were being pursued for some reason by the forces of law and order.

The very distinction between "worthy" and "unworthy" beggars displays in Braeuer's view a central contradiction in the policies of the Habsburg monarchy under Leopold I. On one hand, the completion of the Counter-Reformation in Austria had emphasized the charitable mission of the church and its duty to give alms to the poor and to feed those in dire need. On the other hand, the imperial residence attracted increasing numbers of landless, unemployed vagrants, seeking work, alms, or loot. Those who could not find the first had to turn to the second, and in some cases, when denied that, might turn to petty theft to survive. This group of the indigent on the edge of subsistence was perceived as a threat to the established order, and the discomfort and fear of the "Obrigkeit" led to demands for protection.

The pattern of Habsburg policy in this instance, as in so many others, was laid down in the reign of Ferdinand I, who in 1552 issued a Patent prohibiting begging in Vienna, and coupled that with a decree to the effect that each community in his realm was responsible for caring for its own poor. The problem was that many of the "masterless rabble" (*herrenloses Gesindl* in the contemporary phrase universally applied to them, though not mentioned by Braeuer) had no home town, no roots to return to. The decades of war in the region led to massive up-

rooting in countryside and towns. Waves of migration accompanied Turkish assaults in the East, while the disbanding of imperial armed forces, including a decrease of one-third in the Vienna *Stadtguardie*, sent many poor men who had been recruited into the service out into the world of the unemployed.

As in other instances, the crown made a general prohibition, then created mechanisms for making necessary exceptions to it. Hence the distinction between "worthy" and "unworthy," with the former given a written permit to seek alms inside the city walls, the others condemned to be expelled from the city if found begging; or, if they repeated the offense, being condemned to a stay in the dungeon of the city hospital or sent to the Zuchthaus established in 1671, where they would perform forced labor, often in irons. In general the distinction made was between the truly incapacitated, the blind and wounded who were conventionally pious in their religious observations and prayed regularly, and the "healthy beggars" who, it was assumed, were not working for a living because they were lazy and not because there were no opportunities for employment. In many of his discussions of these issues and policies, Braeuer sounds eerily like those involved in the discussion of "welfare reform" in contemporary industrialized societies. The few public institutions created to provide shelter and subsistence to the elderly and infirm, the Armenhaus and the municipal hospital, were overcrowded even before they were completely finished. The ideas of the cameralist writers, notably Becher and von Hoernigk, offered a solution based on increasing employment through mercantilist policies, but their practical schemes came to naught for lack of capital and the opposition of the old nobility, which stoutly resisted such bourgeois plans.

Given these structural elements of the situation in the second half of the seventeenth century, Braeuer turns to a discussion of the beggars themselves: Who were they? Where did they come from? How did they operate? Did they in fact spread disease and indulge in criminal acts as they were accused of doing by the established social elites? On the basis of brief records of depositions of some seven hundred beggars caught by the authorities, Braeuer ventures a few important conclusions, always careful to indicate the limits of the sources and the fact that no general statistical analysis of the entire group will ever be possible, since only a fraction of it ever produced any record at all. The first and most emphatic conclusion he draws is that begging was an intensely individual activity in the period. Unlike some Western societies where mendicancy became virtually professional and beggars formed a kind of underworld society, in Lower Austria it was pursued by single individuals or family groups with few close relationships among them. With the exception of a few visible "gangs" of teenage males, the indigent showed little inclination to organize or to express collective opposition to the authorities who were the authors of much of their distress. The "unworthy" beggars, who produced most of the written evidence, came from all over the empire and the Habsburg lands, but mostly from villages in Lower and Upper Austria and Bavaria. By the reign of Leopold I, many of them were products of the "masterless rabble" itself–children of single mothers who knew the father only as "a soldier." Some of them were in fact occasional or seasonal beggars with permanent shelter in the suburbs who sought alms to tide them over periodic unemployment.

As for the image of beggars purveyed by popular literature pandering to the insecurity of the settled classes, Braeuer dismisses the accusations that they spread the plague and that they were the breeding ground for crime and violence. In the first case evidence is hard to find either way, for the state of medicine and hygiene in the late seventeenth century did not require a mobile underclass to spread disease from one place to another. At the same time the beggars were frequently themselves victims of degenerative diseases or festering injuries that rendered them incapable of work. As for criminality, Braeuer's argument has to rest largely on the fact that records of serious crimes punished in the period do not indicate that begging was the criminal's occupation. That alms seekers were tempted to practice a little petty thievery if the occasion presented itself is understandable, but again Braeuer argues that the risk of discovery was much greater and the punishment vastly more severe than that meted out to beggars. Braeuer points out that, although the authorities really meant what they said in the prohibitions ("It was more than stage thunder," p. 190), there was a large gap between stated intention and practical reality. Beggars escorted to the city gate and expelled could be back in the city very shortly by bribing a guard with 5 Kreuzer. While enforcement was haphazard, it did encourage a certain discretion on the part of "unworthy" beggars, who had to keep a low profile to avoid heavier sentences for repeated offenses.

The evidence gathered for this study is impressive, and Braeuer uses much of it imaginatively. The bibliography shows a mastery of all the German literature, both historical and theoretical, and of works in other languages that have been translated. Helmut Braeuer, a Leipzig historian, gives in his methodological introduc-

tion a striking example of the creative reunification of eastern and western European historical interests. The book is written in the rather dense jargon of German social science, and there is a persistent tendency to find the underlying causes of mendicancy in the structural adjustments taking place in a proto-capitalist, late feudal society. What seems to me missing is an appreciation of the importance of dependency in this society. To be without a master (*herrenlos*) had enormous consequences for personal identity in a hierarchical society, material and psychological consequences that went beyond lack of employment. On the other hand, Braeuer's sources enticed him to focus on the experiences of individuals who were caught up in the system as it was; and in exploring the variety of their experiences, he shows that "begging had a historical dimension and its practitioners real biographies" (from the notice on the back cover). In that enterprise he has added a valuable new facet to the social history of early modern Vienna.

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