

Recent Findings of Research in Economic & Social History

Is poverty a relative or absolute concept? Is it a permanent or temporary phenomenon? In this wide-ranging and topical article Michael E. Rose analyses how concepts of poverty have changed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and with them ideas of how best to relieve the poor through self-help, philanthropy or state welfare.

Poverty and Self Help

Britain in the 19th and 20th Centuries

If two themes can be said to mark recent writing on the history of poverty in Britain, they are those of continuity and relativity. This contrasts with an earlier welfare history which told a tale of discontinuity and progress. The dissolution of the monasteries; the Poor Law Act of 1601; the Speenhamland system; the new poor law of 1834; the poverty surveys of Booth and Rowntree; the Liberal welfare reforms of 1906-11; mass unemployment in the 1930s; the Beveridge Report of 1942 and the legislation between 1945 and 1948 constructing the universalist welfare state were seen as defined stages in the progress of society towards its collective recognition of responsibility for the poor. Britain had gone from workhouse to welfare state in little more than a century. Attitudes to poverty had changed from harsh individualism (whipping beggars and setting the poor on work) to collective sympathy and state responsibility. Poverty, it was argued, was becoming a problem of the past. If proof were needed of this, the historian could cite the poverty surveys of York by the social investigator, Seebohm Rowntree. These showed that the proportion of York's citizens living in poverty fell from 28% in 1899 to 18% in 1936 and then to a mere 1.51% in 1950. The welfare state which was beginning to operate in the early 1950s, together with increasing material affluence from the mid-1950s, seemed to be rapidly effacing the last traces of the old poverty.

This comfortable assumption was rudely disturbed in the 1960s by the work of social scientists such as Pichard Titmuss, Peter Townsend and Brian Abel-Smith. Their investigations, brought to wider public notice by the publication of the pamphlet, *The Poor and the Poorest* in 1965, showed considerable gaps in the net of public welfare. Many families, particularly those with young children, were found to be living at levels well below those thought acceptable in a wealthy post industrial society. The economic crises and inflation of the 1970s, the high unemployment and market-oriented policies of the 1980s have been seen as increasing the

gap between rich and poor. Campaigning charities like Child Poverty Action Group have used every opportunity to draw public attention to the plight of the poor. Churchmen and others, through investigations like the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission, which produced *Faith in the City* in 1985, have expressed concern about the deprivation of those living in Britain's inner cities. The unease which led investigators like Powntree to carry out their studies of urban poverty in the late nineteenth century has returned in the late twentieth century. Historians, reflecting the concerns of their age, have been drawn to reconsider the rather simplistic model of the gradual conquest of poverty which satisfied an earlier generation. Concepts of poverty, its measurement a treatment have been re-examined, whilst oral and auto biographical sources have provided new evidence on the experience of poverty and reactions to it.

The Idea of Poverty

The early nineteenth century distinction between poverty, an honourable and economically necessary state, and indigence or pauperism, a condition of dependence, indolence and loss of individual self reliance developed into the Victorian philanthropist's identification of the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor. Increasingly, from the 1840s, the latter were found in the overcrowded inner districts of cities like London, Manchester or Glasgow, where they came to be viewed with alarm as a "pauper residuum", a menace to the stability of respectable society. [I] This concern was increased by later nineteenth-century concepts of "national efficiency"

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fuelled by pseudo-scientific notions of eugenics. Breeding recklessly in the overcrowded and unsanitary slum areas of large cities, an inferior racial type was thought to be developing, hindering the nation's stability to meet economic and military challenges from abroad.

This idea of self-perpetuating pauper residuum has been slow to disappear. The American anthropologist, Oscar Lewis, in the 1960s, advanced the idea of a "culture of poverty" amongst poor, urban ethnic groups with a high proportion of

love-waged or unwaged single parent, female-headed families. The offspring of such families, forced to enter the labour market early, were unable to acquire the educational and social skills needed to avoid low wages, teenage pregnancy, petty crime and drug dependence. A

