

Studying Communication in the Margins of Medieval Society

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This paper is somewhat different from those that follow it in this volume, in that rather than presenting the results of research on a topic, it seeks to present a line of research, situated between the study of the margins of medieval society and that of the social history of communication.¹ There has been much attention paid to both these topics, and therefore it may seem wrong to claim that there is anything new in studying communication in the margins of medieval societies. There exists a huge bibliography on the margins of medieval society, even if general interest in the subject seems to have decreased somewhat after the groundbreaking work published up to the end of the 1980s.² There also exists a huge bibliography on medieval communication. This massive scholarly output has been produced mainly from the 1960s onwards, with the tide really starting to rise in the 1980s and especially 1990s.³ At present, interest in the topic of medieval communication, which was new and therefore extra exciting a generation ago, has become mainstream; there seem hardly any aspects of medieval studies that are not affected by the questions posed by the developing discipline of the social history of communication in the Middle Ages. A consequence of these trends in research has been that medievalists' interest in these topics has known hardly any overlap. The study of the margins of medieval society was new and exciting until the end of the 1980s, whereas the study of communication started to flourish from the 1980s onward. That is

1 The present article was written at the Paris Institut d'Études Avancées, where I was a fellow from 1 September 2018 to 30 June 2019. I thank the IEA for the opportunity offered. I also thank the anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments, which have enabled me to make the argument of this paper clearer.

2 See, e. g., the *International Medieval Bibliography* <<http://cups.brepolis.net.proxy.library.uu.nl/bmb/search.cfm>>, with, under "Marginal social groups," 240 hits (as of 4 August 2021). When one considers the other subjects mentioned at each of these hits, the number of studies devoted to particular groups or aspects of the topic can be shown to be much larger.

3 Marco Mostert, *A Bibliography of Works on Medieval Communication* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), lists 6,843 titles on the subject, including selections in the fields of art history, religious studies, ritual studies, oral traditions, folklore studies, and literature. Since publication, more than 3,000 new titles have been published.

why the study of the social history of communication specifically in the margins of medieval society is still in its infancy. In the 1980s there were simply very few students of groups in the margins of society who had already become aware of the potential of the study of communication.⁴ All this has as a corollary that the present chapter of needs consists mainly of a tentative search for a methodology to study its topic. Its scope is very broad, and it is unfortunately impossible to go into specifics. It is hoped that it will inspire further research that will render the review published here, warts and all, quickly out of date.

The relatively new field of the social history of communication can be distinguished from that of the history of written culture, which occupies itself with the study of writing and its uses, benefitting from the results of centuries of study in paleography, diplomatic, codicology, and epigraphy – to name but a few of the more important auxiliary sciences of history. However, whereas written texts, and their making, keeping, and using, are by their nature the most important sources for the study of communication in the Middle Ages, they are not the only sources. In the social history of communication their study takes place against the vast background of that of other, non-verbal and non-written, forms of communication.⁵ For, despite the considerable rise in the numbers of written texts produced, especially from the long thirteenth century onwards – a rise that was accompanied by a rise in the numbers of literates and semi-literates in ever more social groups – it is clear that the use of speech and of non-verbal forms of communication such as gestures, symbolic images, or rituals did by no means experience a decline in importance. Changes in literacy, though the most visible development due to the survival of ever more written texts on parchment and paper, handwritten and, from the middle of the fifteenth century, also increasingly printed, may have led us to become less attentive to that which was never written down – even if there are traces of non-written communication as described in written texts and rendered visible in images.

The social history of communication can be distinguished also from the sociology of communication,⁶ in that it is interested also in expressions which address the supernatural beings in whose existence medieval people believed: gods or God; Christ; the Virgin Mary; angels; devils and demons; saints deceased; or the souls of the deceased. They formed part not only of the

4 Needless to say, the work of these relatively few scholars and their successors are fully referenced below.

5 See Mostert, *A Bibliography*, 6–9.

6 See Mostert, *A Bibliography*, 31–44; for example, Robert Escarpit, *L'écrit et la communication*, 3rd edn. (Paris: P.U.F., 1984).

mental or religious medieval universe, but were thought to be as real as one's neighbors, and to be able to reply to questions and requests in more or less the same way.⁷

There are some developments in the history of communication that may lead to the formation of a comparative or global history of communication, by adducing examples from societies that had not (or not yet) come into contact with the civilizations of western Europe, and comparing how people communicated in those societies, remote geographically or in time from medieval Europe. More often than not, however, these comparisons are made simply in order to understand the European Middle Ages better, and they can therefore best be seen as applied historical ethnology of communication. Ethnology itself seeks to understand the societies it studies in their own terms.⁸ As the social history of communication has this aim with regard specifically to European societies, it can be seen as a special case in the historical ethnology of communication. It is also interested, however, in historical development irrespective of whether contemporaries could have been aware of those consequences of changes in the use of forms of communication which would become apparent only after many generations. The uses of oral forms were to be influenced by the introduction of written forms; the use of handwritten forms by printed forms. But these changes took place only very slowly, and influenced the functions of oral, handwritten, and printed forms only piecemeal, and hardly ever in a revolutionary manner.⁹

Research into medieval social communication has had its eye on the various social groups making up society from quite early on. Because of the preponderance of sources that have been produced by mainstream Christians, the majority of studies have concentrated on them, and other (religious) groups, such as Jews, Muslims, converts, and members of Christian sects, have been underrepresented. And even within this majoritarian perspective, not all communities have been equally studied. As a consequence, there is a danger that groups marginalized during the period are too often studied only from the perspective of inclusion versus exclusion, due to the sources most scholars are familiar with. Clearly, this is not the intention of the present chapter – although it has to use the studies that have been published so far, and therefore might on

7 Mostert, *A Bibliography*, 6–7, and §15.8, pp. 495–99, “The Magic of the Written Word” (Nos. 6734–96).

8 Mostert, *A Bibliography*, §1.2, pp. 35–37, “Anthropological and Sociological Contributions to the Debate” (Nos. 85–128). See also *The Book: A Global History*, ed. Michael F. Suarez and H.R. Woudhuysen (Oxford: OUP, 2013).

