

## **Begging and peddling in Vienna and its surrounding areas (1918-1938)<sup>1</sup>**

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The 1920s and 1930s find begging as an important social issue within politics, policies and the press. Begging is discussed as a particularly Viennese problem, a dreadful state of affairs - even a plague - which seems to be grounded on an old tradition of mistaken charity, the catholic willingness to give pittance, and the police's carelessness. Begging is criticized not only as a burden on private charity and the public welfare system; pittances are also calculated to be a huge, unproductive drain on the national income. Beggars seem to crowd the inner city's streets, obstruct business and bother the passers-by. They are accused of hurting tourism and Vienna's image in the eyes of the world.<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of the 1930s, the fight against begging and the police raids against beggars were intensified. There were estimated to be up to 30.000 beggars in Vienna. Even some years later there were still 10.000 beggars counted. It is a paradox produced by this strong politics opposing begging that within the same time, begging almost disappears from the statistics of criminal offences, but the numbers of convictions of "Arbeitsscheu" (work-shyness) and vagrancy drastically rises.

Despite this picture of masses, crowds and plague, contemporary observations are well aware that they are dealing with quite a variety of persons, social situations and social careers. It is not simply neglected that after WWI and within the world economic crisis, life was hard. So, poverty, inflation, unemployment or inability to work caused by invalidity, malnutrition or age could be considered good reasons for begging. Newspapers colourfully describe all kind of beggars: the forms of begging, their arguments, excuses, and tricks, as well as their places. They distinguish poverty from fraud: the genuinely injured from impostors, and those injured in war from those suffering civil injuries (or none at all). Those begging out of real hardship are called "qualified" beggars. They are contrasted with those who make begging a habit or even a profession by choice. Beggars are suspected of making a living from poverty. Like professionals, they work regular hours and places. They gain a certain income according to their abilities to grab peoples' sympathy. There is even a rumour about a beggars' guild,

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<sup>2</sup> Other governments disagreed with this judgment, and located the problem of Viennese beggars not in Vienna, but in their own districts and town. Since welfare was a matter of municipal service and bound to the so-called "Heimatrecht" the origins of beggars was a hotly debated matter for budgets.

which allocates pitches and rents kids to be used for begging.<sup>3</sup> Such journalistic depictions and distinctions might be social exoticism or hair-splitting, but distinctions - if officially acknowledged - could decide important issues about arrest, admission to the workhouse or the newly installed prison camps for beggars. Police, government and welfare institutions intensified the effort and increased their odds of identifying the professional beggars, by producing and connecting records. The so-called “Unterstützungsausweis” was established – an identity card that confirmed claims for support, which also allowed the authorities to register where and how often somebody asked for official social support in different places. The crucial point in all these discussions seems to center around the ability and the willingness to work. Among the variety of beggars, those who ask for public or private charity without “inevitable force”, those who are able to work but apparently refused to, are fought the most diligently. But: What is begging? What is work? A feuilleton of 1926 describes the beggars in Vienna:

*“There is the apostle in front of the Kammerspiele, old Marcus on the Bridge[...] with his violin, the Goldengerl, who sells newspapers, Petrus from the Neuer Markt, who lets his old fashioned musical box play; the chimneysweep with his long ladder and “best wishes” for the night owls, the woman who sells postcards in the coffee houses; the man who sells bird food, the woman with two kids. There are the blind who knock their stick in front of them, grandfathers with white hair; dilapidated very old ones; men without hands, without feet; different bent and misshapen people with faces eaten away and mutilated; there are shaking and trembling ones; rascals, which stare in rags and dirt or remarkably clean ones, who are murmuring prayers and moaning whimpers; shy and brazen - an odd, bizarre collection which is on view everywhere.”*<sup>4</sup>

The difference between work and begging, asking for pittance and offering goods or services (however insignificant or cheap they may be) seems to vanish.<sup>5</sup> So whereas begging is suspected of being practiced as an occupation, certain trades seem to lose their legitimacy as work. Buying appears as an act of charity, and the offered goods are regarded as an excuse for begging. Such an equation of begging and peddling seems familiar, not least from signs still to be found in old houses which say: “begging and peddling forbidden.” This equation still needs an explanation.

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<sup>3</sup> Maria Jahoda: Aus den Anfängen der sozialwissenschaftlichen Forschung in Österreich. In: Das geistige Leben Wiens in der Zwischenkriegszeit. Wien 1981, 216-222, 218.