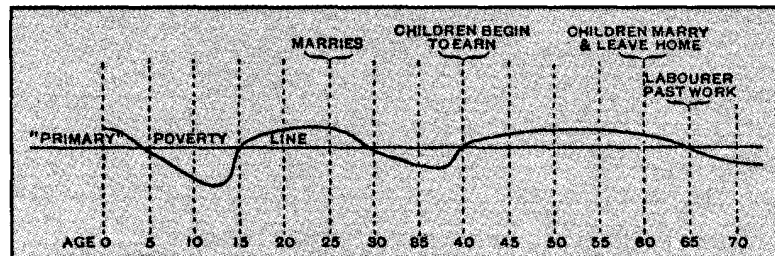


Figure 1. Rowntree's dynamic concept of poverty.
(B. S. Rowntree, *Poverty. A Study of Town Life*, 1901, p.137)

culture of acceptance developed, resistant to urban welfare programs which sought to encourage communal self help in escaping the dismal cycle of poverty.

Recent British concern about the inner city has led to the concept of an "underclass" of the long term unemployed, the homeless, the mentally-ill and the teenage runaway existing in a poverty trap of inadequate welfare benefits and irregular low earnings. Such groups do not enjoy the unreserved sympathy of their fellow citizens. An E.C. survey in 1977 showed that 43% of British respondents thought poverty to be the result of "laziness and lack of will power" as compared to a European average of 25%. As far as poverty is concerned, "Victorian values" did not have to await the advent of Mrs. Thatcher for their revival.

The measurement of poverty

A moralistic concept of poverty as due to individual failure remains. This is despite the apparently greater ability of social scientists to identify and measure poverty in an objective, statistical manner; a development which the social scientist Charles Booth is thought to have pioneered in his researches for *The Life and Labour of the People in London*, the first volume of which appeared in 1889. Its impressive array of maps and tables, together with its finding that 30 per cent of the population of London were living "in poverty", appeared to give social scientific exactitude to the measurement of poverty. However, recent investigation of Booth's work, notably by E.P. Hennock, has placed him in the direct line of earlier Victorian social investigators with their amalgam of impressionistic statistics supporting moralistic judgements. [2] 30.7% of London's population might fall below Booth's roughly constructed "poverty line", an income of 18/- (90p) to 21/- (£1.05) a week for an "average" family of man, wife and three school age children. Yet only 8.4% were in "want or distress" and of these just under 10% belonged to the lowest class of "semi-occasional labourers, street sellers, loafers, criminals and semi-criminals". The removal of these lowest classes by strict policing and poor-law measures, involving the dispatch of some to labour colonies, would provide more elbow room in the labour market for the rest of the poor to obtain more regular wages and thus be kept from distress, if not from decent poverty. Rowntree's 1899 survey of York, *Poverty. A Study of Town Life*, by contrast was both smaller and more inclusive in its sample. It was also more exact in its

drawing of the "poverty line", an income of 21 /8d 01.08p) for the average family, a figure arrived at only after careful consultation with doctors, dietitians, and poor law administrators. A further advance on Booth's methodology was Rowntree's concept of the poverty cycle, showing poverty to be a dynamic and not a merely static concept.

A family might be below the poverty line at some period of its existence, as young parents with several infant mouths to feed for example, yet above it at others, as when both parents

together with older children might be in paid employment. (See Figure 1).

With the publication of Rowntree's first York survey in 1901 and of Booth's massive completed study of London in 1903, the social survey became an accepted

method for the identification and measurement of poverty. It was developed, as Hennock has again shown, to a higher degree of sophistication by Sir Arthur Bowley before and after World War I, using sampling techniques and comparing communities with different economic and social structures. [3] It was much used between the wars both to assess the extent to which poverty had diminished as compared to its prevalence in late Victorian and Edwardian England, and also to point to its continued existence, especially in areas afflicted by high unemployment.

Two of its features had great consequence for the debate on poverty. The first was that of the "poverty line", a highly artificial construct, as Rowntree had recognised. Translated by Edwardian social reformers into the ideal of the national minimum, a measurable standard of minimal decent living which all in society could be raised to, it played a central role in the construction of the welfare state. The Beveridge plan of 1942, implemented between 1945 and 1948, provided for a universal national minimum with national assistance playing a residual role to protect those falling through the welfare net into poverty. Above that minimum the individual was free to provide extra benefits for himself and his family through saving, investment, or private insurance.