9 Paul Bertrand, *Les écritures ordinaires. Sociologie d'un temps de révolution documentaire (1250-1350)* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2015).

occasion also fall into the trap of overestimating the majoritarian perspective. The study of the history of social communication, and therefore also the topic of this paper, is still under construction.

There is no lack of studies on the uses to which the regular and secular clergy put the forms of communication at their disposal. Nor do we need to search long to find studies on the higher nobility and rulers, or indeed on the lower nobility. The peasants are less well served by research, no doubt because they had recourse to writing far less often than members of the clergy or the nobility, even if very recently there has been some exploration of “country-side literacy.”¹⁰ The social groups mentioned so far have been at the center of early medieval social thought; added to them later on have been town dwellers, whose literate behavior has been studied in much detail by practitioners of urban history.¹¹ All these groups were known as such by contemporaries and were considered to be within the pale of society. They could be characterized by specific uses of the forms of communication available, and have been the object of studies which explicitly mention them in their titles. And yet there have hardly been any attempts to study communication in the margins of medieval society. The time seems to have come to remedy this state of affairs.

Back in 1991, Aron Gurevič mentioned “The various levels of culture and religiosity, their conflicts and interactions, in particular the reciprocal rapports between the official, intellectual culture of the elites and popular or mass culture, and also the relationship between book culture and written culture generally and oral, folklore culture” among his (far from exhaustive) list of research topics for historical anthropology.¹² Even if popular culture could be found inside the boundaries of medieval society as understood by contemporaries, it was most likely to be found among the lower strata of society, among the poor. And the poor had more chance of ending up in the margins of society, if not outside it altogether. Gurevič would have wholeheartedly consented to the inclusion of the topic of “communication in the margins of society” among those that could be studied under the heading of historical anthropology. The

10 *Oral and Written Communication in the Medieval Countryside: Peasants – Clergy – Noblemen*, eds. Anna Adamska and Marco Mostert (Turnhout: Brepols, in preparation for 2022).

11 See, e. g. *Writing and the Administration of Medieval Towns: Medieval Urban Literacy I*, eds. Marco Mostert and Anna Adamska (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013); *Uses of the Written Word in Medieval Towns: Medieval Urban Literacy II*, ed. Marco Mostert and Anna Adamska (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013); Agnieszka Bartoszewicz, *Urban Literacy in Late Medieval Poland* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017); and Katalin Szende, *Trust, Authority, and the Written Word in the Royal Towns of Medieval Hungary* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018).

12 Aron Jakovlevič Gurevič, “L’antropologia storica,” in Aron Jakovlevič Gurevič, *Lezioni romane. Antropologia e cultura medievale* (Torino: Einaudi, 1991), 3–32, at 26–27.

historical anthropology of communication, then, also concerns itself with communication by those groups that found themselves outside those groups that made up the culturally dominant members of a given society.

When Gurevič wrote in 1991, the time when all medievalists knew what the term “the margins of society” was supposed to mean had already come to an end. In the 1970s and 1980s, there had been much attention paid to those of the lowest social status, especially the poor, as well as to those in the margins of society. This interest was especially prominent in France, where it seems to have originated at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, under the inspiration of Jacques Le Goff and others.¹³ But it was also noticeable elsewhere, for instance in Poland. There, Bronisław Geremek published works on the poor, vagabonds, the miserable, and the marginals of Paris. After his studies had been translated into French, they became known among social historians of the Middle Ages worldwide.¹⁴ It was also in France that two influential surveys of historical trends were published. In 1976, *La nouvelle histoire*, co-edited by Jacques Le Goff, contained a survey by Jean-Claude Schmitt on “L’histoire des marginaux,”¹⁵ and in 1999 the *Dictionnaire raisonné de l’Occident médiéval*, edited by Jacques Le Goff and Jean-Claude Schmitt, contained