<sup>4</sup> Die Bettler von Wien. Maßnahmen gegen das Bettlerunwesen. In: Neues Wiener Tagblatt 213, 6.8.1927, 6f.

<sup>5</sup> Das Bettlerwesen in Wien und seine Bekämpfung. Bericht über die am 19. Februar 1933 von der „Ethischen Gemeinde“ veranstalteten Konferenz. Wien 1933, 12.

The paper discusses peddling and begging in all of its disputed and varying meanings and connotations. Rather than analysing beggars or peddlers as clearly distinguished groups, or as a number of clearly defined people, my research focuses on those more or less efficient practices that define and distinguish and try to establish a hierarchy. It aims to reconstruct a field of forces that - through conflict and consensus - produces practical categories of more or less legitimate ways to find an income. It would be easy to imagine beggars or peddlers as mere victims of police and politics. Beside the official categories, there are however also critiques using words or in practices, and other attempts to distinguish and represent. Including the attempts of the dominated and less powerful to distinguish and represent themselves, however, gives a clearer insight into the process which brings these practices into being.

### **The historical perspective**

Such criticism and suspicion of peddlers is nothing new. The law against vagrancy from 1885, which was the legal basis for politics against begging until 1938, tries to clarify the term vagrancy and distinguishes it from itinerant trades, like peddlers, fairmen, and street musicians. A vagrant is defined as somebody “who drifts unemployed and without business and is unable to prove that he owns or seeks to gain legally the means for his maintenance.” Vagrancy and those who are begging or use public welfare out of “Arbeitsscheu” (work-shyness) are to be punished with detention. The criminological comments on this law, however, notice that the police or judges are seldom able or willing to explore the real motives of the vagrant or beggar, and that the accused seldom have the possibility of proving their motives to be honest. In a criminological context, itinerant trades remain suspected as covers for habitual work avoidance or other crimes.

There are, however, other perspectives on itinerant trades, and there is not a single closed front against them. Peddling was legally allowed at the end of the 18th century. With the intention being to increase commerce, it was argued that everyone should be allowed to earn his living in a legal way. It should also be possible for everyone to satisfy his real or imagined needs. A survey from 1899<sup>6</sup> discusses peddling – despite all critiques – also as a trade for the poor, and as an income for the population of poor regions and as a possibility for supplying underdeveloped regions with goods. Peddling is considered as the sale of cheap goods that are flawed or out of fashion to people who could not afford better. The description of peddlers in Vienna and Lower Austria suspects just the women and kids who sell flowers or using

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<sup>6</sup> Untersuchungen über die Lage des Hausiergewerbes in Österreich. Leipzig 1899 (=Schriften des Vereins für Socialpolitik 82)

peddling as cover for begging and prostitution.<sup>7</sup> Since peddling was seen as a possibility for increasing commerce and as the primary means of distribution for certain industries and trades, it was supported by representatives of industry, some chambers of commerce and even by singular sedentary crafts at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> In opposition to that, the cooperatives of sedentary trades and shops tried to forbid or restrict peddling as an illegitimate competitor, as superfluous in cities, and as a threat to health and hygiene. Peddling was accused of defrauding consumers, and of selling goods without value by illegitimate means of persuasion or gaining sympathy. Both sides use the consumers' interests as an argument. Consumers obviously seemed to support peddling in a practical way, by buying the peddlers' goods. Peddling wouldn't exist otherwise. People with low income used the possibilities offered by peddlers: buying in instalments, and selling or exchanging their own old possessions for other things they needed. And last but not least, there are the peddlers who not only worked but also argued in favour of their occupation.

### **After WWI**

This survey from 1899 also discusses the actual decreases in peddling in relation to stable trades during the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This perception is commonly shared by historical research on peddling,<sup>9</sup> however most historical studies end with WWI. After WWI, it seems a common sense assumption that peddling was a traditional or even dying profession. We find nostalgic descriptions of the disappearance of all kinds of exotic traders from the different regions of the former monarchy. Simultaneously, there are complaints of masses of peddlers in Vienna – where peddling was forbidden since 1910 - and about masses of Viennese peddlers (in this context often depicted as Galician Jews) flooding the provinces with worthless goods. Official statistics claim that there are around 2200 peddlers in whole of Austria in the first years of the 1920s, but there are also estimations of 30.000 peddlers with or without licence in Vienna alone. The pros and cons of peddling are quite similar to those of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but the field of forces now seems to change even more to the disadvantage of the peddlers. The federation of industry still supports peddling, but the chambers of trade and commerce, together with the trade cooperatives, are now united strictly against peddling. The chamber of labour and the labour movement support peddling as a possibility for the unemployed and especially for war invalids to find income. It also welcomes it as competition

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<sup>7</sup> Rudolf Kobatsch: Wien und das übrige Niederösterreich, in: Untersuchungen 1-34, 25.