Yet those in poverty, as Booth and Rowntree had recognised, were not merely those whose income fell statistically below that defined by the "poverty line". Another of Rowntree's methodological contributions to the study of poverty was his concept of "secondary poverty" as compared to the "primary poverty" of those below the "poverty line". In the York of 1899, 7,230 persons were found to be living in "primary poverty", but a further 13,072 were in "secondary poverty". Although their family income was, if spent in an inhumanly disciplined fashion, adequate to maintain healthy physical existence, it was quite inadequate for the modest standard of living normal in working class communities. Nor did it make any allowance for such disasters as sickness or unemployment.

Poverty is a relative concept. As living standards rose in nineteenth and twentieth-century Britain, so the norm for decent existence rose continually above that of mere absence of starvation. Academic studies of poverty recognised this. Rowntree, in his 1936 survey of York, devised what he called a "human needs standard" which allowed for "personal sundries" including a trade-union subscription, the price of a daily newspaper and hire-purchase payments on a radio.

Townsend's survey, conducted in 1968-9, used a sampling and questionnaire method to obtain a more realistic assessment of what constituted poverty than a strictly physiological one of defining what income was required to sustain physical health. Yet the concept of a poverty line remained enshrined in the existence of a minimum state welfare benefits level. Any increase in this, to meet rising living costs and standards, swelled the numbers defined as being in poverty. At the same time, the concept of "secondary poverty" provided support to those who thought that poverty was of the individual's own making. In this view, more careful management of a limited income should ensure that the family had enough to eat and was not, by absolute standards, poor.



Andover Workhouse in 1846 exemplifies the prison-like facade that was intended (tinder the New Poor Law of 1834) to deter any but the really destitute poor from applying for relief within its walls

The relief of poverty.

Recent historical interpretations emphasise that continuity of attitudes towards the poor had been matched by continuity of policy. As far as the role of the state is concerned, local studies from the 1960s onwards have shown that the old parish poor-law system was not in a state of decay in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but was responding to economic and social change through devices like wage supplements, child allowances and make work schemes. Much of this continued after the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. The Act's blueprint of a centrally-directed, uniform poor law policy in England and Wales which would test the need of able-bodied applicants by offering relief only in a disciplined workhouse, was compromised by the resistance of locally elected administrators - the boards of guardians. [5] New workhouses were built, but came increasingly to contain the aged, sick and orphaned poor, rather than the able-bodied unemployed who sought other forms of aid.

The workhouse system gradually and painfully adjusted itself to the needs of this clientele. [6] Despite the strictures of the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws of 1905-09, the poor-law system survived administratively until 1929 and, in terms of its institutions and appointed officials, for much longer. The workhouses of the nineteenth century supplied

much of the building stock for the National Health Service after 1948. Poor relief became "public assistance" after 1930, but the "workhouse test" was only replaced by the "means test", under which the resources of an applicant's family were assessed to ensure that these did not lift them above the benefit level. Even after the Beveridge-inspired social security, reforms of the late 1940s, more people remained dependent on means-tested national assistance benefit than its planners had intended. A weakening of universalist notions of minimum benefits for all, in favour of targeting scarce resources towards those in need, resulted in more complex bureaucratic procedures for claimants. These constitute as great a deterrent to the poor as did the more simplistic workhouse test of the

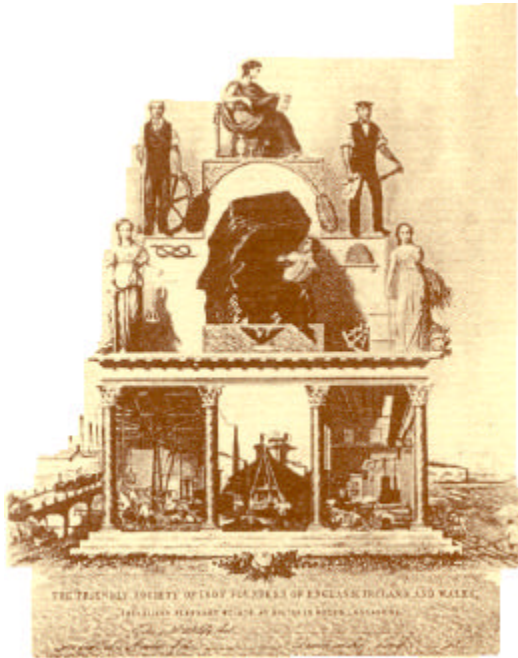
nineteenth century. Less regarded until recently by historians has been the growth of philanthropic provision for the poor. Charity was a major Victorian growth industry providing aid for an increasing number of specialist needs and unpaid employment for middle class ladies. Concern that indiscriminate charitable relief might create pauperism, led to the foundation of the Charity Organisation Society in 1868 to co-ordinate the work of charitable bodies, provide trained investigators to assess the needs of claimants, and encourage co-operation between the voluntary system and the statutory poor-law one. Research shows a continuation of this trend. Far from charitable activity being supplanted by increasing state provision for the poor, its scope has increased. [7] The twentieth century has seen increased co-operation between state and voluntary sectors in the relief of poverty, with the latter acting either as the agent of the state or in pioneering new services, sometimes with the aid of state funding. The persistence of philanthropy is becoming more obvious as historians begin to reduce their fixation with state growth and place the welfare reforms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries into a broader context.