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- 13 Michel Mollat, *Les Pauvres au Moyen Âge. Étude sociale* (Paris: Hachette, 1978), is a classic. He was preceded by Jean-Louis Goglin, *Les misérables dans l’Occident médiéval* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1976). Among more recent monographs on the poor, see in particular Priscille Aladjidi, *Le Roi père des pauvres. France XIII^e-XV^e siècle* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2009), and Jean-Pierre Leguay, *Pauvres et marginaux au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Éditions Jean-Paul Gisserot, 2009). Also worth noting are *Aspects de la marginalité au Moyen Âge*, ed. Guy-H. Allard (Montréal: L’Aurore, 1975), and Sophie Brouquet, *Les Marginaux du Moyen Âge. Ladres, brigands, ribauds, gueux et mendiants au Moyen Âge* (Rennes: Éditions Ouest-France, 2018). The last publication is lavishly illustrated. A useful collection using literary texts was published in 1978: Carole Bercovi-Huard, et al, *Exclus et systèmes d’exclusion dans la littérature et la civilisation médiévales* (Aix-en-Provence: Édition CUERMA, 1978).
- 14 Bronisław Geremek, *Les marginaux parisiens aux XIV^e et XV^e siècles* (Paris: Flammarion, 1976); Bronisław Geremek, *Truands et misérables dans l’Europe moderne 1350-1600* (Paris: Gallimard/Julliard, 1980, revised edition Paris: Gallimard, 2014); Bronisław Geremek, *La Potence ou la pitié. L’Europe et les pauvres du Moyen Âge à nos jours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987); Bronisław Geremek, *Les Fils de Caïn. Pauvres et vagabonds dans la littérature européenne (XV^e-XVII^e siècle)* (Paris: Flammarion, 1991). A number of articles published originally in Polish have been made available in English as Bronisław Geremek, *On the Middle Ages*, with a foreword by Hanna Zaremska, translated by George Szenderowicz (Warsaw: Instytut Historii PAN, 2017), available in open access at <<https://rcin.org.pl/dlibra/publication/82927/edition/63208>>.
- 15 Jean-Claude Schmitt, “L’histoire des marginaux,” in *La Nouvelle histoire*, ed. Jacques Le Goff, Roger Chartier, and Jacques Revel (Paris: Retz – C.E.P.L., 1978), 344–69.

another substantial article, “Marginaux,” by Hanna Zaremska.¹⁶ Many of the works mentioned above remain in print in France, even if the field of history they represent has gradually lost its attraction among the medievalist community worldwide. Only in Germany does the topic continue to be studied, although this seems to be done predominantly by specialists in early modern society.¹⁷

When defining the groups that fall under the heading of the “marginal,” we need to distinguish those at the bottom of society – the poor – from those in its margins. Both clearly do not belong to dominant social groups, but those at the bottom of society are strictly speaking not beyond the pale. The dominant groups will distinguish them from those who are in the margins, who are either tolerated, because they fulfil functions considered necessary for the maintenance of society (for instance grave diggers, executioners, prostitutes), or whose actions are perceived as having put themselves outside society (for instance criminals, vagabonds, bandits, anyone without a place of residence). But the poor at the bottom of society are always at risk of ending up, by way of the margins of society, outside the warm embrace of their fellow community members who manage to stay within social boundaries. A gate enables two-way traffic, and anyone can be forced outside it.

Becoming marginalized always has to do with exclusion, and the reasons for exclusion by dominant groups in a society can be wide-ranging. They may be religious, legal, criminal, economic, linguistic, medical, social or cultural. They always bring with them, as Giacomo Todeschini observed, anxieties and feelings of psychological insecurity. Those at the bottom and in the margins of society have no name; they cannot be relied upon in legal courts; they are

16 Hanna Zaremska, “Marginaux,” in *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'Occident médiéval*, ed. Jacques Le Goff and Jean-Claude Schmitt (Paris: Fayard, 1999), 639–53.

17 Bernd Roeck, *Außenseiter, Randgruppen, Minderheiten. Fremde in Deutschland der frühen Neuzeit* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1993); Robert von Friedeburg, *Lebenswelt und Kultur der verständischen Schichten in der frühen Neuzeit* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 2002); Wolfgang von Hippel, *Armut, Unterschichten, Randgruppen in der frühen Neuzeit* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 2013). On the Middle Ages, see for instance Franz Irsigler and Arnold Lassotta, *Bettler und Gaukler, Dirnen und Henker. Außenseiter in einer mittelalterlichen Stadt* (Cologne: Greven, 1984, 2nd edn. Munich: dtv, 1989); Frank Meier, *Gaukler, Dirnen, Rattenfänger. Außenseiter im Mittelalter* (Ostfildern: Jan Thorbecke, 2005). In English, there is *Living Dangerously. On the Margins in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt and Anna Grotans (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), a collection of six essays and an Introduction by Barbara Hanawalt; this does no justice to the overall complexity of the topic. A very early study in Dutch, with an emphasis on literary texts, is Diederik Theodorus Enklaar, *Varende Luyden. Studiën over de middeleeuwse groepen van onmaatschappelijken in de Nederlanden* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1937, 2nd edn. 1956).

unable to take up roles in government, not even in the smallest towns; and they have no renown, no fame: they are the in- and the un-famous.¹⁸

Using the reasons for which one might be relegated to a place outside the dominant groups in society as a guide, we can recite a long – yet not fully comprehensive – litany of those who belonged to the large groups of the “marginal.”¹⁹ For religious reasons: polytheists, heretics,²⁰ and Jews.²¹ For legal reasons: those without a name, who are not allowed to bear witness in court.²² For criminal reasons:²³ thieves, vagabonds, forgers, beggars, bandits,²⁴ etc. For economic reasons: the poor (including widows, orphans, the old, and certain students) and usurers. For medical reasons: those afflicted with mental or physical impairments, such as the mentally ill²⁵ (including those “possessed” by devils or demons) and lepers.²⁶ For superstitious reasons: those accused