<sup>8</sup> Arnold Raesch: Soll der Hausierhandel abgeschafft werden? Wien 1897, 15.

<sup>9</sup> See for example Hannelore Oberpenning: Migration und Fernhandel im „Tödden-System“ Wanderhändler aus dem nördlichen Münsterland im mittleren und nördlichen Europa. Osnabrück 1996 (Studien zur Historischen Migrationsforschung Bd. 4), 38.

against the monopoly of sedentary trades in small towns. All these political institutions and even the peddlers' organisations welcome regulation and the restriction of peddling, and they fight against peddling without official licence. Defending against the attempt to totally forbid peddling, peddlers organisations insist on both the tradition behind and the necessity of their occupation.

It was also common sense to think that if peddling was allowed at all, it should be open mostly or exclusively to war invalids and war widows. This agrees with a tendency to re-integrate returnees from the war into the economy. The "Kriegsinvalidenbeschäftigungsgesetz" from 1920 on tried to grant the possibility of employment to invalids, and required all companies with more than 20 employees to employ invalids. Following the principle of productiveness, this policy aimed to restrict welfare mostly on people who couldn't support themselves by working, a principle that was shared also by the representatives of Red Vienna.<sup>10</sup>

The new law for Peddling from 1922 makes peddling officially a matter of poverty and the inability to do "real" or "valuable" work. Peddling – already regulated not through the law of industry but in separate laws since 1852 – is now made to a matter of special exception in certain cases. Unless somebody had continuous permission since 1914, a registration for peddling required one to prove an extraordinary economic hardship and to be physically unable to work in another occupation. The applicant had to be 30 years or older, of good reputation and free from contagious or disgusting diseases. Getting permission for peddling became an immense bureaucratic effort: It was necessary to renew the permission once a year. Reports from the local authority, police, the tax office, and the medical officer were required. These applications were then examined by the chamber of commerce, the trade cooperatives, the chamber of labour, and the local government. This kind of administration produced information, which allows some insight into the situation of the applicants and the process of decision in individual cases. The involved institutions mostly decided according to their position mentioned above: Local authorities often gave a positive report, probably in order to unburden themselves of welfare expenses. The chamber of labour generally supported the applicants. Yet there are many applications every year and most of them are turned down. A common argument on the rejected applications was that the applicant wasn't unable to find

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<sup>10</sup> Gerhard Melinz: Von der Armenfürsorge zur Sozialhilfe: Zur Interaktionsgeschichte von „erstem“ und „zweitem“ sozialen Netz in Österreich am Beispiel der Erwachsenenfürsorge im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert. Wien Habilitationsschrift 2003, 175.

another occupation, being insufficiently invalid. It is often recommended that the applicant should work in another easier and more valuable occupation, like in a shop or in an office. Domestic work is sometimes recommended as an alternative for women. Other applicants were judged too invalid for the hard work of peddling. Finally, some of the applicants – or their families - still had too much income, social welfare, or too many possessions to apply for peddling. Criminal records are also a common reason for a rejection, first of all in cases of crimes against property; sometimes even if these convictions have already been expunged from the records.

How does begging work in this context? According to the context, many of the applicants argue that they don't want to rely on welfare and burden the community. They say that without permission to peddle, they would be forced to begging – or even theft. The records show that many of the applicants already have convictions for begging or vagrancy, but occasional begging alone doesn't make a beggar. There was still a chance to get permission if other aspects spoke in favour of the applicant (like the support of the local trade cooperatives in the cases of bankrupt or old shopkeepers who tried to find new income as peddlers). If there is a long list of convictions, or already the applicant is already labelled as a beggar, work-shy, etc., then the application was turned down and the exclusion from a regular occupation is reinforced. Attempts to legalize illegal peddling by getting permission seem seldom successful.

### **Peddlers and travelling salesmen**

In a few isolated cases, the whole policy against peddling appears to be founded on a simple attempt at arbitrarily applied suppression caused by hostility against Jews, Gypsies and vagrants, who are commonly associated with this kind of occupation. This is one aspect, but to understand peddling or begging or other more or less legitimate attempts to find livelihood in this time, a historical or isolated perspective seems not enough. Within the context of other professions it is obvious that this politics of re-definition, regulation and restriction is also part of a more general process of the normalization and regulation of trades, professions and markets. Within this process, access to occupations, professional training, work conditions, and social insurance were regulated more and more precisely. The places, the goods, hygiene, and the access to markets are defined and controlled more and more clearly.