*A middle-class woman visiting the poor. Such philanthropic activity assisted both in alleviating the poverty of the labouring classes and in assisting women to emerge from the private to the public sphere. (S. S. Ellis, *The Women of England*, 1839).*

Self-help formal and informal

Predominant amongst the solutions for poverty, however, has been the ideal of self help. Those likely to fall on misfortune at some time in their lives were always urged to take precautionary measures to protect themselves and their families in hard times. Eighteenth-century paternalists advocated the provision of allotments and the establishment of



Membership Certificate of the Iron Founders Friendly Society, founded in 1809.

savings clubs for the poor. From the late eighteenth century, working people themselves formed friendly societies and benefit clubs which, funded by the small weekly contributions of members, established schemes of benefit on which a member and his family could draw at times of bereavement, sickness or loss of employment. By the mid-nineteenth century, some of these small local societies were affiliating to larger organisations like the Manchester Unity of Oddfellows or the Ancient Order of Foresters whose greater financial power provided more security for funds. [8] Relatively neglected by earlier labour Historians, research in their scattered archives is beginning to reveal their fundamental importance for working people as a shield against misfortune. Not only was membership of them widespread, extending far beyond the boundaries of the more affluent, skilled working class, but their customs and ritual, as well as their benefits, made them an influential force in many labouring communities. Provision of similar contributory benefits by trades unions are now seen as a central feature of their work, and not as a mere smokescreen to disguise their industrial activities. Such schemes of contributory benefit were important for the developing state welfare systems. The 1911 Insurance Act established a system of compulsory state-backed contributions to provide for benefits to shield the insured from poverty caused by ill health or unemployment. Although high levels of unemployment in the interwar period made this type of compulsory self help difficult to sustain, the 1934 Unemployment Acts distinguished clearly between insurance benefits given as of right to those with a full contributory

record, and assistance for those whose contributions were exhausted or non-existent, provided only after the inquisition of the means test. Self help through contributory insurance became a main plank of the Beveridge scheme of 1942, and has arguably proved more important in the development of twentieth-century state welfare in Britain than either philanthropic or state provision.

Just as formal, institutionalised self help has become more visible and interesting to historians seeking to explain the development of provision for the poor, so the increasing use of oral history and of working class autobiography has revealed the extent of informal, communal or familial self help. Working class wives operated credit mechanisms of considerable complexity in pawning goods, paying rent, buying food and clothing and, as a last resort, borrowing money. Their weekly budgets were miracles of domestic management which only highlight the artificiality of the social survey's "poverty line". Children earned small sums, often in defiance of child labour and school attendance laws, or cared for younger siblings to allow mothers to go out to work. Mothers and children economised on food and other needs to allow the lion's share to go to the male bread-winner. Neighbours rallied to help at times of crisis like childbirth, or to protect the poor family from the intrusion of the rent collector, the policeman or the charitable visitor. [10] Such help was reciprocal, and had to be repaid in cash or kind. Poor communities could be harsh towards those who broke, or stood outside, its unwritten conventions. Family and community provided care for the poor, but at a cost not always noted by those who argue for an increase in their welfare role today.

Conclusion

The last two centuries have not seen the withering away of poverty. Its treatment today retains many of the features and contradictions of the past. This is not a counsel of despair, a pessimistic contrast to the old Whiggish optimism. The poverty of the few indicates the rising material standards of the many. But the indecency of poverty in the midst of affluence remains. "The Poor Ye Have Always with You."

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