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- 18 Giacomo Todeschini, *Visibilmente crudeli. Malviventi, persone sospette e gente qualunque dal Medioevo all'età moderna* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2007). I have used the French translation, *Au pays des sans-nom. Gens de mauvaise vie, personnes suspectes ou ordinaires du Moyen Âge à l'époque moderne* (Lagrasse: Éditions Verdier, 2015), with a preface by Patrick Boucheron. There is some overlap between those without name and those without face, studied by Valentin Groebner, *Defaced. The Visual Culture of Violence in the Late Middle Ages* (New York: Zone Books, 2004).
- 19 The literature mentioned in the following notes consists merely of publications found useful in coming to grips with the issues dealt with in this article. A fuller list can easily be obtained by consulting the *International Medieval Bibliography*, online at <<https://about.brepolis.net/databases/medieval-and-early-modern/imb/>>.
- 20 R.I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Authority and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1987).
- 21 Friedrich Battenberg, *Das Europäische Zeitalter der Juden: Zur Entwicklung einer Minderheit in der nichtjüdischen Umwelt Europas*, 1, *Von den Anfängen bis 1650*, and 2, *Von 1650 bis 1945* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1990); Maristella Botticini and Zvi Eckstein, *The Chosen Few. How Education Shaped Jewish History, 70-1492* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).
- 22 Todeschini, *Au pays des sans-nom*, 46–52, 69–75.
- 23 Claude Gauvard, “*De grace especial*”. *Crime, État et société en France à la fin du Moyen Âge*, 2nd edn. (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2010); older, but still useful, is Dirk Arend Berents, *Misdaad in de Middeleeuwen. Een onderzoek naar de criminaliteit in het laat-middeleeuwse Utrecht* (Utrecht: Stichting Stichtse Historische Reeks, 1976), with an English summary at 135–37.
- 24 *Bandit Territories. British Outlaws and their Traditions*, ed. Helen Phillips (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), seems more interested in the traditions than in the outlaws that inspired them.
- 25 H.H. Beek, *Waaanzin in de Middeleeuwen. Beeld van de gestoorde en bemoeienis met de zieke* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1969); Maud Ternon, *Juger les fous au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2018).
- 26 Françoise Bériac, *Histoire des lépreux au Moyen Âge. Une société d'exclus* (Paris: Éditions Imago, 2018).

of witchcraft or sorcery.²⁷ For reasons of knowledge: alchemists. For cultural reasons: strangers (including merchants, Romani, and Moriscos). For social reasons: those who have infamous trades (prostitutes,²⁸ executioners, actors,²⁹ grave diggers, gamblers³⁰). For sexual reasons: “sodomites.”³¹ And, finally, for linguistic reasons: those who speak another language.

Clearly, there was some overlap between the groups thus identified. After Christianization had been all but complete, the “pagans” were identified with Muslims; in the Iberian peninsula, however, there were sizeable groups of converts from Islam to Christianity, the Moriscos. Losing a religious reason for exclusion, they nevertheless were culturally distinct from the other inhabitants of the Iberian peninsula (they had different bathing habits, for instance), which led to exclusion for cultural reasons – and to doubts about their having really been converted to Christianity.³² Similarly, Jewish people – though undoubtedly not Christians – may have been assimilated socially to a certain degree, and may have received protection from secular rulers.³³ There was always a chance, however, that they could lose their precarious position due to an increase in the weight given to theological reasons for their exclusion, or political expediency. Their situation was bound to cause them existential anxiety.

There are other distinctions to be made among some of the groups mentioned. In late medieval towns, the town’s own poor (those who through no fault of their own, for instance through an accident, had become unable to earn their own living) were supposed to be taken care of by their neighbors. But the situation of the poor who, because of war or famine, were knocking at

27 See, for instance Rainer Decker, *Die Päpste und die Hexen. Aus den geheimen Akten der Inquisition*, 2nd edn. (Darmstadt: Primus, 2013).

28 Jacques Rossiaud, *La prostitution médiévale* (Paris: Flammarion, 1988); Maria Serena Mazzi, *La mala vita. Donne pubbliche nel Medioevo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2018). The case of prostitutes clearly has to do both with ‘infamous trades’ and with sexuality. The reason to put them under the first heading has to do with medieval towns trying to regulate prostitution (and earning some money in the process).

29 Jelle Koopmans, *Le Théâtre des exclus au Moyen Âge. Hérétiques, sorcières et marginaux* (Paris: Éditions Imago, 1997), deals with the plays in which actors, often excluded from society themselves, put other marginals on the stage.

30 *Gioco e giustizia nell'Italia di Comune*, ed. Gherardo Ortalli (Rome: Viella, 1993).

31 John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality. Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the 14th Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

32 Olivia Remie Constable, *To Live Like a Moor. Christian Perceptions of Muslim Identity in Medieval and Early Modern Spain*, ed. Robin Vose (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), with a foreword by David Nirenberg.

33 Battenberg, *Das europäische Zeitalter der Juden*, 1, *Von den Anfängen*, especially 130–43.

the town's gates, was different. They might have been recognized as Christians, and therefore as worthy of being helped; but in times of need the town's own (Christian) poor came first. This condemned the other poor to a wandering existence, and vagrants were dealt with in quite another fashion.³⁴

Sometimes one sees an increase in literature on the groups considered to make up the lowest layers of society, commonly called "the poor."³⁵ According to some scholars, this vast category comprised slaves, servants,³⁶ apprentices, day laborers, certain professions such as itinerant miners and shepherds, and even widows.³⁷ Although these groups (or persons) may have experienced more existential anxiety than others – being more likely to become destitute and therefore at greater risk of having to resort to begging, prostitution, or crime – until they did so, and provided they were Christians, they were nevertheless undoubtedly considered to form part of mainstream society. It is difficult to determine who the destitute were. Some scholars regard people as living in extreme poverty when they cannot be sure where the next day's food is to come from.³⁸ And there were others who, though not destitute, were nevertheless poor. It has been estimated that, in the late medieval German towns in which trade was the main *raison d'être*, up to 40% of the population was poor. In industrial towns, the percentage of poor people could rise to 86.5%.³⁹ Within a town, the distinction between the dominant groups and the others was quite often ownership of one's own house, as only those who had assured themselves of possession of their place of living could be expected to dispose

34 Geremek, *Truands et misérables*, 162–207, with at 186 reference to a nineteenth-century remark on the similarities between the attitudes of those having to deal with the poor in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the ways in which they were dealt with in his own time.