This context becomes more obvious if we consider other professions of sales in relation to peddling. In the above-mentioned survey from 1899, sales agents and travelling salesmen are included in the description of peddling. There are already separate organisations of salesmen founded at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and in the interwar period these professions seem something quite separated from peddling. The “Handelsagentengesetz” of 1921 newly regulates the work of sales agents. They are defined as self-employed businessmen and represented by the chamber of commerce, but there are also other social democratic organisations of travelling salesmen and agents. Their self-representation stresses the modernity of their profession, the specific knowledge and qualifications – or even psychology of sales - required to be a good salesmen. Access to this profession was quite easy in comparison to peddling, and the travelling salesmen’s organisation complained about the masses of unqualified and unemployed who sought income in this line of trade. Their occupation faced very similar prejudices and critiques as a result of their methods of persuasion. Salesmen and peddlers – who appear to be so much different on the level of self-representation - do not seem so clearly separated if we look at individual records and many cases of conflict. Salesmen are legally not allowed to sell goods but only to take orders. There are, however, often accusations of illegal peddling. Similarly, peddlers are accused of taking orders and selling amounts of goods that would have been impossible to carry around themselves, and it was thought they illegally used trucks for transport. Despite the comparatively better reputation of salesmen, we find records of salesmen who had convictions for vagrancy, begging, and homelessness – which resulted in the loss of their permissions. The label of peddlers and salesmen both represent a broad variety of social situations, practices and economic strategies. There are overlaps and exchanges in-between. Conflict and convictions show the effort actually made to clearly separate both occupations.

Whereas salesmen managed to establish themselves as a legitimate vocation, peddling - at least officially - almost disappeared. By 1934 there is a general end to new registrations for peddling. In 1938, there are just 250 peddler-licences left in lower Austria and Vienna, and peddling was forbidden in 70% of the towns. However, things don’t happen just with permission, and politics didn’t just reinforce the image of peddling as a matter of poverty. In some respects, politics provoked illegal peddling. Illegal peddling was considered a violation only against the laws of industry, and was punished with a fine and not imprisonment, much like a violation of the law of vagrancy. At least illegal peddling proved a willingness to find livelihood in an honest way, which was even confirmed in a decision of the Supreme Court in

1938.<sup>11</sup> This decision didn't necessarily affect police work, but subsequent police work had to be based not only on the will to fight against beggars, but also in law. It also met opposition and critique – although in a rather spontaneous and apparently not efficient way. We find complaints about passers-by who didn't only give alms, but interfered in police work by warning or defending beggars. There are finally those who are on the streets despite all forms of persecution. In 1937 the police complained to the ministry of internal affairs<sup>12</sup> that they didn't have the legal basis to fight against the professional beggars. These are now no longer simply the work-shy, but people who are unfit for a custodial sentence and unfit for a labour camp. Since there was no law that allowed police to force them into an asylum, they were free to escape both the welfare system and imprisonment, which they obviously preferred to do.

### **Conclusion and the further perspective of the project**

To understand the production of more or less legitimate ways to find livelihood, it seems necessary to consider aspects of economy and culture equally. This sketch of some fields and questions within the project could also show that we have to deal with a spectrum of different interests, strategies, and commitments of varying efficacy. To analyse the varying efficacy of these practices, it is necessary to include a broad variety of the more and less successful practices and representations. It is equally necessary to consider the explicit and implicit representations, manifested in practices. The concept of a space of possibility will allow us to systematically compare and contextualize these variables across different cases.

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<sup>11</sup> 36. auch ein unerlaubter Erwerb kann ein rechtlicher Erwerb im Sinne des §1 des Gesetzes vom 24. Mai 1885, RGBI. Nr 89, sein. Entscheidung vom 21. April 1938. In: Entscheidungen des österr. Obersten Gerichtshofes in Strafsachen und Disziplinarangelegenheiten. Veröffentlicht von seinen Mitgliedern unter Mitwirkung der Generalprokuratur. XVIII Band. Wien 1938, 80f.

<sup>12</sup> Brief der Bundes-Polizeidirektion in Wien an das Bundeskanzleramt, Generaldirektion für die öffentliche Sicherheit Abt. 2; Wien 21. Mai 1937. Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, AdR 04, Bundeskanzleramt Inneres 20/2, Kt 4755, 131245-6/1938.