

# HISTORY

OF SOCIAL WORK

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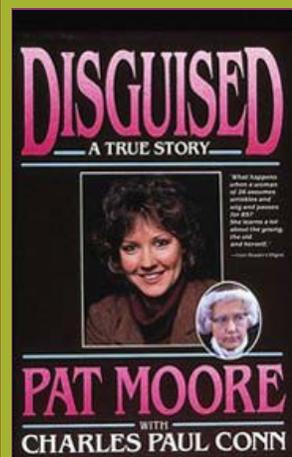
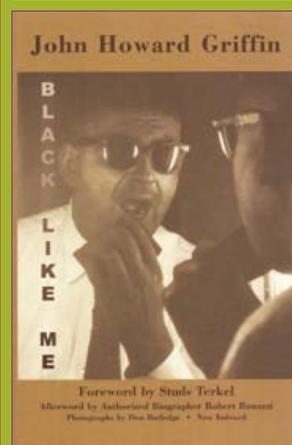
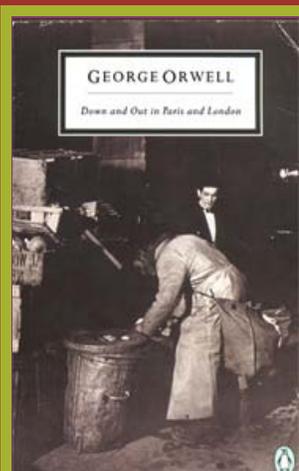
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## 1933 Orwell, Griffin and others The (in)humanity behind statistics



There was a time before 1933 when Eric Blair was not yet known as George Orwell, the author of *1984* and *Animal Farm*. Determined to become a writer, he explored the reality of homelessness and industrial poverty at first hand. In fact it was a time in which he was so poor himself that he needed to move to Paris where the cost of living was much lower. He wrote up his experiences in London and France upon his return to London in *Down and out in Paris and London* (1933). Later, after extensive investigation at first hand in the industrial north-west of England he published *The road to Wigan pier* (1936), thus providing a considered description of what poverty really looked like. He offered a view on the (in)humanity behind statistics with more vividness than quantitative research could offer.

To give one example, Orwell describes how he and his Russian friend Boris are short of food and spend their last cash on some bread and garlic. The combination is part of their survival skills: "the point of rubbing garlic on bread is that the taste lingers and gives one the illusion of having fed recently."

Others wrote similar accounts of poverty and injustice. Well known examples include John Howard Griffin, a white man who decided to darken his skin colour in order to experience society like 'a black'. For several months in 1959, he lived like a black citizen in the segregated deep south of the USA. The diaries he kept were published the year after as *Black like me* and showed the many (ugly) faces of day-to-day racism. Griffin became a respected civil rights activist but also received death threats and was at one time severely beaten by members of the Ku Klux Klan.

Similar to Griffin's work is Pat Moore's *Disguised, a true story* from 1985. A student of gerontology, Moore wanted to get a better understanding of what it meant to be a senior citizen. She started by donning a grey wig and for example blurring her sight by applying baby oil to her eyes. Travelling through the USA and Canada in this disguise, she organised her own excursions into the world of the elderly. Although in the introduction to her book it is claimed that she was not a social worker, she most definitely was. Her project became a great example of how bad product design (including buildings, vehicles and transport infrastructure) excludes people with age-related impairments. She also clearly illustrated how working on social progress can go hand in hand with business interests.

Griffin and Moore worked in North America and are not well known in Europe. The same approach has however gained widespread fame in Europe through the work of the German journalist Günter Wallraff. Around the same time as Pat Moore's work, Wallraff disguised himself as a Turkish immigrant worker. He worked for several companies, including Germany's steel industry giant Thyssen and the fast food chain McDonald's. His book *Ganz Unten* (Lowest of the low) was translated into many languages and made a great impact as it illustrated both the exploitation of immigrant workers in the labour market as well as the day-to-day racism shown by German people.

All of the above are prime examples of the use of immersive research and role-play techniques to highlight situations of social injustice. This approach is not something consigned to the past, but is still being used in our time. Examples include the UK journalist [Polly Toynbee](#) who worked as a low-skilled employee and published her experiences in *Hard work* (2003); the US writer Barbara Ehrenreich who did the same and published *Nickle and dimed* (2002); and the French journalist Florence Aubenas who lived for six months as a low-skilled single woman in a poor area of the French city Caen.

All three of these recent examples of immersive research illustrate that life at the bottom of society is not easy. If three well educated women with plenty of life experiences did not manage to remain out of poverty when living the life of a low-skilled person, how could somebody genuinely in that situation do it? Their research shows that society still

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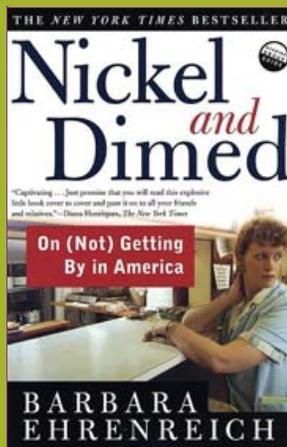
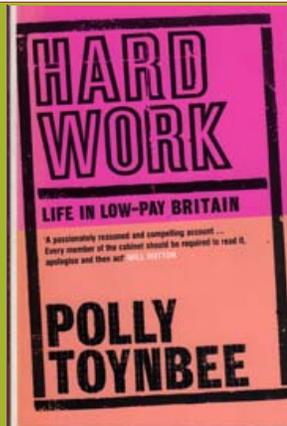
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This initiative also exists in Dutch, where it covers the history of social work in the Netherlands, in Flanders, and internationally.

See [www.canonsociaalwerk.eu](http://www.canonsociaalwerk.eu)

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has not succeeded in building 'ladders out of poverty'.

#### Additional information

- [Orwell, G. \(1933\), \*Down and out in Paris and London\*. London, Victor Gollancz Ltd.](#)
- [Griffin, J. H. \(1960\), \*Black Like Me\*. Souvenir Press](#)
- [Moore, P., Conn, C. P., & Conn, P. \(1985\), \*Disguised: A True Story\*. W Pub Group.](#)
- [Wallraff, G. \(1985\), \*Ganz unten, translated as 'Lowest of the low'\*. Mandarin](#)
- [Toynbee, P. \(2003\), \*Hard work, life in low-pay Britain\*. London: Bloomsbury.](#)
- [Ehrenreich, B. \(2002\), \*Nickel and dimed, undercover in low-wage USA\*. London: Granta books.](#)
- [Aubenas, F. \(2010\), \*Le Quai de Ouistreham\*. Editions de l'Olivier](#)

#### Links

- [Short video on Pat Moore's \*Disguised\*](#)



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