35 Cf. *Le Petit peuple dans l'Occident médiéval. Terminologies, perceptions, réalités. Actes du Congrès international tenu à l'Université de Montréal 18-23 octobre 1999*, eds. Pierre Boglioni, Robert Delort, and Claude Gauvard (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2002).

36 Cf. Jacques Heers, *Esclaves et domestiques au Moyen Âge dans le monde méditerranéen* (Paris: Fayard, 1981).

37 See the *International Medieval Bibliography*, searching for "marginal social groups" combined with the terms mentioned above.

38 Fernand Braudel, *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme, 1, Les structures du quotidien. Le possible et l'impossible* (Paris: Colin, 1979), translated as: *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th century, 1, The Structures of Everyday Life* (London: Phoenix Press, 2002), 75, 285.

39 Karin Schneider-Ferber, *Aufstand der Pfeffersäcke. Bürgerkämpfe im Mittelalter* (Darmstadt: Theiss, 2014), 202, on Lübeck (1460) and Augsburg (1475) respectively. However, Geremek, *Truands et misérables*, 166, gives much lower figures for a number of cities, many outside Germany.

of the time necessary to take a role in the town's government.⁴⁰ The names of those without their own house, while not necessarily being poor, were not proposed as possible officeholders, even if their names were entered in the list of the town's citizens. Those who could not satisfy the demands of citizenship and were not in such a list led a precarious existence, as membership of guilds and the economic and social security that brought was often not possible without citizenship either.

The distinction between the dominant groups of society, the "poor" in the inferior layers of society, those in the margins of society, and those "marginals" who were beyond the pale, is a useful one, provided one realizes that there were no impermeable boundaries between them. Over the course of their lives, individuals might find themselves in more than one group; if illness, for instance, prevented someone from earning a living, he could become poor, taking his family with him on the road to destitution. If he were cured, he might take his place in "respectable" society once more. That some people's spirituality led them to adopt individual poverty as a way of life also shows that a distinction could be made between "respectable poverty" and "abject poverty." Those whose poverty was not the result of their own choice might hope that the situation they found themselves in was to prove temporary; they could still look down on those whose poverty was – in their judgement – of their own doing.⁴¹

Sentiments that led to the exclusion of members of other groups can only be clearly observed among the dominant groups in society, but must also have occurred further down the social ladder, even among those at the "bottom." The latter did not, however, have the same authority and powers to bring about the actual exclusion of persons or groups. We hear something about the sentiments among those who occupied the middle rungs of the social ladder in the rules issued by town councils and guilds against allowing foreigners to exercise their crafts within towns' territories.⁴² But the dominant groups were able quite early on to take decisions that made individuals *de facto* into marginals.⁴³

The Church had at its disposal the ritual of excommunication, by which Christians were forbidden to have any intercourse with excommunicates

40 Cf., e. g., Charles D. Liddy, *The Politics of Citizenship in English Towns, 1250–1530* (Oxford: OUP, 2017).

41 See, on this matter, the references given in note 11, above.

42 Liddy, *Contesting the City*, e. g. gives several examples of attempts to oust outsiders regarded as threatening craftsmen's livelihoods.

43 *Sterben über den Tod hinaus. Politische, soziale und religiöse Ausgrenzung in vormodernen Gesellschaften*, ed. Claudina Garnier and Johannes Schnocks, Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2012.

whatsoever, which, when followed to the letter, must have led to the death of those struck by excommunication. In the tenth century, the liturgy of excommunication which was being developed in France was doubled by a liturgy for the readmission of the condemned into the bosom of the Church, but as the words of the prior liturgy of excommunication did not allow for any occasion of talking between Christians and excommunicates to take place, one wonders whether there was much use for the liturgy of readmission.⁴⁴ Similarly, secular authorities had banishment as their preferred punishment, which had the same dire consequences for convicts as the Church's excommunication. The banished were to sever their ties with their families, neighbors, and all who had durable ties with them in the community. They had no protection from the law, had no right to a burial, and had to stay away from other humans.⁴⁵ In this way, "marginals" in the strict sociological sense of the word are made: they are those who refuse to take part in social life, or are excluded from it. According to the social scientists who first studied marginal people at the beginning of the twentieth century, marginals are found between a universally acknowledged culture and a culture rooted either in the past (in the case of immigrants) or a culture engendered by opposition to dominant values. Marginality is also linked to degradation.⁴⁶

In the two examples mentioned above, dating from the early Middle Ages, it is dominant groups that make marginals, and that communicate their new status to convicts through their verdicts. From the thirteenth century onwards, dominant societies became ever more repressive; ostracism and exclusion struck ever more groups. This was in part a consequence of attempts by intellectuals to define more clearly the conditions the faithful needed to fulfil to be admitted into the (Christian) community. Those who were found wanting needed to be told; those within the community needed to be clear about the new definitions as well, and also needed to be told – or shown.⁴⁷ This means that we need first to recognize the ways a dominant society communicated with the marginals it had made itself. This is a different question from that of how the marginals communicated among themselves. As there was some overlap between the various groups and individuals that made up dominant

44 *Exclure de la communauté chrétienne. Sens et pratiques sociales de l'anathème et de l'excommunication (IV^e-XII^e siècle)*, ed. Geneviève Bühner-Thierry and Stéphane Gioanni (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015).

