

Other Literacies: Communication in the Margins of Medieval Society

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This text is meant first of all to help the participants in the round table discussion at the International Medieval Congress at Leeds, on 3 July 2017. It may also serve in the preparation of regular sessions at future IMCs, and, if there proves to be enough interest in the topic, in the preparation of a volume of essays on this neglected topic.

Despite much attention being paid over the last decades to medieval literacy and communication, hardly any attention has been given to the ways those in the margins of medieval society communicated among themselves and with those who had established themselves at the centre of society. And yet there is information available for the study of the non-verbal, oral and written communication by beggars and vagabonds, robbers and thieves, gypsies and lepers – to name but a few of the groups living at the edge of society. This round table discussion will address possibilities and impossibilities of studying marginal groups from the perspective of literacy and communication.

Four Questions

If we want to address this topic, it will be necessary to give provisional answers to the following four questions. Who are the marginals we are talking

about? How do these marginals communicate among themselves? How does 'normal' society communicate with the marginals? And finally: how can one study communication in the margins of medieval society?

Who Are the Marginals?

Our awareness of the definitions of the social groups at the edge of medieval society (*Randgruppen*, *marginaux*) has been constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed by historians and sociologists during successive waves of intense research in the second half of the twentieth century, depending on how they chose to determine Otherness.¹

In medieval times, too, there were various ways in which marginal individuals and groups could be perceived as 'different' by those who lived at the centre of medieval society, with its regular and secular clergy, its higher and lower nobility, its town dwellers and peasants. There were also those who lived elsewhere, such as pagan peoples, with whom one might come into commercial or military contact. These outsiders were not considered as forming part of one's own society and therefore are left outside the marginality under discussion here. There were also groups of outsiders who might on occasion share the same space with those at the heart of Christian society, such as the Jews, Muslims and converts from these religions. These groups, sometimes accepted yet always different because of their religion, merit separate treatment; although they have certain characteristics in common with the groups of other, mainly Christian, marginals, they will not be considered here.² They lived side by side with Christians, but not necessarily at the bottom of society.

In the margins of Christian society we find 'loose people', vagabonds, beggars, criminals, prostitutes, people with dishonest professions, and people suffering of contagious illnesses (first of all lepers). These people, whose lives were characterised by mobility, homelessness and a lack of stability, were looked upon with distrust. Most of them were poor. Apprentices, servants and students might swell the numbers of those called criminals, just as the unfortunate poor.

¹ B.-U. HERGEMÖLLER, "'Randgruppen' im späten Mittelalter: Konstruktion – Dekonstruktion – Rekonstruktion", in: *Die Aktualität des Mittelalters*, ed. H.-W. GOETZ (Bochum, 2000: *Herausforderungen: Historisch-politische Analysen* 10), pp. 165-190.

² For similar reasons, heretics are also left out, as are other individuals and groups that were considered 'different' for religious reasons.

The groups mentioned so far lived in marginal conditions because of socio-economic reasons. In addition there were persons and groups who were marginalised because of socio-cultural reasons: ethnic minorities such as Gypsies, and, for instance, minstrels or actors.

Because we are mainly interested in communication within marginal groups, and between marginal groups and society at large, we will concentrate on groups rather than individuals, leaving aside for instance the phenomena of transgenders, madmen, and executioners.

How Do Marginals Communicate Among Themselves?

The matter of communication in groups of marginals is determined in part by the ways in which these groups came about. Most of them could be found in the towns, where they communicated among themselves wherever workers were hired, in churches, taverns and warehouses. Their predominantly oral communication had to make use of secret languages (argot, slang, *Geheimsprache*), which were intentionally created to isolate one's group from society at large. They were developed mainly among beggars, thieves, gamblers, and prostitutes and pimps. Some groups, such as the Gypsies, were multilingual.

Marginal groups did not confine themselves to secret forms of coded languages, however. They might also resort to secret gestures, and on occasion they used the written word as well. Written documents seem to have been important especially in their contacts with society at large.

How Does 'Normal' Society Communicate with the Marginals?

