



Marienthal: The Sociography of an Unemployed Community

Marie Jahoda, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Hans Zeisel

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"One of the main theses of the Marienthal study was that prolonged unemployment leads to a state of apathy in which the victims do not utilize any longer even the few opportunities left to them. The vicious cycle between reduced opportunities and reduced level of aspiration has remained the focus of all subsequent discussions." So begin the opening remarks to the English-language edition of what has become a major class in the literature of social stratification.

The study on which *Marienthal* is based was conducted in 1930 in Austria, at the time of a depression that was worse than anything experienced in the United States. But the substantive problem is still very much with us, although our focus is now poverty rather than unemployment. In Austria, the institutional response to mass unemployment was the dole. Unlike the work relief programs of the New Deal, the dole system left workers destitute and idle. The essential finding of this research is that when people are deprived of work, there is a breakdown in the personality structure of a group.

Marienthal represents a colossal breakthrough in social research. It provides a combination of quantification and interpretive analysis of qualitative material—an approach that remains in the forefront of present-day research design. The work combines statistical data at hand, case studies, information on historical background of those being studied, and questionnaires combined with solicited reports that enhances a sense of daily life without intrusion by investigators. The work provides a unique insight into how creative innovations can assist in overcoming collective deprivations.

The work of Marie Jahoda, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and Hans Zeisel was sponsored by the then newly created Psychological Institute at the University of Vienna. Each of the authors went on to extraordinary professional careers. Jahoda held positions at New York University, Brunel University, and the University of Sussex. Lazarsfeld spent the better part of his career from 1933 to his death at Columbia University in New York City. Zeisel came to the University of Chicago after the rise of Nazism.



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