45 Hanna Zaremska, *Les bannis au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Aubier, 1996), with a preface by Claude Gauvard.

46 Zaremska, "Marginaux," 639.

47 Richard van Dülmen, *Theater des Schreckens. Gerichtspraxis und Strafrituale in der frühen Neuzeit* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1985 [repr. 2014]).

society, those at the bottom of society, those in the margins of society, and those who were defined as being outside the pale altogether, we need to beware of erring on the side of caution when dealing with sources that were produced by a dominant society. The recipients got the message of their exclusion, and responded to it. This process was as much a part of their communication system as the exchange of information that went on within individual groups of marginals themselves. It is clear, however, that it will prove difficult to find evidence of communication within groups of marginals that is not tainted by the assumptions within the systems of communication used by dominant groups. The evaluation of the information found will therefore also prove more difficult than is usually the case.

In the social history of communication, it is customary to distinguish between non-verbal, oral, and written forms of communication, and cases in which a combination of these forms is used (for instance in the case of rituals or ceremonies).⁴⁸ Sources containing information on all four categories of sources can be found. Most, as is to be expected, come from the dominant groups in society; yet examples from groups of marginals themselves have also come to light in preliminary explorations of the literature written on medieval marginals.

Before mentioning a few examples of communication addressed to and received by marginals, it will be helpful to consider their potential levels of literacy. It would be a mistake to assume that marginals as a rule were less literate than their contemporaries within mainstream society. Among the marginals, the possibilities also go from illiterate, via semi-illiterate and semi-literate to fully literate.⁴⁹ And, just as elsewhere in society, we may assume that there

48 Mostert, *A Bibliography*, 6–7.

49 Marco Mostert, "Forgery and Trust," in *Strategies of Writing: Studies on Text and Trust in the Middle Ages: Papers from "Trust in Writing in the Middle Ages"* (Utrecht, 28–29 November 2003), ed. Petra Schulte et al (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 37–59, at 40–41: "Illiterates' have no idea of what writing is, and do not know, for instance, that writing is language rendered visible; they do not understand that the content of a written text is transmitted through the eyes rather than through the ears. With the unbecoming expression 'semi-illiterates' are meant those who, although they cannot read or write themselves (and therefore are functionally illiterate) nevertheless know what writing is, and in which ways the written word differs from the spoken word. 'Semi-literates' are those who know how to read and write, but who are yet unaware of the subtleties of written communication. Their mentality is therefore in some respects close to that of the semi-illiterates. Finally, those who are [fully] literate' can manipulate the culture of writing. Because of their thorough understanding of the techniques of the written word they are able to decide autonomously whether to avail themselves of the possibilities offered by the culture of the written word."

were more semi-illiterate and semi-literate people among the marginals than there were fully literate people found among them.

Even if it comes from societies sometimes far removed from one another in time and space, we have some information about the non-verbal forms of communication imposed on marginals in the demand that they wear visual signs setting them apart from other people. Across a wide range of time and space, Jews, lepers and their descendants, the Cagots, prostitutes and (in the south of France) Muslims and heretics were compelled to make themselves known in this way.⁵⁰ Apparently, it was impossible to distinguish members of these groups by other visual characteristics. The ways in which Jews, for instance, came to be depicted as physically different from Christians likely had little basis in reality.⁵¹ These signs can be studied through the visual images that have been made of them. Marginals may also have made themselves recognizable through their behavior, dress, or language. Above, we have seen how the Christianity of the Moriscos on the Iberian peninsula could be doubted on the basis of their behavior. Similarly, the Romani (Roma) who are now thought to have arrived in the Balkans as early as the twelfth century, were recognizable by their differences. Their attempts at assimilation were countered by attempts to keep them apart from dominant society, to site them permanently at the gates of the dominant group.⁵²

Moving on from non-verbal to oral forms of communication, there are many instances where marginals, even when their vernacular may be assumed to have been different, were able to communicate by word of mouth with representatives of dominant society. As medieval societies were as a rule multilingual, this may have been less of a feat than it appears to be at first sight.⁵³ For individual marginals, it was necessary to make themselves understood and to understand what was said to them. There were also groups of marginals, such

50 Ulysse Robert, *Les signes d'infamie au Moyen Âge*, Paris: Honoré Champion, 1891, superseded in large part by Ruth Mellinkoff, *Outcasts. Signs of Otherness in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages*, 2 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

51 Willehad Paul Eckert, "Von Niedrigkeit umglänzt ihr reines Bildnis". Antijudaismus in der christlichen Kunst. Zur Darstellung von Juden und Judentum in christlichen Kunstwerken des Mittelalters und des Barock," in *Antisemitismus. Erscheinungsformen der Judenfeindschaft gestern und heute*, ed. Günther B. Ginzel (Cologne: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1991), 358–88.

52 David Abulafia, "The Coming of the Gypsies. Cities, Princes and Nomads," in *Power and Persuasion: Essays on the Art of State Building in Honour of W.P. Blockmans*, ed. Peter C.M. Hoppenbrouwers, Antheun Janse, and Robert Stein (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 325–42.