Society decided which people were excluded and imposed a broad spectrum of visual and auditive signs of exclusion, according to the mechanisms ruling the 'emblematic society'. Many of these signs have attracted scholarly attention over last three decades.³ Conversely, in their contacts with society, the marginals themselves adopted means of communication familiar to society

³ See, e.g. the works of the French scholar Michel PASTOUREAU on colours of exclusion and the idea of an 'emblematic society', or R. MELLINKOFF, *Outcasts: Signs of Otherness in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages*, 2 vols. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford, 1993).

at large. They were able to speak the natural languages of society and to turn to their favour some of the commonly used signs of social identity (e.g. shaving their heads in false tonsures). However, one also encounters the use of letters and (forged) privileges. This may have been possible in part thanks to the many clerics and poor students that ended up in marginal groups. Some studies of these practices of writing suggest that the opinion of full illiteracy of the people in the margins (including at the bottom) of medieval society, prominent in the older scholarly literature, needs serious reconsideration.⁴

How to Study Communication in the Margins of Society?

So far, there are hardly any studies dealing explicitly with communication in the margins of medieval society. Marginal social groups have, however, been studied by many disciplines, in particular by social and economic history, legal history, religious history, and the history of mentalities.⁵ Much research has been done from the 1960s to the beginning of the 1990s, after which the topic, due to changes in late twentieth-century scholarly interests, seems to have lost much of its earlier appeal.

Today, the *International Medieval Bibliography (IMB)* today lists 193 publications dealing with ‘marginal social groups’, and many of them incidentally make valuable observations on the ways forms of communication were used inside those groups and between insiders and outsiders. They also refer to the views of outsiders as expressed, for instance, in works of literature, in which forms of communication also make an appearance.

⁴ E.g. W.M. ORMROD, “Robin Hood and public record: The authority of writing in the medieval outlaw tradition”, in: *Medieval Cultural Studies: Essays in Honour of Stephen Knight*, ed. R. Evans *et al.* (Cardiff, 2006), pp. 57-74; S.A. SROKA, “Villains, merchants and the written word: A document of highland outlaws from the Polish-Hungarian border area from 1493”, in: *Medieval Legal Process: Physical, Spoken and Written Performance in the Middle Ages*, ed. M. MOSTERT and P.S. BARNWELL (Turnhout, 2011: *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* 22), pp. 267-280.

⁵ One scholar has to be mentioned here by name, as he was instrumental in putting the subject of marginal social groups on the map: Bronislaw GEREMEK. Several of his monographs have been translated into French: *Les marginaux parisiens aux XIV^e et XV^e siècles* (Paris, 1976); *Truands et misérables dans l’Europe moderne 1350-1600* (Paris, 1980) *La potence ou la pitié: L’Europe et les pauvres du Moyen Âge à nos jours* (Paris, 1987); and *Les fils de Caïn: Pauvres et vagabonds dans la littérature européenne (XV^e-XVII^e siècle)* (Paris, 1991). Cf. Also his *O średniowieczu*, ed. H. ZAREMSKA and A. NIEGOWSKA (Warsaw, 2012). The references for the examples mentioned above can be found back through his works.

The publications listed in the *IMB* also mention the other subjects addressed in the 193 publications dealing with marginal social groups. Thus, one can look for the individual groups we have identified above and find publications about them even when 'marginal social groups' is absent from the list of subjects.

These publications will need to be read for references to primary sources for the study of communication in the margins of medieval society. These references will be collected (quotations in the case of textual sources and reproductions in the case of visual images and objects) and analysed using the questionnaire of historical criticism.

Most of the written sources that have survived deal with the repression of marginal persons and groups by medieval society. They deal with crime and poverty rather than with criminals or the poor. When our sources are due to representatives of groups at the centre of society, can we be certain that they understood correctly the rhetorical and stylistic means used by those on the edges of society? Do our sources correctly distinguish between the transmission of information, performative language or phatic communication? And do they detect irony? This is important, because modern scholars have to deal with a double filter: that between the medieval authors of our sources and their spokespersons, and that between ourselves and our medieval authors.

Apart from written sources, we can also use the visual images of marginal people produced by contemporaries. These iconographic sources seem to have been all but overlooked by the scholars who dealt with medieval marginal social groups in the past.⁶ Needless to say these sources, too, need to be evaluated before they can be put to use as visual evidence for past realities.

Finally

Based on a preliminary collection of primary sources it must be assumed that much more can be found than can possibly find a place within the covers of a single monograph or collection of essays. What is needed first of all, however, is not a definitive treatment of the subject but a provisional synthesis which may lead to further studies. The round table is meant to provide an occa-

⁶ One of the exceptions would be Gerhard JARITZ. See, e.g. *The Sign Languages of Poverty: International Round-Table Discussion, Krems an der Donau, October 10 and 11 2005*, ed. G. JARITZ (Vienna, 2007), especially the contributions of Patricia SKINNER, Axel BOLVIG and Gabor KLANICZAY.

sion for a first tentative discussion of this new topic in the field of the social history of communication.