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Exploring the history of settlements

Sarah Vicary, John Gal and Stefan Köngeter

On a lovely spring day in Edinburgh a joint pre-conference event entitled, 'Exploring the history of settlements' was led by the SWHN and ESWRA Special Interest Group on social work history research. The idea for the session was that of John and Stefan. Sarah provided support on behalf of the Network which was especially important as the session was held in the United Kingdom. In preparation for some months, we were really pleased by the response to the call for papers. The audience numbers did not disappoint either. From the photograph they all also appeared to enjoy it!

Divided into three parts, the programme first explored historical case studies, followed by more contemporary studies and then an opportunity for discussion. To begin, Stefan Köngeter discussed the transnational development of the Settlement House Movement, identifying the different models. He was followed by Hugh Shewell who gave an insight into Basil Henriques (a family member) and the Oxford and St. George's Settlement House which he spoke about in terms of a Jewish response to Christian social reform in early twentieth century Britain. John Gal, on behalf of himself and Yehudit Avnir, then gave a paper on the Settlement Houses in the Jewish Community in Mandatory Palestine also providing a series of fascinating photographs by way of illustration. Francisco Branco then spoke to his paper, 'What a Difference an R made: Chicago's Hull House experience, French "maisons sociales" and their influence in Portugal'. The R in question



John Gal



Stefan Köngeter

referred to residence, reform and research. Kate Bradley brought this first session to a close introducing us to the Poor Man's Lawyer and social work, c.1890-1939 as they existed in English settlements.

After a short break we had a first paper from Rory Crath's, 'Animating objectivity: The Chicago Settlement's use of numeric and aesthetic knowledge to render its immigrant neighbours and neighbourhood knowable,' a fascinating exploration of the use of maps. Next our own Network chair Terry Bamford spoke about 'A passion for social change – the temperance movement, social reform and settlements'. Two colleagues from The Open University then followed; Steven Malies' 'From 'Agit Prop' to community social work partnership. A look at how a Victorian Settlement in London's East End responded to the needs of its local communities in the 1970s to 1990s' and Jeanette Copperman's 'Community Development within Waterloo Action Centre 1981-1987.' Both were fascinating insights into the recent past and current use.

Finally, Barbara Levy Simon introduced us to Mary Simkhovitch and in particular the influence Prussian academics held for this Settlement pioneer.

Our final session, which took place after the lunch break, allowed an opportunity for the audience to comment in more detail and for a fuller dialogue about further research in this area. Begun by

Jim Minton, the current Chief Executive Officer of Toynbee Hall and Geoff Ginn, both went on to comment on the quality of the morning's speakers and also of the themes that had occurred to them. As chair, Sarah attempted to collate some of the main points of the discussion that followed; that the Settlement movement is a

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Attendees at the Edinburgh meeting

broad tent and that transnational is embedded in a localised place. The audience also queried the use of concepts, for example, the German language has no literal translation of community, so what then is being discussed; is it an aspect of communality or public space where people can relate to each other and to have something in common? A further question was, which story can be told at a certain moment to a certain audience and does time count? Could these places be sites of memories which could also be addressed in the digital world, and could a new space develop? In relation to Toynbee Hall, the audience also wondered how its importance could be considered today and, if so, how does it 'translate?' In terms of future research, it was agreed that the biographical approach does fit well (as indeed some of the papers highlighted), but it was also agreed that it is important that other approaches should be considered such as network analysis; looking at people in these places being there at a point in time and also what happens over time with an emphasis on networks within as well as across. The audience also questioned whether there are lost and hidden histories, for example squatting. A further debate concerned the teaching of history and the need to deepen our understanding of the intellectual

history of social work. Do social workers have this and if so, why is it not more to the forefront? Praxis: the idea of putting theory into practice are not just historical concepts, questions or challenges, there is an interrelation between social work and social education. Kate's talk, in particular, made the audience consider the role of law in the development of social work. Other papers also gave rise to the theme of how gender and class shaped social work and also can social workers be radical and not radical at the same time, all aspects of current significance to social work education.

Overall, this was a hugely enjoyable day, supported by a range of high quality papers and an international audience with a real interest in the topic. John, Stefan and I plan to build on this momentum and are considering an edited book possibly in the book series launched at the Conference by the publishers, Policy Press. If members of the Network are inspired by what they have read here and would like to contribute do please get in touch:

sarah.vicary@open.ac.uk

john.gal@mail.huji.ac.il

koengeter@uni-trier.de