53 See Andrzej Janeczek, "Urban Communes, Ethnic Communities, and Language Use in Late Medieval Red Ruthenian Towns," in *Uses of the Written Word in Medieval Towns*, eds. Mostert and Adamska, 19–35, esp. 23–24.

as Jews, Muslims, and Roma, who had their own languages, whether they were high-prestige sacred languages or vernaculars for use among themselves. And there were groups of criminal marginals, who developed forms of the dominant vernaculars called cant or thieves' argot.⁵⁴ Several lists of words used by vagabonds and bandits have come down to us. The *Liber vagatorum*, first printed in 1510, has as its third part a list of the words used by marginals. It is based on an earlier list, the *Basler Rathsmandat wider die Gilen und Lamem* of c.1450. The authorities were interested in these words, as they allowed them to understand what suspect persons said among themselves. Thieves' argot consists mainly of the substitution of commonly understood words by words whose meaning is not understood by outsiders; knowledge of this vocabulary, which is restricted to those things its users did not want others to know, therefore amounts to knowledge of a special language. Admittedly late evidence about the argot spoken by bands of Italian beggars, one of whose number had been arrested and was interrogated in Rome on 18 March 1595, stated that they were about to change their language (*il gergo di parlare*) that coming September, when they were to meet from all over Italy, because it had been discovered and deciphered.⁵⁵ If this evidence can really be believed, this shows both a remarkable degree of organization and a similarly remarkable understanding of the purpose of the beggars' special language.

As far as written forms of communication are concerned, we can mention the rich written traditions of Jews and Muslims; "heretics," those who dissented from dominant Christian norms, could also resort to writing.⁵⁶ Research is also indebted to the study of criminals and criminal law, which is based on the rich archives maintained from the later Middle Ages onwards by courts of law. Among the marginals themselves, a literate role was played by those unsuccessful university students who had fallen on ill times.⁵⁷ An interesting example has come to light of a band of outlaws sending a letter, in 1493, to the

54 Roland Girtler, *Rotwelsch. Die alte Sprache der Gauner, Dirnen und Vagabunden*, 2nd edn. (Vienna: Böhlau, 2010).

55 Geremek, *Truands et misérables*, 228–47, at 245. The statement is published by Martin Löpelmann as "Il dilettevole esame de' guidoni, farfanti o calchi, altramenti detti guitti nelle carceri di Ponte Sisto di Roma nel 1598. Con la cognitione della lingua furbesca o zerga comune a tutti loro," ed. Martin Löpelmann in *Romanische Forschungen* 34 (1913): 653–54. See also *Il libro dei vagabondi. Lo "speculum cerretanorum" di Teseo Pini, Il 'vagabondo' di Rafaele Friano e altri testi di 'furfanteria'*, ed. Piero Camporesi (Turin: Einaudi, 1973).

56 *Heresy and Literacy, 1000–1530*, ed. Peter Biller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

57 Bartoszewicz, *Urban Literacy in Late Medieval Poland*, 335–45, mentions students in Cracow trying to make ends meet, e. g. by working in pubs, the urban baths, and even as gravediggers.

town council of Bardejow (now in Slovakia), demanding the release of their leader, who had been arrested, and voicing threats about what would happen if their demands were not met. They asked for an astonishingly large ransom of 400 florins. Of even greater interest than the contents of the document is its appearance, for its authors drew a saber, a broom, fire and a harquebus below the text. They also wrote the names of six towns. Below each of those names, a hole has been burnt. The drawn objects were to symbolize the form of revenge to be exacted on the townsfolk of Bardejow. It has been suggested that this letter was produced by an (obviously literate) gang member who most likely had received a university education, as he followed some of the conventions of contemporary charters. This is not the only evidence for literate skills among bandits. The available evidence suggests that, although not all bandits needed to be able to write, they did on occasion use the writing skills of some of their number, and were aware, even if most bandits were semi-illiterate at best, of what the power of the written word could be.⁵⁸

The examples of the use of non-verbal, oral, and written forms of communication in communication with, but also among marginals, shows that there are indeed sources for the study of communication in the margins of medieval society. But how many sources are there? Can they be shown to be representative of what went on among marginals? And, given the fact that many of them seem to have been produced by members of dominant groups in society, are they not subject to bias? Which are the questions that must be included in the historical criticism of these sources? And finally, can one expect any help from the social sciences?

These questions obviously need to be addressed, and most of them are not only important in the study of marginals, but also in that of inhabitants of, for instance, the countryside.⁵⁹ The question of how one can build a sizeable collection of sources relevant for the study of the communication of marginals, in the absence of any research tradition devoted to this particular topic, is even more important than in the case of the communication of peasants. For a start, research in archives and manuscript rooms will have to be postponed until it is clear – from the general literature that has been published on marginals – which archival documents and manuscripts might prove productive of relevant information. And even then, choices will need to be made.

58 Stanisław 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. Marco Mostert and P.S. Barnwell (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 267–80.

59 See the Introduction to *Oral and Written Communication in the Medieval Countryside*, which addresses the circumstance that here, too, many sources are attributable to members of the dominant groups in society, and what this means for the criticism of these sources.

Although it is evident, for instance, that the archives of the courts of law that dealt with cases of criminal law would very likely produce new documents, it is also evident that it will be impossible to visit all depositories of medieval criminal records extant today. Fortunately, after its latest update (of, at the time of writing, 4 August 2021) the *International Medieval Bibliography* lists 240 publications under its index term “marginal social groups,” and many more under the index terms for individual groups of marginals. There is nothing for it but to go through all publications on “marginal social groups,” and selections of the publications on individual groups, insofar as their titles seem promising to a student of the social history of communication. It is hoped that in this way a sizeable collection of sources will come to light.

The question of whether the sources found in this way can be thought to be representative is a difficult one. It does not, however, need to be a matter of numbers alone. An example from a related field of interest, that of the history of education, can be useful here. Recently, there has been a growth in the history of reading, and Michael Clanchy has once more paid attention to the surviving “ABC” primers.⁶⁰ A case can be made for the existence of tens of thousands of (very) cheap booklets which allowed young children of about six years of age to learn to read at home – in the sense of ‘voicing the letters on the page’, the meaning of the Latin *legere* – whereas ‘understanding the words on the page’, the meaning of *intellegere*, more often than not required formal teaching. As these booklets were given to small children, their chances of survival were slight at best. In fact, when one disregards the much more luxuriously produced primers given to the children of kings and other noblemen, which have much better chances of survival, only four copies of such booklets seem to have survived.⁶¹ This means that at best a single copy out of every 10,000 made seems to have come down to us; that is 0.001%, and probably the percentage is much smaller if, as seems likely, the numbers produced were in fact much larger. The four extant copies of ABC primers are priceless, representative witnesses of what was once a mass-produced commodity. In the case of the surviving ABC primers, it is beyond doubt that they are representative of much larger numbers. In the case of the letter written by bandits to the town council of Bardejow, we cannot make such a claim. We can, however, notice that this unique letter (unique, that is, until another such letter surfaces) is representative at least of a more general *possibility* that bands of bandits

60 Michael Clanchy, *Looking Back from the Invention of Printing. Mothers and the Teaching of Reading in the Middle Ages*, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), 137–62: “The ABC Primer. Was it in Latin or English?”; and 19–20, 24–27, 33, 81–83, 129, 177, 189.

61 Their first pages are reproduced in color in Clanchy, *Looking Back from the Invention of Printing*, as figs. 12, 40, 41 and 42.

were able, if they thought it expedient, to avail themselves of the means of literate communication. The Bardejow letter shows us that “bandit literacy” was possible.

Some of the preliminary work of assembling sources has already been done. Collections of relevant visual images do exist,⁶² and other assemblages are available for study in catalogues. The celebrations of St. Martin of Tours in 2016 were the occasion of an exhibition at the Tours Musée des Beaux-Arts. The lavish catalogue provides many images of the best-known gesture of the saint, that of sharing his mantle with a poor man or beggar. These images allow one to follow the development of this subject in detail, with changes that are suggestive of a development in the notions of “the poor” and “beggars,” and what they looked like.⁶³

We are left with the question of whether the social sciences might be of help in making sense of whatever the quest for information about communication in the margins of society might uncover. Clearly, many, if not necessarily all, those that lived in or beyond the margin, suffered from the stigmas that come with exclusion. This means that the works of Erving Goffman, and those sociologists that came after him, may help in the refinement of a research questionnaire.⁶⁴ Goffman also paid attention to relations in daily life,⁶⁵ and his work on that topic might also prove relevant in studying those groups of marginals whose behavior was likely most often observed on the streets and, as has been suggested, in other public and semi-public places, such as prisons, brothels and taverns. Another author who, having made his mark as a consummate historian of early modern history, also came to pay attention to twentieth-century daily life, was Michel de Certeau. In his *L'invention du quotidien*, he paid attention to the tactics used by contemporary consumers, ordinary language, and the uses of language more generally, including the “poaching” of reading.⁶⁶ His observations refer to the “common man” rather than to “marginals,” and – as

62 Cf., e. g. Brouquet, *Les Marginaux du Moyen Âge*.

63 *Martin de Tours. Le rayonnement de la cité* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2016). The study by Philine Helas, “Darstellungen der Mantelspende des Heiligen Martin vom 12. bis zum 15. Jahrhundert als Indikator der Veränderung sozialer Praktiken,” *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 89 (2007), 257–81, shows some possibilities of this topic.

64 Erving Goffman, *Stigma. Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968).

65 Erving Goffman, *Relations in Public. Microstudies of the Public Order* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971).

66 Michel de Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien*, 1, *Arts de faire*, new edn. by Luce Giard (Paris: Gallimard, 1990). Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard, and Pierre Mayol, *L'invention du quotidien*, 2, *Habiter, cuisiner*, new edn. by Luce Giard (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), is also of interest, especially for Michelle de Certeau and Luce Giard, “Envoi,” 353–61, 396–97, for its observations on “orality” and the “ordinary.”

do Goffman's – to modernity rather than to the Middle Ages, but they may attune scholars to matters shared by many, if not always all, women and men in the dominant groups of society and the marginals.

Finally, let us not forget that, whatever the numbers of marginals were, we are dealing with very substantial groups of medieval people. Their ways of giving form to their lives through communication within their groups and with outsiders have never as yet been studied from the point of view of the history of social communication. That means that there is a serious deficit in our knowledge of the Middle Ages, irrespective of the enormous numbers of studies on medieval communication and on marginal groups that continue to be published. Not only does the topic of the study of communication in the margins of medieval society promise to be an exciting intellectual adventure: it also will pay a debt to the memory of those whose names have been forgotten because they did not contribute to what contemporaries in dominant groups of different societies considered important to remember. Historians and other medievalists, however, have a duty to remember, lest they end up with a distorted image of what is at the center of their scholarly attention.